

Swedenborg and Buddhism

A talk given by Walter Mason

We'll start with a short period of meditation.

During the meditation I will read a short fragment from the Avatamsaka Sutra, one of the Buddhist holy books.

“Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net that stretches out infinitely in all directions... There is a single glittering jewel in each eye of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in all dimensions, the jewels are infinite in number... In its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number... Each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels.... There is an infinite reflecting process occurring...”

You've just heard a famous excerpt from the Avatamsaka, or “Flower Adornment” Sutra, describing the interconnectedness of all things – all beings, all states of mind, and, most importantly for us, all concepts. Nothing arises by itself; nothing exists unconnected to anything else. And there can be no cause without effect.

Each of us is connected, and each thing we do, each action we take, has an unavoidable cause and effect. Each idea, too, is never completely original. Like the jewels in Indra's Net, the shining ideas of the great spiritual masters reflect each other, their brilliance bounces off each other and reflect infinitely the age old spiritual truths that form the basis of each and every philosophical system.

Thich Nhat Hanh alerts us to the marvel of Indra's Net, noticing how “each jewel suspended in the great cosmic net reflects the image of the other jewels, creating infinite reflections of light.” This image of Indra's Net alerts us to the fact that never, at any moment, are we alone. That each of us is a jewel, reflecting God's love and the wisdom and beauty of all of humanity, of all creation.

The exercise of comparative religion, of finding common ground in religious expression, has fallen somewhat out of fashion. It has been important to recognise the particularity and the uniqueness of spiritual traditions, but it has also led to a situation where each person feels the need to protect their own little piece of spiritual turf from any encroaching ideas. The aforementioned Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh tells the story of attending a conference on religion at which the various attendees were at great pains to explain that, while they saw value in people of different religions sharing their visions, they did not wish to see traditions merged. One of the delegates

said that “we are here to admire the individual fruits of spiritual practice, but not to make a fruit salad.” Thich Nhat Hanh stood up to address the audience and, after a moments Zen-like silence he smiled at them all and said “But fruit salad can be absolutely delicious!”

So I’ll state my possibly controversial position at the outset. I am someone who seeks to explore the common ground of religion. More than common ground, I believe the way forward in a multi-cultural nation and a globalised world is in shared spiritual practice, in deep and fundamental meetings of spiritual ideas and in the active, living practice of shared – and yes, even combined – traditions. I employ with trepidation a term that has much currency in the contemporary academic world, though it may be used within that most maligned of disciplines, cultural studies. The term I embrace with enthusiasm is *bricolage*. For the strict Anglophones in the audience I will provide a definition - something made or put together using whatever materials happen to be available. The essence of *bricolage* is in the appropriation of old, possibly too familiar, things and giving them a whole new life by associating them with something new, or something recently discovered, or something with which they wouldn’t normally be associated. So bear with me while I explore a potential *bricolage* and tread lightly across the exciting shared territory between the theology of Emanuel Swedenborg and the teachings of Buddhism.

My own journey to exploring Swedenborg’s ideas came via Buddhism, and via an intense involvement in Buddhist life and culture for the past 15 years. I have sat at the feet of masters, I have chanted sutras and recited the Buddhist Rosary, I have sat through gruelling meditation retreats and helped organise joyous festivals celebrating key moments in the Buddhist year. I have always remained impressed by the intellectual freedom and the genuine spiritual open-heartedness of practitioners of all Buddhist traditions, followers at all levels of society and with all different manners of understanding. It has seemed that there is something in Buddhism which encourages this outward thinking, this open mindedness, this great flowering of what Swedenborg would call *free will*. The basis of this is most certainly doctrinal – the Buddha himself, in his famous Kalama Sutta, urged his followers to question and test all philosophical positions – even his own! The essence of the Kalama Sutta is this: The Buddha was questioned by the people of a small village, who had been subject to consecutive visits by a variety of religious teachers, all of them teaching something very different, and all of them laying claim to an exclusive insight into spiritual truth. Each teacher had claimed that theirs was the only way (does this sound familiar?) and had urged the people of the village to accept it. The villagers were understandably confused, and asked the Buddha – himself little more than another of those spiritual masters travelling through town – how they might genuinely examine these claims to exclusive truth. Now here was

a perfect opportunity for the Buddha to hang up his own shingle, to tell the perplexed villagers that HIS was the one true source of wisdom, and that everyone else had been a fraud. Instead he proceeded to instruct them as follows:

"Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, 'The monk is our teacher.' Kalamas, when you yourselves know: 'These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,' enter on and abide in them."

(Soma Thera Translation)

It is very difficult indeed to find the same degree of spiritual freedom in any of the Western traditions – indeed I had despaired of ever finding it, much as I wanted to. Until, that is, I began to examine more closely the ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg, and discovered at last a thinker whose commitment to intellectual honesty and the cultivation of a true spiritual wisdom could match Sakyamuni Buddha's.

Faith Alone is not Enough

Like the Buddha, Swedenborg recognised that what one believes is of absolutely no significance while one does not act upon those beliefs. To put one's hand over one's heart and declare oneself to be a deeply spiritual person counts for little when you shout at the bus driver on the way home from church. It is action which is of the essence, not philosophical positions.

Swedenborg and Buddhism

This discovery of connections between Swedenborg and Buddhism is not, of course, my own. That great populariser of Zen Buddhism in the West, D. T. Suzuki was a great admirer of Swedenborg's thinking, and translated some of his books into Japanese. He also wrote a long essay on the Buddhist parallels in Swedenborg's theology called *Swedenborg: Buddha of the North*.

There is no evidence that Swedenborg had any contact with or knowledge of Buddhism, on either the physical or spiritual planes. It would seem that, in the tradition of all the truly great spiritual thinkers, Swedenborg arrived at these universal ideas entirely on his own. Through contemplation he seems to have tapped in to that great Universal source of wisdom that has so deeply, and so

similarly, affected all of the great mystics and philosophers. That a man so separated geographically, philosophically and historically from Buddhist ideas should have arrived at some of the incredibly Buddhist conclusions that he did points to the existence of an eternal and all-wise universal force that is available for all of us to access. The Buddha may have called it nirvana or sunyata or dhammakaya, Swedenborg called it God and Heaven, but the wisdom revealed was essentially the same.

No Fixed Self

The idea that there is no fixed self, that the ego is a delusion is probably one of the most confronting notions in Buddhism. I have discussed it with devout Christians and staunchly materialist atheists and both have found the idea terrifying. Indeed, I have noticed in recent years that the ego is having something of a comeback. In spiritual circles I have overheard people say “Of course, the idea that we need to overcome our ego is just nonsense – and downright impossible.” Not so, said the Buddha. Indeed, the idea that there is nothing that can really be pointed to and called the self is a central one in Buddhist philosophy. The doctrine is called *anatta* – not self – and realising that this is at the very heart of our physical existence is the first step on the road to enlightenment. When materialists argued that the existence of a self was obvious and irrefutable, the Buddha pointed to a nearby stream and said: “There is a stream – it is inarguably so. We can drink from its water, bathe in its shallows – plunge into it and you will certainly get wet. But what is the essence of that stream? Is it not changing, fundamentally and completely from moment to moment? From one second to the next, isn’t the state of that stream in constant flux and change? Can you cup your hand and extract some of the water and say this is the essence of the stream? Nonsense – the moment you do this it is not even a stream, we do not even recognise it as such.

Wilson Van Dusen, that brilliant and endlessly fascinating writer, a noted Swedenborg scholar and a mystic in his own right, suggests that Swedenborg also was hinting at this idea when he raised the problem of *proprium*. Swedenborg suggested that the things we love, the things we cling to and point to as being emblematic of self are in fact illusions; self made follies that serve only to distract us from our true, divine nature. We think: “This is our self” but our self-love is deceiving us. Far from being real, the *proprium* – may I now call it the ego? – is utterly false. It is that handful of water scooped from the stream. “This is the essence” we cry, as the water runs through our fingers, leaving nothing. Like all things, the ego is emptiness. But it is also one of the hardest things to leave behind. And as long as we trust in this ego, believing it to be our real selves, as long as we

remain propped up by this hellish proprium, we can never realise spiritual oneness. We cannot leave the self in charge because there is no self – there is only God.

Van Dusen saw in Swedenborg's ideas a thread common, not only to Buddhism but to the even more ancient wisdom of the Hindu Holy books – the idea that there is only one self, in which we all share. Only one idea, which is God. And the thread of the Divine does not change colour from race to race, from religion to religion – it is the same sacred thread that binds us all. Swedenborg conceived it in the form of the Universal Human – the great human shape of heaven to which we all contribute a vital piece. And, as in a human body, how can a heart have more validity than a lung, an arm greater strength than a leg? Swedenborg, like the Buddha, saw that goodness and truth were of the utmost importance, and that no-one could lay exclusive claim to the possession of these heavenly qualities. If any one person is capable of receiving the Lord's grace then all of us must be equally capable – the difference lies only in how open each of us is to receiving it.

The Buddha spoke of 84,000 Dharma doors, and it's an idea that has always excited me. He claimed that there were 84,000 ways of arriving at the truth. That considered, people should really avoid feeling superior or spiritually chauvinistic – the way he taught was only one of these doors. What a humbling idea! But at the same time an idea that is liberating and truly equalising.

Hell and Heaven in the Here and Now

One of the clearest parallels between the visions of Swedenborg and the teachings of the Buddha is in the area of heaven and hell. Like Swedenborg, Buddhists have traditionally taught that heavenly states are merely an extension of the habits and states of mind we have cultivated in this lifetime. At the moment of death, Buddhists believe that the karma of our self-cultivation will simply kick in, and we are instantly re-born into a state for which we have prepared ourselves. Those who have surrounded themselves with wickedness, violence and judgement will arrive at that place for which they've so busily been preparing. And those who have lived their lives informed by love, charity, goodwill and peacefulness will slide straight into those states of being. In the Pure Land tradition, the most popular by far in the countries of East Asia, Buddhist followers attempt to keep their minds in a constant state of Buddha-like wisdom and serenity by repeating the name of the Buddha throughout the day. Whether aspirated or recited silently, the Holy Name of the Buddha Amitabha is on the lips of millions of Buddhists even as we speak. In monasteries in Vietnam, the Buddha's name stands in for all sorts of everyday language, so conscious are people of keeping his example constantly in mind. "Good Morning" is replaced by a

hearty salutation of “Mo Phat!” which means, simply, praise Buddha. Excuse Me – Mo Phat. I’m sorry – Mo Phat. Pass the Salt – Mo Phat. Letters begin and end with “Mo Phat” – no need for “Dear Monk” or “Yours Sincerely”. Human rebirth is precious, and we cannot afford to waste even a moment. We need to make haste in our spiritual cultivation, for death comes to us all, sooner rather than later. Every Buddhist dreams of dying with the name of the Buddha upon their lips, and nobody can afford to be caught unawares.

The preciousness of our human incarnation is expressed in the following story from the Lotus Sutra:

Imagine a lone blind turtle that dwells in the depths of a vast ocean, coming up for air only once every hundred years. On the surface of the same ocean floats a golden yoke. Imagine the turtle pushing its head through the yoke when it takes its centennial breath....The chances of this are greater than the chance of being born as a human... Human birth is compared to a rare jewel, difficult to find and, if found, of great value, because it is only in the human body that we can tread the path that leads to liberation.

It is the state of our mind that creates heaven and hell, and this is in exact accordance with Swedenborg’s notion that the state of being in the afterlife is merely a reflection of the loves we have encouraged in this worldly life. Upon death all falsity (all ego) is stripped away, and the true state of our spiritual selves is left to seek its own level.

That Heaven and Hell are states we can know right now is a central and liberating part of Swedenborg’s theology.

In the *Dhammapada*, the most concise collection of sayings attributed to Sakyamuni Buddha, Verse 21 states:

Heedfulness is the path to the Deathless, heedlessness is the path to death.
The heedful die not, the heedless are already dead.

The Buddha here is echoing Socrates in saying “the unexamined life is not worth living.” The person who is happy to enjoy life without introspection, without a spiritual consciousness - that person is already dead. That person is in a Hell state, doomed to make the same mistakes over and over, unconscious of the truly transcendent, and the truly good. In *The True Christian Religion* Swedenborg expresses the same idea so beautifully when he says:

God is in him, and as far as he lives according to Divine order, fully so

...But as far as man lives contrary to order, so far he shuts up the lower parts of his mind or spirit, and prevents God from descending and filling them with His presence.

Then God is in him, but he is not in God.

Karma

Another stumbling block in the dialogue between Buddhists and Christians is the notion of *karma*. Karma is not a complicated thing, and to the majority of the world's population it makes complete sense – the things that you do now will shape your life in the future, and the things you have done in the past are what have contributed to your life at the present. So uncomplicated and commonsensical is this notion that I would hazard to suggest that it is not a piece of religious doctrine at all – it is merely the way life works. My substantial stomach is not a product of Divine fiat – it speaks of a dedication to fine dining and substantial desserts on winter evenings. It attests to my sedentary lifestyle and my natural aversion to things like team sports and jogging. D. T. Suzuki thought that Swedenborg came very close to a Western explanation of karma in his ideas about Divine Providence. Swedenborg taught that there are no accidents, but that “everything is conveyed by the Divine Providence through Wisdom and Love.” Let not karma be an issue between east and west, and let's not point a finger at the everyday practitioners of Buddhism who do good deeds in an effort to cultivate good karma in this life. I would suggest that petitionary prayer and the exercise of good works all serve a similar function for most religious people in the west. All we are talking about is differences in language, not in spiritual understanding. And language is always a very poor thing in the face of Divine Truth.

The Buddha spoke wisely about this when he urged people not to cling to concepts. Concepts and doctrines were all very well, he thought, for getting us to a certain level of spiritual development, but clinging to them and using them to exclude others was very poor form indeed. He used the analogy of a raft: when we come to a river, we are grateful for a raft to help us reach the other side. But once it has taken us across the river we don't pick up the raft and carry it with us for the rest of the journey. Such an action would be foolish – the raft would weigh us down, tire us out and cause us to lose patience with the process. How many people do you know carrying about an enormous spiritual raft on their shoulders, people who wag their fingers at those more skilful souls who overtake them on life's journey, jogging ahead with passion and determination, destined to reach

their goal. While those poor raft carriers, those people weighed down with the importance of their own ideologies, sink slowly into the mud.

Free Will

Swedenborg always stressed the importance of free will. Each person, he taught, is responsible for the state of their own souls. No-one can be compelled to be good and kind, let alone undertake a life of spiritual renewal. Each person makes their own decisions and so must bear the responsibility for their actions – heaven and hell are self created states. Here he is in complete agreement with the Buddha, who taught that there is no such thing as predestination. Yes, we may be born under poor conditions that might go some way to excusing our poor life choices, but at each and every moment we choose how to behave, and ultimately we must all be answerable for those choices. But it is important to note that it is intention that ultimately defines how we bear responsibility for these acts. Swedenborg too was careful to explain that it was intention that coloured the nature of our actions. If we intend to do something bad and follow through on that intention, then the results become immediately obvious. A Buddhist would say that we have created bad karma, and that we must eventually pay for that bad action. Swedenborg would say that our bad intentions create around us a state of evil, and that we have taken the first step into a hell state. There is nothing esoteric about these doctrines, and the moral is perfectly clear – if we intend good, and choose at each moment to behave in a way that helps others then we are contributing towards the creation of a heavenly state, both for ourselves and others. So guard your intentions carefully, and never seek to justify your bad actions through extenuating circumstances. The responsibility is always ours, no matter how great the struggle might be.

God

Let us talk, for a moment, about God. God is a problem in Buddhism because, for the most part, Buddhists don't concern themselves with questions of God. Does God exist? Did she create the world? Does she guide our every action? The Buddha avoided all such questions. If people came to him with questions about God (and they did), the Buddha would simply urge them to attend to their own meditation practice, and to go about being a good and kind person. In the Buddhist conception, that is the best we can hope to do. God will take care of herself, and perhaps even us, if we can take care of ourselves. The Buddha likened the endless argument over the nature of the deity (and yes, it was even going on in his time) to a man who has been pierced by a poisoned arrow. "Pull it out, quickly!" the wise around him shout, but no, this philosopher pauses to ask:

“But who made the arrow? And of what wood? What is the poison that covers its tip? And who shot it?”

By the time he has finished asking these questions the poor soul is dead – and none the wiser. Had he possessed the wherewithal to pull the poisonous arrow from his side, he may have bought himself a little more time to address those fascinating questions. The Buddha suggests that most of us are like that poor, pierced man – we suffer from the most acute spiritual ailments – selfishness, pride, anger and depression poison our systems, but instead of applying the first aid of meditation, kindness, charity and love, we are happier to seek answers to ‘the really big questions’. If I can’t make it through the day without 3 glasses of Scotch and a nasty argument with my partner what does it matter who created the world and in how many days?

I remember back to the dim dark distant days of 1999, when there were all sorts of crazy ideas about how the world was about to end at the turn of the millennium. There was a particular chap – I can’t remember his name – who had predicted that the polar ice caps would melt in the last days of 1999 and that come January 1 most of us would be drowned. I remember he produced maps (which you could buy on the internet for a very reasonable price) showing what would be left of the world in the year 2000. It wasn’t much. All that was left of Australia was Blackheath and Mt. Kosciusko. Anyway, someone had translated this nonsense into Vietnamese, and the Vietnamese language tabloids all over the world were urging people to run to the hills and stock up on canned food. I was visiting a Vietnamese Buddhist monastery in Cabramatta one day and a poor old man came in much distressed and clutching one of these newspaper stories. “What are we going to do?” he asked the Abbott. “We’re all going to die.” The Abbott glanced over the story nonchalantly and said dismissively “Pfff – we can’t even live today in mindfulness and peace – what does it matter if we all drown next month. I’d urge you to go home and do good now, my child, and stop worrying so much about a future that may never come.” Cold comfort, perhaps, but doubtless very good advice.

Swedenborg, too, saw the folly of religion without action, of ideas without works. He categorised it as the mistake of faith without love, and faith without wisdom. He saw that it was impossible to guarantee a cosy little place in heaven just by mouthing the right platitudes and possessing the right ideas about the nature of the deity. Heaven is not a place divorced from our daily actions. Heaven is now, and the nature of the afterlife is determined by the uses and loves that we cultivate on this very day. D. T. Suzuki saw that this one idea of Swedenborg’s coincided with the very essence of Buddhist teaching. That this and many other jewels were endlessly reflected in the net

of the cosmos. The source of this universal wisdom may be unknown, but its essence is beautiful – it sparkles and liberates and catches us all in its light.

Each of us, too, are reflected in the finely polished surface of these jewels, and by living a good life we can be assured that we are all caught up in the same cosmic net, irrespective of the labels and names we might choose to give to goodness.

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