

JESUS and Buddha: Faith in a Mustard Seed

I. Prologue

JESUS AND BUDDHA: Two Messengers of Light

Two sons of Wisdom, two sages and prophets

Two World teachers with hundreds of millions of followers

Two moral and spiritual revolutionaries

who changed everything in their times and much in ours.

Their ministries changed how their cultures measure time:

Christian calendars are dated to the death & resurrection of Jesus

Buddhist calendars begin with the death & paranirvana of Buddha.

I will be offering side by side comparison of the teachings
of Jesus and Buddha on 3 key points:

their **Diagnosis** of what ails us

their ministerial responses to the reality of **Life and Death**

and their treatment plans

for what ails us.

Come, let us inquire together

with an open heart and an open mind:

how might the ethical & spiritual teachings

of Jesus and Buddha

light our path as Unitarian Universalists?

II. Two Diagnosis of What Ails Us: Sin and Suffering

Both Jesus and Buddha are portrayed as “Great Physicians”.

They hear the cries of human sorrow and come to heal us

or to help us heal ourselves.

Their diagnoses of the human condition are distinct *and yet alike*.

Jesus speaks out the tradition of Biblical prophets

who find humankind marred by “Sin”. [1]

Buddha speaks out the tradition of Asian sages who find humankind marked by “Suffering”. Sin and Suffering is where their ministries began.

The Biblical doctrine of “sin” operates on two levels, it has a **vertical** axis that connects humankind to God; it has a **horizontal** axis that connects us to our neighbors. Put these two axes together and you have a cross or a cross in a circle.

According to Christian theologian Paul Tillich **The vertical dimension of SIN, sin with a capital “S”** points to the way that humans are separated, estranged, alienated **from “God” or the “Ground of our Being”**. When we defy Divine Commandments, when we break our promises, when we act as if we were gods, the sinful gap between Creator and Creation widens.

This tendency to be estranged from the Creator and his Plan **pre-dates any action.**

It is “original sin”. It does not begin with us, it comes down to us from Adam and Eve, and is transmitted from generation to generation. Our world is **“fallen”**, we are “fallen” as the old Episcopal catechism of my father’s ancestors says: “We are sick and *there is no health in us.*”

The horizontal axis of sin is particular actions that “miss the mark”. The Hebrew word for “sin” is borrowed from archery: we keep missing the target most of the time despite our best efforts.

These sins involve our “**doing**” not our being:
they estrange us from our neighbors,
they cause of us to lose track of our “best selves”.

Buddhism offers a different diagnosis,
and a different treatment plan.

Buddhism focuses its attention on “human suffering” or “**Dukkha**”.

This term comes from blacksmithing:

a wheel is “out of joint” or dukkha, if it is not round,
if it does not turn smoothly around its axis.

If you have ever tried to drive on a flat tire, you know “**Dukkha**”:
the whole car shakes and it might be hazardous to drive.

Dukkha is not easy to translate but we could say
it is our reactive responses to stress
that transform pain into **systemic suffering**.

In Early Buddhism, Dukkha exists
in the horizontal axis of humanity in this world.

Later forms of “Pure Land” Buddhism will add in much
that original Buddhism left out-----

transforming Buddha into a supernatural savior with three bodies
who carries his faithful followers to a “Western Paradise”.

(John Cobbe: *Beyond Dialogue...*)

The causes of Dukkha are habits of our heart, mind and actions
that create suffering for our selves and others.

For Buddhists pain is a persistent feature of embodied life;
these bad habits transform pain into great suffering.

In early Buddhism, as shocking as it may seem,
there is no vertical axis to explain or cure suffering-----
there is no supernatural Creator, Judge or Savior.

There are no supernatural “angels” to help alleviate our suffering. The teachings of Old Buddha are *naturalistic, humanistic, agnostic*. Later Mahayana Buddhists will add a vertical axis *and* Buddha becomes a supernatural Savior: the Buddhas of Invincible Light (Amitabha Buddha).

Sin & Suffering: Points of Convergence

With those differences in mind,
I want to point out two areas of possible common ground where these paths cross.

Common Ground #1: Persistent imperfection

The world, our selves, our neighbors are rarely **perfect** we can always imagine a better self, a better neighbor, a better sermon than the one we are experiencing right now.

Christian and Buddhist teachings
*invite us to embrace **persistent imperfection** in our selves & others.*
If we can admit that we are imperfect
we are much less likely to need a scape-goat---
someone else to blame for our own short-comings.
That makes us less dangerous and better neighbors.

As I have said in every congregation I have served:

“we don't do perfect here, we do better.”

If you're hoping for perfection here, you've come to the wrong place. This sermon which returns to the full manuscripts of my early ministry,
is an attempt to try something new:
maybe better, maybe worse---too soon to tell.

Common Ground #2: Habits of Heart, Mind & Action

As Christian teachings evolved,
the Church began to map the “7 Deadly Sins”
which keep us alienated from God and each other.
[gluttony, lust, sloth, anger, pride, envy, greed?]

Buddhist tradition identified 4 “Toxins” that multiply pain into
suffering: fear, anger, desire and ignorance.

Not identical lists, but parallel lists.

Knowing the **7 Deadly Sins** or **4 or 5 Deadly Toxins**

can make us less likely to sin, less likely to create suffering.

These lists are a good diagnostic tool which might produce
a more individualized treatment plan for sin or suffering.

They also might make us more compassionate
for the ways that people like us get stuck.

III. Two Responses to Life and Death

All spiritual and ethical teachings must deal
with the terrible realization that we are alive *now*,
but we won't *always* be----

Jesus and Buddha were not only teachers and prophets
they were **ministers** who had to respond personally
to people like us caught between love and loss.

Here are two stories of these founding ministers in action.

Jesus Raises Lazarus (John 11. 1 - 44)

This story appears *only* in the Gospel of John
which was written 200 years **AFTER** the death of Jesus.
John emphasizes the divinity of Jesus the Christ
more than earlier gospels like Mark
which emphasize the humanity of Jesus.

Jesus received news that Lazarus,
beloved brother of Mary & Martha is sick.
He waited two days and then tells his disciples---
“Let's go to Judae and wake up our friend Lazurus”.
One of the disciples points us that they were just stoned in Judea
and that if Lazarus is just asleep, he can wake up on his own.

Jesus said : *“I meant that Lazarus is dead,
and I'm going to wake him from death,
so that you might believe.”*

So Jesus and the disciples go to Bethany in Judea
where Lazarus has already died.
Martha his sister says, *“Jesus...if only you had been here,
our brother would still live.”*

Jesus says: *“Your brother will rise again...
do you believe in me, Martha?”*
After Martha says *“Yes, Lord, I believe in you!”*
Jesus holds a similar interview with Mary,
who says when asked: *“Yes Lord, I believe in you!”*
Jesus weeps with the sisters to share their grief,
then leads Mary and Martha to the grave of Lazarus.

He commands that the stone be rolled away despite complaints
that after 4 days Lazarus is likely to stink.
The stone is rolled away, and Lazarus walks out alive,
still wrapped in his funeral shroud.

Old Buddha was faced with a similar request
from a young mother, still holding her dead child in her arms.
She said: *“O Lord Buddha, can't you raise my child from death?”*

Buddha replied, *“Perhaps, but first you must bring me a single mustard seed from a house that has experienced no pain, no disease, no sorrow, no death.”*

The young mother goes to every home in the village---
rich and poor, upper caste and out-caste
In every home what does she find???

After a long day of searching she comes back to Buddha and says:
“Lord Buddha, there is no house in our village that has escaped pain, disease, suffering and death.”

According to tradition,
the young mother bowed to the Awakened One,
and went home to bury her daughter.
The next morning, she joined the followers of the Buddha.
She became known as “Karuna”
whose name means *tender-hearted compassion*.

Do you see, do you hear, do you feel the power of these two Spiritual Doctors coming face to face with the mystery of life and death?

Jesus in the gospel of John says *“Believe in me.”*

Buddha in this story says, in effect, *“Go and see for yourself”*.

Which doctor do *you* prefer?

Who would you call upon in your hour of need?

Where do you find comfort and meaning:

in hoping for a better life beyond this one?

Or in embracing this life with its all its limitations?

Or do you prefer both? Or neither?

Who or what is the doctor of your soul?

IV. Salvation or Awakening?

The last turn on this two-fold path is perhaps more complicated: what do Jesus and Buddha promise their followers?

Both of their names provide significant clues.

“**Buddha**” comes from a Sanskrit/Pali root (Bud) which means “wake up”, “awakened” or “enlightened”.

“**Jesus**” or “Yeshua” comes from an Aramaic/Hebrew root which means “to save” or “savior”.

So we can say that from the beginning the emphasis in Buddhism has been *waking up* and the emphasis in Christianity has been *salvation*.

But religions are lively engines of ingenuity and given centuries to evolve they create new variations some of which are heresies compared to orthodox faith. A school in early Christianity called the Gnostics emphasizes not faith (belief beyond question) but “gnosis” (inner awakening) as the key to transformation.

If you doubt this please consult the Gnostic “Gospel of Thomas” or “Thunder Perfect Mind” or the “Gospel of Mary Magdalene” or Elaine Pagels fine book *Beyond Belief* which compares the Gospels of John and Thomas.

So too, as Buddhism evolved in India, China, Japan and Tibet it spawned hybridized versions called “Mahayana” (large vehicle) which turn Buddha into a supernatural Savior who welcomes his followers into a transcendent “western paradise”.

In “Pure Land” Buddhism the key to salvation
is not awakening (“gnosis” or “bodhi”)
but **faith** in the saving power of Buddha!

As an evangelical friend and mentor of mine puts it:
This is not a theoretical question, Rev. Ted.
The important question is:

how deep is your vehicle in the ditch, Rev. Ted?

Will a jump-start or tune-up
from regular spiritual/ethical practice suffice?
Or do you need to call the Transcendental Tow-Truck
with the flashing white Light on top
to haul your sorry vehicle out of the ditch
and put it back on the road again?

If you imagine your body-mind-spirit as that vehicle
what do you require at this moment:

a natural awakening or heavenly salvation?

How far is **your** car into the ditch?

I can't answer that question for you,
as the old gospel song goes:
you have to walk it for yourself,
nobody else can walk it for you.....

V. Benediction: Words of Blessing

*Let us give thanks for these two World Teachers,
Peace-makers, and Earth-shakers
Buddha and Jesus.
May we find our own path
in the radiance of these two bright Lamps
united by the Light which illumines all beings.*

