

Buddhism as a Historical Faith: Answer to John Cobb

by Whalen Lai, *University of California, Davis*

One of the stumbling blocks in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue is the Christian claim that only the Judeo-Christian (and Islamic) tradition is a historical faith. Buddhism that knows of no Creator God and no promise of final redemption but instead talks of *samsāric* cycles and nirvanic release lacks a sense of history.¹ As so often put by scholars from Heiler to Weber, Christianity is prophetic; Buddhism is mystic. Or, in Mircea Eliade's slightly different phraseology, theophany in the Judeo-Christian tradition alone can face the terror of history without flinching and without trying to escape from it.² All other religions, Buddhism included, know only how to live in a myth of the Eternal Return.

In the present exchange between Buddhists and Christians, that is still where the line is often drawn. Take John Cobb for example. Cobb goes farther than most theologians in accepting Emptiness as *Pratītya-samutpāda* as the equivalent of God as Process. He even accepts the equation of Amitābha and the Christ *Logos*, but still he is confident that the Jesus of history is preferable to the fiction of the bodhisattva Dharmākara (Amitābha-to-be).³

On the Buddhist side, not everyone is eager to show up the historicity of the faith. Quite the contrary. There is, since the time of D. T. Suzuki, the equally proud and confident defense of the timelessness of its Truth. The draw of the Buddha-Dharma is precisely that it is good in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end. Engaging the Christian in that kind of antithetical exchange is Nishitani Keiji in his book, *Shūkyō to wa nani ka* now translated into English by Jan van Bragt in the Nanzan translation series as *Religion and Nothingness*. The last two chapters on Time and History counters the Christian perception of the lineal flow

of history. In a Heideggerian twist, Nishitani shows how if the finite progress of time Past, Present and Future is what is disclosed to the being of the Western man, then as the being of that self is emptied and then grounded in the *Ungrund* or field (*topos*) of Absolute Nothingness, time and history will be disclosed as a kind of infinite duration—the interpenetration of infinite past and infinite future in the eternal moment of the present.⁴

Perhaps that indeed is the difference between Christianity and Buddhism. However, in this essay I will propose to present Buddhism as a "historical faith." That is, instead of looking to find the antithesis to the Christian sense of history, I hope to locate a common ground upon which the differences between myth and history can be better understood and resolved. This is because I believe that, in the end, we are not dealing with Christian History vs. Buddhist Timelessness but with two different senses of what is historical and what is more than historical. To better demonstrate this, I will also be shifting the Buddhist discussion away from the mystical tradition of Zen to the legacy of faith in Pure Land. A sequel to an earlier piece on "*Avadāna-vāda* and the Pure Land Faith,"⁵ the present essay will attempt to disclose the temporal horizon (*i.e.*, the sense of time) assumed by, and made present anew through, the Amitābha *avadāna*. *Avadānas* are extension of the *jātaka* genre. *Jātakas* tell of the past birth stories of the Buddha Śākyamuni; they rose as pious folk tales. *Avadānas* tell of the prehistory or past careers of other Buddhas and bodhisattvas; they provide much of the mythical side to the Mahayana sutras.

In keeping with the nature of the mythic materials dedicated to the Buddha, our discourse will try to avoid dwelling excessively on doctrines,

the province of the Dharma. Too much of the Buddhist-Christian comparisons have been informed by dogmatic concern. Doctrines and dogmas are developed by intellectual highbrows whose task is often to find differences. We want to turn to the language of the everyday, and root it in plain, human experience shared by Buddhist and Christians alike. We hope to expose certain basic assumptions but do so without mystification.

To sound learned, one can call this approach one based on a "phenomenology of the everyday." But being academic has come to mean being irrelevant and talking in a language no simple folk can understand, which is hardly the purpose of the *avadānas*, the literature of the people. Because of that, I will avoid technical vocabulary; all the big words will be put in brackets and only for reference. We begin with the simple fact that the average Buddhist does not dwell in "Eternity" any more than a Christian sees God face to face. He does not ponder the beginninglessness of *samsāra* and not count the years before a kalpa ends. The average Christian cannot tell history and eschatology apart; the average Buddhist cannot explain what the infinite *dharmadhātu* is.

This is not to say such sophisticated ideas do not impact their lives. They do — but only if and when they are translated into the everyday world (*Lebenswelt*). Thus, the theological caricature of the Buddhist as one living on some nirvanic cloud notwithstanding, the fact is that the average Buddhist orients himself toward his surrounding with as much "ethico-historical responsibility" as the Christian would. The cloud of nirvana may well be what allows him to live responsibly in this world. In other words, whether time is considered finite or infinite, linear or circular, a curse or a blessing, what really matters is how that sets up the "temporal horizons" of the everyday world Buddhist and Christians alike live in. And for all the fantastic time-scale of the Buddhist worldview, the Buddhists live, love, and work in history, not in alleged resignation, but with very much the same degree of faith (in the past), hope (in the future) and love (in

the present) as would any honest-to-God Christian.

If showing how Buddhism is "historical" might appear unnecessarily apologetical to some, it is hoped that by the end of the essay, it will be evident that the reconstruction of the Buddhist sense of history is at the same time a critique of the Christian one. After all, although the idea that Christianity is a "historical" faith, as Gnosticism was judged not to be, went back to the early church, for much of the medieval period, the difference between a Christian and a pagan was seldom divided along that line. It was more that the pagan worshipped idols, nature instead of its creator, this world instead of the world beyond. The theologians of the Enlightenment, trusting in universal Reason, were not particularly eager to stress historical details. That was left to the Romantic, such that it is really Hegel that gave Christian history its unique due.⁶ Being historical in the nineteenth century was aligned with being progressive, and even Weber worked on that assumption of a dynamic Protestant Europe and a stagnant Orient.⁷ It is precisely that unholy alliance of history and progress and its disillusionment that came with the world wars, especially the Holocaust, that has opened up the question "What is meant by a historical religion? What is the meaning of history itself?"

THE "LEAP OF BEING" THAT LIBERATES AND DIVIDES

The idea that only the Abrahamic tradition knows of prophets has actually been already disputed by Robert N. Bellah's seminal essay "Religious Evolution." Unlike Weber who still accepts the mystic/prophetic distinction, Bellah accepts the presence of the prophetic individual or prophetic individualism in all major, world religions.⁸

Following Vagoelin, Bellah speaks of a "Leap of Being" in the "historic" phase of religious development, a time when certain individuals achieved direct contact with Transcendence that allows these founder figures to break away from

the bondage to Nature and Cosmos in primitive-archaic religions, and critically review the hitherto sacred socio-political order. The Buddha, despite his mystical tendencies, was no less a critic of Brahmanical society. His response to a higher norm ruling all men allowed him to renounce the *mythos* of nature (Eliade's Eternal Return) that underwrote the cosmos of order (the sanctity of the old caste system).⁹

With that "Leap of Beings," these founders and paradigmatic personalities also resolved the religio-cultural identity of the Axial Age and set up a model lifestyle for their followers to imitate. Thus Christians, imitating Christ, would naturally

make more of martyrdom than, say, Buddhists who, walking in the footsteps of the Buddha, accept death with an equanimity of mind free from undue hope. And Muslims still make better holy warriors than record-keeping Confucians who make better retirees. But precisely so, historic religions so tied to such identities also tend to regard their solutions to life's problem the normative one and judge each other according to its own norm. The result is that they habitually misunderstand one another.

Thus, the irony is that whereas they are all united in rejecting the primitive-archaic faith, they are divided by what they found. Take, for example,

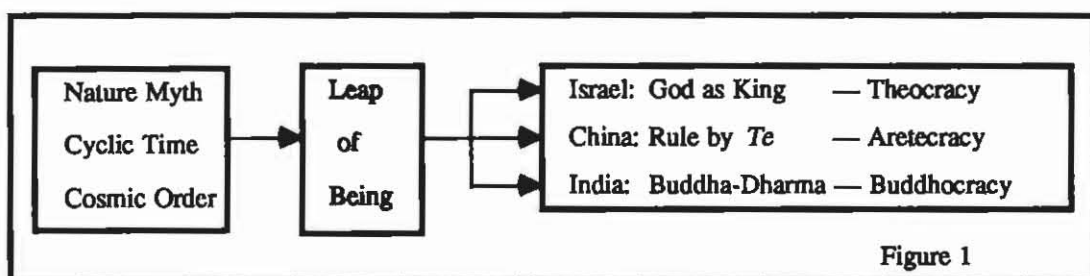


Figure 1

Israel, China, and India. Under Moses, Confucius, and the Buddha, they each came to restructure their society along new but different principles as shown in Figure 1. The Hebrews had God as their King (Theocracy); China accepted a Heaven-mandated Virtue (Ch., *Te*; Gk, *arete*) as its judgment; and Buddhist India set up a Buddhocracy based on the Buddha-Dharma.

The three paradigms that freed them also bound them, so that even now discourse across paradigms remains difficult. Each "Leap of Being" misjudges the others as incomplete and as falling back on a primitive-archaic phase as each sees it. Thus, converts to Yahweh cannot but help to see others as being still slaves to the gods of nature. Christian scholars often still reduce Buddhist enlightenment to being "nature mysticism" (i.e., short of revelation) — despite the fact that *samsāric* nature holds even less attraction for the Buddhist

than it would to the Psalmist of Psalm 104. In turn, the Buddhist, having renounced the Vedic gods, can never quite understand how the Christians would still worship a Creator, like Brahma, yet unenlightened. And few Confucians could understand why Matteo Ricci would like them to go back, beyond Heaven, to *Shang-ti*, the Lord on High — China's Ur-monotheism according to Ricci — when clearly *Te* (virtue) is the higher standard to rule over both man and gods.¹⁰

These barriers between historic religions notwithstanding, no hermeneutical circle is so tight that the religions cannot understand one another better. Touched by Transcendence, they are not as culture-bound as primitive and archaic religions are. Men may meet as strangers, but with a little patience and imagination, they can part as friends. To get behind the differences that now divide the Christian and the Buddhist, we can try retracing the

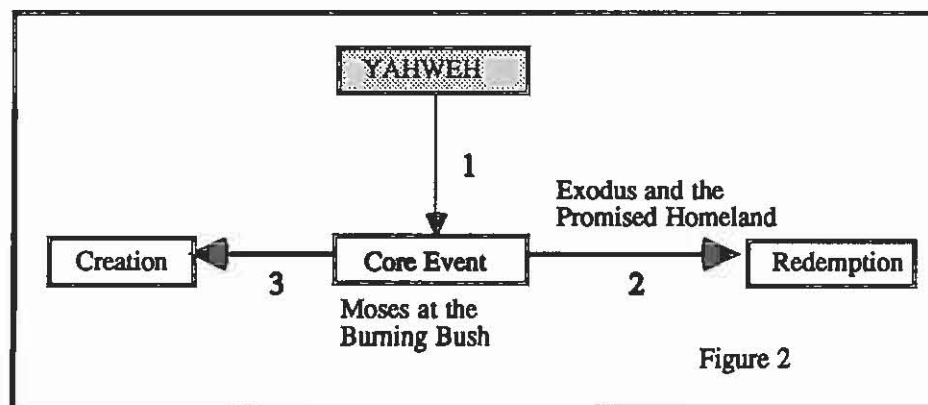


Figure 2

steps leading to those two different “Leaps of Being” and, see how, before dogmas and doctrines divided them, each defines the world they share (*Mitwelt*) in similar ways. We will begin with reliving the Biblical side of the story and come to the Buddhist one later.

RELIVING THE BIBLICAL SENSE OF HISTORY

There is no denying that the central event in the Hebrew Bible is the Exodus. That happened when Yahweh, through Moses, called up a hitherto loose confederation of twelve tribes as His People (“Israel”) and led them out of slavery in Egypt.

If I define “history” as the linking up of the temporal horizons of past, present, and future with a purposive goal, such that man has a meaningful sense of where he came from and where he is heading, then Sinai is what gave the Israelites that sense of history or historical destiny. The initiative in this tradition comes from God (Theocracy). It is Yahweh who called up His People. His being in the present (or presence) — his “being there” — in that and future hours of need is proven by his action. But it is his promise of deliverance in the near future and of a homeland within a generation that mark the horizon of the future, the “project” that makes this a future-looking faith.

Figure 2 capturing that “Core Event” — the historic event that defines all future and past understanding of the most significant moments in history — depicts that disclosure of the temporal horizons in three movements: (1) the present as presence; (2) the future as promise; (3) the past as what leads providentially up to the present.

What this Figure hopes to show is that it is only with the interruption by Transcendence (vertical line downward) upon profane time (the horizontal base line) that a person and/or a people would develop a sense of history. Profane time itself does not make history. Before that interruption, profane time comes across only as an inevitable flow of time from the past wherein the past appears only as a series of contingencies randomly “thrown together” with no seeming purpose except to remind man that he is a creature of circumstance. For creatures of circumstance, the present is just another ontic moment in time, not an opening to possibility; and the future holds no particular promise, being just the consequents of past actions.

Only Transcendence can open up the freedom — and with it the responsibility — of the present (1) and grant to man or to a people a purpose in life by a definite promise set in the future (2). It is that given project that then gives the random flow of profane time to date (3) a meaningful structure. The past and the future are then viewed in light of

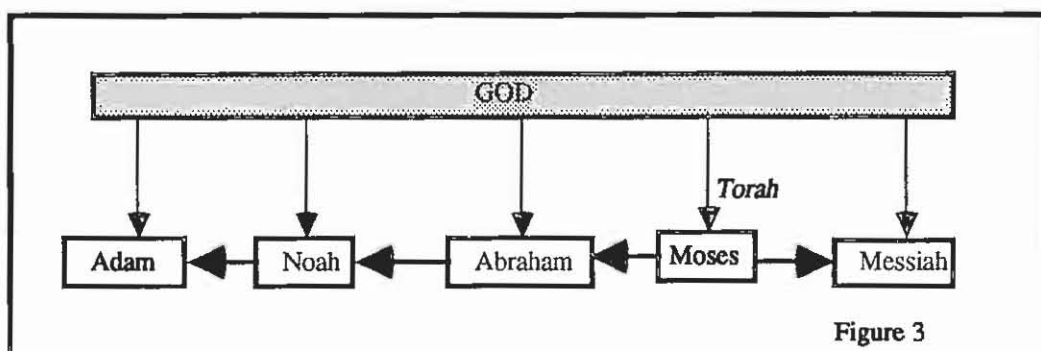
that "Core Event" (1): in terms of past prefigurations (3) and final fulfillment (2). In this Figure, the extreme ends of past and future are, respectively, Creation and Redemption. It is natural for a tradition to eventually extend that coverage of time to such ultimate ends. This is what Christianity nowadays usually means when it claims to have a linear history beginning with Creation and ending with Redemption and Destruction.

But that extension of the base line to Creation and Redemption came much later and should not be made the basis of testing if Buddhism is historical or not. The element in the "Core Event" that gave the Israelites a sense of purpose in history is the *immediate* promise of an Exodus. What that reveals is the Sovereignty of God (Theocracy) and although it is only logical that that sovereignty would be extended to cover all space and time, all of nature and all of mankind, the Israelites crossing the Red Sea were not thinking that far back to the Genesis or that far ahead to an Eschaton. And although we said that a sense of history is what unites past, present, and future, there are indications that the "new" God, the hitherto unknown-by-name Yahweh, soon had some conflicts with the old God. The people were not too happy with the new God so while Moses absented himself by staying up on Mt. Sinai, they pressed Aaron to set up the Golden Calf. Moses put down the cult with wrath and great bloodshed, but Ba'al was just a

cousin of the God El or Elohim to whom the tradition of Yahweh would be joined later. The first major alignment of present and past was, however, through the promise of Yahweh and the promise made by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that the homeland promised to the Israelites is the same home given to Abraham on his Exodus from Ur.

That story of Abraham, how historical we cannot be sure, is an example of how the "Core Event" at Sinai is seen as the major paradigm of God's intervention in history against which all major events of the past (and future) should be measured. Past covenants with God were reviewed, revised, and retold as prefigurations of Sinai, starting with Abraham, then going back to a more mythic Noah, reaching finally the anthropogenic myth of mankind as Adam. Those prefigurations, all isomorphic, are retrojected as illustrated in Figure 3.

It is God who called Abraham out of Ur. Abraham obeyed in trust and became the father of a nation. His stay in Canaan became part of the legal justification for the (re)taking of Canaan at the time of Joshua after the Exodus. The Abrahamic covenant then prefigures the Mosaic one. It was sealed, following Babylonian custom, with a sacrifice. The lamb substitutes for the first born, though the sacrifice of Isaac is kept alive in the symbolic rite of circumcision, needed for receiv-



ing the *Torah*. For his trust in God, Abraham was rewarded with the standard blessings, long life, material prosperity, and many sons.

That paradigm is replicated in the less historical story of Noah. Called away to build the Ark, Noah responded and was saved from the Flood. He thanked the Lord with a sacrifice. A dove is picked instead of a lamb, and a covenant was sent by God to man in the form of a rainbow. God promised Noah that he would not so destroy humanity again. Noah lived even longer than Abraham, prospered and multiplied. And God kept his promise not to send the flood so indiscriminately, though his wrath still could fall on whole cities after the good Lot made his escape.¹¹

One cannot help noticing that these earlier covenants seem to tell of a changing Hebraic view of man. When the *Torah* was given at Sinai, the assumption was that the Israelite nation would be able to keep the Law. Men were not so sinful as to be incapable of good. There is also little suggestion that the Hebrews suffered slavery in Egypt because of sin. It was due more to misfortune: A new Pharaoh rescinded the favorite treatment Joseph had secured. In the story of Abraham and Noah, whole cities and humanity itself are wallowing in sin as if every covenant made was only to be broken by evil men. This is a picture of faithless humanity that may be born of the post-Kingdom period of despair.

Pushed back to the garden of Eden, a fallible Adam would sin by disobeying just one prohibition — "Do not eat of the fruit." There is no explicit covenant, no animal sacrifice in the Garden, unless we count the snake as the scapegoat. By this stage, the sovereignty of God, which in the Decalogue was over man, is clearly extended to all of nature. Nature was seldom on the mind of the prophets whose points of reference were human history and society, but the Writings — the Proverbs, the Psalms like Psalm 104, and the whirlwind in the Book of Job — do look sometimes to lessons derived from nature. The expansion of the time scale (the base line in Figure 3) is related to the fall

of the Kingdoms. As the prophets criticized the cult of temples and of kings and called for a return to the justice of the Law, the old warnings about the wrath of God came also with new ideas of his patience and compassion. In the elevation of God to cosmic heights, Yahweh's sovereignty now extends to all nations and all nature. Theocracy, not possible now, was removed to the end of time, ushered in by a Messiah, a David reborn, in an eschatological Kingdom or *via* some apocalyptic figures during the final conflict between cosmic Good and cosmic Evil.

It is within that expanded world outlook that Christianity would find its own "Core Event" — a new covenant — in the Cross, from which perspective the past was judged anew. Christianity looked more to the story of Adam, the father of all man, in the past; the reversal of the Fall in the second Adam in the present; and the return of Christ the Messiah in the last days. In that understanding of history, Christianity does draw a straight line between Creation and final Redemption. Confident that only such a sense of history would produce a historically responsible faith and not finding that time-line in Buddhism, it rests sure that Buddhism cannot be historical. But it is almost unthinkable that the Buddhist does not know how to live a meaningful life in time or a purposive life in history. The question is how to make the obvious obvious.

THE DISCLOSURE OF PURPOSIVE TIME IN BUDDHISM

If the sense of history cannot be so defined by a literal belief in Creation and Redemption, but is to be sought in an interruption of Transcendence into profane time resulting in the transformation of meaningless time into purposive temporality, then our task is to look for a similar "Core Event" that marks the "Leap of Being" in the formative days of the Buddhist faith, in which Transcendence also broke into profane time and render it purposive. The event has to be the enlightenment at Bodhgaya

where the Buddha attained enlightenment (*bodhi*).

This historic event, illustrated in Figure 4, changed history itself. Before, *Māra* (*saṃsāra*, death) ruled; after, the Dharma reigns. The sovereignty of the Dharma (Buddhocracy) was a social institution after the Buddha gave men the Law (Dharma) to that kingdom and set down the *vinaya* (monastic rules) for a new brotherhood of men. The Dharma as universal Law was critical of Hindu society and would leave its mark on it. And, just as Christianity looks forward to the final fulfillment in the Second Coming, so too would Buddhism look forward to the coming of Maitreya, the future Buddha. With such an alignment of past ignorance, present awakening, and future fulfillment, can Buddhism be so ahistorical? Can this world-conquering faith be all that essentially world-renouncing?

That the Dharma was earthshaking is well told by the legends. *Māra* saw it coming and tried to stop it. The gods celebrated it with homage. And at Benares, the Wheel of Dharma is said to be set into motion anew. Even as the Buddha passed away, his *parinirvāṇa* became the midpoint of the Buddhist calendar like the Christian BC/AD. Not only that, for New Testament scholars, one can point even to a similar "two age" theory in Buddhism. The age of ignorance "has no beginning but an end"; the age of nirvana or *bodhi* "has a beginning but no end"; the objective *saṃsāra* has

"neither beginning nor end." This structure is illustrated in Figure 5. If we compare this structure at Bodhgaya with the structure of the eschatological kingdom of God commencing with the proclamation of Jesus Christ, taking note how, even as *saṃsāra* or human history persists beyond the two "Core Events," participation in the two kingdom is "already" possible though "not yet" completed, then we will have to say that the two structures are very similar.

Buddhist sense of time is, however, seldom presented this way. Most text books would say that Gautama believed in *saṃsāra*, therefore he looked for a release from history (*sic*). Sometimes the Buddha is said to be similar to the Upaniṣadic sages who, in originating the idea of karma and *saṃsāra*, first aspired for liberation from the world *via mokṣa*. But this textbook account distorts the Buddhist teaching; and it is never accepted by the Buddhist tradition — for good reasons, too.¹²

In Christianity, we do not say man feels guilty about his sins and therefore he looks for God. It is in encountering God that he realizes himself to be a sinner. It is the vertical line of Transcendence (Figure 3) interrupting the profane flow of time that reveals the latter for what it is. So the Buddhist tradition never says that Gautama looked for a way out of *saṃsāra*. An end to suffering, yes; and that is possible. An end to an endless *saṃsāra*, probably no. The tradition distinctly remembers the

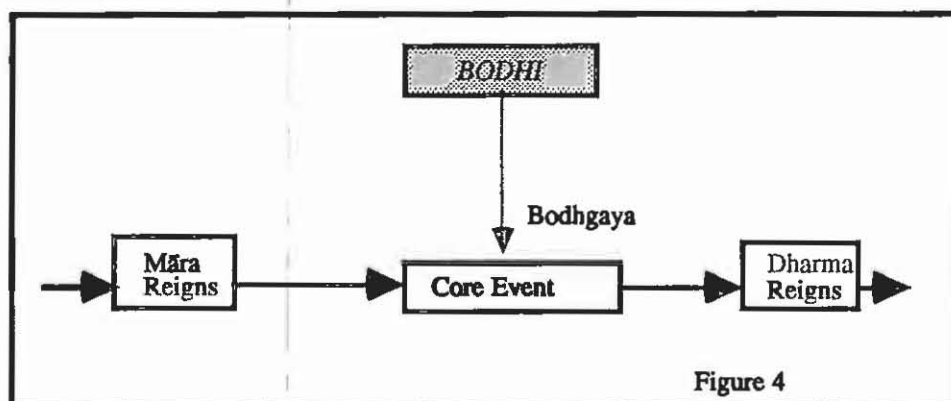
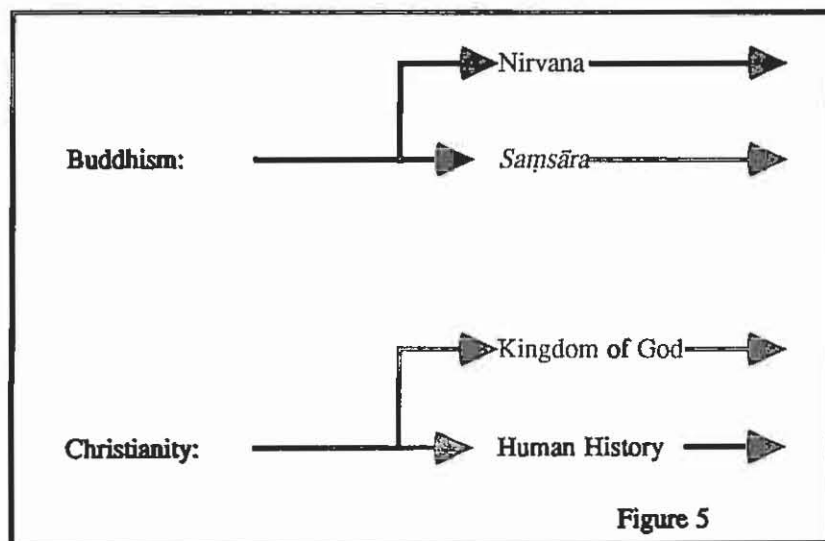


Figure 4



Buddha gaining an insight into past and future lives only upon his enlightenment — not before — because what he found then are the cause and condition leading to *samsāric* suffering. That knowledge was not known to the Upaniṣadic sages, or anyone before. In other words, the whole idea of *samsāra* as a structured reality (*i.e.*, instead of an inexplicable set of contingencies bearing no meaning or purpose) came only at Bodhgaya. Once the experience of Buddha's nirvana discloses *samsāra* in its karmic structure (the twelve *nidānas*), we have then that orderly flow from ignorance to old age and death (till now) that can be, henceforth, reversed (*via* the counter-series of the twelve chains).

So just as God reminds man how sinful the latter is, it is nirvana that discloses the reality of *samsāra*. Not *vice versa*. And to consider Buddhism and the Upaniṣads to be both teaching the same world-denial is to forget how the Buddha rejected the Brahmanical idea of an eternal *ātman* untouched by the karma of the world. In rejecting *ātman*, the Buddha rejected the Gnostic solution: pneumatic world-flight. To proclaim *anātman* is to accept that everything is karma and that liberation

requires facing this "terror of history" and passing through it. That is why the Buddha lists nirvana as the fourth mark of all existent things: impermanence, suffering, no-self, and nirvana. What that means is that in Buddhism, unlike in Hinduism, there is no confusion of Nature and Man. Nature goes through eternal cycles but man, a product of ever-changing karma, never exactly relives the same life twice. The Buddha *jātakas* know this: no two past lives of the Buddha are ever the same. Hinduism believes the cosmos to go through cycles of Creation and Destruction. Buddhism never really does. Buddhist therapy considers human suffering as changeable but the material conditions of *samsāra* ("with no beginning and no end") may not be within its purview.

If Buddhism is so "historical" as alleged here, one might ask, what is this about the Six Buddhas of the Past? These six past Buddhas lived in time preceding the present aeon that produced a Śākyamuni. They are virtual clones of him, being born princes who left home to sit down under various species of Bodhi trees gaining the same Noble Truths thereby. Before too much is made of them, they should be seen as Buddhism's equiva-

lents of a Noah or an Adam — retrojections of the “Core Events” at Bodhgaya backward in time. The point is that just as the sovereignty of God should be there in the Beginning, so the sovereignty of the Dharma must be warranted by the presence, in those six aeons of Buddhas before our Buddha. The historical sense in Buddhism — the magnetizing of meaningless time into meaningful temporality — is dependent on recognizing the sovereignty of the Dharma, but not on the number of past Buddhas. If science should discover still more galaxies that the Hebrew never dreamt of, God’s sovereignty would still rule over them all as their Creator. The Christian Theocracy does not stand or fall on the number of galaxies, six more or six less, either.

There are, of course, differences between the sovereignty of God and the sovereignty of the Buddha-Dharma. Buddhas do not create the world of suffering; they passed away in nirvana and therefore there cannot be one Buddha for all times; and the past Buddhas are clones, not prefigurations, of Śākyamuni such that there is, in this Theravāda series, no progressive disclosure of *bodhi* as there is, in the *Bible*, a progressive revelation of God.

THE OTHER POWER IN THE VOW OF AMITĀBHA.

We cannot lay out all of the differences between the Christian and the Buddhist preunderstanding of the world, but there are two objections pertinent to the parallel we drew between the two traditions earlier. The “Core Event” in Christianity has God calling Man or becoming Man; the arrows are downward in Figures 2 and 3. The “Core Event” in Buddhism is a spiritual ascend; the arrows are drawn pointing upward (Figure 6). Downward grace still goes with the prophetic call to change the world according to a divine will; upward ascend still suggests an inner flight of the spirit. The metaphor of “kingdom” might have been applied by the tradition to describe nirvana, but it is hard to see how nirvana is communal and still harder to see how it is empowered to change the world.

To track down a possibility within Mahayana for a downward grace coming from an empowered and communal Other, we will have to acknowledge that Buddhism was never a homogeneous tradition (as neither was Christianity) and to see how the Pure Land faith in Amitābha could and did provide that possibility.

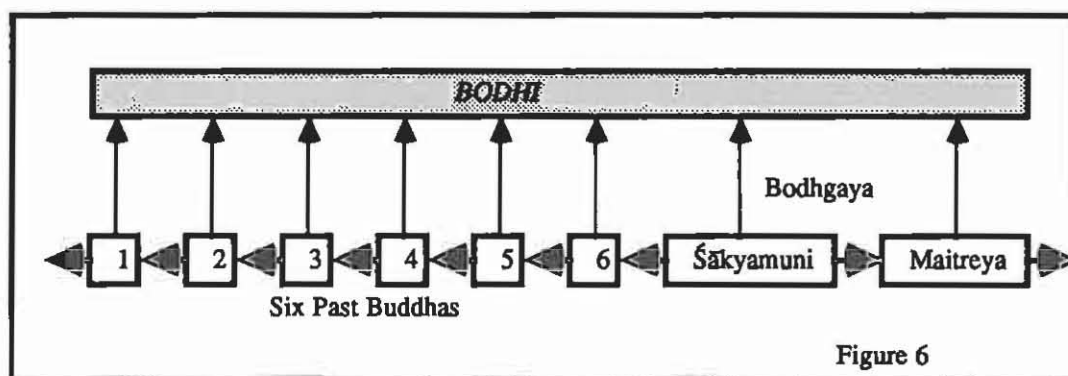


Figure 6

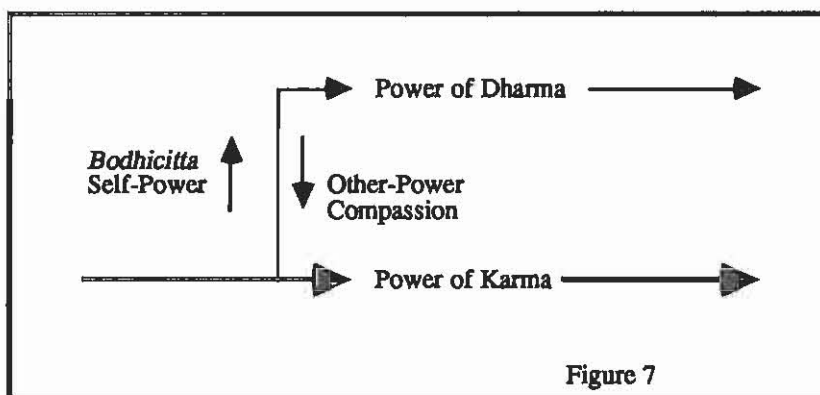


Figure 7

Simply put, in Mahayana, that arrow becomes reversible as shown in Figure 7. The bodhisattva has to arouse the aspiration for enlightenment (*bodhicitta*) as well as to transfer all merits to others out of the commitment to compassion (*karuṇā*). There is still the upward flight to nirvana but there is now also the downward return to *samsāra*. The *bodhicitta* represents that “Leap of Being” upward: It is in fact said that once aroused, enlightenment is a *de facto* surety. (This is known as the “awakening of faith” and the “already” of *hongaku* even if enlightenment should be still the “not yet” of incipient *shigaku*.) Likewise, the vow of compassion once made, it is destined to fulfill itself. Although traditionally, all Mahayana followers as potential bodhisattvas must replicate these two aspects of wisdom and compassion which make up the “Core Event” of all bodhisattvas that went before, it happens that the Pure Land tradition in Japan put total trust in Other Power of Amitābha to the exclusion of self-power. Hōnen had ruled out the availability of *bodhicitta* and then Shinran considered all merit cultivated for birth in Pure Land to come, not from the aspirant, but from Amitābha himself. The consequence is that Jōdo Shin approximates the Protestant understanding of faith and grace.

At the same time, the impotent nirvana of Theravāda has also been subverted by the preferred absolute of *bodhi* in Mahayana. And

whereas the Mahayana *Prajñā* (wisdom) tradition cannot avoid the absence of attributes for Emptiness, the “*avadāna-vāda*” mythic lores, devoted not to explicating Dharma but glorifying the Buddha, have lavished the latter with personalist details. These *avadānas* do not concern themselves with *ātman*, *anātman*, *pudgala*, *abhidharma* or the various types of *śūnyatā*. It talks of the sublime in the language of the mundane; it encourages simple folk testimonials like the *Ōjōden* and the *Myōkōninden*. It also depicts the pure and blissful land of Buddhas. Anyone looking at these in medieval paintings would have to admit that such residence of saints and commoners is communal by nature. It is possible that from such mythopoeic language was developed the philosophical idea of there being infinite, good *guṇas* in the matrix of the One so enlightened (*buddhagotra*, *tathāgatagarbha*: buddha-nature). The end result is that in the Pure Land tradition, the pious can draw on that store of infinite Dharma, the power of which, through Amitābha’s grace, can cancel out the power of karma and transport man to that pure community (*ōsō*) and return him to the world (*gensō*) as its agents (prophets of change), preaching; and enjoining congregational worship and comradeship (*dōbō*).

But granted there is personalism, communalism and grace in the Pure Land faith, how — asks the Christian — can a belief in a Buddha that is not

historical procure a historical faith? That, in short, is John Cobb's question. Cobb could align God and the Christ *Logos* with Process/*Pratītya-samutpāda* and Amitābha, respectively. However, Christ *Logos* has its concrete manifestation in a historical Jesus, whereas Amitābha has only a shadow in a fictive Dharmākara.

ANSWER TO COBB

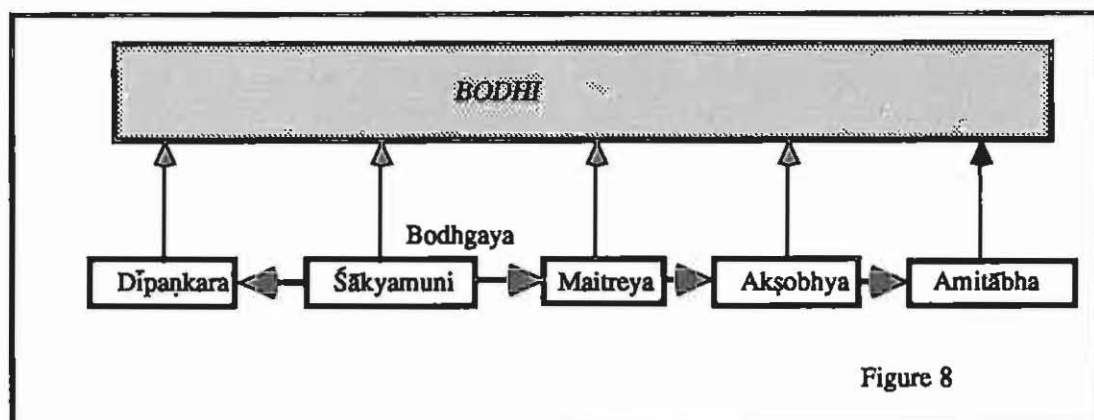
To answer Cobb and to make the case for Buddhism, I have to challenge the parameters of his discourse a little. Christian theism is predicated upon the idea of personhood. Personhood is the highest expression of man and God. Buddhism does not deny the sacredness of the person. You might hate the evil action but you are not to hate the evil actor. But this does mean that the Buddhist, ever since the Buddha denied the Hindu *ātman*, does tend to analyze personality in terms of the sum of its actions, whether it be the simple forces of karma (in Theravāda) or the complex process of *pratītya-samutpāda* (in Mahayana).

Although devotion to Amitābha is person-to-person, the same attention to what makes a person a person would lead the pietist to say that he is saved not by Amitābha the person but by the power of his Vow (*ganriku*). It is the Vow that saves and the Vow that creates Amitābha. This is not to be confused with mystical impersonalism, any more than saying "God is Love" is meant to turn God into an abstract noun. It is just that in Buddhism a primacy is granted the power behind the personality ("Compassion manifested as Amitābha") while in Christianity, it is the reverse ("God who Loves"). Neither tradition denies the person nor the dynamics and one should no more accuse the other of impersonalism than the other accused the one with fixation with pure *ātman*. Still, I do not doubt that for most Christians, the idea that Amitābha as the personification of Eternal Enlightenment and Dharmākara as the hypostasis (Latin, *persona*) or simply the sum of the Store of (good) Dharma would still appear alien.

But if we have to look for a grounding of Amitābha as the *Logos* in history, as Cobb would us do, then the choice is not Dharmākara who is the pre-existence of Amitābha, but rather Śākyamuni who is considered the *nirmāṇakāya* of Amitābha as *sambhogakāya*. The manifestation of Eternal Light and Eternal Life in the finite life and in this impure earth is Śākyamuni. As priority belongs to Christ over Jesus, so too without Amitābha, there would be no Śākyamuni. This is the ontological (*Trikāya*) answer to Cobb. There is still the teleological answer possible.

To one who might still ask, "How is Amitābha himself grounded in history? Does Dharmākara not belong to a different time-line prior to Śākyamuni? Does not Amitābha's domain, though present to us, lie in a different world-sphere?" the answer would be that Amitābha is the fulfillment of the enlightenment that is Śākyamuni. Previously we have shown how the past Buddhas are retrojections of Bodhgaya and how as virtual clones of Śākyamuni, there is no sense of progressive disclosure or revelation. Only Maitreya the future Buddha may be said to be a step beyond Śākyamuni since he will be born son of a *cakravartin* who will bring the world under one rule much as the Second Coming of Christ would conjoin both terrestrial and celestial triumph. Maitreya also represents *Maitrī*, *Mettā* or Friendliness, an anticipation of Mahayana compassion or *karuṇā*.

Now in Mahayana, Buddhas are no longer just clones of one another. That aspect is now moved up to an eternal Dharmakāya. Meanwhile, Buddhas in their "common vow" are the same but in their "specific vows" are differentiated. This makes for divided functions as well as a chance for progression. Thus, in the series (one out of many) shown in Figure 8, the first Buddha is Dīpaṅkara, the "Initiator of Enlightenment," valued for starting Śākyamuni on his way. The Mahayana Śākyamuni shows also gradual maturation toward full bodhisattvic compassion. He reaches transcendental heights of power in the Lotus Sutra.



Maitreya has still more greater compassion in Mahayana, but he would be superseded by others in terms of power of immediate deliverance. Though of a different realm, Akṣobhya the "Immovable" is a Buddha in the present, an exemplar of yogic rigor and one of the first Buddhas to create a pure environment (Pure Land) for others, yogins primarily, to practice in relatively greater peace and quiet Finally, Amitābha of the Eternal Light lets shine its light on sages and commoners alike. In his still more comfortable Happy Land, he is the final demonstration of that cosmic love natural to the enlightened ones. That love was present already in Śākyamuni, if not as fully.

If the Christian can claim the New Testament supersedes the Old or if the Muslim can claim the *Koran* supersedes the *Bible*, then faith in Amitābha supersedes faith in Śākyamuni. The Pure Land sutras have the same last word as the equally fantastic *Book of Revelation* telling of still better things to come.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

It is a theological dogma that only faith in Jesus would make man more historically responsive. But it has never been proved — certainly not by the record of history — that that must be so. We

have tried to show in this essay how all historic religions are historically responsive, once Transcendence interrupts profane time and "magnetized" past, present and future by giving it order and direction. It is that "Core Event" and the reliving of it by the tradition that re-creates that sense of purposive history, even as the paradigmatic event is being extended forward and backward to come up with a total history.

We then argue that although Buddhism knows a different time-scale, Bodhgaya was that "Core Event" that defines all events in this tradition. When that inner journey upward to nirvana is sufficiently modified by an ideology of communal grace, there is no rule to say that it cannot produce the same eschatological tension as what one finds in primitive Christianity. So long as the Pure Land pietist connects up with the "Core Event" at Bodhgaya via his response to the "Core Event" of the Vow of Amitābha, he does not lose himself in some prehistory of Amitābha as Dharmākara but rather grounds his faith solidly in history via the historical Śākyamuni, the *nirmāṇakāya* of Amitābha. (Jōdo Shin followers do that via their two saints of Shinran and Rennyo.)

In the end, what constitutes History? Surely not the simple Creation-to-Redemption linearity that has been shaken in this century. Maybe the

Sovereignty of God that inspires that view is still a clue to an answer. But linearity by itself is not any necessarily better than circles or clones or what not. A linear history with a beginning and an end but without any moral purpose is not preferable to a Sovereignty of the Dharma, Buddhist style. Maybe ultimately the test of historicity of a religion is not some cosmic timetable but in the everyday world (*Lebenswelt*). Maybe the test lies in seeing what kind of person the religion nurtures, what quality of faith it inspires, and how well its actions serve the world and the times.

FOOTNOTES

1. For a clear and persistent critique of Buddhism (and other religions) based on the historical criterion, see Hans Kung, *Christianity and World Religions* (New York: Doubleday, 1986).

2. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Garland Publisher, 1985).

3. John B. Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Buddhism and Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

4. Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). A comparison of Nishitani's approach to Time with Heidegger's is included within my "Tanabe and the Dialectics of Meditation: A Critique" in Taitetsu Unno and James Heisig, ed., *The Religious Philosophy of Tanabe Hajime* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1990), pp. 256-76.

5. In *Pacific World*, New Series, No. 3 (Fall 1989), pp. 5-12.

6. Georg W. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); a summary and a critique of Hegel can be found in Hans Kung, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today* (New York: Random House, 1981).

7. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1977).

8. Robert N. Bellah, "Religious Revolution," now included in his *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

9. Though the Buddha's critique of Hinduism is covered by even introductory books on world religions, the most provocative thesis (dealing, however, only with Theravada materials) comes from Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

10. "The idea that the future of man or the destiny of a dynasty depended upon virtue rather than the pleasure of some mysterious, spiritual power marked a radical development from the Shang to the Chou. (Significantly, the word *te* [virtue] is not found on the oracle bones on which Shang ideas and event are recorded, but it is a key word in early Chou documents." So notes Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook of Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 3.

More recent scholarship (from David Nivison at Stanford and David Kneightley at Berkeley) has amended the statement cited above, but the tenor of the change from premoral gods to moral Heaven expressed herein still holds.

11. Materials on the covenant at the time of Noah — the dove and the rainbow — are indebted to a conversation I had with Rabbi Pinchas Giller.

12. This idea that samsara did not necessitate nirvana, but rather, the encounter with nirvana disclosed the nature of nirvana, is something I learned from Nishitani's *op. cit.*