

# ***Buddhism and Christianity: Interpreting A New Testament Passage***

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One of the most striking and outstanding images or symbols in the Christian New Testament is the Good Shepherd illustrated by a parable which Jesus told his disciples: Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him (Jesus). And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." And so he told them this parable: "Which one of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"

"When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, and rejoices.

"And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost!'

"Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." (Luke 15: 1-7, quoting 4-7; New Revised Standard Version)

This passage offers vividly the basic principle of Christian grace or the belief that God takes the initiative in the salvation process. The image makes clear that human beings, as lost sheep, have spiritually lost their way and cannot return unless the shepherd reaches out for them and carries them to safety.

This fundamental principle of grace resonates deeply with Mahayana Buddhism and particularly Shin Buddhism. Shinran (1173-1262) gives a parallel expression when he declared: "If a good man can be saved, how much more an evil man!". As the lost sheep in the Christian story is the object of God's seeking, so the "evil" person is the object of Amida Buddha's Vow as Shinran interpreted it. He wrote: ...But Amida Tathagata has in fact established the Vow of the threefold mind (sincerity, joyful trust, aspiration for birth [in the Pure Land]) for the sake of foolish and evil sentient beings. How are we to understand this?

Answer: The Buddha's intention is difficult to fathom. ...I find that all beings, an ocean of multitudes, have since the beginningless past down to this day, this very moment, been evil and defiled, completely lacking the mind of purity. They have been false and deceitful, completely lacking the mind of truth and reality.

Thus, when the Tathagata, in profound compassion for the ocean of all sentient beings in pain and affliction, performed bodhisattva practices for inconceivable millions of measureless kalpas, there was not a moment, not an instant, when his practice in the three modes of action (body, mouth and mind) was not pure, or lacked this true mind. With this pure, true mind, the Tathagata brought to fulfillment the perfect, unhindered, inconceivable, indescribable and inexplicable supreme virtues. The Tathagata gives this sincere mind to all living beings, an ocean of beings possessed of blind passions, karmic evil, and false wisdom.... (The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization, III. (The Collected Works of Shinran. (Kyoto: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-Ha, 1997.) I, p. 95, #21.)

The principle of grace which permeates the New Testament was singled out as the singular focal point for Christian theology by the German reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546). Sola Fide, faith alone, was proclaimed as the witness to the acceptance and trust in God's grace.

However, 200 years before Luther, Shinran established the paradigm of true entrusting endowed through the gift of Amida Buddha's compassion and wisdom as the paradigm for salvation in Pure Land Buddhism. Where Christianity taught that salvation is not by works but by faith and grace, described as God's unmerited favor, Shinran taught that we cannot attain enlightenment through self-inspired, self-striving practices. Rather, we can attain salvation only through trust and reliance on Amida's unconditional compassion expressed in his Primal Vow. Consequently, trust in God's grace or trust (shinjin) in Amida's unconditional compassion became watchwords in the respective traditions.

Shin Buddhists can look upon the principle of grace in Christianity and Shin Buddhism as significant evidence for the universality of trust in human experience. Faith is the basis for living and meaning in everyday human existence. A measure of trust and faith is involved in every dimension of life, especially in human relations. Religious faith and symbolism opens our eyes to the fact that our everyday life rests on the gift of love and compassion shared by family, friendships and community.

Nevertheless, this parable, so influential in Christianity, is essentially Buddhist in character. The sheep did not rebel against the master or shepherd. Rather, it wandered off from the flock and lost its way. It was, by implication, in error and ignorant, but not sinful which is viewed in the Bible as rebellion against God.

Buddhism emphasizes that we are blind and ignorant of our true natures as potential Buddhas. We disregard our welfare and those about us, being driven by our ego interests. We are like the prodigal son (*Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 4 or Luke 15: 11-32) who squandered the inheritance he had received from his father by living extravagantly in a foreign country. We have also developed an amnesia of the heritage that has made our life possible.

Yet, the father continued to yearn for the return of his son. In the Christian story, he welcomes him home when the son unknowingly returns and is recognized by the father when he is still far off. In the Buddhist story, the father also welcomes him home, but he is concerned that he might frighten the son by suddenly revealing his true status. Consequently, he has his servants gradually guide the son with discipline to the point where he could understand his true nature and identity and assume his responsibilities as a son.

Both versions, Buddhist and Christian, demonstrate the principle of "grace" or "unconditional compassion" which we see also at work in the parable of the lost sheep or the salvation of the evil person. The father responds to the need of the son just as the shepherd carries the sheep home.

In contrast to some Christian interpretations of Jesus' parable, the Buddha-Dharma does not stress punishment for sin. Rather, it illuminates our ignorance, as the father guided the son to the truth. The Buddha-Dharma offers insight into our passion-ridden, spiritually distorted, grasping selves. The consequences of bad choices are the natural outcome of the process of cause and effect (karma) and not the autocratic judgment of a wrathful deity.

The concept of the evil person must be carefully understood. As we have noted in Biblical tradition, the evil person or sinner is understood as the one who violates the laws of God. In the text the tax collectors, represent those serving the Roman state and therefore disloyal to their Jewish heritage, while the sinners were those who violated the Torah instruction (613 commands) which had been given by God to Moses on Sinai. In contrast are the Pharisees and scribes, a kind of legal expert, who maintained, though adapting, the Torah instruction and despised those who deviated from it.

In contrast, Jesus is asserting that God's purpose is not to condemn such evil people, but to provide a way for them to be saved, as the shepherd seeks the lost sheep. However, he does not change the definition of who the evil people were.

Shinran, however, changed the definition of the evil person. For him it includes all people, however defiled or righteous they might be. The evil person is one who believes that he attains enlightenment through his own efforts and prides him or herself on how pious or devoted they may be, expecting a reward for their righteousness or religious devotion. It is pride in one's spiritual capacity or goodness that marks Shinran's understanding of the evil person. The Apostle Paul comes close to Shinran when he indicates: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8,9.) Pride and self-exaltation undermines true spirituality.

Shinran sympathized with those people who were defined as evil by the society of his time, such as hunters, fishermen, samurai and merchants who were driven by their karma to undertake tasks which were considered spiritually impure. He declared that the Buddha-Dharma did not discriminate people, according to some socially defined scale of goodness. (See *The Collected Works of Shinran, The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization*, III. I, p. 107, #61.)

For the Buddha-Dharma, the father or the shepherd is not understood as a self-subsistent being, existing outside ourselves. Rather, the teaching regards such symbols or expressions as upaya, compassionate means, for picturing the mystery of life and our responsibility and obligation to life itself, through our awareness of the inheritance we have received from our ancestors. We return home spiritually when we recognize our interdependent relationship with all people who have, at some time in the karmic process, been our parents, brothers and sisters in nature and society (See *A Record in Lament of Divergences*, 5. *The Collected Works of Shinran*. I, p. 664.) It is really our Buddha-nature or potentiality to become Buddha to which we awaken through true entrusting and paradoxically realizing our natures as foolish beings who have been embraced by Amida Buddha. (See Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone', *The Collected Works of Shinran*, I. p. 463.)

Amida Buddha is a symbol of the process of interdependence which is reflected in the myth of his Vows. The form of the 48 Vows indicates that unless all beings realize the promised attainment of the respective Vow, then the Bodhisattva will not accept enlightenment for himself. The Bodhisattva's enlightenment is portrayed as contingent on the enlightenment of all beings who are the object of the Vows.

Amida Buddha, whose name means Infinite, Immeasurable and Inconceivable, is the totality of reality within which we are living and which lives within us. This perspective is comparable Paul's statements in Athens quoting from Greek poets: Epimenides: "...In him we live and move and have our being," and from Aratus: "For we too are his offspring."... (Acts 17: 28. New Revised Standard Version, Study Bible note.) Amida Buddha and the God indicated in these quotes is the principle of Life which cannot be defined, yet which embraces and animates all forms of existence.

Thus, there is no need for Buddhists to prove the existence of Amida as no one proves Infinity and our being alive witnesses to an inconceivable source of life in ourselves.

Viewing the imagery of the Good Shepherd in Jesus' parable, from a Buddhist perspective offers an approach to discovering a common foundation for two rather dissimilar religious expressions which have evolved historically. Both traditions provide insights into the nature of reality and human life which, despite differences in expression, can assist modern people in sharing spiritual experience across religious boundaries and thereby decrease the religious fragmentation and polarization so evident today. We are all embraced by the same reality, conceived in different terms, and hopefully our respective spiritual paradigms will bring more unity to our disparate lives and societies.