

A tale of two expressed spirits. An odyssey through the symbols of the *Bodhi* tree and The Cross of Jesus.

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Praca stanowi zaliczenie kursu *Meeting East and West - Cultural Understanding* prowadzonego w roku 2007/2008.

Christianity and Buddhism are undoubtedly the two of the world's greatest living religions continuing to exert influence across continents even in this post-modern era. Christians account for nearly 2 billions while Buddhists of all hues account for nearly half a billion throughout the world.¹

In the book called „A Guide to The World’s Religions” we find some basic information about these two religious systems. We read that Buddhism is the oldest of the world’s three missionary religions and has probably the same impact on Asia that Christianity has had on the West. Just as Christianity arose out of the matrix of Judaism, becoming a universal religion, while Judaism remained identified with its own orthodox culture, so the message of Buddhism broke with Hinduism in many aspects.²

Both Christianity and Buddhism have as their founders the hallowed personages of Jesus and the Buddha who are from Asia. We can tell that Buddha and Jesus have created a tale of two sages from

¹ L. Ratnasekera, *The Bodhi and the Cross*, [online], available on: http://www.newsfinder.org/site/more/the_bodhi_and_the_cross/ [1.09.2008].

² D. Bradley, *A Guide to the World’s Religions*, New York, 1963, s.108

the East, though their vision of man and life show a clear contrast. The *Bodhi* and the Cross were turning points that marked the life and message of the Buddha and Jesus respectively in a decisive way. The cross was raised on a hill in the city of Jerusalem whilst the *Bodhi* nestled serene, lost in the luscious verdure of the forest in Gaya.³

Wherever Christianity is introduced and established, the sign of the Cross begins to span all its spiritual edifices, social institutions and ethical values in as much as the same way Buddhism everywhere considers the Sacred Tree of the *Bodhi* to be a unique symbol of spirituality and culture.⁴

Therefore, the tree of the Cross is a central symbol of veneration amongst the Christians. It is the cynosure of every Christian religious building. People sign themselves with the sign of the Cross as a means of benediction, good fortune and protection from evil and all harm. At the head of all religious processions a cross is always carried. As Steven Sora claimed, a part of the real cross on which Christ was crucified, was placed in the Basilica di Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome.⁵ From the end of the 4th century it was said that St. Helen had made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, during which she discovered the True Cross and many other relics.⁶

On the other hand, the Sacred Tree of the *Bodhi* or simply the Bo-Tree under which Gauthama Siddhartha attained enlightenment on the moonlit night of the Vesak Poya, graces all hallowed shrines of Buddhist viharas, dagobas, temples and monasteries. One of the most revered and adorable relics of Buddhism is the Maha Bodhi of Anuradhapura which is believed to be a branch of the Sacred Bo-Tree of the Enlightenment brought to Sri Lanka, by Sangamitta, the sister of Mahinda Thera who introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka.⁷

³ L. Ratnasekera, *op. cit.*

⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁵ S. Sora, *Skarby z niebios. Dzieje legendarnych, prawdziwych i fałszywych relikwii chrześcijańskich*, Warszawa 2005, p.64

⁶ *Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, Rome*, [online], <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/italy/rome-santa-croce-in-gerusalemme.htm> [1.09.2008].

⁷ L. Ratnasekera, *op. cit.*

About the importance of those two symbols Rev. Fr. Leopold Ratnasekera writes:

These two trees carry immense depth- meanings and indeed are sacraments in that sense of the most inner-core realities of the two respective spiritualities, Christian, the other Buddhist. They symbolize the way the two religions and their founders interpret the ineffable realities of life and its vicissitudes.⁸

This comment corresponds with a more metaphorical statement of Bede Griffiths who thinks that every serious religion uses the symbolic language to exceed the current state of the world because only myth and symbolic language may depict, even if only roughly, the Final Truth.⁹

I also fully agree with Ruth Benedict, who claims that “the richness of a given culture is a product of historical process and is a result of many selection of the knowledge transferred from the past.”¹⁰ The knowledge from the past may be transferred only because symbols that were created by individuals, at the same time were created in act of all community.¹¹ So the symbols of the *Bodhi* tree and the cross have become two of the most significant and meaningful images for the East and the West.

In an age where symbols and images keep proliferating in the globalized world filled with mass media communication networks.¹² In this connection it seems to be needful to find some immortal

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ B. Griffiths, *W poszukiwaniu Najwyższej Świadomości. Zachodnia nauka i wschodni mistycyzm ku wizji nowej rzeczywistości.*, Bydgoszcz 1995, p.100.

¹⁰ R. Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, [in]: Kotański W., *Japońskie opowieści o Bogach*, Warszawa 1983, p.5.

¹¹ P. Tillich, *Symbol religijny*, w: *Symbolism in Religion and Literature*, red. Maya R., New York 1960, p.148

¹² Edited by D. Morrison, A. Singh, *Connection of Heaven and Earth: Symbolism of the Cross and Tree*, [online], available on: <http://nexusnovel.wordpress.com/2006/09/07/connection-of-heaven-earth-symbolism-of-cross-tree/> [1.09.2008].

symbols which express the religious sphere, which according to Tillich, contains all autonomic culture.¹³

In Heidegger's paper *Science and Reflection*, one comes across a statement that the dialogue between East and West is unavoidable.¹⁴ During such dialogue both sides tried to provide analogies or clarifications so that some common ground for discussion might be reached. These encounter encouraged precision and also clarified differences.

For this precision when the East meets the West, most important role play especially one feature of the symbol, namely deep ingrained in community recognition of a thing as a symbol. Perfect explanation of this gave us Paul Tillich, who claims that because in a given symbol the community may recognize itself, so the symbols of faith may constitute identification for different believes.¹⁵ In that context, we may perceive the cross and the *Bodhi* tree as a specific ways of expression of some groups, tendencies and communities.

The Cross

One may say that without cross there is no Christianity as it is its typical sign of identification. The Cross or Crucifix is associated with Christianity in terms of Christ's sacrifice and from 390 CE it has become its central symbol.

The cross is also a familiar symbol in other traditions as well. The cross has symbolized life, immortality, union of heaven and earth, and union of spirit and matter. It also represents the centre (for example, arms of the cross may be mapped to the four directions

¹³ That thesis he developed in his work *Philosophy of Religion*, compare: P. Tillich, *Ubek die Idee einer Teologie der Kultur, Vortrage der Kontstudien*, second edition, 1921, and Dessoir, *Lehrbuch der Philosophie*, 1925.

¹⁴ M. Heidegger, *Science and Reflection*, in: Woźniak C., „Koniec filozofii” na Zachodzie a Buddyzm, [in]: *MCCXXL Studia religologica* Z 37, Kraków 2004.

¹⁵ P. Tillich, *op.cit.*, p.149.

what was common motif in pre-Colombian civilizations like the Aztec and Maya in the Americas).¹⁶

The same representation of the center Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade perceives in the symbolism of cross in many patristic and liturgical texts, where the cross is compared to a ladder, a column or the mountain. For Eliade they all are characteristic ways of expression of the centre of the world, what means that for Christian imagination the picture of the center was natural.¹⁷

In essence, the cross represents the intersection of two lines. The vertical axis is the divine, the horizontal the human, and the meeting point between them represents the unity of heaven and earth, human and divine. Eliade, using his specific language, in the *History of religious ideas* wrote that by means of the cross (the centre) possible is connection with the heaven, and because of that the whole universe is "redeemed".¹⁸

In order to explore the meaning of the cross, we need to turn to an earlier understanding of the tree because the Christian cross is rooted in mythic account of two trees.

Trees have a long fascination in human consciousness as symbols of mystery, life, and the center. The tree in its structure buries its roots in the earth, symbolic of a deep connection with the earth. It lives on the earth, yet its branches reach up to the heavens. So the tree embodies a connection of earth and heaven, of spiritual and physical realms.¹⁹

We have trees in Abrahamic traditions: the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life present in the Garden of Eden. In New Testament appears another tree – the Christian Tree of the Cross on which Christ was sacrificed.

The tree is a symbol of the unity of heaven and earth, however the Biblical Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life disrupt this unity through the Fall of Adam and Eve, and their

¹⁶ D. Morrison, A. Singh, *Connection of Heaven and Earth, op.cit.*

¹⁷ M. Eliade, *Krzyż i Drzewo życia, w: Historia wierzeń i idei religijnych*, Vol. 2, Warszawa 1988, p.261.

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

¹⁹ D. Morrison, A. Singh, *Connection of Heaven and Earth, op.cit.*

descendants. Before the Fall, the world was non-dual with light and dark, good and evil, male and female, and knowledge and mystery united. After picking the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, duality emerged. The tree in this myth no longer unites heaven and earth but instead it represents separation from the Tree of Life, nature and the divine.²⁰

So if there is Fall in the Christian tradition, so there must be also a spiritual redemption. The tree of the Christian cross on which Christ dies as the new Adam symbolically reconnects earth and heaven. According to that tradition, the link between the Cross and Tree of Life becomes clear because wood used in the Cross came from the same Tree that grew in the Garden of Eden.

Interestingly, Christianity is the tradition that disrupts the original unity of humanity to spiritual life, nature, god and the self. That explains why it offers a soteriology of the cross – to mend that break.

The tree represents the intersection of the divine and human realms. With the Fall of Adam and Eve this unity is disrupted, according to Christian perspective. So the crucifixion of Christ becomes necessary to restore this unity through his self-sacrifice in order to atone for Adam and Eve's sin. In traditions, where this disruption through a Fall doesn't occur, the need for a sacrifice is meaningless.

Daisetsu Suzuki, the man about whom Thomas Merton said that he „*contributed no little to the spiritual and intellectual revolution of our time*“²¹ points sharply at the matter in his statement, while he set Christianity against Buddhism:

Whenever I see a crucified figure of Christ, I cannot help thinking of the gap that lies deep between Christianity and Buddhism. This gap is symbolic of the psychological division separating the East from the West.²²

²⁰ *Ibidem.*

²¹ T. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, New York 1968, p. 59.

²² D. Suzuki, *Worlds Perspectives, Mysticism Christian and Buddhist*, London 1970, p.129.

In many traditional accounts we find spiritual transformation as an important aspect of trees. The Buddha became enlightened under a *Bodhi* tree ("Tree of Enlightenment"), which signifies that like the tree's renewal through new foliage, the Buddha was spiritually reborn that day. It involves a death of the ego for a new life like shedding old leaves for new.²³

The ego-idea

It is highly significant that the Oriental mind refers all things to the *transcendental ego*, even if not always consciously or analytically, and sees them finally reduced to it. In the contrary the West attaches itself to the *relative ego* and starts everything from it. As we can distinguish two phases of the ego-idea, we can describe the first as a relative, psychological, or empirical, and call the second as a transcendent ego.²⁴

The relative ego comes out of the transcendental ego and is completely related to it. Without the transcendental ego, the relative ego cannot exist. According to this, it will not be a derogatory generalization to state that the transcendental ego is, after all, the mother of all things.²⁵

Thus the empirical ego is limited. It has no existence of its own. Any assertion made by it, has no absolute value because it is dependent on others. Always depend. So this is no more than the relative ego and psychologically established one. The remarkable feature of the relative ego is its lack of freedom.²⁶ That type of ego is a hypothetical one because it is a subject to all kinds of conditions.

This deep difference in perceiving ego has a lot of implications in both systems of thinking, and why I devote a lot of place in my essay to explain the issue at length To sum up that part of my dissertation I will quote D. T. Suzuki:

²³ D. Morrison, A. Singh, *Connection of Heaven and Earth, op.cit.*

²⁴ D. Suzuki, *op.cit.*, p.129.

²⁵ *Ibidem.*, p.131.

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

The individual ego asserts itself strongly in the West. In the East, there is no ego. The ego is non-existent and, therefore, there is no ego to be crucified.²⁷

I will elaborate on a subject later on.

Why only Christian need crucifixion

As I have already mentioned, instead of relating the relative ego to the transcendental ego and making the latter its beginning, the Western mind tenaciously clings to it.²⁸ But since relative ego is essentially defective, it is always found unsatisfactory and frustrating. What is more, it inevitably leads to a disaster. And while the Western mind believes in the reality of this “troublemaker”, it wants to deal with it quickly. And here we can see something what reflects the most striking feature of the West, for they have crucified that defective ego.

How, on the other hand, does Buddhism appear in this issue? D.T Suzuki explains it in the same work:

In a way the Oriental mind is not inclined toward the corporeality of things. The relative ego is quietly and without much fuss absorbed into the body of the transcendental ego. That is why we see the Buddha lie serenely in Nirvana under all beings, non-human as well as human, non-sentient as well as sentient. As there is from the first no ego-substance, there is no need for crucifixion.²⁹

In Christianity crucifixion is needed, because corporeality requires a violent death, followed by resurrection. As Paul said: “*And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.*”³⁰

²⁷ *Ibidem.*, p.129.

²⁸ *Ibidem.*, p.131.

²⁹ *Ibidem.*, p.132.

³⁰ I Cor., 15: 14-17, quotation from: *New International Version of Bible*, [online], available on: <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+corinthians+15> [1.09.2008].

In these sense, crucifixion has a double meaning:

- 1) individualistic, what symbolizes the destruction of the individual ego, and
- 2) humanistic, what stands for the doctrine of vicarious atonement (all our sins are atoned because Christ died for them).

In both cases, resurrection is needed, because without it, destruction has no meaning whatever. Again Paul may be quoted: *"For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."*³¹

But even if the resurrection is dramatic as well as human enough, there is still the odour of the body in it.³² What is more, the soil of the earth still clings to it though the resurrected one goes up to heaven. Here you have to go up to heaven and wait there for the transformation of the earth into the Pure Land. It is completely different in Buddhism, but I will explain it a little bit further.

Christian symbolism of the suffering man

Christian symbolism has much to do with the sacrifice and the suffering of man. The crucifixion is its climax. Christ carries his suffering to the end by ending his earthly life in a cruel way. Christ hangs helpless, full of sadness on the vertically erected cross. (How terrifying this vision may be, shows the law suit brought up against one school in Bavaria by the German citizen, when children become scared to death by the ill-treated figure of the Christ on the cross that hung in the classroom.)³³ Regardless of what may be symbolized by this sight, it is almost unbearable to the Oriental mind. (However, Buddhists are accustomed to the sight of Jizo Bosatsu (Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva) on the roadside, but this figure, in contrast with the suffering Christ, is a symbol of tenderness.)

³¹ I Cor., 15:22, *op.cit.*

³² D. Suzuki, *op.cit.*, p.132.

³³ more about the *Classroom crucifix case from 1995*, [online], on: <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/lpbr/subpages/reviews/kommer97.htm> [8.09.2008].

The pope Leon XIII said: “Suffer, and suffer constantly is a real human thing.”³⁴ That shows how important for the Occidental mind, deep-rooted in the Judeo-Christian outlook, is problem of suffering. This part of my consideration I would like to end with the simply comment written by Andrzej Strumiłło, the artist from Podlasie, in the summary of his artistic journeys on the East. In album called *Nepal* he wrote that the West generally explored the exterior of the world, seeking in it the mechanism of suffering and happiness, while the East turned towards the inner life.³⁵

Bodhi tree

In Buddhism a simple tree takes on a tremendous meaning as it claims a linkage with the Buddha’s full realization of the Dhamma.³⁶ Gotama serenely sitting under the *Bodhi* tree attained Enlightenment - full and perfect (*abhidsambodhi*) enlightenment. His selection of this tree is connected with that pre-Buddhist tradition. As mentioned in early Buddhist sutras, religious practitioners in India have long practiced meditation under a tree. Meditating under an *assattha* is considered especially significant. Called the *aśvattha* in Hindi and known in Sanskrit as the *pippala*, the *nyagrodha*, and the *vat* are all types of banyan, a tree long venerated in India.

The *Bodhi* tree mentioned in Buddhist sutras is simply a mulberry called by scholars *Ficus religiosa*. It is a hallowed relic and symbol of great veneration to all Buddhists. Often its precincts are well guarded, decorated, landscaped and beautified with golden fences. It is the object also of poojas or devout acts of worship and hovered with yellow cloth. Lamps are lit around and devotees chant “Saadu” in praise. They greet and worship it on banded-knee and joint hands. It is said that during the seven weeks that followed the Enlightenment, Buddha spent lot of time sitting near the *Bodhi* tree and remained motionless in contemplation and gratitude. In fact the first week was entirely spent sitting under the tree enjoying the bliss

³⁴ A. Strumiłło, *Nepal*, Łódź 1987., p.16.

³⁵ *Ibidem.*, p. 16-17.

³⁶ *Ibidem.*

of emancipation from sorrow and greed - Vimutti Sukha. Throughout the second week, Buddha stood gazing at it with motionless eyes in gratitude to that tree that sheltered him during the struggle for enlightenment.³⁷

Enlightenment

The experience of attaining enlightenment is not merely one of many aspects which could be examined, but it is the most critical one. In that moment his mind opened on the eternal, unconditional freedom, going beyond birth and death. In this moment of liberation he became Buddha, Awake – awake of the state similar to state of ignorance.³⁸

But perhaps the most significant is the agreement that enlightenment is intellectually incomprehensible. It cannot be understood or attained through conceptual knowledge, because it escapes all categories of thought. In the book *Living by Zen* mentioned before thinker Suzuki affirms that Christians “*become victims of logic and rationality.*”³⁹

On the nature of the Buddha’s Enlightenment we read in one of sutras:

Then knowledge and insight arose within me: “My liberation of mind is unshakable. This is my final existence. Never again will there be rebirth for me.”⁴⁰

What is needed in Buddhism is enlightenment, neither crucifixion nor resurrection. In enlightenment there are heavenliness and real sense of transcendence. Through the experience of enlightenment not only a certain historically and definitely ascer-

³⁷ D. Morrison, A. Singh, *Connection of Heaven and Earth, op.cit.*

³⁸ J. Goldstein, *Jedna Dharma*, Poznań 2003, p.28.

³⁹ D. Suzuki, *Living by Zen*, Londyn 1972, p.71.

⁴⁰ H. Nakamura, *Gotama Buddha. A Biography Based On the Most Reliable Texts*, Vol. 1, Tokio 2000, p.207.

tainable being is awakened to a state of enlightenment but every being individually and collectively attains Buddhahood.

It is highly significant that when Buddha attained his supreme enlightenment, he was in his sitting posture, what means he was neither attached nor detached from the earth. He was one with it, he grew out of it, and he was not crushed by it. As a newborn baby free from all *sanharas*, while standing with one hand pointing to the sky and to other to the earth, he said: *"Above heaven, below heaven, I alone am the honoured one!"*⁴¹

As D.T. Suzuki states, there are three principal figures in Buddhism, symbolizing: (1) nativity, (2) enlightenment, and (3) Nirvana, that is standing, sitting and lying – the three main postures man can assume. He depicts Buddhism in juxtaposition with Christianity, as deeply concerned with human affairs in various forms of peaceful employment and not in any phase of warlike activities.⁴²

Verticality versus horizontality

D.T. Suzuki makes a geometric comparison between a statue sitting cross-legged in meditation and a crucified one. He claims that verticality suggests action, motion, and aspiration, while horizontality, as in the case of the lying Buddha, makes us think of peace and satisfaction or contentment. As if the sitting figure gave us the notion of solidity, firm conviction and immovability, because the body sets itself down with the hips and folded legs securely on the ground. To remark on the centre of gravity, Suzuki says it is around the loins, so it is the securest position. He carries his statement even further. For him this is the securest position a biped can assume while living. It is also the symbol of peace, tranquility, and self-assurance.⁴³

In a different way we perceive a standing position. This one generally suggests a fighting spirit, either defensive or offensive. It is also connected with a feeling of personal self-importance born of individuality and power.

⁴¹ D. Suzuki, *Worlds Perspectives, Mysticism Christian and Buddhis*, p.136.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ *Ibidem.*, p.134.

Suzuki explains this association in this way:

When man began to stand on his two legs, this demonstrated that he was now distinct from the rest of the creatures walking on all fours. He is henceforth becoming more independent of the earth because of his freed forepaws and of the consequent growth of his brains. This growth and independence on the part of man are constantly misleading him to think that he now is a master of Nature and can put it under his complete control.⁴⁴

This idea has its great confirmation in the Biblical tradition which applies to morally legitimate domination of man over all things on earth.⁴⁵ As a result, we talk so much about conquering nature, except our own human nature which requires more disciplining and control (probably even subjugation) than anything else.

But contrary to that Judeo-Christian tradition, in Buddhism we have the sitting cross-legged and the posture of meditation make a man feel not detached from the earth. And though, he is supported by the earth, he sits in it as if he were the crowning symbol of transcendence - in other words, he is neither attached to the soil nor detached from it.⁴⁶

Suzuki ending his reflection placed in the chapter *Crucifixion and Enlightenment* in his great work on Christian and Buddhist mysticism suggests bringing together their antagonistic thoughts and checking how they can be reconciled.⁴⁷

If we follow his advice, probably we will be not disordered by such feelings that the hero of Jack Kerouac novel had:

⁴⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁵ The most significant implication of this Judaeo-Christian idea of universal domination has been developed by prof. A. Flis. in his essay *Czego się Zachód nauczył od Wschodu w XX wieku?*, [online], available on: http://www-is.phils.uj.edu.pl/publikacje/PDF/AFlis_01.pdf [8.09.2008].

⁴⁶ D. Suzuki, *op.cit.*, p.135.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem.*, p.138.

I felt some subconscious ban wouldn't let me say. I think it is because of schism between Buddhism and Christianity, the split of East and West. But, to what does this damn difference lead? We're all in heaven now, aren't we?⁴⁸

⁴⁸ J. Kerouac, *Włóczędzy Dharmy*, Warszawa 2006, p.145.

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Summary

The aim of this paper was to show how significant symbol of the Christian Tree of the Cross and the Bodhi tree in Buddhism point two highly influential systems of beliefs. Symbolic representation of the psychological distinction between the East and the West was examined. Soteriology of the cross was explained through the concept of relative ego and analysis of the symbolism of the suffering man. Then, the idea of enlightenment represented by the figure of bodhi was described. The antagonistic thoughts of Christianity and Buddhism were brought together to show the plexus of different beliefs in the symbolism of the tree to provide analogies and clarification to reach the common ground for dialogue between the East and the West.