Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 38: Latter-day Saints and Buddhists

There are many significant differences between the beliefs of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly known as the LDS or Mormon Church, and Buddhism, yet these faiths also share important values. This essay will briefly assess some of the salient commonalities - as well as some key differences - between the teachings of the LDS Church in the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the statements of modern church leaders, and Buddhist values.

Buddhism's foundational values consist of the Eightfold Path of Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Awareness, and Right Meditation. Latter-day Saints try to emulate similar virtues, although in a slightly different way.

The observation of some commonalities is not to minimize the many substantive differences in belief, practice, and lifestyle between Buddhists and Latter-day Saints. Even ostensible similarities, when examined minutely, often demonstrate meaningful differences in understanding and practice. The purpose of this essay is not to offer a comprehensive dissertation, but merely to demonstrate that notwithstanding numerous differences, substantial areas of common ground exist which can lead to productive and respectful interfaith dialogue.
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Right Understanding
Buddhists value right understanding, which is a necessary prerequisite to all other virtues. The LDS Church strongly emphasizes the importance of learning and supports universities which teach both secular and spiritual knowledge. LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley taught young people: "Be smart. The Lord wants you to educate your minds and hands, whatever your chosen field...Seek for the best schooling available."[1] The Bible teaches: "For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it."[2] Solomon wrote: "Good understanding giveth favour: but the way of transgressors is hard."[3] Studying the Holy Scriptures can help us to gain understanding and grow closer to God. The Book of Mormon prophet Nephi wrote: "the Lord God giveth light unto the understanding; for he speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding."[4] The Doctrine and Covenants, a book of modern scripture, teaches: "It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance,"[5] and encourages individuals to "seek learning, even by study and also by faith."[6] It further states: "The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth."[7]

Right Thought
Thoughts form the foundation of our character. Buddha taught: "Mind is the forerunner of (all evil) conditions. Mind is chief; and all that we are is mind-made. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the wagon ... If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him."[8]

The Bible teaches: "As he thinketh in his heart, so is he."[9] Christ stated: "those things which proceed out of the mouth come

forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man."[10] The Book of Mormon teaches that God "looketh down upon all the children of men; and he knows all the thoughts and intents of the heart; for by his hand were they all created from the beginning."[11]

LDS Prophet David O. McKay declared: "Your thoughts are the architects of your destiny." The prophet Spencer W. Kimball wrote: "A man is literally what he thinks, his character being the complete sum of all his thoughts." He continued: "How could a person possibly become what he is not thinking? Nor is any thought, when persistently entertained, too small to have its effect. The 'divinity that shapes our ends' is indeed ourselves."[12] The Christian mathematician Blaise Pascal observed: "All our dignity consists then in thought. By it we must elevate ourselves, and not by space and time, which we cannot fill. Let us endeavor then to think well; this is the principle of morality."[13]

Buddha declared: "Him I call indeed a Brahman who does no evil through body, speech, or mind, and is restrained in these three respects."[14] The Book of Mormon teaches the importance of right thought, right speech, and right action: "if ye do not watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God, and continue in the faith of what ye have heard concerning the coming of our Lord, even unto the end of your lives, ye must perish."[15] Buddhist and LDS teachings thus demonstrate considerable agreement regarding the importance of right thought.

Right Speech
Buddha taught that right speech consists in abstaining from musavada (lying), pisunavaca (slandering), pharusavaca (harsh speech), and samphappalapa (frivolous talk). He taught, "The liar goes to hell; also he who having done a thing says, 'I have not done it.' After death both are equal, they are men with evil deeds in the next world."[16] "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour" is one of the ten commandments.[17] The Book of Exodus also admonishes: "Thou shalt not raise a false report: put not thine hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness."[18] Jesus taught, "every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment."[19] Christ further declared: "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh."[20] In a book of modern revelation called the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord admonishes individuals to "clothe [themselves] with charity; and cease to do evil, and lay aside all [their] hard speeches."[21] He further commands us to "cease from all your light speeches and light-mindedness."[22]

Right Action
Buddha taught that right action includes abstinence form panatipata (killing), adinnadana (stealing), and kamesu or micchacara (sexual misconduct). Similarly, murder, theft, and adultery are condemned in Biblical Ten Commandments. King Solomon wrote: "But whoso committeth adultery with a woman lacketh understanding: he that doeth it destroyeth his own soul."[23] The apostle Paul taught, "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God."[24]

Right action as taught by Buddha includes kusalakamma, or wholesome deeds; metta, or loving kindness; karuna, or compassion; mudita, or sympathetic joy; and caga, or generosity. Of good deeds towards our fellow-men, the Biblical Psalmist wrote: "Blessed is he that considereth the poor: the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble. The Lord will preserve him, and keep him alive; and he shall be blessed upon the earth."[25] One of the LDS Articles of Faith declares: "If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things."[26] The prophet Moroni wrote: "charity suffereth long, and is kind, and envieth not, and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things."[27]

The Dharmapada states: "Careful in speech, controlled in body, aware of the workings of the mind; patient under insult, never angry; this is the path of great progress."[28] In the Book of Mormon, Christ declared: "he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another."[29]

Right Livelihood
Buddhists and Latter-day Saints believe that one's livelihood must be honorable. For Buddhists, "the right livelihood means abstaining from a livelihood that brings harm to other beings, such as trading in arms, living beings [slavery and prostitution], intoxicating drinks and poison as well as slaughtering, fishing, soldiering, deceit, treachery, ssoothsaying, trickery, etc." LDS Prophet Spencer W. Kimball stated, "I feel strongly that men who accept wages or salary and do not give ... [fair] time, energy, devotion, and service are receiving money that is not clean." President Kimball also noted that "money obtained by evil or idle practices, such as theft, gambling (including lotteries), graft, illegal drugs, oppression of the poor, and the like is unclean money."[30] He further taught:

> "Clean money is that [pay] received for a full day's honest work. It is that reasonable pay for faithful service. It is that fair profit from the sale of goods, commodities, or service. It is that income received from transactions where all parties profit. Filthy lucre is ... money ... obtained through theft and robbery, ... gambling, ... sinful operations, ... bribery, and from exploitation."[31]

The Doctrine and Covenants condemns slavery and exploitation of any sort: "it is not right that any man should be in bondage one to another."[32]

Right Effort
Buddists define right effort as Nyanatiloka, or "the effort of avoiding or overcoming evil and unwholesome things, and of developing and maintaining wholesome things." Right effort is important to developing the character and the state of mind from which other virtues flow. Jesus taught, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."[33] The Apostle Paul declared that "God is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."[34]

Wrong passions and desires can make us slaves. Buddha taught: "From lust comes grief, from lust comes fear; he who is free

from lust neither sorrows nor fears."[35] He also wrote: "Men, entwined in craving, are terrified like the bound hare. Held fast by fetters and bonds they undergo sorrow again and again."[36] It is important for us to purify ourselves of unrighteous desires and replace them with good desires. In the Book of Mormon, the Lord states: "I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts."[37] It is important not only that we do the right actions, but that we do them for the right reasons. The Book of Mormon also teaches that if one "offereth a gift, or prayeth unto God, except he shall do it with real intent it profiteth him nothing."[38]

Jesus taught that the first and great commandment is to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."[39] Our great task is to keep God's commandments with all of our might, mind, and strength.[40] Achieving harmony and obeying God requires effort. Doctrine and Covenants teaches: "Neither be idle but labor with your might."[41] LDS scripture admonishes readers to "labor diligently"[42] and to be "anxiously engaged in a good cause."[43]

Right Awareness
Buddhists and Latter-day Saintss both believe in the importance of proper understanding and awareness in our worship. Jesus taught the importance of right awareness, stating: "we know what we worship ... the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him."[44] To the Greeks who did not know what they worshipped, the Apostle Paul proclaimed: "[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring."[45] He continues: "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent."[46] In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord states: "Will I accept of an offering, saith the Lord, that is not made in my name? Or will I receive at your hands that which I have not appointed?"[47] He further declares: "Wherefore he that prayeth, whose spirit is contrite, the same is accepted of me if he obey mine ordinances."[48] Right awareness is necessary to ensure that our actions are acceptable to God and will lead us to harmony with Him and with our fellow man.

Right Meditation
Right meditation can help us to purify ourselves and achieve harmony. Budda taught: "Not to do any evil, to cultivate good, to purify one's mind -- this is the advice of the Buddhas."[49] Latter-day Saints are counseled to study, mediate, and "feast upon the word of Christ."[50] We are commanded: "Treasure up in your minds continually the words of life, and it shall be given you in the very hour that portion that shall be meted unto every man."[51] The Prophet Joseph Smith taught: "The things of God are of great import; and time, and experience, and careful, and ponderous, and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, oh man, if thou wilt lead a man unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanses of eternity; thou must commune with God!"[52] Latter-day Saints find great meaning in prayer, study, and meditation, as properly directed prayer and meditation can help us to achieve inner peace and to better serve our fellow man.

Differences between Latter-day Saints and Buddhists
A Supreme Being
Buddhist and LDS teachings also diverge in important ways. Buddhists believe in a harmony of the universe with which the contemplative and pure can one day unite with by transcending worldly cares, but not in the idea of a supreme being who governs the universe and will one day judge mankind. Latter-day Saints recognize God, the Supreme Being, as the source of knowledge, truth, and justice. The Bible teaches:"there is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding."[53] God "has all power, all wisdom, and all understanding; he comprehendeth all things, and he is a merciful Being, even unto salvation, to those who will repent and believe on his name."[54] The Supreme Being worshipped by Latter-day Saints is not an uncaring, distant force, but a caring Heavenly Father, who loved the world and sent His Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ
Whereas Buddhists are often sympathetic to considering the insight of wise teachers, Latter-day Saints believe that Jesus was not just another prophet or a wise teacher: He was the literal son of God. Jesus alone had power over death. Christ's atonement paid the penalty for the misdeeds of those who turn to God with their whole hearts and obey God's laws. Obedience to God's laws is necessary for us to achieve a state of eternal harmony.

The Church
Buddhism is a personal religion which involves meditation, lifestyle, the visitation of shrines, and some ritual, but lacks specific concepts of organized worship or church service by lay members. Latter-day Saints believe that God established His Church, an organization led by disciples called by God and given authority to teach God's word and to act in God's name. In the church, we have opportunities for mutual support, learning, and service that would not be possible for individuals meditating alone. The Church is necessary to help us to fully live the eightfold path and to achieve inner harmony and peace in this life and in the coming world. The Book of Mormon teacher King Benjamin teaches: "I would desire that ye should consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God. For behold, they are blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual; and if they hold out faithful to the end they are received into heaven, that thereby they may dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness."[55] Achieving this happiness and harmony with God through obedience to gospel laws and helping others to receive harmony also are key purposes of our lives.

Latter-day Saints and Buddhists thus share many important commonalities, yet also differ in key points of doctrine and practice. Latter-day Saints applaud the principles of the eightfold path of Buddhism, and believe that the teachings of the LDS Church offer significant value and importance to those seeking enlightenment and harmony.

[1]Gordon B. Hinckley, “A Prophet’s Counsel and Prayer for Youth,” Ensign, Jan 2001, 2.
[2] Proverbs 8:11
[3] Proverbs 13:15
[4] 2 Nephi 31:3
[5] D&C 131:6
[6] D&C 88:118
[7]D&C 93:36
[8] Dharmapada 127-128, 1-2.
[9]Proverbs 23:7
[10]Matthew 15:18-20
[11]Alma 18:32
[12] Kimball, Spencer W., The Miracle of Forgiveness, pp. 103-105.
[13] Pascal, Blaise. Pascal's Penses, number 347.
[14] Dharmapada 262 (391).
[15]Mosiah 4:30
[16] Dharmapada 187 (306).
[17]Exodus 20:16
[18]Exodus 23:1
[19] Matthew 12:36
[20] Luke 6:45
[21] D&C 124:116
[22] D&C 88:121
[23] Proverbs 6:32
[24] 1 Corinthians 6:9-10
[25] Psalms 41:1-2
[26] Article of Faith 13
[27] Moroni 7:45
[28] Dharmapada, cited in Hsing Yun, p. 7.
[29] 3 Nephi 11:29
[30] Kimball, Spencer W., as cited in Gospel Principles, chapter 27.
[31] Kimball, Spencer W. LDS Conference Report, Oct. 1953, p. 52.
[32] D&C 101:79
[33] Matthew 5:6
[34] Hebrews 11:6
[35] Dharmapada 37 (215).
[36] Dharmapada 41 (342).
[37] D&C 137:9
[38] Moroni 7:6
[39] Matthew 22:37-38
[40] D&C 11:20
[41] D&C 75:3
[42] Moroni 9:6
[43] D&C 58:27
[44] John 4:22-23
[45] Acts 17:27-28
[46] Acts 17:30
[47] D&C 132:9-10
[48] D&C 52:15
[49] Dharmapada 244 (183).
[50]2 Nephi 32:3
[51]D&C 84:85
[52]Joseph Smith, Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 137
[53] Job 32:8
[54]Alma 26:35
[55] Mosiah 2:41