

Transcending the Temporary: Buddhism Encountering God in the Diversity of Faiths

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:6-7

We are on a journey of seeking an encounter with God through a cursory overview of the some of the religious traditions of the world. To some Christians, such a journey is meaningless, after all we follow the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. And yet, I hope that as we unpack a bit about other traditions, we might come to admire and respect the ways that peoples have encountered the Divine. I hope that this journey might infuse new meaning and significance into our own traditions and understandings of God, and maybe just maybe, our understanding of God might expand as we experience the ways people worship and understand what God is doing in our world.

Just this week Deputy Sandeep Dhaliwal, a Sikh police officer in Houston, was killed during a routine traffic stop because of religious intolerance and fear. He joined the police force as a turban-wearing Sikh to help heal and bridge some of the misunderstandings and harm between law enforcement and the Sikh community, but at this traffic stop, hatred won the day and his life was cut short. From my religious perspective, such ignorance, violence and intolerance is completely contrary to what Jesus taught and modeled for those who might follow him.

This week, we consider the faith tradition of Buddhism, which might seem a little bit of a stretch since Buddhists don't necessarily ascribe to a doctrine or understanding of God. The tradition of Buddhism is sometimes considered a philosophy and other times a religion. Since there are 320 million Buddhists in the world, with a variety of beliefs and practices, our consideration will remain pretty skeletal, but important.

Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, was a Hindu in India. He was a wealthy young prince, whose mother died in childbirth. His father sought to shelter him from pain and suffering, surrounding this young boy with everything good and beautiful. In many ways he had everything, yet he yearned for something more. Siddhartha's Hindu tradition taught him that God was ultimately unknowable and mysterious so God wouldn't be the one to turn to for answers. Thus, Buddhism doesn't mention God or deny the existence of God. The story goes that Siddhartha journeyed out in the world three times by chariot, encountering first an elderly man, second an ill person, and the third a dead person. Each time, asking if this was the fate of all people to have his charioteer reply – yes, one day we all grow old, suffer illness, and eventually die. When he was 35, while sitting under a tree, he determined to stay there until he found answers, and he fell into a trance, believing he had reached enlightenment, discovering the ways to overcome sadness and suffering.

The Buddha's teachings and the teaching of subsequent Buddhas invite followers to take responsibility for their own minds. Life is never pain-free, but we can accept the human condition and not allow pain to cause suffering. Pastor Adam Hamilton interviewed a Buddhist teacher, who summarized the eightfold path of Buddhism as avoiding doing evil, doing all the good one can, and purifying one's mind.

As Barbara Brown Taylor considered her own attraction to Buddhism, she realized that the Christian faith teaches about God, and Buddhism teaches about living one's life through choices. *"[Buddhism] is not about God. It is not about gaining converts or opposing other ways. It is "just" about life, with an open offer of methods for living more mindfully to anyone who would like to try them out and decide if they are useful or not"* (Holy Envy, p. 54).

The Buddhist tradition doesn't seem as contrary to Christianity because Jesus also taught to avoid doing evil, to do good, and to purify one's mind. The meditative practices of Buddhism, the centering of singing bowls and chanting seem different, and yet at a deeply spiritual level, they seem all too familiar.

We differ on our understanding of the source of suffering – Buddhism teaching that the source of suffering comes from clinging or attachment. Christians understand evil as a spiritual reality in the world since the beginning, and our own sins, individual and corporate sins, giving life to evil in the world. We don't necessarily see all attachments as negative – material goods, greed, obsession with achievement, etc. sure, but not attachment to people, communities, and good causes. The solution to the problems of suffering, according to Christians is not ultimately detachment, but reliance on God's grace to move – in our lives, through our actions, and in the world. Paul wrote to the Philippians to pray, and God's peace will come...this is not detachment, but an ultimate attachment of the supreme quality.

We differ on our understanding of what happens eternally – not obliteration like a drop of water being united with the ocean, but we anticipate our own resurrection with all creation, including, very specifically maintaining our unique and differentiated selves.

However, with all that makes us different, there is an emphasis in Buddhism in transcending the temporary and finding perspective that could be clarifying for us. The Dalai Lama, who is the 14th leader of Tibetan Buddhism co-wrote a book with Archbishop Desmond Tutu about Joy, and his ability to not deny the existence of suffering but transcend that which is temporary is admirable. Tutu commented, *"we often feel that suffering will engulf us, or that the suffering will never end, but if we can realize that it, too, will pass, or as the Buddhists say, that it is impermanent, we can survive them more easily, and perhaps appreciate what we have to learn from them, find meaning in them, so that we come out the other side, not embittered but ennobled. The depth of our suffering can also result in the height of our joy."* (The Book of Joy, p.156)

As Christians, we do not often exhibit that whole not worrying thing very well. We don't commit time for prayers and meditation. We allow ourselves to be consumed with attachments, to material possessions, idols of success and accomplishments, keeping up with the Joneses. Perhaps the lesson we learn from Buddhism is understanding impermanence – that which is simply not worth the effort it takes to consume our hearts, our souls and our joy. The Buddhist tradition invites us to breathe, to sync our souls with the universe, to do good, dwell in that which heals and inspires...which starts to sound like that very next two verses in Philippians,

"Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." (Philippians 4:8-9)

May today be a day when we hear God's invitation to dive deeper in our relationship with Her and taste the sweetness of peace. Amen.

