

What Can Buddhism Add to Christianity?

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These days, an Episcopalian or a Presbyterian may well tell you about her Zen master. And Roman Catholic nuns and priests travel about teaching Zen meditation. In fact, not a few mainline Christians in these waning years of the second millennium are seeking to enrich their practice of the Christian path through the adoption of Buddhist meditative practices. I would honor the openness of these seekers, Christians who are willing to recognize wisdom in this practice of the great Buddhist tradition.

For myself, I have been content to carry on with the various traditional forms of Christian contemplation that I learned in a Roman Catholic seminary in the late 1950's. The gift that I seek from the Buddhist tradition is of another shape altogether. That is the gift of philosophy. Perhaps I might call this the gift of a new tongue, or should I say the interpretation of tongues? I first began to feel the need for a new language when as a young seminarian and priest I became frustrated with the conundrums posed by traditional, Greek-influenced Christian theology. It was not so much a dissatisfaction with the traditional answers as the sense that western philosophical language imposed a limitation on the questions one was able to articulate.

I believe that Buddhism can make a contribution to Christianity precisely because of the "otherness" of its language—because it brings to

speech very different approaches to the philosophical issues, enabling one to pose new questions and thus come to new insights. For this reason, I have chosen to base my attempts at Christian theologizing upon the Mahâyâna philosophy of emptiness, which teaches that all views are empty of any unchanging core content. Any view, religious or otherwise, is necessarily conditioned by the multitude of historical and cultural factors that are entailed in human living.

Mahâyâna Buddhist thinkers declare that all doctrines are empty of any final or absolute viewpoint. And yet, they maintain, these same doctrines are humanly and profoundly valid—as witnesses to awakening. They reject a metaphysics that would define the essences of things in final and irreversible philosophic visions, but they do not thereby banish philosophy or negate the value of human thinking. Paradoxically, by demoting human thinking to a human, conventional status, they affirm its validity *as a human construct*.

The "Middle Path" of Mādhyamika Buddhism—that path between fixed, unchanging views on the one hand and degenerative nothingness on the other—affirms that the emptiness of all things is the same as the dependent co-arising of all things. In other words, to maintain that all things (or ideas) are empty of fixed and essential meaning is but a negative way of affirming that these things (or ideas) are *indeed* meaningful in precisely their dependently co-arisen, historical, and human form. Thus, when a Mahâyâna philosopher like Tsong-kha-pa, the Aquinas of the Tibetan tradition, teaches that wisdom consists in seeing things as conventional "being only," he is both rejecting claims of absolute truth *and* affirming the claims of conventional truth.

In no wise is emptiness the debunking of meaning in a "that's-all-there-is, Virginia" fashion: No Santa, no magic, just the boredom of everyday life. No. To affirm that everything is "only" dependently co-arisen from a host of different causes is to affirm that—if one could but see with the eyes of awakened wisdom—these everyday experiences are replete with profound significance.

The alternative is to cling each to our own images and ideas as if somehow they could actually capture reality and express it in clear and unambiguous language. Indeed, this clinging to imagined realities is the very meaning of delusion and primal ignorance. And it can be the source of arrogant and intolerant religious certitude.

Mahâyâna Buddhist philosophies can offer Christians new philosophical models through which to think about the faith without succumbing to traditional metaphysical arrogance. When these models are applied, the Gospel can indeed become diverse to diverse people, can be preached to those who have no understanding of—or who reject—the familiar metaphysical models of the West. Must we continue to insist upon the acceptance of traditional Western assumptions of what constitutes the "really real" as a prerequisite for faith in the Christian message? Not in the least! No more than Paul needed to insist upon a Jewish cultural identity for gentile Christians. Thus, there is a missionary component in accepting alternate philosophical models for the enunciation of the Christian faith: We can demonstrate that the faith is capable of being articulated in as many tongues as there are languages!

Mahâyâna philosophy can, for example, offer an altogether new framework in which to consider the current dispute about the historical Jesus. Opposing views in these debates have become clearer, starker, and more denunciatory in recent months. To sketch the positions of one pair of opponents in these discussions: In one corner we have Robert W. Funk with his *Honest to Jesus*, concluding that we have "only the story about Jesus," with no supernatural realities anywhere, no self-serving theological ideologies, no comforting guarantees. Echoing Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, Funk proclaims that Jesus is a poet who had a glimpse of God's imperial domain, not the theological "heavy" of later Christians. In the other corner we have Luke Timothy Johnson, arguing in *The Real Jesus* that the truly real Jesus is not the construct of Funk's Jesus Seminar, with its debunking approach, but rather the Jesus of the gospels, who is encountered by practitioners as the risen Jesus who lives today. This Jesus has no need for any scripture scholar to validate his reality. The debate is surprising in the way it mimics controversies of past ages; the sides are drawn much as they were when Adolf von Harnack first dismissed the supernatural claims of the gospel in his day.

From a Mahâyâna philosophical perspective, however, the framework of this "historical Jesus" debate is far too narrow. Each side makes assumptions that would be negated in a Mahâyâna approach. Each makes claims that, if emptied, would be affirmed in a Mahâyâna approach.

Funk definitively rejects the overlay of later Christian theory, for in his view this is precisely what Jesus needs to be liberated from. Jesus, the divine son co-eternal with the Father, "deserves a demotion," he writes (306). To achieve this demotion, we are to go on a "theological diet" anchored in the

historical Jesus, the sage teacher and poet of God's domain. To this end, Funk attempts to uncover the "specific difference" of Jesus' visage from the general crowd (67-69). In a Mahâyâna context, Funk is indeed engaged in emptying traditional christological views, presenting us with "just Jesus," in all his historical bareness and power. So far, so good, for no view can represent the final state of anything.

Yet Funk fails to empty emptiness—and thus he fails to recover a sense of the historical reality and significance of early Christian faith experiences and confessions. The point of a metaphysically-empty Christ is not to have an essential definition of Jesus arrived at via a historical method driven by a positivistic agenda, which allows us only scanty glimpses of the earliest, pre-gospel figure of Jesus. It is not enough merely to empty views. The view of emptiness itself must be emptied, and this is done by reclaiming the dependently co-arisen truth of the tradition. Indeed, why should we privilege the image of Jesus at one particular point in history—a reconstructed, pre-gospel view of Jesus—over depictions of Jesus in the gospels, or over other views of him throughout the long history of the Christian faith? Why box out these later traditions about Jesus?

Luke Timothy Johnson in his *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* presents a trenchant and apposite critique of the procedures and protocols of Funk and the Jesus Seminar. He is especially critical of the "creeping certitude" that extrapolates from first instance probabilities to second instance certitudes. Indeed, one often does wonder how Funk or any scholar can be so confident of opinions that seem to admit only of greater or lesser probability. Johnson's

critique is a liberating breeze that whisks away those overwrought historical certitudes.

Johnson, however, goes on to assert that there does exist in the gospels a constant, normative, and true pattern of Jesus, a pattern that presents a core experience of Jesus as risen, a pattern that is expressed from a post-resurrection perspective. Johnson seems to recommend a new version of the kerygmatic theology so in vogue in a few decades ago, a theology in which one can clearly identify the core meaning of the gospels as the real canon within the canon, with little regard for—or need of—historical research into the actual conditions of the times and texts. Johnson rightly critiques Funk's approach as making an unfounded assumption that "the recovery of origins means the recovery of essence" (68). Quite the contrary, he argues, only through a "post-resurrection perspective" can one encounter the real Jesus, the risen Jesus who lives today (144). "The significance of Jesus is not determined by his ministry alone, but above all and essentially by the mystery of his death and resurrection" (57). Again the intrusion of essentialist categories, as if Nietzsche had never lived and no postmodern ever critiqued anything. More history is needed, not less!

If we divorce our awareness of Jesus from critical historical study, then might not the image of a risen Christ become just another frozen paradigm for a self-defined religious life, without in any significant way challenging the very identity of the Christian? Might not a risen Christ serve simply as a support for one's cherished cultural identity? If we can safely ignore the history of Jesus, why can we not ignore the history of later traditions? Furthermore, who says that there is a univocal, core experience of the risen Lord? An "experience" can be just as "essential" as a cherished doctrine.

Johnson's Jesus is a scripture scholar's version of the metaphysical Jesus of classical christology. Who says that the post-resurrection perspective is any identifiable perspective at all? Mark's Gospel, ending at 16:8 with the flight of the last of Jesus' disciples, lacks a post-resurrection perspective altogether.

Johnson's argument for a core experience and a normative perspective parallels the metaphysical approach of traditional Christology. It too would be negated by the Mahâyâna philosophy of emptiness, but not in the sense of debunking the faith experience or perspective. All core experiences and all perspectives are declared to be empty of inner essence, and *thereby* we are freed to cultivate and proclaim experiences of the risen Lord and to develop perspectives that bring those experiences to speech, as in the four gospels.

The Mahâyânists encountered a parallel problem long ago—they too had to come to terms with an awareness that all meanings, even those associated with the Buddha, were language constructs and empty of any final referent. They too had a metaphysical tradition that claimed to provide the final and absolutely true viewpoint and they too had docetic tendencies that depicted a scarcely human, supernatural Buddha. Thus, Mahâyâna thinkers declared that words and stories—a fortiori historical words and stories—get at nothing core and central, no final, absolute viewpoint, because whatever is contained in a viewpoint is language-formed and humanly-constructed. And yet those words and stories are still words and stories, patterning our reading of life, inscribing themselves upon our minds, and constructing our identities. Their not being absolute does not mean that they are not true. The patterns, conventional though they be, can nevertheless be powerful and true. True insofar as not absolute. True insofar as producing good fruit, insofar as fostering engagement in compassionate activity.

Zen Buddhism teaches that there is nothing special, no special realm of ontologically true being, no special realm of privileged history, whether early or late. Having declared the emptiness of all ideas and all words, the awakened person is liberated to engage in ideas and words with passion and commitment. Precisely because nothing is guaranteed by supernatural status claims, human effort is crucial and indispensable.

When the framework is an either/or alternative of defining a special status for Jesus on the one hand, or on the other debunking that status in favor of a new "specific difference" uncovered by historical analysis, then the opportunity to move from emptiness to engagement in the dependently co-arisen world is missed. One is forced to choose between two alternatives, both inauthentic. The Mādhyamika framework would want to hold in healthy tension the emptying of all claims about Jesus *so as to* affirm claims about Jesus. A christology of Jesus as empty offers an approach that rejects the very possibility of defining the specific nature of Jesus and thus glories in no metaphysical exaltation of his person and no positivistic debunking of his person. He is defined in terms of relationships: his relationship to Abba and his relationship to people. Through a Mahâyâna lens, then, one may envision a different christology.

This Mahâyâna lens may also enable us to focus on specific Christian traditions with fresh eyes to see. The doctrine of incarnation, for example: Although the Platonic anthropology underlying the historical argumentation about the incarnation tended to wrench spirit free from matter, the Church Fathers avoided this dichotomy through a creative and paradoxical balancing act—affirming contradictory properties in one and the same person of Jesus. Some today regard this as a dated, static metaphysical view of the dual

reality of Christ, but I am convinced that in its time and within its own cultural context in the living Greek tradition—where the terms "nature" and "essence" were much more real than any concrete individual person—this doctrine of the incarnation was organically related to soteriological concerns and therefore most relevant to the lives of concrete persons. To the Fathers, the doctrine of the incarnation was not in the least a static point of metaphysical speculation, but rather a vision of how all humans have been saved by their participation in the enfleshment of Jesus.

An attentive reading of the history of this central Christian doctrine of the incarnation, encouraged by insight into the historical, dependent co-arising of all doctrine, can cause us to recognize in this affirmation of opposites in the same person of Christ a direct challenge to our facile notions both of human nature and of divine nature: Jesus combines such properties as immutability, omniscience, omnipotence, and eternity with those of mutability, limited knowledge, suffering, and death. His person, dead and risen, becomes the central paradox of Christian living. The gospels often and in various places teach that we are to die to self and live to Christ, that he lives in us and we in him—not to give us a comforting metaphor but rather to challenge our self-enclosed definition of human nature, of who we are. Perhaps Christians more commonly see in the doctrine of the incarnation a new doctrine about God: that God is no longer the distant immutable being of Greek philosophy, but has "emptied" himself of such exalted status by becoming human (Philippians 2:7 is the favorite citation). The notion of "divinity" is emptied of content in the person of Christ, and a way is opened up for humans to become, in the phrase of the Fathers, "divinized."

But the classical doctrine of the incarnation also challenges our notions of what it means to be human, of human nature. Nothing special anywhere, the Zen people say. Everything empty, nothing solid, no essences to cling to, the Mahâyânists proclaim. All with the intent of reinserting people more fully into the actual life they live in the world of our manifold interbeing (Thich Nhat Hanh's felicitous translation for the Buddhist concept of dependent co-arising). The issue for Christians perhaps is not to admit that Jesus is divine, but to understand what it means to declare the Logos to have become human, flesh. To follow the path of Jesus is to immerse ourselves in the dependently co-arisen course of life events that constitute our individual and group histories, and not to pretend to certitudes beyond anyone's ability to assure.

Mahâyâna Buddhist philosophy can indeed "add" to Christianity, by enabling us to refocus our attention. It can offer us new and exciting ways to encounter the word of the Father from silence—Jesus. On the other hand, I would never claim that Mahâyâna is *necessary* to the Christian theological endeavor as if Christian faith is bereft without its contribution. Philosophy is always but the handmaiden to faith thinking.