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IN THE REALM OF SEARCHERS:

THE ETHICAL IMPACT OF BUDDHIST MEDITATION PRACTICES

ON CHRISTIAN PRACTITIONERS

INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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INTRODUCTION: ON THE SPIRITUAL SEARCH

One of the burning questions that led me to study theology was, *what is the source or ground of ethics?* Now, Jesus was, among other things, an unparalleled teacher of ethics, but what happens to those Christians whose search moves beyond the original naivete that tells them that ethics is simply what it is as given by Christian scripture? Often enough, they find themselves, willingly or not, in the embrace of contemporary social sciences which view our particular ethics as strictly relative social constructions, and perhaps as an evolutionary adaptation. It turns out that ours is an age of spiritual seekers – because there are so many poor souls who are not entirely satisfied with the orthodox stories of either the church or the academy.

There are many directions these questing Christians can turn. Those whose openness to possibility has not been totally overwhelmed by their skepticism have found that a global marketplace of spiritual/religious traditions is available to them. It's similar to the phenomenon of patients supplementing their doctors' care with alternative medicine (but is it as rampant?). The fact is that many people in the Christian camp today already do participate to some significant extent in practices which are not native to the Christian tradition.

In this paper, I will examine one such set of practices: mindfulness meditation in the Buddhist tradition. What impact might such meditation have on the ethical orientation of the Christian practitioner? What virtues might it encourage and how might it dispose the practitioner to others? It's worth knowing how well such an "import" coheres with the Christian understanding – perhaps in the end they are saying the same thing...or perhaps not. But it's important to recognize that in order to genuinely practice Buddhist mindfulness meditation, the

Christian must adopt some key working assumptions about the world that are quite alien to her own tradition.

First, I will briefly review the phenomenon of spiritual searching – of taking the experiential path – as an important force in Christian practice today. Second, I will introduce some of the key features of mindfulness meditation and the worldview out of which it springs. Third, I will examine some recent analyses – by James Fredericks, John Cobb, and Paul O. Ingram – of the question of whether Buddhism in general encourages withdrawal from moral engagement with the world. Finally, I will consider these practices in terms of their implications for orienting oneself ethically, the virtues they encourage, and the ways they dispose practitioners toward each other and the world.

SPIRITUAL SEARCHING AS FORCE IN CHRISTIAN PRACTICE TODAY

Science, and historical criticism, have challenged and changed traditional Christian theological understandings in countless ways. For example, the concept of original sin has undergone radical surgery as, among other things, it is found that biological death is a fact of nature, not a result of sin. Science has also especially changed our image of ourselves. Yet, if the Christian soul/self – relying as it does on motifs such as being created in the image of God, or being fallen creatures – has been rendered less obviously right, it's also true that cognitive science has not provided a satisfactory understanding of conscious selfhood to stand in the place of the Christian scheme. The fact is, a real opening exists for new ideas concerning the spiritual basis of the human self. It happens that Buddhism is well positioned to speak to such quandaries.

The consequence of such a wrenching of the Christian understanding of our world is that, on the ground, many people from a cultural background of Western Christianity do not find the

security in the tradition that their forbears did. Yet many of these people do not deny that there is spiritual reality and religious truth “out there,” nor do they want to abandon the Christian context for relating to this reality better. Let us imagine a practitioner who is committed to working out of her own Christian tradition, while wrestling with how to rework or expand the traditional understanding to accommodate compatible elements from other sources. We can suppose that the Christian practitioner of Buddhist meditation expects or hopes that this importation will enhance, deepen, complement her own faith. She expects the practice to be essentially capable of integration with the Christian tradition.

But is this expectation realistic? Buddhist practices come bundled with a universe of understandings that are radically different from those in the Christian tradition. Much has been written about whether, or how, the two worldviews are compatible. I cannot examine these analyses here, but I will accept that a plausible case has been made that at least *some* Buddhist practices *could be* compatible with a life of Christian faith. Another intriguing question which I cannot address here is whether the wandering gaze of some Christians, and any resulting syncretism, could either invigorate or undermine the larger Christian community, morally or otherwise.

FEATURES OF BUDDHIST MEDITATION AND WORLDVIEW

Central to Buddhism is the practice of meditation. In simple terms, meditation is intended, among other things, to encourage the development of *mindfulness*, a state of mind in which the relentless flow of individual thoughts is interrupted, and a space opens for a kind of awareness which overcomes the perceived divide between subject and object. Such “panoramic” awareness is said to encompass both the meditator and her environment in an undivided whole

(this is not the same thing as a transcendental or ecstatic state, which is generally regarded in Buddhism as a distraction or a trap, fraught with illusory phenomena).

The idea that such a panoramic state is achievable is predicated on a body of understandings which are not found much in the Christian tradition. Among the most difficult from the Christian perspective, which emphasizes so strongly the salvation of individual souls, is the concept of “no-self” – the belief that the individual self is an illusion. What does it mean, no-self? For Buddhism, everything that exists is grounded in “co-dependent origination,” meaning that nothing *is* except insofar as it is *in relation* with other things. Nothing has an independent existence. This is an important basis of another Buddhist concept that trips up Westerners: *Sunyata*, or “emptiness.” To say that the self is empty is say that the self, like everything else, is *empty of independent existence*.

What emerges, then, is a picture of radical interconnectedness between all entities. It is only our awareness that is cut off from this underlying reality of interrelation. This is a picture of reality which has interesting resonance with some contemporary science (for example quantum physics and dynamical systems theory) as well as ecological theory. Christian ethics is clearly very much about relationships, but what it has to say about such a fundamental sense of interconnectedness is an open question. Another stumbling block for the Christian worldview, though, is Buddhism’s depiction of the world (creation) as, in its entirety, as an endless cycling on the wheel of *samsara* – suffering and illusion. Enlightenment means to break the wheel and extinguish the independent continuation of the self.

There is, of course, far more subtlety and intrigue – as well as varied interpretations – in the Buddhist picture of the world than this brief sketch allows. Nonetheless, by emphasizing here

the challenging aspects that accompany meditative practice, I hope that we will see the ethical differences between the two systems in sharper relief.

DOES BUDDHISM ENCOURAGE WITHDRAWAL FROM MORAL ENGAGEMENT?

That Christianity comes bundled with a complete moral universe is well known (although, of course, interpretations of what it all means vary widely!). The Buddhist tradition, by contrast, has sometimes been criticized by Westerners as socially unengaged, as lacking a strong sense of justice. Analysts of these differences are quick to point out that actual Buddhists are neither more nor less moral than actual Christians. But they frequently find differences which seem to put Buddhism at a disadvantage as a moral system.

James Fredericks describes three doctrinal factors which explain why, in his view, “Buddhists have generally manifested a weak sense of the social dimension of ethics”:

1. The language of Buddhism is more psychological than social or political, thus the focus tends to be on the individual.
2. Justice is generally seen in the form of karmic retribution: current injustices may be seen as deserved, and in any case the justice or rightness of the universe will win out in the long run, so there is apparently less of a call to question the morality of present social structures.
3. The doctrine of “no-self” shows the suffering of this world to be an illusion. Salvation from this suffering comes by “‘extinguishing’ (nirvana) the passions and cravings of the substantial self” – and this is the work of individual, not corporate, liberation.¹

Fredericks sees, by contrast, three aspects of the Jewish tradition which contribute to Christianity’s greater appreciation of the social dimension of ethics:

1. The Jewish covenantal theology lends to Christianity an understanding of salvation in terms of the experience of the entire community. The reign of God is a social metaphor.
2. The prophetic tradition measures virtue “not by cultic purity, but by the social standard of meting out justice for those who cannot compete economically.”
3. Eschatological hope has led to a heightened historical consciousness, so that human beings are seen as creators of structures for which they are responsible.²

John Cobb, a Christian commentator very sympathetic to Buddhism, sets up a different contrast to show how he thinks Buddhist thinking is less engaged in social action than Christianity. Cobb says that Buddhism is concerned with breaking the dominance of the self (the “I”): “all boundaries...between self and other are ontologically cancelled at the moment of enlightenment.” In this way, “Buddhists are able to achieve a unique openness to the structures of reality.” Christian teaching, by contrast, is concerned with “heighten[ing] self-transcendence by objectifying one’s self as separate from other selves.” Whereas the Buddhist experiences, in a unique and wonderful way, “compassionate empathy for the suffering of all unenlightened beings,” the Christian is an ontologically separate self existing in a state of sin. Thus, while the Christian is unable to make herself good by doing good, nonetheless she performs moral and social obligations to others as an act of gratitude for God’s grace. Christians, then, are taught more explicitly to assume responsibility for what they *do* and *are* as individual selves.³

Paul O. Ingram comes to the defense of Buddhist morality, claiming that Buddhist “awakening” is not a withdrawal or disengagement. He points out three Western obstacles to seeing social activism as integral to Buddhist awakening.

1. Modern Western philosophy has tended to see ethics as primarily about rules and injunctions, and less about good character. Buddhism is very much about cultivating character.
2. A duality of reason and emotion tells us that “we cannot help what we feel, but only what we do.” Because emotions are not objects of ethical obligations, they are not ethically relevant. Buddhism is far more concerned with these inner dynamics.
3. A duality between external agency and internal attitudes tells us that it’s more important to choose the right course of action than to possess good qualities. No such firewall exists in the Buddhist self-conception.⁴

This “western view” may be an unfair characterization of Christian morality in action, but it does capture some of the biases that can easily taint the examination of an alien morality.

For Ingram, the most fundamental aspect of Buddhist morality is the implication of “co-dependent origination.” Radical interrelatedness means that “we’re all in this together” – that no one is fully liberated unless all are liberated. Thus, at the end of each meditation session, the Buddhist dedicates all the good that been obtained by it “to the enlightenment of all sentient beings.” In a similar manner, the highest Bodhisattva ideal is of the “Buddhist monk or layperson who through endless deeds of wisdom and compassion through numerous cycles of rebirth [strives] for Buddhahood by vowing to help all sentient being attain enlightenment.”⁵

If, like most forms of ethics, Buddhist ethics are about the “good life” – an orientation towards happiness and well-being – then this orientation is achieved through social engagement inasmuch as “the good” is made up of “interlocking and interrelated parts, forms of activity, both internal and external.” The Dalai Lama sees opportunity in the suffering all around us: “in an interdependent world of suffering beings, toward whom is there not ample opportunity to exercise compassionate social engagement?” Thus he prays for the Chinese oppressors of Tibet. A compassionate concern for the well-being and flourishing of all sentient beings must engage in the “rough-and-tumble of social, political, and economic existence,” for Buddhism offers no escape from this world. Even the enlightened stay in the world as it is to continue their work. Ingram characterizes the attitude as detached yet engaged: “being in the world, but not of the world.”⁶

For Buddhist ethics, then, “social work entails inner work”⁷ – thus “social reform performed merely from a socio-ideological or economic-ideological point of view” cannot fundamentally solve a problem: the inner motivations – becoming virtuous – are critical (it’s notable that, if Buddhism cannot point to a long history of social activism – its tide is seen as beginning to build in Vietnam in the 1960s, with forceful nonviolent action by Buddhist monks –

nor really can Christianity, whose liberation wing got started around the same time).⁸

Ingram interestingly describes his own difficulty understanding what is unique about Christian ethics:

Sinful human beings in a sinful world can never become virtuous. But illumined by God's grace, sinful persons can recognize this existential context for making ethical and social choices and behave morally in social activism as an act of gratitude for what God has accomplished for humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of the historical Jesus. But one need not be a Christian or experience Christian faith to live according to the same moral obligations guiding Christian social activism.⁹

IMPLICATIONS FOR ETHICAL ORIENTATION

What implications might Buddhist meditation have for the Christian's ethical orientation and disposition toward others and the world? This is potentially a giant topic; I can offer only a few observations in a rather unsystematic manner.

The Buddhist meditator's commendation of her meditation results "to the enlightenment of all sentient beings" seems, on the face of it, like a morally good thing to do. However, it also appears to put the practitioner in an effective role in the cosmic drama of unfolding universal enlightenment. Assuming that "enlightenment" could have a positive meaning for Christians, it might bear some relationship to things Christians see as achievable only through God's grace. Thus, such intentional participation by the meditator might encounter theological criticism along the lines of "works-righteousness." So there are potential theological bombshells for Christians in actions which to a Buddhist would seem only to be unambiguously good, ethical conduct.

Now let us consider parallels to the Christian's "love of neighbor." In recent times, Christian theologians and ethicists have focused in fruitful ways on extending the meaning of love of neighbor. To some, that love can be extended even to nonhuman realms of life. All the same, as a moral injunction, love of neighbor obviously refers to the individual "I" and the

individual (or collective) “thou.” The gap between them is overcome by a kind of reaching out with love. In Buddhism, a far more radical threshold is crossed: ultimately, there is no separate self and neighbor – the two are thoroughly intertwined. In practical reality, the average Buddhist experiences the same state of separation as Christians do, but they view such experience as illusory. I do not know that this makes any difference in terms of ethical results, but the case might be made that an awareness of interdependence strengthens the bond between the practitioner and other beings. On the other hand, one might argue for the strengths of an orientation in which one freely takes on ethical obligations in the context of relationships between individuals.

In any case, to give a sense of how some forms of Buddhist meditation can deeply engage the practitioner in relatedness to others, in a way that is quite prayerlike, let us consider the practice of *tonglen*, or giving-and-receiving. As the meditator breathes, she imagines breathing in the suffering of another person, for example a loved one, as if it were a kind of toxic cloud, and breathing out a kind of wellness, a relief. Similar practices are extended even to those one hates or fears. These are regarded as very powerful practices, and one can easily imagine that their consistent application would build virtue as they changed the practitioner’s outlook towards other beings.

Finally, a foundational orientation for Buddhists is that of “openness,” the spaciousness of lacking ego-obstructions, which grows out of meditative practices concerned with letting go and not “grasping” the things of the world. Such practices oppose the state of *desire*. Making no demands, the emptiness of the meditator is both exposed and expansive, not on guard; such openness is referred to as “awareness without a watcher.” This spaciousness is said to open the meditator to the limitless compassion and love which is characteristic of Buddha. Compassion is

felt as an instinctive warmth that develops in meditation practice. A central value of Buddhism, compassion is that total openness with no ground, no sense of territory. Compassion is “‘crazy wisdom,’ because it does not relate to ego’s literal and simple-minded attempts to secure its own comfort.” And the cultivation of such compassion within the practitioner is an essential Buddhist virtue. Much of this language accords with Christian talk of the infinite, gratuitously overflowing love of God, and with the injunction to love as God loves. If meditation can bring the practitioner into a tangible, visceral experience of such compassion, and encourage her to practice it consistently in her own life, then that is powerful testimony to ethical benefit.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

I said at the outset that a personal search for spiritual connection, whether to God above or to the immanent spiritualness of the world and everything in it, is a widely prevalent practice today, both within my church and in the larger society. When it comes to moral action, I think that the parallels between Buddhism and Christianity are really quite striking. For example, the highest level of Buddhist ethical virtue goes beyond moral precepts and rules, beyond practices which encourage the enlightenment of all sentient beings, and enters into social engagement in the form of active service to others – helping the sick, the blind, the oppressed, the poor.¹¹ That sounds familiar to Christian ears. So if the question is, *can the Christian engage in Buddhist meditative practices and emerge with all her Christianity intact?* – the answer is, her Christianity will surely be changed, but whether it remains the same in its essentials, I do not know. But if the question is, *can the Christian engage in Buddhist meditative practices and emerge as an ethically better person?* – I think the answer is yes, that is a possible outcome.

ENDNOTES

¹ James Fredericks, 1998, “Jodo Shinshu’s Mission to History: a Christian Challenge to Shin Buddhist Social Ethics,” in *Engaged Pure Land Buddhism*, Kenneth K. Tanaka and Eisho Naus, eds. (Berkeley: WisdomOcean), 51-2.

² Ibid, 53-4.

³ Paul O. Ingram, “An essay on socially engaged Buddhism” in *Engaged Pure Land Buddhism*, Kenneth K. Tanaka and Eisho Naus, eds. (Berkeley: WisdomOcean), 28-9.

⁴ Ibid, 31-2.

⁵ Ibid, 33, 35.

⁶ Ibid, 41.

⁷ Kenneth Kraft, ed., 1992, *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Non-Violence* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press).

⁸ Ibid, 38-40.

⁹ Ingram, 42.

¹⁰ Chogyam Trungpa, 1973, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Boston: Shambhala), 210.

¹¹ Ingram, 37-8.