

WGUMC January 24, 2016 "Jesus for Buddhists"
2 Peter 1:3-11

In our series on what the worlds' religions can teach us about Jesus, today we move beyond the Abrahamic faiths which all arose in the ancient Near East and look toward the Far East and a very different world. For one thing, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all monotheist, but Buddhism is officially non-theist. So we go from religions with one God to a philosophy with no god. We also go from three belief systems that affirm the reality of the soul to one that promotes the notion of "Not-self." Finally, we go from a faith in a Creator God to a conviction that the world has existed always, and that we are caught up in an endless cycle of death and rebirth.

As we survey the religious landscape of Asia and consider what Jesus could mean for Buddhists, it is obvious that we are not in Kansas anymore. Last week we could look at the Qur'an and other sacred Muslim writings to see what they have to say

about Jesus. But when it comes to Buddhism, we can't do that. Buddhist scriptures say nothing.

But that hasn't kept modern-day Buddhists from studying Jesus, and I want to talk about one of them today. Thich Nhat Hanh is a Zen Master who was born in 1926 in Vietnam.

Growing up, he had every reason to want nothing to do with Christianity. That's because Christian missionaries were allied with the French that were ruling his country, and church and state worked together to discriminate against anyone who wasn't Christian.

Hanh's opinion that Christianity was a tool of foreign domination didn't change until years later when, working as a peace activist, he was brought to this country by an interfaith peace group called the Fellowship of Reconciliation. In 1966, he met many peace-loving Christians, among them, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton, and Daniel Berrigan. Hanh says that through his friendships with Christians who embodied the

teachings of Jesus, he was then able to "touch the depths of Christianity." He even wrote a book about it called, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*.

Today, Hanh lives in a hermitage in France. On his altar are images of both Buddha and Jesus and, he says, "I touch both of them as my spiritual ancestors." [Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 4-5. All subsequent page numbers refer to this book.]

So I can't tell you what every Buddhist thinks of Jesus, but I can share with you what one Buddhist thinks. As you probably know, the practice of mindfulness is important in Buddhism. Hanh says, "When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, we can see and listen deeply, and the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love, and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy." [14]

As Hanh sees it, mindfulness does in Buddhism what the Holy Spirit does in Christianity. "Both of them help us touch the

ultimate dimension of reality. Mindfulness helps us touch nirvana, and the Holy Spirit offers a door to the Trinity." [20]

I tell you this because the Holy Spirit is key to how Hanh understands Jesus. For Hanh, the story of the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus at his baptism is an affirmation of Jesus' enlightenment. In his own words:

When we read, "The heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him like a dove," we see that Jesus Christ was already enlightened. He was in touch with the reality of life, the source of mindfulness, wisdom and understanding within Him, and this made Him different from other human beings. When He was born into a carpenter's family, He was the Son of Man. When he opened His heart, the door of Heaven was opened to Him. The Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove, and He was manifested as the Son of God—very holy, very deep, and very great.

But the Holy Spirit is not just for Jesus alone; it is for all of us. From a Buddhist perspective, who is not the son or daughter of God? [37]

For this Zen Master, Jesus is the Son of God, but he isn't the only one. By practicing the same mindfulness, receiving the same Spirit, we can all be enlightened as Jesus was. By having

the same mind that was in Christ Jesus—as St. Paul puts it in Philippians [2:5]—we can all *be* Jesus. Hanh goes on to say:

"Jesus is the Son of God and the Son of Man. We are all, at the same time, sons and daughters of God and the children of our parents. This means we are of the same reality as Jesus. This may sound heretical to many Christians, but I believe that...Jesus is not only our Lord, but He is also our Father, our Teacher, our Brother, and our Self. The only place we can touch Jesus and the Kingdom of God is within us." [44]

What do you think? Does this sound heretical to you?

Most Christians would reject the idea that we are of the same reality as Jesus. After all, we are only human, whereas Jesus is both human and divine. I don't know about you, but I'm not so good at trying to be god.

But you may be surprised to learn that there is a major branch of Christianity that teaches something similar to what Hanh is saying about our capacity to be Jesus. The churches in the Orthodox tradition hold a belief that, through purification and contemplation (there's that mindfulness thing again), we can participate in the divine nature. Through a transformative

process they call *theosis*, a process where God's energies (grace) work with human activity, we can reach the goal of likeness to or union with God. For the Orthodox Christian, *theosis* is the aim of human life, but it is only achievable because of Jesus Christ. As one of their great saints, Athanasius, put it: "God became man so that man might become God."

This may sound too New Age-y to you, but you'll find the idea in the New Testament as well. The author of Second Peter says that God's power has given us everything we need for life and for godliness. And God has also given us a promise: we can escape corruption and become "participants of the divine nature." [2 Peter 1:4] By supporting faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love,

we can enter the kingdom of our Lord and touch deeply the ultimate reality of God. [2 Peter 1:5-6,11]

Of course, it all takes a little practice to participate in the divine nature, which is something that Thich Nhat Hanh is eager to emphasize. Jesus is the Way, but following him takes practice. You can't just praise his name. You have to practice his life. Hanh says, "When we understand and practice deeply the life and teachings of Buddha or the life and teachings of Jesus, we penetrate the door and enter the abode of the living Buddha and the living Christ, and life eternal presents itself to us." [56]

Thich Naht Hanh is a Buddhist who has been in dialogue with Christians for a long time and has gained a great appreciation for Jesus. While he doesn't want to convert to Christianity, he is more than willing to acknowledge the truth he finds there. Basically, he wants Buddhists to be good Buddhists and Christians to be good Christians. He likes to say

that an orange is an orange and a mango is a mango, and they are both authentic fruits. [194]

That may be hard for Christians to think in these terms, for we in the West have been taught that Truth is an either/or proposition, not a both/and. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." [John 14:6]

Hanh has also read the Gospel of John, the part about Jesus being a door for the sheep. [10:9 KJV] Hanh calls Jesus "the door for us to enter the kingdom of God." [39] But Buddha is also described as a door, a door that opens into the realm of mindfulness, loving-kindness, peace and joy. And in Buddhism there are 84,000 Dharma doors or doors of teaching. It would be very un-Buddhist, Hanh says, to insist that any one door is the only door, as we Christians often do. [39]

In general, Buddhists are a lot more comfortable with religious pluralism than Christians are. But that is the world we

live in today, and one thing Buddhists can do is help us Christians get beyond our dualistic, either/or way of thinking about everything. To survive on this planet, we need more both/and thinking. We already have some practice holding seemingly incompatible ideas together. We say that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. We say that God is both Three and One. So could we possibly say that both Christianity and Buddhism are true?

You'll notice that this Zen Master hasn't said anything about Jesus saving us from sin. I suppose that's because in Buddhism, the human problem is not sin but suffering. I'm not sure that there is a difference. Sin has done nothing but cause suffering from the very beginning. And so Buddhists remind us that we should be as concerned about suffering as we are about sin. Jesus came to liberate us from both.

A final thing that a Buddhist view of Jesus can do for us is to remind us of what we have forgotten about our own

tradition. We often hear of people in the Bay Area who were raised in the church and later found a spiritual home in the practice of Buddhism. What they don't know is that they didn't need to leave Christianity in order to get their fill of eastern wisdom. All they had to do is dig around in the writings of the early church fathers and the mystics and they would have discovered everything they were looking for right here in Christianity.

I recommend that you read *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, not because I want you to go and be a Buddhist, but because it might help you be a better Christian, at least a more compassionate one. There is something very appealing about a non-Christian who looks so compassionately on Jesus and his followers. So I will leave you with these words of blessing from Thich Naht Hanh:

To breath and know you are alive is wonderful.
Because you are alive, everything is possible...Please don't waste a single moment. Every moment is an opportunity to breathe life into the Buddha, the Dharma, and the

Sangha. Every moment is an opportunity to manifest the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

'There is a person whose appearance on earth is for the well-being and happiness of all. Who is that person?' This is a question from the *Auguttara Nikaya*. For Buddhists, that person is the Buddha. For Christians, that person is Jesus Christ. Through your daily life, you can help that person continue. You only need to walk in mindfulness, making peaceful, happy steps on our planet. Breathe deeply, and enjoy your breathing. Be aware that the sky is blue and the birds' songs are beautiful. Enjoy being alive and you will help the living Christ and the living Buddha continue for a long, long time. [58-9]