

3.

What Did Buddha and Jesus Teach?

In this chapter we seek to make our starting points clear: the core teachings of Jesus and Buddha revolve, respectively, around the rule of God and enlightenment for all. Recognizing that these messages are irreducibly different, we also affirm that they are nonexclusive, noncompetitive, and therefore importantly, even urgently, complementary.

A Buddhist Perspective: Paul

The question we are trying to answer in this chapter—what was the heart of the good news that Buddha and Jesus announced?—~~is~~ is as impossible as it is important. For such a question there is no one answer for all times. While there are indeed pivotal, essential, unchangeable ingredients to the transforming messages of Jesus and Buddha, these ingredients will always be assembled and understood differently for different cultures and times.

So let me suggest a way of summarizing Buddha's core message that I think is both faithful to Buddhist tradition and tuned to the needs and language of our present day: To the people of his time and of all times, Gautama the Buddha announces that peace is possible now. He knows that this is true for everyone because he discovered it to be true for himself. It is really and truly possible for all human beings—as long as their basic needs of food and shelter are met—to attain a level of inner peace that will sustain them no matter what happens in their lives.

As the Dhammapada, one of the oldest and most revered of Buddhist scriptures, puts it tersely and dauntingly: "The bhikkhu [the serious practitioner of Buddha's message], peaceful and well-concentrated, is called 'one at peace'" (vs. 378); "The wise person can become an island no flood will overwhelm" (25).

Peace is possible now is the message that Buddha announced in his very first sermon on the Four Noble Truths. But the first of these truths makes it clear that Buddha's promise of peace was as honestly realistic as it was daringly optimistic. The opening line of Buddha's sermon is this: "Life is full of suffering [dukkha]." This is Buddha's hard-nosed realism; there is no way to live life and avoid pain, disappointment, loss, and frustration. There is no place we can go, there is no thing we can do that will fully protect us from, or make us entirely immune to, things or people or events that hurt us. Although Buddha would not have put it this way, he would, I think, have agreed with Forrest Gump: "Shit happens." And we can't stop it from happening.

But we can deal with it. And here enters Buddha's optimism, his good news. No matter what kind of suffering happens, no matter how much of it there is, there is always a way in which we can deal with it so that it does not diminish or destroy our abiding peace. The peace that Buddha offers is stronger than any kind or amount of suffering. In fact, if we follow Buddha's directives and advice seriously and persistently, there can come a point in our lives in which we still feel the pains and disappointments of life, but they will no longer be felt as suffering. They will happen. We will feel them. But they won't be able to unsettle our lives, our fundamental peace-full-ness.

And this can be the case in this life—before we die. This is perhaps one of the most sobering and delightfully challenging aspects of Buddha's teachings for Christians: We don't have to wait till heaven, till the next life, in order to be truly and fully "saved." It can happen now—just as Jesus insisted that the reign of God can happen right now. It is already here. We can be healed, saved, given a new lease on life, before this life is over. In fact, if we follow Buddha's advice, embodied in the Eightfold Path, we can be saved today.

Buddha's diagnosis and remedy for the problem of suffering. Such optimism about finding a solution for the problem of

suffering is rooted in Buddha's diagnosis of the deeper causes of suffering. The Second Noble Truth announces that tanha—translated "craving" or "grasping"—is the origin of all our sufferings. Why does tanha cause dukkha? Simple. Because it is trying to do the impossible—to hold on to things that can't be held on to. They can't be held on to because they are impermanent. Impermanence—the teaching that everything, absolutely everything (even God!), is part of a process of constant change through constant interconnecting—is one of the core truths that Buddha woke up to under the Bodhi tree. Suffering, therefore, is basically the frustration anyone would feel when trying to contain water in a sieve or trying to catch a bird in flight.

But if the problem is craving or clinging, what can we do about it? Here Buddha's diagnosis goes deeper. And here is where it might differ somewhat from Christian diagnoses. At first, what Buddhists call craving and what Christians call sin may seem to be pointing to the same problem. After all, Christians understand sin as selfishness, trying to hold on to things just for oneself. But when we take up the further question of why we are sinful, or why we crave, there seem to be major differences between Christian and Buddhist responses. For Christians, we are caught in selfish craving because we are fallen. Our human nature is a fallen nature. Somewhere, somehow, early in humanity's history, things got messed up. And the mess is something we're born into—or born with. This, we are told, is what the foundational Christian doctrine of original sin is trying to get at. We are sinful by nature, by fallen nature.

Buddha's diagnosis is quite different. The fundamental problem that humanity faces—the underlying reason why people keep causing themselves and others so much suffering because of so much craving and clinging—is not that we are corrupt and sinful by nature. Rather, it is because we are ignorant about who and what we really are. Our problem is not an inherent sinfulness but an inherited ignorance. We've inherited the ignorance from all the karma that preceded us. (We will take a closer look at karma in coming chapters.) But—and here is the really good news—if ignorance is our fundamental problem, we are dealing with a fixable problem. This problem is not within us as part of our human nature. Rather, it's around us, like a surrounding

darkness. But darkness can be dispelled by light. We can be enlightened. The antidote for the ignorance that causes suffering is to wake up to what we really are.

So, what are we really? This we will be exploring in the chapters dealing with the nature of the Ultimate and of the human self. For the moment, following especially Tibetan and Zen teachings, we can say that our true nature, our real nature, is Buddha-nature. Our real self is not our individual self. Our individual small minds are really part of a big Mind. As my Buddhist teacher puts it, we are the Space that contains and expresses everything—a larger conscious, compassionate, interconnecting Reality that is the source of our fundamental safety and peace.

Once we start to realize or wake up to what we really are, we realize that we don't have to cling to or hold on to anything because, as it were, we are already held. Once we wake up to our Buddha-nature, once we realize the Space in which and out of which we live and move and have our being, then nothing, no matter how much it hurts or disappoints or frustrates, can destroy the strength of our inner Peace, of our ability both to endure and to respond to whatever happens.

We look into all this, again and more deeply, in Chapter 7. Buddha offers an orthopraxis rather than an orthodoxy. The question that now naturally and perhaps hesitantly arises is this: How can we wake up to what we really are? How in the world—in this world, right now—can we achieve enlightenment? Buddha offers an answer in his Fourth Noble Truth: by following the Eightfold Path. Here we have another pivotal, glowing piece of Buddha's good news. Not only does he promise that we can deal with suffering and find Peace, but he also clearly lays out how to do that.

We've already touched on the Eightfold Path in Chapter 1. It is especially important for Christians, I think, to note that in offering the Eightfold Path as the means to overcoming ignorance and achieving peace, Buddha is not telling us what we have to believe. He's telling us what we have to do. This is why I'm describing Buddha's good news as primarily a call to orthopraxis rather than to orthodoxy—right acting rather than right believing. Here we may have a certain difference between what Jesus and Buddha called for. Good news based on orthopraxis carries two implications for what it means to follow Buddha:

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1. A call to acting a certain way as the avenue to achieving peace has the character of an experiment. Try this and see what happens. If it doesn't work, if it doesn't produce the kind of peace that can deal with any form of suffering—then chuck it and try something else. Buddha's good news is extremely pragmatic. If it doesn't work, it's either not true at all, or it's not true for your particular situation and conditioning.
2. Buddha's preference for right acting over right believing is not intended to diminish the importance of right believing. Rather, he is offering us a way, or a method, of arriving at right beliefs that is rooted in our own experience and not in his, or anyone else's, authority. In calling us to try out the Eightfold Path, he is promising us that if we act a certain way, we will feel a certain way. And what we feel and what we experience in our own awareness and intelligence will tell us what is true. By acting a certain way, we will begin to experience ourselves and our world differently. Acting leads to knowing. Behavior leads to belief. We will know the truth by doing the truth. For Buddha, we don't first believe the truth and then practice it. We first practice it, and then we believe it.

An orthopraxis of mindfulness and compassion. How might we summarize the right practice to which the Eightfold Path calls us? Picking up on the brief description of the Eightfold Path in Chapter 1, and reflecting the instructions I have received in my Tibetan practice, I think we can focus right practice in two essential ingredients: mindfulness and compassion. Without these two ways of living, we cannot wake up to what we really are.

Mindfulness, as we will see in greater detail in Chapter 9, is the ongoing effort not to let our thoughts and feelings get the best of us. Our problem is not that we have thoughts and feelings, but rather that we take them too seriously; we think they are giving us the full and final word about who we and others really are. When this happens, we don't have thoughts and feelings. They have us.

So Buddha's good news calls us to develop our "mindfulness muscles." We do this especially in the "gym" of our daily meditation. We are mind-ful of all our thinking and judging and feeling

and reacting; we observe what's going on. And we *don't cling* to thoughts or emotions. We let them be. And we let them go. By not holding on to them, they can't hold on to us. And in this process we can get behind, or see through, our thoughts to an awareness or a feeling of the Reality that contains us and that we are. Mindfulness cleans the condensation on the windshield so that we can see what is really there. Just how this all works, I can't say. That it does, I can say. Thich Nhat Hanh calls it "the miracle of mindfulness."

Compassion is both what happens when we are mindful and also a way of practicing mindfulness. Compassion is mindfulness directed to other people and sentient beings. We don't let the thoughts we have of them define them. We don't allow the feelings they stir up in us to determine who they really are. In doing this, we come to feel and understand that they too are held in the Space or Spirit that interconnects us all. In extending compassion to them, we feel the Space. In being mindful of the Space, we naturally feel compassion. This is what Buddhists mean when they announce that Wisdom generates Compassion, and Compassion reveals Wisdom.

So this is the good news of Buddha: it is really and truly possible to wake up to a Reality that grounds us in Peace (Wisdom) and calls us to care about others (Compassion).

A Christian Response: Roger

Paul, your brief but exquisite representation of Buddha's teaching shows its metaphysical depth. Despite its practical character, for the way to peace is through practice, it also reflects the universal condition of the human. This prods me to go back to my largely historical representation of Jesus's teaching and to open up some of its metaphysical underpinnings and projections.

The God who rules is the loving creator God we met in Chapter 1. The God of infinite energy who is "larger" than the universe is personal, loving, attentive to each creature, and intends the flourishing of all. Followers of Buddha and Jesus will have to talk about the latent suppositions of their straightforward depictions of a way of life.

The personal character of the God who creates, sustains, and rules implies a moral universe. The scenario is not persons in an

impersonal world, but a material universe suffused with moral or intentional underpinning. Enlightenment should enable discernment of cosmic intention, concern, and love beneath nature's objectively random and sometimes destructive ways. God is the within of all things, their source of energy and life.

At the heart of this universal morality Jesus locates justice, and he teaches this in forceful ways. The rich man who lacked nothing but ignored the poor man at his door died into a lonesome and punishing suffering; the poor man who succumbed neglected and unattended at the rich man's gate was born anew into comfort and fulfillment. Jesus's parable is a blunt statement that the universal human desire for equity in a world of innocent suffering has a transcendent warranty, a personal Dharma.

Jesus's teaching, according to his tradition, imagines things narratively in time; the cyclical rhythm of the seasons exists within the rule of God that is not affected by them. The realization of God's rule lies up ahead, maybe as something always possible, maybe close at hand, maybe breaking in with this or that event, maybe in fragments here and now, but absolutely in the end. In no case, however, is it programmed organically or teleologically; it is not automatic as a necessary development of nature; it is promised as the result of God's power and fidelity and always mediated by historical events.

The rule of God may be available now, but to tap into it requires practice in the form of action rather than the practice of meditation. The rule of God is a historical project. Here is another item about which followers of Buddha and Jesus have to talk. We cannot drive a wedge between meditation and social activity. The followers of each can understand the language of a path of life. Buddha invited people into a path leading to enlightenment that then overflows in service. Jesus invites followers to do as he does: teach, heal, bear witness, promote change in the death-dealing structures of life, and pray. Living within the rule of God entails living a life of discipleship of one who is enlightened and connected.

A Christian Perspective: Roger

Over the centuries countless essays have been written to introduce Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospels, practically speaking, are

the sole source for recreating Jesus's ministry. But they can be enhanced by historical reconstruction of Jesus's context. In the last couple of centuries historians have also tried to get behind later embellished interpretations of him in the Gospels in order to represent how his ministry appeared to his contemporaries. This historical approach is helpful because it allows comparison with Gautama Siddhartha. Although the Gospels do not provide a detailed record of Jesus's activities, they yield a fairly clear but broad portrait of his ministry and the content of his message. This introduction to Jesus focuses on the rule of God that centered the many facets of his ministry.

Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was born a few years before the beginning of the first millennium and died around the year 30 CE in what is today Israel or Palestine. The Gospels provide no physical description of his person. The stories surrounding his infancy are generally considered theologically motivated legends. Jesus learned his religious heritage as a Jew from Nazareth in Galilee. He was referred to as a carpenter (Mk 6:3). Many think that he became a disciple of John the Baptist before striking out on his own. John preached religious repentance and conversion and symbolized them with a rite of ritual cleansing (Mk 1:4ff.). The messages of the two men are similar in some respects and different in others.

One can discern how Jesus appeared to his fellow Jews by the way he fitted the known roles of teacher, healer, and prophet. As an ~~itinerant~~ teacher Jesus went from town to town in Galilee preaching to people in parable and sayings. Such teachers were generally poor and detached from accumulated possessions; they concentrated on deeper matters of the spirit and illustrated their message by example. A healer was a role that people were familiar with in Jesus's time. Jesus did not use medicines¹ but relied on the spiritual power of faith and an appeal to God's Spirit. His healings are depicted both as routine activity among crowds who pressed in around him and occasionally as wondrous events. As a prophet Jesus criticized various social and religious practices

¹ He sometimes used visible rituals or demonstrative gestures to dramatize what he was doing. A good example appears in Mark's Gospel, when Jesus used spittle to heal a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment (Mk 7:31-37).

in the name of the standard of God's word and values known through his Jewish tradition. His criticisms ranged from indictment of "this generation" to stinging criticism of certain groups within Judaism. His preaching was not timid. He provoked some; he occasioned conflict with certain parties; and his ministry led to his death.

It is not certain how long Jesus's ministry lasted, somewhere between one year and three. But in the end he so antagonized either the religious leaders of Israel or the Romans who were occupying the land, or both, that they reacted. This led to his execution as a threat to public order and other religious charges. After his death his followers became convinced that God had raised him from death and received him into God's own sphere. This faith conviction empowered the formation of a Jesus movement that gradually evolved into a Christian church independent of Judaism.

The rule of God. This phrase describes the very heart of Jesus's teaching. Its comprehensive meaning requires that it be carefully studied in its relation to Jewish tradition and in Jesus's usage. This account of the content of the rule of God simplifies the many different facets of this image but does not betray the basic meaning. What the "rule of God" refers to may be paraphrased as the way things would be on earth if they coincided with the intent of the creator God and the way things will be at the end of time.

Jesus's view of God reflects his Jewish tradition. Because God is creator of the world, Jesus refers to God as both caring for every creature and ruling the world like a king. Kingship in Judaism had none of the negative connotations it might have today in democratic cultures. Jesus's God is both creator and heavenly father; God is sovereign and personally attentive to history. In his ministry Jesus related to God both as divine power and one to whom one prayed using interpersonal language. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he gave them some typical words and phrases. He said that one should honor the transcendence and holiness of God and then ask that God's rule be established in this world in the same way that it is in heaven (Mt 6:9-13). From this one can discern some of the different connotations of the rule of God. The world as it is does not reflect the order the creator intended, but the prayer that Jesus taught asks that God

act to establish it. The rule of God points to an expansive idea, the way things should be in contrast to the way they are, and therefore as a standard for criticism that can help change things.

Aspects of God's rule. Jesus spoke about the rule of God using various rhetorical devices, and he demonstrated its values by his actions. He told parables that illustrated God's rule. These brief vignettes frequently make a point about the rule of God by sharp contrast to human expectations. Describing some of these parables illustrates how creatively they suggest that things could be different. Imagine these stories being told to different people in groups of various sizes.

Jesus spoke of a rich "fool" who stored up all his wealth in barns to finance a long and leisurely retirement and then suddenly died (Lk 12:16-21). The story dramatizes that human life unfolds within a sphere of transcendence that encompasses the whole of existence. The man was a fool because he ignored his relation to God and thought only of immediate temporal comfort.

Jesus told the story of the younger of two sons of a landowner. He asked for his share of the inheritance, went off and squandered it, and ended up in a subhuman situation. When he gained the courage and humility to return home, he found his father waiting for him with outsized acceptance and love (Lk 15:11-32). God is like this father who restored the young man to dignity as though he had been dead and now was alive again. The story depicts a personal, loving, and forgiving God who unconditionally embraces every single human life.

Jesus told his fellow Jews the story of one of their enemies, a Samaritan, who went out of his way to take care of a Jew who had been robbed, beaten, and left for dead by thieves (Lk 10:29-37). The story displays an ethics of love that is not ethnically limited but universal, an ethics that seeks out those in need, even enemies, and makes them neighbors.

Jesus told the story of a rich man living in luxury with a diseased beggar lying outside his gate; the rich man died and was punished in an afterlife; the poor man was comforted in heaven (Lk 16:19-31). This simple story affirms that morality and justice structure the universe; the impersonal and destructive passage of time does not describe the inner substance of reality. Justice

means the equal worth before God of each human being and the human imperative to respect it.

Jesus told the story of the end of time, when those who have actively loved others will be rewarded and those who ignored others in need will be punished (Mt 25:31-46). This story, with its perspective of finality, sorts things out in terms of ultimate importance.

The rule of God has all these qualities that together emphatically change a spontaneous and superficial appreciation of things. It reproves absolute attention to immediate satisfaction. It rejects the idea of an impersonal universe that offers no forgiveness. It condemns a pragmatic individualist ethic unconcerned with society. It transcends a worldview that aims for no future at all or one of absolute emptiness. In contrast, the rule of God offers a universe sustained by a personal power of love, a friendly source of being who accepts and energizes people to love all others out of gratitude, and who offers humanity a promise of eternal life.

The significance of God's rule. There are two distinct but overlapping ways of appreciating the rule of God that Jesus taught. The first way is analytical, as in the preceding paragraphs. Jesus communicated the rule of God in many indirect ways, through his parables, sayings, and actions that reflected its values. The first approach collects the many testimonies of his ministry and tries to fit them together into a complex whole. The second approach recognizes at the start that the rule of God is not a clear idea corresponding to a definable object but instead expresses a religious experience of God's being the almighty creator God who is also a personal lover of human beings and whose desire is that each one flourish and in the end be saved. The rule of God points to the deeper foundation of all reality that cannot be clearly imagined. Although it only appears in fragments, it still contradicts the ordinary assessment of things. It manifests itself in Jesus's ministry, which thus provides ideals to be striven for, a basis for critique of destructive human behavior, and grounds for hope in an absolute future.

The rule of God proposes a utopia, an idealistic conception of reality. It sets forth ideals for human striving and virtues that are worth cultivating for oneself and for others in society. The rule of God is not a set of commandments but a comprehensive

vision of reality that grounds the character of human existence, personally and as a community of persons. This framework actualizes itself in concrete persons, actions, and situations as exemplified in Jesus's stories and in his own story.

The rule of God as just described sets the context for an ethics. It does not provide a set of rules to decide complex cases; it is not a categorical imperative that can be expressed in maxims. But the rule of God carries an ethical edge. It gives human beings leverage to recognize that this or that is wrong when it attacks or undermines the value of human lives, or when society fails to be concerned about whole groups of people who are squeezed out of the workings of community.

The rule of God also supplies human existence with the grounds for hope in an absolute future. It responds to the questions of whence, where, and whither with a premise of creation and a promise of eternal life on the basis of the power of a personal creator God. Such a promise engenders a second kind of empowerment beyond the power of being itself. It gives humans something to live for in the future, a goal. And this goal promises meaning for each person and for each person's actions. In other words, the rule of God challenges the rule of death and promises eternal meaning for what human beings are and do. It directly addresses the question of human suffering.

Jesus's relevance for all. That which opens up the possibility that Jesus can be a universally relevant and reconciling mediator and not a competitive religious figure lies in the exegetical consensus that historically Jesus did not preach himself but the rule of God. Jesus's mission and being were oriented toward making God's values, the will and the rule of God, operative in the world, in personal lives and in society.

This exocentric interpretation of Jesus can be found in the hymn to Jesus Christ in Philippians 2:6–11. Jesus emptied himself and took on the form of a servant or slave relative to the rule of God. This is frequently called kenotic Christology, a term drawn from this text. In theology Paul Tillich has adopted a version of this strictly dialectical Christology: Jesus is the Messiah or Christ because he surrenders his own person to the absolute and ultimate reality of the creator God, ground of being.

The strictly theocentric character of Jesus's ministry requires a christological interpretation that preserves the humanity of

Jesus and his being filled with the power of the Spirit of God the creator. This tension allows the Christian to find the creator God who was at work in Jesus analogously at work in other religions precisely as immanent, loving, accompanying, and provident energy. Jesus does not appear to be a divisive barrier between religions, except where religion sanctions human behaviors that run counter to the values of God's rule, and these appear as frequently in Christianity as they do in most other major religions.

A Buddhist Response: Paul

I must say, Roger, that your summary of what Jesus taught contrasts starkly—but I hope promisingly—with what I think Buddha taught. The differences revolve around Jesus's notion of the rule of God.

If you had just focused on Jesus's experience of "a personal, loving, and forgiving God who unconditionally embraces every single human life," then, as we shall see in Chapter 5, we could explore some illuminating analogies between God as love and the Mahayana teachings on Emptiness and Interbeing. But if Jesus's main concern, as you say, was not just God but the rule of God, then I believe we have something that is really unique to Jesus, that is, something for which there is not a direct analogue in Buddha's message.

The rule of God, as you describe it so clearly, means that Jesus's God wants to change not only hearts but social structures. The world as it is—as it was in Palestine under Roman oppression—is not the way God wants the world to be. As you and other liberation theologians make clear, for Jesus, as a good Jewish prophet, a society consistent with God's rule will be built not only on love but on justice—justice especially for those who have been stepped on and pushed aside.

So the God of Jesus is up to something in history. History is going—or can go—somewhere, toward a world that can be better tomorrow than it is today. Therefore, Christians can hope. Indeed, they must hope. And they have to act in order to bring about this hoped-for, changed world.

I hear very little of such a message from Gautama. The intent of his teachings was primarily to change hearts and minds, not society. He wasn't concerned about history going anywhere.

Yes, he surely realized that enlightened minds would produce an enlightened society, but he wanted to transform the way people saw and experienced the world so that they would not cling to their thoughts and desires about the world. Yes, his message that everyone could be enlightened was an indirect criticism of the caste system and gender identities of the time. But that was not his main intent. The notion of justice does not even figure into his preaching. He was so concerned with living in the moment that he warned against the distracting dangers of hoping for the future.

So, he never got into trouble with the powers that be, as Jesus did. He did not antagonize or provoke kings or princes the way Jesus and other Jewish prophets did. Thus, the differences in their deaths—Jesus dying the victim of a political execution, Buddha having eaten poisonous mushrooms (according to some traditions) and succumbing to old age.

Are these differences contradictory, illustrating the frequent contrasting of the “prophetic-historical” religions of the West and the “mystical-personal” spiritualities of the East? Or are they fundamentally complementary, in need of each other? We will be exploring those questions especially in Chapters 10 and 11. For the moment, we have to note and take seriously the apparent contrasts between Jesus’s central concern for the rule of God and Buddha’s for Enlightenment.

It Seems to Us

On the question of what Gautama and Jesus taught, one of the first things that we agreed on was the importance of getting it straight—that is, the importance of doing our historical and hermeneutical homework as best we can in an effort to understand the original impact of these two teachers. Yes, we both recognize that the prospect of arriving at a clear, final, universally recognized picture of what the historical Jesus and Gautama said, what they did, and what they thought of themselves is beyond our reach. The Gospels and the early lives of Buddha are, one might say, impressionist paintings rather than clearly defined photographs. They’re interpretations, not historical records.

But we also agreed that if the task of knowing the historical Jesus or Gautama can never be done perfectly and finally, it is still possible and necessary to do it partially and as best we can. That’s what Roger’s phrasing “the original impact” is getting at. With the help of historians and scholars we can know how and why Jesus and Gautama upset, inspired, and made a difference in people’s lives; we can determine what must have been key elements in their message, their vision; we can know what people of their time thought of them and why they followed these two teachers. A firm hold on this original impact and intent of their messages will provide us with needed leverage over the interpretations that were made of them through the centuries. Needless to say, we can be sure that both Gautama and Jesus have not been happy with many of the things that have been taught and done in their names.

Irreducibly different. And when we take up our hermeneutical tools and try, as best we can, to bring into focus what Jesus and Gautama taught, we find that their messages are not the same. Indeed, they are remarkably and irreducibly different. These stark differences are embodied in what we can call the core content—or better, the core intent—of their messages. For Jesus, that was the rule of God. For Gautama, it was the enlightenment of all.

The rule of God was for Jesus a social reality. Certainly, it called for a change of individual hearts. But it aimed at a new way of organizing and living in this world that would be both the result and the facilitator of such a change of heart. As Roger made clear in this statement, Jesus believed in and experienced a God who was intensely personal and who had a plan for creation and so was “up to something in this world.” The rule of God was Jesus’s vision of what this earth would look like if humans lived according to God’s intention. It would certainly be a world very different from the violent, oppressed, and poverty-laden land in which he lived. See 1 ms

Having realized his own enlightenment, Buddha’s intent was to make enlightenment a possibility for everyone. His main concern was to transform the awareness of each individual. If he could remove the ignorance in the mind of each, there would necessarily be less greed and less hatred in the lives of all. Yes, Buddha, after his enlightenment, wanted to form a sangha, a

OK community of his followers. But the purpose of coming together was the transformation, the waking up, of each individual. Let that happen right now, in the lives of each, and the future will, as it were, take care of itself.

+ We recognized that the differences between the social rule of God and the individual enlightenment of all led to even more marked differences in what went on in the lives of Jesus and Gautama. We suggest that perhaps those differences can be emblematically captured in an event in Jesus's life that does not seem to have a counterpart in Gautama's life: the cleansing of the Temple (Mk 11:15-19). For Jesus, as for all Jewish prophets, the God of love was a God of justice; so yes, for them the universe does bend—or better, can and must be made to bend—toward justice. Prayer and meditation, though necessary, are not enough. This world will not change, the rule of God will not be realized, without the prophetic actions of God's people—actions that seem to be spurred on not only by compassion but by anger. If these actions can be, and need to be, forceful, confrontative, disruptive, they are also nonviolent. Such seem to have been the actions of Jesus in the scene at the Temple. And, as we know, the disruption of the Temple led to the crucifixion on Golgotha.

In noting that an incident like Jesus's prophetic action at the Temple does not appear in the life of Gautama, we are not suggesting that it should have. For the moment we want only to recognize differences. Buddha had his own program for transforming suffering (with an analysis of private property as the cause of poverty that bears socialist coloring).² But it did not include the announcing of a God who called for justice and for active confrontation with the pharaoh or emperor or landowner. In the coming chapters (especially Chapters 10 and 11) we will take these differences very seriously.

Jesus and Buddha are coinciding opposites. We expect that these (and other) "remarkable and irreducible" differences in the messages of Jesus and Buddha will turn out to be what Nicholas of Cusa calls a "coinciding of opposites." This is part of our understanding of Christ and Buddha as nonexclusive and noncompetitive. That means that their messages, no matter how head-buttingly opposite they may appear to be, will or can prove

² Aggannya-Sitta (Dighami Kaya 27).

to be coinciding—complementary rather than contradictory. At this juncture, we cannot say we know that for sure. But the following four reasons make us suspect that this is what we will discover as we carry on our discussions in the rest of this book.

1. It would be difficult to deny, we think, that however stunningly diverse the messages of Jesus and Gautama are, what motivates the messengers is the same: negatively, the desire to remove, or deal with, unnecessary suffering; positively, to promote full human flourishing. We believe that this shared motivation—really, this shared goal—can therefore serve as a criterion for assessing not only the veracity but also the complementarity of their teachings. Even if the content of each's message seems to contradict the other, if both messages are effective in enabling people to deal with their sufferings and so to promote human and environmental well-being, then there has to be something in each message from which the other can learn.
2. Besides having a common motivation, the messages of Gautama and Jesus have also produced common ethical fruits: radical love/compassion for others, for all sentient beings or all of God's creatures. Buddha could endorse Jesus's admonition: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn 13:35). This would suggest that both teachers and students have much to learn from each other about their different ways of achieving and practicing such a capacity to love.
3. The evidence is quite clear that both Gautama and Jesus considered their messages to be more important than themselves. We can imagine, therefore, that whatever Jesus encountered that helped promote the rule of God, or whatever for Buddha enabled enlightenment, would have been warmly acknowledged by each of them—even though it might be something not clearly contained in their original teachings. They were the kind of teachers, we suspect, always ready to learn—and they would want their followers to do the same.
4. Finally, and more theologically, in light of the pluralist confession that we made last chapter, we do believe (trust

yes

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Muhamed

would be the better word) that despite the insuperable and incorrigible differences that do exist in the messages and self-understanding of Jesus and Gautama, they are, both of them, *mediators of absolute Mystery and Truth*. Yes, we recognize that these words and symbols are more familiar to Christians and Westerners than to Asian Buddhists. But we believe that they can be functionally analogous for Buddhists. The Buddha and the Christ can be understood and experienced as very different fingers pointing to the same moon (or perhaps to different parts of the same moon).

In the rest of our conversation we explore how the irreducible differences in the message of Gautama and Jesus might be mutually challenging and life-giving. At this point we can list some of the sharpest "opposites" that we hope will coincide: How is ultimate Mystery personal yet beyond personality—intimately present to but always exceeding what is happening in our lives? How might the absolute end of history be contained in its eternal now? If history bends toward justice, how might compassion make it amenably bendable? Can one be both angry and accepting before the sufferings of injustice? Can one speak of a priority for either personal or social transformation?

We expect our conversations to be as rewarding as they promise to be challenging.

4.

Who Were Buddha and Jesus?

After their deaths, Siddhartha was recognized as the Buddha and Jesus as the Messiah or Christ. Every Buddhist and Christian lives within the interpretive context of who these historical persons really were and are. So we will talk about the complex meanings that have grown up around being followers of Buddha and Jesus.

A Christian Perspective: Roger

The stories of Jesus of Nazareth and Siddhartha Gautama did not end at their deaths. Both of them gained followers, and as the movements progressed over time, they became subject to extensive and cumulative interpretations. In the case of Jesus, in a relatively short time after his death many of his followers recognized that God had raised Jesus from death. The bases for the interpretations of Jesus lay in his resurrection and what he communicated to people. The interpretations also resonated with the various ways in which Jesus introduced God into people's lives. This experience was called salvation, and it will be necessary to examine what it means to call Jesus savior. All of this locates Jesus at the center of a Christian spirituality of following Jesus; it is there that the identity of Jesus appears.

Jesus's resurrection. After Jesus's death and the faith experience that God raised him from death, a Jesus movement arose, and interpretations of the sacred character of Jesus gradually