

***The Lotus and the Cross. Jesus Talks with Buddha.*** Ravi Zacharias.  
Oregon: Multnomah Publishers Inc., 2001

This is a very useful and penetrating book, which helpfully covers some of the foundational Buddhist concepts. I did feel somewhat uncomfortable at the device Zacharias uses, involving a projection of what Jesus might have said. Jesus was notoriously unpredictable, so it's artificial and at least a tad presumptuous to represent Jesus in this way. But the purpose of Zacharias' ploy is admirable, to throw into sharp relief the contrast between a worldview grounded in the Buddha's teaching and one grounded in the teaching of Christ.

### **About the Author**

Zacharias' website is <http://www.rzim.org/> He was born in India in 1946 and immigrated to Canada with his family twenty years later. He is a distinguished intellectual and apologist who has spoken by invitation at high level government events. He has written many books and delivers regular radio broadcasts.

### **Introduction**

Zacharias explains that the lotus is the symbol of Buddhism, as the cross is the symbol of the Christian faith. He states at the very outset, "Jesus and Buddha cannot both be right" (8), since the two belief systems are diametrically opposed.

### **Prologue**

Zacharias recalls his trip on a boat along the River of Kings. He cannot shake from his memory a newspaper article he read the previous day. It concerned an attractive 17-year old girl, Priya ("sweetheart", "beloved"), who left home, at the enticement of a friend, to earn a living in the big city. Her so-called friend manipulated her into becoming a prostitute, managed by a handful of thugs. She later discovered she was HIV-positive. But she continued as a prostitute, being desperate to fund treatment for her disease. She was signing each man's death warrant but her life had lost all value. Eventually her disease disfigured her body. After some failed suicide attempts she poisoned herself, set the house on fire and burnt herself to death.

Zacharias pondered what Jesus would have said to Priya, had she come to Jesus. He also considered what the Buddha would have said to her and, beyond that, what Jesus and the Buddha would have said to each other.

### **The Lotus and the Cross. Jesus Talks with Buddha**

Jesus invites the diseased and dying Priya to sit next to him. He notes that those whom she had trusted used and abused her till she was nothing more than a body to them: "How typical it is that the scavengers are never around after the flesh is

consumed” (16). Further, her parents bear immense guilt for having encouraged their daughter into a life of prostitution.

Jesus explains to Priya that she has been enticed by the evil one and that her way of life has brought her spiritual death and that she needs the life that can only come from God’s Word. He offers her forgiveness and life beyond the grave.

At this point the Buddha feels he must interrupt. He speaks of his compassion for Priya and rejects Jesus’ talk of “spiritual death”, “the Word of God” and “forgiveness” as crutches for the spiritually weak, insisting these are not realities but illusions. He dismisses belief in such things and in the evil one as mistruths that are clung to by the immature of uninformed.

The Buddha agrees that wealth and plenty don’t satisfy, though for a different reason than the one put forward by Jesus. He tells Priya that everything she has lived through is the fruit of all that she herself has sown. She was in debt when she was born and will not be free from debt when she dies. For her every act, word, and deed must be paid for.

When Jesus charges Gautama with laying an unbearable burden on humanity the Buddha relates how he has found a way to lift the burden. He explains the law of *karma*, that there is a moral law of cause and effect which exists in the human consciousness and that whether God or the evil one exist or not is completely immaterial to this reality. The Buddha admits Priya had nothing to do with producing the debt with which she was born. But he tells her that during her life she had the freedom to choose whether to reduce the debt with which she was born or to pay it.

The Buddha then offers hope to Priya, teaching her that the sum of her good deeds and bad deeds will reappear in another life. That is, she has effectively made her deposit into an account that will be drawn from in a reborn life.

Priya seeks clarification, asking if she will be given another chance of repayment when she is reincarnated. The Buddha tells her that, technically speaking, she will be reborn not reincarnated [the difference between Buddhism and Hinduism], because she will not return as herself. Rather:

“Another life will make its entrance after you’re gone... another consciousness with the moral deposit reaped from your indebtedness will be born” (23).

Priya finds this confusing. She asks,

Whose karma is being worked out when each life is wrapped around so many? I wonder: Are my parents also paying for past lives through my tragedy? Are my customers paying when I sell my diseased body to them? What about the baby that I gave up? Was that its karma, even before it knew anything about good or bad? I mean, trying to reach for an answer in this karmic cycle is like putting your hand in a bucket of glue and then trying to wipe it clean. Everything you touch become sticky and there's nowhere to wash it off (23-24).

The Buddha tells Priya that her origin is dependent upon innumerable causes – the doctrine of dependent origination. But since Priya cannot change the past she is advised to forget it. She is also advised not to think of the future, since this is all speculation. She is exhorted to deal only with the now, to free herself from the illusions of God and forgiveness and individual life hereafter. She is told that her only priority is to ensure her good deeds outweigh her bad ones and that she develop a pure heart that will offset her impure acts and thoughts.

[Zacharias portrays the Buddha as one who was born a Hindu but who later rejected some Hindu doctrines. Here Zacharias adopts the standard understanding that Buddhism arose as a reaction against Hinduism. Much depends here on how one defines Hinduism. For many the caste system is integral to any definition of Hinduism and the developed caste system, as opposed to the four social classes of early Indian society (most societies, ancient and modern, have social classes), is a late development. It is probably more accurate to say that both Hinduism and Buddhism developed from early Indian philosophies, e.g. Brahmanism and Vedism. Indeed, it is arguable that Buddhism precedes Hinduism.]

In an interchange with Jesus the Buddha presents himself as one who has reached the pinnacle of all knowledge and wisdom. The Buddha sees himself as identifying the fundamental problem of suffering and wrestling with it long before Jesus was born. Jesus points out that Job wrestled with this issue long before the Buddha and that before him Abraham did. Jesus adds that he himself was before Abraham.

The legendary story is recounted of the Buddha's decision to renounce an idyllic life and treat his wife, children and parents as attachments that must be left to find true peace. We are told of Gautama's initial life of extreme asceticism and of his experience of enlightenment which involved remembering an infinite number of previous lives and becoming "unshackled from desire" (33).

Jesus points out that for the Buddha's followers there are "rules, scores of rules, like a noose tauntingly swaying above the head, ready at the hint of one wrong move to be tightened around the neck" (34): 227 rules for male and 311 for female monks. But he also points out that for the Buddha renunciation is not enough. Jesus tells the Buddha that "morality as a badge of attainment breeds the deadliest state of mind – a delusion of absolute autonomy" (38).

The Four Noble Truths are recounted, with the Buddha offering two words to summarise the dilemma of being human, namely ignorance and craving. The Buddha says that if Priya had been devoid of her "self" and her victims devoid of their "selves" then the terrible life she has experienced would never have happened.

When the Buddha experienced enlightenment he first thought that his discovery was unique and so unfathomable that he considered spending his life without uttering a word of what he'd discovered. However, his followers persuaded him otherwise. Jesus finds this incongruous, that the Buddha should claim to have attained perfect knowledge and understanding and yet he, the enlightened one, needed to be corrected by his disciples, unenlightened ones. In addition, he had to be persuaded to make it a rule that no young person could become a monk without parental permission and needed to be persuaded in order to allow the formation of an order of nuns.

The Buddha counters that the Bible presents God as changing his mind when Moses and Abraham prayed. Jesus explains that "God doesn't respond because someone opens up some new insight for Him" (47) and that the Buddha is most unlike God because when he, the Buddha, changed *his* mind it was because something had changed *in him*.

The Buddha distinguishes between prayer and meditation, looking beyond and looking within. He concedes that sometimes reason is set aside and emotion triumphs when prayer slips in.

The Buddha insists the self is non-existent:

It exists nowhere, neither in our physicality nor in our mental parts. Look at this boat. Is it the wood? Is it the motor? Is it the glue? Is it the paint? No, it's none of these. In the same way, the self does not exist in any of the individual elements that we are composed of, nor is it outside of them. We're nothing more than physical quantities, and when that physical being dies, the individual dies as well. Nothing remains beyond that consciousness. And all of our troubles begin by having this sense that

there's an individual, united self.

It's only when you realize that the self doesn't exist and that you're living with an illusion of self that suffering comes to an end.

All of this woman's desires were for her self. Take a look at this pathetic, shriveled-up body that Priya lives with. If she had seen that she didn't have a self, she would've stopped trying to satisfy that self and would never have entered into this state of devastation.

Once we realize that the self doesn't exist, we find the middle way between asceticism and pleasure, and in that balance, life ceases to hold us hostage to our attachments (54-55).

Jesus responds that the Buddha's words are contradictory since personality is assumed in saying, "Once we realize.. We find the middle way... If she only knew... She would not be... Life ceases to hold us." Jesus tells the Buddha he cannot shake off the person no matter how hard he tries: "You cannot reconstitute reality just by changing language" (55). The Buddha's analogy of the boat should be a contrast (with persons), not a comparison. Priya is not a boat or a thing to be used but an individual, created unique and in the image of God.

The Buddha denies that God is needed for humanity to have dignity. Jesus responds, "It's surprising that you haven't yet discerned that morality itself cannot bring freedom or dignity" (58). Jesus suggests to the Buddha that in looking for an answer to suffering he hasn't dealt with the problem at all, but just tried to obliterate relationships.

Jesus then invites the Buddha to take Priya's hand but he says he can't touch her. Jesus responds, "That's the ultimate expression of her destitution." He tells the Buddha, "What you've lost in denying the self as real is not the problem of pain but the essence of being" (60).

The Buddha expresses his disappointment with the ritual and idolatry he sees in Buddhist temples. Jesus tells the Buddha that when he took God away from people they inevitably became superstitious since in its essence this is but a subtle lack of faith in God. For when God is absent people try to appease the world of unseen power and habits develop out of fear of the unknown. Jesus also accuses the Buddha of being responsible for legalism. He illustrates this by asking Priya to invite a monk to join them for lunch. But because it is past the noon hour he will not since to do so would be a violation of his code of discipline. When the boat driver offers him fruit he refuses it lest it pollute him.

Jesus also challenges the Buddha's claim to have recalled an infinite number of births since he also claims to have had a final birth. Yet: "How can an infinite

number have finality?” Further, Jesus insists that morality is inextricably joined to personhood:

“There is no way to talk of what one ought to do without showing the value of the person... There’s no way to confer value on a person unless that value is intrinsic. There’s no way value can be intrinsic unless that person is created by one of ultimate worth” (71).

The Buddha explains that he gave his disciples no written word as an abiding authority. Jesus asks him why not. The Buddha responds, “Because... everything is impermanent” (76). Jesus retorts, “Even that statement? Is that impermanent too?”

Jesus proceeds to point out that the Buddha’s followers have no final word to rely on. This makes it impossible for Buddhists to accuse others of perverting truth:

There is no permanent truth if everything is impermanent. And even the statement that everything is impermanent is only impermanently true. Which means the absolute you posit becomes only relatively true. If it’s only relatively true, it can no longer be stated as an absolute (76).

Since everything the Buddha teaches hangs on his statement of impermanence he has inadvertently proved that truth is principally asserted by words and can be tested by reason. If nothing is ever said or thought in assertions then there is no way of assessing what is true or not.

Jesus goes on to tell Gautama that he can never be truly righteous until he is redeemed and that he can never achieve this by looking deep inside himself and meditating.

The boatman is troubled because he so venerates the Buddha that he finds it difficult to regard him as wrong. Jesus points out that the Buddha respected the Brahman priests, but believed they were wrong, showing one cannot sacrifice truth at the altar of respect: “Respect for the right of another to be wrong does not mean that the wrong is right” (81).

Jesus tells Priya that he has paid for all the evil she has done in the past. Jesus challenges Gautama to ask anyone around if they expect to attain *nirvana* in this life and points out that they never know if it’s paid. Jesus’ message of atonement and forgiveness is diametrically opposed to the Buddha’s view that people are born in debt and that the way they live determines whether they add to or subtract from their debt.

Jesus asks the Buddha what he has to offer Priya and he speaks of the Triple Gem, the Three Refuges (the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha). Jesus points out that effectively the first gem is nonexistence since the Buddha does not personally exist; the second gem concerns teaching that “has no eternal Word to preserve, no absolute to be guided by” (83); and the third gem concerns a community “who believe no self exists and move toward not desiring anything, including the friendship of others” (83).

Jesus tells Priya that her choice is either to obliterate her self (follow the Buddha) or find your self (follow Jesus).

### **Epilogue**

Buddhism is described as

a philosophy of how one can be good without God, pulling oneself up by one’s own moral bootstraps. Its allurements are obvious. In a very subtle way it is the ultimate crowning of the individual with total autonomy, while at the same time it declares that the self is an illusion (91).

Zacharias also observes: “It argues for impermanence with the force of a permanent injunction” (91).

He also claims that while it encourages thought and contemplation its final destination is thoughtlessness and oblivion. However, this point is weakened somewhat by differences between schools of Buddhism concerning the nature of *nirvana* and the final enlightened state.

Zacharias notes the way Buddhism encourages insulation from the world:

If you break of all attachments, you cease to worry. If you have no loves, you will never have a broken heart. If you cease to love, you cease to suffer. If you do not desire, you can never lose. That is it in a nutshell (92).