

“The Kingdom of God is Within You”
 Reverend Roger Fritts
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 Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church
 Bethesda, Maryland

In the gospel of Luke, it is written:

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ Or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke, chapter 17, verses 20-21)

Other translations are slightly different. In one version Jesus says, “The kingdom of God is among you.” In still another version Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is in the midst of you.”

These sayings, attributed to Jesus, whose resurrection Christians around the world celebrate today, sound to me much like the sayings I read when I look at Buddhist writings.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, “In Buddhism, our effort is to practice mindfulness in each moment—to know what is going on within and all around us.”(Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*)

And the Dalai Lama says, “I believe the purpose of all major religious traditions is not to construct big temples on the outside, but to create temples of goodness and compassion inside, in our hearts.”(Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart*)

These are wisdom sayings from Christianity and from Buddhism that try to describe a universal human experience. They are responses to human suffering.

When Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is within you,” he was responding to the Jewish belief that a king from the line of David was about to take power away from Roman rule. Suffering under the Roman occupation, many Jews coped by trusting that someday soon a Messiah would come to rule the Jewish people and create a Messianic Age, a future time of peace and justice on the earth, a time without illness, or crime, or war or poverty. The phrases “Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of Heaven” refer to such an age.

The Jewish revolutionary religious leader John the Baptist espoused the view that a new time of peace and love would soon replace the current age. After Jesus’ death another Jewish revolutionary leader, the apostle Paul, also embraced this belief that the current age of Roman rule was about to end and be replaced with a resurrected Jesus, who would rule in a time without suffering, an age of prosperity, peace and justice. Two thousand years later hundreds of millions of people are still waiting for this second coming of Christ.

The dream of a better future, of a Messianic Age, is a common human response to suffering. It can be a powerful positive dream, as long as it does not turn us into passive people waiting for someone else to come along and make us happy. Jesus rejected this passivity, this tendency to wait for someone to fix things, when he said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' Or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you."

Jesus was saying, "Do not focus on an imaginary future. Heaven is spread out upon the earth right now. Goodness and divinity are within you and are all around you. What you are looking for is here right now. Be on your guard so that no one deceives you by saying, 'Wait for the future.' The seed of true happiness exists within you right now."

Buddhism is also a response to human suffering. No first hand written account describes the life of the Buddha, but accounts written down about 400 years after his death describe the legend that arose about his life. According to the legend, approximately 560 years before the birth of Jesus, a baby, the son of a king and a queen, was born near the foothills of the Himalayas, just inside the border of modern day Nepal. The parents named the baby Siddhartha and raised him in luxury. The boy's father did everything he could to prevent his son from becoming aware of the sorrows of life. He took precautions to keep the boy away from the sight of the sick, the aged and the disabled. In the presence of the boy, the king would not allow any person to talk about illness, death, misery or unhappiness of any sort.

Siddhartha married when he was 16 and within the confines of the palaces, he and his new bride discovered the pleasures of marriage. Palace life was comfortable, but as time passed, the prince asked his father's permission to visit the world outside. His father said yes to his son. However, the father sent messengers to the people, asking them to hide all sights that might be unpleasant for the prince to see. The prince was only to see healthy, smiling people. Once given permission, Siddhartha made four journeys with his chariot driver.

On the first trip, in spite of his father's precautions, the prince saw an old person bent over with age. The discovery of old age shook the young man. On the second trip, he saw a sick person covered with ulcers. On the third trip, he saw a dead person being taken for burial. Within the walls of the palaces, Siddhartha had every material and physical pleasure for which any young man could ask. However, after he became aware of the reality of human suffering, these material and physical pleasures were not satisfying for him.

On a fourth trip the prince saw a holy person in whose face the prince saw the signs of deep, inner peace. The thought came to Siddhartha that he might seek a religious solution to the problems of suffering. That night he decided to leave the palace. Taking a last look at his sleeping wife and his newborn child, he departed. He was twenty-nine years old. Siddhartha cut off his long hair, which was a sign of nobility, and dressed himself in a single sheet.

Siddhartha found religious teachers who told him that meditation was the way to achieve happiness in the face of suffering. He learned a meditation technique that induced a trance-like state. Although he zealously practiced meditation, it was not the permanent solution he sought.

Eventually he left the trance and came back to normal waking consciousness with the fundamental problems of human suffering still unresolved.

Next, he studied with a religious teacher who believed people could achieve freedom from suffering by extreme austerity. Siddhartha decided to try this approach. First, he practiced an exercise in breath control that involved retaining the breath for longer periods. Instead of producing spiritual knowledge, however, all this resulted in was painful headaches. Abandoning this technique, Siddhartha tried a second method that involved reducing his intake of food, to just a spoonful of bean soup a day. He kept this up until the diet emaciated him. He was unable to sit upright and his hair began to fall out. He concluded that extreme fasting would not lead to happiness, any more than the extreme luxury of his father's palace led to happiness. So he began to eat again. Reviewing these experiences, he decided to avoid the two extremes of indulgence and austerity. Instead, he decided to follow a middle path.

He was now thirty-five years old. Sitting under a tree, Siddhartha returned to meditation, but instead of meditating himself into a trance, he decided to try to use meditation to achieve peace and calmness while remaining present in the world around him.

In a calm and peaceful state, he examined his physical sensations, his feelings, his mood and his thoughts. The realization came to him that he was free to choose how to react in all situations. A new sense of freedom replaced the grip of desires and compulsions. This realization, that he could choose how to react in all situations, was his enlightenment. He became the Buddha, which means one who is awake.

According to legend, when the Buddha was asked, “Sir what do you and your monks practice?” He replied, “We sit, we walk, and we eat.” The questioner continued, “But sir, everyone sits, walks, and eats.” And the Buddha told him, “When we sit, we know we are sitting. When we walk, we know we are walking. When we eat, we know we are eating. When we are touching deeply the present moment, we can see and listen deeply. The fruits of this practice are understanding, acceptance, and love.” (Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*)

A follower of Buddhism says, “The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When our mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers. . . . When your beloved is suffering, you need to recognize her suffering, her anxiety, and her worries, and just by doing that, you are offering some relief. Mindfulness relieves suffering because it is filled with understanding and compassion. When you are really there, showing your loving kindness, the energy of the spirit is in you.”(Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*)

Jesus and Buddha. The stories of two people coping with suffering. They came from different backgrounds.

- Jesus grew up as a Jew in a land suffering from the occupation of a Roman Army.
- Buddha grew up in a wealthy home and left that life to try to understand why there is suffering.

Their answers are similar. They point to the same universal human truth. They both affirm the power within each of us.

Jesus invited us to recognize “that the love we all long for in our innermost heart is already present. . . . Most of us can remember a time . . . when we felt that everything in the world was exactly as it should be. Or we can think of a joy . . . so vast that it was no longer inside us, but we were inside it. What we intuited then, and what we later thought was too good to be true, isn’t an illusion. It is real. . . . You are a responsible human being; you are called on to enlighten yourself; the ultimate authority is always lodged in your own soul.” (Stephen Mitchell, *The Gospel According to Jesus*.)

Buddha invites us to let go of the striving for success and the fear of pain. Buddha says get rid of status, do away with pride, forget ambition, do not strive, do not push, sit still. Feel the emptiness, then a light, a flash of intuition, a new awareness, insight, and illumination. The power within you to choose to be at peace, to choose to love yourself, to choose to love others. Feel the harmony and blessedness of experiencing the kingdom of God within you.

On Easter Sunday, many Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Many Christians look forward to the second coming of Christ, they look forward to Christ bringing about a new age of heaven on earth, a future time without suffering, a time without illness, or crime, or war or poverty.

But in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus did not encourage us to wait. Instead he said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' Or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you."

On this beautiful Easter day, I invite you to practice living each moment of your life in awareness. Everything can be spiritual. Enjoy the beauty of spring. Feel inside you your own strength and your own power. “For the Kingdom of God is no spiritual roof garden. It is inside you.” (e.e. Cummings quoting his father, a Unitarian Minister, *I, six non lectures*)

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Reading before the sermon:

It was more than I could believe that Jesus was the only incarnate son of God, and that only he who believed in him would have everlasting life. If God could have sons, all of us were His sons. If Jesus was like God, or God Himself, then all men were like God and could be God Himself. My reason was not ready to believe literally that Jesus by his death and by his blood redeemed the sins of the world. Metaphorically there might be some truth in it. Again, according to Christianity only human beings had souls, and not other living beings, for whom death meant complete extinction; while I held a contrary belief. I could accept Jesus as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice and a divine teacher, but not as the most perfect man ever born. His

death on the Cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it my heart could not accept.

From *The Story of My Experiments with Truth - An Autobiography* by Mohandas K Gandhi, Part II., XV. "Religious Ferment."

My Christian friends have told me on more than a few occasions that because I do not accept Christ as the only son of God, it is impossible for me to understand the profound significance of his teachings. I believe that this is an erroneous point of view, and that such an estimate is incompatible with the message that Jesus gave to the world. For he was certainly the highest example of one who wished to give everything, asking nothing in return, and not caring what creed might happen to be professed by the recipient. I am sure that if he were living here now, he would bless the lives of many who perhaps have never even heard his name, if only their lives embodied the virtues of which he was a living example on earth: the virtues of loving one's neighbor as oneself and that of doing good and charitable works among one's fellows.

What then does Jesus mean to me? To me he was one of the greatest teachers humanity has ever had. To his believers he was God's only begotten son. Could the fact that I do or do not accept this belief make Jesus have any more or less influence in my life? Is all the grandeur of his teaching and of his doctrine to be forbidden to me? I cannot believe so.

To me it implies a spiritual birth. My interpretation, in other words, is that Jesus' own life is the key to his nearness to God; that he expressed, as no other could, the spirit and will of God. It is in this sense that I see him and recognize him as the son of God.

Mohandas K. Gandhi, *All Religions Are True*, ed. Anand T. Hingorami, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962, pp.65ff.