

The Common Ground for Buddhism and Christianity— a Basis for World Peace

By Akizuki Ryomin



Introduction

There certainly appears to be a significant difference between Christianity and Buddhism. According to the Christian faith, "In the beginning God created the heaven

and the earth." And the reign of God is anticipated on earth as it is in heaven. By contrast, in Buddhism the standpoint of no God and *anatman* (no ego) has been maintained right from the time of the founder Shakyamuni. Shakyamuni did not resort to

God to solve the problem of sufferings inherent in life. He negated the substantiality of the atman (ego) that is to be saved, and espoused instead the idea of "egolessness (*niratman*)." Unlike Jesus, who spoke of the reign of God, Shakyamuni preached the law

of cause and effect based on Karma (to be precise, the Law of Dependent Co-arising, i.e., *Pratityasamutpada*).

Although I am now a Zen master, I nevertheless accepted baptism in my youth to become a Protestant Christian. For many years since then, I was continuously engaged in serious dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism in view of both religions' unique systems of thought, both within my own mind and with Christian friends of mine who are established theologians. As a result, I am now beginning to envision that these two apparently different religions share a common religious ground at the deepest fundamental. Here I would like to explain this new envisagement of mine.

As a Zen Buddhist, or rather as a man of religion, I have learned some profound lessons from Christianity. I would like to recognize that first of all. The first thing I learned from Christianity, among others, is the idea: "One who does not know the True God necessarily has an idol." The second one is this: "One who has seen the True God dies." I applied these propositions to Zen Buddhism.

The One Mind and Chinese Zen Master Huang-po

Let me take up the first proposition: "One who does not know the True God necessarily has an idol." As I ask myself if Zen Buddhists do not have an idol, the following words of ninth-century Chinese Zen master Huang-po Hsi-yun, (the teacher of Lin-chi I-hsuan), come to mind.

"Buddhas and all sentient beings are just One Mind, and there exist no other beings." "Suppose you contemplate the Buddha and imagine the forms of purity, brilliance and enlightenment; suppose you contemplate sentient beings and see in your mind the forms of defilement, stupidity and transmigration. So long as you have such an understanding in mind, you will never be able to attain enlightenment, even after you have practiced for as many aeons as there are grains of sand in the Ganges River. This is because you are attached to forms. The only truth is this One Mind. You cannot grasp even a particle of the truth other than the

One Mind. This One Mind is itself the Buddhahood and nothing else. Yet practitioners of today are blind to this very nature of the One Mind. They imagine a form of another Buddhahood-mind as residing on top of the ultimate One Mind, and seek the Buddha (True Mind) outside the One Mind. In this way, they are attached to forms in the midst of their practice. All these ways of practice are entirely illegitimate; they are not the Way to Bodhi (enlightenment)." (Huang-po Hsi-yun: "The Essentials of Mind-to-Mind Transmission").

To put it another way, people usually tend to think that what matters in Buddhism is the idea that there are ignorant sentient beings on one hand and Buddhas (awakened beings) on the other. Thus, an ignorant sentient being practices, attains *Satori* (enlightenment), and becomes a Buddha (an awakened one). However, the Zen Buddhist says: What we regard as a Buddha or a sentient being, grasped in that mutually separate way, is nothing else than a form that would be representing an independent substance as illusively constructed in the minds of common mortals, who are in bondage to earthly passions (hereafter referred to simply as "form"). You can find no such substance whatsoever anywhere. The only truth is the One Mind. Zen Buddhism directly points to this One Mind. What is the One Mind? It is the fundamental fact of existence per se, as I shall explain next.

In order to make a comparison between Buddhism and Christianity, it would be a little too crude for us to conceive the Buddhist words such as "Buddha" and "sentient being" as directly corresponding to the Christian words of "God" and "humanity." Christianity has a totally different background of thought and tradition to that of Buddhism. Thus I might call this individual being of mine technically (that is, from the viewpoint of the philosophy of religion) by the name of the individual. This would correspond to what is called the atman by Indians and the ego by modern Europeans. And I might call God and Buddha technically by the name of the Trans-individual. Using these terms of religious philosophy, the words of Huang-po as quoted earlier could read: "There does not exist the Trans-individual per se, nor the individual per se. The truth of the matter is the individual of the Trans-individual as it constitutes the sole

seamless reality."

"Immanuel" the primary contact and the secondary contact

The equivalent in the Bible of this One Mind, in the sense of the fundamental fact of existence qua the individual of the Trans-individual, as it were, can be found in the phrase "Immanuel" (God with us)."

From this point of view, both "God" and "humanity" as they stand separate from each other are only forms. Only in contact with the fundamental fact of "Immanuel" one can meet the True God. And only on that occasion do all idols disappear.

Right within this contact between God and humanity which can be biblically expressed as "Immanuel," a Japanese philosopher Takizawa Katsumi drew a distinction between the primary contact and the secondary contact.

The "primary contact between God and humanity" means the fundamental fact of "Immanuel" (God with us)," (das Urfaktum Immanuel), which unconditionally and directly constitutes the basis of the self-existence of all persons.

However, we are not usually awakened to this fact. The event in which an individual awakens to the Proto-factum is to be called "the secondary contact between God and humanity." This secondary contact is the event that brings religious life into reality.

According to Takizawa, Buddhism and Christianity represent different types of the secondary contact which is based on the primary contact. Takizawa holds that herein lies the "common ground" as this makes it possible for both religions to engage in a dialogue. It is said that Takizawa gave a clear "yes" in his reply to the question whether his primary and secondary contacts corresponded to the Buddhist terms of Hongakumon or A Priori Awakening and Shikakumon or Acquired Awakening respectively. He stated this when asked by Nishimura Eshin (Professor at the Zen Studies Department, Hanazono University) at the First East-West Spiritual Exchange Conference in Kyoto.

The "Immanuel" in the primary contact is the Grace itself which constitutes the basis of the existence of all persons. This corresponds to the "A Priori Awakening"

(Hongakumon) in Buddhism. It is a fact that "Sentient beings are by nature Buddhas," whether or not they are aware of it. Yet usually they are not awakened to this fact.

The "Immanuel" in the secondary contact is the event in which people awaken to the Grace which constitutes the basis of their existence. It corresponds to the "Acquired Awakening" (Shikakumon). (This same truth is also represented by the Sanskrit word "*prajnaparamita*.")

However, Christians have not made this distinction—i.e., the distinction between the two contacts—in their understanding of the person of Jesus. In my view, concurring with Takizawa, Jesus represents an individual who typically accomplished the secondary contact. Yet it seems to me that there has been a misunderstanding on the part of traditional Christianity to the effect that the very primary contact has been established by Jesus, or that he himself is the primary contact. This gives rise to the perception of Jesus as the unique revelation of God in history, that is, the only saviour of humankind, and hence to the absolutism of Christianity. However, as long as Christians take this stand, there will be no possibility in their hearts and minds for dialogue with other religions. I would like to add at this juncture that it is important that Christianity has maintained the line of dialogue between different religions after the decision at the Second Vatican Council.

Meanwhile, Buddhism has regarded Buddhist Awakening as the supreme criterion for all judgment, although the Awakening is an event which takes place on the part of human beings. Buddhism commits an error by putting this event, which constitutes only the secondary contact, prior to the primary contact. (I would say, Zen Buddhists are liable to degrade the Buddha Dharma, which should be essentially "egoless," into the "Zen seeking identification with the greatest ego.")

As I have explained, though I am a Buddhist, I believe that the ultimate in religion is represented by the phrase "Immanuel" (God with us) in the Bible. As a Buddhist, I deeply identify with Takizawa's religious philosophy and agree with it from the bottom of my heart.

In his personal letters to me, Takizawa used the word "one" instead of "contact." This is reminiscent of "oriental oneness," as

this was proposed by Daisetz T. Suzuki. I would like to follow this line hereafter.

Furthermore, Takizawa gave structural clarity to the notions of the "primary and secondary oneness of God and humanity." He said (i) that the relationship between the primary oneness and the secondary oneness is "inseparable, non-identical and irreversible" and (ii) that the relationship between God and humanity in the primary oneness is also "inseparable, non-identical and irreversible" in the same manner.

Additionally, with a closer look at the "non-identical" aspect, we find that God comes prior to humanity. It is absolutely impossible to reverse this order of priority. The word "irreversible" is used to signify this state of affairs (see the note on the last page).

I share the view with Takizawa that God can be distinguished from humanity (God is "non-identical" with humanity), but that God cannot be separated from humanity (God and humanity are "inseparable"). Therefore, I am not in a position to accept a God who at the beginning of creation, created the heaven and the earth and then human beings, and who judges them at the end of world history. God is always with us, here and now.

On the basis of what I have explained so far, a doubt arises: Most of the ideas about God and those about humanity indicated in the Apostolic Creed of orthodox Christianity in the section which begins with the words, "At the time of Pontius Pilate . . ." seem to differ from the idea of the "True God." Zen Buddhism would consider these ideas about God and humanity to be forms, i.e., myths. It is these forms and idols that the Zen master Huang-po referred to when he said, "There are no Buddhas of purity nor sentient beings of defilement; the only truth is the One Mind." Neither the Buddhas of purity (the Trans-individual) per se nor sentient beings of defilement (the individuals) per se exist, but rather they are forms illusively constructed by common mortals. The only truth is the "One Mind" (the individual of the Trans-individual as it constitutes the sole seamless Reality), in which Buddhas and sentient beings are one, i.e., both are inseparable, non-identical and irreversible. This implies that God and humanity, as mutually separate entities standing separate from one another, are forms illusively constructed by

common mortals. Also, these words of Huang-po seem to agree completely with that religious fact evidenced by the Bible, that is, the fact that the truth of religious existence is simply the fundamental fact of "Immanuel" in which the relationship between God and humanity is inseparable, non-identical and irreversible. We Buddhists also share this belief with Christians.

The condition for the Proto-factum "Immanuel" to manifest itself: egolessness

Thus, when and where does that fundamental fact of "Immanuel" manifest itself.

St. Paul says: "I died on the cross with Christ and have been resurrected with Christ," and "I no longer live as I myself, but Christ lives within me." What is meant by this is the event of death and resurrection. In terms of religious philosophy, I can express this by the phrase "to die to one's ego and live by one's Self." For St. Paul, Christ living within him is his "original and true Self."

Zen Buddhists refer to Christ living within St. Paul as the "True Person without Rank" alive and active within our flesh. They express the fundamental fact of "Immanuel" by the word Dharma and place importance on the time when dharma manifests itself.

Then, when does the Dharma manifest itself? It is when and only when we are egoless, that is, we have emptied ourselves (*sunyata*); in other words, when and only when we have died to our ego and have been resurrected. It is in this line that Huang-po later redefined the One Mind as the "Mind qua No Mind."

Only by dying with Christ and being resurrected with Christ, St. Paul was able to establish his own true subjecthood (i.e., original Self, True Person). The essence of both Buddhism and Christianity is to "die to one's ego and live by one's original and true Self." I believe this indicates the common religious ground which our religions share.

The next question is: where does the fundamental fact of "Immanuel" manifest itself?

I have just said that the Dharma, or the fact of "Immanuel," manifests itself when one has become egoless, or when one's ego

is emptied. Our ego is absolutely negated in *zazen*. *Zazen* is where egolessness is actually realized. It follows, therefore, that the Dharma, or the fact of Immanuel, manifests itself where *zazen* is being conducted.

Although it may sound strange, "Absolute Nothingness" in Buddhist terminology corresponds to the fact of "Immanuel." Accordingly, one's true *Zazen* is, in other words, one's experience of Absolute Nothingness as this manifests itself in oneself.

The experience of the death of ego and the resurrection as the True Self through this death is what is called "Satori" (which is another expression in Buddhist terminology for the secondary oneness of God and humanity). It can, therefore, be said that *zazen* is one's own experience of Satori itself. Whereas many people have a view that *zazen* is an instrument (or a process) for Satori, I would like to make it clear that this view is wrong. I know it is said in Christianity that "one who has seen God dies." It seems to me that the significance of this sentence accords to true *zazen*.

Although the literal translation of *zazen* is sitting meditation, this is not confined to "sitting." In traditional Buddhist terminology, *zazen* corresponds to "*dhyana*" or meditation. In Indian Buddhism, *dhyana* is one of the three disciplines of Buddhism; namely *sila*-morality (i.e., keeping precepts), *dhyana*-meditation, and *prajna*-wisdom. So meditation is just one of the three disciplines. By contrast, "*chan*," which is the Chinese equivalent to the Japanese *zen*, is taken to mean "the unity of meditation and wisdom, and the oneness of meditation and precepts." So, *zen* is the merger of the three disciplines in unity. This is why true *zazen* must be the Great Death of one's ego and the Great Rebirth of one's Self, rebirth realized through the Great Death. In other words, it is the awakening to the fundamental fact of "Immanuel." In this event, and only through this event, does one become an individual of the Trans-individual, a True Person without Rank, a Buddha.

Mysticism versus Buddhism

At this juncture, I would like to touch briefly upon the relationship between Buddhism and mysticism.

A certain Catholic priest once said when he was practicing traditional Soto Zen before joining the Sanbo Society: "I want to become one with God. Catholics do not have a complete method for attaining the union of God and man. That is why I learn the method of attaining the union from the *zazen* of Buddhism."

At the ultimate core of Hinduism, the orthodox religion in India, is, as you know, the theory of the oneness of brahman and atman. This theory advocates that atman, which is the basis of the ego, should be unified with brahman, which is the ultimate basis of the universe. As such, it is a theory of the union of God and man.

All thoughts advocating the union with the Absolute are commonly designated to be mysticism.

I am strictly opposed to the interpretation made by most scholars of Buddhism that Buddhist enlightenment (awakening to the manifestation of the Dharma) is an extension of the traditional Hindu theory of the oneness of brahman and atman. This is because I believe that the Dharma manifests itself when one has emptied one's ego. The theory of the oneness of brahman and atman says that the ego is unified to the greatest ego. It is thus ego-oriented, and therefore, represents just the opposite direction of egoless-oriented Buddhism. As it is said, "the Buddha Dharma is without ego."

I believe that Buddhism, Zen Buddhism in particular, cannot be regarded as mysticism. In his later years, Daisetz T. Suzuki, a master of mine, was opposed to seeing Zen Buddhism as mysticism. Yet I, together with Suzuki, acknowledge that there is affinity between Absolute Nothingness in Buddhism and the Godhead (Gottheit) of Eckhart, though there still remain some problems as to how Eckhart should be interpreted.

Eckhart, a German mystic who broke through the personal God and preached Godhead (Gottheit), was declared a heretic probably because his mysticism evidenced by his idea about the union of God and humanity was regarded as advocating *unio mystica*. In the legitimate Christian faith, *unio mystica* is not acceptable as the culmination of one's religious life; rather the mystery as found in the midst of one's encounter with Deity must always be *communio mystica*. In the light of the decision at the Second

Vatican Council to promote dialogues between different religions to the deepest and broadest extent possible, I hope that the Vatican will retract the declaration of heresy against Eckhart as soon as possible.

What did Shakyamuni awaken to?

After escaping from the world, Shakyamuni first learned *dhyana* (yoga) under a brahma in the country of Magada. Then he visited Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, hermits then renowned for their high virtue, and asked them for instructions. Unsatisfied with their teachings, Shakyamuni earnestly spent six years engaged in various ascetic practices, including fasting. At some point in his ordeal, however, he realized that asceticism was meaningless. He gave up fasting and bathed himself in the Neranjera River, which flowed near a certain village. He ate the yogurt offered by Sujata, a girl from the village, and recovered his physical strength. After this mental and physical adjustment, Shakyamuni went to Gaya, where he laid some grass under a big pippala tree (later called the bodhi tree), and there he calmly entered into meditation.

Thus Shakyamuni sat for some days and attained very deep, egoless meditation. One early morning, Shakyamuni experienced a kind of intuition in which the egolessness attained in meditation exploded and the Dharma manifested itself to him all of a sudden. It is said that Shakyamuni's Satori experience was occasioned by the sensation caused when he looked up and saw a morning star twinkling. Thus Shakyamuni realized that he awakened to the Dharma and became the Awakened One (Buddha). The fact thus experienced by Shakyamuni is called Satori or Bodhi.

Then, what exactly did Shakyamuni awaken to? Many scholars say that it is the Law of Dependent Co-arising, and even famous propagators would often parrot them. However, I do not think they hit the mark. Let me explain the reason.

In so far as the Law remains in the shape of preached doctrines as they are expressed through language, it is nothing but a processed product, as it were, as a result of conceptual operation for Shakyamuni to have divided into pieces the truth (the Oneness) to

which he had awakened and to have put them together, so as to formulate a certain logical doctrine.

If what Shakyamuni had awakened to were nothing more than the Law of such nature, all rational persons could perfectly grasp it in terms of logical intellect, with their own ego remaining as it stood.

Let me remind you, as I mentioned earlier, that the Dharma (the truth) manifests itself only when we are egoless, in other words, only when we die to our ego.

It follows, accordingly, that there exists an insurmountable discrepancy between the Law of Dependent Co-arising of such nature on one hand, and what Shakyamuni awakened to on the other. Shakyamuni awakened to the One Mind, Mind qua No Mind, True Person without Rank, i.e., the truth per se.

Agape and karuna

Japanese Zen Master Mumon Taishitsu once wisely said: "When Shakyamuni saw a morning star and awakened to the Dharma all of a sudden, he must have shouted: 'Oh! That's me twinkling!'"

One's ego entails a hard shell which separates one's ego from all other individuals and all other things. When one becomes egoless (i.e., one dies to one's ego), the shell of one's ego consequently disappears. As was truly pointed out by Master Mumon Taishitsu, "That's me twinkling." It follows, therefore, that the pain of other individuals becomes instantaneously one's own pain. In this moment one and other individuals are merged into the Oneness.

Miyazawa Kenji, a Japanese author, confessed, "No one can be truly happy unless all individuals become happy on a global basis." Daisetz T. Suzuki, a master of mine, urged: "The paradise of Buddhism is not your final destination. Once you ascend there, you must immediately come back to this world and be ready to suffer in place of your brothers and sisters." Vows and practices of Buddhas (*bodhisattvas*) such as these are typically stated in the first of the Four Great Vows: "However innumerable sentient beings may be, I vow to save them." And this is the very marrow of Mahayana Buddhism. Great Wisdom (*prajna*) starts working as Great Compassion (*karuna*) spontaneously.

This is exactly the same state of affairs as

what Christians are getting at when they say: "One who loves, knows God. Love comes out of God." We can clearly see the source of Christian love, as manifested in the following words: "Love for very little ones is the love of God himself."

Once, when I visited a Benedictine monastery in Germany, I said to the abbot: "In the beginning was *karuna*, or Great Compassion." He made a prompt response: "Oh, *karuna*. There you and I have become one." "Karuna" in Buddhism is "agape" in Christianity. I believe this is where the common ground of Buddhism and Christianity lies. The word "logos" appears in the original Greek text at the beginning of the Gospel according to St. John: "In the beginning was the Word." The "logos" is "Dharma" in Buddhism. Just as the logos is love (*agape*), so Dharma is Great Compassion (*karuna*).

In connection with this, I think I must seriously search my soul as a Zen Buddhist with regard to the Christian saying: "One who has seen God dies." Are Zen Buddhists really dead? Do they see the "True God?" Do they have a true contact with what they call "Absolute Nothingness?" These questions readily come to mind, making me think hard about us, Zen Buddhists. Do not most Zen Buddhists degrade the "egoless" Buddha Dharma into the "Zen seeking identification with the greatest ego?"

At any rate, the primary "Immanuel" represents the fundamental basis of human existence; "the oneness of God and humanity." And only when we live in strict accordance with this fundamental basis can we recognize our shame (*sin*) and truly accomplish what Buddhists call *sange*, or penitence.

Detachment from religious absolutism: a basis for world peace

There is a view that Christianity is a "religion of salvation," which begins with faith, and that it appears to be completely different from a "religion of Awakening," such as Zen Buddhism, which begins with practice. However, it is not appropriate to look at the two religions in that manner. They both should be taken to agree with each other in the following sense: St. Paul died on the cross with Christ and was resurrected with

Christ, while the Dharma manifested itself only when Shakyamuni emptied his ego, i.e., when he died to his ego.

So long as a religion insists that it alone represents the universal truth for humankind and negates other religions, there must persistently be the likelihood of the danger of holy wars. Therefore, with the dawning of the 21st century now so near, it is urgently necessary for all religious persons to truly detach themselves from absolutism and to seriously encourage dialogues between different religions.

This I say with an earnest hope that they will be able to establish a fundamental basis for world peace.

Note:

Takizawa's theory, its principle of irreversibility in particular, raised a controversy among Zen Buddhists and Christian theologians in Japan. Abe Masao, a leading disciple of Hisamatsu Shin'ichi and a Zen scholar, contended that "irreversibility" was a matter of Christianity, and that Buddhism was characterized by "reversibility." Honda Masaaki, a Catholic philosopher, advocated "reversible qua irreversible." Yagi Seiichi, a representative theologian in Japan, agreed with Honda. As for me, I accept the theory of Takizawa as it is.

I agree with the theory of Takizawa in its entirety because I believe it excludes the possibility of accepting "inseparability" and "non-identity" while at the same time rejecting "irreversibility." What is demanded is a response, be it positive or negative, with regard to the principle of the "inseparable, non-identical and irreversible" relationship with the three aspects being at one. This is the way I read Takizawa's text. And I read it that way because, if you rely solely upon analytical intellect which strictly requires logical consistency, you may fail to hit the mark. I feel there are two types of logic: Kantian (Apollonian) and Hegelian (Dionysian). And, my conviction is that Takizawa is a Hegelian or Dionysian logician. DJI

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