

# WHAT DO I EXPECT BUDDHISTS TO DISCOVER IN JESUS? “CHRIST AND THE BUDDHA EMBRACING EACH OTHER...”

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## **1. Preliminary Remark**

This paper addresses a rather speculative question, for as a scholar of Buddhism who is not a Buddhist I am called to answer not a historical question but a question of faith from within a Buddhist consciousness. Yet the question requires both historical analysis and hermeneutic awareness, and thus I believe this presentation could make sense. Therefore we need to discuss both: the hermeneutic problem inherent in the perception, understanding and interpretation of an other religion; and the possible concrete answers and claims a Buddhist might come up with in answering the question of this paper.

The conscious, scholarly Buddhist-Christian encounter<sup>1</sup> has had a long and exciting history for more than 100 years. Especially in Sri Lanka, Japan, America, Germany and elsewhere disciples of both masters have been actively engaged in understanding each other; all participants benefit from the opportunity to clarify their own patterns of living and thinking in the light of the other's. I would like to share here only a few existential insights from this encounter, starting with a revealing story which also points up the humility necessary for any encounter and communion between human beings and between humans and God or the Ultimate Reality:

A Christian missionary met a Buddhist Zen-master in Japan. They talked about Jesus. The Zen-master acknowledged that Jesus was certainly a great man. The missionary insisted: “He was the greatest of all men.” The Zen-master replied:

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<sup>1</sup> *The actual social encounter of both traditions goes back to the hellenistic culture and marginal encounters during the Middle Ages. However, the consequences of those encounters remained insignificant concerning the development of both traditions.*

“Well, perhaps the greatest.” After some time the missionary asked: “Don’t you believe, as I do, that he was the Son of God?” The Zen-master’s answer: “If you want to express his spiritual greatness in this way – well, perhaps he was the Son of God.” The missionary left, and around the corner he met Jesus on the street. “Lord”, he said, “I have managed to get this pagan Buddhist to acknowledge your divine nature, I am sure next time I will be able to baptize him!” Jesus replied: “And what good did this do you except inflate your Christian ego?”

Today’s situation is certainly one of increasing interreligious encounter and discourse. And not only the Zen-master and the missionary are meeting. Cross-cultural relations are a product of modern civilization. The tendency towards religious pluralism and the pluralization of both values and life-styles has its roots in the Enlightenment period in Europe and the American Revolution. After the end of 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonialism other cultural forms, and especially the Asian and Islamic religions, have become self-conscious. Christian theologians realize that the otherness of the other – which includes his religious identity – is not an evil to be eradicated but might indeed be a gift of God: God might be speaking to Christians even through the language and images of other religions. Believers in other religions are not necessarily objects of Christian missionary zeal anymore but rather subjects under the providence of God. Buddhists might make similar discoveries: their encounter with Jesus could stimulate their Buddhist practice. They themselves would have to say in which way this might be the case. It is not for me to tell them. But since I have been invited to play that game, I will do so and enjoy it: After all, the question is, what do *I expect* Buddhists to discover in Jesus. So my conjectures and expectations may be justified and forgiven.

## 2. Methodological Questions

How can Buddhists discover anything in Jesus? In what possible ways (methods) might they really encounter what they have hitherto not had in their own consciousness? After all, religions are and probably remain different. Their answers to the human predicament do often clash. There are conflicts – some avoidable, be-

cause they reflect human egotism and power-struggle, others not avoidable, because contradictory attitudes to life and politics do lead to controversies. To be sure, conflicts are to be solved non-violently: that is a tenet for both Buddhists and Christians, as well as the presupposition for democracy and a more peaceful international scene. However to be able to put conflicts in perspective requires understanding, and understanding is being sought in dialogue. There is, therefore, a *dialogical imperative*.

First, there is a basic methodological issue to be addressed here: In order to appreciate the other religion as meaningful we need to acknowledge that the Buddha or God speaks to us through the other religion *also*. This can be interpreted in different ways, but it excludes an *exclusivistic* position that says: Salvation comes *only* through the Buddha's path or *only* through Jesus' path as we know them historically, mediated through the *samgha* or the church(es). Buddhist thought acknowledged this problem very early on by introducing the concept of the *pratyekabuddha*, i.e., a practitioner who follows the Buddhist path without the mediation of the *samgha* lineages. This is a kind of *inclusivistic* position: A path outside the *samgha* is acknowledged as valid – but it basically contains the same steps that the Buddha has shown. Another option would be a *pluralistic* position: The path to enlightenment may be different even in essence from what the Buddha has shown. I do not think such a position has ever been taken by a major Buddhist tradition, for even the concept of *upaya* (“skilful means”) speaks of different capacities, adaptations etc., but not of differing paths in principle.

The internal methodological reflection in each tradition has to show and present the reasons for dialogue: Whether I am an *inclusivist* or a *pluralist* – I do not mention the *exclusivistic* position since it cannot be a basis for dialogue – dialogical communion with the other is possible only when I recognize the partner as a possible *source* for my truth and salvation, or at least of my understanding of my truth and salvation. The other must be taken as a possible medium for my transformation (*metanoia*) or the conversion of my life to God and the Buddha-dharma. Whether that is really so or not is under testing during dialogue. As long as my conviction tells me I have to “win over” the other one into my camp (this would be proselytization) there can be no genuine dialogue. This is not to say that partners in dialogue should not defend the views and ways of their traditions. They certainly

should, for otherwise dialogue becomes meaningless and even boring. They should witness to the truth they experience in their own specific and unique way – and this would be mission as genuine witness, to use traditional terms. But this is more a spontaneous happening than a strategy lest it become loaded with ulterior considerations which might not be entirely genuine, honest and truthful. On the other hand they also need to be open for the truth they might receive mediated by the other partner in dialogue – not necessarily, but possibly. I like to call this neither exclusivism nor inclusivism nor pluralism, but *relationism*. Mission is not an enterprise to get people into one's own camp so as to become more powerful oneself, but is rather a witnessing to truth in the dialogical discourse and becoming transformed when truth really opens up. Buddhists would probably discover in Jesus this openness to the given situation by virtue of his attitude of unconditional love. He would be recognized as a master of dialogue and of testing the genuineness of faith in actual encounter with strangers, outcasts and people of other religions. The stories of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10: 25ff.) and the Centurion (Lk 7) should create resonance with Buddhists.

Second, there is a kind of “religious nationalism” that needs to be overcome. It is a form of clinging against which the Buddha warned. Nationalism is the absolutization of genuine national identity, which kills both the regional identity and the kind of identity which extends beyond the national, reaching out finally to all humankind and perhaps to the cosmos. The more sophisticated and educated a person is the more s/he might (though not necessarily!) be able to reach out and realize her identity in and with the cosmos, but for most people on earth today this is too abstract and they cling to a national identity. We could argue, of course, that this clinging is false, but most of us are not yet enlightened, anyway.

What has been said so far can be applied to the religious situation: Suppose you have an identity as a Buddhist. What does it mean? On a certain level of identification – especially when you face a Muslim or a Christian – you are a Buddhist with all the characteristics which one associates with “Buddhism”. But in your daily life you are a Pure Land, Zen or Shingon Buddhist, or a Tibetan Buddhist of a certain school. Living uprooted in the city you might lose this identity that has been shaped over centuries in villages, but many people still long for it or find surrogates for such a clearly identifiable identity. As a Buddhist you do not speak Pali or

Sanskrit but your local language, and this is what imparts identity. Similarly as a Christian: You are not just a “Christian”, but a Protestant or a Catholic or whatever. Even here, your religion is not abstract but very much localized, and this shapes your primary religious identity. Most people attend worship services and listen to sermons not to be instructed on globally abstract Christian tenets, but rather to be shaped by narratives that represent a local tradition and identity. Even migrants try to build up a new regional identity by sticking to a social-religious group that guarantees the continuity of the regionalized religious identity. The United States is a good example. What I am trying to say is: To counterbalance nationalism or its equivalent, i.e. the absolutization of religious identity in Buddhism, Christianity etc., we need two emphases: the local-regional identity and the global identity of one humankind. Often interreligious discourse addresses only the second aspect and thus is too abstract in many cases, lacking the warmth and real living relationship that you find in your village or your neighborhood.

But the problem of identity is also a source of fear. We already touched on the fear generated by finding oneself uprooted from one’s tradition and value system. I could argue that only spiritual experience will overcome and heal this fear, because it is in vitally perceiving the presence of ultimate meaning or a loving basis of life that humans can let go of actual fears. The other source of fear is the possible loss of national identity. Europe – and Germany in particular – is an excellent case for study: There are so many migrants into Europe that irrational fear is generated in all strata of society. It is not that most of these people hold views fundamentally xenophobic, nor are they anti-other-religions as such. They simply feel threatened by too many immigrants who are perceived as “others”.

The reason for immigration is the disastrous state of economic affairs in Africa, Latin America, Asia and elsewhere. Unfair and unjust international economic, financial and trading policies are one of the reasons for this problem (in addition to inefficiency, corrupt bureaucracy and undemocratic power-struggles in those countries themselves). In order to build an interreligious understanding we need to eradicate the kind of nationalism born of fear of foreigners and foreign control. This will be possible only when thousands (or, better, millions) of potential migrants find decent living conditions at home – which requires a change in the international economic and financial order. This problem, therefore, is *intrinsically*

connected with our search for interreligious understanding and peace! The point of Jewish-Christian justice is not mere charity or sharing from what we have too much of; it is a most important aspect of our human and interreligious relations.

Identity, therefore, is not static. We live in different identities depending on the context. And these identities change. To ask what Buddhists might discover in Jesus spiritually is to envisage a kind of *interreligious identity* for the future. This, however, would not be a substitute for the other identities, but an *additional dimension* that informs and changes other identities but does not remove them.

Having said this emphatically, I need to add: The level of interreligious identity that might be mediated by spiritual practices does exert an influence on the local and regional identity, and we have to make conscious efforts to link-up these different levels. But they are not the same and should not be confused. It is one thing to embrace a Muslim or a Hindu or a Buddhist at an interreligious conference which radiates a certain appealing intellectual and spiritual climate; it is another thing to embrace a Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist in my own neighborhood. It is different not just because different aspects and socio-political influences are at work but it is different in so far as different levels of identity are being touched upon. Thus, asking what a Buddhist might find in Jesus does not at all imply incorporating the Buddhist into a Christian *ecclesiastical* understanding of religion and identity.

This needs elaboration, and indeed a whole course in intercultural psychology and education would be required. Here it is only important to understand that in order to build a lasting interreligious understanding and cooperation without provoking new tensions we have to keep these different levels of identity in mind and give them their proper place.

Third, religions are different, and this will probably remain so in the future. They organize their different experiences in differing symbol systems and languages. Yet languages and religions can be learned. How deeply one can go into another religion depends on many factors, such as personal biography and hermeneutical awareness. In any case, this experiential learning-process is not easy, for it requires effort and changes the person. Such experiences are made by everyone who lives with people of other languages or other religions. When such a person returns to her own home s/he is no longer the same: patterns of thinking, values,

judgements and one's own religious perception have changed. In our highly pluralistic living situation, where Buddhists, Christians, Muslims and others mix more or less freely, one observes that there are different possibilities and interpretations of life. In relation towards the other we ourselves change. And precisely this is the history of all religions which have developed in encounter with other religions. Over the last 100 years contacts with Hindu and Buddhist cultures and other religions has been changing Christianity, and the whole process could be found in Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and other religions as well.

What we know as Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox Christianity or as Mahayana, Theravada, Tantrayana Buddhism – i.e., confessional plurality – is a reflection and result of diverse roots and influences in the past. Religions would be but corpses if their identities were to be fixed and they were unable to integrate new aspects. A spiritual movement, a culture or religion can assimilate what “corresponds” with it, what does not somehow divert its inherent movement from its own center or its own axis. This assimilative process can at times imply dramatic changes in basic attitudes, a rediscovery of the original impetus or experience of a given religion. By the same token, a religious tradition must dissociate itself from what does not correspond with it. For instance, in Christian faith basic human inequality, injustice and human sacrifice (there are certainly modern forms of destruction of human beings!) must be excluded because they would contradict categorically the experience of the presence of God in all creatures or, in Buddhist terms, the *tathagatagarbha*.

Each tradition forms a unique identity and yet can still integrate others. This is precisely what is happening today throughout the world. Religions find themselves in a fundamental crisis in the confrontation with secularism and an increasingly economized culture which seems to be taking hold everywhere we look, whether in India, Japan, Europe or America. All religions thus face the question of what their unique and important contribution for human beings is. They are called not simply to legitimize or strengthen their religious institutions but to offer a selfless service to human beings on the basis of their original impulses.

Identity is therefore not static, and various identities can “contain” each other, like the different containers of a Chinese box: smaller boxes are contained in the respective larger ones without destroying the smaller. Or, speaking in a religious

idiom, we recognize that all of us are children and creatures of one God. Such a statement relativizes the traditional religious identities which had held different cultures apart. Today's growing understanding and practice of "one humanity" has no parallel in the previous history of humankind, even if certain institutions, because of their interests in power, are fighting these developments.

The point is that in the current partnership of religions on all levels of human expression and formation, a specific form of common identity is emerging which has heretofore been unknown in our respective traditions and which offers therefore us no model we could turn to.

### **3. Concrete issues**

Now I would like to discuss a few issues which may prove relevant to the question of this paper. However, we need to bear in mind the plurality of Buddhist schools and understandings of life, and the plurality of Christian interpretations of Jesus – and therefore the possible claims and results of our analysis should not be universalized too easily.

But we need to be aware of another problem: There is no unmediated view of Jesus. Both Buddhists as well as Christians create their images of Jesus, based on their own respective mental and social predispositions as well as on historical preconditions. All attempts to reconstruct a "life of Jesus" or a map his personality have failed. There are certain data which could be called "historical" in a more objectified sense, but those data are not very useful for our question. Hence, the question of this paper is well-phrased as a "discovery". For what I discover depends largely on my starting point, the route and the vehicle I am accustomed to taking. And on my attentiveness or attention. My point is that we have no an immediate access to Jesus apart from our philosophical and theological constructs, and this holds true independent of our faith commitment. However, through historical research, comparison and ongoing debate we could discover our preconditioned views, correct and enlarge them, and set out on a real discovery that might lead us into unexpected lands and experiences. In such a setting, a Buddhist dis-

covery of Jesus might yield significant insights into the ongoing presence of Jesus in the consciousness of humans or sentient beings.

### 3.1. Universality with respect to Social Reality

The proper religious attitude to the world is not a merely mental outreach to other people but a social reality (Matt. 25). This is implicit in many stories in the *Jatakas* as well, where the spiritual status of the Buddha ripens through his relating to other people and animals in selfless love. This is the essence of the Bodhisattva ideal.

Christian faith is rooted in the *unconditional* love of God which he himself has revealed in Jesus Christ in a unique way. This love extends to the whole cosmos in space and time, perhaps even further, for unconditionality implies that it cannot be limited spatially or temporally. Nor can it depend on the condition of knowing this fact. Faith as trust in God's unconditional love, therefore, is a pure gift of the loving God. In Christian theology God is conceived in Trinitarian dynamics such that his actions *ad extra* are indivisible (*opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*).<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the very act of reconciliation is present also in creation and in the free presence of the spirit everywhere and at all times, not only implicitly but also explicitly. What follows is that human beings in all their languages, religions, circumstances of life and attitudes of consciousness are being reached by God's reconciling presence. Christianity expresses these thoughts through the concepts of creation and reconciliation.

The creation myth expresses a theological thought, not cosmological observations. The concept of creation is the first step of a salvation history, not a theory about the origin of the cosmos in metaphysical terms. Buddhists need to understand the difference in order to appreciate the creation story, even though they would express the potential for and reality of salvation for the whole cosmos in different symbols and language patterns. Yet, as the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama often points out: Buddhists can appreciate the deeply motivating power of the belief in creation. Jesus is a Jew, and as such he definitely shares in the Jewish concept of God the creator. But Jesus is not interested in "what was in the beginning" but in "what is now": The Sermon on the Mount draws attention to the birds in the sky and the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. M.v.Brück, *The Unity of Reality*, New York: Paulist Press 1991

lilies in the fields – all is being taken care of by God; there is no need to worry about life and death and worldly needs and achievements. Rather: “Seek first the kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matt 6: 33)

Now Buddhists might interpret this kingdom of God as the “Pure Land” in their own tradition. But they would add: Do not even cling to your concept and expectation of this kingdom or Pure Land; rather, purify your consciousness to such an extent that you realize this kingdom precisely in what appears to be a no-kingdom. We do not know how Jesus would have answered this thought-transcending attitude. He probably would have had a hard time understanding what it was all about, for he, as a Jewish Rabbi, would have been trained to express a similar objection in a different way, that is, in the words of the second commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an idol.” (Ex. 20:4)

Buddhists certainly might interpret the figure of Jesus as a Bodhisattva outside the historical tradition of Buddhism. In fact, the Dalai Lama has said just that,<sup>3</sup> in arguing that Jesus coincides with what the Bodhisattva Avalokiteavara stands for, but he hesitates to work out this understanding on a more theoretical level because Christians might feel embarrassed by such Buddhist inclusivism; they might feel deprived of Jesus by the Buddhists.

### 3.2. Buddha-nature

I suppose that the Mahayana concept of Buddha-nature<sup>4</sup> could provide a basis or starting point for a Buddhist appreciation of Jesus’ awareness that he and the Father are one or that Jesus’ consciousness is an *abba*-consciousness, as John Keenan has emphasized.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Jesus expresses his experience of Oneness with the Ultimate Ground or God in highly emotional language. Buddhism usually prefers a more rational parlance. That is why Aloysius Pieris and others have noticed a dif-

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<sup>3</sup> Mv.Brück/Wh. Lai, *Buddhismus. und Christentum*, München: C.H.Beck 1997, 56f.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. B.E. Brown, *The Buddha Nature. A Study of the Tathagatagarbha and Alayavijñāna*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1991

<sup>5</sup> J.P. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ. A Mahayana Theology*, Maryknoll: Orbis 1989

ference between an agapeic and a gnostic religious language and attitude.<sup>6</sup> The distinction is no doubt useful. But I wonder whether it really meets and expresses the phenomena we observe in both traditions, for breaking through the ego-identity is accompanied by emotional release, joy, light and lightness even in Buddhist accounts. That is to say: to realize the transcending power of Buddha-nature or to actualize the potential for awakening opens human consciousness to a universal horizon that we find expressed by Jesus in sayings such as “I and the father are one“ (Jn 10: 30); or “Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mk 14: 36); “I am the light of the world” (Jn 8:12). Here it is not important whether the statements in John’s gospel exhibit a substantialistic understanding of oneness or whether they rather corroborate a oneness of the will as suggested by Mark. Greek tradition has definitely tended towards some kind of substantialistic notion of oneness, and this is something Buddhists would certainly not subscribe to.

But in Jesus’ Aramaic language this is not the point because what is expressed here is the fullness of Jesus’ consciousness, the realization of being filled with God-consciousness which penetrates Jesus’ whole being and behavior. And this is what a Buddhist would appreciate. The result of this consciousness is Jesus’ fearlessness in speaking and living what he considers to be the truth, even marching to death while taking on the religious authorities of his time. He completely surrenders. No ego, no separated ego-consciousness, but identification with the Other – and this other is his true self: God, the stranger, the one in need. (Those in need – the sick, poor, forgotten ones – are Jesus himself: see Matt. 25.) This is what Buddhists might discover in Jesus and what would resonate with the depths of Buddhist spirituality: “Complete openness – nothing holy”, as the Zen tradition has it, referring to a famous saying attributed to Bodhidharma.

### 3.3. Openness and Truthfulness due to Unconditional Love

Jesus’ attitude of surrendering the ego and its willpower to God (“Thy will be done”) is certainly an attitude Buddhists are apt to appreciate – even his self-negation unto the cross, as expressed in Paul’s famous hymn on *kenosis*. This has been taken up by Zen-Buddhists of the Kyoto-school in particular. We are not to

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<sup>6</sup> A. Pieris, *Theologie der Befreiung in Asien*, Freiburg: Herder 1986, 30ff.

assess whether or not these things have been correctly understood but to report the resonance of Jesus with Buddhists. In this sense, self-negation and discipleship in following this self-negation is central to Jesus' life as well as to the Buddhist path. Jesus says: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life (for me and for the gospel) will save it" (Mk 8: 34f).

Buddhists should not be irritated by the fact that this logion links saving one's life to Jesus personally and to the gospel. For one thing, what this reflects is the experience of early Christian disciples under persecution. For another, this link reflects precisely the existential concern: You need to take up your own cross on your own path (which is difficult). You have to go yourself, and nobody can remove the difficulty from you. But you can be confident that this leads to the goal, for the path has been prepared before you by Christ.

Jesus' radical surrender and giving up of ego implies a total trust in God the Father. This trust makes it possible for human beings to be totally honest and open without fearing the loss of their dignity and identity. Dignity does not depend on human achievement but on God's gift, his love, his presence and so on. (Later this experience became known under the more juridical term "justification".) This humbleness, humility and openness is possible in Christian spirituality, though not often realized, of course. But it is a ferment that is visible. It seems that Buddhists who perhaps concern themselves overmuch with the question of which level of Bodhisattvahood (*bhūmi*) they have achieved and ought thus to be able to dwell on – Buddhists preoccupied with their own perfection – seem to appreciate and enjoy this Christian humility and honesty, for it is a precondition for a relaxed mind.

I remember a dialogue I had with Buddhist monks in Dharamsala.<sup>7</sup> The monks were extremely eager to hear about the Christian concept of sin, confession and the forgiveness of sin. They maintained that the difference between "ought" and "being" would not be openly addressed in their monastic life; if it were, there would be lot of hypocrisy: The ideal of perfection in Mahayana would be so high that it would be difficult if not impossible to speak about concrete faults and mistakes, at least for those higher up in the hierarchy. Truthfulness and humble realism con-

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Mv.Brück/Wh. Lai, *Buddhismus. und Christentum*, München 1997, 57

cerning one's self-image would be something they admired in Christian spirituality.

#### 4. Projections – Creative Imagination

The topic of this paper concerns what I envisage Buddhists to envision about Jesus. That is to say, we are neither descriptive nor historical here but rather imaginative. To envisage “Buddhists developing a relation to Jesus” or “Christ and the Buddha embracing each other” in a creative way requires much more than a scholarly approach to the problem. An intellectual (linguistic, historical, methodological) analysis describes and relates the respective patterns of each other's past in order to construct a picture of the present. The future, on the other hand, is not the business of the scholar. Rather, it demands the artist, the poet, the mystic visionary to *see* in a nutshell what is already at hand, and to project images which can serve as guiding principles for possible ways and means. And it requires an actual experiential encounter with the “fruits” or consequences of Jesus' presence on earth, i.e., it requires an experience of the results of his presence. For a Buddhist this could take the form of a vision of Christ's immediate spiritual presence in the deeper levels of consciousness, but such experiences would be rare. More common would be an encounter with a disciple of Christ today. There is a story:<sup>8</sup>

During one of the exchange programs between Tibetan Buddhists and American Benedictines a Tibetan monk, Kunchok Sithar, addressed a larger meeting of Christians in Oklahoma. After his talk he was asked in a rather aggressive way by a conservative Protestant Christian: “Did you accept our Lord Jesus Christ, King of Heaven and earth, the only savior of humankind?” The Buddhist monk replied: “No, I have not met Jesus. But I met many of his disciples, and I am happy in their presence. Indeed, I love them very much.”

There is an other methodological question to be raised: How do I come to know the other unblinded by the bias of my own tradition and language? Is it possible to take a third position in order to judge both, my own and the other's position? There is

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<sup>8</sup> *Mv.Brück/Wh. Lai, op.cit., 50*

certainly no third position; I think and speak always in my own language. But I can look critically at my thinking, tradition, language and religion, i.e., I can use the tools of my tradition in order to reflect upon and distance myself from the presuppositions of my tradition. In other words: I can realize that my tradition and language is limited and not universal!

The touchstone in the comparative endeavor here is not some pre-fixed tenet informed by my traditional way of thinking and prejudice but the dialogical discourse itself in the actual encounter of people of different traditions. If the other partner enters into the encounter on the same basis, then creative development for both is possible. There are many examples of this “mutual transformation” (John Cobb) which leads us deeper into the mystery of the sources of our respective traditions.

In other words: Our interreligious concern needs more visionary and poetic impulses! The poet might be informed by an academic study of historical patterns and paradigms – and this would be the ideal case, because it helps to distinguish visionary quality from escapist fantasy.

Here I must be brief, and therefore I would like to give just one example: Carrin Dunne’s “Buddha and Jesus”<sup>9</sup>. This small book contains talks between the two masters which the poet (who is a scholar in religious studies) imagines. She makes no claim to “historical proof” but instead projects basic impulses from these two human beings and their traditions onto the reference-field of our own present-day questions. The result is a most touching drama reflecting the questioning heart of the contemporary, secularized (or not-yet-secularized) person who lives in doubt of her own and humankind’s future. The point is that a creative *translation* of our respective traditions is called for, not just the repetition of old patterns in order to perpetuate what we believe to be the glorious past.

To give an example: Gautama argues that Jesus should not direct attention onto his own divinity, but rather onto the divine nature of his disciples; for it would be much easier to accept their own divine nature than to accept another person’s claim to divine nature. Jesus answers that precisely because it is more difficult it should be the starting point for religious practice. Gautama recognizes: “Not being in the

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<sup>9</sup> Carrin Dunne, *Buddha & Jesus. Conversations*, Springfield, Ill.: Templegate 1975. Cf. M.v.Brück/Wh. Lai, *op.cit.*, 323 ff.

grip of another's illusion of self, one is quicker to perceive another's shortcomings and biases than one's own."<sup>10</sup>

Buddhism sees the potential of enlightenment in every living being while analyzing reality as *duakha*. Jesus talks about sin and the tremendous corruption of human nature while reminding his friends that they all are sons and daughters of the Divine Father. Are these two views incompatible? Here, I do not want to go into an analytic discussion of this problem. I just want to draw our imagination to the answer Carrin Dunne is trying to give in her fictional conversation between the two masters. Says Gautama to Jesus:

“You have come to reveal the secret thoughts of hearts, regardless of what those secret thoughts may be. How can there be a revelation of the very beautiful without a corresponding revelation of the very ugly?

Jesus: If only it were an abstract teaching, and the lives of men were not at stake!

Gotama: No, cruel as it may seem, you do men a great favor in unveiling the blackness of their hearts. It is the shock of that self-discovery which explodes the prison walls. With the collapse of the idea of self comes the release into compassion. Those who fail to make the discovery, who refuse it, not only in the first moments of reeling and staggering from the blow, but who turn deaf ears and blind eyes, they remain in their deafness and blindness, and that is their woe. For them the revelation has never occurred.

Jesus: Yes, Gotama, I see what you mean. It comes from each man when the time is right.

Gotama: Infallibly.

Jesus: At the precise moment when he reaches the fullness of time.

Gotama: And passes over into eternity.

Jesus: When he accepts his whole past, his whole present, his whole future.

Gotama: When he accepts the world's past, the world's present, the world's future."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Dunne, *op.cit.*, 64

<sup>11</sup> Carrin Dunne, *Buddha & Jesus, op.cit.*, 69

The point of interreligious encounter is not to demonstrate who is right and who is wrong or to assert that everybody says the same thing. The point is to encourage one other to a spiritual practice which requires everybody to go beyond ego, beyond the ordinary religious claims of true pronouncements, established identities etc. This is why it is the mystic who is the archetype of the person able to reach out, to reach out to people of other faiths and identities. Conceptual clarification is important for hermeneutical awareness, and without this awareness we could not understand the other in herotherness – which in turn would deprive us of the real experience of learning and change. But beyond clarification is the communion in a mystery beyond ego.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. The hermeneutical answer

Again, much has been written and said in this area, and the process of clarification is still going on. I do not think that any method has been really satisfactory so far, nor do I have an answer either, of course. The basic problem is: How do we really understand the other without imposing our own structure of language, meaning and psychology on him/her, allowing the other to remain other, and yet understood by us — which means that s/he is by no means *only* “the other” any more, for understanding is an act of integration!

One of the most thorough attempts in this field is Perry Schmidt-Leukel’s, *“Den Löwen brüllen hören”. Zur Hermeneutik eines christlichen Verständnisses der buddhistischen Heilsbotschaft*<sup>12</sup> (“Listening to the Lion’s Roar. Towards a Hermeneutics of a Christian Understanding of the Buddhist Message of Salvation”). After discussing (and generally dismissing, for good reasons) many hermeneutic attempts of the past and present, the author suggests that we have to start with the basic human experiences (such as suffering, death and relationship) precisely because they can be found in all traditions – and yet are respectively situated in a specific *hierarchy*, a hierarchy which in Buddhism is different from Christian-

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<sup>12</sup> *Schöningh: Paderborn 1992.*

ity's. Whereas Buddhism takes off from the experience of impermanence and suffering, Christianity starts with the experience of personal (and person-making) relationship. All other concepts of God or the Ultimate, the religious path, the understanding of the human situation etc., in the two traditions are derived from these starting-points. Such a hermeneutic attempt sounds well grounded, but the problem is that even those basic experiences of the human being are mediated by particular traditions, languages and differing symbol systems; they are not experienced independent from the conditions that forged the history and language of the given tradition.

Therefore I suggest that the hermeneutical basis for interreligious communication is not to be found in the past; it is not in the search for an original historical pattern or whatever; *it is the present*. Precisely in this moment as I speak, and a follower of another tradition with his own mother-tongue listens, or as he speaks and I listen (speaking in the sense of an all-comprehensive communication, not just with words), a communication-field is created, and the necessary hermeneutics is worked out by trial and error in the very process of communication – not before.

In interreligious communication and communion we do not rehearse the past and then present it to the outsider, but together with him or her we create a new situation, one informed and conditioned by different pasts. We do not research "the way it really was" and then relate these *bruta facta* to each other; rather, we are much more imaginative – and the rules for the process take shape in the process itself. The motives for undertaking the process might be different in each case and for each partner, but via *communication* there gradually emerges *communion*, fragile and not ultimate, but again and again taken up as part of the cosmic play of mutuality and interrelationship observable on all levels of the evolution of reality.

## 5.2. Call for humbleness and humility

What I have been saying so far could be put into more philosophical (and more precise) or even into mythic language. But the problem is that we so easily and readily identify with "our" philosophical/traditional parlance and are so proud of our heritage, that interreligious communication becomes an opportunity for self-staging. Interreligious endeavor, however, requires more than anything else *humil-*

*ity* in face of the ever greater mystery; honesty in facing my (and my tradition's) real state of affairs in the past and in the present; and a kind of awe over against that which I do not (yet) and can not understand.

We may say that this is the way of the cross or *kenosis*, or the mutual conditioning envisaged by the concept of *pratityasamutpada*, helping us to overcome the clinging to our own substantialistic concepts – or deconstructed symbols, as the Buddhists would put it. We might call it an act of total and unconditional surrender (*Islam*), but more important than the name is that the concept becomes an attitude actually shaping our lives, including our interreligious relations and interpretations, as this has to do with the spiritual level we discussed earlier.

The ways of silence and engaged love, communion in psychologically manageable groups, are building blocks for an interreligious understanding none of us is able to describe. We do not need a call for more (and better) books by Buddhists *about* Jesus (or the other way around), or for more institutions; we do not need to speculate as to whether religions (and languages) will merge or stay apart, whether the processes of learning from each other and mutual transformation (Cobb) will touch the identity of the present religious traditions in such a way that they will disappear or that they will become even more self-conscious. After all, all our religions have appeared in time, changed in time, and they may disappear or transform in time. We do not know and do not need to know. All that is required is honesty, simplicity and an integrated approach (similar perhaps to Gandhi's model) to shape ways for an interreligious concern which are genuine (measured according to the basic insights of our respective traditions) and helpful (in the sense of furthering the contemporary impulse for liberating and holistic authenticity). In this regard, it is our image of Jesus and our image of Gautama that matters, and both are being transformed all the time, as history shows us. What is required is that we recognize our different identities which are always "soft", flexible, in-the-making, *relational*. I have called this the process of building identity in partnership. This in turn is possible only on the basis of a strong and unconditional faith in God/the Ultimate Good or the Power of Enlightenment which supports us even if we fail, or better: precisely in our failures and errors.