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Christians Talk about Buddhist Meditation; Buddhists Talk
about Christian Prayer (review)

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Buddhists and Christians in relation to each other and to the natural sciences. Unfortunately, the responses are not always the clearest, but they may prod others to think further.

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CHRISTIANS TALK ABOUT BUDDHIST MEDITATION; BUDDHISTS TALK ABOUT CHRISTIAN PRAYER. *Edited by Rita M. Gross and Terry C. Muck.* London: Continuum, 2003. 157 pp.

It is popularly assumed that meditation enhances well-being and relieves stress. In the West, Asian practices are taught to persons from mainly Christian and Jewish backgrounds as new forms of spirituality, often presented as dramatically different from monotheistic traditions. Yet some practitioners consider meditation and other forms of Asian spirituality as enhancing rather than replacing worship of God.

This book presents essays by twelve authors that explore similarities and differences between Buddhist meditation and Christian prayer. The book reprints pieces that originally appeared in the journal *Buddhist-Christian Studies* in 2001 and 2002. It is thoroughly dialogical in format. Part 1 contains five Christian reflections on Buddhist spiritual practice followed by two Buddhist responses, while part 2 consists of five Buddhist reflections on Christian spiritual practice with two Christian responses. Many of the contributors are connected with the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies. Importantly, they combine academic and experiential knowledge of the two religions. The collection is framed by an introduction by Terry Muck and a conclusion by Rita Gross, the book's editors, who are Christian and Buddhist practitioners, respectively. The symmetry of the chapter layout is pleasing and apt.

Sociologically, the major impetus for this dialogue is the fact that a growing number of Christians have found Buddhist meditation fruitful. However, these Christians have not left behind their original religious identification. As they interact with Buddhists, dialogue has emerged comparing the two traditions. Clearly for Christians practicing some Buddhism, the emphasis is on mutual appreciation and commonality. To examine the motivation for interreligious dialogue, it is fitting to ask, whose interests does the dialogue serve? First and foremost, the interests are Christian. While Christian authors have gained from Buddhist spiritual practice, Buddhists have not adapted Christian prayer techniques in return. But although the genealogy of dialogue has Christian origins, the editors intend to take a neutral approach. They frame the topic broadly and invite

contributors to remark on any facet of the other tradition, including critical points.

In part 1, Frances Adeney, Mary Frohlich, Paul Ingram, Terry Muck, and Bardwell Smith express how aspects of Buddhist meditation have enriched their Christian spirituality. Adeney learned techniques of Buddhist silent meditation from a Jesuit priest in Indonesia that enable heightened awareness of God's presence. Frohlich belongs to a Catholic religious order for women and finds Buddhism helpful for developing discipline in prayer. For Ingram, Buddhist meditation is one ingredient in a spiritual journey focused on social liberation and discovering God's presence. Muck has found reflection on Theravada teaching about morality (*sila*) to be an impetus to overcome the theological dichotomy between faith and works and to develop the importance of spiritual readiness that cuts across religious traditions. Smith's participation in interfaith pilgrimage and meditation illustrates the spiritual discipline that Buddhism offers.

There are many overlapping insights among these chapters that Grace Burford helpfully summarizes in her response essay: first, Buddhist practice can confirm aspects of Christian practice, such as silent prayer; second, the encounter with Buddhism can lead Christians to uncover untapped streams within Christianity, especially monastic and mystical traditions; third, Buddhism can offer unique new techniques to Christians, such as *zazen*, which provide rigor in developing mental concentration. Christian appreciation of Buddhism blurs religious boundaries but never requires abandonment of church or creed. Robert Thurman's response concludes with a comment on the postmodern insecurity about boundaries, and praises these Christian authors for resisting the hardening of religious identities. He reminds readers of the Dalai Lama's exhortation that conversion to Buddhism is not generally the best option for non-Buddhists drawn to his Tibetan tradition. Rather, he advises taking what seems good in Buddhism to enrich one's original religion, thus remaining integrated with family members, communities, and local customs.

In part 2, the contributions of Buddhist authors display more academic distance because of the fact that the authors are not engaged in Christian practices in their Buddhist lives. But the essays are nonetheless personal in reflecting on subjective impressions gained from the encounter with Christian spirituality. One of the most exciting areas of exploration in these essays concerns how Christian petitionary and devotional prayer bears resemblance to certain types of Buddhist practice.

Robert Aiken catalogues seven Mahayana Buddhist practices and considers Christian analogues, focusing on the use of words in Buddhist mantras, sutras, and vows. He explores how Buddhists may supplicate higher beings for protection and assistance, yet insists that these beings are metaphors rather than reified entities. He ends his essay that accentuates parallels with an enigmatic "Yes, but . . . *chacun à son goût*." His cryptic ending suggests paradoxically that the similarities may be superficial (and differences deep), or that differences are merely a matter of taste (and convergence deep). Rita Gross hones in on a common theis-

tic misconception of Buddhist nontheism embodied in the question, why would Buddhists pray if there is no God listening? She asserts that Buddhists believe in the relative existence of divine beings, analogous to Christian belief in saints or angels. But an enlightened person recognizes the absolute nonexistence of these deities. Buddhist prayers are skillful means to realize nonduality, and their importance lies in the effect they have on the petitioner. Kenneth Tanaka explores the stereotypical image of a young girl kneeling by her bed praying to reflect on the intimacy and trust that Christians place in God. He observes that, in Japan, ordinary visitors to temples regularly enact devotional practices that request healing and other benefits, just as Christians do. He hints that perhaps mainstream Buddhism is too monastic and unfairly looks down upon such petitions. Taitetsu Unno focuses specifically on the Nembutsu of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan compared with the Jesus Prayer of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Both are world-affirming and transformative, although the Buddhist view does not dualize good and evil. Unfortunately, in his essay, knowledge of the Jesus prayer is from books rather than personal contact, and differences between Amida Buddha and God are not explored. In the last contribution, Mahinda Deegalle considers how Sri Lankan Buddhist rituals request protection from deities, like some Christian petitions, and also how monastic Buddhist prayers serve as tools for mindfulness. She suggests that newly formed Western Buddhist groups may strategically employ petitionary exercises to cater to the sensibilities of converts with theistic backgrounds.

In the responses to the five essays by Buddhists, Donald Mitchell accentuates the parallels discovered by the authors, drawing on Christian writers such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. In fact, Christian mystics figure largely in the spirituality of these Christian practitioners interested in Buddhism, who appreciate silence and unknowing. Ursula King organizes her response by distinguishing between similarities in practices (chanting, petitioning) and similarities in the results of spiritual practices (love, wisdom). She criticizes the assumption that Christian prayer is mainly petitionary, found particularly in Tanaka's image of a young girl praying beside her bed. To her, the center of Christian prayer is the lives of saints and mystics, even if this heritage may be neglected by Christians. She makes a plea for the close interrelation of prayer and meditation and the need for Christians to recognize this complementarity. The respondents hold that Christianity spirituality moves in the same direction as Buddhism.

In the conclusion, Rita Gross provides a persuasive hypothesis for why Christians borrow prayer techniques from Buddhism and not vice versa. Her explanation is that Buddhism offers "content-free" varieties of meditation (*samatha*) that calm the mind and center on the breath. In contrast, meditation that explores Buddhist concepts (*vipashyana*) is not borrowed by Christians because it is not suitable conceptually. In return, the reason that Buddhists do not use techniques of Christian prayer is because theological concepts are always involved. She closes by considering why prayer matters in today's world and makes the bold claim that spiritual discipline has the same purpose across traditions—it enhances flex-

ibility, tolerance, awareness, and compassion for others. It is significant that this published dialogue not only aims toward comparative reflection, but also considers the social implications of prayer and meditation. Ideally, Christian prayer and Buddhist meditation can both contribute to making the world a better place.

The high importance of this book lies both in its approach and topic. The theme is timely given growing experimentation with Buddhist meditation in the West. Quite unusual for an academic publication, the choice of authors who are all practitioners provides rare insights into both religions. This selectivity reflects current insights in the theology of pluralism, where religious experience outside one's own tradition may be considered a prerequisite for interreligious dialogue.

The book has much to commend it, but there are a few weak points. While the book's organization is symmetrical, the quality of contributions is not. The Christian essays are on the whole shorter and less detailed than their Buddhist counterparts. In the introduction, the reader is told that conference presentations were given on this topic, and some printed essays read more like informal talks than others.

Direct confrontation of religious differences seems lacking. Sometimes I found myself wishing for a less peaceable tone among authors, even though I agree with the editors about the importance of good will and humility between dialogue partners. Looking at the book as a whole, it rather underplays differences between the two religions. To put it another way, the emphasis lies heavily on similarities, especially among Christian contributors. For instance, the stark division between content-free and content-full Buddhist practices, defined in Rita Gross's conclusion, suggests a level of incompatibility in practice that is not found in the foregoing essays. Mainstream Christianity holds a concept of God that is (at least to some degree) external, whether conceived more impersonally as a higher being, or as a heavenly father. In this context, prayer would seem less comparable with Buddhist practices. Broader representation from Christian practitioners would have made the dialogue more representative and sharply differentiated.

A related issue of critical importance concerns "popular" practices of meditation and prayer. Authors on both sides seem uncomfortable with asking for what seems to be magical intervention from above. For the most part, Christian authors distance themselves from reified notions of deity and emphasize mystical divine presence, while Buddhist authors explain that calling upon Bodhisattvas does not imply external assistance. There seems to be consensus that prayer and meditation are for the purpose of changing the person, and not receiving help from outside. Both sides demythologize their traditions and emphasize human transformation. While such humanist emphasis has its persuasiveness, it does not represent the fullness of either tradition, it is condescending toward popular practices, and it is particularly controversial among Christians.

This book demonstrates convincingly that there are more areas of overlap be-

tween Buddhism and Christianity than commonly perceived. It proves that this topic is a highly promising focus for continued dialogue. Indeed, the asymmetries between the two traditions deserve much further analysis. The dialogue uncovers often neglected areas of Christian spirituality. It prompts Buddhists to think about Christian practice, which is otherwise may not be considered. Mutual understanding among religions is an important task advanced by this dialogue.

The audience for this book is wide. It is accessible to ordinary readers and students, as well as academics. This dialogue enriches both intellectual and practical reflection on Christian-Buddhist dialogue and may even prompt readers to deeper spiritual engagement.

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