

# Q & A Session

## H. L. Richard:

The first question is, as Christians we are attuned to the many varieties of Christianity but we are a bit lazy when thinking about other faith traditions. Can all of you help us think with more nuanced understanding about “a Buddhist.” We have Theravāda, we have Mahāyāna, we have new Buddhist movements, we have what’s been called folk Buddhism. When one of us meets “a Buddhist” what should we be thinking? How should we be understanding and responding?

## Rory Mackenzie:

Thank you for this question. One thing to bear in mind when we meet somebody who says they are a Buddhist is that they may not be a devout Buddhist and they may be disenchanted with their tradition, and that’s why you have new Buddhist movements emerging, people who have left the mainstream and found a spiritual home in another expression of Buddhism. So, we should not immediately assume that we’ve got to contextualize and do redemptive analogies, because perhaps they have had enough of Buddhism and they’re only nominally Buddhist, culturally. They are Buddhist, but perhaps they are looking for something else.

You’re right, there are some significant differences between Theravāda and Mahāyāna, and of course Vajrayāna or Tibetan style Buddhism. Reichelt himself noted that Theravāda was quite narrow, and he felt it should be a bit wider. I suppose it is narrow in the sense that it focuses on the *arahat* (one who has reached enlightenment) and there’s a real focus on spiritual enlightenment, and for the monastic community that really means let’s not get involved with the plight of others until we ourselves are enlightened and in a position to help others. Whereas the Mahāyāna tradition is much more open. There’s the *bodhisattva* concept of learning and becoming more enlightened by doing acts of compassion, which I think is just a really great concept, that we learn through doing and we reflect on our practice and refine our practice. So, in many ways, Mahāyāna Buddhists are a bit more open to this concept of someone else doing for us what we can’t do for ourselves. Jesus doing for us what we are unable to do for ourselves, is one way of expressing the Christian gospel. The concept of being helped by a divine being is very much present in Mahāyāna. Whereas in Theravāda, technically that’s not the case, although they do have *bodhisattvas* in the Theravāda tradition. Maybe it’s helpful to remind ourselves that regardless of the tradition, it’s often underpinned by a folk or primal

tradition. This folk/primal belief and practice is very important to many Buddhists. So, these are some initial responses to the question.

## Notto Thelle:

This is a great issue. I think it’s impossible to say what “a Buddhist” is. There’s not one Buddhism, there are many Buddhisms. You have already many aspects of Mahāyāna and Theravāda. I worked in Japan for many years and sometimes Christians in Japan are a little embarrassed because there are so many Christian denominations. Sometimes Japanese have said, well don’t worry about that, we have much more, so many different Buddhist traditions. We’ve talked about Pure Land Buddhism and Zen Buddhism. Many Westerners think that Zen is the dominant tradition in Japan but it is not. The Pure Land tradition is much more vital and many more people follow it. To follow up on what Dr. Mackenzie said, most Buddhists in the East don’t know what Buddhism is. They know what they’re going to do if they go to the temple or the monastery, they know how to bow and how to offer incense and so on, but if you ask them what Buddhism is, they wouldn’t be able to say very much about it.

In Japan to a great extent there is funeral Buddhism. Westerners often think that Buddhists meditate a lot, but even Zen Buddhists in Japan don’t meditate very much, and sometimes they admire Western Buddhists because they are much more eager for doing meditation and so on. And I think they are, because Western Buddhists have found a new way. They’ve been attracted either to the philosophy or to personalities like Dalai Lama and Buddhist masters, and they do meditation with much more motivation than most Japanese or eastern Buddhists.

**Theravāda spiritual enlightenment means not getting involved in the plight of others, but Mahāyāna *bodhisattvas* do acts of compassion for others. (Mackenzie)**

There was a question about the relationship between different traditions of Buddhism in China and Japan. Is there any cooperation there? Actually, there is very little cooperation between the various traditions. In Japan we often speak about Buddhist

sects, and they don't speak to each other, they coexist side by side with very little cooperation. They are not interested in the others, as at least Christian denominations tend to be. There's no ecumenical connection. Where there have been ecumenical relationships within Buddhist traditions, they have been inspired by ecumenical Christians who invite various Buddhist traditions to engage in dialogue. We mentioned new Buddhism and Western Buddhism, and it is my impression that Western Buddhists generally are much more united in the sense that they are there searching for the common roots of Buddhism. Of course, there are some basic insights in Buddhism and they are more ecumenical in the sense that they recognize each other and they cooperate with each other.

**H. L. Richard:**

Yes, thank you. Dr. Muck, can you help us out here? The question was about diversity and how Christians are naive to it, but now we are overwhelmed. What in the world are we going to do with all of this stuff?

**Terry Muck:**

Well, it's interesting. They often say about missionaries that they are Methodists or Baptists when home on deputation in the US, but when they get to the field they're just Christians. And the same dynamic works with Buddhists, as Dr. Thelle said. Western Buddhists are just Buddhist, but you go to Sri Lanka and expect to find Theravādins and you go to China expecting to find Mahāyānists, but there is no easy solution to the actual complexity except to say that it's a mixture. One story in support of what my two colleagues have said. I taught a year at Trinity Theological College in Singapore and one of my assignments was to teach an introduction to Buddhism. About thirty students signed up for the course, almost all of them, I believe, all but one or two, had grown up Buddhist and converted to Christianity and were now going to seminary. So, I wasn't quite sure how to approach this group, but I decided to teach the course just like I taught it in the US. I started with the history of Buddhism and then the teachings of the Buddha and then the practices of Buddhists. What I discovered was that my Singaporean students who had grown up Buddhist knew almost as little about the history and teachings of Buddhism as my Western Christian students in seminary, but when we got to the third section, the practices section, they knew everything and I became the learner. I knew almost nothing about what really was the practice of Buddhism. I knew what a book would say, but they taught me about what they did when they had funerals and when they went through all the everyday events of life. I think that's probably what you will discover, that a lot of people, maybe even most people, don't know a lot about their own tradition in certain aspects (particularly the history and the teachings), but when it comes to the practice, they know everything.

**H. L. Richard:**

Can I follow up again to the three of you? What does that mean then, when we meet a Buddhist and we know this person is probably not theological, they're probably not historically oriented, they probably are ritually oriented, have done rituals and maybe still are doing rituals. Now we're coming in as someone who wants to dialogue and wants to represent Christ, wants to share good news. How do we negotiate that? How do we become the learners? Dr. Muck, you mentioned a classroom situation where it was set up, but you reversed the whole thing, becoming the student yourself. In normal human relationships how does that kind of thing happen, how can we negotiate our turf?

**My Singaporean students who had grown up Buddhist knew as little about Buddhist teachings as my Western Christian students, but they knew everything about the practices. (Muck)**

**Terry Muck:**

Well, I'll just kick it off and then Rory and Notto can jump in. It's kind of a cliché that if you want to talk to a Buddhist about common religious interests that you have, you start with practices, not with teachings, not with theology, not with history. You start with what's it like to be a Buddhist in this culture, and then they'll probably ask what it's like to be a Christian in your culture, or something like that. But the focus on practices is very real, maybe especially in Buddhism. We have this image of Buddhism as being a religion that focuses on meditation, but probably few Buddhists really do serious, deep meditation, that's just not the way it works. But the tradition is a meditative tradition in many respects. So, when you meet a Buddhist, start to talk about practices, start to talk about what it's like to be a Buddhist, what do you do? When you go to the temple, or whatever you call it, what do you do? Take advantage of this dialogical approach. Find out what they know that you don't, and then start talking about that. You will learn and you will also have a conversation.

**Rory Mackenzie:**

Yes, I think that's right, the focus on practice rather than on belief is helpful. The question is how can we listen well to the individual before us, a person with hopes and fears just like us. I think it's great just to talk about their social responsibilities in the community, their practice, what difficulties they face in that. And I think it's important to demonstrate some kind of competence, that we can be trusted with that information.

Many people here know quite a bit about Buddhism, but it's important not to overpower the other person with your knowledge of Buddhism, but just listen to their individual story.

### Notto Thelle:

In our Western countries there's a difference between Western Buddhists and what in Norway we call ethnic Buddhists. I mean Thai people, Vietnamese and so on. Because those coming from Asia and living in Norway are very much continuing the tradition of the local cultures from Thailand or Vietnam and so on. And they are truly in a sort of ritual tradition and wouldn't be able to say much about what Buddhism is. As I think I said yesterday, sometimes we answer questions or try to answer questions which haven't been raised. I think the meeting points are things that happen. You happen to become friends with someone you have met, or a colleague, or there are special occasions like funerals or weddings or so on, where it becomes relevant to start to talk. Maybe we will return to that later in thinking about people who have dual belongings, often a place where it's necessary or natural to start a dialogue about faith. But often I think there are not so many occasions. At least that's my experience. Norwegian Buddhists, meaning ethnic Norwegian Buddhists, are not very interested in Christianity. They think they know what Christianity is, they abandoned it and they don't want to talk about it if they haven't come to certain stages in life where suddenly they start to reflect about "What did we leave behind?" And, of course, many such converts to Buddhism will also ultimately discover that Buddhism has problems, too. There's a lot of oppression and power struggles and corruption, as there are in every human community, every human religion. So, that may be a place where people start to search for real answers and questions.

**I wonder if we can make a distinction  
between dual belonging and dual  
allegiance. The cultural Buddhist belongs  
to two communities but his allegiance is  
to Jesus alone. (Mackenzie)**

### H. L. Richard:

Thank you all very much for your reflections. I'm going to move on to another question which is mixing a few questions from the comments that have come in, and picking up even on what you were just referring to, Dr. Thelle. There's a lot of interest among us in the fulfillment concept that Buddhism leads to Christ and to Christianity, but more recently we have the multiple religious belonging idea which is much discussed and the idea of following Jesus as a

Buddhist, as new paradigms for thinking about these things. To all three of you, do you have case studies of the fulfillment kind of person, the multiple belonging kind of person, or the Buddhist follower of Jesus, and how do you view these things? Are those three equally valid paradigms? Is there something that we should be preferring? Are there dangers we should think about with each of them? How should we be thinking about that, how should we be responding?

### Terry Muck:

The dialogue society that I belong to here in the US, The Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, has a lot of people who describe themselves as dual belongers. In fact, we did a couple of issues of our journal particularly on this. Many, perhaps most, of the US members of the society are former Christians who have become Buddhist, but "becoming Buddhist" did not mean giving up everything about Christianity. Rather, they have put together a religious practice that includes elements from both traditions, and our dialogues about this in the society were very interesting, very heartfelt, very creative. There's no single kind of dual belonging. It almost becomes a personal thing, how you construct your personal spirituality. Of course, the most common kind is when someone continues to participate in Christian worship but also meditates. They go to church on Sunday morning and meditate on Wednesday evening, putting it together that way, but there are as many kinds of combining and shaping as there are people.

### Notto Thelle:

Maybe America is more mixed than Norway or Scandinavian countries, but I think also now in our countries there are so many people who have just happened to be involved with Buddhism, not because they've been searching and encountered Buddhism, but they are in a family relationship, maybe the father was Christian but mother was committed to Buddhism. How does one deal with that? Somehow they have to, although of course some opt out of all religion. So, there are many who without much serious thought act in some relationships as Buddhists and in other connections as Christians. When it comes to rituals it becomes more important; funerals, for instance. Most people in Norway have Christian funerals; for the Catholics it is mass so it is clearly defined as Christian. But what happens now in the Church of Norway is that the funeral service has an open space where you may read a Buddhist text or something New Age and so on. It is a thoroughly Christian funeral with prayers, hymns, and biblical readings, and most people accept that even though they may have other religious commitments. They just want to include an element of their own faith tradition. I think that type of generosity is important. Who owns the funeral? That is a vital question. It's still controversial in Norway, but I think we are trying to find the type of space where it can be a Christian farewell, a Christian service, while at the same time having a space for and hospitality towards the other.

**Rory Mackenzie:**

I wonder if we can make a distinction between dual belonging and dual allegiance. Dual belonging I can see working fairly well. A person who is culturally a Buddhist, comes from a Buddhist family, and has social responsibilities to the family but has become a follower of Jesus, this person, if you like, belongs to two communities at the same time. But allegiance is to Jesus, not to Jesus and the Buddha. I am just wondering if we can make that distinction. I myself, although a Westerner, I feel that I have a dual belonging as I'm plugged into the Thai temple here, not as a Buddhist, but as a student of Buddhism, long standing friend of Thai people, and a follower of Jesus. I do what I can to help to support the community. I'm part of that community. But at the same time, I follow Jesus so that to me seems a bit different than, say, somebody who worships both Jesus and the Buddha and maybe can't fully decide or doesn't feel they need to decide as they are comfortable with both.

**My impression is that the Christian-Buddhist will have a basic commitment to the Christian tradition, but will have integrated and been inspired by Buddhist practices. (Thelle)**

**H. L. Richard:**

So, it sounds like there's good dual belonging and there's bad dual belonging. What about the person who really identifies as Buddhist? I am Buddhist but I follow Jesus. Dr. Thelle, you seem to reference that as a viable option, but how does that work out? Do any of you know people who have identified in this way, who are trying to live that out?

**Notto Thelle:**

My impression reading and meeting people is that some people call themselves a Christian Buddhist or a Buddhist Christian. I respect that very much, but my impression is that in most cases they would have one sort of basic commitment to one, perhaps to a Christian tradition, but they have integrated and been inspired by Buddhist practices like meditation or philosophy. So, they're rooted in one tradition, either Buddhism or Christianity, but they have been informed and inspired by and have integrated aspects from the other. I met in Japan many Christian Buddhists. One of my old friends who died many years ago was a philosopher, a Buddhist, and told when he was young he was in a spiritual crisis he read whatever he came across of philosophy, east and west, and then one day he read the Gospels and he was so attracted. He read the Gospels once and

it was as if he was drawn into a magnetic field. He was old when he told this, "When I read the Bible, the Gospels, two times, I had to tell myself that if this is Christianity, I am a Christian." He was a Buddhist, committed to Christ. Then he said later, which was very disappointing in many ways (but I understand him), "I went to Europe and then I didn't understand anything anymore." He didn't find there what he was searching for.

**Terry Muck:**

I've always been curious about, really upset in a way, about people who think that if you're a Buddhist you can't respect and like and even love Jesus and if you're a Christian you can't respect or like the Buddha. I lived a number of years in Sri Lanka and while there I bought a Buddha statue and when I came back to the US, I made the mistake of writing something about how much I loved my statue of the Buddha. It was a beautiful piece of art and I also said that I respected Gautama and what he taught and the life he lived. I was young and naïve and I have never experienced the kind of uproar that occurred when I did this. It just seemed natural to me to give credit where credit was due. Buddha was a great man. But it works the other way, too. One of my primary teachers at Northwestern, Walpola Rahula, was a leading Sri Lankan Buddhist who wrote several good books on Buddhism, and one day we were at lunch at Northwestern and I asked him if he had ever read the Gospels. He said he had read Mark. I said, well, what did you think? He said, "I cried." He said, "Jesus was a great, great man." That kind of mutual recognition of the good parts of one another's tradition should be part of any kind of mission work, as we have been discussing, and I am always warmed when I run across it either way.

**H. L. Richard:**

This kind of intermixture that we're talking about is very threatening to the average Christian. Is it threatening to the average Buddhist also? They're not interested in it, they're in their own world, but are they less threatened by this than Christians are? How do you view a Buddhist follower of Jesus? No one has given a case study of that; maybe we don't actually see that happening, where someone has that primary identity as a disciple of Jesus, but as a Buddhist in a Buddhist family and society.

**Rory Mackenzie:**

I think a Buddhist would be less threatened than a Christian by dual belonging for a variety of reasons, but I think a Buddhist is very open to anything that nourishes, from whatever tradition. I have a close friend, a Thai Academic, who did his PhD in Edinburgh. We spent years meeting up every week, sometimes meditation, some prayer, studying the Gospels and other things and he would come to church sometimes and was involved in our Christian group for international students. He

loved being part of that and found that the Holy Spirit energized him and his research and gave him wisdom or enhanced his ability to solve the problems he faced. So, something great in Christianity for him, but he's still a Buddhist and doesn't see any need to convert, to change. He knows that this disappoints me and he mentions it from time to time, but that's who he is. So, the two traditions are really important for him and why choose? He doesn't see any need for that.

## Is the fulfillment theology paradigm dead? Should we get that out of our thinking as we talk with Buddhists? (H. L. Richard)

**H. L. Richard:**

None of the three of you nibbled at the fulfillment part of the question. Is the fulfillment paradigm just dead, so we should get that out of our thinking as we talk with Buddhists? Or does that still have some relevance? Perhaps we need to get a refined version of that somehow. Can we talk about that with a Buddhist at all or is that just not a fruitful paradigm anymore?

**Notto Thelle:**

I'm not sure it's a fruitful paradigm anymore. When I was working in Japan, we arranged a seminar for missionaries and pastors in the mosque in Tokyo. There I heard beautiful talk from the imam when he spoke about the development of religion. We start from the kindergarten of folk religion and then it gradually goes up to school and then it goes further to higher middle school and high school and finally on to university. And his point was that religions have this development towards the highest university, which is of course Islam. I thought, "I have heard those stories before by missionaries." It was very interesting. I was not hurt by it, but it was a reminder that it may be too easy to speak in those terms of preparation and fulfillment. I mean the point of fulfillment theology was to give honor to other religions, to give them a place in God's pedagogy, God's works through history. In the Catholic tradition you speak about anonymous Christians and so on. You can say that as a reflection within the church, but you cannot say to a Buddhist that actually you're an anonymous Christian; if you really follow your aspirations, you will become a Christian. Or as a Muslim says, every person is basically a Muslim, we just have to discover that, and so on. So, this is all a way of thinking which is problematic.

**H. L. Richard:**

Dr. Muck, you seemed to be more hopeful about fulfillment theology yesterday.

**Terry Muck:**

When I think about it, I'm attracted to it, yes. As a Christian, I believe salvation is through Christ alone and so the idea that all the other religions are kind of positive preparations for that, appeals to me. But when I think about how it affects people of other religions, let's say Buddhists, I can see how that's a real downer for them. So, maybe fulfillment is not the best way to express it. When I was teaching at a seminary we had several Native American students, and I made a mistake one day; let's say it turned out to be a learning experience. I said, "I went to a friend's house in a suburb of Chicago and we had a sweat lodge out in the back." I thought this would be impressive to these Native American students, but they said, "You're just a 'New Ager put-downer.' You're stealing our tradition and turning it into a New Age experience." So, you have to think about the way you talk about a person's religion, how it affects them, and what it means to them. You can't just try and satisfy your own intellectual longings about a perfectionist evolutionary scheme here. You have to be careful when you're talking about fulfillment, what you mean and how you mean it and who you talk with about it.

**H. L. Richard:**

Dr. Mackenzie, any thoughts? Have you ever had a stage in your life where you were impressed with fulfillment? Are you still semi-impressed or is this all flat to you?

**Rory Mackenzie:**

I get some of the points of fulfillment theology. It's a term I don't use myself because it's open to misunderstanding. I try and think of redemptive analogies. There are some things in Buddhism, like *karma* or non-self teaching, that we can show respect for and use as a bridge over which to pass from Buddhism to Christianity, so I think that's the way I approach it. Some great things are there and, as Reichelt said, these are emotional stepping-stones placed there by God over which people may pass as they look for the Truth.

**H. L. Richard:**

A final question or discussion point I will direct to Dr. Thelle and Dr. Mackenzie. We're talking here about a very slow, gradual process. You have both surely worked with numerous Americans in your time of service and you will understand that doesn't fit the American temperament very well. We want to get things done. We want to do it and accomplish it, and this slow, patient, relational approach to Buddhists is almost an affront to our national character. What do you have to say to

us? How do we deal with this massive change of paradigm? Dr. Muck is welcome to come in and defend our national character or speak more strongly against it in case you two are too polite.

### Notto Thelle:

Well, is there a characteristic American out there? I don't know the American personality. I think there are so many different Americans. But, of course, you speak about one sort of stereotype which we Europeans often have of Americans. When I worked in Japan, I didn't meet those Americans. From time to time of course I did, American missionaries who were sort of salespeople. A good friend of mine had a lot of books about how to sell so and so, how to sell this and how to sell that and how to sell Christianity. I wonder if this is an American way of doing things? Is it effective? But most of the Americans I knew were very different from that.

I think Westerners are all sorts of people and we have to find our own ways and try to find out what other people are. Myself, I'm not a very aggressive person, and maybe even afraid of confrontation. This is both a strength and a weakness. But sometimes weaknesses can be good, because I tend to give myself time to react. So, I think every person has to find his or her way to approach other people. I don't think a slow way is always the way to get into dialogue. I think sometimes a frank discussion also may open up understanding. I think even stupid questions sometimes may be good questions because they give an opportunity for clearing up misunderstandings. I sometimes say to my students who are afraid of asking silly questions, "Well, just do it because silly questions are often good questions. You are asking questions that others don't dare to ask." So, I think there are so many ways of relating and maybe I should ask the Americans? Are Americans much more direct and outgoing and so on? I'm not quite sure about that.

### Rory Mackenzie:

I'm not the person to ask about this. I've never been to America. In fact, I'm not sure there is such a place! Maybe Harvard is just a referencing system! But certainly, I remember George Verwer, the founder of Operation Mobilization, whom I knew quite well, visiting me in Bangkok. He stayed with us for a night and in the morning at breakfast time he asked, "How many Christians come here?" We stayed in the church, the house we used for a church. When I said fifteen, he said, "Remind me again how long have you been here?" I said six years, and he burst into tears, saying "I don't know how you can do that; I could never do that." I thought what we had done was quite reasonable for Thailand and I put the lack of growth down to my lack of ability as an evangelist, but he was certainly distressed by the whole thing.

I've known monks here for twenty odd years, and I've shared my faith with them. They've shared their understandings of Buddhism with me, and we're the best of friends. They haven't

come to faith, and it's the long haul that we're in for. It's about relationships, and it's about finding belief and hope that somehow, in some way, in all of this, God is at work. Can I just tell you a little story? I went for a haircut and I discovered that the hairdresser was heavily into New Age thinking and practice and as I left I said, "Look, I'm actually going to Thailand tomorrow, but I'll get my wife to come in and she will give you a copy of Mark's Gospel which I think you will enjoy reading." So, she read Mark's Gospel and I came back from Thailand and went in for my next haircut and she said, "There you are. Listen, I read that book you gave me. I went to bed that night. I woke up sobbing in the morning as I had a dream." She described the dream where she was in a dark room at a theological college, and there was an old blind guy standing before a fire warming himself. He was pointing to three men in the shadows of the room, sitting together on a couch. She said to me, "I was there to enroll as a student of divinity. What do you make of this dream?" I said to her, "Well, it's very simple. I'm the old blind guy standing in front of the fire and I was pointing towards the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It's to them that you have to go." She stopped cutting my hair in amazement and I thought she is about to turn to the Lord, certainly by the time I come back for my next haircut she will be saying that she has begun to follow Jesus. That's over twenty years ago and she has not believed. Maybe by the next haircut!

### H. L. Richard:

Dr. Muck, what do we do? Open dialogue that never ends—it's not an easy thing for us to embrace, is it?

**None of us can bring these conversations to an absolutely satisfactory conclusion. The best thing is to keep them going, and the only way is with a certain amount of humility. (Muck)**

### Terry Muck:

No, it isn't easy, and one of the words I keep coming back to in the requirements for being a good and faithful Christian is humility. The fact is that none of us can bring these kinds of conversations to an absolutely satisfactory conclusion. So, the best thing to do is keep them going, and the only way you can do that is with a certain amount of humility about who we are and what we're capable of, each one of us, each one of our cultures. So, we just have to keep talking with goodwill and hopefully moving forward. **IJFM**