

THE CONQUERED SELF: EMPTINESS AND GOD  
IN A BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

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"One's own self conquered is better than all other people conquered. . . ." *Dhammapāda*

"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. . . ." Galatians 2.20

I

What have, unfortunately, been the abstract ideas of emptiness in Buddhism and God in Christianity can be approached fruitfully in the arena of all religions: the human self or personality. (We do so knowing that Buddhists would deny that such a self exists as shall be noted presently.) There are clear parallels between Christian conversion and coming to "True Self," and Buddhists arriving at *śūnyatā* or emptiness, void, enlightenment. As Thomas Merton wrote in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*:

Buddhism and Biblical Christianity agree in their view of man's present condition. Both are aware that man is somehow not in his right relation to the world and to things in it, . . . they see that man bears in himself a mysterious tendency to *falsify* that relation, and to spend a great deal of energy in justifying the false view he takes of his world and of his place in it (Merton 1968, p. 82).

In both Christianity and Buddhism, the fundamental impediment to spiritual maturity is the concept of an individual ego, "a subject

for whom his own self-awareness . . . is absolutely primary." Such an attitude creates a "solipsistic bubble of awareness—an ego self—imprisoned in its own consciousness. . ." (Merton 1968, p. 22). In Buddhism "a supreme goal [is] . . . nonpersonal existence in which selfhood is absent" (Cobb 1982, p. 81). Again and again comes the refrain in Buddhist literature: "By one's self the evil is done, by one's self one suffers; by one's self the evil is left undone, by one's self one is purified" (Wilson Ross 1966, p. 114). Though it may not seem so at first glance, this is not far from the words of Jesus in John 14 which assure us it is not He who acts and speaks, but the Father in Him. St. Paul understands this and presents it in Philippians 2 as *kenōsis*. But this is taking meat before milk. Let us stop and briefly suggest the nature of the Christian and the Buddhist views of "self."

## II

An orthodox Christian view of the self would say that we are not one, but two persons: in St. Paul's terms, the old and the new; in psychological terms, an inauthentic and an authentic person. In Adam we have all sinned, and in Christ we are all made alive (or redeemed, perfected, offered the hope of restoration). We might speak of an external and an internal self, of the public or private self, but these lead us to unfruitful dualisms the nature of which are outside the realm of this essay. Let us say we have a False and a True Self.

The False Self wants to live outside the reach of God's will; it harbors illusions, desires which confuse ego gratification with the inner needs of the soul. It is the self which, to use the metaphor of Thomas Merton, winds titles and experiences and knowledge and jobs and ordinations and publications around itself like bandages in order to make what is empty visible to the world (Merton 1972, pp. 34 ff). It is monumentally self-conscious and self-concerned, even obsessed, with its own self-affirmation. It is the self which Paul in Galatians 1.10 suggests seeks the favor of men. As Brother David Stendl-Rast once suggested, it identifies with the "aims and servitudes of society." Call it unredeemed human nature.

Beside it stands the True Self, which is made after the likeness of God, "made clean by the word which [Christ has] spoken to you" (John 15.3). Liberation from the False Self to this True Self is a process of self-emptying which leads from isolation to unity with God. As St. Paul suggested, we no longer live as individual entities, but Christ dwells in us and is our life. ("You know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you"--1 John 4.17).<sup>1</sup>

The idea is expressed in John 12.24-26: "I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me."

In order for our "seed to die," we must doubt all we have seen in ourselves, for only this doubt will dissolve our ego identity. Here again Thomas Merton writing in the Preface to the Japanese edition of *Thoughts in Solitude*:

The "doubt" dissolves our ego-identity. Faith gives us life in Christ, according to St. Paul's word: "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2.20). To accept this is impossible unless one has profound hope in the incomprehensible fruitfulness that emerges from the dissolution of our ego in the ground of being and of Love. . . . To accept our own dissolution would be inhuman if we did not at the same time accept the wholeness and completeness of everything in God's Love. We accept our emptying because we realize that our very emptiness is fulfillment and plentitude. In our emptiness the One Word is clearly spoken (Merton 1981, pp. 96-97).

We empty ourselves of our selfish desires, our ego, and turn to God hoping to be filled with the spirit of the Risen Christ. Or, to put it another way, when we are no longer a "self," we recover our true identity in God. "This true identity is the 'birth of Christ in us'" (Merton 1968, p. 12).

Buddhism starts from the position of saying that there is no self. Period. Historians of religion stress that the specific contribution of Buddhism to religious thought lies in its insistence on the

doctrine of "not-self. . . . Belief in a 'self' is considered by all Buddhists as an indispensable condition to the emergence of suffering. We conjure up such ideas as 'I' and 'mine' and many most undesirable states result" (Conze 1959, p. 18).

What we normally think of as the "self," is in Buddhist analysis actually five "aggregates." Four are designated "mind": consciousness, feeling (pleasure, pain, etc.), perception, and conditioned mental factors (greed, love, hate, etc.). One is designated "body" or "form". When these "are analysed and examined, there is nothing behind them which can be taken as 'I' . . . or Self, or any unchanging abiding substance" (Rahula 1974, p. 52; Cobb 1982, pp. 81-86). This, in essence, is the doctrine of *Anatta* (the Pali term for the doctrine of Non-ego, Sanskrit, *anātman*) which states that all things lack substance or permanent identical reality. It is actually two propositions: "(1) It is claimed that nothing in reality corresponds to such words or ideas as 'I'. . . . In other words, the self is not a fact. (2) We are urged to consider that nothing in our empirical self is worthy of being regarded as the real self" (Conze 1959, p. 19).

The modern Buddhist thinker, Nishitani Keiji (b. 1900) states the issue thus:

Person is an appearance with nothing behind it which might make an appearance. Behind person there is nothing at all; that is, behind it lies absolute nothingness.

While this absolute nothingness is wholly other to his person and means the absolute negation of the person, it is not *something* different from the person. Absolute nothingness is that which, becoming one with that "being" called person, brings into being that person (Waldenfels 1980, p. 141).

So the self-emptying of a Buddhist leads to nothingness, a slippery term at best. It is called in the literature *śūnyatā*, "enlightenment of the nature of essencelessness," or emptiness. Nothingness in Zen, for example, "is not a 'nothing' out of which all things were created by God, but a 'nothing' from which God [himself] emerged. According to Zen, we are not creatures of God, but manifestations

of emptiness" (Abe 1982, p. 71). "Zen emptiness does not open one to being filled by God but is itself the fullness of the Godhead" (Cobb 1982, p. 70).

To put the Buddhist experience in Christian terms (dangerous at best!), when one empties self, or rids self of ego, there is no "step two," being filled with God or the spirit of Christ. To be empty of ego is to be Empty. The doctrine of *Anatta* is simply that what we call "I" is "only a combination of physical and mental aggregates, which are working together interdependently in a flux of momentary changes within the law of cause and effect, and that there is nothing permanent, everlasting, unchanging and eternal in the whole of existence" (Rahula 1974, p. 66). There is no self. There is nothing behind what we call the self. Reality is emptiness, and to realize that fact is *Nirvāṇa*, the attainment of final enlightenment.

### III

We are now at the crux of the issue for dialogue. The Christian self empties to be filled with Christ. The Buddhist self-empties to be Empty. The point of dialogue centers around what we would call *kenōsis*, but the ends for which this is undertaken are seemingly very different. Let us ask a "stupid" question: Is Buddhist self-emptying and Christian *kenōsis* for the same end? Or, can we with truthfulness to both traditions equate or find parallels between God and Emptiness?

John Cobb suggests in *Beyond Dialogue* that both being and *Nirvāṇa* are names for ultimate reality. "Emptiness," he says, "for much of *Mahāyāna* becomes the preferred way of naming ultimate reality."

To be empty is to lack any boundaries, any determining content of one's own, any filter through which the world is experienced. To be empty is to be perfectly open to what is there, what ever that may be. It is to be completely defenseless and with nothing to defend (Cobb 1982, pp. 88-90).

Ultimate reality is empty; so the "True Self" of Zen equals Emptiness. As Masao Abe suggests, "what is beyond all affirmation and all negation—that is, Ultimate Reality—should not be 'Him' or 'Thou'. . ." (Waldenfels 1980, p. 141). However, the Christian True Self is "Christ within" (Galatians 2.20).<sup>2</sup> On the surface it seems that self-emptying and *kenōsis* lead to two different and incomparable ends: Emptiness and God (or Christ). But suppose God (or Jesus Christ) is understood by the Christian to be empty in terms that a Buddhist could accept?

In *Beyond Dialogue* Cobb discusses "God and Emptiness." He argues that asserting ultimate reality to be emptiness does not necessarily sever the connection the Christian makes between God and ultimate reality. In fact, it clarifies the conceptual confusion between God and being, by helping us to see the difference between ultimate reality and its divine manifestations and by helping us to recognize "that the God of the Bible . . . is a manifestation of ultimate reality, not the name of that reality" (Cobb 1982, p. 111). Simply stated, we must not make adjectives into nouns. Further, "manifest" is a misleading term for the relationship between God and ultimate reality, because "God also actualizes and embodies that reality" (p. 112). "Acceptance of the view that ultimate reality is emptiness rather than being can free us from a tendency to place it at the top of a hierarchy in which its actualizations are located in ontologically subordinate roles" (p. 112).<sup>3</sup>

While Cobb concedes that "to date, no formulation of the Christian understanding of God is compatible with the Buddhist vision," he believes a key requirement in rethinking God in Buddhist terms is that "God be understood to be wholly, unqualifiedly empty" (p. 133). Though perhaps not in an unqualified state, I suggest that this formulation has existed for some time in Christianity.

In the early sagas of the Old Testament, God remains unknowable or "empty" by refusing to give a name (Genesis 32.29) and, thus, in Cobb's terms, remains without boundaries or determining content. When a name is given (Exodus 3.14), it is so opaque that scholars still argue about what it means. What of Jesus of Nazareth? The substance of the synoptic gospels is an attempt to

determine who He is. John provides an answer in the following terms, when Philip asks to be shown the Father. "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? . . . The Father who dwells in me does his works" (John 14.10). Jesus is a manifestation of the God Who is unknowable! (We shall return to this presently.)

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.) at least hints at an empty God along these lines:

What then, brethern, shall we say of God? For if you have been able to comprehend what you would say, then it is not God. . . . If you have been able to comprehend Him as you think, by so thinking you have deceived yourself. This then is not God, if you have comprehended it. But if it be God, then you have not comprehended it. Therefore how would you speak of that which you cannot comprehend? (Quoted in Whitson 1966, pp. 23-24)

That which I cannot comprehend (or am unable to know) is certainly, at least on a conceptual level, an emptiness to me. (Of course that I do not "know" God, or that God is an emptiness to me, does not mean that God does not exist. Emptiness is pure possibility, open to all, denying nothing.)

A less orthodox source of the formulation "God - Emptiness", but one which is still within the Christian tradition is provided by the mystical theologian Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500 A.D.). His writings attempt a synthesis between Neo-platonism and Christianity and stress the intimate union between God and the soul which is realized by a process of "unknowing" (leaving behind the senses and the intellect—which sounds very Buddhist). In chapter 7 of *The Divine Names*, a section is devoted to "how we know God, which is neither intelligible, sensible, nor in general some being among beings. It is never true to say that we know God in terms of his nature. . . . We know God in terms of the order of all beings which are projected out of it and which have some similarity and likeness to its divine paradigms" (Jones 1980, p. 178).

We might worry about the problem of "manifestation" which Cobb speaks of were it not for the following remarkable statement:

God is  
 all in all,  
 nothing in none,  
 known to all in reference to all,  
 known to no one in reference to nothing (Jones 1980, p. 179).

God is nothing in none, Absolute Nothingness! The editor of the work, John D. Jones, has expressed Dionysius' intent as follows:

The divinity is all that is,  
 Apart from all that is: nothing.  
 Divinity: nothing (p. 103).

We could quote other Christian sources which intimate an equation of God and emptiness,<sup>4</sup> but certainly Dionysius the Areopagite has established the connection. What of the equation of Jesus Christ and emptiness?

A simple (and flip!) answer can be offered by engaging in a bit of grammar school logic. If God is Empty and God is Jesus, then Jesus is Empty. Hans Waldenfels makes the connection more satisfactorily in the section of his book, *Absolute Nothingness*, entitled "Jesus Christ: The Figure of the 'Empty' God." He begins by warning that we are dealing here not with an 'emptiness' without content, . . . but with an emptiness of comprehension." (Waldenfels 1980, p. 155. This seems to me to point back to Augustine as quoted above.) Jesus Christ is the "emptiness" of God taken form. As Paul wrote in the letter to the Philippians:

Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of



men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil 2. 5-8).

Waldenfels quotes Rahner (*Theological Investigations*, Vol. 8, pp. 239ff) to describe the nature of Jesus' self-emptying; in it "the one who loves makes a total surrender of everything pertaining to the movement of his own personal history toward fulfillment." "The fundamental attribute of the figure of Jesus," Waldenfels notes, "is that . . . it continually and radically points away from itself" (p. 160). Jesus Christ constantly turns us to God; he understands himself as belonging to God in obedience (John 10.30). There is nothing in him which he holds fast for himself. This, for Paul Tillich, is the central event of Christianity.

It is a personal life, the image of which, as it impressed itself on his followers, shows no break in his relation to God and no claim for himself in his particularity. What is particular in him is that he crucified the particular in himself for the sake of the universal (Tillich 1965, p. 81).

And what is "the universal" toward which Jesus points if it is not this self-emptying God? God empties Himself to be born of a virgin, to become human. Rahner thus defines man as the "self-emptying" of God; "If God wills to become non-God, man comes to be . . ." (Rahner 1964, vol. 4, p. 116). Waldenfels continues:

. . . the high point of the kenōsis of God, is realized in two steps, with the radical and total correspondence of the self-emptying of God and the self-emptying of man. That is precisely what Christian belief confesses in the figure of Jesus Christ and in no other. The self-surrender of God to the world in his Logos corresponds to the radical obedience of Jesus of Nazareth in his total self-surrender to his "other" which he calls "God" and whom he addresses as "Father." In Jesus of Nazareth the self-emptying of God and the self-emptying of man coincide (p. 158).

The God who is empty (in the sense of unknowable or without content) empties Himself to become a man. Jesus Christ desires or grasps at nothing for Himself and empties Himself to become nothing in the world. Jesus Christ thus "embodies" the emptiness of God. The Christian, like Jesus, must strive to be an "embodiment" of emptiness. By "putting on" Christ, as St. Paul says, aren't we Christians "putting on" emptiness?

If there is any accuracy in this way of viewing God, Jesus Christ, and Emptiness, then we can rightly begin to explore the connections between Buddhism and Christianity in this fundamental realm: personal spiritual development.

#### NOTES

1. Many metaphorical uses in the New Testament suggest this idea. For example, we are "baptized into" Christ; we "put on" Christ; and we "take Christ in" in the Eucharist.
2. Waldenfels notes that about ten years ago Nishitani placed just this point (from the perspective of Zen) before theologians in Basel and Marburg. "I find a statement in Paul which I, coming out of Zen-Buddhism, believe I understand only too well. He says he has suffered a death: 'I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me.' That makes sense to me immediately. Allow me only to ask you this: Who is speaking here?" (p. 157)
3. This is an especially appropriate point for Christians who have wrestled with the doctrine of the Trinity and the problem of explaining to non-Christians (especially Muslims) the distinct-but-One-and-equal-God.
4. For example, in the *Summa Theologica* Thomas Aquinas says we have no means for considering how God is. Another obvious source would be John of the Cross.

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