

DINING WITH THE “OTHER”

*Domyo Sater and Matthew Farlow**

Two tables, two families, two different dinnertime discussions—Buddha’s teachings inspire one party while Jesus’ New Covenant consumes the other. Two worlds ordinarily divided by an invisible wall.

However, following the Kendra James shooting, a dialogue arose between these two respective families with the hope to build—together—a common place of understanding. What followed from the discussions was an agreement that we as players upon the stage of life do indeed share many wonderful and beautiful things, and in order to chip away at the wall of separation we need to better understand the “other.”

This desire, to understand the “other,” led people from both camps, Buddhist and Christian, to sit down over one table as one family for one dinnertime discussion. The success of the one dinner led to multiple dinners whereby followers of Buddha and followers of Jesus sought to draw closer to one another while growing in a deeper understanding as to what it means to be a player upon the world’s stage.

What follows is a dialogue as to why a Buddhist would so desire to sit and eat with a Christian, and why a Christian would desire to sit across the table from a Buddhist. While none of us involved expected world peace to result from our dinners together, we did hope to find out a little more about ourselves through the intentional interaction with the “other.” Herein lay the reasons behind our dynamic interactions

Why a Buddhist Would Dine with a Christian

I had to answer this question not long ago when I was describing our Buddhist-Christian dialogue to my sister. My sister is a socially liberal, moral, loving, conscientious person (incidentally, Christian, not Buddhist), who sees “conservative” Christians as the “other” standing on the opposite side of the battle line in a war for our country and culture. I despair that anything I can say can convince someone to see the value of dialogue with the “other” unless his or her heart and mind are already open to such a concept. I certainly didn’t convince my sister.

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I'll start at the superficial level of explanation—the external, social, and tangible reasons for engaging in dialogue. It has been proven again and again that when people truly get to know each other—especially in a friendly, peaceful atmosphere—their stereotypes of the “other” get broken down and they gain more acceptance of the other. I wanted to take some of this social medicine, even though, as a concept, it seemed counter-intuitive and intellectually and morally distasteful. (“Someone who believes . . . can't possibly be loving, intelligent, kind, spiritual, flexible, interesting, moral, etc.”). The result of true dialogue can only be personally experienced, not explained; so all I can offer is my own testimonial: *I met the “other,” and they were me.*

Buddhism (as opposed to secular, social liberalism) teaches the following. People are, by nature, good. All beings are seeking happiness and trying to avoid suffering. If they do harmful things, it is because of ignorance. Ultimately, everything and everyone is interdependent—no separation. Ultimately, there is no “other.” Imagine what kind of world we would live in if we all were deeply, personally convinced of this!

Adopting the Buddhist worldview was part of my salvation from bitterness, despair, fear, and anger. Deepening my wisdom and challenging my ignorance is also part of my vow as a Buddhist; so it is natural that I should seek an even deeper, personal conviction of this worldview. It is not enough that it sounds good on paper, or that my teacher told me it was thus, or I wish it were so. I want to test my theory.

This brings me to the deeper level of explanation—the internal, personal, intangible reasons for engaging in dialogue. In a sense, I did it for my own spiritual growth (which I also do for the sake of others). When I share Buddhism—if I am speaking of something of which I do not have personal experience—I am required, by tradition, to say, “Thus have I heard.” When I speak about something as essential as the fundamental goodness and sameness of all human beings, I do not want to have to say, “Thus have I heard.” And I don't have to. I know.

Within our dialogue group we had very real, very charged differences. Members of our group truly believe homosexuality is a sin, and one of the members of our group is a proud homosexual in a long-term, committed relationship. Members of our group believe abortion is murder, and one of our members had gone through two abortions with his wife; he shared the pain of this but also said they would probably do it again in the same circumstances. At one point a Christian I had grown fond of and considered my friend looked me straight in the eye and said with a smile, “Yes, according to our belief you are going to hell. Sorry about that.” We both laughed as I said, “Well, that's OK; according to our thinking you may be lucky enough to get it right in the next life.” Finding the Buddha-nature in such “others” is a powerful affirmation of my faith. To anyone who cannot imagine such a thing, I propose a challenge: *try it yourself.*

Why a Christian Would Dine with a Buddhist

So why try something that seems so contrary to the nature of my selfhood? Some in the Evangelical faith would cringe at our being involved with a group of people who do not believe the same way we do—these people might infect us, right? Why would I as an Evangelical Christian so desire to engage a group of Buddhists in a series of dinners? Why would my family and I so desire to spend our time sharing a meal with people who believe differently about Jesus? Then again, why not?

Some might jump to the chance for purely apologetic reasons, as an opportunity to prove that Buddhism is wrong and Christianity is right, hoping all the while to notch another mark upon their belt of winning souls. Yet for me and my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, the reason for us enjoying repeated dinners with our Buddhist friends drew from something far deeper than any of us—it was and is rooted in our love of Jesus. In order for our words to be true, we have to be willing to live them—for Scripture is certainly not ambiguous when it states that “To *live* is Christ.” And what type of living is Christ, if nothing other than loving through the Holy Spirit.

To prove others right or wrong is much easier than actually becoming involved with them in a loving relationship. Yet, Christ desires His followers to enter into this relational aspect, just as He did when walking within His creation. Indeed, through the dinners, the discussions illumined many areas of disagreement, and we openly discussed the topics raised, offering what the Bible said about each given topic. But ultimately, we were not involved in the dinners so we might win arguments. No, our hope throughout each of the gatherings was to be a light for Jesus—to live Christ so our Buddhist friends might see and hear how much Jesus loves them and desires a relationship with them—so they might see the love that has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

The reason for the dinners was to build a bridge of understanding so we might all, Buddhists and Christians alike, come to see that life cannot be lived in isolation—to see that inside, our hearts beat along the same wave of need—the need of the “other.” For truly, the dinners illumined the commonly forgotten aspect that the truest test of our faith is how we make space for the “other” so as to live with each other day by day.

Because of our foundation and union in Christ through the Holy Spirit, my brothers and sisters and I would pray that the words spoken would truly glorify the Lord and that hearts would be softened and ears would be opened to the overwhelming love of Jesus Christ. We wanted and still want nothing more than the souls of our Buddhist friends to experience the eternal joy of Jesus Christ. This desire should focus our attention keenly on the world’s need for Jesus.

Ultimately, those of us who follow Christ did not come to dinner expecting anything other than to live the love of Christ in and through the indwelling of the

Holy Spirit—to be transparent so as not to be a hindrance to the consumption and transformation in and through Christ. For if we had any other desire than this, the wall of division would simply have grown larger as opposed to being chipped away through the beautiful friendships that have developed through this engagement.

Conclusion

My friend Domyo and I were not under any crazy or misguided notion that we were going to solve the world's problems by bringing our two respective families of believers to sit down together for dinner and dialogue. Nor did we think world peace would be the outcome of our time together. However, it is our hope that through such examples of two different belief systems intentionally and willingly coming together for irenic communion, the world will indeed move closer to the peace hoped for by so many. We did not come together to covertly convert, but to compassionately care for the “other.” This type of caring only occurs when there is a desire to understand, for as St. Francis of Assisi tells us, we must “seek not so much to be understood, as to understand.”¹

It is through our love and compassion of *another* that the differences shall fade slowly into the horizon to become beautiful impressions of distinctness, all the while illuminating the universal need to love and be loved. We must constantly ask ourselves, are we seeking to understand and love, or are we ones who wish to *make* people understand? For it is in our desire to understand and love the “other” that true dialogue becomes a reality. And in this reality we shall all be able to offer the same testimonial as Domyo, “I met the ‘others,’ and they were me.”

1. *The St. Francis Prayer Book: A Guide to Deepen Your Spiritual Life* (Orleans, Mass.: Paraclete Press: 2004).