



Christian / Buddhist DIALOGUE



Buddhist Comment

What is to be gained by interfaith dialogue ?

In addition to the practical issue noted in the opening, a dialogue with Christians offers us a place to encounter people of faith. In a society that is growing more secular, where the value of faith is dismissed so easily, it is of benefit to us to have others who ask questions similar to our own, such as the ones which will become topics for us over the rest of the year.

The Buddha-way, and our tradition of Tendai in particular, is characterised by an acknowledgement that there are “84,000 teachings”. Ours is called the harmonious way because we encourage all seekers to explore and examine from their own hearts and minds to uncover both an understanding of the Way and the practices that resonates and facilitates it most fully. There is no reason why we should exclude a non-Buddhist faith from our study. The Buddha taught us to search out the end of suffering, to uncover that and make it available to all beings. This is our only task, not peace of mind, not Nirvana, not transcendental awakening . We are called to end suffering. Where better to look for teaching and answers than the tradition of the “suffering servant”?

Why might a Christian/Buddhist dialogue be valuable for my faith?

When I first began to explore these two faiths, I was drawn back into my own upbringing as an Anglican. My religious formation began in a Christian church. I learned the same categories as every Christian and became disaffected by many of the same questions and challenges that have troubled Christian churches over the past 50 years. As I re-visited Christian teaching and commentary, this time with the eyes and

ears, and the hearts of a mature spiritual pilgrim, I was struck, over and over again, at the many ways we are examining similar human challenges. We will discover, I think, that we are not so different.

In particular, as my own understanding and teaching of the Buddha-dharma has grown to include what we call “jodo-shu” (the way of devotion), and I have incorporated such practice into my own and that of my community, I have recognized these commonalities even more. We’ll touch on this in a later month.

A further point directs us back to the efforts of our Dharma brother Kanzan Purchase, who worked so hard this past year to engage us with a larger interfaith initiative directed at international government policy on the environment. As I have written elsewhere, it falls to us, the spiritual practitioners and leaders of our communities to stand up for issues of pressing concern, such as the fate of the very planet that supports us. An interfaith dialogue is more than just interesting and stimulating. Its is an absolute necessity. We have to join together with spiritual people in our communities to find ways to steer the ignorant and greedy to these life-threatening issues. Their must be a spiritual voice on climate change, on terrorism, on misogyny and abuse, on economic inequity and more. We need to speak with and to each other to form these necessary alliances.

Christian Comment

First I need to say how privileged I feel, to be able to be a part of this interfaith conversation. And more than privileged, I feel humbled. In a world so vast and un-knowable, it's a wonderful thing to be able to be a part of a search for new understandings, and the building of relationship among seemingly disparate groups. My sense is that in our ongoing conversations, Rev. Innen (Ray) Parchelo and I will be finding many commonalities in our most basic beliefs about life, our place in the universe, our concerns and cares around the world's suffering, and our response to it.

My own thoughts and feelings about reaching out in interfaith dialogue are grounded in our United Church of Canada New Creed, which includes the phrase, "We are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence, to live with respect in Creation, to love and serve others..."

That phrase "live with respect in Creation" means all of Creation: the animal world, the earth we walk on, the air we breathe, the water that supports all of life. And humanity. All of humanity. I am grounded in a belief system that says all of God's people deserve respect, and the best way to help nurture that respect is by working at understanding each other as best as possible. And that means dialogue. It means conversation. It means, in this particular type of conversation, recognizing and naming our commonalities, and honouring our differences. It means not falling into the facile trap of saying "all religions are really all the same."

This conversation/dialogue is important to me because I live in this world. As a Christian, I'm told that I am to be a part of my world. Although there's a Christian tradition of asceticism, of communities for retreat, reflection, contemplation, most of us are living our lives and our faith right smack dab in the middle of a busy and ever-changing world. The

example of Jesus Christ is one who was always reaching out, expanding his circle of those he knew, those he sat with and ate with. That's the example I try to follow.

What is to be gained from interfaith dialogue?

I answer not only for myself, but, I think, for anyone who's involved in this sort of communication. It opens us to an expanded understanding of the world. An opportunity to learn in ways that we haven't yet had a chance to explore. A chance to walk in each other's shoes. I believe that we all can learn from each other, and that even in matters of faith, others' understanding of Creation and our place in it, can inform our own beliefs.

The Christian/Buddhist dialogue is an important one because historically, in the Americas and in Western Europe, at least, Christianity has far overshadowed Buddhism. Christians haven't been very good at reaching out to other faiths in the hope of understanding, so much as reaching out to convert, or to obliterate those who resisted conversion. As technology progresses, our world gets smaller, and it's even more important for all people of faith to reach out and make connections built on mutual respect, and not a desire to dominate.

Buddhist Reply

I'll focus here on Reverend Meg's comment about "all religions are really the same." When I first looked into approaches to interfaith dialogue, I came across *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue*. In this collection of themed conversations (a model we borrowed here), Perry Schmidt-Leukel proposes three phases of interfaith engagement. At the lowest and least useful level, the one most like adolescent high school debates, each side presents their faith. They analyse, criticize and challenge (even mock or condemn) the other, trying to prove how their faith is vastly superior. Claims of superior logic on one hand or supreme power of one's "book" on the

other, keeps both sides from really learning much. The next level is where the mocking or combative element disappears and there is some attempt to learn, but always from the safe assumption that either “my faith is the true one” or the superficial and thoughtless assertion that Meg points out, “all religions are really the same.” This is both mere tolerance and lazy ignorance. The third and most useful kind of interfaith dialogue is open to gaining new insights about one’s own faith by practising and studying with others in their faith. This Schmidt-Leukel describes as ‘the challenge of mutual transformation’. This is where we step off in this series. Unless we release the conviction that my view is the true view, we will take no risk and, by consequence have no chance to learn or grow.

Christian Reply

As I read Rev. Innen's perspective on the importance of this conversation, I am struck by the congruence of our approaches to this exercise, and our reasons for engaging. Both Innen and I understand that we are part of a much bigger world-view than either one of our faith perspectives can encompass, and that we have much to learn from each other. We both see the need to look beneath the superficial layers of our understandings, to a deeper and more compelling vision of what the other believes, how it influences and supports our world-views, and what it is we hope to gain from this project. We both recognize that in solidarity with each other, and, indeed, with all faith traditions, we have a strength to tackle the most pressing needs of our communities and the wider world. In faith, the conversation continues!

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.