

THE SILENT STREAM
– CONTEMPLATION AND BUDDHIST –
CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

By Ven. A Dhammika Thera

Ven. A Dhammika Thera is an Australian and is attached to the Buddhist Society of Victoria, Box 256, Melbourne, V I C 3001, Australia. This is a text of a talk delivered at a dialogue session organized by the Ecumenical Institute.ed

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On the points of agreement, we can be happy and the points about which we disagree we can agree to disagree. If we conduct dialogue about the experiential we can do much more than just talk to each other, we work with each other. I can't participate in the Mass as I do not accept the divinity of Christ. A Christian cannot participate in a Buddha puja because he can have no object or worship other than God. But about the pathways of the mind, about what qualities of heart lead us to Nirvana or bring us closer to God as far as I can see we have little disagreement.

Despite increasing secularization religion is still a force in men's lives. It inspires them to sacrifice, renunciation and spiritual transformation. Sometimes unfortunately it also drives wedges between human beings and can even be used to justify or condone the hatred that such divisions can bring. So quite apart from just learning about how other people worship, interreligious dialogue has an important part to play in helping men understand and appreciate those who are different from themselves. In this country relations between Buddhists and Christians have not always been good. There has been much petty competitiveness, much exalting oneself and disparaging others, suspicion and jealousy, all of it is very unbecoming the noble ethics and high ideals of both Buddhism and Christianity.

Fortunately most of this is now in the past. There are several reasons for this change, and one of them is that both sides have started talking with each other. But of course it has gone far beyond this. The training of a Catholic priest now includes three years study of Buddhism not with the old reservations that any contact with another religion may weaken one's faith and not to "know the enemy better" but out of a genuine desire to understand. I know of no Buddhist institution

that has got around to teach Christianity but I am sure it will come in time – Dialogue on the philosophical and theological levels, has led to many interesting changes none the least is the use of the word Dhamma to translate Logos of St John’s Gospel in the new Sinhalese translation of the Bible. Speaking for myself, I can say that this word has given me an entirely different and more sympathetic understanding of this passage from the Gospel of St. John. But there is much that Buddhism and Christianity can still learn from and share with each other and to this end I would like to talk with you today about some aspects of the contemplative traditions of these two great religions. But before I start I will have to define the word contemplation as I am going to use it here.

Faith plays a central role in the life of the Christian but he must have more than just faith, he must try to love his neighbour, he must be generous, he must be humble and so on. As St. Paul said, “I may have faith so that I can move mountains but if I lack love I have nothing”. In other words the Christian is someone who accepts the divinity of Christ and who tries also to develop certain states of mind. In Buddhism little emphasis is placed on faith, one is saved by developing a “knowledge and vision of things as they really are” and only a mind that is pure, detached, patient and tranquil can do this. Recognizing the importance of changing heart and mind both Buddhism and Christianity have developed techniques and exercises to bring about these changes and it is the conscious practice of these that I mean when I speak of contemplation.

The Sutta Pitaka is a venerable store house of detailed information on contemplative techniques and psychology in contrast to the New Testament which has almost none. However, since the time of the Desert Fathers, Christian mystics have written numerous manuals of contemplation and descriptions of their own struggle to win perfection which we can use to compare with the teachings of the Buddha.

Both traditions recognized that the ordinary mind is a constantly changing mass of unruly, useless, and frequently unwholesome thoughts. The Buddhist describes it thus:

“I know of nothing that changes as fast as the mind in that it is difficult to give a simile of just how fast it changes”.

And again:

“Good thoughts and evil fly up like sparks from a Fire”.

The Clouds of Unknowing, a Christian Manual of mysticism written in the middle ages, put in this way:

“It is always a sudden impulse and comes without warning springing up to God like a spark from a fire. An incredible number of such impulses arise in one brief hour in the soul who has a will to this work. In one flash the soul may completely forget the created world outside. Yet almost as quickly it may relapse back to thoughts and memories of things done and undone, all because of our fallen nature. And as fast again it may rekindle”.

A mind in such a state is completely unworkable and the contemplatives have recognized the importance of developing concentration as a prerequisite for change. Fixing the attention on one point to the exclusion of everything else is recommended for developing malleability and workability of mind. The *Clouds of Unknowing* for example suggests repeating a word.

“Take a short word, preferably of one syllable, the shorter the word the better. A word like “God is Love”. Choose which you like or perhaps another so long as it is of one syllable. And fix this word fast to your heart, so that it will be there, come what may. It will be your shield and spear in peace and war alike”.

In Buddhism the most common object of concentration is the breath. One fixes all attention on the breathing process, gently returning to the breath each time the mind drifts away and in time mental activity slows down. Describing the practice and its results the Buddhist says:

“A monk goes to the forest, the roots of a tree or an empty hut and sits down, having crossed his legs, keeping his back straight and establishes his mindfulness in front of him. Mindfully he breathes in, mindfully he breathes out”. And again “This intent concentration on in-and-out-breathing if cultivated and made much of is something peaceful and choice, something perfect in itself and a pleasant way of living also. Not only that it dispels evil unskilled thoughts that have arisen and makes them vanish in a moment.

The value of concentrating on the breath was well known to the monks of the Mount Athos tradition; the *Philokalia*, a 14th century work, recommends:

“Sit down in your cell, collect your mind, lead it into the path of the breath, along which the air enters in, constrain it to enter the heart, together with the inhaled air and keep it there. Keep it there but do not leave it silent and idle, instead give it the following prayer.”

“Lord, Jesus Christ son of God have mercy upon me”. Let this be its constant occupation never to be abandoned. For this work, by keeping the mind free from dreaming renders it unassailable to suggestions of the enemy and leads it to Divine desire and love”.

Anyone who has tried these exercises will know just how difficult it can be. Patience, gentleness and a good deal of skill are necessary if success is to be met. In a letter to a friend St Francis de Sales says this about concentration.

“If the heart wanders or is distracted bring it back to the point gently..... And even if you did nothing else during the whole of your hour but bring your heart back, though it wandered away every time you brought it back, your hour would be very well spent”.

This is just the kind of encouragement that a meditation teacher gives to his pupil in the Buddhism tradition.

As the mind becomes calmer it also becomes clearer. Mental states and emotions that are to one’s benefit or detriment are known directly. One does not have to read theology, one’s experience tells one. The Buddhist calls the detrimental emotions and thoughts “hindrances”. They are sense desires, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry and doubt. St. John of the Cross in the 5th Chapter of his *Dark Night of the Soul*, describes the contemplator’s enemies – delighting in the sensual nature-being enkindled by anger, a certain energy and boldness, luxury of spirit and complacency of will. *The Clouds of Unknowing* mentions almost the same distractions as the Buddhist does and says:

“This happens whenever you deliberately conjure up the memory of someone of something or other. If it is a thing that grieves or has grieved you and you rage and want revenge, then it is wrath. Or you will get wearied and bored with being good in spirit and body, and that is sloth. And if it is a pleasant thing present or past you experience a delight when you dwell on it, then that is pride. If it is love or pleasure or flirting fawning and flattering of yourself or others then it is lust”.

In a celebrated and apt simile the Buddhist describes the effect the five hindrances have upon the mind as being like the surface of the water being disturbed by the mind. St. John of the Cross uses this same simile. He says:

“The soul is uneasy and fatigued by its desire because it is wounded and moved and disturbed by them as is the water by the wind, in just the same way, they disturb it allowing it not to rest in any way, place or in anything whatsoever”

Having seen in their own experience that these types of thoughts only keep heart and mind in turmoil, tied down to the earth, the contemplatives developed several ways of dealing with them. In the Vitakkasantana Sutta, the Buddhist perhaps not surprisingly suggests constant diligence and effort:

“If evil unskilled thoughts continue to arise he should with teeth clenched and tongue pressed on palate restrain subdue and beat down the mind with the mind”.

The Clouds of Unknowing puts it this way:

“Get to work quick, smart. If memories of your past actions keep coming between you and God or any new thought or sinful impulse, you must resolutely step over them you must resolutely step over them You must trample them under foot and indeed as often as they come up push them down”.

A much more subtle skillful but no less effective way of dealing with distracting thoughts, practically when their persistence is starting to fatigue and frustrate is to just forget about them. The Buddhist says once again:

“If evil unskilled thoughts continue to arise he should forget about them, pay no attention to them. It is just as if a man with sight who did not want to see something should close his eyes or look in the other direction”.

The Clouds of Unknowing recommends this same “dodge” as it calls it.

“Do everything you can to act if you did not know that (these thoughts) were so strongly pushing between you and God. Try to look as it were over their shoulder as if looking at something else If you do I believe that you will soon find your hard work much easier”.

Of course there is much more to the spiritual life than just ceasing to do evil; one must also learn to develop the good. So once the contemplatives have quietened and tidied the mind they begin exercises intended to develop spiritual attitudes. The Buddhists called these exercises the *anusatis* and they differ according to individual differences. *Buddhanusati*, contemplating on the good and the example of the Buddha, *Silanusati*, reflecting on one's own virtues and good deeds, *marananusati* reflecting on death and *mettabhavana*, developing thoughts of kindness and love towards others.

Other contemplatives seem to have recognized the importance of such practices. St. Theresa of Avila, for example, says:

“There are many mansions in heaven and so there are many roads leading to them. Some people derive benefit from imaging themselves in heaven. Some meditate on death. Others if they are tender-hearted become exhausted by always dwelling on the Passion but derive great benefit from thinking of the power and greatness of God and his love for us”.

We will just briefly look at how Buddhists and Christians have practiced some of these exercises. The meditation on death and the meditation on love. In Buddhism one of the most important doctrines is the three signs of being, one of which is impermanence. The truth of this doctrine can be deeply comprehended by keeping in mind the inescapable fact of one's own death. In the Satipatthana Sutta he recommends going to the charnel ground and watching the progressive disintegration of a corpse.

“A monk considers his body as though he was looking at bodily remains thrown in a charnel ground, one, two or three days dead, bloated, livid and oozing matter and thinks: My body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that”.

But more usually one merely thinks about death, as it were. Take the Jara Sutta:

“How short indeed is life, within a hundred years one dies, and should one live longer, one would just decay. Folk grieve at the thought of mine, for one's wealth does not last, and fortunes are shaky. See this and live with detachment. It is all left behind at death and yet men think ‘mine’, ‘mine’, ‘mine’. But the wise man knows this and no longer stoops to ‘mine’”.

The Christian contemplatives had very similar ideas about the value of thinking of death. Ignatius Loyola suggests meditation quite-similar to the Buddhist cemetery contemplation and Thomas A' Kempis has a whole chapter on death and frequently speaks of the vanity of all worldly things because of their impermanence.

“Very soon the end of your life will be at hand; consider therefore the state of your soul. Today a man is here, tomorrow he is gone. Oh how dull and hard is the heart of man, which only thinks of the present! You should order every deed as though today were the last day in your life. If you are not ready to die today, will tomorrow find you better prepared? Tomorrow is as uncertain”.

Metta-bhavana, the development of loving kindness, is perhaps the most popular of all the contemplations recommended by the Buddhist. Details of how to do this are given in the Visuddhimagga, Buddhaghosa's great work on meditation and philosophy. First it recommends arousing warm feelings and projecting them to oneself and thinking:

“May I be happy, may I be well etc.” then in the same way towards a dear friend, then neutral person and finally towards the enemy. St. Augustin writing at about the same time as Buddhaghosa recommends the same exercises. He says:

“First extend your love to those near to you for you really love yourself when you love those that are close to you. Then extend it to strangers who have done you no harm. Then go beyond them, even arrive at loving also your enemies”.

Scholars have suggested that this correspondence between Buddhaghosa and St. Augustin indicate borrowing. This is possible but I think there is a much more likely explanation. Both Buddhaghosa and St. Augustin were intensively interested in the heart and mind of man and whether one lives in North Africa or Sri Lanka the mind remains the same. Both could see the self-hate could block one's ability to love others. Both were aware that thinking of someone one likes could make warm feelings well up. Both were aware that it is not easy to love those one hates but with training, the mind can be gradually coaxed to do so. And perhaps most important, both, one a Buddhist and the other a Christian, knew the importance of love. If they met it is unlikely they would have been able to come to any agreement about, say, cause and effect, transubstantiation, the exact nature of God or even whether or not he existed. But about love, perhaps a definition of

love, its nature, its effect and how to develop it, there would have been much to agree on. Theology and philosophy, the conceptual, is the product of a Christian mind or the Buddhist mind. But the experiential, the emotions, are universal. There is no Buddhist love or Christian love – Love is Love. Listen to how St. Paul defines it;

“If I gave everything I had to the poor and if I was burned alive for the preaching of the Gospel but I didn’t love others it would be of no value at all. Love is patient and kind, never jealous or envious, never boastful or proud, never haughty or rude. Love does not demand its own way. It is not irritable or touchy, it does not hold grudges and will hardly even notice when others do it wrong. It is never glad about injustice but will always rejoice when truth wins out”.

Now listen to Gurulugomi a medieval Sinhala writer:

“Hate restricts, love releases; hatred strangles, love frees; hatred brings remorse, love brings peace; hatred agitates, love quietens, stills, calm; hatred divides, love unites; hatred hardens, love softens; hatred hinders, love helps; and thus by correctly studying the effects of hatred and love one should develop love”.

All of us, Buddhists and Christians know what St. Paul and Gurulugomi were talking about, because we have all experienced the states they have described. If we conduct dialogue only about the theological and philosophical we limit ourselves.

Take the religious man as described by Thomas A’ Kempis in the *Imitation of Christ* and the perfect man as described by the Buddhist in the Sutta Nipata. Both are lovers of silence. Both speak their truths quietly and gently. Neither is given to retaliation. Neither make judgements about others. One says: “Allow God to be the judge” the other says: “the law of Karma will decide”. Both see the vanity of fame, worldly honours and encourage the development of detachment. One says: “attachment pulls one away from Nirvana” the other then “it pulls one’s heart away from God”. Would not both these men have much in common?

Both Buddhism and Christianity have many streams running through them, the devotional, the temporal, the philosophical, the archetypical and symbolic; contemplation is the silent stream. If we both Buddhist and Christian pay more attention to our hearts and minds it will make us more worthy of our respective

religions. It will give us much more in common with each other than just ideas and may be, the silent streams will merge.

The Golden Link, S'pore

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