



## **Newsletter Archives**

### **Buddha and Christ Two Gods on the Path to Humanity**

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# **Buddha and Christ - Two Gods on the Path to Humanity**

## **Article of the Month - November 2003**

An enduring episode in the annals of Christian art is the 'Last Supper' of Jesus Christ. This was the final meal he had prior to his crucifixion. However, before partaking of the food, Jesus rose from the table, took off his outer garments and tied a towel around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the feet of his twelve disciples sitting around him. Intrigued and bashful at the same time, one of them exclaimed: 'You, Lord, washing my feet?' The Great One answered: 'At present you do not understand what I am doing, but one day you will.'

After washing their feet, he put on his garment and sat down again. Addressing them he said: 'Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me master and lord, and rightly so, because that is what I am. If I then, your lord and master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have set you an example: you are to do as I have done for you.'

Yes, the Great Christ himself knelt on the hard floor, and with his graceful hands, cleansed the feet of each and every of his disciple. This inspiring parable gives us a significant insight into Christ's humility and the essentiality of his message:

"He who wants to be great must become the smallest of all." (Mark 9.35).

Buddha was born into a royal family amongst rich and extravagant circumstances. Yet he gave it up all and became a monk, subsisting on the charity of others. Thus from the highest material station he graduated himself to the humblest and lowliest worldly state possible. Hence says Christ at another place in the Bible: "Whosoever exalts himself shall be abased; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14).

As a relevant aside it should be observed that the symbolic washing of the disciple's feet also signifies that by sacrificing himself at the cross, Jesus has in a sense washed away the sins of all humanity.

Jesus Christ and Buddha, born in two different traditions separated by large geographical distances, nevertheless share common characteristics, which is not surprising since they are but both manifested expressions of the universal human yearning for mystical harmony with the rhythms of nature. According to Robert Elinor, 'Buddha and Christ are but local inflections of a universal archetype: the Cosmic Person imaging wholeness.' Beneath the perceived differences underlying these two visionaries, there are subtle unifying attributes which are amply exemplified in the life they led and the message they spread.

An important idea in this context is the belief shared by both in the natural cosmic law of cause and effect, popularly known as 'karma.' Christ says for example:

'Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive earthly men their trespasses neither will your Father forget your trespasses. Therefore all things whatsoever you would like that men should do to you, do them; for this is the law and the prophets.' And of course the popular quote:

"You shall love your neighbor as yourselves." (Mark 12: 31)

The Buddha reiterates whatever Christ puts forward and elaborates:

'Hard it is to understand: By giving away our food, we get more strength; by bestowing clothing on others, we gain more beauty; by founding abodes of purity and truth, we acquire great treasures. The charitable man has found the path of liberation. He is like the man who plants a sapling securing thereby the shade, the flowers and the fruit in future years. Even so is the result of charity, even so is the joy of him who helps those that are in need of assistance; even so is the great nirvana.'

Since they both embodied universal human aspirations and their ultimate realization, it was but natural that the art they inspired too would develop motifs which would elaborate similar principles, though the metaphors deployed would vary, being dependent upon local contexts.

Rather bewilderingly for the interested reader, the first verses of the New Testament are merely a long list of names. Now the New Testament is the sacred scripture from which much of our information about the life and deeds of Christ are derived. Thus this lengthy array of names is bound to have some spiritual import too. It does. These names enumerate the ancestors of Joseph, Christ's earthly father. Significantly, one of the names mentioned is that of David, the second and greatest king of Israel (famous for his victory over the giant Goliath). Thus is Jesus proved to belong to a line of kings. We have already noted Buddha's royal antecedents.

This typical characteristic presented both a challenge and opening to artists. Here was an abstract attribute (divinity) reduced to an earthly metaphor (kingliness), and thus was presented a solution to the difficult task of representing simultaneously their twin nature: fully human and fully divine. The question only remained of developing visual formulae that would convey eloquently the dual personalities of these exalted beings. Both traditions went about it differently:



According to Christian legend, towards the end of one hard December in Palestine, a Jewish carpenter and his pregnant wife traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be taxed by the bureaucrats of Imperial Rome. There was no room for them at the inn, so they lodged in a stable, where the young woman, weary after the long journey, gave birth to a son. Alerted by angels. Shepherds hurried down from the hills to see the baby. Three kings guided by a star, came from the east to offer him gifts. The shepherds signify the Jewish people while the three kings are differently colored: black, brown and white, representing Africa, Asia, and Europe respectively.

**Gossaert. The Adoration of the Kings, c. 1510**

The essence being that not only the people of Israel rather rulers from all over the world came to venerate the infant Christ. That he was glorified thus by kings representing the majority of humanity reconfirmed his own status as the king of kings, or ruler of the world. Of related interest here are the individual offerings made by the three kings. These were namely:

- a). Gold: Symbolic of Christ's earthy kingship.
- b). Frankincense: This incense is used in worship and hence is a metaphor for his divine status.
- c). Myrrh: A resin used in the embalming of the dead, thus predicting Christ's imminent and unnatural death.

Here it needs to be observed that the identification of the three visitors as kings is a later modification in Christian art as the Bible itself does not specify their royalty, rather only mentions them as 'wise men from the east.' But more importantly when they came, they asked for the 'newborn King of the Jews.' (Matthew 1:2)

The Buddhist aesthetic too was faced with a similar dilemma, namely the simultaneous depiction of humanity and divinity. But rather than take the Christian route of narrative theology transformed into verbal metaphors, the art of Buddhism presents a hard-hitting picture of the Buddha himself bejeweled and crowned as a king would be.



But if only things were so simple. This leaves the issue of divinity wide open and also a logical basis needs to be given to the representation. Both are resolved in a single and graceful stroke of artistic ingenuity. The answer lies in the gesture Buddha makes with his hands (mudra), the thumb and index finger of both hands touching at their tips to form a circle. This circle represents a wheel, and herein lies the key to the whole symbolism. In Sanskrit, the word for wheel is 'chakra,' and in ancient times the title of Chakravartin or 'wheel turner' was conferred upon a powerful and mighty ruler. The idea being that as the chariot of majestic and warrior king rolls along, all impediments on his path get crushed and no obstacle can stand in his way, expanding his empire endlessly. Similarly is Buddha glorified as a Chakravartin, the circle which his fingers make signifying the wheel, visualized as the wheel of dharma. The wheel's swift motion serves as an apt metaphor for the rapid spiritual conquest wrought by the teachings of the Buddha.

Not to be interpreted in a literal sense, Buddha and Christ are of course not sovereigns over material kingdoms, but rather cosmic emperors, ruling the spirit rather than the body. Verily does say Christ: 'My kingdom is not of this world.' (John 18:36)

## Humanity - Their Common Religion:

One of the prominent Jews of the city once invited Jesus for dinner. Jesus arrived and took his place at the table. Just then, a woman with a bad reputation in town entered. In her hands was an alabaster jar containing an ointment.

And she stood at his feet behind him weeping, and she began to wash his feet with her tears, and wipe them with her hair, and she kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.

Now when the host saw this he said to himself, if this man was a prophet he would have known who and what sort of woman this is that is touching him: for she is a sinner.

Jesus (as if reading his thoughts) said to him, Simon I have something to say to you.

There was a creditor who had two debtors: one owed five hundred pounds and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he freely forgave them both. Tell me, therefore, which of them will love him most?

The host answered, I suppose that he to whom he forgave most.

And he said, You have judged rightly.

And he turned to the woman, and said to Simon, Do you see this woman? I entered your house, and you gave me no water for my feet. But she has washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head.

You gave me no kiss: but since the time I came in this woman has not ceased to kiss my feet.

You did not anoint my head with oil: but this woman has anointed my feet with ointment.

Wherefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven. For she loved much. But he to whom little is forgiven, loves little.

This tale from the Bible illustrates Jesus' all embracing forgiveness. In Christ's kingdom of heaven there is mercy for all. Thus said Buddha: 'No sin is so great that a person cannot be purified of it. Imagine that you had murdered several Buddhas; you could still be purified.' (Dhammapada 295)



**Jean Beraud. Christ in the House of the Pharisee, 1891**



**"Father, forgive them, for they not what they do." Francisco De Zurbaran c. 1632-4**

Yes. A person can be great enough to forgive even his own murderers, as Christ said when he was hung on the cross:

'Father, forgive them, for they not what they do.' (Luke 23: 34)

It is well established that both these luminaries evolved out of the latent reaction against centuries of blind ritualism that plagued the local communities. The original meaning and symbolic structure of the rituals had been lost and what remained was exploitation and subjugation of the masses by the priestly class. Not surprisingly thus, Buddha and Christ offer refreshing insights into religious behavior. Christ says for example:

When you pray, don't pray like the hypocrites; for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by others.

Enter your closet, shut the door, and pray to your father in secret; and your father who sees you in secret shall reward you openly.

And when you pray, use not vain repetitions, as the hypocrites do; for they think that they will be heard for their much speaking. Therefore do not be like them. (Matthew 6:5-8)

Dull repetition of sacred verses does nothing to remove rust on the soul. (Buddha in the Dhammapada 240).

In a beautiful simplification Christ also elaborates upon the superiority of brotherhood of man over mere ritualism:

If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has anything against you, leave there your gift before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5: 23-24)

### **Views on Charity:**

Many people appear to be generous, but in fact are trying to gain advantage for themselves. (Dhammapada 249).

Take heed that you do not give alms making it a show. When you give alms, do not sound a trumpet. But rather when you give alms, let your left hand not know what your right hand does. Your alms be in secret and your Father who sees it in secret shall reward you openly. (Matthew 6: 1-4)

### **On Being Non Judgmental:**

It is easy to see the fault of others, but much harder to see your own faults. You can point out other people's faults as easily as pointing out chaff blowing in the wind. But you are liable to conceal your own

faults as cunning gambler conceals his dice. (Dhammapada 252)

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged; and with what measure you give, it shall be measured to you. And why behold the speck that is in your brother's eye but do not consider the log that is in your own eye? How will you say to your brother, Let me pull the speck out of your eye, when you are blind to the log in your own eye. First pull the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. (Matthew 7: 1-5)

### **And also:**

You have heard that it has been said, You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies, bless those that curse you, Do good to those that hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you, and persecute you. That you may be the children of your Father who is in heaven: For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, And sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5: 43-45)

Right he is. Who are we to make judgment on what is right or wrong? They are both twin aspects of the same reality manifested on the earth by the divine powers above.

### **The Cross and the Tree:**

It is well known that Buddha attained enlightenment under a tree. In popular parlance it is known as the bodhi tree or 'tree of knowledge.' It is not without significance that Buddha found grace under a tree. The tree, with its annual renewal of foliage, reminds us of life's continuity and suggests that Buddha was that day reborn (spiritually), as each of us will be on our own day of resurrection (Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God (John 3: 3)).



According to legend, the denuded tree on which Christ hung was made from the wood of Eden's Tree of Knowledge. It is through ascending this tree of knowledge that an ordinary human can transcend all that is material and mundane in life, gaining the heights of heaven. Thus by ending his life at the cross, the great Christ in a sense infused us with the promise of a new, spiritually enlightened life. Thus was the tree of knowledge transformed into the 'tree of life.'



The tree of life is a common feature of salvation mythology and is said to be standing at the axis of the cosmos. It is the place where divine energies pour into the world, where humanity encounters the absolute, and becomes more fully itself. Buddha and Christ, as incarnations of god, are themselves the navel or axis of the world, the umbilical point through which the energies of eternity break into time. More than a physical point, it is a psychological state which enables us to see the world and ourselves in perfect balance. Without this psychological stability and this correct orientation, enlightenment is not possible. The tree of life grows throughout the world as the principal symbol of cosmic centering and regeneration. Continually reborn through its seed at the world axis, its root thrust

down through the earth to the underworld, its trunk rises through the world, where it grasps everything in its immeasurable arms, and its crown glances heaven.

Indeed, the cross is a cosmic symbol, its vertical and horizontal lines spanning the universe. According to Rutherford: 'The cross of Christ on which he was extended, points, in the length of it, to heaven and earth, reconciling them together; and in the breadth of it, to former and following ages, as being equally salvation to both.' It is the heavenly ladder, the only ladder high enough to touch heaven's threshold.

A beautiful thing about the cross is that its center of gravity is not at its exact center, but upwards where the stake and the crossbeam meet. In simple terms it symbolizes the tendency to remove the center of man and his faith from the earth and to "elevate" it into the spiritual sphere.

In a mystical dissertation on the notion of cosmic wholeness, Jesus describes himself as a tree:



**Christ Crucified on the Vine, about 1435.  
German, Middle Rhineland Plaster, Painted,  
diameter: 21.6 cm.**

own the five senses.

I am the true vine and my father is the gardener. Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away; and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, to make it clean and bear even more fruit. You have already been made clean by the teaching I have given you. Dwell in me, as I dwell in you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself, but can only bear fruit if it is united with the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you are united with me. (John 15: 1-4)

Heaven is god's throne and earth his footstool (Isaiah 66:1), and Christ, suspended on the cross, is the connecting link.

Indeed, just as Buddha gained enlightenment by conquering the five senses, Christ, pinned in five places (the two hands, the two feet, and the head crowned with thorns), nails

## **Conclusion:**

Christ and Buddha, two manifestations of divinity, showed us that true salvation lies only on the path of humanity and compassion towards all. Indeed, through their humanity they are both related to us, and through their divinity, to god.

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