

Book Report: Living Buddha, Living Christ, by Thich Hahn

In *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thich Nhat Hanh explores the spiritual connection between Buddhism and Christianity. The author advances the idea that both Jesus and Buddha are the spiritual ancestors of the two religions, and that their teachings call for human beings to seek intimate relationships with their creator. Hanh contends that both religions are similar in terms of their teachings and the ideals they espouse. For instance, he observes that both faiths encourage people to seek truth, and they will realize that they are seeking the same source of happiness. He states: “I do not think there is that much difference between Christians and Buddhists. Most of the boundaries we have created between our two traditions are artificial; Truth has no boundaries¹.”

Although the author does not offer a theoretical explanation to illustrate the unity of the all faiths and religions, he demonstrates that the teachings of Christ and Buddha agree on the virtues that believers should cultivate in themselves. Both teachings are aimed at bringing human beings closer to God and inject happiness and spiritual satisfaction into their lives. He asserts that since Buddhists and Christians seek the same goals (happiness), the religious differences between them are artificial. Therefore, “when you are a truly happy Christian, you are also a Buddhist; likewise, a truly happy Buddhist is also a Christian” (197). Hanh demonstrates this spiritual relationship by equating the practice of Holy Communion among Christians with the Buddhist ritual of meditation. Both practices transforms people’s consciousness into a state of “mindfulness,” which creates a sense of awareness about the “interconnection of all things,” or what he terms as the state of “interbeing” (Hanh,). The state of “interbeing” suggests that

¹ T., Hahn, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, New York, Ebury Publishing, 2012, p. 153.

“everything is part of something else,” because nothing exist in isolation. In reference to the relationship between Holy Communion and meditation, Hanh contends that:

The miracle happens...because we eat and drink in mindfulness....If we allow ourselves to touch our bread deeply, we become reborn, because our bread is life itself. Eating it deeply, we touch the sun, the clouds, the earth, and everything in the cosmos. We touch life; we touch the kingdom of God².”

Accordingly, Hanh views meditation and the Holy Communion as the source of the living power that heals the soul of its earthly worries. The significance of food in Buddhism is reflected in the ritual-like sacredness with which mealtime is conducted within the Christian and Jewish traditions, including the partaking of Eucharist. Similarly, the Christian commandments and Buddhist precepts serve as the framework for distinguishing between what is right or wrong. At the same time, the invocation of “The Three Jewels³” in the Buddhist trinity, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, is equated with the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity consisting of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, Buddhism and Christianity teach that God’s Kingdom, or nirvana, exists within our hearts. Buddhism’s sacred sayings, the sutra, teaches about the “the seed of enlightenment that is already in everyone’s consciousness while the Christian Gospels refers to the kingdom of heaven as “a mustard seed planted in the soil of consciousness⁴”. By this, Hanh refers to the presence of the “original mind,” or the Holy Spirit in our hearts. It is the shining light that removes ignorance and enables people of faith to discern truth and the harmony of

² Ibid, p. 30-31

³ Ibid, p. 191.

⁴ Ibid, p. 167

things in the universe. He states that “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”⁵. In this regard, Hanh suggests that people should not abandon, but embrace their religious traditions as a means to rediscovering and strengthening the foundation of their spirituality.

Meditation master Geshe Kelsang Gyatso explores a similar theme in Modern Buddhism, where he argues that there is a strong parallel between Buddhist and Christian teachings. For instance, both teachings regard life as precious and sacred and the consequences of human actions (karma). Like Christianity’s teachings about faith and suffering, Buddhism’s four noble truths help human beings gain a better understanding of the meaning of suffering and its value in strengthening one’s faith. Gyatso views the spiritual redemption that one experiences after receiving the Holy Spirit as similar with the spiritual freedom that one gets (nirvana) after overcoming earthly temptations like pleasure and lust. Similarly, both teaching encourage a culture of deeds, where one practices his beliefs daily. For example, Buddha and Jesus taught about the need to show love and compassion for others as a means to achieving greater happiness. He states that

If we cherish others, we shall always have good relationships and live in harmony with others, and our daily life will be peaceful and happy. We can begin this practice with our family, friends and those around us, and then gradually we shall develop and maintain cherishing love for all living beings without exception⁶.

⁵ Ibid, p. 192

⁶ Ibid, 172

By loving others, human beings will be able to overcome spiritual temptations associated with selfish behavior, jealousy, and anger. This will in turn lead to a state of calmness and peacefulness. Buddhism and Christianity provide the wisdom that enables people to understand reality better and avoid being deceived by the superficial appearance of things.

Nevertheless, the Buddhist teachings on the four noble truths come out as the most relevant point of intersection between Christian and Buddhist beliefs. Christian teachings portray human suffering as a necessary and inevitable experience in a Christian's life that leads to spiritual sanctification and purification. It is the journey that an individual must travel before attaining holiness. Similarly, the four noble truths in Buddhism teach about the significance of suffering in a Buddhist's life. Their teachings present suffering as part of the obstacles in one's spiritual journey. The existence of suffering is a manifestation of the world's imperfect state. Therefore, overcoming the temptations of suffering serves as the vessel for transporting one to the farther shore. Therefore, Buddha's teachings should serve as the model in the life of a believer. However, the noble truths emphasize that one must practice the values of Buddhism in order to achieve happiness and freedom from ignorance and earthly temptations. The Buddha also emphasized that individuals must be their own torches by practicing the teachings of Buddhism. This idea reflects Jesus' teachings to his followers of the need of becoming the world's salt through their deeds. Practicing one's faith, therefore, is the living teachings of any religion.

In this regard, I consider Buddha's teachings to be very insightful in inspiring believers to seek solutions to their problems by following a spiritual path in their daily lives. Buddhism's four noble truths reveal the meaning of human existence and suffering, and how the latter is an important stepping stone towards wisdom and spiritual enlightenment.

In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha illustrates the meaning and significance of human suffering as well as the means of its cessation. The first truth refers to the inevitability of suffering in this world. It states that “Life means suffering⁷.” In this truth, the Buddha suggests that the physical world is vulnerable to imperfections and impermanence. As a result, human existence is also subjected to these imperfections through experiences of suffering, pain, and sadness, as well as the transitory/temporary nature of happiness. In the second truth, the Buddha counsels that “The Origin of Suffering is Attachment⁸.” He explains this concept that people’s suffering is a result of their being obsessed with, and craving for the transient things (things that do not last). When one fails to achieve material success or loses what they already possessed, they feel the loss and suffer as a consequence. Boethius presents a similar idea about materialism in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, where Lady Philosophy counsels against men’s desire to attain happiness through riches. He argues that wealth only provides temporary satisfaction to people’s wants. He states: “Want can be assuaged by riches, but it cannot be wholly dispelled, for it sits there with its mouth open, making incessant demands, and even if it is gorged with riches, it must still remain there, waiting to be satisfied⁹.”

The third truth states that “The Cessation of Suffering is Attainable,” and teaches that individuals have the ability to undergo a redemptive process that would dissipate/extinguish their cravings and obsession for material things. Finally, the fourth truth states that “The Path to the Cessation of Suffering” occurs in gradual steps. It outlines the gradual phases of enlightenment

⁷ Ibid, 172

⁸ T. Geshe, and G. McDougall, *The Four Noble Truths: The Foundation of Buddhist Thought*, New York, Wisdom Publications, 2010, p. 15.

⁹ P., Walsh, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, London, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 52.

and spiritual revelation through which individuals attain complete freedom from attachment to transient things.

Therefore, it is necessary to cultivate an understanding of the four noble truths as a means of gaining knowledge about the existence and significance of human suffering. The four truths also teach about the means out of the spiritual imprisonment that results from attachment to materialism. Gaining spiritual knowledge serve as the raft that takes one across the sea of suffering and temptation into the farther shore, the state of spiritual enlightenment and contentment. In other words, “knowledge is the vessel to take one to the next level¹⁰.” The farther shore represents the new state of being that is achieved after being freed from the obsession for the pleasures and trappings of material thing. Knowledge and practicing of the four noble truths, therefore, constitutes the means of spiritual redemption in the same manner that practicing Christian teachings provides the light to salvation in Christ. Both teachings encourage believers to overcome the temptations of worldly pleasure and materialism, because they blind people’s hearts and keep them from attaining true happiness.

In this regard, Thich Hanh portrays the practicing of Buddhism and Christianity as path towards understanding the world’s imperfect nature. Buddhism, in particular, reveals the human disposition to desire material things like wealth, pleasure, happiness, and power. This idea captures the reality in people’s lives; the constant struggle to attain happiness through wealth and power. However, Hanh suggests that people will attach little value to material things if they embraced the Buddha’s teachings. Instead, they will aim to develop strong characters steeped in spiritual enlightenment and freedom from worldly temptations.

¹⁰ T. Geshe, and G. McDougall, p. 16.