



# Christian / Buddhist DIALOGUE



## PART 6: WORKS AND FAITH JULY, 2012

### INTRODUCTION

*In both faiths, there is an historical debate which has challenged theologians and everyday practitioners for centuries. Simply put, we ask whether we can reach our spiritual goals by virtue of what we do or through profound faith in the object of our faith. In both traditions, there are those who affirm that deep and unwavering faith, a dedication to the Divine, has sufficient force to guarantee our acceptance to the Divine. On the other, there are those who assert we cannot step away from our responsibilities as creatures/beings, that we must act in expression of our deep commitment, that we are required to do so as a commandment of faith.*

### Buddhist Comment

In the early centuries of Buddhist practice the guiding message came from Shakyamuni's own final words, "work out your own liberation with diligence". We are taught to dedicate ourselves to determined and wholesome practice, to cut ourselves off from the temptations of the this ephemeral body. Shakyamuni is our mentor and model, like him, we must strive to cut off all attachments and work out our salvation by our unflinching effort. No one can do this for us. As the teaching grew, the model of the Buddha evolved as well. We learned that there are countless Buddhas and Buddhas-to-be whose Vow is the liberation of all beings. From this ideal emerges a new lesson, that of a life of compassionate action. As Buddhists we are called to lead lives of compassionate service, our own liberation will come through selfless action. The Bodhisattva Path calls us to become Buddhas by being Buddha-like, that is living as the action of compassion and wisdom. Finally, in the second millennium following the

Buddha's death, a further teaching arises. It grows from an awareness and acceptance of the weakness and corruption of human life. It proposes that humans are not, in fact, capable of achieving Awakening by their own efforts alone. Teachers like Honen and Shinran advise that only through unshakable faith in the saving Vow of the Buddhas, especially Amida, will we arrive at Awakening, the Pure Land.

Buddhism is not spared fundamentalism, and there are hardliners in all camps. One man who practised with us briefly declared that social engagement (as Buddhist works-motivated faith is called these days) must wait. The seeker must accomplish his own spiritual education first, good intentions are not wisdom, he insisted. Other prominent Buddhist writers insist that we are obligated to act for peace, for the environment and other social justice issues..

What is a Buddhist seeker to make of these conflicting messages? Can we resolve this apparent dilemma?

This debate has been a question which has pushed and pulled at me all of my life. I have found myself at both extremes, never with full satisfaction, never without doubts.

Lately, in the writings of others who share my question I have found some workable position. In this case the clarity comes from the Shin or devotional school of Buddhism which is the most popular form in East Asia and North America and encourages faith in the power of Amida Buddha as Other Power. In the article, *Towards A Shin Buddhist Social Ethics* (in *Living in Amida's Universal Vow*, ed. Bloom), Toshimara writes:

*the (earlier) Shin teaching of 'leave everything up to others ...is a mistaken understanding of*

*Other Power. As even though this is essential in order for ordinary people to become Buddhas, we must still do our best to live our daily lives to the utmost....The only thing that Other Power guarantees is the attainment of Buddhahood. It will not resolve the contradictions, conflicts and discord in our daily lives.*

The answer to this question remains a dilemma, and like any dilemma, it is not solvable. We can only find some position of integrity along its dimensions. For me, I remain compelled to rely on my faith and to affirm my determination to do "good works", that is, compassionate action for the benefit of all suffering beings.

### Christian Comment

Our Christian scriptures are very clear on this topic: We are saved by faith alone. Scriptures tell us:

John 3:16 -- "God so loved the world as to give the Only Begotten One, that whoever believes may not die, but have eternal life."

Acts 10:43-- "To Christ Jesus all the prophets testify, that everyone who believes has forgiveness of sins through this Name."

Romans 5:2-- "Because of our faith, Christ has brought us to the grace in which we now stand..."

Ephesians 2:8-- "And it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith-- and even that is not of yourselves, but the gift of God."

Romans 3:22-- "The justice of God works through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe."

Acts 16:31 -- "They answered, 'Believe in Jesus the Saviour and you will be saved...'"

John 3:36-- "Everyone who believes in the Only Begotten has eternal life..."

Galatians 2:16-- "... we know that people aren't justified by the Law, but by believing in Jesus Christ."

That being said, there are also scriptures that talk about the place of 'works' in our salvation. Can we be faithful Christians without doing good works? Can we point to our good works and use them as reason enough to feel assured of salvation? Scripture is less clear on this matter.

James 2:17-- "So it is with faith. If good deeds don't go with it, faith is dead."

Romans 2:7-- "... eternal life to those who strive for glory, honor, and immortality by patiently doing right."

2 Corinthians 5:10-- "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, and each of us will get what we deserve for the things we do while in the body, good or bad."

Revelation 22:12-- "Remember, I am coming soon! I bring with me the reward that will be given to all people according to their conduct."

Ephesians 2:10-- "We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to do the good things God created us to do from the beginning"

So there seems to be some room for discussion here. Grace/faith is what saves us, but there is a place for works, as well. My own belief is that as faithful Christians, we need to understand our good works as a natural offshoot of living our faith. We can not look to good works as a means to an end. They are not a means of racking up brownie points in heaven. If we believe that there's a judgment after death, where we are found 'fit for heaven' or not, the presence or absence of good works in our life on earth will be taken as evidence of the depth of our faith in life. But not simply the presence or absence, but the motive behind them.

What about those of us whose faith is not dependent on belief in a judged afterlife, and for whom the word "saved" is not tied to an

eternal judgment?

My theology of salvation is one of relationship in the here-and-now: my relationship with God, with my neighbour, with myself. Salvation happens over and over again, when I reach out with the transforming love of God, as modeled by Jesus Christ, and energized by the Spirit. So what is the relationship between faith and works in my theology? I can do good deeds motivated by my understanding of what God wants from me, or I can do them for selfish reasons, and the end result may be exactly the same, regardless of my motive. But I have lessened the state of my own integrity when I act from selfish motives, and that compromises my theology as well. Even though I don't believe that I need to behave in a way that gets me into an eternal afterlife, I am still prompted to act out of love, in order to live with integrity in this life

### Buddhist Reply

I don't find this a very easy question. We haven't even gone into the question of the nature of Buddha/God - that is, how can our efforts cause/impact on our salvation? If salvation is an act of God, literally, how can our actions affect them? Can we be passive, simply loving God and leaving suffering to His Grace? If we do good works, can that obligate God's grace?

Another question for me as a Buddhist is the one of *karma*. If we are embedded in a somewhat mechanical, cause-and-effect process called karma, where our every actions have consequences, then how is it possible to expect that a life of faith, regardless of our actions, will lead to being born in some liberated state (such as the Pure Land) at the end of that life? Can there be the kind of death-bed salvation proposed in our Pure Land tradition? I think even the spiritual giant of that tradition, Shinran, questioned that.

I agree with Meg that we act in a moral way, at least because it is coherent with our values. I think that's enough, but it still leaves us with some theological questions. I also agree that a

morality unsupported by or related to faith, that is a kind of humanist morality, is not very satisfying either. Any affirmation that an action is morally correct needs, I think, some relationship to a moral absolute, what I think of as a divine energy, force or being. I think there is much more to dialogue on here.

### Christian Reply

It seems to me that too often our theological/philosophical questions are based on an absolute, either/or dichotomy, which makes it very hard to come up with a satisfactory answer. I am somewhat reassured to see from Rev. Innen's commentary that Buddhists also struggle with this notion, and wrestle with a sliding scale of responses.

From Rev. Innen's commentary, I take it that within the Buddhist tradition there is a school of thought that says that each one of us is responsible for our own salvation. This is a major difference from Christian theology, which always comes back to a base point of God's grace as the cornerstone of our salvation, regardless of where we stand on the importance of works. There can be no salvation by our own efforts alone, no matter how faith-based they are. But for those of us who name ourselves as Christians, it seems imperative that we live out our faith as the Buddhists do, in compassionate service. We look to the image of Jesus as suffering servant as mentor and guide in our own faith works.

*This dialogue is between Reverends Innen Ray Parchelo, of the Red Maple Buddhist Congregation, Renfrew, Ontario and Meggin King, of the United Church of Pugwash, Nova Scotia.*