

Japanese Buddhism and Christian “Good News”

A Christian Reflection on Aspects of the Buddhist Approach to Reality

by Cinto Busquet

Being faithful to one’s own religious convictions and at the same time remaining radically open to the other’s truth—this is what assures that together we may experience a deeper presence of God, the Ultimate Truth.

In a short article, it is not possible to touch, and still less to deepen, our understanding of all the aspects and facts that would be necessary to present the subject of Buddhist-Christian dialogue exhaustively. Therefore, my humble intention is just to offer a few indications, from my own experience as a Christian in contact with the Japanese Buddhist tradition and especially from my recent research work¹ on a contemporary Japanese Buddhist, Nikkyo Niwano (1906–99), founder of Rissho Koseikai, a Japanese lay Buddhist association founded in 1938. Niwano was very active in the interreligious field from the early sixties, with his Buddhist faith rooted in the universalistic approach of the Lotus Sutra—one of the most important scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism and the most outstanding in the Japanese Buddhist context. He recognized and stressed the value and significance of all religious traditions. Moreover, he was particularly open to Christianity, and he maintained many contacts with the Catholic Church. For this reason, I think it is meaningful to reflect on his thought and his experience, considering him as a kind of window through which we can catch some glimpse of the complex and rich landscape of Japanese Buddhism.

Buddhism arrived in Japan in the sixth century from China through the Korean Peninsula. In the eighth century, while Nara was the imperial capital, six Buddhist schools, initiated in China, were established on Japanese soil: the Jojitsu, Sanron, Hosso, Kusha, Kegon, and Ritsu schools. At the beginning of the ninth century, with Kyoto already the seat of the imperial household and the government, the Tendai school was founded by Saicho in Japan and the Shingon school by Kukai, and both schools spread quickly throughout the country from Mount Hiei and Mount Koya, respectively. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Pure Land Buddhism, based on faith in Amida Buddha’s saving power, took root in Japan with two new schools, Jodo and Jodo Shin, founded respectively by Honen and his disciple Shinran. Zen Buddhism took hold in Japan in the same period, with the establishment of the Rinzai Zen school by Eisai and the Soto Zen school by Dogen. Nichiren is also a prominent figure in the thirteenth century, and the school that takes his name and his devotion to the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Dharma have strongly influenced posterior Japanese Buddhism. From Nichiren’s stream, several new Japanese Buddhist associations emerged in the twentieth century.

Considering the wide range of ways of interpreting and practicing Buddhism in Japan, as I said before, it is quite difficult to speak in general about Japanese Buddhism. For this reason I will concentrate on a single figure that characterizes it well in our age: Nikkyo Niwano. Through a few of his quotations, I will try to reflect as a Christian theologian on some aspects of the Buddhist approach to Reality, as the subtitle says.

Fundamental Unity

Speaking about why interreligious cooperation is essential, Nikkyo Niwano says: “In its essence religion does not reject others but instead allows us to think of others with the same regard we have for ourselves. The oneness of self and others is fundamental to religion. Thus even when it is fractured into differing sects and groups, it is not natural that they should fight one another. People of religion should, rather, study each other’s doctrines and practices, discuss issues of religious faith that are of mutual concern, and on that basis, work together to establish world peace.”²

In these words, Niwano has already clearly pointed out a very important truth: the fundamental unity and equality of human beings. Although this unity and equality may be interpreted and explained differently by the two religions, we can consider it a common ground of Buddhism and Christianity.

Everything and everyone is linked with everything and everyone else in an endless succession of causes and effects,



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in a continuous interaction among all the elements of the phenomenological world. That's the law of interdependence of all that exists. Nothing exists for itself; everything exists in its relation to the outside world. Every human being is called to awaken to the same Universal Law that sustains the whole universe. In every person the same Dharma is at work. If we were to summarize the Buddhist approach to the world and to human existence in a few words, we could possibly express it in this way.

For Christianity, instead, the essential equality and unity of all human beings is based on their common dignity, having been created by God in his own image and likeness. Jesus reveals the face of God as a loving father who cares for every man and woman with infinite love, and as a logical consequence of this faith, Christianity teaches that all human beings must live as brothers and sisters, as children of the same Heavenly Father. The Gospel according to John tells us that the day before his death on the cross, Jesus prayed for the perfect unity of his disciples: "That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21). Jesus is one with the Father. In the Christian faith, he is the Son of God: God who gives himself completely to humankind in the humanity of Christ. And as God is one, humanity is called to be perfect in unity, one family, where reciprocal love renders oneness real and almost tangible.



Rev. Nikkyo Niwano shakes hands with Pope Paul VI during a private audience on September 15, 1965, the day after the ceremony opening the fourth period of the Second Vatican Council.

Shared Ethical Commitment

In September 1965, Nikkyo Niwano was invited to attend the opening ceremony of the fourth and last session of the Second Vatican Council. On that day, September 14, he was probably the only Buddhist in Saint Peter's Basilica. He was very impressed by the whole event, but in a special way he was struck by Paul VI's words on universal brotherhood and love: "The love that animates our communion does not set us apart from other men and women . . . does not make us exclusivists or egoists. On the contrary, because it is a love that comes from God, it gives us a universal dimension; our Truth leads us to Charity. . . .

While other currents of thought and action proclaim quite different principles for building human society—power, wealth, science, class struggle, vested interests, or other things—the Church proclaims love. The Council is a solemn act of love for humanity."³

Nikkyo Niwano wrote in his autobiography: "The love of God of which the pope had spoken in his opening message to that session of the Second Vatican Council is the same thing as the compassion advocated by Buddhism. The pope insists that the love for the neighbor taught by the New Testament must be interpreted to mean love for peoples everywhere, no matter what their nationality or

race. Shakyamuni taught the same thing about compassion.”⁴

Here we already have another possible strong link between Buddhist practice and Christian practice. The fundamental truth of the ontological unity of all human beings leads to the ethical commitment toward others, out of compassion and love for fellow beings.

The day after attending the ceremony in the basilica, Niwano was received in a private audience by the pope. He explains that on that occasion Paul VI said to him: “I know what you are doing for inter-faith cooperation. It is very wonderful. Please continue to promote such a wonderful movement. . . . In the Vatican, too, the attitude toward non-Christian religions is changing. It is important for people of religion not to cling to factions or denominations but to recognize each other and pray for each other.”⁵ Many times, Niwano said that he could not forget the warm hands of Pope Paul VI and that he believed that their firm handshake “put blood into the cooperation, friendship, and mutual understanding between Christianity and Buddhism.”⁶ From that encounter, Niwano deepened his “determination to be a bridge between the two religions, and extend this bridge to various other religions, as well.”⁷

Universal Truth

Buddhism and Asian religions in general are often interpreted as having a relativist religious approach. Nevertheless, Mahayana Buddhism proposes a “great vehicle,” a path to reach enlightenment suitable for everyone. It speaks of *ekayana*, in Sanskrit, or *ichijo*, in Japanese: the “one vehicle,” “the only vehicle.” This concept, central to the Lotus Sutra and other Mahayana scriptures, can be understood in an exclusivist way or, on the contrary, from an inclusive and comprehensive outlook. Usually Buddhist tradition interprets it from a holistic and all-encompassing point of view: eternal

and universal Truth must be above every particular grasp of it, and at the same time many paths can lead to it. Niwano asserts that “the Lotus Sutra, in its deepest meaning, is not a proper noun but a common noun meaning the highest and most real teaching, which teaches the truth of the universe to all human beings and leads them to the true way of living. But the real and the highest teaching can never be two. Though it can be expressed in various ways, in its fundamental meaning it is one.”⁸

The Zen master Renpo Niwa, abbot at that time of Eiheiji, the main monastery of the Soto Zen school, during the Interreligious Meeting of Prayer for Peace convened by John Paul II in Assisi in 1986, said: “Generally the faith of human beings is universal: beyond race, sex, or social class. . . . The life of people who communicate intimately in a religious mode is equal without any distinction of rank. . . . Universal truth is reflected in a different way in the diverse religious teachings; fundamentally all the religions are connected with one another.”⁹

This deep interconnection between the different religious traditions is what is meant in the Japanese expression *ban-kyo dokon*, “all religions spring from the same root.” It is a key saying for understanding the basic Japanese approach to religious diversity and plurality.

The Catholic Church professes her faith in Christ as “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself. At the same time, as the Second Vatican Council declared, “the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy” in the non-Christian religions and “regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones [the Catholic Church] holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”¹⁰

Therefore, we can agree that there is one Truth, a universal Truth toward which we can converge. According to Niwano, what is the final, the profound truth? For him, “it is the finding of the infinite life of humankind within the eternal life-force of the universe.”¹¹ True human nature, in its union with the eternal life force of the universe, is the so-called buddha-nature. All beings possess this potential for enlightenment, and the noblest form of Buddhist practice is the way of the bodhisattva, who devotes himself to attaining enlightenment not only for himself but also for all sentient beings.

The Ineffable Ultimate Reality

Niwano explains that the Lotus Sutra expounds the idea that every human being is a child of the Buddha: “The Buddha in this sense means the great life of the universe, which is the very root of all phenomena. In other words, the Lotus Sutra teaches that even though the individual person appears to live a detached existence, fundamentally everybody is an offshoot of the one great life of the universe.”¹² He was convinced that “the basis of all religions is the belief that all human beings are the children of the Buddha or of God” and that “all religions must transcend the limits of individual organizational differences in order to achieve the goal of religion itself.”¹³

The Buddha that Nikkyo Niwano speaks about is no longer simply the historical Buddha. It is the Original and Eternal Buddha, the personification or visualization of the Eternal Dharma that can be recognized in Shakyamuni, the Indian prince Siddhartha Gautama, but whose existence would extend far beyond the historical figure of the founder of Buddhism. In the Mahayana tradition, the Ultimate Reality is invoked and reached through the image of the Buddha, but it remains something formless and vague,

beyond any conceptualization and any personified image.

Niwano wrote: "There are many ways of naming this biggest, most absolute thing. Some call it the Law that creates and moves the universe. Others call it Truth or universal life-force. No matter what it is called, . . . the absolute is the basic force or rule that makes our existence possible and that gives us life. . . . The universal Law . . . controls the lives of all things and does not, therefore, give special treatment to any one living creature or any one human being. Managing everything in the universe means maintaining harmony among all things, all of which are constantly and dynamically in action."¹⁴

As is clearly expressed in the quotation I have just cited, the Ultimate Reality in the Buddhist understanding remains an indefinite principle or force. It is the Dharma that rules the whole universe. It is not the personal ontological entity that calls the world and the human being into existence, as it is in Christianity and in other monotheistic traditions. Buddhism stresses that the eternal and immutable Truth, the absolute and ultimate Reality, "will never be found in the material world, for things are not permanent. They are constantly changing."¹⁵ However, Niwano explains: "Religion is what enables human beings, living in the relative world of things, to perceive the world of the absolute. Religion makes the world of the absolute the mainstay of our hearts, allowing us to walk the path of life with sure-footed confidence."¹⁶

And walking ahead on this inner journey toward the deepest layer of their own existence, human beings are set free from the illusion of their possessive self and become radically aware of their interdependent nature.

Always Far Beyond

An old koan attributed to Zen Master Linji, the founder of the Rinzai school,

says: "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!" I think this aphorism summarizes well one of the stimuli that come from the Buddhist religious practice to the Christian faith. Of course, the saying is a koan, an enigmatic and paradoxical phrase that is proposed to encourage further meditation in order to reach a deeper wisdom about the mystery of life, and therefore there is not a univocal single interpretation. But I like to interpret it as an invitation to be thoroughly and constantly open to the infinite and ineffable reality of God, the mystery that upholds everything and everyone and at the same time transcends always our limited capacity of understanding. Human beings have been tempted from ancient times to create idols, distorted and inadequate images of the divine. The Hebrew scriptures strongly forbid the making of idols and exhort with insistence the adoration only of God, the only one God, the creator of heaven and earth and the father not only of Israel but of the whole of humankind. Jesus Christ, speaking to his disciples, admonishes: "None of you should be called a teacher. You have only one teacher, and all of you are like brothers and sisters. Don't call anyone on earth your father. All of you have the same Father in heaven" (Matt. 23:8-9). The Buddhist koan "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!" is maybe, in its way, stressing an aspect of this teaching. On our earthly journey, all of us are travelers walking the same road. Some are ahead on this road, others have walked far beyond, but no one must be considered above the others, because we are all children of the same Father, we are all brothers and sisters, and we must go on helping each other to advance more and more toward that infinite fullness that abides only in God himself. At the same time, for his disciples, Christ is the teacher, and he is not just a historical figure of the past, an ancient master whose teachings we listen to. He is the Risen Lord

who promised to be with us always until the end of the world. Then, even though only in a spiritual way, we can really meet him on the road. The Christian experience is well symbolized in the scene of the disciples of Jesus who were going from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus and met him on the road, the day of his resurrection, as described in the last chapter of Luke's Gospel.

In Relationship with the Mystery of Life

The basic expression of Buddhist faith, common to all Buddhist schools, is to take refuge in the Three Treasures: the Buddha, the Dharma (interpreted as Buddhist doctrine, expression of the Universal Law), and the Sangha (the Buddhist community). According to Nikkyo Niwano, taking refuge in the Buddha means "attaining a selfless state and entering directly into union with the great life" of the universe; the profound meaning of taking refuge in the Dharma "is the casting off of the ego to reach a state of complete accord with the Truth and the Law of the universe"; and the meaning of taking refuge in the Sangha is "to revere harmony as the highest virtue in human society, to rely on it in one's own life, and to devote one's body and soul to trying to bring it to real life."¹⁷ The main aim of the Buddhist path, therefore, is to be liberated from the illusion of the self and to become fully aware of being called to express in our lives the cosmic harmony in which we exist. The Buddhist religious experience, however, does not usually reach the point of experiencing the transcendent as a personal God with whom we can establish a personal relationship, as someone whom we are invited to open our hearts to, to listen to, and to whom we can pray and entrust ourselves, as it is in the Christian experience of faith. In the Buddhist religious path, the practitioner is not led to meet the one who is the source of existence and to enter

into dialogue with him, but the practitioner is trained to become aware of the oneness in which he exists and to reach the wisdom of a non-self-centered insight that guides him to a compassionate life.

Genkai Sugimoto, a Japanese Zen monk who participated in the East-West Spiritual Exchange program between European Catholic monks and Japanese Buddhist monks in the eighties, reflecting on his experience in the Benedictine monastery of Santa Maria de Montserrat, in Catalonia, which lasted for a few weeks, wrote: "I think that one of the essential differences between the two religions consists in the fact that the Buddha was a human being, not God. Through his own efforts Buddha reached a state of peace which was fully realized. And he lived as a master who guides others to reach this state of peace. . . . Instead, in the monastery I saw how the Catholic monks diligently endeavor to become humble and obedient before God, praying and praising his holy name. Their greatest concern is God, while ours is our own hearts."¹⁸

Nevertheless, in Niwano's writings we can sometimes detect a personalistic approach to Ultimate Reality. He affirms, for instance: "If one knows the personal experience of being together with God or the Buddha at all times, waking and sleeping, of maintaining a constant dialogue with either of them in one's heart, of being certain that they support one's life, then can we say one is unhappy? Certainly not. . . . This is because either God or the Buddha fills the universe with his reality. They are the basis of life, the truth. By experiencing unity with them, by always knowing that one is together with them, one is assured of great cheer and courage and of great peace."¹⁹

In this English translation of Niwano's words, the use of the words *God* and *Buddha* in parallel can easily lead to some misunderstanding. In Niwano's mind, they are not separate realities, as

in a polytheistic comprehension of the divine sphere, but just different ways of referring to the same one Ultimate Reality. The melding of Shinto categories and Buddhist categories in the Japanese religious experience throughout the almost fifteen centuries of coexistence of Buddhism and the traditional religion of Japan on its soil has produced a manifold and typical Japanese way of describing the realm of the sacred. For instance, the very characteristic Japanese word *shinbutsu*, which refers indistinctly to the transcendent without specifying the religious comprehension of it, is written with two ideograms: one for *kami*, the Japanese word referring to the Shinto divinities and "superior spirits," and the other for *hotoke*, the Japanese word for Buddha.

The sense of the divine and of the sacred remains strong in Japanese religiosity but rather indistinct and undefined, as Saigyō, a twelfth-century Japanese poet, very well expresses when he describes his feelings while being in a Shinto shrine: "I don't know what mystery inhabits this place, but I cannot refrain from weeping in gratitude for it."

Solidarity and Kindness as Religious Values

In any case, I think we can say that the Japanese approach to religion, and in general the Buddhist approach to religion, is more practical and ethical than metaphysical and doctrinal. Let me cite a few quotations taken from Niwano's books that confirm what I have just affirmed:

"Although ways of expression and nuances in the way of thinking differ according to the land, time, and race into which a religion was born, the fundamental teaching is, in its essence, the same. If we were to dispute over details, we could find minor differences between the *agape* of Christianity, the compassion

of Buddhism, and the *makoto* of Shinto. But when we examine their roots, all are human sentiments that are, simply and purely, the great life of the universe. . . . To live on good terms with the others is the way of living that coincides with the truth."²⁰

"Caring or worrying about someone else, or being cared or worried about, is what gives happiness in human life. . . . With this caring, we communicate heart to heart, and such an exchange engenders a profound sense of belonging, of oneness. In the Buddhist canon there is a definition of humanity as that which lives between one person and another. The true meaning of this is not what exists merely physically between people but what moves from heart to heart, what thrives on mutual help and a feeling of solidarity. And this, I believe, is the first key to unlocking the mystery of human happiness."²¹

Even Christianity is understood by Nikkyō Niwano mainly in its ethical and anthropological dimensions:

"Christ said that he came not to be served but to serve. In the Sermon on the Mount he said, 'Always treat others as you would like them to treat you' (Matt. 7:12). This is known as the Golden Rule and is a guiding principle for human harmony. Some proclaim that the golden age of humanity will arrive when the Golden Rule is always observed. Serve others. Be kind. Help those in need. The practice of helping others is in the end the fastest means of making oneself happy."²²

And it is precisely when they put into practice these principles that Christians and Buddhists will recognize each other as religious people, and they will be able to encounter each other profoundly. Moreover, they will discover their shared responsibility to promote these values in society and to educate people to solidarity and mutual understanding.

Four years ago in Rome, addressing the bishops of Thailand, Benedict XVI said: "The coexistence of different

religious communities today unfolds against the backdrop of globalization. Recently I observed that the forces of globalization see humanity poised between two poles. On the one hand there is the growing multitude of economic and cultural bonds which usually enhance a sense of global solidarity and shared responsibility for the well-being of humanity. On the other there are disturbing signs of a fragmentation and a certain individualism in which secularism takes a hold, pushing the transcendent and the sense of the sacred to the margins and eclipsing the very source of harmony and unity within the universe. The negative aspects of this cultural phenomenon, . . . in fact point to the importance of interreligious cooperation. They call for a concerted effort to uphold the spiritual and moral soul of your people. In concordance with Buddhists, you can promote mutual understanding concerning the transmission of traditions to succeeding generations, the articulation of ethical values discernable to reason, reverence for the transcendent, prayer and contemplation. Such practices and dispositions serve the common well-being of society and nurture the essence of every human being.”²³

Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue

Interreligious cooperation and dialogue, therefore, can no longer be regarded as optional but are required by the needs of our times not only from a practical point of view but also in the theoretical reflection on the big issues that the world is nowadays facing. Nissho Takeuchi, a monk and a scholar of the Nichiren school, after having participated in a Christian-Buddhist symposium held in Castel Gandolfo in 2008, affirmed: “In this twenty-first century, humanity has to face a great variety of very complex problems. The natural and

human sciences have to give answers to very serious issues and it’s as if it finds itself up against a wall which it cannot climb over. There is need for a global vision which gives light to the individual questions, which harmonizes the overall vision with the concrete issues in the various fields. The integration of knowledge is an urgent need. This is the direction toward which Christian theology and Buddhist philosophy must work so as to give a substantial contribution to the twenty-first century. Science alone cannot give the answers, it needs religions. . . . I think that Christianity and Buddhism together, in a harmonious way, like two wheels moving in the same direction, can engage the civilizations of East and West in profound dialogue and assist humanity in progressing toward a future where the differences are integrated from the very roots, to reach unity.”²⁴

Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975), a great British historian, once said: “When a historian one thousand years from now writes about the twentieth century, he will surely be more interested in the interpenetration which occurred for the first time between Christianity and Buddhism than in the conflict between the ideologies of democracy and communism.”²⁵

The encounter between Buddhism and Christianity, first of all, is not the encounter between doctrines or religions in the abstract, but it is carried out when Buddhist practitioners and Christian believers meet each other with reciprocal interest and esteem. In this sense, I think the relationship that Saint Francis Xavier established in Japan in 1549 with a Buddhist monk in the very first period of the Christian mission is emblematical. A few weeks after landing in Kagoshima, in a letter sent from that city, he wrote: “I spoke many times with the wisest of the bonzes, especially with one for whom all of those living here have great respect, for his scholarship, his life and the dignity he possesses, as

well as for his venerable age of eighty years; he is called Ninshitsu which in the Japanese language means ‘Heart of Truth.’ . . . It is wonderful to behold how this Ninshitsu is a great friend of mine. Many people, lay and monks, are very happy in our company and they are astonished to see that we come from countries which are very far away—Portugal and Japan are six thousand leagues apart—just to speak about the things of God and how people should save their souls by believing in Jesus Christ; besides, they add that the reason why we have come to these places is something ordained by God.”²⁶

After this initial good impact with the Buddhist Japanese world, we know that several misunderstandings and mistrust unfortunately arose between the European Christian missionaries and the Japanese Buddhists, and after a relatively quick diffusion of the church in the second half of the sixteenth century, Christianity was strictly banned in Japan for almost three centuries. Nevertheless, since the establishment of religious freedom in modern Japan in 1873, we can observe that an atmosphere of trust and dialogue has prevailed among the different religious groups to this day.

I think it is significant that many Japanese were present at the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi in October 1986 and that in August the following year, inspired by the prophetic gesture of Pope John Paul II, Ven. Etai Yamada (1895–1994), head of the Tendai Buddhist denomination, convoked on Mount Hiei a religious summit that gathered religious men and women from all over the world. I had arrived in Japan just a few months before, and I remember how impressive that event was for me. Saicho (767–822), the Buddhist monk who initiated the Tendai school on Mount Hiei at the beginning of the ninth century, wrote: “Take upon yourself that which is bad and pass on to the others that which is good. Forget yourself and do good to others [*moko-rita*];



Rev. Nikkyo Niwano guides Ms. Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare Movement, around the Horin-kaku Guest Hall in Risho Kosei-kai headquarters in Tokyo in December 1981.

this is the supreme expression of compassion.” According to Etai Yamada, in these few words we can grasp the very essence and the heart of the Buddhist practice and of any true religious commitment. John Paul II himself quoted and commented on this saying of Saicho’s during his meeting in Tokyo with representatives of the different religions in February 1981.²⁷

Buddhists and Christians United in Love

As the Second Vatican Council declared in *Nostra Aetate 2*, “The Church exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.” The Catholic Church, therefore, encourages Christians to value every good found anywhere and to establish sincere bonds

of friendship with the followers of other religious traditions. In Japan, in the last decades, many examples of this kind of dialogue could be pointed out, both on the institutional level and from private initiatives.

In fact, I could mention the close friendship between Risho Kosei-kai, the Buddhist lay association founded by Nikkyo Niwano, and the Focolare Movement, a worldwide Catholic lay movement based in Italy, in which I am personally involved. Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement, visited Japan twice, invited by Niwano in 1981 and 1985. The well-known Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, following Chiara Lubich’s second trip to Japan, answered in this way a journalist’s query about the dialogue between Christians and Buddhists: “If we question ourselves on the meaning of good, we arrive at the definition of love, which is more than only justice. . . . If you speak about love and you bring it to its extreme consequences, you are speaking as a Christian because God is love. I would like to show you what I mean by giving an example. And I have one which deserves to be known. I am referring to Chiara Lubich. She went to Japan and spoke to Buddhists, and they understood. The negation of self, the negation of egoism, self-denial: this is the center of Buddhism. . . . By doing so, the wise man arrives at self-negation . . . and enjoys a peace in which there is no longer concupiscence but a kind of benevolence towards all that exists. But if you say to this wise man: ‘Yes, it’s true, we must deny ourselves. . . . Yes, I must overcome the concupiscence of being myself, but . . . because I belong to Another, because there is Another who loves me.’ If

you tell him this, he will understand. He will begin to see that there is a link between Buddhism and Christianity. Chiara Lubich did this. I believe it can be a model of dialogue. And the dialogue with Buddhism is perhaps the most difficult.”²⁸

Hence, the point is not about comparing beliefs or religious practices but of living radically according to one’s own faith and being attentive to and interested in the other’s. In her diary written during her stay in Japan, Chiara Lubich says: “If the Buddhists have the extinguished candle as their symbol, a sign that all desires have been suppressed, we Christians have the lighted candle because we are the followers of Love. In fact we have another light in us which must live; it is the light of God in us. If it lives, it is the death of the self.”²⁹

Interaction between Buddhists and Christians, out of true faith and generous religious commitment, is always a two-way street that brings further light and love to both sides. Being faithful to one’s own religious convictions and at the same time remaining radically open to the other’s truth—this is what assures that together we may experience a deeper presence of God, the Ultimate Truth, who gives himself to us when we are united in love.



Religious leaders pray for peace at the temple Enryakuji on August 4, 1987, during the first Religious Summit Meeting on Mount Hiei. Six hundred religionists attended the summit, including twenty-four religious leaders from sixteen countries other than Japan.

Together Toward the Truth

Buddhists and Christians have many things to learn from each other. We are not religious competitors in the marketplace of spiritual supplies. All of us are seekers and witnesses to the Truth. For us Christians, Jesus Christ is the Truth itself, but we do not possess him; we are just his followers. He does not belong to us; rather, we feel called to belong to him. Trying to live as he did and striving to put into practice his teachings is, we know, the way to be more and more dwelled in and led by his spirit, the Holy Spirit, God himself, who will guide us to the fullness of Truth if we persevere in his love.

Shakyamuni Buddha, explains Nikkyo Niwano, “advocated flexibility when he taught that one must be candid and open and obedient to the truth. . . . One must be ready to accept new truths when they are discovered. . . . There can be no absolute incompatibility among human beings. This is a truth to which we must all become enlightened. . . . To follow the way of truth is to have spiritual and mental flexibility. The person who has these traits can grow in all directions,” concludes Niwano.³⁰

Romano Guardini, another outstanding Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, several years ago wrote about the initiator of the Buddhist path using the following words: “There is only one individual who could be placed in a position close to Jesus: the Buddha. This man is a great mystery. He stands there in a frightening, almost supra-human freedom, at the same time he demonstrates a goodness, mighty as a world power. Maybe Buddha will be the last with whom Christianity will have to argue. What for Christians he signifies, nobody has pronounced so far. Perhaps Christ did not have only one precursor in the Old Testament, John, the last prophet, but also one at

the bottom of antique culture, Socrates, and a third one who has spoken the ultimate word of eastern-religious knowledge and overcoming, Buddha.”³¹

To understand something we must try to grasp what is at the root of the given thing, the facts that led to that result. To understand the Buddhist path in depth requires an understanding of the experience that transformed Siddhartha Gautama into the Buddha, the Enlightened One, twenty-five hundred years ago. To understand what is at the core of the Christian faith, we are required to look at Jesus of Nazareth, who gave his life on the cross out of love and who is professed as the Risen Lord by his disciples. But this will become possible not merely with an individual rational effort of our intelligence but mainly through the vital encounter among true committed followers of the Buddha and of the Christ. Interreligious dialogue is not about exchanging information and knowledge but about communion of hearts in the deepest layer of human existence. It is a shared experience of the Universal Truth that visits us. □

Notes

1. Cinto Busquet, *Incontrarsi nell'Amore: Una lettura cristiana di Nikkyō Niwano* [Meeting in love: A Christian reading of Nikkyo Niwano] (Rome: Città Nuova, 2009).

2. Nikkyo Niwano, “Why Interreligious Cooperation Is Essential,” *Dharma World* 33 (July–September 2006): 33.

3. Paul VI, “Opening Address to the Fourth Session of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council” (Vatican City, September 14, 1965).

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