

Christ, Buddha and the Bodhisattvas

An inter-religious Reflection

Living as Christian in Thailand for a period of time, you will encounter Buddhistic belief and culture. Especially interesting is that certain legends about the life of Gautama Buddha have surprising similarities to bible reports about the life of Jesus Christ. Looking closer, there are also crucial differences between those stories – a challenge for Christians – and probably also for Buddhists – but one that can deepen the understanding of respective beliefs.

Buddha (“The Awakened One”) lived from 624 to 544 b.c.e. (some scholars date from 566 to 486 b.c.e.) in the northeastern part of India.

He was born as a noble in the caste of the knights, called Siddhartha from the Gautama Clan, and married at the age of 16 years. Thirteen years later – his first child, a son, was born – but he left his noble family at the age of 29 years and became a wandering preacher and wisdom teacher called “Gautama the ascetic” and “the Sage from the Shakya tribe” (Shakyamuni). Practising different paths of meditation including extreme fasting, he finally discovers the “middle path” to enlightening knowledge.

Buddha appeared for 45 years as a wisdom teacher, and died at the age of 80 years after completing his teachings.



Buddha, Wat Suthat, Bangkok / Thailand, 19th Cent.
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer



Christ, Monreale Cathedral, Sicily, 12th Cent.
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

Christ („The Anointed One“) lived from 7 b.c.e. to 30 c.e. in northern part of Israel and Jerusalem.

He was born as a son of a craftsman and called “Jeshua”. At the age of 30 years he joined the disciples group of the “desert prophet” John. But soon he disagreed with John’s threatening message of a coming last judgement, and he finally discovered his enlightening call in teaching a message of a coming new world, transformed by God.

Christ appeared only for a few years, before being arrested and executed as a rioter by the forces of the Roman Empire who occupied Palestine at that time. Not having fulfilled the age of 40 years, his death looked like a failure of his mission. What happened after his death however – the Christian call it “resurrection” - proved the power of his teachings.

The Amazing Birth



The Gods Indra and Brahma force Buddha to his final reincarnation (Temple Mural, Thailand)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

Both of them have a pre-existence – the later Buddha prepared himself by 547 former incarnations, and Christ is looked at as the incarnation of God’s wisdom (“Logos”) which existed since the creation of the world.

Beside the historical facts, there are number of similar legends which emphasize the religious importance of Buddha (“The Awakened One”) and Christ (“The Anointed One”):



The „Wisdom“, the „Word“ close to God during the creation of man (Michelangelo, Sixtina Chapel Rom, 1511)
Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Christ’s Conception by the Holy Spirit (South Germany, 14th Cent.)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer



Buddha’s conception by a white elephant (Gandhara 2nd .-3rd Cent). © Marie-Lan Nguyen
Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

Both of them have an unusual conception: Maya, the mother of the former Buddha, was touched by a white elephant, and Mary, the mother of the later Christ, was touched by the word of an angel and Holy Spirit.

Both of them are born during a voyage,
without a protecting environment –
they are no “creations of this world”



The Birth of the Buddha
(Temple Mural Vientiane / Laos)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer



The birth of Christ
(Romanian Icone) Wikimedia Commons, GNU Free
Documentation License, Pschemp 28 May 2007

And both of them are recognized by old sages, who had waited for them for a long time.



The new born Christ in the arms of the
old sage Simeon, who had waited his
whole life to meet this child
(Rembrandt van Rijn, 17th Cent.)
Wikimedia Commons



The new born Buddha on the head of the old sage Asita,
who had waited his whole life to meet this child
(Temple Mural Thailand) Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

How can these similarities be explained?

It can't be proved historically, that the legend of Christ's birth is a copy of the legend of Buddha's birth, spread out from Far Asia to the Middle East by travellers using the Silk Road.

It is also beyond the abilities of human comprehension to interpret these similarities as an evidence of the "one-ness" of all religions. The similarities could be a result of mankind's "archetypes" which show up in different times and cultures.

The common message of both similar birth legends is amazement – and the insight that "salvation" is beyond human abilities. But the detailed view on the teaching of Buddha and Christ will reveal that they have a different understanding of what "salvation" means.

Conversions

The biographies of Buddha ("The Awakened One") and Christ ("The Anointed One") have a number of similarities:

Prince Siddhartha left his wife, newborn son and his aristocratic way of life at the age of 29 years, after he encountered the realities of weakness, illness and death. He started a new existence as monk, following different gurus (spiritual teachers) to learn how to overcome suffering and death. During that time he is named "Gautama the ascetic" or "the sage from the Shakya family" (Shakyamuni).



Siddhartha's ride encountering an old, a sick and a dead person - and an ascetic. (Temple Mural Thailand)

Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer



Siddhartha cutting off his hair and becoming a monk (Temple Mural, Thailand)

Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

Jeshua lived in a country, which was suffering of occupation by the Roman Empire. At the age of about 30 years, Jeshua left his normal life and joined the group of disciples following the “desert prophet” Johannes, receiving a baptism as a symbol of the coming new world of God.

During this time Jeshua practiced a 40 days fasting, rejecting temptations of miraculous power.



Jeshua refusing the temptation of magical power
(St.Martin Church, Zillis/Graubünden/Switzerland, 1130 A.D.)
Photo Adrian Michael Wikimedia Commons
GNU Free Documentation License

Gautama and Jeshua both left their former teachers:

After practising yoga meditation, philosophical analysis and fasting near to starvation Gautama discovers the “middle path” to overcome suffering.

And Jeshua is not ready to follow the teachings of Johannes who announced a threatening judgment day of God to the world – he discovers a god who is transforming everything.

So Gautama Shakyamuni and Jeshua from Nazareth seem to have had a similar spiritual development: radical, but refusing any religious extremism.

But differences have to be noticed in their view on the basic questions of life: suffering and injustice.



The lesson of the three strings and the middle path,
taught to the extreme fasting Gautama
by God Indra
(Temple Mural, Thailand)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

Enlightenment

The biographies of Buddha (“The Awakened One”) and Christ (“The Anointed One”) both include experiences of enlightenment. These experiences are linked to the topics of suffering and salvation.

Buddha teaches the roots of suffering by men being trapped in greed, hatred and illusion.

This suffering can be overcome by knowledge, ethical conduct and meditation.

Similar to Hinduism, Buddha interprets life and suffering as an endless circle of reincarnations: earlier existences have impact on following incarnations according to the principles of Karma. In this context salvation means to escape from the cycle of involuntary rebirths by the extinction of greed, hatred and illusion.

Different to Hinduism, however Buddha highlights the possibility of **total** extinction without any remaining personal “soul” or “mind”.



The Enlightenment (Awakening) of the Buddha:
overflowing merits overcome Mara’s temptations
(Temple Mural, Thailand)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer



The Enlightenment (Anointing) of Christ:
he receives God’s Holy Spirit by his baptism
(Monastery of Hosios Lukas, Greece, 11th century)
WillYs Fotowerkstatt, Wikimedia
Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0
International (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Christ teaches the roots of suffering is being trapped in the power of sin – not only in the sense of unethical behavior but very basically understood as a breakage of relation: the relation to yourself, the relation to others, the relation to God.

This power of sin can be overcome and healed by love, repentance and forgiveness.

Similar to Judaism, Christ teaches that men have to deal with their “heritage” from earlier generations. But this happens in a salvific history starting with the exodus of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and continuing in the presence of Holy Spirit. This salvific history includes the expectation of an “Anointed” (“Messiah”/“Christ”) sent by God and the transformation of all social and economic injustice into an all-embracing “shalom” (peace).

The teachings of Buddha and Christ are not exclusive routes. Buddhism also practices compassion, searching for a peaceful life together. And Christianity also knows to practice meditation and contemplation to overcome selfish desires.

But the basic analysis and the visions are different. This can possibly be explained by the different basic experiences of everyday life:

Nature in tropical Asia exhibits a permanent and simultaneous sprouting, growth and decay – this could lead to the idea of an endless circle of reincarnations.

In contrast, the Middle East's and Europe's nature shows highly differentiated fertile and (cold or hot) desert seasons – this could lead to the idea of a total transformation of men and creation.



Buddha Images at Wat Mahathat, Bangkok
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer



The repentance of the prodigal son
(Rembrandt van Rijn, Netherland, 17th Cent.)
Google_Art_Project
Wikimedia Commons Public Domain

Travelling and Teaching

Delivering his first sermon in the Deer-park of Sarnath Buddha ("The Awakened One") set the "Wheel of Dhamma" in motion. The five ascetics who had left him before, when Buddha had stopped the extreme practices of fasting and meditation, now became his first disciples. Later also aristocrats joined the disciples group of Buddha.

Preaching while travelling around, Buddha met people from all social classes. Many of the legends show the Buddha focusing his teachings especially on nobles and kings.

A number of miracles are reported: Buddha calming a fierce elephant, curing an obsessed person, and restoring a destroyed garden overnight.



Buddha delivering the obsessed Angulimala
(Temple Mural, Thailand) Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer



The first disciples of the Buddha
(Temple Mural, Thailand) Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

A development can be observed in Buddha's attitude on women: in the beginning he refused the wish of his former wife Yasodhara to become a nun in the Buddhist sangha. But later Buddha allowed the ordination of women to become nuns, which was a significant dissociation from the Hinduistic tradition.

Buddha also faced hostilities: a woman was sent to accuse him in public of having made her pregnant; a jealous queen agitated her people against Buddha and one of his relatives delivered some assaults against him.

Also the teaching of Christ ("The Anointed One") starts with the formation of a circle of disciples: Jeshua appoints twelve "Apostles" (messengers), symbolizing the renewal of the twelve tribes of Israel.



Christ delivering an obsessed person (Austria 15th Cent.)
Wikipedia Commons GNU License



Christ celebrating Holy Supper with his twelve disciples
(Wood Carving East Germany, 17th Cent.)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

Travelling around Christ teaches in parables and sermons, but also by prophetic "staging": common meals with people from different social groups and opposite parties, miraculous healing of sick and obsessed, and un-prejudiced contact to women, valuing them as equal conversational partners.

Those crossings of social boundaries created discussions and conflicts between Jeshua and the “Pious”, and also between Jeshua and those who wanted to understand him as a rebel against the Roman occupation. Also his mother and his siblings didn’t like his activities for a long time. And when Jeshua was arrested, one of his disciples was involved.

One difference remains comparing the appearance of Buddha and the appearance of Christ:

Buddha appeared for 45 years as a wisdom teacher. His death has to be understood as “extinction” into the nirvana without any more reincarnations and suffering.

Christ appeared only for a few years, before being arrested and executed. His death looked like a failure of his mission. What happened after his death however proved the truth of his teachings.

Heaven and Hell

Both in the reports of the life of the Buddha and in the reports of the life of Christ there can be found descriptions of journeys to heavenly spheres and to the realms of the dead. These stories represent a combination of the “earthly” teaching of Buddha and Christ and the beliefs of their followers, who long for salvation in their own lives and for the whole of creation.



View of the realms of the dead while Buddha descends from Tavatimsa Heaven (Temple Mural, Thailand)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer



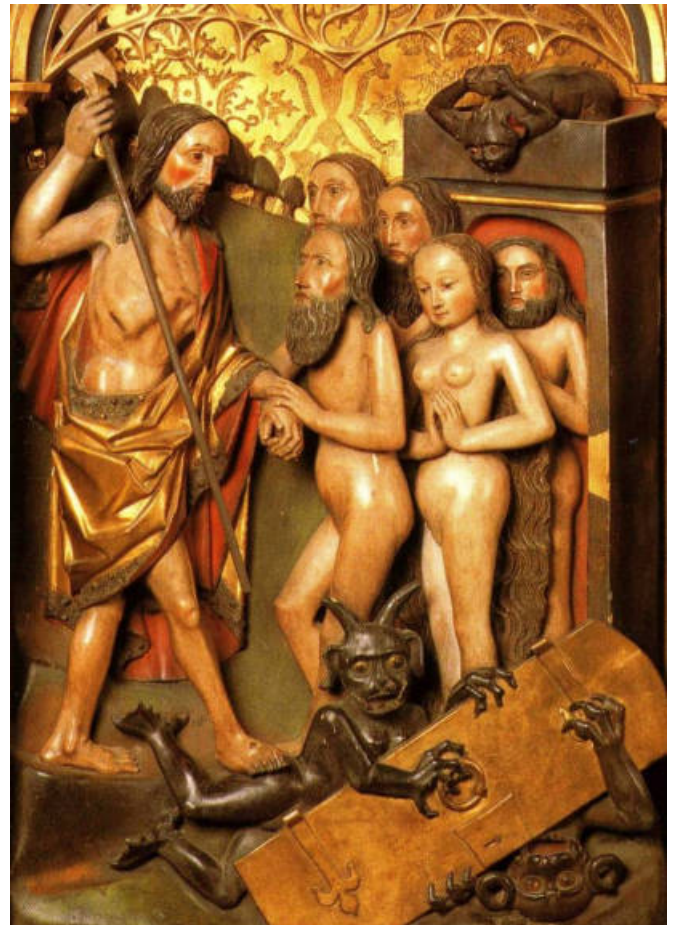
Buddha descending from Tavatimsa Heaven (Temple Mural, Thailand)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

One of those stories describes Buddha – seven years after his enlightenment – staying in Tavatimsa Heaven for three months, preaching there to his mother Maya and the deities. At the end of this period Buddha descends from Tavatimsa Heaven, accompanied by the Hindu Gods Indra and Brahma. This descending of Buddha opens the boundaries of heaven, earth and realms of the dead, and in this moment all their inhabitants are able to see each other.



Those stories connected with heavenly realms are also reported for Christ: beside his “ascension” after his resurrection there is also his “transfiguration” on Mount Tabor: three of his disciples see him in a bright light, accompanied by Moses and Elias, the most important prophets of Israel. And beside this there is a voice from heaven, addressing Christ as “My Son”. And then, descending from Mount Tabor, Jesus travels to Jerusalem, where he was convicted and executed as a rebel against the Roman Empire.

Transfiguration of Christ
(Byzantine Mosaic 13th Cent.) Photo Marie-Lan Nguyen,
Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 Generic license.



And there is a second story of “descendence” in Christian tradition: after his death and his resurrection Christ descends to the realms of the dead, breaking the doors of the nether regions and gripping the hands of Adam and Eve to release them and the whole of mankind from the slavery of death.

Christ descending to the realms of the dead
to release the whole mankind
(Woodcarving Germany, 15th Cent.)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

The similarities of those “descendence” stories of Buddha and Christ are amazing – especially the fact that both of them are accompanied by two representatives of their respective religions.

But there is one crucial difference, focusing on the impact of their “descendence”:

Buddha descending from Tavatimsa Heaven opens the eyes of all beings, and they can see what their fate in between heaven and hell will be in future reincarnations, according to their deeds and karma. So this story can be interpreted as a strong appeal for good ethical conduct.

In contrast, Christ descending from the mount of transfiguration down to the realms of the dead can be interpreted as a step of transforming the whole creation: Mankind imprisoned by the forces of death gets released by Christ’s touching.

Those two interpretations are not exclusive. The release of mankind by Christ intends of course a good ethical conduct in present life. And the good ethical conduct according to the teachings of the Buddha is part of a spiritual path leading to release and salvation.

But the path itself and the objectives are different. Especially Theravada Buddhism emphasizes that everybody has to walk this path by his own strength and responsibility – until the final “extinction” happens. In contrast to this the Christian tradition emphasizes that all abilities of own deciding and acting have their source in Christ’s blessing, and that the final objective is peaceful communion in a transformed creation.

Death

The reports on the dying of Buddha and Christ are quite different – on first view:

Buddha appeared for 45 years as a wisdom teacher, and died at the age of 80 years after completing his teachings.

Christ appeared only for a few years, before being arrested and executed, not having fulfilled the age of 40 years. His death looked like a failure of his mission.

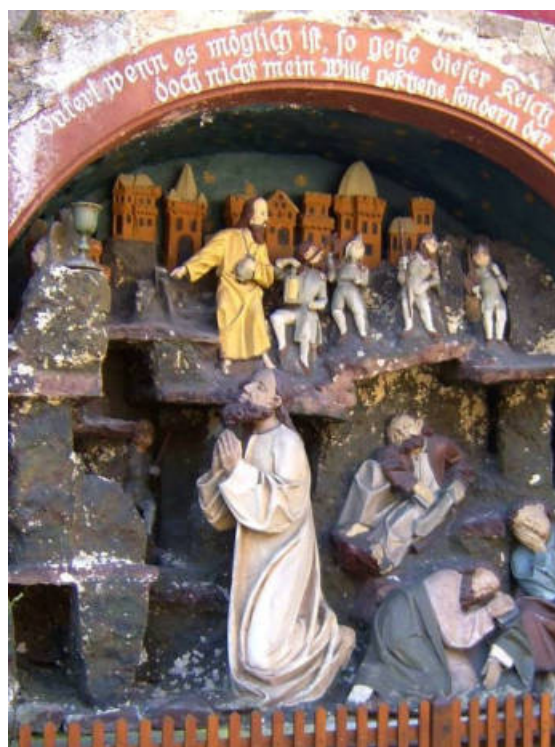
Looking more closely, surprising similarities can be discovered in the reports on the dying of Buddha and Christ:

At the end of his life Buddha again was tempted by Mara, who tried to convince him to escape from his body’s weakness by entering nirvana. But Buddha refused this temptation because he hadn’t yet completed his teachings.

Also Christ had the chance to flee from being arrested and executed. But he refused this temptation to flee after a long “struggling” prayer: “not my will, by THINE be done”.



Buddha’s last temptation by Mara
(Temple Mural, Thailand)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer



The Death of the Buddha didn’t come “naturally”: he died of spoiled food. The reports emphasize that Buddha was aware that the food, offered by a disciple named Cunda was spoiled, and that he prohibited the accompanying monks to eat this food. Furthermore, Buddha defended Cunda from being accused of having poisoned him – because Cunda only wanted to make merit by revering him.

Also the death of Christ was caused by one of his disciples, named Judas: he delivered Jesus to the temple guards in Jerusalem, who delivered him to the Roman Empire’s Authorities to execute him.

The Christian tradition later interpreted Judas as a prototype of “traitor”. The biblical reports however describe that Judas only performed an order of Christ “to do what had to be done”. And that Judas became desperate when he realized that Jesus didn’t prove himself as a liberator from the dominance of the Roman Empire.

Christ praying in Gethsemane to be spared, Judas delivers him to the temple guards
(South Germany, 16th Cent.) Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

Referring to the different ways of dying, the images of the dying Buddha and the dying Christ are also different:



Buddha entering parinirvana
(Temple Mural, Laos) Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

The dying of the Buddha means entering Parinirvana, without any more reincarnations and suffering – lying on his right side and with a relaxed expression in his face.

The dying of Christ means torture and execution of a public enemy by the authorities of the Roman Empire. Christians have been shocked so deeply by this, that it needed more than 500 years to create the first image of the crucified Christ. And these images show two different types: the resurrected Christ being a victorious King, defeating death and injustice, and the suffering Christ at the cross.

Those images of the suffering Christ often disgust people – however they are quite close to some parts of Buddha's life: it was the encounter with suffering and dying people which led Prince Siddharta to monkhood. And it was his fasting near to starvation, which made him – when just skin and bones – discover the "middle path" to overcome suffering: salvation can't be forced.

In the Christian tradition images of the suffering Christ were often used for counseling and consoling purposes: especial in medieval times of plague those images were shown to critically ill persons – confirming the risen Christ's promise to be close to men, even in deepest suffering and pain.



Crucified Christ, watched by Maria Magdalena and St. John
(Germany, Woodcarving 13th Cent.)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

At least the reports of Buddha and Christ describe what happened after their death:

Buddha was cremated – which was possible only when his disciple Maha Kassapa attended the cremation, because only he was authorized to pass the teachings of the Buddha. But after Buddha's cremation seven kings demanded some of his relics, threatening to start war. The distribution of Buddha's relics was led by the Brahman Dona, who finally tried to get hold of one of Buddha's teeth – which was prevented by God Indra.



Christ rising from the tomb while guarding soldiers are sleeping (Germany, Glass Painting 13th Cent.) Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

Threats by seven Kings before the distribution of Buddha's relics (Temple Mural, Laos) Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

Plurality of traditions

After the death of the Buddha and the death of Christ a plurality of different traditions came up which focused especially on two topics:

1. How far can Buddha and Christ be interpreted as *human* teachers and prototypes, and how far can they be interpreted as *divinities*, who should be adored?
2. The paths to salvation revealed by Buddha and by Christ – are they only suitable for “*chosen people*” (for example monks), or are they also achievable by “*ordinary people*” (lay persons)?

The southern Buddhism (“Theravada” - meaning “the teaching of the elders”) describes Buddha as a philosophical teacher who revealed the eightfold path for release from the circle of reincarnation. Every single person is invited to realize this path to become an “*arhat*” (“one who is worthy”) to gain “*extinction*”. In practical experience there may exist the cultural view that this path can only be realized by monks (hence males). Lay people (and females) can only try to collect good karma for their subsequent reincarnations by deeds of merit such as offerings to the monks.

In contrast to this, the northern Buddhism (“Mahayana” - meaning “great vehicle”) teaches that Buddha in his human appearance is only one aspect of an all-embracing reality, joined to transcendent emanations of the Buddha and the absolute truth. And from that spiritual sphere “*Bodhisattvas*” (beings on their path to become a Buddha) emerge to encourage and support human seekers. So in Mahayana Buddhism, the path to salvation is suitable not only for monks, but for all human beings, and combines wisdom and compassion. And salvation can't be gained by human effort, only “*received*”, because everything is “*empty*” and filled by “*Buddha-Nature*” at the same time.

The most well-known of those Bodhisattvas is Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (“looking down to all beings in compassion”), very often in a hermaphrodit or in a female form (Prajnaparamita, or Guanyin in China) and who is joined to the Buddha Amitabha (“Buddha of the infinite light”).

In the tradition of Christianity there can be found surprisingly similar discussions and interpretations:



Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara as Guan yin
with Buddha Amitabha at his forehead
(Bangkok, Bang Kapi / Khlong San Saep)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

From the first centuries up to present times there is one interpretation of Christ, which regards him as an “exceptional person” or “prototype”, but not as a “Son of God”.

And at the same time there is another interpretation of Christ regarding him as a “divinity” or God himself – and his human nature is looked as a kind of disguise or “pretend body”.

Behind all those doctrinal discussions there can be discerned the same question, which also is crucial for Buddhism: how can human being gain “salvation”? If Christ is “only” a teacher or a prototype, it must be finally dependant on the human being themselves to be successful in realizing the teacher’s path – or not.

And vice versa: if Christ is “only” divine, supra-natural, then the divine spheres remain far apart from human beings, and they can’t touch and transform them. Because of this the Christian creed confesses a Holy Trinity: God “Father”, “Son” and “Holy Spirit” – to keep the earthly-human sphere and the supra-natural divine sphere joined.

And – especially in the roman catholic and in the orthodox tradition of Christianity – there are also “saints”, male and female(!), building the bridge between the “heavenly” and the “earthly” sphere. Especially St. Mary, the mother of Christ, is the most popular female saint, “full of mercy” and lifting intercession prayers for human beings to God.

But reflecting “salvation” the Jewish-Christian tradition doesn’t focus only on “heaven” and “earth” but also on “justice”: how a can a whole creation be put out of its misery when so many good deeds seem to be without effect, and so many bad deeds seem to be so effective? The Jewish-Christian tradition answers these questions by describing a “final judgment” – which means not only an individual reward or individual punishment after death but a transformation and recovery of the whole creation. And this transformation begins in present times – by believe, and by ethical conduct.

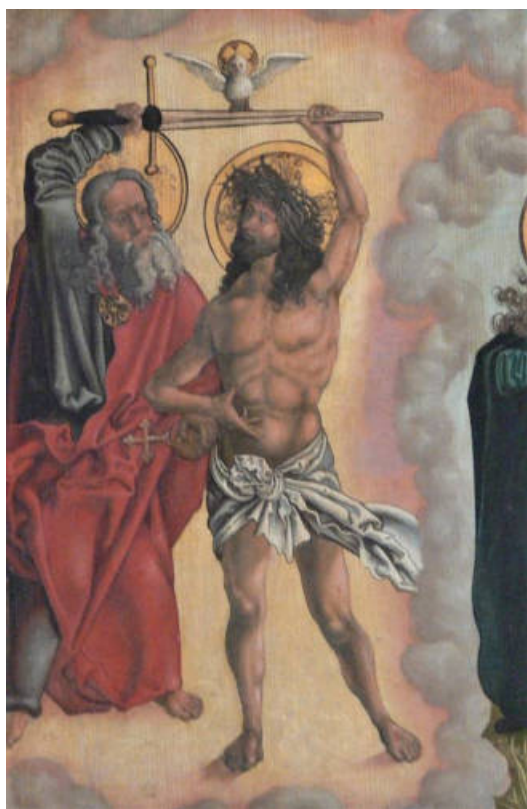


Protecting Mary Mother of God
(Woodcarving, North Germany, 15th Cent.)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

Referring to a "Judgment" Theravada-Buddhism would emphasize the individual karma. "Judgement" happens by the chain of reincarnations, not by a "final judgment" at the end of time. And during this process, "transformation" happens all the time, because nothing in this world is permanent.

Mahayana-Buddhism would describe this by the words: Buddha-Nature is always existent – it only has to be realized. Or in the perspective of tibetian Buddhism: “male” wisdom (overcoming greed, hatred and illusion) and “female” compassion have to return to the original unity.

And what is the role of Christ, the “Anointed of God” in the Christian vision of transformation?



The traditional Christian interpretation describes the crucifixion of Christ as a sacrifice. But Christians are in discussion today on the meaning of this sacrifice: Does it mean (as in a medieval perspective) that the wrath of God had to be appeased by a sacrifice? Or does the mystery of justice and transformation imply that human beings have to sacrifice all ambitions of “domination”, “control” and “reward” to come close to God’s presence? No “winners”, no “losers”, but peace?



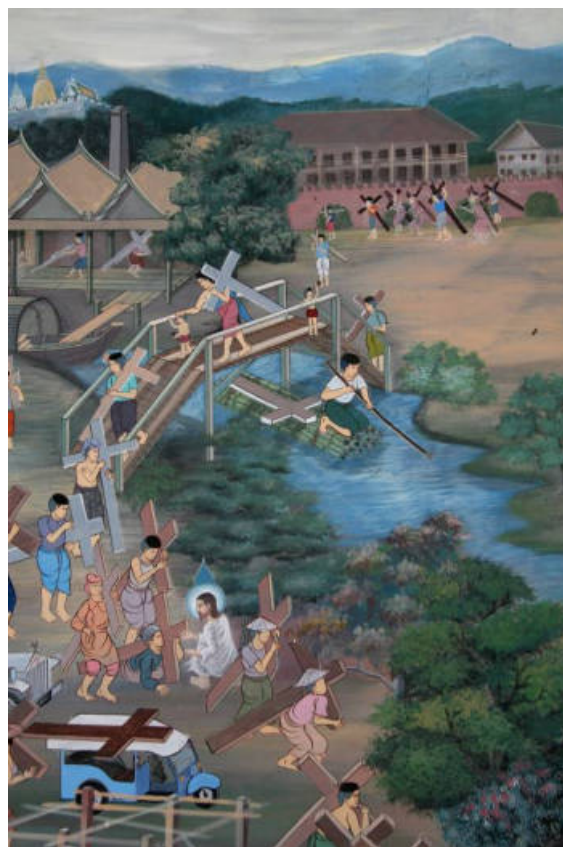
The dynamic Unity of Wisdom and Compassion: the wrathful Manifestation of Bodhisattva Manjushri embracing Vajra Vetali (Tibet, 14th- 15th Cent.)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer

The dynamic Unity of Justice and Mercy:
the suffering Christ limits
the consequences of God’s judging sword
(Sebastian Dayg 1511, Heilsbronn)
Photo Andreas Praefcke
Wikimedia Commons
GNU Free Documentation License

To sacrifice all ambitions of “domination”, “control” and “reward”. To focus on meditation and prayer, but not on “winning” or “merit making” - this might be a challenge for both Buddhists and Christians .

Ulrich Holste-Helmer, 2022

Ulrich Holste-Helmer, *1957 worked as christian protestant pastor in Essen, Bangkok and Alsdorf/Aachen



Christ as Bodhisattva amidst of men with their Karma-Cross Burdens
(St. Klement Chapel, Pattaya / Thailand, 21th.Cent.)
Photo: Ulrich Holste-Helmer