

Living Buddha, Living Christ

What's in it for me? A nurturing look at two religious traditions.

Gautama Buddha and Jesus of Nazareth never met. In fact, these two great leaders walked the Earth in distinctly different times, places, and cultures. Yet each managed to ignite religious movements that are still lively today. Despite their differences, each religious tradition can offer much to the other. Drawing on the thoughtful insights of Thich Nhat Hanh, these blinks explore what we can learn by putting these two spiritual leaders into dialogue. You'll learn how the teachings of both holy men share profound similarities on issues like faith, understanding, compassion, and how to live a good life. In these blinks, you'll learn

how faith is like a garden; what's more valuable than your grandmother's jewelry; and why life is like an ocean.

Interfaith dialogue can open paths toward peace and spiritual fulfillment.

There's no single Buddhism. It's just the opposite, in fact - there are many forms of this spiritual tradition. Just 100 years after the death of Gautama Buddha, the faith's founding teacher, the tradition split into two distinct schools. A few hundred years later, there were more than 20 different sects. Yet these schisms aren't cause for strife. Each faction is but a single flower in the overall garden of Buddhism. Each is beautiful on its own, but together they form a vibrant ecosystem. Moreover, outside the Buddhist garden are other gardens of other faiths, each with its own flourishing flowerbeds. To become spiritually whole, it's important to recognize the beauty in all of these blooms. The key message here is: Interfaith dialogue can open paths toward peace and spiritual fulfillment. There's an unfortunate tendency for people of different faiths to regard each other with suspicion or even animosity. Sometimes these tensions come from unfamiliarity. In other instances, they're fostered by political or social strife. For instance, during the French colonization of Vietnam, Catholic missionaries worked to suppress Buddhism; this pressure drove the two faiths apart needlessly. Yet if we look beyond these artificial divides, it's clear that both faiths share profound similarities - there are Buddhist elements in Christianity, and Christian elements within Buddhism. This state of deep, mutual connection is called interbeing. By looking closely and studying this interbeing between the two faiths, it's possible to enrich our experience of both. In fact, both faiths encourage this type of contemplation. The Christian Psalms urge the faithful to "Be still," in order to know God's love. This means practitioners should be tranquil and concentrate on the world around them. In the same vein, Buddhists practice vipasyana, or "looking deeply." With practice, Buddhists also come to know love by cultivating a calm, relaxed, and contemplative disposition toward the world. This isn't the only similarity between these two religions. The teachings of Buddha and Christ convey similar themes of love, acceptance, and understanding, and both offer valuable advice on how to find joy and overcome suffering. Investigating these overlaps helps practitioners of either faith gain a deeper understanding of their own religion. And, even more importantly, fostering a rich interfaith dialogue, one in which both sides truly listen to one another, can go a long way toward healing the

divisions that exist in everyday life.

It's crucial to bring the teachings of Buddha and Christ into everyday life.

Both Jesus Christ and the Buddha were real historical figures. The historical Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in ancient Judea. He was raised by a carpenter, spent his adult life traveling and teaching, and was eventually killed at the age of 33. Meanwhile, the historical Buddha was born as a prince in Kapilavastu, on the Indian subcontinent. As an adult, he forsook his family's wealth, practiced meditation, and taught until his death at age 80. But these are just historical details. In a more profound sense, both figures remain with us through their teachings and ideals. These notions transcend space and time and are accessible to humanity today. These sublime principles can be understood as the Living Buddha and the Living Christ. Following these eternal figures is just as important as knowing the historical ones. Here's the key message: It's crucial to bring the teachings of Buddha and Christ into everyday life. The day-to-day lives of the historical Buddha and Christ were very different, both from each other and from the lives that we live today. But by looking through the specifics of their biographies to the heart of their teachings, we can find ways to follow the path of the Living Buddha and the Living Christ even in today's complex and messy world. Both traditions argue that each person has the ability to embody the values of his or her leader. In the Bible, the Book of Matthew describes the Kingdom of God as a mustard seed. If we create the right conditions by living Christ's teachings, that seed will grow and bloom within us. Similarly, Buddhism teaches that everyone contains tathagatagarbha, or the "womb of the Buddha." By practicing mindfulness, we may nourish that potential Buddha within ourselves. How can we follow the Living Buddha in everyday life? There are many ways. For one, we can approach every task, no matter how mundane, with an air of mindfulness and gratitude. For instance, enjoy a meal in thoughtful silence. Before eating, contemplate the miracle that we have food at all, then carefully savor each bite. Recognize how you and your meal become one as it nourishes and sustains you. Following the Living Christ is possible as well. The Christian sacrament of Communion encourages every follower to consume the body of Christ through the Eucharist. In this act, believers recognize the presence of God inside everyone. This same spirit can manifest in daily life if you make a mindful effort to approach everyone you encounter with a sense of community and love.

Strong communities are at the heart of any religious faith.

Let's be honest. Following the Living Buddha and the Living Christ isn't always easy. Our lives are filled with stress, strife, and seemingly endless lists of work and chores. So how can you stay mindful while doing the laundry or running errands in town? How can you remain loving when dealing with difficult coworkers or rude strangers? Wouldn't it be easier simply to escape the daily grind and live out your days in a monastery as a Buddhist or Christian monk? Maybe. But it's not a realistic solution for everyone. And don't forget: even monasteries require cooking and cleaning. As it turns out, in both monasteries and the real world, following a spiritual path is easier when you build a shared sense of community. The key message is this: Strong communities are at the

heart of any religious faith. Following the tenets of your chosen faith is always easier when you're surrounded by people who share your values and commitment. For this reason, both Buddhism and Christianity have developed rich monastic cultures in which devout adherents live together in tight-knit communities. But you don't have to embark upon a special retreat to enjoy the benefits of spiritual camaraderie. You can cultivate a supportive community right where you are. In the Bible, Jesus stresses the value of worshiping as a group. He declares, "Wherever two or three are gathered in My name, there I am." Buddhism offers a similar notion with a concept called Sangha. A Sangha is any group of four or more people who come together to practice the Six Concords. These include sharing space, sharing goods, sharing insight, and observing Buddhist principles in thought and action. In both cases, community and collaboration are at the heart of these groups. Both religions use similar metaphors to describe how these communities come together to form a whole. In Christianity, the members of a church are described as being part of the body of Christ. Meanwhile, in Buddhism, members of a Sangha are called the hands, the legs, or the arms of Buddha. In a thriving religious community, all members help all other members as they would help themselves. After all, if your right hand is injured, you'll use your left hand to mend it without even a second thought. Buddhists call this form of selfless altruism *dana*, or generosity; this form of benevolence is practiced by Christians as well.

The path toward peace starts with understanding your enemy.

Imagine for a moment a world without weapons. In this scenario, all the bombs, guns, tanks, and daggers that populate our military bases and private armories are transported far away to the surface of the moon. In this outlandish fantasy, will we achieve world peace? Unfortunately, probably not. Because even if we remove the tools of war, the roots of violence will remain. The fear, ignorance, distrust, and bigotry that reside in our hearts will persist. And as long as these corrupting forces endure, we'll find a reason to fight and make new weapons to do so. So what's to be done to avoid further pain? Well, both Christ and Buddha suggest the solution may be found in compassion and understanding. The key message here is: The path toward peace starts with understanding your enemy. The historical Buddha and the historical Christ were both outspoken proponents of peace. When the ambitious king Ajattasatru tried to stir up war against the nearby country of Vajji, the Buddha strongly admonished him and withdrew his support. Likewise, in one of Jesus's best-known teachings, the Sermon on the Mount, he advises his followers to resist violence by always turning the other cheek to an enemy. Rather than meeting violence with violence, both teachers advocated achieving peace through compassion. Following the Living Christ means loving your enemy as you love yourself. This means that we should look deeply at our antagonists to understand the roots of their anger, frustration, and suffering. When we see the humanity in our enemies, they cease to be our enemies – and only then can we start taking concrete steps toward peace. The Living Buddha echoes this idea. For Buddhism, suffering is rooted in a lack of understanding. If we don't understand our enemies or the conflicts that pit us against one another, we'll never see a path toward peace. The Buddhist practice of meditation is helpful in this process. If we take time and space to contemplate our conflicts calmly, we'll see beyond our anger to possible solutions. Neither of these traditions equates non-violence with non-action. Both religions urge followers to act on their compassion. A dramatic instance of this was the self-immolation of the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc. In 1963, he burned himself to death to bring

attention to the oppressive colonial regime in South Vietnam. He hoped his sacrifice would help his antagonists see the suffering they caused. Of course, your actions don't have to be as dire – but they should be motivated by love.

Both faiths offer age-old guides to living that still resonate today.

Family heirlooms. Most of us have them tucked away somewhere in our closets, wardrobes, or kitchens. Maybe you inherited a lovely necklace from your grandmother, or perhaps you've got some antique china from your grandfather. No matter what they are, these objects hold special meaning because they connect us to our roots. But our ancestors give us more than just things. They also pass on values, traditions, and religious principles. And while all that silverware and jewelry is surely nice, these intangible goods are often more important to our spiritual well-being. Unfortunately, we neglect this spiritual inheritance all too often. Rather than live these values in our daily lives, we leave them to collect dust. Here's the key message: Both faiths offer age-old guides to living that still resonate today. For Buddhists, the most important spiritual heirlooms are the Five Wonderful Precepts. This basic code of ethics has been passed down through the generations as a guide to living a life filled with meaning and beauty. The First Precept is to revere all life and always strive to reduce suffering, no matter how insignificant. The Second Precept is to be generous in providing material and spiritual aid to those in need. The Third Precept is to honor your body and the bodies of others. The Fourth Precept is to honor language by speaking carefully and truthfully. And the Fifth and final Precept is to practice moderation – that is, not to overconsume or indulge in vices. If these Precepts sound familiar, it's probably because the guidance they offer parallels many of the ideas present in the Ten Commandments. In the Christian tradition, these holy rules have also been handed down from one generation to the next. They praise similar virtues, such as truthfulness and gratitude, and condemn similar vices, such as violence, lying, or wanton consumption. While these two sets of edicts aren't exactly alike, they do pose the same challenge. No matter which religion you adhere to, you must actively integrate these values into your daily life. Merely memorizing the rules or hanging them on your wall isn't enough. Knowing moderation is important won't do any good if you still regularly gorge on sweets or blow your savings on shopping sprees. Just remember: such Precepts and Commandments must offer effective spiritual guidance to have survived millennia.

Buddhism and Christianity both grapple with the notion of eternal life.

How can we describe God? Surely, if a deity is all-powerful, all-knowing, and omnipresent, even a whole dictionary of words would fail to capture its full scope. To solve this quandary, the Greek Orthodox church employs "apophatic theology," or "negative theology." In this worldview, God isn't described with language at all. Instead, theologians only talk of what God is not. Amazingly, Buddhists follow a comparable philosophy – practitioners are encouraged to abandon the concept of "the Buddha." Instead of getting bogged down in definitions, they're encouraged simply to experience the Buddha directly. While such metaphysical concepts can be quite abstract, these difficult, sometimes perplexing questions are at the heart of both religions. The key

message is this: Buddhism and Christianity both grapple with the notion of eternal life. Through the Five Precepts and the Ten Commandments, both Buddhism and Christianity offer some nice, concrete rules for daily living. But these two traditions also grapple with more abstruse and philosophical mysteries as well. Chief among these enigmas is how we should think about complex concepts like life, death, and eternity. For Buddhists, life and death are really a bit of an illusion. This is because what we call “the self” doesn’t actually exist. Instead, we consist of various elements, including our body, our feelings, our perceptions, our mental states, and our consciousness. These elements can temporarily come together to manifest a “self,” but they’ll inevitably change, rearrange, and dissipate from moment to moment. In this way, the self will dissolve, but nothing will truly die. For its part, Christianity also suggests that what we think of as life and death aren’t the full picture. For Christians, dying is merely a physical process – our corporeal bodies may wither and fail, but our souls continue on. Once we transcend the physical plane, we enter the Kingdom of Heaven. In this eternal sphere, there’s no birth or death; instead, we become one with God and the distinctions that separated us as individuals on Earth become inconsequential. To truly grasp such an abstract idea, it’s helpful to consider this common Buddhist metaphor. If you look out over an ocean, you’ll see an endless series of waves. These individual waves may appear distinct, but as they swell, crest, and dissipate back into the water, they all reveal themselves to be connected – part of the same vast body of water.

Prayer and meditative chanting keep faith alive throughout the day.

In many ways, faith is like a garden. It’s beautiful, natural, and can bring joy to all who come upon it. Yet, also like a garden, faith is best when it’s living and growing. And, as any gardener will tell you, fostering a flourishing bed of flowers takes work. It must be nurtured and tended to daily. Now, imagine that you were charged with cultivating a garden, but given no tools. Sure, you could do your best to water, rake, hoe, and prune with your hands, but the toil would be arduous and the results discouraging. Fostering your faith without tools is just as challenging. Luckily, both Buddhism and Christianity offer their followers time-tested practices to help them cultivate their spiritual gardens. The key message here is: Prayer and meditative chanting keep faith alive throughout the day. Whether you’re following the path of the Living Buddha or the path of the Living Christ, it’s important to practice your faith daily. This way, your spiritual being stays awake and activated instead of merely receding into the background. For Buddhists, this practice is known as *citta bhavana*, or cultivating the mind and heart. For Christians, it’s thought of as keeping God in your heart. A common tool that Buddhists use to practice *citta bhavana* is meditative chant. Chants come in many forms, depending on which strain of Buddhism you follow. For instance, some Buddhists practice *Buddhanusmrti*, or recollection of the Buddha. This involves reciting the ten names of Buddha and reflecting on what each name represents. Another practice is *Dharmanusmrti*, which involves chanting the Lotus Sutra, a meditative phrase that evokes peace and timelessness. For Christians, prayer can also take on the qualities of a meditative chant. Early Christian monks favored prayers drawn from the Psalms. These short, simple mantras include phrases like *Deus in adiutorium meum intende*, or “O God, come to my assistance.” By repeating this prayer with an air of careful concentration and mindfulness, followers can keep the love of Jesus alive in their hearts throughout the day. While both prayer and chants can offer opportunities to deepen your spiritual engagement, it’s important to treat them with respect. Simply reciting

words by rote without truly engaging with their meaning and feeling will provide no devotional reward or divine insight. However, if you take up these spiritual tools with reverence, they may bring you closer to peace, joy, Nirvana, the Holy Spirit – or whatever it is that you seek.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: While Buddhism and Christianity are distinct religions with entirely different histories, cultures, and theologies, they nonetheless share some valuable insights into spiritual matters. Both religions preach the value of community, compassion, and tradition. As well, each faith offers profound insights into metaphysical matters like life, death, and eternity. By fostering interfaith dialogue, followers of both faiths may deepen and enrich their spiritual practice. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Living Buddha, Living Christ as the subject line, and share your thoughts!