

BOOK REVIEWS

THE OX-HERDER AND THE GOOD SHEPHERD: FINDING CHRIST ON THE BUDDHA'S PATH, by A. H. Hart, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Erdmans, 2013, 126 pp., \$12.34

Addison Hodges Hart has given us a thought provoking book with the thesis that the ultimate and authentic spiritual life is very much the same for Christianity and Buddhism. He would have us believe that the spiritual visions of both paths are very similar. The author is very well versed in both disciplines and that fact alone provides the incentive to peer deeper into his claim. He stresses the similarities while minimizing the discrepancies between the two. If the reader is open to exploring different ways of interpreting propositions, this book will provide a vast pasture for meditation.

I would agree that both systems provide, in generic terms, a course for self-improvement leading to a better understanding of self, human nature and improving personal existential status. Both recognize human nature, in its rough state, will require an arduous road to continuous improvement. Christians label human condition as sinful nature while Buddhism calls it inability to tame a restless and fearful nature. All humans are in a state of despair, both systems agree. Christians prefer the term "sin" or "missing the mark" while Buddhists explain our shortcomings as "going off course." Again, there were very similar explanations.

From a way of life perspective, both religions (and I would prefer not to use the term religion, but rather Ways of Life) are very similar. From its foundational mindset, a Buddhist life appears to present a regimen somewhat similar to what I would consider a monastic Christian's life might be, both stressing the value of a life that requires controlling the sensual aspect. That, of course, is only the impression I am given. But both systems agree the process of spiritual growth takes considerable effort and persistence.

The author would suggest that both Jesus and Buddha would agree that a main task of all is to come to be able to control one's thinking and requires a life of discipline. Our thoughts mold who we are. We cannot afford to allow unbridled thinking to lead us any which way. Jesus stressed the condition of being anxious while Buddha pointed to inability to accept a changing world and our fear of constant instability. Both would say we need to have more control. Interestingly, both recommend observing parts of the identical Ten Commandments as a worthy, healthy life course. But here also lies the divergence of the two perspectives. Buddha employs the last five of the Ten Commandments as a suitable course of action while Jesus highlights the first five give deference to God as the Supreme Personage. Buddha's concept of the first cause is simply an impersonal "Source of Life." If we could overlook that glaring divergence in viewpoint I would think we might be able to agree that Hart has made his case that the outlook of the two Ways lead to very similar courses of action. Hart is able to personally combine the two views by saying the ultimate goals of both are identical. His interpretation of Christianity's goal is the process of seeking the "Kingdom of God." For his interpretation of the Kingdom he employs St.

Paul's description of the Kingdom as "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Romans 14:17) He would insist that sounds very much like Buddha's hope for "Enlightenment" and "inner serenity and permanent stability" coupled with being "unconcerned about things outside."

Pursuing further that glaring difference in the two paths, though, is the Christian belief in being permitted to ask for help from an outside source, an all-powerful entity, be it a mind or other personification of power, versus Buddha's vision of an impersonal source to which all emanate. The value of the Christian way is the consolation of feeling one does not have to accomplish the transformation all alone. The Christian asks for direction from an all-powerful mind called "Our Father." The Buddhist will retort that the beauty of Buddhism is that it teaches self-discipline with no need to count on anyone else. The natural course of this religion is to simply find one's way back to the Source from whence one came. As a Christian I had to appreciate the insight from Buddha that we all appear to get frustrated by change. There is nothing physical or human that does not change. I would admit it is true that most people are unable to deal with "impermanence" and this is the cause of much of human discontent and ubiquitous suffering. Our friends, families leave us or die, our health slowly dissipates over time. We try to hold on to people, places, things, time, careers and intimate relationships whereas we must learn to accept the reality. I personally have gained solace from realizing and learning to anticipate the change that will inevitably come.

We now come back to the understanding the author, Addison Hodges Hart, asks us to accept. There is no doubt much of Jesus' and Buddha's insights coincide completely. But can one concur with Hart that we "can find Christ on the Buddha's path?" This, of course, is a matter for each individual to resolve for himself. We can, at least, take comfort in recognizing these two great spiritual teachers independently espoused similar directions to an end whether called Enlightenment or The Kingdom of God. Jesus said his way allows us "To find rest for our souls" (Matthew 11:29) which is in the spirit of Buddha's wishes.

P Serwinek, Prof. Emer.
William Tyndale College