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BUDDHIST RESPONSES TO  
CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

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## Christian Prayer Seen from the Eye of a Buddhist

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When I think about Christian prayer, the image I get is that of a young girl of about eight years old with long brown hair. Wearing a nightgown, she is kneeling next to her bed with her hands clasped and her head bowed. I have often queried myself about the source of this image. This is an interesting question in itself. I personally don't know of anyone who fits that description or who has actually witnessed someone like her in prayer. Nevertheless, it is interesting how a Buddhist raised in a predominately Christian society comes to form his image of Christian prayer.

Working further with this image, I see this little girl—let's call her Megan—doing two things in her evening prayer. One is that she is giving thanks to God for the benefits she has received. She thanks him for her food, clothing, friends, and family. Then, she also makes a request. In this petitionary element of her prayer, she is asking God to make her sick father get well soon. As she does so, her expression turns more serious, and she clasps her hands more firmly and brings them closer to her chest. She then looks up toward the ceiling, expressing her heartfelt wish for her father's early recovery. What is noteworthy is that Megan's prayers are spoken aloud as in a human conversation.

I realize that this image does not do justice to a topic as enormous as "Christian prayer," but I believe that it provides a glimpse into how one Buddhist imagines the topic. I have a number of questions about Megan's prayer, particularly as I try to understand what may be going on inside of her. I wonder first and foremost, what God looks like to her. Is God a male or a female, or neither? I would think that even for her (in this gender-sensitive age), God is still a male. If so, does she see him as an elderly man with a long white beard, holding a cane and sitting in a throne? Next, where does God reside? If he is in heaven, what is heaven like to her? I wonder if heaven is located somewhere amidst the lofty, puffy clouds. In regards to her father's illness, how does she think God can make her father get well? What is the mechanism by which a personified God can heal? Perhaps I am being too analytical and overly rigorous with my questions about a spiritual act, and that of an eight-year-old at that.

Perhaps I should, instead, turn the questions toward me, asking how I would

answer the same questions about a Buddhist girl “praying” before the Buddha or a bodhisattva for the same kind of wish? The image that immediately crops up in my mind is of a girl of about twelve and her mother whom I saw at a pagoda in Rangoon, Burma, a number of years ago. The girl is wearing a large, red fresh flower in her hair and has on traditional apparel. She sits with her mother on a marble floor of a spacious area in front of Buddha images that are several meters in height. She holds a bouquet of flowers held upright between the palms of hands in a gesture of reverence. She sits with her legs folded but thrown out to her side, a style common in her country as well as in Thailand. Her eyes appear closed, and her head is slightly bowed down toward the Buddha images. She stays in that posture for what seems like several minutes; her mother does the same. I don’t know, of course, what is going on inside, but she is certainly not meditating.

I believe this is an important point to make here, for Buddhists are stereotypically seen to only meditate. However, the vast majority of lay Buddhists in Asia primarily “pray” or express themselves devotionally, during which they give thanks but also petition for one thing or another of worldly nature. While panoply of Bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteshvara and Kshitigarbha serve as objects of these earthly petitions in Mahayana Buddhist countries of East Asia, the Shakyamuni Buddha is the primary object of devotion in the Theravada societies of Southeast Asia.

Shakyamuni Buddha, then, is the object of her request. The huge images of the Buddha in his meditation pose sit in front of her. Supposing she too is asking for her father’s early recovery from an illness, I wonder what kind of image she holds of the Buddha. Would that image in her mind be the tranquil, meditative Buddha, or the handsome, gallant prince Siddhartha, who boldly went off to seek truth, or the image of some “fatherly figure” from her life experience? More than likely, her image is amorphous, as an amalgamation of the images mentioned above, and more. However way she may conceive of the Buddha, she must feel a satisfying level of comfort with the Buddha for such a deeply personal and devotional act to hold any sense of meaning.

While we see similarities between these two girls, I believe that the act of Christian prayer entails one quality that is virtually absent in the Buddhist devotional form: an interaction with the ultimate, in other words, God. The Christian prayer is a two-way communication, a conversation with God. In contrast, there is virtually no sense of the Burmese girl having a conversation with the Buddha. To her Buddha may answer her prayers for better crop or physical healing, but I would be very surprised if she expected to interact with Buddha on a personal level, whereby, for example, she experienced a spiritual conversation with him. On the other hand, Megan (the American Christian girl), in her prayers would talk with her God in a much more personal way. She may even barter or negotiate with him, offering to be a “good girl” if only God can cure her father of his illness. God appears more willing to listen to her needs and to respond on an individual basis. God at this level is more like a caring uncle who is willing to listen and talk with her.

Now, this leads me to another character of Christian prayer that I believe plays a vital role in making Christian spirituality more accessible to “ordinary” people. The

prayer as I have described above does not involve an inward apprehension of the mystical divine presence. Most prayers are not mystical, and it would be going too far to claim mystical experience for ordinary prayer. Like Megan, prayers seek God above and not within. This, in fact, does distinguish Megan's prayer from Buddhist meditation, which most people agree involves some form of "mystical experience." It is precisely this point that gives some conservative Buddhists the necessary proof of the "superior" nature of Buddhist soteriology over that of Christianity. I shall return to this Buddhist claim later, but I wish to point out here that this is also the reason for the less accessible nature of mainstream Buddhist spirituality to ordinary folk. In this respect, Christian prayer at whatever level, certainly including Megan's, is more effective in being inclusive and allowing more people to be "connected" to mainstream Christian spirituality. Megan's prayers are carried out in very ordinary circumstances (at home before going to bed) with real human concern (father's illness). I believe this ability of prayer to affirm the mundane and to lead the seekers to deeper levels of Christian spirituality has been a real asset to Christianity.

I am afraid that I cannot say the same for meditation. Its aim has been to be much more disengaged from the mundane, thus less accessible to ordinary Buddhists in Asia (though interestingly the opposite may be the case in contemporary West, where meditation, as presented, is the primary appeal of Buddhism). One of the reasons for meditation's disengagement from mundane concerns (e.g. Megan's concern for her father's illness) is that they are regarded as the very source of suffering (attachment to a person). This samsaric (cycle of births and deaths) existence needs to be transcended through personal cultivation in which meditation plays a key role. However, such meditation practices with extremely lofty mystical goals were not easily accessible to ordinary Buddhists.

This vacuum has come to be filled with such "devotional practices" as sutra chanting, making offerings of flowers, lanterns, or food, and "prayers" (e.g. Burmese girl described above). However, from the mainstream monastic Buddhist view these practices are viewed as secondary or, at best, provisional. Nevertheless, it is these that the majority of lay Buddhists engage in on a daily basis. Allow me here to elaborate on some examples of what I mean by "prayer."

It is customary for Buddhist sutra chanting to include a "prayer of blessing" called, "the verse for transferring of merit to others." For example, in my own Jodo Shinshu tradition, virtually every sutra chanting ends with the following verse:

*Gan ni shi ku do ku* (May this merit-virtue)  
*Byo do se is-sai* (Be shared equally with all beings.)  
*Do hotsu bo da-i shin* (May we together awaken the Bodhi Mind.)  
*Ou jou an raku koku* (And be born in the realm of Serenity and Joy.)

This verse is taken from the writing of a seventh-century Chinese master, Shan-tao. Since everyone, including children, participates in the sutra chanting at religious services, far more people than the small number of priests take part in this "prayer of blessing."

A similar but even more popular form of prayer of blessing called the “Golden Chain” (one that was composed in Hawaii in the early part of the twentieth century) is recited at religious services, particularly when youths and young adults are in attendance.

Golden Chain—II

I am a link in the Buddha’s golden chain of love that stretches around the world. I must keep my link bright and strong.

I will be kind and gentle to every living being and protect all who are weaker than myself.

I will try to think pure and beautiful thoughts, to say pure and beautiful words, and to do pure and beautiful deeds, knowing on what I do now depends not only my happiness, but also that of others.

May every link in the Buddha’s golden chain of love become bright and strong, and may we all attain perfect peace.

Particularly the last stanza expresses the Bodhisattva spirit of wishing all beings to realize the ultimate goal of all Buddhists, that is, nirvana or Buddhahood. I personally have regarded this last stanza and the previously cited “verse for merit transference” as my Buddhist prayer for all living beings.

If what I have discussed above can be regarded as “prayers of blessing,” what I am about to share can be seen as “prayers of petition,” on the same order as that of Megan’s prayer for her father to get well. Scholars may regard them as self-serving and, technically, not religious, but I doubt we can easily dismiss them, especially when the “petitioners” are carrying them out within their respective religious framework (God, Buddha, Bodhisattva, etc.) and at formally recognized settings (Buddhist temples, etc.), as we shall see.

As I write this on January 2 here in Japan, the temples are inundated with people who gather for the annual New Year’s visits (*hatsu-mode*). It is estimated that almost half of the Japanese population of 125 million people pay visits to Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines on the first three days of the New Year. What motivates so many people to fight the huge crowds to participate, especially when most of them never go to temples or shrines the rest of the year? The primary motivation can be categorized as “prayers of petition.” In general, they pray for “a safe, healthy and prosperous” New Year. Of course, there are numerous more specific prayers such as for their loved ones or themselves to recover from illness, to enter a college of their choice, or not to lose their job or business in the current bad economy. On one level these motivations seem “worldly” and petitionary. None is more so than the common scene of people gathered around incense burners fanning the incense smoke onto parts of their body needing fixing or improvement. Some see the need for “purification” of their persistent back pain, of their head to do better on examinations, or of their legs to look thinner for cosmetic purpose.

Perhaps for many these actions are done with a light-hearted expectation, for they “really” don’t think that they work, but do it out of custom and just in case it works! However, there are others whose motivations are serious and compelling. A woman

in her late seventies suffering from cancer stands in front of the image of Kannon-sama (Avalokiteshvara). All medical treatments have failed and she is told that she has perhaps one year to live. She places her palms together out of genuine feeling of reverence to the Kannon. She expresses her deeply felt gratitude for the wonderful family she feels she has been blessed with—a caring and devoted husband, and three grown children with wonderful families of their own. She is grateful for the fact that she was able to work at a meaningful job for twenty years at a time when it was not fashionable for women with families to do so. She has no regrets. However, she wants to live a little longer. She would like to be able to see all her family again at the next New Year's family gathering. So, after her expressions of appreciation about her life, she petitions Kannon-sama for her cancer to slow down so as to be able to visit the same temple next New Year. Then, adding to her grateful and petitionary thoughts, she also asks for the compassion of Kannon-sama so that when she has to go, she would be embraced and protected. She has not arrived at a doctrinal Buddhist understanding of what happens to her after death, but she would be satisfied as long as she is assured that she “would be alright.” This anxiety about “being all right” is partially consoled because she is confident that her family would regularly pay visits to her grave, where her ashes would be interred. She also knows that her family would also take good care of the Buddhist altar at home (where her Buddhist name would be displayed along with her photo) by regularly lighting the incense and candles with offerings of flowers and, at times, her favorite food.

This elderly lady is actually my projection of what probably was going on in the mind of someone I have come to know intimately, my mother-in-law. She went to the temple today, and I surmised what probably took place. I chose to talk about her because it is real (and personal for me) and representative of what actually happens. There are thousands of people like her (and millions like the ordinary *hatsu-mode* visitors discussed above) at Buddhist temples throughout the world. And they equally represent the living Buddhist traditions of today along with the meditating monks and nuns. Perhaps, therefore, meditation should not readily be considered the Buddhist counterpart to Christian prayer, for, as seen above, “prayer” in its many forms is very much carried out and by a majority of people who regard themselves as Buddhists.

I must at this point qualify my somewhat critical comments concerning Buddhist mediation (especially given my Japanese Pure Land background, known for its anti-meditation stance). I am in no way categorically condemning meditation, for I too practice an elementary form of Theravada *vipassana* meditation learned during my monastic stint in a Thai monastery in 1970. What I object to is the attitude that privileges meditation at the expense of other forms of practices, thus contributing to the view that excludes a large number of people from “authentic” Buddhist spirituality. In stark contrast, Christian prayer (at least in its contemporary form) has helped to avoid this Buddhist pitfall.

Now, let me turn to couple of other comments I have about Christian prayer, particularly in its public forms (as opposed to the private ones discussed so far). I could not help but take note of the invocation at the U.S. president's inaugural ceremony,

where the Christian minister sought God's guidance in helping President George W. Bush to carry out his duties and responsibilities as president. Then the minister invoked God's help for Vice-President Dick Cheney as well as for the wives of these new leaders. I wondered whether God is able to render help to such specific people when there were over six billion people in the world! I don't mean to make light of this, for I realize that such an invocation holds profound spiritual and theological meaning for those involved and that this has become an indelible part of our political liturgy. But on a gut-level reaction for this Buddhist, I see a tinge of self-serving quality about the way in which God was being solicited. It seems to me that God is concerned with all people (and from a Buddhist perspective, all beings) and is, thus, beyond being connected to a specific nation or individuals.

Perhaps my uneasiness was triggered by the obvious manifestation of "civil religion" in action and the seemingly undermining of the principle of separation of state and religion at this presidential inauguration as well as those that have preceded it. The self-serving nature of public prayer is not confined to important political events but is especially glaring in athletic games where prayers (in the forms of thanksgiving and invocation) often serve one's own team at the expense of the other. I often wonder, "Does God really take sides?"

The second observation that I have of public prayers, especially of the thanksgiving variety, is God's monopoly on the credits. Everything worth being thankful for is attributed to God. I can understand this, given the role of God as the maker of all things seen and unseen, but from a Buddhist view it seems that more credits are warranted for the deserving people, other living beings, plants, or unseen conditions. When one gives thanks to God for the food we are about to partake, shouldn't there be thanks given also to the cow, fish, or broccoli whose lives we took for our benefit? Yes, God created them, but they made the real sacrifice. I realize that for some Christians God represents all, so that in giving thanks to God, one is inherently thanking all the creatures and living things. My reticence with acknowledging only God stems from the Buddhist view that does not see Buddha as a creator. We therefore give thanks to him for showing us the way to liberation but not necessarily for the bounty bestowed us.

I regret that the pressures of time have permitted me to present only an impressionistic essay, not a researched article as I had hoped. But perhaps such an impressionistic essay may be a more accurate and honest representation of my views on the topic of Christian prayer (in a comparative framework that includes Buddhist prayer and meditation). In reflecting again on what I have learned from jotting down my thoughts on this topic, I am left with the image of Megan, which I would still like to hold up as my paradigmatic Christian prayer: conversational, personal, and hopeful.