

Who Was Jesus? Who Was Buddha?

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Meditation

The year has turned. We have marked the turning.

Yet the turning never ceases in the endless flow of time.

May we find once again a centeredness in the midst of the turning, in the midst of the joys and sorrow, successes and challenges, of our lives...

May we allow our breathing to slow, our thoughts to slow, any tensions in our body to relax...

To find refreshment of the spirit here and now, embraced by this place, embraced by one another's presence and compassionate love...

May we find once again a quiet centeredness in the midst of the turning...

That from that center may grow peace and compassion that will be a blessing to those around us, a blessing to the world.

Readings

From the preface by editor Marcus Borg to *Jesus & Buddha - The Parallel Sayings*:

As a Christian, there was a time when I thought Christianity was the only way – the only true religion. It was part of the inherited belief of my childhood. There came a time when this belief crumbled, and all religions looked like human inventions. The disappearance of my belief in the uniqueness of Christianity was accompanied by a skepticism about religions in general.

In more recent years, my appreciation of religious pluralism – my acquaintance with a number of the world's religions, and my studies of religious experience across cultures – has reversed this skepticism. The parallels among the religions (especially at the level of experience and teaching about “the way,” though not very much at the level of doctrine) suggests that there is something here worth taking seriously.

In short, seeing the parallels between the wisdom teaching of Jesus and the Buddha adds to the credibility of both. Acceptance of religious pluralism need not generate skepticism, but can provide grounds for saying, “Here is something I must not ignore.”

And so I invite you to ponder the parallels between these two enlightened teachers of an enlightenment wisdom. The path of which they both speak is a path of liberation from our anxious grasping, resurrection into a new way of being, and transformation into the compassionate life.

The words of Jesus and the Buddha, as compiled in *Jesus & Buddha – The Parallel Sayings*,
Marcus Borg, editor

The words of Jesus:

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

Matthew 13.31-32

The words of the Buddha:

Do not underestimate good, thinking it will not affect you. Dripping water can fill a pitcher, drop by drop; one who is wise is filled with good, even if one accumulates it little by little.

Dhammapada 9.7

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The words of Jesus:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

John 15.12-13

The words of the Buddha:

Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings. Let your thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world.

Sutta Nipata 149-150

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The words of Jesus:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

Matthew 6.25-26

The words of the Buddha:

Those who have no accumulation, who eat with perfect knowledge, whose sphere is emptiness, signlessness, and liberation, are hard to track, like birds in the sky. Those whose compulsions are gone, who are not attached to food, whose sphere is emptiness, signlessness, and liberation, are hard to track, like birds in the sky.

Dhammapada 7.3-4

Sermon

Put aside any predictions for 2009. There is no such thing as a future into which we can peek. The days and months of 2009 are not already laid out, just waiting for us to live through them, to discover what they hold.

Instead – paraphrasing Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, our task is to pay attention to our actions in the present; for then the so-called future will take care of itself. Or paraphrasing Jesus, do not worry overmuch about tomorrow – tend to today’s worries and tasks, and tomorrow will tend to itself.

So, yes, there *are* many pressing matters before us as a people, as human beings on the planet, as individuals; and yes, we are naturally curious as to how it will all “turn out.” But in the midst of all this there are more useful questions: How do we want to live... now... each day? And who or what will be our guide in the living?

Well, that’s where those we might call spiritual masters, such as the Buddha and Jesus, come in: Two of the spiritual geniuses in the history of humanity, two of those who have called us to ways of living different from the conventional ways into which we too easily habitually fall, two human beings whose presence made such an impact upon those who encountered them that the religions of their respective times and places were transformed, and two new traditions began to grow, traditions which millions upon millions follow to this day, these many centuries later.

So – who were these guys? And does it matter: are they and their teachings still worth heeding? And were they teaching *similar* messages or *divergent* messages from which we must choose?

My own sense of who each of these figures were has changed a bit over time.

I was first acquainted with Jesus. I was raised until I was eleven in a Presbyterian church school – and not surprisingly, we talked a lot about Jesus. So to this day two images from that time come first to mind when talking about Jesus. One image is the sentimental portrait of a fair-skinned, sweet-faced Jesus with long, flowing light brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard – sitting under a tree talking to a group of children. The other image is the same figure crucified.

One might well ask (as I doubt I did at the time): Why would anyone do such a terrible thing to such an apparently sweet man? Another way of putting it would be, “What made this man so dangerous that he would be crucified?”

Yet though as a child I knew that Jesus was *supposed* to be important, in some way our savior, he simply did not make a huge personal impact on me at the time. Among other things, I simply couldn’t believe what we were told were the most important things about him: the miraculous multiplying of loaves and fishes, walking on water, healings, bringing back someone from the dead, his own resurrection...

Come on... these things couldn’t happen.

Then one summer during my college years I read the Sermon on the Mount, the few chapters in the Gospel of Matthew that string together what were probably bits and pieces from various talks and sayings presented at various times to various groups. By then, I had been reading philosophy at a Quaker college, encountering Eastern religions, practicing some meditation and yoga... and the Sermon on the Mount fit right in to my evolving worldview:

Love your enemies, turn the other cheek, seek and you shall find, don't judge lest you be judged, be as the lilies of the field.

Here was someone, I now felt, who, as it says in the gospels, spoke with authority; as if he had experienced something profound about the nature of life and was sharing what he *knew* to be true, sharing something that could transform your life. (So... put the miracles aside as later embellishments.)

And though I can't say I manage to put the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount into practice or even to fully understand them all, those teachings have remained a touchstone for me in all their challenging, life- and world-transforming (if we would really listen) simplicity. There *may well be* something that could be called the "Kingdom of God" and it may indeed be, as Jesus affirmed, within each of us and spread among us, would we but open our eyes to see – and live accordingly – in a spirit of radical love and equality and justice.

Now, as for Siddhartha Gautama, who came to be known as the Buddha, the "Awakened One," my earliest encounter with this spiritual teacher from 2,500 years ago was through a photograph of a golden statue of the Buddha which was in a large book on the religions of the world that we had on our coffee table as I was growing up. Such an expression of peace and compassion.

Quite different – so it certainly would seem – from the iconic image of the crucified Christ!

And though I wouldn't have put this in words at the time either, I suppose the unspoken questions *this* image raised for me were "What made this man so peaceful?" and "What does he know that I might want to know too?"

These were questions that those who met him asked too. After his enlightenment, again and again when people encountered him they could see something in his bearing, something in his eyes, that suggested he had indeed in some profound sense found answers to life's most persistent questions, that suggested he had found the peace that everyone wanted. And like Jesus, he too spoke as someone who *knew* and who was living from this place of profound knowledge and experience of life's meaning. So they listened to him, and they followed him.

As to some degree have I, over all the years since. I studied Buddhism in college, learned basic Buddhist meditation, and have continued to read and reflect and strived to put into practice at least in some elementary ways his teachings about the nature of life and how we ought to live if we wish to be awake like the Buddha – or... at least a little more awake. The teachings? Life as we generally experience it includes suffering, caused because we grasp after that which does not provide enduring happiness or contentment; yet there is a way out, which the Buddha called the Noble Eightfold Path, seeking to live ethically (right speech, right livelihood, right action...) from a place of profound awareness and understanding (right mindfulness, right views, right thinking...).

But a little more about Jesus and the Buddha as human beings. Again the question: Who were these guys?

On the surface much about their lives seems quite different:

Jesus of Nazareth, a poor carpenter's son, a Jew from the peasant class living in Palestine during the oppressive rule of the Roman empire.

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, born a prince in a ruling family of northern India.

Jesus, a man seemingly in a hurry, charismatic, challenging, an extraordinary story-teller and wordsmith, someone who could heal (in some manner) with a touch, a man who enjoyed eating and drinking, and who made a point of opening his table to all, to society's outcasts, all welcome at the table of the kingdom of God – both a spiritual challenge to everyone and a political challenge to the ruling authorities of the day.

The Buddha, a more systematic teacher, yet at the same time a man who struck others as warm and compassionate, with great depth to his presence, who in his teaching also challenged the hierarchies of his day, as he offered his teachings to all who would listen.

Jesus, whose message was rooted in a thoroughgoing theistic worldview, assuming a personal God as creator and sustainer of our lives and of the universe.

The Buddha, whose message was largely based on a non-theistic, almost scientific approach to the dilemmas and suffering of life.

Jesus killed by the authorities after only a year – or at the most just a few years – of itinerant teaching and healing, leaving just a few followers, yet those few giving birth to a religion which has grown to become the largest on the planet today.

The Buddha dying in old age after decades of teaching and spreading the dharma, creating the monastic order which continues to this day in all its variations, along with lay followers now numbering in the millions – and though not nearly as large as the Christian faith, spread to nations around the world.

So, clearly many differences, yet beneath what are real differences in their stories and their teachings, perhaps Jesus and Buddha *were* more alike than we might think, and perhaps their teachings are more alike than we might think.

Even in the legendary stories of their lives we discover deep similarities beneath outward differences. Both the Buddha and Jesus were clearly spiritual seekers, both leaving home to pursue their quests at about the age of thirty. Both then had transformative spiritual experiences – what we might call enlightenment or awakening experiences: the Buddha as he sat beneath a tree, Jesus as he was baptized by John. Both then began to share their experience and their teaching with others.

Think of it this way: If you accept for a moment (and perhaps you believe this already) that there is something called an enlightenment or awakening experience, and if you further accept that there have been some men and women over the course of history who have had such an experience not just fleetingly or occasionally (as many of us do), but in such a way that they live that experience, that enlightenment, that awakening pretty much all the time, and if you accept that a few of these individuals are also masterful teachers... then doesn't it make sense that in their teachings we will of course find similarities at the depths yet not surprisingly differences on the surface? For isn't it quite natural, to give the examples at hand, that a runaway Indian prince would formulate a universal teaching of awakening for his time and place differently than would a poor Jewish carpenter's son living under Roman oppression in Palestine?

So we ought not gloss over the differences in the stories or teachings of Jesus and the Buddha – differences from which we can learn – but there is also a great gift in seeing through to the depth parallels and similarities in the two. As Marcus Borg wrote in the first reading, seeing the parallels in the two teachings (not to mention in many of the world's other wisdom traditions) “can provide grounds for saying, ‘Here is something I must not ignore.’”

Well then: Before I finish, just a little more about how I understand that something at the depths of both Jesus' and the Buddha's lives and messages.

Briefly, look for a moment at two of the three parallels we heard earlier.

The first begins with one of Jesus' parables concerning the kingdom of heaven. Too often the "Kingdom of Heaven" or "Kingdom of God" is imagined as some sort of life after death; too often it is thought that Jesus is telling us to live in such and such a way, to be good, and then in the sweet bye and bye we might find ourselves in the kingdom of heaven. But the parables are clear: The kingdom of heaven is within, and the kingdom of heaven is also spread among us and we just do not see, the kingdom of heaven is an *experience* of radical love and connection with God – the source of all, both creator and creation – and with one another. This kingdom, small as the world reckons such things, but the largest, most important thing of all, as the spirit reckons.

The same as Buddhist nirvana and wisdom? I would suggest at least the same territory.

A spiritual territory in which we do indeed *experience* that we are all God's children as a Christian might put it, in which we *experience* that there is no such thing as a separate self, that we are all part of an interdependent net of existence, as a Buddhist might put it, and that we can be liberated from our usual grasping and sense of separateness into this feeling of interdependence, of nirvana... again, the kingdom of heaven.

And from that kind of *experience*?

Of course (as the second pair of parallels affirm) compassion and kindness, of course love – qualities at the heart of the messages both of Jesus and the Buddha. Not compassion and kindness and love because we *should* behave in such ways. But because we have experienced the world in such a way that we more naturally *do* behave in such ways.

And – here's hope, and a kind of faith: Living *as if* all this were true can in an important sense make it so.

Well... all this is barely an introduction to "Who was Jesus? Who was Buddha?"

You could come to my class to learn more.

Or you could simply heed the message which is at the heart of both Jesus' and Buddha's teaching: Look within for heaven, for God, as Jesus put it. Be a lamp unto yourself, as the Buddha put it.

For in the end, though great spiritual exemplars and teachers can be guides on our paths of life, perhaps it matters far less who Jesus and the Buddha were than who *we* are and who *we* choose to be and how *we* choose to live – in the midst of our lives of joy and sorrow, in these troubled times as at all times.

Who are we?

How do we choose to live?

Resources among those which informed this sermon, and which may be of further interest:

Jesus & Buddha: The Parallel Sayings, Marcus Borg editor

Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, by Marcus Borg

Who Is Jesus? By John Dominic Crossan and Richard Watts

Buddha, by Karen Armstrong

Living Buddha, Living Christ, by Thich Nhat Hanh

Good Heart, by the Dalai Lama