Jesus the Bodhisattva: Christology from a Buddhist Perspective

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To believe and affirm that God is love and that human beings are not like "orphans" lost in the vast, meaningless universe but are under the care of a loving God constitutes the core of Christian faith. Yet it is by no means easy to do so, for there seems to be more hatred than love in the world, more injustice and violence than justice and peace, and in the eyes of modern science the world appears to be nothing more than blind congeries of restless particles. Despite this, however, what enables Christians to have the courage to affirm the moral meaning of life is none other than the truth revealed through Jesus Christ concerning human life and the world. Christians believe that, in Jesus Christ, the mystery of the ultimate reality of the world and the ultimate meaning of life was decisively revealed. Rather than relying on abstract philosophical speculation, they base their understanding of the ultimate reality and its relationship with human beings on a concrete historical being, Jesus. It is for this reason that Christology—which is thinking about the mystery of Jesus' person and the significance he has for human salvation—is of decisive importance in Christian theology.

What I attempt here is to develop an indigenous Asian Christology by interpreting the meaning of Jesus' message and life from the Buddhist perspective, especially from its doctrine and ideal of bodhisattvahood as developed in Mahayana Buddhist tradition. I try to show that the power that made Jesus what he was and the power that makes a bodhisattva a bodhisattva are ultimately the same and that the only way for humans to be authentic human beings in Buddhism and Christianity is through the power of cosmic love.

I. "WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?"

We find already in the New Testament diverse Christological thoughts on the mystery of Jesus' person and the salvific significance he has for humankind. Titles like *Christ, Lord, Son of Man, Son of God,* and *Logos* are some of the concepts that represent these Christological thoughts. The Western church has developed its Christological thoughts on the basis of these New Testament concepts and under the heavy influence of the Greek philo-

Buddhist-Christian Studies 16 (1996).

sophical mode of thinking. But modern historical thinking makes us reexamine not only the traditional metaphysical Christology but also the New Testament Christological concepts themselves. One of the distinct characteristics of modern historically oriented Christological thinking, as opposed to the traditional metaphysical Christology, is to make the "Jesus of history" or "earthly Jesus" its starting point. As a result, we are witnessing a new type of Christology, the so-called Christology from the bottom *(Christologie von unten),* which sees less distance between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith" than the kerygmatic theology of R. Bultmann, for instance, does. The present article is also positioned in this line of Christology from the bottom, although at the same time I believe that some sort of ontological, if not metaphysical, speculation is unavoidable in so far as any Christology affirms and tries to account for the transcendent aspect of the person of Jesus and his activities.

The diverse Christological titles and concepts were the products of the effort on the part of the early Christians to understand and express the impact of Jesus: his message, his life and death, and his resurrection. The early Christians employed various terms and concepts current in their times in order to give expression to the power of salvation that they had experienced through the Jesus event. As such, they were historically and culturally conditioned, and there is no reason to absolutize them, even though the Christian church should not underestimate the power they have had in mediating the salvific experience to the Christians of subsequent generations, even down to the present. This observation holds true even more for the traditional Christological thoughts formulated by the church fathers. What is important throughout all these Christological formulations of the New Testament and the Western church is the reality itself *(Sache selbst)* behind them, not the outward expressions themselves, which vary according to the historicocultural situations to which the gospel is addressed and in which it is received. The crucial question that the Christological thinking should always ask anew is, What was the power that was operative in Jesus' person, in his message and acts—the power that is still believed to be mediated by him to his followers?

One of the serious problems of the traditional metaphysical Christology of the Western church is that, despite its affirmation of Jesus' humanity, it has not done justice to it and has failed to show in a concrete way how Jesus' words and acts embody and mediate the universal and transcendent power of divine salvation. This transcendent power made Jesus not a supernatural or superhuman being as the traditional Christology would have it—a strange exceptional being who is said to be both God and man at the same time but who appears to be neither of them truly but some sort of an incomprehensible being in between the two—but a most natural and authentic human being who provides a model for all humans to emulate. It was through this universal and transcendent power, the Logos as the fourth

Gospel calls it, that Jesus was able to be what he was, demonstrating a new humanity who freely gives himself up for God and other human beings and thereby attains eternal life.

Another weakness of the traditional Christology lies in the fact that it has tended to identify the universal power of salvation exclusively with Jesus, a finite human being, in such a way that it was regarded as confined to Jesus alone. The traditional doctrine of the incarnation of the Logos has normally been understood as implying that Jesus had monopolized this universal power of salvation and that hence it is impossible to know or get into contact with it apart from Jesus. It may indeed be impossible for Christians truly to understand Jesus' person and his work apart from the power of the Logos, and it is in this sense true that he was its "incarnation." But this need not imply that Jesus monopolized the Logos as its only incarnation. The incarnated Logos is not necessarily the whole of the eternal Logos; there may be many other, in fact innumerable, "incarnations" of it, certainly less decisive than Jesus for Christians, but nevertheless very important for other peoples. In other words, we may say that Jesus was wholly the Logos but was not the whole of it—to borrow John Hick's description of Jesus as wholly divine but not the whole of God, *toto* but not *totus*. Although inseparable, we still have to distinguish between the intratrinitarian eternal Son of God and the Son of God who appeared on earth as a finite human being and proclaimed the message of the Kingdom of God, was crucified and resurrected. By exclusively confining the eternal universal reality of the Logos to a particular historical being, many Christians have committed the folly of confining the universal divine love to Christians only.

As long as they remain loyal to their Christian identity, Asian Christians cannot talk about the Logos and the universal divine love apart from the Jesus event. For it belongs to the essence of Christian faith to believe that the Logos had been decisively and finally—"eschatologically"—revealed through Jesus' words and acts. Yet it should be borne in mind that the power of salvation itself is eternal and universal and can never be confined to a finite being, however unique and miraculous he may be. The Logos through which "all things were made" (John 1:3; also Col. 1:15–17) is the source of all life, without which nothing on earth can ever exist; it is the creative power of love that holds things together (Col. 1:17). We may not necessarily name it *Logos,* but it is something that makes all human life possible everywhere and that all cultures must have one way or another.

If this is so, we may now ask how the great philosophical wisdom of Asia has known this creative source of all life and salvation throughout its long tradition. By what name has it grasped it, and how has the Asian aspiration for it been expressed? If Jesus had been born in Asia, in what form would he have appeared, what language would he have used, and how would Asian people have responded to the question, "Who do you say that I am?" In short, how would Asian "theologians" have developed their Christological thought?

For Asian people, the image of Jesus suggests above all that of a bodhisattva, one who does not seek his own happiness but throws himself into the world of suffering out of boundless compassion for sentient beings. In the eyes of Asian people, Jesus strikes the image of a typical bodhisattva, the embodiment of selfless *(anātman)* compassion. Had Jesus been born in Asia, he would most likely have appeared in the form of a bodhisattva, and from this viewpoint nothing would be more natural for Asian Christians than to respond to the question, "Who do you say that I am?" "You are for us none other than the one who showed most clearly the ideal image of the bodhisattva that has captivated Asian people's hearts." *Bodhisattva,* no less than *Christ, Son of God, Lord,* and other titles, is a legitimate Christological title that Asian Christians can adopt in their efforts to formulate the salvific meaning that they perceive in Jesus. Like all Christological titles, the concept of bodhisattva has its strengths and weaknesses, but there is no a priori reason to make it unfit for a Christological title. And this is what I try to show in what follows. Before doing so, however, some more theological clearance is in order.

That Jesus was born a Jew is an immutable fact, and all Christological thinking has to start from accepting it and taking it very seriously. Unlike the Jesus event itself, however, our efforts to understand it and the categories we employ to interpret its meaning have been diverse and relative. The event of Jesus took place in the Jewish context, but its interpretations have taken place in the diverse religiocultural contexts in which Christian communities have found themselves. This process of manifold interpretations, which had already begun in the New Testament period, we may call the *second incarnation,* the first being the Jesus event itself. The entire history of the Christological thinking of the church, beginning with that of the New Testament, constitutes the process of this secondary incarnation through which the salvific meaning of the Jesus event has been interpreted and conveyed to people situated in diverse historical environments in terms that are intelligible and meaningful to then. This process of hermeneutical incarnation inevitably takes place in historical diversity and relativity, for all understanding is human understanding, and all interpretation is done through the categories available to the interpreter, who belongs to a particular historicocultural tradition.

Unfortunately, however, Asian Christians have thus far not been able to participate in this process of hermeneutical incarnation. Partly owing to the short history of Asian churches, and partly owing to Western theological dominance and Asian theologians' neglect, Asian Christians have not been able to find their own idioms and voices, voices and idioms arising from their own encounter with the primary incarnation. It is now time, many Asian theologians rightly assert, for Asian Christians to interpret the meaning of the gospel in their own terms and categories—the third process of incarnation, so to speak.[1] To be sure, there is no pure fact of Jesus given uninterpreted to Asian Christians. The primary incarnation is already avail-

able only through the confessional language of the early church as recorded and transmitted through the Bible and as interpreted by the theological tradition of the Western church. In this sense, Asian Christians are also bound to a certain degree by the normativity of the church tradition, especially the New Testament Christological witnesses. Yet, in order to create the Christological language that is fresh and truly meaningful to them, it is essential for them to begin their Christological thinking all over again from the very beginning by distinguishing the event from the later interpretations as far as the modern historical scholarship allows. Paradoxically, this Christological freedom may also be the best way for Asians to appropriate or reappropriate the true meaning of the biblical and Western ecclesiastical tradition of Christology as well—the tradition that often appears unintelligible and meaningless to Asian people, and probably to many modern Westerners as well, including many Christians.

The present article is the product of a Buddhist hermeneutic of Jesus, that is, an attempt to interpret Jesus' words and acts for Asians in Buddhist terms, especially in terms of the Mahayana bodhisattva ideal and the concept of Emptiness *(śūnyatā)*. How does Jesus appear when seen through the eyes of Buddhist ideas and concepts, and what new elements can the Buddhist vision of reality help Christians find in Jesus? Some may doubt from the outset that there can be any such thing as a Buddhist hermeneutic of Jesus, holding that Jesus can be understood only from within the Christian hermeneutical tradition, beginning with the Bible. While there is certainly some validity to such skepticism, one should at the same time bear in mind that there may in fact be an even greater gap between the biblical witness and the Western metaphysical Christology than between the former and the Buddhist perspective. As a Christian, my Buddhist perspective is inevitably limited and may even be biased. But, as a person who has not been satisfied by the traditional metaphysical Christology of the Western church and who is at the same time fascinated by the Buddhist vision of reality, I find within myself an internal Buddhist-Christian dialogue that has been going on for a long time—the dialogue that resulted in the following Buddhist hermeneutic of Jesus. The idea of Jesus as a bodhisattva may indeed sound radical to many Christians. But was it less so when the earliest Christian kerygma proclaimed the crucified Jesus as the Christ, the triumphant Messiah whom the Jewish people were expecting to come to save them from the pagan power?

II. JESUS AND BODHISATTVA

1. Freedom

Bodhisattvas are above all free beings. They are in the world, but they are not bound by it; they are "in the world, but not of the world." They are involved in the world of birth-and-death *(saṃsāra)*, but they remain un-

affected by it. Free of the three poisons of avarice, anger, and ignorance, they are not attached to this world of suffering. They are not caught by the vicious circle of birth-and-death perpetuated by a ceaseless hankering after the transient things of the world, for bodhisattvas look at the reality of the world and human life without delusory thoughts; they have gained insight into the true character of human existence as selfless *(anātman),* transient *(anitya),* and suffering *(duḥkha).* Hence they remain unattached to "reality" as we normally see it; neither are they settled in it. For them "reality" is no reality, for they see it in a different light. Bodhisattvas are not realists in the conventional sense of the term. For them, reality is not an immutable structure. Ever subject to change and ever shifting, what appears to us solid reality is for bodhisattvas nothing but a mental construction, in which we in turn become trapped. Hence it is not worth our commitment and struggle.

Likewise, Jesus was not a realist. He awakened people to realize that the present reality is not what it seems to be. It is soon to give way to another reality more "real" than it, that is, the reality of the imminent Kingdom of God. Confronted with this higher reality, the order of this world and its values lose their ultimacy and are doomed to vanish. Thus, Jesus did not settle in reality. Life lived in reliance on such reality may look secure but is in fact like building a house on sand or like the life of a foolish rich man who does not realize his imminent death. The powerful vision of the coming Kingdom of God freed Jesus of the pressures of the present reality. He lived a free life, unattached to this passing world.

Certainly, the way in which "reality" becomes deconstructed for Jesus differs from the way in which bodhisattvas deconstruct it. In the case of Jesus, simple faith in God as father *(abba)* and in his kingdom of grace liberated him from the cares and concerns of this world. All efforts to make one's life secure and to justify oneself before this God of unconditional love prove entirely futile and unnecessary. In the case of bodhisattvas, it is their wisdom and insight into the true nature of reality, that is, Emptiness *(śūnyatā),* that enable them to remain unattached to the world. Despite this difference in the way in which they are free of the world, Jesus and bodhisattvas show an essential unity of spirit in pointing out the illusory character of our belief in the immutable order of things, in awakening people to another dimension of reality, and thus in liberating us from the hard grip of reality and its laws.

Bodhisattvas are free not merely from the world of birth-and-death but also from attachment to nirvana. Birth-and-death and nirvana, illusion and enlightenment, sentient beings and Buddhas, the false and the true, the secular and the religious, impurity and purity, are not two *(advaya)* in bodhisattvas' eyes of wisdom. Through this wisdom of nonduality they enjoy freedom from all kinds of discrimination *(vikalpa)* and attachment, including that to nirvana and the idea of freedom from this world. Bodhi-

sattvas are not mesmerized by the power of language and concepts; they are not bound by names and forms, including those belonging to the Buddha-dharma. Not abiding in any name and form, bodhisattvas are even free of religious attachments and moral discriminations. They do not discriminate between good and evil, and in their eyes good persons and evil persons, the righteous and the unrighteous, sentient beings and Buddhas, are equal. Bodhisattvas also remain free of religious ideas and concepts; they are not enslaved by religion. They do not sacrifice the true (the sacred) for the sake of the false (the profane) or the false for the sake of the true. They see nirvana in the very midst of birth-and-death, and birth-and-death in the midst of nirvana. Not dwelling in either, bodhisattvas freely move in and out of the mundane and the supramundane realms. This is the bodhisattvas' absolute freedom, which comes from their wisdom of nonduality.

We find the same absolute freedom in Jesus as well. Just as bodhisattvas are free of the Hinayana wisdom that discriminates the true and the false, so was Jesus free of the Jewish legalism of his time. Jesus criticized the Pharisaic legalism that makes a sharp distinction between the sacred and the profane, the pious and the impious, the righteous and the sinners, the pure and the impure. Jesus boldly rejected the legalistic prejudices and proclaimed human liberation from oppressive religious ideas and practices. He knew the paradox by which the righteous becomes the sinner and the sinner the righteous, the clean unclean and the unclean clean. Before the unconditional divine love no one can claim any privilege, religious or moral, and no one is excluded. Jesus taught the freedom of the children of God who simply commit themselves to God's unconditional love without any pretension. Like the bodhisattvas' freedom, which sees the nonduality of the sacred and the profane, Jesus proclaimed liberation from religion and the preoccupation with the sacred.

Here, again, the ground on which Jesus' freedom stood is differently understood from that on which the bodhisattvas' freedom is based. Whereas the bodhisattvas' freedom is based on the wisdom of Emptiness, which does not allow any kind of discrimination, even the moral and religious, Jesus' freedom is grounded on God's unconditional love, which leaves no room for human pretension and renders all human efforts futile and unnecessary. Emptiness and divine grace constitute for the bodhisattvas and Jesus the source of infinite freedom, liberating human beings from all kinds of oppressive ideas and practices, institutions and ideologies, not the least the religious and the moralistic.

Bodhisattvas and Jesus are above all beings who are free of themselves. Completely free of the discriminating ideas of self and others, they are persons who have embodied the truth of no-self *(anātman)*. Whereas bodhisattvas are free of the attachment to self owing to their insight into the Emptiness of persons *(pudgalanairātmya)* and all things *(dharmanairātmya)*, Jesus was free of preoccupation with himself owing to his complete

trust in the God of unconditional love. Before the heavenly Father of sheer grace, all our self-attachment is bound to disappear; our efforts to secure our own safety and to justify ourselves are not merely futile but also unnecessary. We have no choice before this God of unconditional love but to empty ourselves and become beings of no-self. When the Father is recognized as such, the son empties himself in the obedience of faith and become selfless.

The person of no-self is the one who is completely free of false notions about oneself, one who realizes one's true self as it is. For bodhisattvas, the *true self* refers to the self that exists in a relationship of mutual dependence with others. Deeply realizing the law of dependent co-origination *(pratītyasamutpāda)* and the Emptiness of all beings, bodhisattvas are liberated from the false notion of an independent, substantial selfhood. Hence, without self-attachment and self-preoccupation, they live a life in perfect openness to others. In the case of Jesus, too, the *true self* refers to the self who stands in relationship with the heavenly Father and one's neighbors—the relational being open to God and his fellow human beings. For bodhisattvas and Jesus, the authentic human beings are the relational beings open to each other and dependent on each other. They are beings of no-self. Here, again, the source of openness to other beings is differently understood by bodhisattvas and Jesus. For bodhisattvas it is the truth of Emptiness, whereas for Jesus it is the utterly gratuitous character of divine love. Yet, in their own ways, they live their lives in perfect openness to other human beings and to the transcendent dimension of life, that is, Emptiness and divine grace. They realize their true selves by embodying the truth of no-self in their lives. Realization of the true self through the denial of the false self, self-affirmation through self-denial, self-perfection through selfless love, in short, life through death, constitute the common secret of true life in bodhisattvas and Jesus.

Freedom from the world, freedom from religious attachment and moralistic discrimination, and freedom from self—these are the freedoms that bodhisattvas and Jesus enjoy. Freedom is the core of their being and acting.

2. Love

Such freedom as bodhisattvas and Jesus enjoy is not a blind freedom, freedom simply for the sake of freedom, or a closed freedom, one that remains self-sufficient. Their freedom is one that makes them reach out to other beings in love and compassion. It is a freedom for self-sacrifice, commitment, and devotion to others. The lives of bodhisattvas and Jesus demonstrate that there cannot be a genuine love without freedom and no true freedom without love, for how can there be sharing and participation when one is preoccupied with oneself and attached to the world? Where

there is self-attachment there cannot be a pure love of others, and where there is a discrimination of self and others there cannot be a pure selfless giving *(dāna)* or a work of love that is done without letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing. As long as one sees an enemy as an enemy, one cannot love one's enemy; as long as one sees sinners as sinners, one cannot truly accept them. As long as sentient beings are viewed merely as sentient beings, there cannot be the bodhisattvas' great compassion *(mahākaruṇā)* that is based on the nonduality of self and others, sentient beings and buddhas. One has to be free of all these ideas and forms in order to have a genuine selfless love and compassion. Furthermore, so long as one discriminates between the true and the false (the profane), the pure and the impure, nirvana and *saṃsarā,* one will try to avoid one and be attached to the other. Thus, one will not gladly become involved in the turmoils of this impure world. Without, therefore, a transcendent wisdom or viewpoint that looks at the world and life in a perspective different from our ordinary discriminating mode, and without the freedom that comes from it, genuine love and compassion are impossible.

The bodhisattvas' compassion and Jesus' love by no means belong to the ethics of common sense. They are not based on our calculative wisdom or utilitarian consideration, nor are they derived from a cold sense of duty or some categorical imperative. They are absolute ethics based on the realization of Emptiness and divine grace and on a profound awareness of the truth of no-self. The love that embraces one's neighbor as oneself, the love that accepts even one's enemy, the love as perfect as the heavenly Father's, "who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust," is no ordinary love; it is unconditional, nondiscriminating, and selfless (no-self) love. It does not give in expectation of any reward, nor is it practiced in order to make up for what is lacking. It is not eros but agape, not ordinary compassion but great compassion, the pure love that gives without the idea of the giver, the receiver, and the given.

This unconditional and nondiscriminating love is made possible in bodhisattvas and Jesus by their transcendent wisdom and power. Jesus' love flows from his simple yet profound awareness of the unconditional character of divine love; the Bodhisattvas' great compassion arises from the liberating insight into Emptiness that demolishes all lines of conceptual distinctions drawn by our discriminating intellect. In the eyes of bodhisattvas, sentient beings are not sentient beings, evil persons are not evil persons, buddhas are not buddhas. In the eyes of Jesus, likewise, sinners are not sinners, tax collectors are not tax collectors, and the righteous are not the righteous. Without the equalizing wisdom of nonduality, the Bodhisattvas' pure compassion does not arise, and, without the transcendent viewpoint of divine eyes, the absolute love of Jesus' ethics is impossible. Jesus could love the dispossessed and the alienated because he saw them differently

from the way in which others saw them; they were none other than the sons and daughters of the heavenly Father, although they themselves did not realize this. Bodhisattvas view foolish sentient beings not simply as what they are but as none other than buddhas. Only when the wall separating the righteous and the sinner is demolished does true love and reconciliation become possible; only when the discriminating mind that distinguishes between buddhas and sentient beings disappear can the "great compassion of one body" appear.

Yet bodhisattvas do not always look at the world with nondiscriminating wisdom. Otherwise, they would lose contact with the world of ordinary sentient beings; they would not be able to see the difference between sentient beings and buddhas, *saṃsarā* and nirvana. In order to see sentient beings in the sea of birth-and-death and to bear their voices of agony, bodhisattvas also employ discriminating wisdom as a skillful means *(upāya)* and approach the world of sentient beings. Bodhisattvas recognize form as Emptiness and Emptiness as form at the same time. Thus, bodhisattvas dwell in our world of forms and distinctions. But their dwelling is nondwelling, and the form they perceive is not the form we perceive, for form is Emptiness at the same time. Hence, bodhisattvas are not trapped by the differences they see; they do not absolutize them. The distinctions that they make arise from the world of nondistinction, that is, Emptiness. Thus, while engaged in the world, they are able to remain disengaged.

Likewise, Jesus approaches the world with a dual perspective. On the one hand, he shares with us our conventional mode of thinking. Thus, he thinks in our categories, distinguishing between good and evil, righteousness and sin, pure and impure, rich and poor, strong and weak. Yet the way he understands these distinctions is not the same as ours; he approaches a world divided between opposites with a divine heart and with God's standard. Thus, in his eyes, the righteous becomes the sinful, the high the low, and vice versa; his standard of goodness is not ours, for he says that no one is good except the heavenly Father. He sees impurity in purity and purity in impurity, strength in weakness and weakness in strength, for his standard of purity and strength does not conform to ours. Likewise the rich and the poor. In short, Jesus sees everything from God's perspective and with a divine heart. With Jesus as with bodhisattvas, the distinctions create love and compassion. With us, they discriminate, alienate, and kill.

Just as Jesus identifies himself with the thirsty, the hungry, the naked, the sick, and those in prison, bodhisattvas often appear in popular Buddhist stories disguised as the weak and the helpless, the marginal people of society—beggars, travelers, sick people, gamblers, sinners in hell, old women, and children. In these bodhisattva figures it is not difficult to find the figure of Jesus, the "friend of sinners and tax collectors," and it is not difficult to find in Jesus the good shepherd, he who goes after the one lost sheep, the

image of bodhisattvas who renounce their own nirvana until they save the last sentient being remaining in the world of birth-and-death.

Undoubtedly, the bodhisattvas' great compassion and Jesus' unconditional love are embedded in different religiocultural backgrounds and find different expressions in practice. Yet both are based on the freedom arising from a transcendent wisdom, and both embody pure and absolute love, which challenges our conventional worldly ethics. Ultimately, both are grounded on the deeper reality called Emptiness and God's love.

III. EMPTINESS AND LOVE

Where does the power come from that enables bodhisattvas and Jesus to enjoy freedom from the world and yet participate in it with a commitment of love and compassion? Given the essential similarity in the mode in which freedom and love are manifested in their lives, can we conclude that they come from the same source, one understood differently owing only to cultural differences? Or do they come from two entirely different sources? I have already referred to the fact that Jesus' freedom and love are differently grounded from those of the bodhisattvas. For bodhisattvas it is the insight into Emptiness that makes their freedom and compassion possible, whereas for Jesus it is the awareness of the unconditional divine love. The question to be considered now is how different Emptiness and divine love really are in substance.

Jesus' freedom and love come from his complete trust in the God of unconditional love, the heavenly *abba*. This awareness of and absolute trust in divine grace is what enabled Jesus to live an untrammeled life like a "true man of no rank"—to use that famous expression of the Zen master Lin-ch'i—and yet commit himself to the marginal people of society. The true man of no rank for Jesus is none other than the person who completely entrusts himself to God's grace and thereby is absolutely freed from all kinds of earthly cares and anxieties—the person who has given up futile efforts to secure his safety and to justify himself before God and who has thus realized his true self as a child of God. Such a person enjoys the wonderful freedom of the children of God and manifests pure and spontaneous love untainted by selfish will. Jesus exemplified this life of the children of God in such a perfect way that he was called the Son of God. In Jesus we find the figure of a bodhisattva who accomplishes all things in perfect spontaneity, that is, in no-thought and no-mind.

The bodhisattvas' freedom and compassion come from their wisdom *(prajñā),* which realizes the identity of Emptiness and form: "form is Emptiness, and Emptiness is form." Free of attachment to forms and names, bodhisattvas are not bound by anything in the world. Yet, embracing all forms at the same time, they are compassionate beings committed to the welfare of all sentient beings. It is Emptiness devoid of all forms that makes

their freedom possible, and it is also the same Emptiness full of forms that makes their compassion possible—the compassion that requires discrimination without discrimination, attachment without attachment, and form without form. In bodhisattvas we cannot fail to recognize the figure of Jesus, who led a life of freedom and love in perfect spontaneity. Once again is raised the inevitable question of whether *Emptiness* and *God's love* after all refer to the same reality. My comparison thus far of the bodhisattvas and Jesus suggests an affirmative answer to this question. Let me then elaborate on this matter.

Emptiness and divine love are for bodhisattvas and Jesus objective reality. Whether we are aware of it or not, whether we realize it or not, and whether we accept it or not, they refer to the reality as it is. Although this reality may remain concealed from us because of our ignorance and disbelief, it is always there as something that is given prior to our knowledge. As far as bodhisattvas and Jesus are concerned, nothing is more certain than it. For them, all things in the world, and not merely human beings, live constantly with it and in it. It is nearer to us than any other thing in the world; it is even nearer to me than my own being. It is the very ground of our being, what makes our existence possible in the first place. Jesus and bodhisattvas simply realize this fundamental truth and live their lives in perfect accord with it. For them, to know this truth is the most important thing in human life; all misfortunes and tragedies come from not realizing it. That Emptiness and divine love are objective reality means that they are given there prior to any human apprehension. Not even bodhisattvas and Jesus take precedence over it, for they do not create it. Instead, they become what they are precisely because they see reality as it is *(tathātā)*—for bodhisattvas Emptiness and for Jesus the prevenient grace of God as *abba*.

If this is the case, then the conventional view that Buddhism is a religion of salvation by self-power and Christianity a religion of grace and salvation by other-power needs reconsideration. In so far as Emptiness is something that is given prior to any human intervention, should we not say that it also has the character of grace in the sense that it is beyond our control? In Buddhism, to be sure, Emptiness and *prajñā*-wisdom always go together and are considered inseparable. Nevertheless, no Buddhist would object to giving precedence to Emptiness over our *prajñā*-wisdom, for Emptiness as the very nature of things must be there in the first place before any human being can ever realize it. The Dharma takes precedence over Buddha, as Sakyamuni Buddha himself would no doubt recognize. What is given and not made by human beings is, in Christian language, grace—something we must simply recognize and accept gratefully. After all, what saves human beings in Buddhism is before anything else the unchanging truth itself.

On the other hand, as far as Jesus' own thought is concerned, it is not self-evident that Christianity is a religion of faith as commonly held. What is

vitally important for Jesus in human life is to realize that God is our gracious Father who loves us all as his children: he is our *abba*. This is an objective truth, a self-evident truth for Jesus. For Jesus, it is an immutable fact that we are children of God. Jesus deeply realized this truth and tried to remind others of it so that they too might live their lives as children of God. In fact, Jesus was like a living embodiment of this truth to his followers, and they found in him the image of the Father whom he knew so intimately and loved so passionately. Thus, he was called the *Son of God,* and it has become difficult for his followers to think about God's love or his fatherhood apart from his sonship.

For Jesus, a pious Jew, God was above all the object of knowledge; to know him is the most fundamental thing in life. You must know the maker of heaven and earth and the author of human life as the gracious Father. Faith, trust, and commitment—and risk—come thereafter. We know that knowledge of God is a very important theme in the Old Testament, and it is by no means all that strange that Jesus, a pious Jew, did not talk much about faith *(pistis),* at least not as much as his followers did in later generations. Certainly, Jesus talked about the power of faith (and its lack), but this faith, as trust, presupposes knowledge of God as the gracious heavenly Father—something that amounts to an indisputable fact of life for Jesus. Surely, Jesus did not manifestly thematize knowledge of God either—at least not in the synoptic Gospels. But his entire mission was nothing else than a continuous witness to this crucial fact of life. Christians talk a lot about faith, but Jesus did not. Instead, he simply awakened people to a realization of what was so vivid a reality for him, that is, God as the gracious Father of all.

Seen in this way, the religion of Jesus was more a religion of knowledge of God—or "awakening" to God—than is commonly held. The God of unconditional love was for Jesus the object of knowing, awareness, and discovery before being the object of faith. And those who deeply know God as their gracious Father enjoy their freedom as children of God. As Jesus says in the fourth Gospel, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Jesus himself realized this truth and preached it as the good news to others. Whether they believed it or not, whether they accepted it or not, was a secondary matter for Jesus. He simply bore witness to it through his words and acts so that people may also realize it and live lives of freedom and love in accordance with it. If Emptiness can be understood as a form of grace, divine grace in turn is for Jesus something to realize and discover, something to be awakened to.

Now, I go a step further and come to my central thesis, namely, that Emptiness and divine love, after all, refer to the same reality in different ways. In other words, what makes a bodhisattva a bodhisattva and what makes Jesus what he is is the same universal reality. Tübingen theologian Walter Kasper writes as follows concerning the love realized in Jesus:

> Thus, what constitutes the deepest essence of man finds its single highest realization in the death and resurrection of Christ: the love that surpasses and renounces one's own self. Jesus himself universalizes this fundamental law: "For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35). "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:24f.). Now these words directly acquire ontological relevance: all that is exists only in transition to another being; each particular thing has its truth only through its being accepted into a whole. A living being should go outside of itself in order to maintain itself. "I" must remove itself to "Thou" in order to win itself and the other. But community, society, and mankind can find and preserve their only unity in something common that embraces and impinges on its members, a mediation that again can only be personal itself. Thus, unity among men is possible only in their self-transcending for a common recognition of God. Formulated more universally: all being finds its identity not through a shy dwelling-in-itself without relationship with others; concrete identity is possible only through relationship and self-transcending into others. So is the love that constitutes the innermost core of Jesus, the bond that holds everything together and gives each its meaning.[2]

Here, Kasper is enunciating the ontological meaning of the love manifested in Jesus. Or we may call it the structure of love operative in all beings. That is, love is not merely human feeling or moral quality but the fundamental principle of being for all beings. There is nothing in the world that can exist closed in itself; all beings can exist only in openness and in relationship to each other. Interestingly, Kasper is here saying essentially the same thing as the Buddhist doctrine of the law of dependent co-origination, that is, the Emptiness, the interrelatedness, the nonsubstantiality of all beings. Or, to use the Hua-yen expression, it is the "nonobstruction between phenomena and phenomena." Everything maintains its identity through self-negation and self-transcendence. Affirmation through negation, life through death—this is the universal character of all beings in the world, and it is none other than the principle of love. Emptiness is love; love is Emptiness. Or, as we may put it, Emptiness is the ontological concept of love, and love is the personal manifestation of Emptiness. Emptiness and love are the principle of being and the way things are in mutual interdependence.

In the passage quoted above, Kasper points out another aspect of reality, namely, that the individual entities can maintain unity or harmony among themselves only on the basis of an all-embracing reality that he calls God. This reminds us of another Hua-yen formulation of truth, namely, the "nonobstruction between principle and phenomena." All individual entities par-

ticipate in the common principle of being, that is, Emptiness or the interdependent nature of things. Although principle and phenomena are inseparable, they are nevertheless distinguished, just as all things exist in relationship with God and yet remain different from God. Does this then suggest that Emptiness, the ontological principle or power of love, is after all the same as God and that love is God? While I cannot go into this difficult problem here, the least that I can say for the moment is that, love being the essential character of God, Emptiness certainly reveals an essential aspect of God as well. It is God as the power of love and Emptiness that makes all beings exist in self-transcendence and interdependence and holds them together at the same time.

Certainly, God as the all-embracing reality is regarded as personal Being (not a being!) for Christians, whereas Emptiness is commonly understood as impersonal reality. But, for the moment, we are comparing Emptiness not with God but with his love in its ontological structure. Christians believe that God is love, and to say this is to say that love is a cosmic reality, not merely a human phenomenon. The ontological implication of love suggests to us that it is a cosmic reality or "force" that corresponds to Buddhist Emptiness. Thus, I hold that Emptiness is the ontological formulation of love and that love is the personal manifestation of Emptiness. The categories of *personal* and *impersonal* should not be taken as ultimate. Here, I agree with John Hick's view, which, following Kant, allows a certain epistemological distance between the reality itself *(Ding an sich)* and the categories through which we approach that reality. Our ways of thinking are inevitably bound by our cultural background. So are Jesus' and the bodhisattvas' ways of thinking too. But, as far as we can go beyond our conceptual categories and ascertain the "meaning" behind and beyond them, we may conclude that love, as much as Emptiness, characterizes the nature of reality and that the true nature of the universe and life has the character of the nonobstruction between principle and phenomena and between phenomena and phenomena. The world, as seen through the eyes of bodhisattvas and Jesus, is Emptiness and love.

Kasper makes one more point. He asserts that love constitutes the core of Jesus' personhood and saw its single *(einmalig)* highest expression in him. This, of course, reflects Kasper's Christian theological stance and is something that all Christians would endorse. On the basis of my investigation thus far, however, I go further than this position and assert that the same cosmic love is also manifested in bodhisattvas, for what makes a bodhisattva a bodhisattva is nothing else than Emptiness, the very principle of cosmic love. Christian theology asserts the universality of the Logos, through which all things were made (John 1:3) and in which all things are held together (Col. 2:17). Christian theology also asserts that this cosmic principle, the cosmic Christ, was manifested most decisively in the particular figure of Jesus of Nazareth, so much so that Christians regard him as

the very incarnate Logos. If we regard this Logos as the cosmic love through which all beings exist in interdependence, the Logos is none other than Emptiness. With Kasper, Christian faith certainly is entitled to regard Jesus as the single highest realization *(einmalige höchste Verwirklichung)* of this love, but this should not be taken as suggesting that Jesus is the only incarnation of the Logos, for the cosmic love is constantly at work throughout the universe and can be manifested in numerous other personalities. As we have seen, what makes a bodhisattva a bodhisattva is none other than Emptiness, the ontological principle of love; in this sense, bodhisattvas are certainly manifestations or "incarnations" of the Logos. As a Christian I do believe in Jesus as the "single highest" incarnation of the Logos, but not the only one. Wherever love is at work, wherever there is freedom and self-giving acts of compassion, there the Logos is at work and manifesting itself.

In the foregoing, I have identified the Logos, the cosmic principle of love, with Emptiness. The objection to this identification is more likely to come from the Buddhist side than from the Christian side, for the Christian tradition has normally hypostatized the Logos, whereas the Buddhist tradition has tried to avoid this trap, although not always successfully. *Emptiness* simply refers to the way things are; it is not regarded as an independent metaphysical reality in its own right, although it still has to be distinguished from evanescent phenomena as such. Here, Christian theology may have something to learn from the Buddhist side and revise its traditional view, which has hypostatized the Logos as some kind of metaphysical entity or person.

One last question remains in relation to the above observation. If we can and should avoid hypostatizing the Logos, can we do the same thing with regard to the concept of God? God is love, says the Bible. Does this mean that love is an attribute of God, who is then understood as some kind of substance? Is love the quality of divine person? Here, again, the Buddhist view of reality would have serious difficulties accepting this, for it cannot admit the existence of any separate being—whether conceived of as the highest substance or as an exceptional being or as a person—whose existence can be thought of apart from the general ontological principle of love and Emptiness. Should we then say that love, and hence Emptiness itself, is God? I cannot give a satisfactory answer to this problem now, but I must say that, so long as we have trouble considering God as a being, a *Seiende* (Heidegger), a substance, a person, or a subject—according to the modern view of man as an autonomous subject, distinct from the world of nature as object—the Buddhist challenge to dehypostatize our concept of God remains valid. For the moment, I am inclined to think of God as some kind of force or power, and in this sense I would not hesitate to call the cosmic power of love *God*. Identified with Emptiness and love, God is not a particular being but the universal power that "transcends" (not spatially or meta-

physically) all individual entities while at the same time embracing them, which allows them all to be what they are in their diversity and unique particularity and yet to be open toward each other in interdependence and finitude.

Jesus and the bodhisattvas are what they are because of their realization of this cosmic power. It constitutes the inner core of their personhood, and in this sense they are all its incarnations. But this same power of love also operates in the lives of numerous little Jesuses and bodhisattvas, transforming their lives and the lives of millions of other people who come into contact with them. In fact, as I have mentioned already, it is what makes all existence possible.

Now Asian Christians can respond to the question, "Who do you say that I am?" "You are the one who revealed to us most concretely and powerfully the image of a bodhisattva that has captivated our hearts." Buddhists, in their turn, reserve every right to call Jesus simply one of the innumerable bodhisattvas, earthly or heavenly, if they can admit that the power behind bodhisattvas and Jesus is ultimately the same. But for the Christians who have traditionally rejected the docetic view of Jesus—and hence may not be satisfied with the docetic tendency in the Mahayana conception of the bodhisattva—Jesus is the person who realized the ideal of the bodhisattva most clearly in history. He is the one who embodied most concretely and decisively the power that makes all bodhisattvas bodhisattvas, that is, the power of love and Emptiness.

NOTES

1. Here, I am following the theological method of Claude Geffre, who regards the history of theology as a series of incarnations of the Word; see his *Le Christianisme au risque de l'interpretation* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1983).

2. Walter Kasper, *Jesus der Christus* (Mainz: Katthias-Gruenewald, 1974), pp. 227–228.

A Buddhist Response to "Jesus the Bodhisattva"

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Today we live in one world. Owing to the development of transportation and communication, East and West have become one, the world just a global village. In this global village, the encounter between religions is unavoidable, and mutual understanding among religious traditions is an urgent

Buddhist-Christian Studies 16 (1996).