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*When Jesus opens his mouth in the Gospel of Thomas, there is a Buddha sitting on his tongue.*

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## The Circle of the Way: Reading the Gospel of Thomas as a ChristZen Text

The Christian Gospel of Thomas is a wisdom text, a collection of sayings in which a fictive Jesus instructs his followers (and readers like us) in a new way of living. The sayings are a means for the transformation of life. Thomas is part of a long tradition of such collections that includes Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Pirke Aboth ("Sayings of the Fathers" included in the Mishnah), and the later (fourth century) collections of sayings of the Christian desert fathers. These collections are generally read as straightforward guides for proper living.

The goal of the student of Zen is to open the mind to satori (enlightenment or realization) in which one realizes oneself. This transformation is the result of mind-to-mind transmission from the teacher to the student. The ego and the intellect get in the way of realization, and the teacher's role is to help orient the student toward a state of consciousness in which fundamental change is possible. One of the vehicles for such reorientation is the koan.

The Sayings Gospel of Thomas can be encountered in the same way one encounters a koan. The teachings of Master Jesus cannot be apprehended intellectually. Like koans, they need to be realized by what Zen

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would call the unthinking mind. This essay is an experiment in reading Thomas with Zen mind. It concludes with some traditional Zen-style readings of three of the Thomas sayings.

### **The Gospel of Thomas**

The text of the Gospel of Thomas exists in its entirety only in the Coptic version discovered as part of the Nag Hammadi library, which was buried in the fourth century and unearthed in Egypt in 1945. Greek fragments were first found among the Oxyrhynchus papyri and published in 1897 and 1904. While the Coptic version dates to the early fourth century, some scholars estimate that the original text may have been composed late in the first century C.E., probably in Syria. In most versions, it consists of 114 sayings.

Although part of what is generally referred to as a Gnostic Library, Thomas (as the Gospel will be referred to hereafter) is not simply a Gnostic text. Some ascribe the Gnostic aspects of it to a redactor. Harold Bloom, in his "Afterword" to Marvin Meyer's translation, is a cheerleader for Thomas as a thoroughgoing Gnostic. In his introduction, Meyer demurs. He notes that Thomas clearly has other, equally important identifying marks. For example, it is part of the ancient genre of collections of sayings and is of a piece with Jewish Wisdom literature, as I mentioned earlier (Meyer, 7–8).

In terms of its relationship to the canonical New Testament Gospels, Thomas is probably best described as being part of a process of creative borrowing and reworking over time, in which original contributions were combined with traditional materials to create novel literary forms addressed to specific Christian communities. Meyer suggests that the forms of some of the sayings in Thomas appear to be more original than New Testament parallels (Meyer, 13). Bloom finds in Thomas (and the Q Gospel, a sayings collection woven through the synoptics) a Jesus who is a great verbal artist in the oral tradition. He has identified a Jesus who is more like a teacher than a savior:

Nothing mediates the self for the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas. Everything we seek is already in our presence, and not outside our self. What is most remarkable in these sayings is the repeated insistence that everything is already open to you. You need but knock and enter.... The emphasis of this Jesus is upon a pervasive opacity that prevents us from seeing anything that really matters. Ignorance is the blocking agent.... (Bloom, 112, 115)

This perspective sounds more Buddhist than Christian.

The possibility of there having been a Buddhist influence on Thomas is not remote. Elaine Pagels in *The Gnostic Gospels* notes that the living Jesus of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts speaks of illusion and enlightenment, not sin and repentance. "Instead of coming to save us from sin, he comes as a guide who opens access to spiritual understanding. But when the disciple attains enlightenment, Jesus no longer serves as his spiritual master: the two have become equal — even identical" (Pagels, xx). (Hence, the voice of Thomas is Didymus Judas Thomas, revered in the early Syriac church as an apostle and twin brother of Jesus.)

Jesus said, "I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become drunk from the bubbling stream which I have measured out. . . . He who will drink from my mouth will become as I am: I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him."  
(Thomas, 35 and 50)

As Pagels points out, this identity of the divine and human, concern for illusion and enlightenment, and a founder who is a spiritual guide not a savior sound more Eastern than Western. The living Jesus could as easily be the living Buddha. The British scholar of Buddhism, Edward Conze, has suggested in fact that Hindu or Buddhist tradition may well have influenced Gnosticism. He points out that "Buddhists were in contact with the Thomas Christians (that is, Christians who knew and used such writings as the *Gospel of Thomas*) in South India" (Conze, in Pagels, xxi). Trade between the Greco-Roman world and the Far East was opening up between 80 and 200 c.e., and for generations Buddhist missionaries had been proselytizing in Alexandria. The possibility of influence and exchange is provocative.

I am not suggesting that this influence, if indeed there was any, took the form of koan transmission (koans do not emerge in Zen until the end of the first millennium), but I see the similarities between the Buddhist apprehension of reality represented in koans and the Christian reality presented in Thomas as suggestive for reading the two traditions intertextually. The exercise in which I am engaged is primarily literary and imaginative, although I think it has a bearing on recent trends in reading scripture exemplified in scriptural or textual reasoning. Since all religious traditions engage in the reading and interpretation of texts in some form or other in order to apprehend reality, reading texts in common ways can help further interreligious dialogue.

## Koans

Speaking of koans, T. Griffith Foulk writes that the “tension between the implicit demand for interpretation that the root case presents and the explicit rejection of interpretation by the commentary . . . renders the koan a conundrum and frustrates the discursive intellect” (Foulk, in Heine and Wright, 40). Essentially, all scripture shares this attribute when it is read on its own terms.

Foulk’s definition of koan is as good as any — and particularly useful for my purposes. They are

brief sayings, dialogues, or anecdotes that have been excerpted from the biographies and discourse records of Ch’an/Son/Zen patriarchs and held up for some sort of special scrutiny. That scrutiny always involves interpreting and commenting on the passage in question, which is assumed to be an especially profound expression or encapsulation of the awakened mind of the patriarch to whom the words are attributed. . . . There is an implicit demand for interpretation in the very selection of a passage for use as a koan. That is to say, to treat a particular passage from the patriarchal records as a koan is precisely to single it out and problematize it as something profound and difficult to penetrate. (Foulk, 17)

Kung-an (the Chinese word for koan) means public case and derives from jurisprudence in medieval China. Kung-an came to signify a written brief sitting on a magistrate’s table — i.e., a case before a court or the record of a judge’s decision on a case. In Zen, the exemplary cases for practice came to be regarded as authoritative standards for judging spiritual attainment. The one sitting in judgment is not a magistrate but the master. To be found guilty is to be judged deluded; innocence equates with enlightenment. Two representatives of the major kinds of koan collections are the *Gateless Barrier* and the *Blue Cliff Record* — the former a primary and the latter a secondary collection. If Thomas were a koan collection, it would be primary in this classification; it exists without commentary by subsequent masters. The Christian texts lack this commentary tradition, in which experts not only interpret the meaning of a text but then promulgate their interpretation as a new and meaningful evolution of the primary text itself. Revelation is ongoing in Buddhist commentary, as indeed it is in the oral Torah of Judaism.

Two other aspects of koan tradition are suggestive for our reading of Thomas.

The koan may be thought of as being “transmitted outside the scriptures,” to use the phrase from case 6 of the *Gateless Barrier* (*Mumonkan*), in which Sakyamuni (the Buddha) did not speak but held up a flower be-

fore the assembly at Vulture Peak. The venerable Kashyapa smiled and received the dharma transmission — outside the teaching (Low, 64). In this reading, Ch'an (Zen) was a revolution that undermined the scholastic tradition of sutra interpretation and rewrote the history of Buddhism in China according to new criteria. "The Way [consists in] one saying: 'Bodhidharma came from the West, a special transmission outside the teaching.' What is this special transmission of the Way? Directly pointing to the human mind, seeing one's nature and becoming a Buddha" (Welter, 78, 85).

Secondly, the special transmission represented in the koan might be thought of as a "secret, esoteric enlightenment experience . . . transmitted from mind to mind, not via written texts, between master and disciple" (Welter, 94). A particularly vivid example of this tradition of direct transmission, which evokes the Gnostic mode of secret transmission, is found in *The Sutra of Hui-Neng*, where the Sixth Patriarch describes how the dharma (the teachings) was passed to him by the Fifth Patriarch Jung-jen.

[I]n the third watch of the night I went to his room. Using the robe as a screen so that none could see us, he expounded the Diamond Sutra to me. When he came to the sentence, "One should use one's mind in such a way that it will be free of any attachment," I at once became thoroughly Enlightened, and realized that all things in the universe are the essence of Mind itself. . . . Thus, to the knowledge of no one, the dharma was transmitted to me at midnight. (Hui-Neng, 73)

Jesus says in 62 of Thomas, "I disclose my mysteries to those [who are worthy] of [my] mysteries. Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." In 13, Jesus takes Thomas away from the other disciples and speaks three sayings to him that are not recorded. When the others ask him what Jesus said to him, he responds: "If I tell you one of the sayings he spoke to me, you will pick up rocks and stone me, and fire will come from the rocks and consume you." Only the adept, the initiated, are permitted to know the secret. If one were to treat this saying as a koan, the teacher might ask the student: "What did Jesus say to Thomas? If you tell me, I will stone you. If you do not tell me, I will set you on fire."

Thomas is a transmission outside the tradition of Christian scripture. That is one reason it was buried in the fourth century and a major reason that Gnosticism was condemned as heretical. The form of transmission of knowledge embodied in Thomas prevents effective control by a central authority. There is no place for bishops in Thomas, nor for similar protectors of dogma in Zen. There is a process of transmitting Zen authority.

but the form of teaching is the opposite of dogmatic. As the translator Thomas Cleary notes in his introduction to another koan collection, the *Book of Serenity*, Zen literature as it developed in China was designed to engage “the reader in mental dialogue rather than professing doctrines and dogmas. . . . As a matter of practical principle [Zen] commentary refrains from exhaustive explanation, for this would crowd out the learner and undermine the very effort needed for the mental transformation” desired (Cleary, xxxviii).

Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki notes in *The Zen Koan as a Means of Attaining Enlightenment* that Zen experience has “no personal note in it as is observable in Christian mystic experiences. . . . Satori has remained thoroughly impersonal, or rather highly intellectual” (Suzuki, 28). Thomas exhibits this same tendency toward the intellectual rather than the emotional. The sayings invite not ecstasy but insight and reflection. One does not read them in the *lectio divina* tradition of the Benedictines, in which one meditates on the text in order to reveal its meaning to the spirit, but rather one reads them for enlightenment through reflection that, paradoxically, employs the intellect to deny the intellect. “All koans,” Suzuki also says, “are the utterances of satori with no intellectual mediation” (Suzuki, 97).

The great Japanese master Eihei Dogen — whose *Shobogenzo* is a particularly rich collection of koan commentaries and essays on Zen practice — saw spiritual practice (particularly the Zen form of contemplation known as zazen) and enlightenment as inseparable. The way is a circle for Dogen. “At the moment you begin taking a step you have arrived, and you keep arriving each moment thereafter. In this view, you don’t journey toward enlightenment, but you let enlightenment unfold. In Dogen’s words, ‘You experience immeasurable hundreds of eons in one day.’ The ‘circle of the way’ is a translation of the Japanese word *dokan*, [which] . . . represent[s] the heart of his teaching” (Tanahashi, xxviii).

This characterization can be applied to the experience of reading Thomas, which is also a “circle of the way.” Considering the Gospel in light of this tradition — through the consciousness of the koan — offers an opportunity to reread provocatively Christian tradition. In the remainder of this essay, I offer commentaries on three of the Thomas sayings — numbers 2, 22, and 42, following the traditional form of koan commentary. First, I record the saying or “case.” Second, I provide a commentary. Third, I compose a “capping verse” for each that restates my take on the root case in another form or using a slightly different metaphor. The idea here is to offer a different way of reading that utilizes the literary form of

koan commentary. I also hope in this rereading of a Christian text to enter a “circle of the way” that also creatively rereads the Buddhist tradition.

## Commentaries on the Gospel of Thomas

### 2

*Jesus said, “Let one who seeks not stop seeking until one finds. When one finds, one will be troubled. When one is troubled, one will marvel and will rule over all.”*

#### *Commentary:*

Some do stop seeking. They stop looking around. They no longer listen. In time they remain inside with the doors and windows closed and then forget what it was like to be anywhere at all. To seek is always to go somewhere else, to want something, usually better than what we have. And it is never what we expect.

Fishing is like this. I go fishing to catch trout, and I take with me to the river everything I need — artificial Mayflies, monofilament, polarized glasses, the knowledge from previous trips to this same water. Trout live in one place, usually, and one that was under that log yesterday will probably be there again today. You get to know how the trout behave, what they like to eat at different times of the year. I seek to catch a trout.

But if I seek only to catch a trout I will be disappointed. When I pull the flipping, gorgeous living thing from the water, I will not be as happy as I was when the trout was on my hook and the rod in my hand was throbbing. I will not be as happy as I was when the trout leapt out of the water and tailwalked across the stream spraying rainbows. What I find troubles me because it is more beautiful than I could have imagined and has nothing to do with me. It is beyond me already even though I hold the trout in my hands.

I am troubled because I do not understand my longing, my need.

It has been more than a year since I last went fishing. Not so long ago, I was in a stream every week. One fish was never enough. One hour was never enough. I wanted to be troubled by the fish that lay beside the rock at the head of the Bridge Pool. I caught my first fish there — a Rainbow that rose to my Mayfly as naturally as Jesus from the dead. It was a miracle and yet wholly right. But then I was troubled because there might not be another. Is there only one resurrection, one return? And if so, what of me

and my future? How do these troublesome thoughts lead to my ruling over anything? I cannot rule over my own emotions, my own thoughts.

But then I think of myself as the trout swaying in the current beside the rock. When the Mayfly drifts over, I marvel at its presence, at its intricate construction, and I think that I know what I am about to eat. This is nourishment and so I rise to it, hanging back a moment to be sure, and then take it in my mouth. The hook stings and I am suddenly airborne, a fish out of water, and then in someone's hands (which burn because they are so hot). I look up at this expectant creature and see only disappointment and grief. I marvel then because in fact I rule over him and all of his tools because he wants me and cannot have me, even now when there is a hook in my mouth and I am gasping for life.

The seeker who has nothing to find will find it, and what is found will be opened and the seeker will be inside.

### *Verse:*

Here I wait for myself to arrive, like a child in hiding  
from the other children who feel the dark coming on  
and their mothers on the edge of the world, behind screen doors,  
about to step out and call them home. But I am still and marvel.

## 22

*Jesus saw some babies nursing. He said to his disciples, "These nursing babies are like those who enter the (Father's) kingdom."*

*They said to him, "Then shall we enter the (Father's) kingdom as babies?"*

*Jesus said to them, "When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter [the kingdom]."*

### *Commentary:*

When he talks to the disciples, it is sometimes like two different species trying to communicate. He speaks in poetry, they answer in prose. He says, "babies," and they think he means "babies." They see babies nursing, and he sees babies nursing.

The poet Ephrem called Jesus "the living breast."

But is this not the opposite of the direction in which we want to go? The baby wants to remain at the breast but has to separate, be weaned, to



grow. I want to be two, not one. We call it differentiation and psychological health. The inner is not like the outer, nor the male like the female. We need to chop things apart, keep the pieces pure. That is the old impulse of religion, to keep the sheep away from the goats. It feels natural.

Division is a human condition. That is the essence of creation, that the primordial ooze becomes uncountable creatures, each individual yet longing to return to origins. When people are dying or think about death, they try to imagine waking up somewhere else in the consciousness that bears their human name. Once I was living but now I am dead, but I am still I. Such is the strong need to be separate.

Union is divine, as Jesus, who lives both here and in the kingdom, knows. He also knows that you cannot *make* "the two into one" or any of the necessary unions. The one simply are. Like death, they come unbidden. But for the one to be one is the reality that forbids longing. You cannot want it or even know where it is. The foot is the foot, the eyes the eye, the image only what it is.

Jesus knows how difficult this way of thinking is for his disciples, who sit at his feet scratching their body parts — their feet, their hands, their male and female body parts. It is late in the afternoon by the Sea of Galilee, and he keeps talking to them like this. Peter picks his nose and gazes serenely over the water at the distant hills, and thinks that he would like to be there, maybe herding sheep. He vaguely desires this other reality Jesus speaks of but at the same time he desires nothing at all any more.

Jesus sits beside him. "You are very close to the kingdom," he whispers in Peter's ear. The sound is like that of a mosquito. Peter slaps the Master's face.

*Verse:*

The inner life unfolds accordingly. One cannot know or feel it.  
The one is only many when the eye is not the eye, nor foot,  
nor any other. The inner is the outer, as the word formed in the mouth  
comes forth as breath and also sound and ear and understanding.

42

*Jesus said, "Be passersby."*

*Commentary:*

Do not go around. Go through. Be in the middle, but do not stop to gape. Do not pick up anything lying on the ground or pull down anything sus-

pended in the air. When you see someone who needs assistance, help them but do not stay for lunch.

This is the hardest commandment, harder even than to love your enemies because we want to stay exactly here, and even as we wish it have moved on. So the point is knowing that there is no stopping.

Jesus is good at this. He is always on the go, always heading out the door. When he is called to visit a young girl who is sick and maybe dying, he goes right away to see her. Along the way another woman, older, who has had a flow of blood for twelve years (menstruation, almost certainly) touches his robe for healing. (She does not want to feel impure any more. The healing she wants is theological.) He feels her need and stops, even though he is on what the rest of us would see as a more urgent mission. Jesus is where he is needed at the moment.

It is not an easy thing, to be transparent — wholly present and yet on the way to someplace else. The trick is to be attached neither to the next place nor this one. That is why resurrection came so easily for Jesus. He did not think about it, nor even want it, but when the time was ripe he rose. No seed thinks about its future, nor even about its present. Jesus is the seed that comes and blooms and goes without a moment's hesitation. He knows the rhythm of the universe.

Walking on the water toward the disciples who are struggling against the wind, he intends to pass them by, the scripture says. He is not unconcerned for their welfare, but until they cry out he has no reason to stop for them. The way is what matters, not because it is more important than others but because his way is also the way for others. He brings them along if they want to come. He will even ride with them — and so when he is walking on the water and they cry out, he gets into the boat.

Passing by is a state of being, not an action. If I am walking along the street and see someone lying by the wall who is cold and hungry and I pass him by, I am not a passerby. If you call out to me and I stop, then I am a passerby.

Living in the world is not important, and it is the only way.

*Verse:*

Being on the way is no guarantee that we have a place to go  
nor have come from someplace else. We are where we are.  
The one who lies beside the road is passing by the ones  
who cannot stop but think that down the road is destination.

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