

Christ on the Buddhist Road

THE LOTUS AND THE CROSS

By Paul-Gordon Chandler

Albert Einstein, known for his foresight, once wrote, “Buddhism has the characteristics of what would be expected in a cosmic religion for the future: it transcends a personal God, avoids dogmas and theology; it covers both the natural and the spiritual, and it is based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things...as a meaningful unity.” Over the last few decades many in the West have become deeply interested in Buddhism.

Interestingly, a number of Christians as well have taken an interest in various aspects of Buddhism. Perhaps this is best explained by the famous 4th Century Christian bishop of Milan, St. Ambrose, who said, “...all that is true, by whomever it has been said, is from God’s Spirit.” I recall Frederick Buechner, the best-selling novelist and Presbyterian minister, while reflecting on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path of Buddhism, once saying, “If I wasn’t a Christian, I think I would have been a Buddhist”.

Huston Smith, the renowned scholar of world religions and a child of missionaries to China, shares in one of his books about his first meeting with the Dalai Lama. He affectionately writes, “No one I know who has been in his presence has failed to be impressed...But the way he impressed me was almost the reverse of my expectations...For it was not as if he wore a halo...Almost the opposite; from the moment he clasped my hand with a firmness...it was his directness, his utter unpretentiousness, his total objectivity, that astonished. I do not believe that before or since I have been in the presence of someone who was as completely himself.”

The late Catholic trappist monk Thomas Merton, whose life and writings have deeply impacted Christians across the globe, developed a genuine interest in Buddhism in the later part of his life. Among other things, he was attracted to Buddhism’s long and persevering traditions of compassion and nonviolence and it’s indictment of ego-centered thought, reminding him of the goal of Christ’s humility. And he initiated some of the first Christian-Buddhist dialogues.

In turn, as a result of the witness of his life, the Dalai Lama said of Merton, “This was the first time I have been struck by such a feeling of spirituality by anyone who professed Christianity. As a result of meeting with him; my attitude toward Christianity was much changed.”

How can the *cross* encounter the *lotus* (Buddhism’s symbol of spiritual life)? First, it is important to remember that one can find deeper roots of their own faith when immersed in the world of other religions—and returning “home” to our own faith’s depth and heritage in a transformed way. Therefore a true understanding

of Christian faith entails receiving as well as sharing. This certainly has been my experience as a Christian growing up in the midst of another faith, Islam.

Two illustrations come to mind related to Christ walking the Buddhist road. The first is the creative work of Karl Reichelt, a Norwegian who operated a unique ministry serving Buddhist monks, first in China, and then in Hong Kong, in the 1920s. He believed that Buddhism found its fulfillment and ultimate revelation in Jesus Christ. The Christian service that he founded drew on material from the Buddhist monastery world, worship and liturgy, in order to present a Christ that walked within Buddhism. His Tao Fong Shan center was modeled on Buddhist monasteries. Reichelt adopted the style of a Buddhist monk to relate to other monks, adapted Buddhist symbols to Christianity and developed a liturgy based on Buddhist worship structure. His Christian witness focused on building on every area of affinity he could with Buddhism. Consequently, his approach was far-reaching, to temples, monasteries, and Lay Buddhist societies. However, his deepest influence was on the individual Buddhist monks that passed through his center. This is powerfully illustrated in the story of the Buddhist abbot who became a follower of Christ, who was the subject of his famous book titled *The Transformed Abbot*. His perspective on other faiths, as a Christian, was well ahead of his time.

The second illustration is the two Buddhist monks I met on a trip in Southeast Asia. They were studying Sacred Scriptures in a Buddhist monastery and among their texts was the New Testament. On their own, without any “Christian” influence, they came to a belief that this Christ they were reading about was truth, and decided to become his followers. Reading on into the Book of Acts, they realized that new followers of Christ were “put into water” (baptized). Believing that to be an important initiation rite for Christ followers, they went into the nearest town and stopped at the first place they saw the word “Christ”, which happened to be a church. They knocked on the door and told the priest they had come to be baptized. The priest was of course taken back to see two Buddhist monks asking to be baptized. Nevertheless, after hearing their story, he baptized them in a rural area. Today those two men continue to live as Buddhist monks, albeit who follow Christ, wearing their incandescent saffron robes with shaven heads, and they go from Buddhist monastery to monastery telling other monks about the Christ they follow.

In thinking about the *Cross* and the *Lotus*, Christians need to be reminded that “genuine religiousness or spirituality,” such as exhibited by these two Buddhist monks, is often the most important “point of contact” with those from other faiths. Whenever this exists in someone, it affirms their being on the path toward spiritual progress and development, and therefore potentially toward an openness to examining the way of Christ. And from my own observation, more often than not, God seems to work through irregular channels to bring this about. The lotus flower is a good example of this paradox. On the surface of the water the lotus is beautiful. However, underneath the intricate roots reach into the

unseen and unknowing mud that enables the lotus to exist. And just as the beauty of the lotus flower can emerge from the muddy and dark roots, God communicates in paradoxical ways to individuals in what may seem like the most unlikely places.

The Buddhist Scriptures proclaim, “It is a Buddha-making universe”—meaning the nature of reality itself is to enlighten and set free the whole creation, down to the last grain of sand. And for followers of Christ, we see the ultimate purpose of God as enabling all people to fully reflect the “image of God” in which they were created.