

PRAYER FROM A BUDDHIST/SWEDENBORGIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

My purpose in submitting this excerpt to *New Church Life* as an article for publication is to help to illustrate, in part, how Buddhist concepts can collaborate nicely with those revealed in the theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. I believe it is in keeping with Swedenborg's doctrine of charity to strive to discover the commonalities which exist among the various and divergent religious/spiritual traditions that have been provided by the Lord for the salvation of the human race. The increasing perfection of heaven is dependent on the growth of its diversity, and the practice of finding, focusing on, and connecting with the good in others is essential to the emergence of the Lord's kingdom on earth. Can we benefit from learning about the spiritual views and practices of others? Considering what Swedenborg says about the "Gentiles" in the following citation, how could one think otherwise? "... [M]ore from the Gentiles are saved than from Christians; for those Gentiles who have thought kindly of their neighbor and have wished well to him, receive the truths of faith in the other life better than those who are called Christians, and acknowledge the Lord more than Christians do. For nothing is more delightful and blessed to the angels than to instruct those who come from the earth into the other life" (*Arcana Coelestia* 2284:5).

Excerpt

Is it possible to speak of prayer without speaking of God? In the Afterword by David Loy to D. T. Suzuki's *Swedenborg: Buddha of the North*, Loy comments: "Inasmuch as God is infinite, all our conceptions of Him must miss the mark, but inasmuch as we need a conception of Him, the best image is that

Excerpted from *Spiritual Practice and Consciousness*, (Finkeldey,2007)

of a man. To a Buddhist, this is reminiscent of the old nineteenth-century argument that since a religion must have a God, Buddhism cannot be a religion. “The question this begs is: is it possible to have a religion (such as Buddhism) that criticizes all conceptions of the Divine, including the image of God as human, yet still functions as a religion because its spiritual practices nonetheless promote the divine influx?” (Suzuki, 1996, pp.103-104)

I find it reasonable that Buddhism “promotes the divine influx” by means of its practice of love towards the neighbor (through the cultivation of compassion and loving-kindness) and by means of its disciplined use of the mind in meditative practice. Buddhism is essentially a subjective exploration of the nature of reality and of the mind (by means of the mind) in meditative states (Gyatso, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 2005, p. 141). Further, Thich Nhat Hanh explains his perspective on the Divine as follows: “In Buddhism we do not speak of God, we do not speak of creation, we do not speak of revelation, we do not speak of redemption or punishment. In Buddhism, what is equivalent to God is Mind, especially the collective mind. Mind is the ground of everything.... If we understand God as the ground of being from which everything is manifested, then our understanding is not different from the Buddhist vision of mind; because in the teaching of Buddhism, mind is the artist who designs everything, especially the collective mind” (Hanh, 2006a, First Question).

This Buddhist concept of God as Mind, as the ground of being from which everything is manifested, is derived in part from the Buddhist philosophical concept of “no-self” (or emptiness). This notion refers to the idea that all things are empty of a separate existence. This is simply a way of saying, among other things, that everything is connected to everything else. Nothing has an entirely independent existence. In Buddhism, everything is

thought of as being interdependent. In western thought there is a tendency to philosophically separate humans from God, turning each into separate entities. This has its truth of sorts. The Lord is divine. People are human. The Lord is infinite. People are finite (and eternal). The Lord is the Creator. People (and everything else not divine) are that which is created. The “rub” in this western view, in my opinion, is that it tends to incline people to see themselves as being separated from God. Swedenborg explains that the Divine is indivisibly One, and yet is in every created thing apart from time and space (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 4, 59, 69-76, and 285).

There are other conflict-causing glitches in the western Judeo-Christian “God-concept” when seen from a Swedenborgian viewpoint. For example, the Jewish tradition denies the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ. In their struggle for influence over free-thinking minds, Christian Fundamentalism and other forms of Christianity run the risk of tending to divide the one God into a committee of three equal Gods by destroying the right understanding of the Divine Trinity and the necessary oneness of the Divine. This goes hand-in-hand with the Reformed Christian doctrine of salvation by faith alone, which makes introspection and true repentance irrelevant. Consider also the propensity for conflict currently manifest between Islam and the Judeo-Christian west—in the name of God and the defense of the self. Much better is the Buddhist teaching of emptiness. We are empty of a separate existence—we “inter-are”. Or, as Swedenborg expressed it, “we are because God is” (*Divine Providence* 46).

The no-self, or emptiness idea is one of the deep teachings of Buddhism. It is deep in the sense that it refers to the inner dimension of reality, rather than the phenomenal world at the outer natural level. In the phenomenal world there is the very clear and powerful experience of a “self” distinguishable from

other “selves”. It is therefore remarkable that the Buddha (and his followers), through deep meditative introspection and apparently without the help of a “Swedenborg-type” divine revelation, could reach the deep insight that everything is connected. This insight is very close to the idea that, “we are because God is” (*Divine Providence* 46). It is the knowledge of this interdependence of all things that fuels the powerful loving-kindness energy and practice in Buddhism.

Buddhist practitioners are highly inner self-managed individuals who tend to be thought of as being more involved with meditation than with prayer. In a recent *Psychology Today* article Katherine Ellison notes: “Practiced Buddhist meditators deploy their brains with exceptional skill. Drawing on 2,500 years of mental technology—techniques for paying careful attention to the workings of their own minds—they develop expertise in controlling the flow of their mental life, avoiding the emotional squalls that often compel us to take personal feelings oh, so personally, and clearing new channels for awareness, calm, compassion and joy. Their example holds the possibility that we can all choose to modulate our moods, regulate our emotions and increase cognitive capacity—that we can all become high-performance users of our own brains” (Ellison, 2006, p. 72).

Although Buddhists are most well-known for skills in meditation, it should be noted that Buddhists also pray. This is made clear by Thich Nhat Hanh in his delightful treatise on prayer entitled *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice* (Hanh, 2006c). In the introduction to this work, written by Larry Dossey, an author and medical doctor who advocates prayer in the practice of medicine, prayer is defined with a question: “What is prayer but communication with the Absolute, from whence we arose, with whom we are connected, and to whom we shall return...? Prayer is... a bridge

to the Absolute” (Hanh, 2006b, pp. 9 & 13). As I mentioned earlier with emphasis, Buddhism is profoundly non-theistic. Why, then, would Dossey, in his introduction to this Buddhist commentary on prayer, capitalize “Absolute”? Indeed, why would the Buddhist author himself, whom I cited previously as saying “In Buddhism we do not speak of God” (see above), speak of God in the following quote? “In Buddhism, we know that the one we are praying to lies inside us as well as outside of us. Buddha lies in our heart and so does God. It is a mistake to think that God is only outside” (Hanh, 2006b, p. 57, emphasis added).

This statement by Thich Nhat Hanh, one of my primary representatives of Buddhism, is a virtual echo of Swedenborg’s comment in *Divine Love and Wisdom* regarding the angelic view of the Lord. He writes: “[T]hese things can be little understood by a man who thinks about God from space. For God is everywhere and yet not in space. Thus He is both within an angel and outside him. Consequently an angel can see God, that is, the Lord, both within and outside himself, within himself when he thinks from love and wisdom, outside himself when he thinks about love and wisdom.... Let every man beware lest he fall into that abhorrent heresy that God has infused Himself into men, and that He is in them and no longer in Himself, when yet God is everywhere both within and outside man; for He is in all space apart from space.... [I]f He were in man [not apart from space]... man then could even think himself to be God. So abominable is this heresy, that in the spiritual world it stinks like a dead body” (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 130).

The only real difference between the two statements is that Hanh warns against thinking that God is only outside of us while Swedenborg warns against thinking that God is “infused... into men” thus dividing an indivisible and omnipresent Divinity.

I believe that the answer to the question as to how a Buddhist

can speak of God is that the non-theism of Buddhism is not the atheism with which we in the west are generally familiar. According to Webster, “[A]n atheist rejects all religious belief and denies the existence of God; an agnostic questions the existence of God, heaven, etc. in the absence of material proof and in unwillingness to accept supernatural revelation” (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 86). I have not found an authoritative modern source that categorically states that Buddhism denies the existence of God, or, is anti-God. I assert that Buddhism belongs more in the category of agnosticism, as defined above, than atheism.

Hanh offers a view of prayer as a spiritual practice that has been tempered and influenced by his extraordinary life and practice as a Buddhist meditator and teacher. It is a view that looks at prayer as a means of transcending the self in its space/time milieu and touching the interdependence and oneness of all things (Hanh, 2006b, pp. 42-43). This interdependence and oneness of all things, I assert, is established by the Lord’s presence apart from space and time as the necessary element in every created thing (see Swedenborg, 1969, *Divine Love and Wisdom* 53 & 285). Hanh explains that there are many elements of effective prayer; but there are two that, in his view, are the most important. The first is, “to establish a relationship between ourselves and the one we are praying to” (Hanh, 2006c, p. 41). The second of his two most important elements of prayer is the “energy” of “love, mindfulness, and right concentration” (Hanh, 2006b, p. 43).

Hanh stresses the importance of visualization in prayer (Hanh, 2006b, pp. 30 & 42). This kind of visualization establishes the relationship between the one who is praying, the one who is being prayed to, and sometimes the one who is being prayed for. From his Buddhist tradition, he offers a visualization ‘gatha’ that is like a small verse designed to remind us of that relationship:

“The one who bows and the one who is bowed to are both, by nature, empty. Therefore the communication between us is inexpressibly perfect. (Hanh, 2006b, p. 42, emphasis added)

“Empty”, that is, of a separate existence. Visualization is also essential in Swedenborgian prayer. In his work entitled *True Christian Religion*, Swedenborg stresses the importance of visualizing the Lord in His Human form: “Linking with an invisible God is like linking the sight of the eye with the expanse of the universe, the bounds of which are not to be seen. Or it is like looking out in the middle of an ocean, when the gaze falls on air and sea and is frustrated. But linking with a visible God is like seeing a man in the air or the sea opening his arms and inviting you into his embrace. For any linking of God with man must also be a reciprocal linking of man with God; and this second reciprocity is only possible with a visible God” (Op. Cit. 787).

Hanh seems to echo something of this Swedenborgian idea in his work on prayer: “You will not find God in an abstract idea. This is something very important. God is here for us through very concrete things” (Hanh, 2006b, p. 71).

The second most important idea offered by Thich Nhat Hanh regarding effective prayer is the idea of cultivating the “energy” of “love, mindfulness, and right concentration” in prayer. He writes that, “when you have mindfulness, then you have concentration.” He defines “mindfulness” as being “the real presence of our body and our mind. Our body and our mind are directed toward one point, the present moment....To pray effectively, our body and mind must dwell peacefully in the present moment” (Hanh, 2006b, p. 43). The real presence of the body in prayer is augmented by “prostration”. Hanh advises assuming a prostrate position with one’s body when praying. He says, “It is a position that diminishes the ego, opens one up, and brings one close to the earth” (Hanh, 2006b, p. 63). This is

necessary, he says, because, “It is essential for prayer that body, speech, and mind are one, and are all truly present. It is not enough to pray with words; effective prayer also takes mental and physical concentration” (Hanh, 2006b, p. 63).

So, dwelling peacefully in the present moment, with the real presence of body and mind, and praying from love while visualizing our connection with the one to whom we are praying summarizes Hanh’s Buddhist view of effective prayer.

In his explication of the Buddhist qualities of the (Christian) Lord’s prayer, Hanh reminds us to avoid trivialities and to remember what the true purpose of prayer is. He does so by asking: “What are we looking for? We are looking for something very great. We are not asking God to let the sun shine so we can have a good picnic....We are looking for the kingdom of God. Our first aim in prayer is the kingdom of God” (Hanh, 2006b, p. 75).

Clearly, Hanh’s view of prayer incorporates his life-long experience as a meditator, to the point that his model of prayer looks very similar to meditation itself. Before moving on to the topic of meditation, I would like to add one more thing from Thich Nhat Hanh that is critical to the thesis of this paper – and that is his idea of the importance of healthy communities and environments. He explains: “When we live in an unhealthy environment, the negative thinking, speaking, and actions of that environment influence us, and sooner or later we may fall sick. Living in an environment where people seek only to satisfy sensual desires can cause collective suffering, despair, and depression.... If we want to have good health, we have to be determined to develop a good environment....A larger community that is committed to spiritual, physical, and mental health is our best opportunity for healing” (Hanh, 2006b, p. 99).

And specifically regarding prayer done as a community: “In the Buddhist tradition, we know that praying as a community, a

“Sangha,” is stronger than praying as an individual....When we simultaneously practice sending spiritual energy, then that energy is magnified and much more effective.... When the whole community prays with us, it can be a significant moment in our lives. We are one of the Sangha who is praying. Our own undivided attention is a key to open the door of the ultimate reality, and the undivided attention of our friends in the practice is an even greater key” (Hanh, 2006b, p. 55).

Whether one is an early Christian, a Swedenborgian, or a Buddhist, prayer plays a vital role in spiritual development and thus in consciousness enhancement. It has tremendous value for the individual and for the group, as a result of its power to conjoin both individuals and groups— not only with each other but also with Ultimate Reality—which is the Lord.

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Attention All Readers of *New Church Life*.

I am very happy that my article, “*New Church Education for People with Special Challenges*,” was printed in the May issue of the *Life*, because it involves a subject close to my heart.

However, in the electronic transfer from computer to computer, some errors and omissions occurred. Readers will be able to mentally add missing quotation marks and dashes, but I must correct one serious error caused by their spell-check program.

In line 7 of the first paragraph (p. 176), I am trying to indicate that some labels are not very meaningful. The word in question should have said “normal” rather than abnormal. That part of the sentence should read, “...she came with big ideas about learning and playing along with everyone else in our class of ‘normal’ children.”

Sincerely, Kit Rogers.