

# A BUDDHIST VIEW

By JIM PYM

**I**MAGINE A LARGE JIGSAW PUZZLE. The picture is of a map. There are many pieces, and all are equally important to complete the picture. This, in a very limited way, is how the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity has been in my life. Just as in my early days I was unable to see how Christianity could have the whole answer for all people, so, since I became a Buddhist, I do not see the *Buddha Dharma*<sup>1</sup> as being the only way. In unpacking the jigsaw and sorting out the pieces the picture will, I hope, become more clear.

At first sight, Buddhism and Christianity seem incompatible: Buddhism denies God, Christianity is based on Him;<sup>2</sup> Christianity talks about the soul or Spirit of God within creation, Buddhism teaches that *anatta*<sup>3</sup> – not self – is one of the signs of being; and so on. Yet it is significant when true dialogue takes place there is an amazing depth of agreement and understanding. If we look for differences we can find them, but for every difference there is another way of perception that brings the two traditions closer together. Differences are important, and true dialogue must recognize them, for they are the reasons that we follow one particular spiritual path, and not another. But differences can also highlight the inspiration we can draw from another tradition, helping us to deepen the experience of our own.

For example, while writing part of this article, I have been sitting – and even working – in my garden. Gardening is a wonderful way of harvesting spiritual metaphors, and the physical work of digging my vegetable plot is the perfect antidote to a brain fevered by an excess of religious thinking.

But it is a sunny day, and I have also been sitting, looking and thinking (I was going to write meditating, but I am not sure that I was, at least, not in the Buddhist sense). As I sit and look at the garden, I find, even though it is not the most orderly of plots (a bit like this article) I am absorbed by its beauty and peace. I am also aware if I think about it that what appears on the surface as a peaceful tranquil scene is in fact busy, bloodthirsty and by no means harmonious.

Christianity teaches that behind this wonder that I call a garden is a Creator, and many Christians aver that the way to know the natural world most deeply is to know the Creator. To know Him is to know the

creation. What kind of being this is, and the extent of the knowledge we can have, depends on your branch of theology.

Buddhism accepts that all things have Buddha Nature, and seeks to see things 'just as they are'. The differences between the ideas of a Creator and Buddha Nature are important. Buddha Nature is the essence of all things, but does not create them. Buddha Nature is not a 'self', (though it is sometimes written as 'Self'). Perhaps one of the best terms is the Buddha's own word, 'Unborn'. Things, and beings, create themselves, through the process of *karma* and rebirth.<sup>4</sup> As there is no fixed and unchanging self, what is reborn is a collection of characteristics called *skandhas*<sup>5</sup> which are constantly changing.

All this is theory. When it comes to practice, we can sit quietly together, leaving behind our concepts and ideas, and just enjoy the garden. Views can be equally right or wrong, but 'Right view', the first step of the Noble Eightfold Path,<sup>6</sup> is not either of two opposites, but the harmony that recognizes that both or either may be right, wrong or even neither. We form philosophies around our experience, but in the experiencing there are no views at all. As a much-loved Chinese scripture puts it, 'The Great Way is not difficult, simply avoid choosing' (*Hsin Hsin Ming, On the mind in the heart*).

At this point, having said a bit about Buddhism, I must be clear that what I now call Christianity might not be recognized as such by many Christians. I have no difficulty with God, and no difficulty with the life and much of the recorded teaching of Jesus. The resurrection and the miracles cause no problems; they have their equivalents in Buddhism and in other traditions throughout the world, and this helps me to accept their truth. The big problem is the doctrines of the unique divinity of Jesus, original sin and the atonement. For me, Jesus is an example, and as such he has to be human, or we have to be potentially divine. His message for me is that both are true. I also cannot see a God of love blaming me for what my mythical first parents might have done, and having to send his Son to be a blood-sacrifice. In fact, even if it were true, I do not think I want to be included in it.

So, for some Christians, there would not be any Christianity left. I apologize to them. But I have met enough sincere Christians with some sympathy for my views to be able to continue to hold them.

It may seem paradoxical – but then all the mystical areas of religious truth have paradox as a major element – to say that it was Buddhism that helped me to find God. But it is so. I have always had trouble with God portrayed as a person. Islam has great wisdom when it refuses to allow God to be shown in this way. Perhaps my early interest in science

fiction and the nature of outer space made it particularly difficult to see God as a person. If God is God, then It has to be everywhere at the same time, and this is manifestly impossible for a Him, or even a Her. I clearly remember that one of my early questions was, 'How big is God?'

Religion is, for me, essentially experiential. A little of my personal story may help the reader to understand more clearly some of the things I have to say. I was born and brought up in a very strict yet loving Roman Catholic home, went to a convent preparatory school and a Catholic secondary school. In religious education, such as it was, we were told what we must believe, and threatened with eternal hell if we did not. Having a logical mind, I could not see how a God of love could ever damn any soul for eternity, particularly with such torments as described by some imaginative Christian writers.

Asking questions, as I did from a quite early age, got me no answers except unreasonable anger and punishment. I was told it was wrong to question, that the Church knows what is right. 'Just have faith', they said. I slowly realized that I did not have faith, that I was wicked, and would go to hell. Asking how I might go about getting faith did not seem unreasonable to me, but I never did get a satisfactory answer. This question of 'faith' was and still is the key to most of what has happened to me in a religious sense throughout my life. Once I came to accept my lack of faith, I realized I was in the wrong place, so I left. I was about seventeen years old. At this point, I felt I was able to commence my spiritual journey. It took a long time before I could recognize that these early experiences were also a part of that journey.

After about a year or so I saw a meeting advertised. It was the local Buddhist group, where I heard a monk lecture on the *Kalama Sutra*.

Do not accept anything simply because it has been said by your teacher,  
or because it has been written in your sacred book,  
or because it has been believed by many,  
or because it has been handed down by your ancestors.

Accept and live only according to what will enable you to see truth face  
to face.<sup>7</sup>

This was just what I needed to hear. I had thought that my lack of faith put me outside all religion, but here was the founder of one of the world's great religions giving experience priority over faith. It was beyond anything I had ever imagined.

After attending the group for a couple of years, and learning basic meditation under a visiting *bhikkhu*,<sup>8</sup> the Buddhist group folded, due to the death of the organizer. Wanting somewhere to spend a quiet hour, I

found my way to the local Friends' Meeting House. There I learned of a Christian way that was also experiential, and not credal, and after attending for more than ten years, I was eventually accepted into membership. Although I knew Quakers are a Christian body, with their own spiritual traditions and practices, I was accepted as I was, and I felt no conflict because in my ten years of worshipping with Friends, the silence had become more important than the words. I valued this means of a new identification with Christianity, and particularly because I was not pressurized to leave Buddhism.

Before this happened, I had to learn that hating Catholicism bound me to it as much as if I loved it. In this, I was helped by a Buddhist priest, some Quakers, a Zen Master who had left the monastic life and taught privately while earning his living as a salesman, and an American Christian mystical teacher and spiritual healer. No wonder my Christianity – to say nothing of my Buddhism – is hardly orthodox. All of these, together with much reading and meditating, helped me to realize that God might be found in the *Dharma*, if an impersonal Spirit permeating all things could be called God. I also discovered that there was enlightenment in Christianity.

The Buddha had refused to be drawn on God. He did not deny God's existence, but he would not affirm it either. He did not think that theology was helpful in achieving enlightenment. He was probably right! The result of this is that many Buddhists – particularly in the West – portray the *Dharma* as atheistic, which it definitely is not. Not all Buddhist teachers feel this way. There are some, particularly in the Mahayana tradition, who see that it was concepts of God that the Buddha rejected, while there are some Christian writers who have seen concepts of God as idolatrous.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus showed us God as 'the Father', which seems at first sight to be definitely individual and personal. However, there are times when the personal aspect becomes blurred. 'I and my Father are one', for example, takes on a different meaning if we do not start from the belief that Jesus is God. If this saying is meant to apply to all of us, as are many of Jesus' other sayings, then the meaning becomes quite different. What appears to be two are in reality One, and this applies to all beings. It leaves no room for a separate self, and no separation from God. Instead of searching for God afar off, or imploring *him* to come nearer, we look within and find God or Buddha Nature there, '... unborn, unmade, unmanifest and unbecome . . .', to quote the words of the Buddha. But there are times when this experience of oneness makes the impersonal seem personal, like a warm loving presence near at hand, which can be and often is felt as Father, Mother or Friend, or Buddha.

In theory, Buddhism offers little possibility of prayer, yet all over the Buddhist world, Buddhists pray. Prayer seems to be an essential part of being human, and every bit as vital to life as meditation. To be able to pray for others is particularly important. Buddhism does not need a 'God' to pray to. It has a number of techniques which fill the gap. In fact Buddhists might say that it is the idea of 'God' which is created to fill the gap. It is said that the Buddha taught eighty-four thousand different ways of practice, and these are known as *upaya* – skilful means – or *Dharma Doors*. Among the most widely practised are *metta* meditation, the use of *mantra*, and the acceptance of a well developed hierarchy of heavenly beings who are vowed to help those still caught in the 'wheel of re-birth'.

The word *metta* means loving-kindness, and meditation in this fashion is a highly developed form of Buddhist practice.

May all beings be well and happy,  
all beings, of all worlds,  
those who are my friends  
those to whom I am neutral  
and those who are my enemies;  
may they all be well and happy.<sup>10</sup>

Words and thoughts similar to this form the basis of this meditation, and we are encouraged to allow our feelings and emotions to follow the thought. We are also taught to direct this loving kindness to ourselves. After all, we are a part of 'all beings'. Again, there is the ever present paradox. Buddhism, which teaches *anatta*, specifically encourages us to love ourselves, while Christianity, which accepts the reality of the 'self', has often taught that it is wrong to love ourselves. But Jesus told us to love our neighbours as ourselves, and presumably, in order to do this, we have to know what it is like to love ourselves.

In particular, we are required to wish our enemies well; 'love your enemies' is as much a part of Buddhism as it is of Christianity. 'Never by hatred is hatred overcome; only by love.'<sup>11</sup> In the Buddha's teaching we are shown a practical and gradual way to do it, starting with those we love (easy), moving to those we know, but have little feeling about (harder) and on to those we hate, resent or would normally have ill-will towards (difficult). Tibetan tradition reminds us that all beings might have been our 'mothers' at some time. In other words, through the networks of rebirth, we are related to everyone.

Buddhism, even *Theravada* Buddhism,<sup>12</sup> has a well developed concept of 'the Communion of Saints'. Because there is no supreme being, the

idea of heavenly beings (and the other kind) is possibly more highly developed. A Buddhist may pray to, and expect answers from, a whole range of *Buddhas*,<sup>13</sup> *Bodhisattvas*,<sup>14</sup> *devas* (gods or angels), saints, monks, people and animals. All of these have spent their time on earth, and some will probably do so again, though they now live in other worlds. The spiritual power which they have acquired they can use to help their journey towards *Nirvana*, by helping those who are still incarnate.

A practice that is common in *Mahayana* Buddhism is the repetition of the name of one of these heavenly beings. It may be their actual name, or a phrase which resonates with them and their work. These are Buddhist forms of *mantra*. The concept of the mantra is probably best known in the West from the teachings of Transcendental Meditation, but Buddhists have several different interpretations. Many of the scriptures tell stories of great beings who achieved *Nirvana* (supreme enlightenment) in countless ages past, and who created from their enlightenment power worlds in which there are no impediments for those born there. The saying of the name or mantra invokes the presence of that being, assures birth in their world, and expresses gratitude for their compassionate vows.

This is ‘the other-power way’, best known as the Pure Land Buddhism of China and Japan. This is the way that I have found to be best for me, my own personal ‘Way’ of Buddhist practice. I was first introduced to it by my Zen teacher, who intuitively felt that *za-zen*<sup>15</sup> meditation was not for me, and told me to find the meaning of *Namu Amida Butsu*. I had never heard of Pure Land Buddhism at that time, but later met two priests from the *Jodoshinshu*<sup>16</sup> tradition who helped me to discover its main practice, which is the repetition of *Nembutsu*<sup>17</sup> or the name of *Amida Buddha*, the Buddha of Infinite Life and Light, and the development of *shinjin*, a true and pure heart (this word is often mistranslated as ‘faith’). The *Nembutsu* is not a magic formula, but a recognition of gratitude which comes through surrender of the idea of self, and acceptance that this Infinite Power of Light, Life and Compassion is the real means whereby we can reach our goal.

In my Pure Land practice I use two methods I discovered through Christian sources. The first is from Brother Lawrence, whose idea of the ‘practice of the Presence’ is a way that is extremely helpful to Pure Land devotees. Just to be still, after reciting the *Nembutsu*, aware of the Buddhas’ presence, not wanting anything, but grateful for all that they have given to us, is a wonderful form of Pure Land meditation. It is particularly helpful for those who cannot visualize, as the traditional forms of Pure Land meditation involve complex visualization. In the

Presence of their Pure Compassion there is an experience that is totally relaxing and healing, and how much do we who live such hectic lives need such an experience! In it we are accepted 'just as we are', for there is no concept of judgement in the Buddhist Path. Another part of this practice is to remember the presence of *Amida Buddha* with me in my daily life, and this complements the practice of saying the *Nembutsu* at odd moments throughout the day. (Actually the practice is to say it continuously, but 'just as I am' includes a bad memory.)

The usual way of chanting the Name in the Buddhist tradition is to do so in a continuous and rhythmic fashion. A method that varies slightly from this is one I have discovered from the writings of the Eastern Church on the Jesus Prayer.<sup>18</sup> It is to say the *Nembutsu* slowly and silently, leaving spaces between each recitation and adopting a listening attitude while saying it. This helps me to become more aware of the Buddha's presence, and the grace and compassion of *Amida* in my life.

One of the chief recipients of prayer in Buddhism is the *Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara*, known as 'The One who Regards the Cries of the World' or 'The All-Sided One'. He/she is able to manifest in whatever form is needed by the individual. Thus: ' . . . If beings are to be saved by his assuming a householder's form, the *Bodhisattva* will manifest himself in the form of a householder and preach them the Dharma . . . ',<sup>19</sup> and so on through all kinds of forms, monk, saint Buddha, male, female, animal or spirit. But there is also a practical side to this service. The Buddha tells us: 'When people hear his name and see his body and think of him in their minds not vainly, they will see every form of ill effaced in all the worlds'.<sup>19</sup>

It is no wonder *Avalokiteshvara* is one of the most popular recipients of Buddhist prayer and devotion, or the one whose name, or mantra, in one form or another, is most often chanted. *Avalokiteshvara* is known by various names and forms throughout the Buddhist world including *Chenrezig* in Tibetan, *Kannon* in Japanese and *Kwan Yin* in Chinese. He/she is pictured in both male and female forms (and occasionally in animal form), and shown as a normal human being, or with various numbers of arms and heads symbolizing an all-seeing nature and supreme compassion. There are also living incarnations of whom the Dalai Lama is probably the best known.

Even knowing all this, I was surprised the first time I came across the idea of Jesus as an incarnation of *Avalokiteshvara*. Going for a walk with my Zen teacher one day, we came to a large Anglo-Catholic church, and went inside. After genuflecting in the approved manner, he knelt and repeated softly *Namo Christus* over and over again, encouraging us to do

the same. On another occasion in a Roman church, he went to the Lady-altar, where *Namo Maria* was the mantra used. (*Namo* means 'I take refuge in'.) When we questioned him later, he said that to him both Jesus and Mary were incarnations of the same being, *Kannon*. The implications of this are staggering, but he did not see any problem in the fact that Jesus and Mary were mother and son. He pointed out that *Kannon* was Universal Compassion, and Jesus and Mary were one with that. The genuineness of his devotion as he said this was expressed in every aspect of his being. Yet his teaching of *za-zen* remained as formless and impersonal as ever.

Following this experience, I have often gone into a Christian church to meditate, and felt quite at home in the process. In a country that is almost without Buddhist temples, it is good to be able to find a place that is still and quiet, and where the Presence of Great Compassion – give it whatever name you like – is to be found. Because I go into churches to be still, I have often noticed that those churches that have the Blessed Sacrament reserved have a different atmosphere from those that do not. I have a Buddhist friend from the Tibetan tradition who can tell the moment he walks in the door whether the Sacrament is reserved. On a tour of East Anglian churches, he was right ninety per cent of the time. As a Buddhist, I have no problem with transubstantiation or consubstantiation. All things and all beings have Buddha Nature, and it is as much in a piece of bread or a glass of wine as it is in God. Similarly if a building has been used for much prayer, singing or meditation this is noticeable in the atmosphere. The esoteric traditions of Buddhism confirm that sound (chanting, prayer and hymns) and meditation have the power to generate energy that will permeate solid matter, and that rightly directed spiritual energy will change things. Such churches are western examples that many people have experienced, often without knowing why.

It was experiences such as these that led me into Buddhist/Christian dialogue, where I have found a great joy in meeting many people, both Buddhist and Christian, who have found similar illumination and help from both traditions. I have known and shared with, among others, a *bhikkhu* who carries a copy of *The cloud of unknowing* in his monk's bag; a lay Buddhist who delights in singing in a cathedral choir, a Christian nun who practises *za-zen*, a bishop who chants a Buddhist mantra as part of his morning devotions, and a Quaker who is also an ordained Buddhist monk. To me, to see how Buddhism and Christianity are pieces of the jigsaw in their lives, as they have been in mine, is a privilege and a joy which is beyond description.

I am quite clear that such experiences do not make me, or anyone else, a Christian/Buddhist, or a Buddhist/Christian. Each person has come to follow a way that is most helpful to them. To walk both paths at the same time would cause the spiritual splits, and get nowhere. However, each can and does help to illuminate the other, and add depth to the practices that an individual has chosen. As the Quaker advices put it, 'Be open to fresh light from wherever it may come'.

I have little doubt that *Gautama Buddha* and Jesus Christ would be at home together, though I think that their agreement might well take the form of silence rather than words. If we all have, in the end, to worship God ' . . . in spirit and in truth . . .' it must mean that there is a level at which both Buddhist and Christian practices can take us directly into the kingdom of heaven. Once there, who is bold enough to say that we do not experience nirvana as well?

If you disagree, listen to the challenge of a Zen master. 'If there is present one who *knows*, let them speak!' Or, the same challenge in different words from George Fox; 'Christ saith this and the apostles say that. What canst thou say? Is it of God?'

Or of Buddha?

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Buddha Dharma*: The teaching of the Buddha in its totality.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article I have used the masculine pronoun when referring to God as Father in the mainstream Christian tradition. I have used She and It (capitalized) when I wish to make a particular point.

<sup>3</sup> *Anatta*: literally 'not self'; the teaching that all those aspects which we regard as 'self' are not really so.

<sup>4</sup> *Karma*: the principle of 'as you sow, so shall you reap'. This principle operates over many lives. The Buddhist idea of rebirth differs from reincarnation in that there is no self to be reborn, and that each existence can take place in a number of worlds.

<sup>5</sup> *Skandhas*: literally 'heaps'; the term for the five aggregates which make up a 'self', and which are constantly changing. They are: matter, sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness.

<sup>6</sup> The Noble Eightfold Path: the fourth of the Four Noble Truths which are the basis of the Buddha's teaching. They are: 1) the Truth of suffering (or unsatisfactoriness); 2) the Truth of the cause of suffering; 3) the Truth that there is a way out of suffering and 4) the Noble Eightfold Path. This is given as Right View, Right Attitude, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Meditation. I have heard them described as 'Right Everything'.

<sup>7</sup> There are many translations available. This one is taken from *Step by step* by Maha Ghosananda, published by Parallax Press, Berkeley, California.

<sup>8</sup> *Bhikkhu*: a Buddhist monk.

<sup>9</sup> See the writings of Meister Eckhart, *The cloud of unknowing*, and books by Joel Goldsmith, especially *Living by grace*, *Thunder of silence* and *The art of meditation*.

<sup>10</sup> Paraphrased from the *Metta Sutta*.

<sup>11</sup> The Dhammapada.

<sup>12</sup> *Theravada*: the teaching of the elders. One of the main surviving traditions of Buddhism. The others are *Mahayana* (Great Vehicle) and *Vajrayana* (Diamond Path). The Theravadins claim the essential purity of the Buddha's teaching as contained in the earliest Buddhist scriptures, the *Pali* Canon.

<sup>13</sup> *Gautama Buddha*, the historical Buddha, is only one of many.

<sup>14</sup> A *Bodhisattva* is one who has achieved *Nirvana* (supreme enlightenment) but chooses to continue to be reborn for the sake of suffering beings.

<sup>15</sup> *Za-zen*: seated meditation.

<sup>16</sup> *Namu Amida Butsu*: the *Nembutsu*, or Name of Amida Buddha in the Japanese Pure Land tradition. (*Namu* means 'I take refuge in').

<sup>17</sup> *Jodoshinshu*: True Pure Land School, the biggest Pure Land sect in Japan, founded by Shinran Shonin.

<sup>18</sup> Particularly *The way of a pilgrim* and *The art of prayer*.

<sup>19</sup> Both extracts from D. T. Suzuki's translation in *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (Rider 1957). For more about *Kuan Yin* see John Blofeld, *Compassion Yoga* (Allen and Unwin 1977). This was reprinted in paperback as *In search of the goddess of compassion*.