LECTURE

Encountering Christ on the Road to Bodhgaya

It is truism to say that all religious faith traditions can learn from one another. Multi-faith dialogues conducted on that premise have sought to understand plural perspectives on truth and salvation. In a multicultural context like Singapore, such dialogues have as their social agenda the bolstering of inter-religious harmony and societal cohesion. Yet, to what extent are such dialogues effective in creating greater spiritual literacy among faith community members and members of the general public? Can we engage spiritual concepts and practices of various faith traditions on a deeper level of encounter that transcends mere rhetoric and the effect of social lubrication? Using a personal case study, I seek to demonstrate some of the dynamics of contemplative engagement with various faith traditions, culminating in the eventual encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ during an intensive meditation retreat. I will share some thoughts on the provocative implications of such an encounter and what it may mean for Christian apologetics in a plural Asian faith context.

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Thank you very much for inviting me to deliver this lecture. In particular, I would like to record my thanks to Jose Philip, my brother in Christ whom I have recently got to know. And thank you all for being here today.

I entitled my talk today as “Encountering Christ on the Road to Bodhgaya” – a deliberately provocative title that seeks to intrigue as much as to inform. Whether that has been the case or not, I leave it to you my audience to judge. What I hope to do in today’s talk is to (1) share a bit of my background and my story – a testimony of sorts – of how I came to faith in Christ. In so doing, I’d like to weave in snippets of reflections on the meaning and significance of my Christ-encounter in the context of cross-cultural theologizing and interfaith dialogue. I would like to (2) theologize and philosophize a little on how a Buddhist comes to faith in Christ through a means least expected – a solitary meditation retreat. In that regard, allow me to then share some preliminary reflections on what some implications of that experience might be – for my personal walk in Christ and more broadly for Christian evangelism. By way of conclusion, I would like to offer some personal thoughts on how my encounter with the Lord and subsequent conversion could (3) inform Christian apologetics in a pluralist faith culture such as in Singapore.

First, let me give you some CONTEXT.

Original Face before I was Born ... Again. On a little red dot called Singapore 48 years ago, I was born into a typical Chinese family of Buddhist-Daoist-Shenist cultural background. At the age of five, I was first introduced to a form of Buddhist contemplative
practice – recitation of the name of Guanyin Bodhisattva, a deified enlightened being in Chinese Buddhism. My mother was particularly devoted to this practice, a devotion which rubbed off on me at a tender age. Throughout my childhood education years, Guanyin was a constant companion and her name was never far from my lips. From TV dramas, movies, cartoons, comic books, and most importantly, through personal involvement with a plethora of Chinese folk deity worship, I got to know the names and backgrounds of several important deities in the Daoist pantheon – Tua Peh Kong, Monkey King, Kuan Kong, Ti Kong or Jade Emperor, and of course the Buddha (who stood above the Daoist deities as a sort of supreme being and teacher but somehow seen as part of the divine pantheon). My grandmother made sure I took part in every religious festival in the family. I remember feeling utterly bewildered and at times rather apprehensive of the temple activities I was expected to attend.

Journey of Awakening. At age fourteen, I began formal Buddhist studies in high school. The seeming intricacies and profundity of Buddhist philosophy fascinated me. Soon after, I started serious practice of Buddhist meditation under the tutelage of several prominent Buddhist teachers. I remember fondly the late Acharya Godwin Samararatne from Sri Lanka, whom I regard as the teacher who left the deepest mark on my life and practice. I trained in a variety of techniques in samatha (tranquility) and vipassana (insight) meditation; cultivated the four brahma viharas especially the practice of metta-bhavana (loving-kindness meditation) and a range of anussati (recollective) meditations. In Australia, while pursuing my undergraduate studies, I underwent a number of intensive meditation retreats to further deepen my practice.

After about twelve years of serious Buddhist studies and practice, I took a detour into Hindu Tantric yoga and meditation, where a highly disciplined lifestyle comprising pure vegetarian diet, yoga exercises, intense meditation practice, and social service marked my days. I was thus spiritually initiated into Ananda Marga or the Path of Bliss. My meditation practice intensified, with twice daily sittings of two to three hours on end. Fasting twice a month on Ekadashi days (on the 11th day before and after the full moon) without food or water created more time and space for deeper meditation practice. Eight years of intensive spiritual practice passed, accompanied by active involvement in social service projects the socio-spiritual organization of Ananda Marga. Profound meditative experiences ensued as a result of my tantric meditation, which was possible because of the strong foundation built in my early years of Buddhist meditative training.

In 2002, I became disillusioned with both the Ananda Marga organization and its spiritual practice. I experienced detrimental effects in my spiritual practice, effects which I had brushed aside earlier but which gradually became more pronounced and impossible to ignore. I stopped its practice and left the organization. Soon after, I started my serious journey into Tibetan Buddhism, a path I had dabbled in before but did not commit to until then. Thus followed years of intensive Tibetan Buddhist studies and meditation.
practice under the tutelage of a respected Tibetan Geshe (equivalent to a fully-qualified meditation/spiritual master with a PhD in Buddhism) and several other Lamas (spiritual mentors). I completed the multi-year Buddhist Studies Program that followed after the classical rigorous curriculum of the Nalanda monastic university tradition. Nalanda was a world-renowned university in its time (5th to 12th century C.E.) where the best and brightest from across Asia flocked to study Buddhist philosophy and practice, mathematics, medicine, astronomy and logic. In 2009, while continuing my Tibetan Buddhist studies, I began training in the pinnacle of meditation systems within Tibetan Buddhism called Dzogchen. Not long after, I studied and practiced Chinese Chan meditation after seeing deep convergences between the Tibetan Dzogchen and Chinese Chan systems. In short, I was passionate about meditation and took every opportunity to explore, study, practice, and realize as much of different meditation systems as they could offer. I was immersed in my quest for awakening or enlightenment (sambodhi). There was an insatiable longing to be free of life’s suffering by realizing the highest truth.

**Encounter and Collapse.** Then came 2014, when I embarked upon a six-month intensive solitary meditation retreat. I was on sabbatical and was relishing the opportunity to meditate up to 15 hours a day, abstaining joyfully from all entertainment, social conversations and activities, and from even leaving the house except to obtain daily essentials once a week. This was a tremendous opportunity to break through into and fathom the ‘innermost nature of mind’ (rigpa), my final all-or-nothing attempt to attain full awakening and liberation from suffering in the Buddhist sense of the word. It was the culmination of all my years of meditative practice, a palpably significant moment in all my years of spiritual seeking and striving. To me, this was make or break time.

Paradoxically, making it requires total surrender of self-effort and self-striving, where the attitude is one of wishlessness and restfulness in the ground of one’s awareness. Hence, I allowed myself to cruise meditatively in rigpai chyokshak (resting in pristine awareness) for days on end. According to textual and oral tradition, this practice becomes predominant only after the trainee has sufficiently developed attentional balance (shamatha) and deep insight (vipashyana) into emptiness. And initial attempts at resting in pristine awareness may be tainted by a degree of conceptual imaging. This soon passes into a natural effortless non-conceptual immersion in pristine awareness. Consciousness is like an open centerless field through which one’s mental events and life history unimpededly flow. Every sensory and cognitive event – that is, every image, sound, smell, taste, touch as well as thought and emotion – is perceived as spontaneous effulgences of pristine awareness, freely emerging and freely dissolving. All is shot through with sheer emptiness and brightness. The heart is blissfully tranquil while the mind is like a sun shining in the vast open sky.

In the course of my sabbatical retreat, I was having increasingly frequent and longer glimpses of resting in pristine awareness. It felt as if I was cruising into natural
awakening when something totally unexpected happened. What came to pass was an event that shattered my world into pieces. My identity collapsed like a house of cards. I no longer knew who or what I was. I will now describe the event as best as I can, though words must ultimately fail ...

One early Sunday morning near Good Friday, I had just finished my morning meditation session. As I was strolling meditatively around the house and taking a break from formal practice, something (or was it someone?) prompted me to turn on the television in the living room. It was 7.00 am. The television was on channel ten. A sermon broadcast was just coming on. The preacher was someone I did not know but whose name sounded familiar, as I have seen his books on bookstore shelves. As I listened to the sermon that was being preached, my heart leapt and felt strangely warmed. Never have I heard the gospel preached like this before. For the first time, I understood the grace of God, the heart of the good news that brings salvation. While I could not remember details of the sermon, I knew that I was coming to a knowledge of Jesus Christ that I never had before. I remember feeling both astonished and excited, expectant and uplifted, inexplicably moved by the lovely Person of Jesus and the perfection of His finished work. From that sermon onwards, I could not return to meditation without thinking about Jesus and reflecting on what He has done for me on the cross. My meditation practice was never the same again.

Next, let me elaborate on my CONVERSION.

So, as I continued my retreat, I realized that I could not return to resting in some amorphous pure awareness where all sensorial and mental events appear as radiant displays of that same awareness. It was no longer possible as the familiar world of meditative bliss and luminosity was broken into pieces. My awareness broke. It was broken by none other than the Person of Christ. In a way that defied description and explanation, I felt as if Jesus had pierced through all that I was and revealed to me His presence, identity, love and grace. This was grace – unearned, undeserved, unmerited favour – specially manifested in His finished work on the cross of Calvary. All this became increasingly salient and clear as I meditated more and more on Jesus. Everything came to a head one day when I saw for the first time a short video clip on “What happened at the Cross.” It dawned on me like a ton of bricks the extent and depth of what Jesus had done for me on the cross. Suffice to say that though words played a role in leading me to that realization, the actual moment of revelation dropping into my heart was beyond words. It was as if there was a turnaround at the deepest seat of consciousness that broke through all that I have ever known or believed in. My philosophical or should I say buddhological architecture came crashing down in a thud, thrown into disarray and pulverized into smithereens. I could for the first time confess and feel how sinful and depraved I actually was, and yet how utterly loved and accepted by Christ I was in spite of my sin and transgressions. I felt utterly vulnerable yet held together and cradled in a majestic
personal presence whose peace and love was palpable. Suddenly I knew I was in the presence of my God and my Lord, Jesus Christ, who became a Man to save me. Tears rolled uncontrollably. All that I was or thought that I was simply melted away in the fire of His love. I prayed the salvation prayer and received Jesus as my Lord and Saviour. I was born again, a new creation in Christ.

Emptying the Buddha. The days that followed my coming to faith in Christ were surreal. They felt light, free, and often emotional. I would spontaneously melt into a ball of tears, kneeling down everywhere and anywhere in my home in uncontrived worship and thanksgiving. My entire world as a Buddhist scholar and meditation teacher has collapsed; I could no longer continue in my old vocation with integrity and obedience to my Lord. Christ has called me into His family and I responded in faith. But what about my vocation? What can I do now? Asian spirituality has been my life’s passion since I was fourteen. Until my conversion, I was a lecturer in Buddhist studies and teacher of Buddhist meditation to many students. My PhD awarded in 2003 was in religious studies majoring in Hindu Tantra. I felt lost and unsure. Whether I liked it or not, my life was being emptied of the Buddha and all that he represented for me. It was scary to be stripped of all reference points for my existence and by extension my vocational life. Buddhism is well-known for its distinctive teaching on emptiness (sunyata), the lack of inherent existence of all things, persons and events. In Buddhism, all things, persons and events exist contingently, fully dependent on assembly of causes and conditions, of component parts, and on conceptual designation. Realizing emptiness was key to becoming awakened/enlightened. Ironically, my enlightenment came as I awoke to Christ and was emptied of all notions of emptiness, emptied of the Buddha in an act of repentance (metanoia) made possible only by pure grace.

Irrevocably Saved and Redeemed. From Buddhist enlightenment to salvation in Christ – this was a paradigm shift and more. I accepted the truth that I was a sinner. I knew I was freely forgiven and accepted by our Father in and through Christ. Adopted as His beloved son, I am now the righteousness of God in Christ. I realized that humanity’s sin is an inconvenient but universal truth, something I had rejected as Buddhism had no concept of sin. Even so, I inchoately knew I had fallen short, that I was a failure, no matter what sacred Buddhist scriptures or ‘enlightened’ Buddhist teachers say about the absence of sin in human and sentient life. For Buddhists, there is negative karma or moral demerit but nothing that can never be purified by meritorious actions and spiritual practice. But no matter how much purification practices I did, I somehow knew that deep in the core of my being was an irreconciliable darkness and depravity that could never be cleansed. Whether I acknowledged it or not, there was a sense of self-condemnation that could never be washed away. No matter how much mindfulness and acceptance I fostered within me, condemnation remained untouched in the subtlest and deepest cavity of my being. The problem of sin was one that could never be resolved by self-effort, however spiritual. In fact, self-effort is inescapable from self-occupation and serves only to
entrench self-condemnation, no matter how subtle. Only in and through the finished work of Another, born of the unmerited favour and undeserved mercy of God, is there any hope of dealing with sin once and for all. Indeed, my coming to faith in Christ was accompanied by sheer relief of the burden of sin – for the first time in my life, I felt truly and irrevocably free from guilt, shame, condemnation, and despair. Un-self-consciously and supernaturally, my weight of sin-consciousness suffused with condemnation was no more. It became clear to me that Christ has paid the price of my sin, redeemed me completely, and that there is now no condemnation for me in Christ Jesus. My Lord has done a perfect unrepeatable finished work on the cross.

Mountains are Mountains, Rivers are Rivers. Emptied of emptiness and the Buddha, irrevocably saved and redeemed by Christ, I faced the real question of what was I to do with my life in practical and concrete terms? Yes, I knew that my life belonged to Christ, yet it remained a journey of waiting on Him and sensing where He was leading me. Echoing the words of Paul, it is “no longer I who live but Christ lives in me” (see Galatians 2:20). With my old identity shattered and my new identity yet to be stabilized and made real (at least in my experience), there was a feeling of uncertainty amidst a deeper sense of assurance that all was well. A new journey of theological and spiritual formation had begun and continues to this day. Paradoxically, everything in and around me appeared to be the same yet not the same. My wife, home, folks, brother, and friends remained who they were, yet because I was no longer who I thought I was, they were no longer who I thought they were. We continued to relate to one another as we usually would but something deep had shifted – our lives were held together, ensconced in, and transfigured in the light and presence of Christ. My wife soon re-dedicated herself to the Lord; my folks and brother accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour on my first visit back to Singapore after my conversion. It was a blessing and honour to witness Christ to them and eventually lead them in the salvation prayer. About ten months later in 2015, my folks were water-baptized, followed by my brother in 2016. My whole family was finally saved, by His grace. I was awed and humbled to witness His sovereign majestic grace at work. To use the classic Zen phrase, mountains are again mountains and rivers are again rivers, yet not quite. The old mountain is no longer and neither is the old river. The Word that was spoken forth did not return void and both mountains and rivers were recreated anew in Christ, fresh testimonies to His wondrous eloquence and glorious grace.

Finally, let me speak about CONVERSATIONS – conversations about the gospel to the lost world, especially those persuaded by diverse Asian spiritualities and value-systems in our part of the world.

Echoes of Emptiness. As a committed Buddhist practitioner, scholar, lecturer, and meditation teacher who is no more, I had to grapple with the koan or puzzle of my life’s vocation. In the course of living my koan, I wrote and published two books and numerous blog articles, in part cathartic and in part literary expressions of my new life in
Christ. I sensed that the Spirit was leading me to use my gifts and talents to share my reflections on the spiritual life, philosophical quest, and contemplative practice. In so doing, He was shaping me to proclaim His gospel in my own distinctive way, with voices of Asian wisdom reframed as echoes of a far grander truth yet most unassuming wisdom – the gracious wisdom of Christ.

Buddhist philosophy speaks of all phenomenal appearances as echoes of emptiness, implying that everything we experience in the phenomenal world is ephemeral, lacking in autonomous reality, and sheer display of empty processes. Thus, the ultimately empty nature of all things – the fact that all things do not exist inherently in themselves – is precisely what makes their existence possible in the first place. For me, this philosophy of emptiness points to the sheer contingency of creation, that nothing in creation exists in isolation from its context. Everything is part of the whole. Yet, in Christ, this philosophy makes sense only in relation to the One who made all things, the Creator by whose Word all creation came into being. Yes, everything in creation is dependently arisen. More than that, the entire cosmos of contingent things is in turn contingent on the One who created all. Creation is utterly shot through with emptiness but for and because of the One who created it and gave it meaning out of His plenitude.

In this way, I sought to find and draw out various types and shadows of Christ in the concepts and practices of Asian philosophical and spiritual systems. This is my first principle of Christian apologetics/evangelism. I believe, naively or not, rightly or wrongly, that revealing Christ in the wisdoms of Asian worldviews is one important and useful way of sharing the Good News with a lost and hungry world. By speaking the conceptual and metaphorical language of Asian thought, I attempt in my preliminary and fumbling way to draw people's hearts and minds to the person of Christ and His finished work, that they might see His beauty, loveliness, and grace.

_Straight from the Heart._ Another thing I learnt about sharing the Good News is to be straight talking – to share as I am, from my heart. While I have delved a little into systematic theology and availed myself of sermons and Christian writings, I do not consider myself a theological expert. I have found most joy and perhaps most positive effect in simply sharing myself and my testimony to people I felt led in the Spirit to witness to. Sharing with non-believing colleagues, friends and relatives has been a joyous challenge. Being mindful of and sensitive to their views and situations, I nonetheless shared openly my own experience and offered on occasions to pray for and with them. Several of them have accepted my offer to pray, though none has yet accepted my invitation to church. I learnt the valuable lesson of not being ashamed of the gospel of grace and to proclaim it as freely as I could. For me, decades of labouring spiritually under the Law (in its various Asian guises, e.g. Buddhist Dharma, Hindu Tantra) has given way to surrender of self-willed effort under the truth of Grace. To me, such liberation and release transcends anything self-occupied spiritual striving can bring.
Proclaiming that grace and truth came by Jesus Christ to my colleagues, friends and relatives still trapped in the default system of the world – material and spiritual meritocracy – is something I feel moved to do. Hence, my second principle of Christian apologetics/evangelism – to share the gospel of Jesus Christ straight from the heart, with all I am and all I can give, in His love and out of Rest, as directed and anointed by His Spirit.

**Full of His Goodness and Grace.** Revealing Christ as the substance behind types and shadows found scattered amongst various scriptural texts and traditions of Asian spiritualities is my first principle of evangelism. To share and proclaim Jesus straight from the heart, out of my lived experience as long-time committed Buddhist practitioner, scholar and teacher now broken before and surrendered to Christ – this is my second principle of evangelism. In revealing Christ and sharing Jesus from my heart, I focus on the goodness and grace of the Triune One who became one of us in His incarnation and died as one of us in His crucifixion. Thus, to unabashedly proclaim the gospel of grace full of God’s goodness is my third principle of evangelism.

In proclaiming the goodness and grace of God in and through Christ Jesus, I like to emphasize the key of contemplative praxis – integration of the knowledge and practice of deep contemplation on the Word of God, in the Spirit. As someone who has extensive experience in meditation over three decades, I can attest to the value and fruitfulness of meditative practice. As a born-again believer, I now know that all my meditative practice was held in His immaculate presence. As a meditator, I knew that all my moments of meditative breakthrough came not through willful effort but through effortless letting go. But what I did not know then which I know now is that the infinitely wakeful, serenely clear, and warmly compassionate field of Jesus’s personal presence was there with me. Jesus grounds, embraces, and directs my consciousness towards His Rest beyond all strife. Realizing that my Lord never leaves nor forsakes me, I meditate on His perfect finished work, incarnationally as He became flesh and substitutionally as our sin-offering at the cross of Calvary. Every fibre of my being, every atom of my soul can rest perfectly in the perfection of the Man Jesus and in the perfection of His work. Spending time contemplating Him and soaking in His sweet presence makes real the goodness and grace of God in each moment. Contemplative praxis, thus, is one of the key means of grace.

For non-believers with various Asian spiritual backgrounds, engaging in practices of contemplative silence is one possible avenue for more deeply engaging in interfaith dialogue. As Christians and non-Christians come to share a common platform of contemplative silence, it is possible that fresh insights and revelations might emerge to enlighten each other’s faith. It is even possible that the Spirit makes happen a life-changing encounter with the Lord, in ways not too different from my own conversion experience. Hence, availing ourselves of opportunities for contemplative engagement between faiths can be life-giving and salvation-bestowing.
In CONCLUSION.

The 12th century Zen master Dogen is perhaps the most significant Japanese philosopher whose thinking has influenced generations of Zen practitioners and spawned the famed Kyoto school of Japanese philosophy in the 20th century. In his masterpiece *Shobogenzo*, Dogen has a famous verse that reads like this:

*To study the Buddha Dharma is to study yourself;*
*To study yourself is to forget yourself.*
*To forget yourself is to be awakened by the ten thousand things;*
*To be awakened by the ten thousand things is to let go*
*Of your body-mind, and the bodies and minds of others.*

~ Genjo Koan

This verse cryptically expounds the process of awakening as involving inquiry into life and forgetting oneself through seamless interpenetration of self and all things. And finally, the process culminates in dropping away of all concepts of body and mind, self and other, in a timeless moment of awakening. Awakened living then goes on. The end.

Yet for me, the end is not the end. For the real end can only be found in Christ, as I hope I have illustrated in my sharing today. Thus, let me take poetic licence to add a few lines to Dogen’s poem:

*To let go of bodies and minds is to behold Jesus,*
*Rest in His finished work,*
*And receive His salvation by grace alone,*
*Through faith alone. Amen.*