

# Some Views on Death from Christian and Buddhist Beliefs

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## Introduction

A famous play writer William Shakespeare says in Hamlet, “To be or not to be, that is a question<sup>1</sup>.” “To be or not to be” is not a question but it is a reality for us. Billy Graham says, “All men are alike at birth and death<sup>2</sup>.” The questions asked by people in any period of history would be like “What will the next life be like ?” or “What will happen to those who died before they heard the Gospel ?” or “Who will take care of the ancestor’s cemetery after we die ?” Kubler-Ross has made very comprehensive observations of death and published significant papers on death and terminal care<sup>3</sup>. She has classified five stages which patients will pass through after they have been diagnosed to be in very critical or as cancer. She has observed three major questions, very typical among patients, “Why me ?”, “Why now ?”, and “Why does this happen to me ?” It seems that modern people are not ready yet to confront death. She defines death as “a clinical death,” meaning that when the heart stops, blood pressure is unreadable, and the body temperature drops. It is generally agreed that a patient is dead when the vital functions utterly fail. A committee of physicians, lawyers, theologians and scientists at Harvard Medical School determined what was to be considered as “brain death<sup>4</sup>.”

The objective of this paper has been intended to make a clear comparison of the death in Buddhism and that of the Pauline Epistles in the New Testament and analyze their perspectives on death. The writer has shared the Gospel with a church member converted and now her family members are in our prayer list so that God will respond to our prayer that they will come to know Jesus and become believers at the right moment. The writer has realized that the biggest issues in Japan that they confront regarding Jesus teaching are worries of death and their ancestors worship after they become Christians.

## **Paul's Two Doctrines**

Let us begin with Paul. The writer tries to paraphrase what Paul has taught us so that we can understand what our issues are and where our stumbles are. Billy Graham defines what death is in a Christian perspective by stating, “Physical death is separation of the spirit and soul from the body. Spiritual death is far worse, separation from God<sup>5)</sup>.”

The writer has seen two perspectives Paul is saying in the New Testament. One is stated in Romans 4 : 25, “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” Paul made certain that Eve was first tempted to sin and Adam followed her although he was given freedom not to trespass in the Garden of Eden<sup>6)</sup>. This sin was inherited to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their descendants. According to Paul, Jesus died on the Cross for the trespass Adam committed, which has been inherited to us human beings as flesh called sinful nature<sup>7)</sup>.

The other important perspective is stated in 1 Corinthians 15 : 3-4, “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

On the other hand, however, Buddhism in the tradition teaches us that every sin is forgiven when we die, because death pays all for us. Some discussions on Buddha will follow in the next section.

## **Buddha's Story**

Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 566-486BC) as a prince of a loyal family was born in the northern India and saw four sights called the great “Going Forth” that is, a sick person, and old person, a corpse, and an ascetic who was attempting to escape the problems of suffering and death by renouncing the responsibilities and pleasures of ordinary existence<sup>8)</sup>. So he left home to search his Satori called “Awaking”, giving up all of his possessions, his kingdom, and his family. While a long traveling alone in the country, he finally came to find an answer to the questions of human suffering and death after along period of meditation under a tree known as the Bodhi Tree. The Buddhism tradition tells us that Prince Siddhartha became Buddha at the

moment when he realized to be enlightened after a series of temptations and a complex process of meditation. His first message as Buddha is called the “Turning of the wheel of the Dharma<sup>9</sup>.” It is summarized as “the Four Noble Truths: the truth of Suffering, the truth of the Origin of Suffering, the truth of the Cessation of Suffering, and the truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering<sup>10</sup>.”

One day Buddha delivered his last message under a tree and passed away, never to be reborn again. This event is known in the Buddhist tradition as “the Buddha’s parinirvana, the complete cessation of the process of rebirth<sup>11</sup>.” It has been a common sense that every one is aware in the tradition that his parts of corpse were brought to the Japanese temples to be buried under the five-storied pagodas in the various areas of Japan.

Most Japanese, Buddhist believers or not, believe in some existence of “a god” or “gods”, or existence of a “supernatural power.” These two, i.e. a god or gods, or a supernatural power have nothing to do with Buddha’s Satori called “parinirvana.” It is much easier to understand his teaching as an ultimate principle as “parinirvana” or “Dharma,” which is of much more meaning. Natural immortality in a Buddhist sense would be an endless life or nothingness apart from any relationship with a god or gods. Buddhists claim that their soul will be brought apart from the corpse to Yama, the King of Hell to be judged either as a good man, going to Heaven, or a bad man, and going to Hell. The survived are expected as a family to worship Buddha and their ancestors in order for them to be judged to go to heaven<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, Buddha does not make sense if people regard him as the Creator of all, or even the creation of the universe<sup>13</sup>. Obviously he is not the Creator of the universe.

### **Japanese Buddhism**

When Buddhism was introduced into Japan in AD 538, it was emphasized that all Buddha saw was “dukka” meaning transience, accompanied by the suffering which arises when people look for something permanent or eternal<sup>14</sup>. As a result, Buddha or a god, or gods are considered as part of the process, a sequence of moment by moment, which can continue through the moments and process of the death. That

is why we have been told from our ancestors to the modern days, and from generations to generations that we would be reborn as insects or animals, or even inanimate objects in “that world” if we would do something wrong, and that we were born as good humans in “this world” because our ancestors had done something good in their existence of the past

A famous conductor Herbert von Karajan would believe that he was reborn as an eagle, and a German film star Marlene Dietrich as an emu<sup>15)</sup>. Can we ask if this judgment, to be born either as mankind or an animal, can be objectively valid? Of course not. How can we tell what punishment we deserve of some crime committed in a previous life? Can Buddha issue a ticket for heaven if they pay more money to him through his Buddhist monks? Those who believe in reincarnation are Plato, Pythagoras, Goethe, Victor Hugo, Schopenhauer, and so on<sup>16)</sup>. It is no wonder that Japanese Buddhist believers are too much worried about who would conduct their ancestor worship ceremonies after they die. The writer can understand how they would feel about who would take care of them if they would be converted, because the writer was told by his older brothers that their local community of his home town and his family temple would not allow them to bury him after his death.

### **The Two Schools of Japanese Buddhism**

By the late twelfth century AD a new age of Buddhism took place<sup>17)</sup>. Buddhism reached its highest peak in the Kamakura period. It is characterized as the two major sects.

One is Jiriki-Hongan, meaning “Self-Reliance,” the doctrine of which is summarized as they can acquire Satori, meaning “awakened” only through a serious of deep Zazen “meditation” with their human knowledge and endeavor, only to become a “Buddha” or “Dharma” by transforming their ‘self’ into ‘nothingness.’ They claim they can eliminate fear and sorrow of death by processing this knowledge that death is a transition to another and superior ‘place’<sup>18)</sup>. From Paul’s perspective, we can say that human wisdom does not work unless it is given by God as said in 1 Corinthians 1 : 19, “For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”

The other one is Tariki-Hongan, meaning “Reliance upon Others.” What is meant by this is that they only can pray Nembutsu, meaning “invoking the name of Buddha.” They have taught that Buddha guaranteed us to enter heaven only if we pray Nembutsu. They say we should pray Nembutsu and hold a memorial service for the dead so that they can go to heaven and that we can go to heaven as well after we die. They can ask other people in Japan if they can go to heaven or become a Buddha only if we pray Nembutsu. We can understand Paul says in Ephesians 2 : 8, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” It is obvious that Christians believe that they cannot go to heaven only by praying to God.

### **Paul’ Epistle of Christian Life**

Paul has explained his two doctrines in his letters of the New Testament. One of the two is about the sin on account of trespass inherited from Adam to all mankind, and the other, about the punishment for the benefit of us, as clearly stated in Romans 6 : 23, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” If we read the Bible with care, we can realize that Paul has incorporated these two in one, that is, we are not alone because he says in Galatians 2 : 20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” That is why Paul proclaims he is strong in Jesus when he is weak in flesh and has been encouraged by Jesus.

Paul verifies God’s love which has been given by Jesus’ blood in his letter in Romans 5 : 8, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” We have been not only justified but have been also given Him as the Peace Maker as it is stated in Romans 5 : 11, “Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have received reconciliation.”

## Conclusion

Since it is obvious that nobody has returned from “that world” except Jesus Christ, we cannot tell whether our ancestors are happy in heaven or suffering in hell. Even if they should be suffering now, they would be an absolute calling to us that we should confess our sins and accept Jesus to be saved before too late, because Christianity is for the benefit of the living people in “this world” now. We should stop worrying and try to make a decision to be a follower of Jesus. Now in “this world” we live as Japanese, while others as Americans, or as slaves of earthly value judgments or free man or woman. But Paul clearly mentions in Galatians 3 : 26–27, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothes yourselves with Christ.” This implies that every one of us is unique and of infinite value as His children.

In concluding, this writer is absolutely positive of that we Christians have the hope to be raised into a new life by faith we have confessed that Jesus is our Christ in God’s power of resurrection, conquering death which Jesus redeemed. Paul teaches this acceptance and overcoming of death as demonstrated by the Jesus’ cross, because it is said in Philippians 3 : 20, “But our citizenship is in heaven.”

“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands for ever.”  
(Isaiah 40 : 8)

## Notes :

- 1) Shakespeare, William, Hamlet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 92.
- 2) Graham, Billy, Facing Death and the Life after (Minneapolis: Grason Co. Ltd, 1987), p. 15.
- 3) Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth, On Death and Dying (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1980), p. 200.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 213.
- 5) Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- 6) Genesis 3: 6–7.
- 7) Galatians 3: 13.

- 8) Muto, Kazuo, *Christianity and the Notion of Nothingness*, vol. 25, Japanese religions (Tokyo: Sobunsha, 1993), pp. 53–82.
- 9) *The Harpercollins Dictionary of religion*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. “The Story of the Buddha,” p. 128.
- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 11) *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religion*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v., “Buddhism.”
- 12) Luttio, Mark, *The Passage of Death in the Japanese Context*, vol. 62, *The Japan Christian review* (Tokyo: Kyobunkan, 1996), pp. 18–29.
- 13) Genesis 1: 1.
- 14) Luttio, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
- 15) Renolds, Frank, “Buddhist Perspectives with Particular Reference to the Theravada Tradition,” in *Death and After Life: Perspectives of World Religions*, (New York: Praeger Press, 1992), p. 12.
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- 18) *Ibid.*, p. 156.