

“Was Jesus a Buddha?”

A Sermon Delivered by the Rev. Marlin Lavanhar
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All winter we look at the bare trees sticking up from the ground. Their dark branches contrast with the blue or overcast sky. They look barren and dead, but we know better. We know something about their essence and potential. We know that all it takes is for the conditions to be right and they will burst into blossom, as many of them are doing right now. When the temperature and rainfall create the proper conditions – wham! Keep that image in mind, the image of a tree, that no matter how it looks at the moment, we know it has the potential, when the conditions are right, to bloom.

Today I want to talk about how the Buddhists helped save Jesus for me. By the time I reached my early twenties, I had become disillusioned with Christianity and Jesus. So, as I set out to travel around the world, I was determined to learn about the many other religions. I didn't think this journey had anything to do with Jesus, but he kept popping up in the most unlikely of places.

Hindu Swamis living along the Ganges River in India used parables of Jesus to teach me about Hinduism. I learned from Muslims living in the Middle East that Jesus is a major figure in their religious tradition. I spent time studying various forms of Buddhist meditation in Japan, Tibet, India, Thailand, and Korea, and my Buddhist teachers had many positive things to say about Jesus.

I came to realize that Christians weren't the only ones with an interpretation of Jesus. I found that there are various cultural and religious lenses through which people view him. By the end of my three-year odyssey around the globe on my mountain bike, I'd discussed Jesus not only with Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists, but also with Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem, and Christians from China and Korea, and Unitarians in the Philippines, Czechoslovakia, India, and Transylvania. What I came to learn was that even Christians from other cultures had different interpretations of Jesus from the ones I knew.

My encounters helped me realize that the Jesus I'd rejected was based on one very particular interpretation (a fundamentalist interpretation), and that I needed to give Jesus another look. I came to find that every form of Christianity, whether it is Methodist, Southern Baptist, Unitarian, or Pentecostal, is really just a particular interpretation regarding the life and teachings of Jesus. Each interpretation is an attempt to understand who we are and how we should live.

Of course, the Bible itself is an interpretation. It's a subjective compilation of writings. Each author gives his interpretation of Jesus' life and ministry, and the people who eventually compiled the Christian Bible chose certain writings to include and others to exclude. So, they've left us with their interpretation of what is most important about the life and teachings of Jesus.

Here's what I've learned from Buddhists about what is at the heart of Jesus' message. I might have called this sermon, "The Gospel According to Buddhists."

To put things in perspective, I have to admit that I'm the kind of person who likes to know why I'm supposed to do something. So, for example, when I was in school and the teachers told me to sit up straight, I assumed this was just another rule without much merit and I was not particularly inspired to follow it. Then, when I learned meditation from the Buddhists they said it was important to sit up straight because it allows the lungs to get enough oxygen which clears the brain and also because sitting straight is said to allow energies in the body to flow freely. Now, having been given a solid reason for sitting up straight, I felt compelled to do it.

In the Christian scriptures there are a lot of things that Jesus says that never made much sense to me, but some of my Buddhist teachers used examples from the Gospels as a way of teaching Buddhism, and in so doing, they helped teach me something about Christianity as well. One teacher cited Jesus telling the wealthy man in Matthew 19:21 that he must give up all of his possessions if he is to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. This never made much sense to me until a Buddhist connected it to the Buddhist idea of non-attachment.

In Buddhism they teach that one of the roots of our suffering is our attachments. Since life is synonymous with change and change is constant, Buddhism teaches us to be mindful of change and to appreciate each moment fully without trying to grasp onto things and people and emotions that cannot stay the same.

It reminds me of when we were looking for an Assistant Minister last spring. I hoped that the blossoms would stay on the trees until Eva came to visit Tulsa. Of course, it's ridiculous to try to keep the blossoms from falling, but how often do we do this in other aspects of our lives. Just as the seasons come and go, people come and go into and out of our lives. Our possessions break, get lost, wear out, or we lose interest in them. Our emotions change from morning until night, and, at some point, we know we too will die.

In Buddhism we are taught to be mindful of impermanence so that we can appreciate each unique moment of our lives for what it is. So, the Buddhist explained to me that Jesus was not trying to tell us that we all have to give away all of our possessions in order to reach

the Kingdom of Heaven. He was making a point about our attachments and how they can trap us and can cause a lot of unnecessary suffering in our lives.

The Buddha also taught that we need to cultivate the child's mind. Jesus says of children, "it is of such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs." (Matthew 19: 12-13) From a Buddhist perspective, the child sees the world with fresh eyes. Children are often engrossed in each moment taking in the world as it comes without judgment. Since children's minds haven't yet been filled with expectations and theories and prejudices, they're able to take things as they are.

The longer we live the more our minds become filled with thoughts and attitudes that can lead to unnecessary suffering. We may come to worry about the future or hold on to regrets about the past. We learn to expect certain things, and if these expectations are not met we suffer. That's why the Buddha instructed us to cultivate the child's mind and why Jesus claimed that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to the children.

But the "Kingdom of Heaven" itself was one of those ideas I struggled to understand, until a Buddhist explained that the reason Jesus talked about the Kingdom of Heaven being at hand with such a sense of immediacy was that he was not talking about some future state of earthly perfection brought on by the coming of a messiah. I was told that the Kingdom of Heaven is available to us right now and in every moment. For the Buddhists it is a state of mind which each of us can access anytime. In fact, it is our true nature.

Like trees in winter, it may not be apparent that we have such miraculous potential, but if we know what our lives are truly about then we know that all it takes are the right conditions for us to blossom. The Buddhists don't talk of Original Sin. However, they do recognize that just as we have the seeds of wisdom, compassion, and mindfulness within us, we also have the seeds of hatred, anger, ignorance, and intolerance. So we must cultivate the conditions for the right seeds to be watered and nurtured.

My Buddhist teachers also said they did not think Jesus was trying to tell us that our salvation would come through our belief in him. Buddhists don't think belief alone can save us. Belief by itself cannot cause the right seeds to grow. In the same way, Jesus' death could not possibly be the event, which wipes away the negative seeds within us. It was his life and his example and teachings that he left us to follow. And it takes more than faith; it requires practice.

I found these Buddhist interpretations helped me realize that the common interpretations of Jesus and Christianity that I had heard growing up were not the final word,

and since we live in an increasingly pluralistic society, it seems important to look at our religious ideas in light of the lives and religions of the people around us.

The Gospel according to the Buddhists I've encountered is obviously not all there is to say and know about Jesus either. In fact, during the rest of my travels and my studies in Divinity School, I came to see that the stories of the Bible are rich with layers of meaning, and the meaning comes from the interaction between the text and the interpreter. The Buddhists gave me more than just new interpretations to replace my old ones; they gave me new ways of looking at these age-old stories.

Now, there are some people who believe that Buddhist missionaries came to ancient Palestine and taught meditation and spirituality to the Essenes, who in turn taught them to John the Baptist, who taught them to Jesus. In 1894, a Russian war correspondent named Nicholas Natoevitch wrote a book called *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, in which he claimed to have found translations of a manuscript in Tibet called the Life of Saint Issa (a Tibetan term for Jesus). In the book it is explained that when Jesus was a youth and young adult he traveled to India and Tibet and learned about Asian mysticism and meditation practices. Indeed, the Bible is silent about these years of Jesus' life. The book was a popular sensation in Europe and the United States at the end of the 19th century.

At the end of the 20th century a book titled, *The Lost Years of Jesus* (By: Elizabeth Claire Prophet) proposed the same theory. But, in fact, there is little historical evidence to back up these claims. Nevertheless, all that I've learned about religious interpretation has helped me realize that the historical way is only one way to understand Jesus and Buddha.

We can learn a lot from history about how each of them lived and died and taught, but then there is what the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hahn, calls the "living Buddha" and "living Christ". The living Buddha and living Jesus are the ones that can animate our lives and values today. Certain stories and perceptions move people's spirits and carry meaning across time and space. Such stories and views are not limited by literal interpretations or historical facts.

A sign I saw in the Philippines said, "Those people who are waiting for the second coming of Jesus are waiting for themselves. For Jesus comes again every time we live out his teachings."

This is a reference to the living Jesus as opposed to the historical one. And Jesus himself said, "When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there." This obviously is not the historic Jesus coming back to life, but a state of being and loving that is made manifest in our world.

I titled this sermon “Was Jesus A Buddha?” If we asked Jesus, his answer would be predictable. He would ask, “Who do they say I am?” because Jesus mostly left it to others to label and define him. If we asked the Buddha, I believe he would answer, “Yes, everyone has the potential to be enlightened and what we know about Jesus tells us that he was a highly realized person.” The Dalai Lama, who is thought by many people to be a reincarnation of the Buddha, has said of Jesus, “...he was either a fully enlightened being or a bodhisattva of very high spiritual realization.”

A more important question is not whether Jesus was a Buddha, but what are the conditions that *you* need to reach a state of self-actualization. Are *you* creating the conditions in your life that help to water the seeds of mindfulness and wisdom, of love and joy and compassion? Because the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand; it is a possibility right now. The love you long for in your innermost heart is already there – and is just waiting to blossom.