

# *Buddha's Mindfulness, Jesus' New-Mindedness*

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Friends, it seems to me we have two choices: Either we can distance ourselves from the sacred traditions of the world, as something alien to us, or we can connect with them, as being inherent to our humanism -- in the classical sense of the word, that "nothing human is foreign" to us. Me, I a connector.

Gotama, called the Buddha, and Jesus, called the Christ, are two historical persons, but persons so deeply identified with their titles that their titles have virtually become their names. Even though the paths they marked out seem to lead in different directions, still these paths throw light on each other when we compare them. My title suggests that the Buddha's way is a way of mindfulness, and Jesus' way is a way of new-mindedness. I mean to suggest that these are two different-yet-strikingly-akin ways of calling us to awaken -- to awaken to the encompassing spiritual reality within which we live and move and have our being. And that is the most that any religious community can do. It may try to impose, but cannot, really. It can only awaken and create a community of the awakened.

Here we are called into community. Here we are called to speak truthfully the truth that we know, because we have found ourselves within it. As if after a long slumber, we have been awakened to it. Just this is the miracle of awakening: to find our true selves in the place where we have been all along. A dedicated community (such as our own), rooted in a sacred tradition, fosters this process. The Buddhist name for such a community is *sangha*, and the Christian name, *ecclesia*.

*Ecclesia* means "the called out," the people called out from their private pursuits into public assembly for public concerns. The sense of a political body, a community of shared moral commitment, clings to the word. The Buddhist *sangha* is first of all a community of mutual support and learning around religious practice. In the *sangha*, supporting one another in the practices of spiritual discipline, even as solitary a practice as meditation, is central. Are these forms of community different, then, or are they essentially the same? In both, the goal is to be done with illusion, obliviousness and indifference, to overcome isolation, despair and self-defeat, to find a nurturing home for our spirits.

There are astonishing similarities between the Buddha and the Christ, as if both traditions were homing in on a common insight: a call to spiritual awakening and to moral

solidarity. And both faiths have shown their great ability to cross over cultural and ethnic boundaries.

There are also striking differences. Consider their attitudes toward time and history. The one speaks of time as a time of decision. The Greek New Testament word *kairos* means "the right time," the propitious or, we could say, "the ripe time." W.H. Auden summed up the biblical outlook: The past is not to be taken seriously ("Let the dead bury their dead") nor the future ("Take no heed for the morrow"), but only the present moment of decision ("Now is the appointed hour").

Buddhism seems to run in the opposite direction: It seeks the experience of the present as time's only reality, of past and future as at best distractions, of Nirvana as a state of being beyond all time, an eternal present. And yet, just here, perhaps the two traditions agree: Only the present moment, whether it be called a moment of awakening or a moment of decision, has absolute weight. According to the Renaissance philosopher Nicholas of Cusa, opposites coincide.

The Buddha's way is supremely dispassionate. His idealized image is an image of one in perfect repose. His image points to a place beyond agony, beyond being agonized, beyond suffering. The Buddha does not weep and does not broadly smile (although as "the laughing Buddha" he laughs raucously). Normally he displays the half-smile of knowing -- the expression that says, *Here and now, I am fully aware, I am content, I am at one with myself and all being.*

The way of Jesus is virtually the opposite. He is passionate; in fact, his life story comes to a climactic conclusion in "the Passion Story," which runs from his entry into Jerusalem, with a wild mass demonstration, to his desperately lonely execution on a cross. Passion means intense feeling, whether of pleasure or of pain. His story invokes the whole range of intense feelings -- anger and cruelty, love and loyalty, betrayal and pain and wonder -- and evokes these feelings in us. Friedrich Nietzsche (no friend of Christianity) said of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" music, "Whoever has wholly forgotten Christianity will hear it there again."

Jesus imperiously calls those who would follow him to turn about and not look back, to know the present as a moment of radical change. He declares: *The appointed time, the time to give all to love, is at hand. Only we must awaken to the realm of God that is present; only we must grasp it with courage and fierce affection.* He said: *Let yourself be changed from within -- be new-minded.*

There are striking differences between the milieu in which Jesus appears and that of Gotama. Jesus' world crackles with the politics of a repressed people, a people under the heel of a foreign power. The Jews then were like the Palestinians today. "Messiah" begins as a political title, and becomes the apocalyptic wish of a subjugated people. Some dream of a bloody uprising, and some of supernatural intervention: God will come down to crush their enemies.

But the awakening to which Jesus calls his people is the transformation of these dreams of revenge and recompense. No wonder he puts so much emphasis on forgiveness: This word says, *Put aside your dreams of vindication and violence. Be transformed as the world is transformed in your hearing -- be turned about -- be new-minded. Metanoia*, the New Testament word usually translated as "repent," literally means re-think, or as we say, "think again" and "start fresh." This spiritual imperative arises again and again: Be new-minded.

For the Buddha, the present moment is the only moment that is real. Only this moment actually lies within the spiritual reality that is present and available to us. The past is only a memory, and memory only exists in the present moment. The future is only an anticipation, and anticipation too only exists in the present moment. Be attentive, then, to the present moment, for all else is illusion, a spiritual darkness in which we lose our way. Only by mindfulness, only by being here now, can we be whole.

Thich Nhat Hanh retells Leo Tolstoy's story of "The Three Wondrous Answers." Here are the three questions, and their answers: *What is the best time to do each thing?* This present moment, now. *Who are the most important people to work with?* The people you are with, right here, right now. *What is the most important thing to do at all times?* Most important is to seek the happiness of the person who is with you here, who is present to you now, for this deed contains the whole purpose of life.

Is this a Buddhist or a Christian story? Tolstoy was a Russian and a radical Christian, one who sought to live by the Sermon on the Mount in the most literal way -- turning the other cheek, forgiving enemies and all. Thich Nhat Hanh is a South Vietnamese and a Zen Buddhist, one not content to meditate only but committed to social service and political action. Or have opposites coincided again here?

The king's questions and the hermit's answers in Tolstoy's story are likewise the questions and the answers of a Zen Buddhist monk from Vietnam. In its purest forms, Buddhism is atheistic: Supernaturalism does not edify, but distracts the mind with vain imaginings. It is also deeply pessimistic: "Existence is suffering" is its First Noble Truth. A little too pessimistic for you? Scott Peck proposed his own translation: "Life is difficult." Well, all right! I'll buy that! Put it this way: To exist is to get pushed around -- to be subjected to forces greater than yourself, until finally, they will kill you. Fully to recognize this first truth is to become a centered self and to have "dominion" over your own existence. It is to become "a lamp unto yourself."

To know that life is suffering (when we wanted the story to end as all those childhood stories ended, "And they lived happily ever after") -- to know that life is lived in the shadow of the cross (the sign of a love that sacrifices its happiness for the happiness of another), when all we wanted was to call ourselves the carefree children of Nature -- these things are difficult, these truths are hard truths. Decidedly not New Age truths, but age-old truths. To know of suffering and sacrifice is also to know the meaning of compassion and the meaning of love. What is the most important thing to do at all times?

At all times, what is the most important thing to do? To be compassionate and kind. To be a friend and to love.

Sidhartha Gotama lived in northern India, in the region of Benares, in the sixth century B.C.E. His life is shrouded in legend, and yet his followers have never doubted that a flesh-and-blood man sat here, beneath the Bo tree, and gained Enlightenment, just as we picture him still.

What are you? they asked him. Are you a god? "No," he replied. An angel, then? "No." A saint, a mahatma? "No." Then what are you? they demanded to know. Gotama replied, "I am awake." His answer became his title, for this is what "the Buddha" means. In Sanskrit, *budh* means both "to wake up" and "to know." Buddha, then, means the Enlightened One, the Awakened One.

Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" And the replies ran in a similar way through the possibilities: maybe a prophet (a visionary, in other words), or a rabbi (a teacher, in other words), or maybe Beelzebub (a demon), or maybe the Anointed One (a king, in other words). Christ is the term that translates Messiah, Hebrew for the Anointed One. Royalty have always been anointed with oil as a symbol of their rank, their power to rule. Joel Cadbury -- keen to the irony, in Jesus' case -- used to translate "Messiah" as "the smeared one."

Mahatmas have fared no better with the powers that be. During the revolutionary period in India, an article in the London Times began: "A new mahatma has appeared in the Ganges valley. The police are after him."

The hardest thing about ministry (as I experience ministry) is carrying around -- as if on one's back -- the expectations, the disparate and weighty expectations, of the whole community. We who minister succeed and yet never fully succeed. We are forever falling short of expectations. What does us in, more than anything else, I think, is trying to be all things to all men, women and children, and at the same time trying to be true to ourselves. And yet even in this realm, the wonderful happens -- speaking to your need is what I need, and nothing less than speaking my truth will speak to yours. Once again, opposites coincide.

Or perhaps I should say: The hardest thing about being human -- the greatest difficulty and the greatest source of suffering -- is lugging around the expectations of others (real or imagined), trying to fulfill them all and still be true to ourselves. Think of all the ways we've never been able to please our parents, our spouses, or even our own children. And many people suffer under the feeling that they have never been able to live up to God's expectations, or to please God as they imagine God to be. But isn't it the case, in each of these instances, that we suffer because we have not been able to accept ourselves, have compassion for ourselves, and therefore be ourselves? If so, the other and the self coincide.

To be mindful is to be in the present, awake to the spirit of life that breathes in you, and awake to the spirit of life that surrounds you. Friends, in the Buddha's mindfulness, find acceptance and self-acceptance, find compassion for others and forgiveness for yourselves.

To be new-minded is to be open to new life, laying hold of the goodness and strength that life offers you here and now, accepting life's gift and amazing grace. Friends, in Jesus' new-mindedness, find acceptance and self-acceptance, find compassion for others and forgiveness for yourself.

These are, I believe, two windows on one spiritual and moral reality, and the wonderful thing about being Unitarian Universalist is that both of them are open to us (and other windows besides). For this is our *sangha*, our community of spiritual practice, and this is our *ecclesia*, our community called together. Here we awaken to the mystery and wonder of being, and here we affirm one another in the solidarity of our life together.