Kierkegaard's Stages Toward Authentic Religious Experience And The Bodhisattva Path To Enlightenment

Introduction

In this paper, I will explore Kierkegaard's life and philosophy, regarding his theory of stages and what it means to be an authentic religious person, compared and contrasted with the Bodhisattva path and series of perfections leading to enlightenment found in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism. An endeavor will be made to show how Kierkegaard's religious person is similar in some ways to the Bodhisattva ideal. An attempt will also be made to reconcile the struggle for Truth, found in both of these traditions, as a necessary component of coming into contact with Sacred Power, contact that is personal, subjective in nature, and highly passionate.

Kierkegaard stands squarely in the Christian tradition of faith in Jesus Christ as the only means of personal salvation. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was an Existentialist, although that description was applied to his thought posthumously. Existentialism can best be described as a mood within philosophy that emphasizes the concrete and particular existence of man in the world. Later Existentialists described man as having no essence but only existence. As it pertains to Christianity, Kierkegaard's thought was instrumental in defining a way of being in the world that is characterized by an insistence on an individual and deeply personal experience leading to salvation. This salvation experience is characterized by a highly subjective awareness of Truth within one's own individual existence. His early writings addressed these topics indirectly, ironically, and pseudonymously. These pseudonymous writings often took positions that were later explained by Kierkegaard himself as being contrary to his personal belief. He did this in order to expose the fallacy of these viewpoints. Kierkegaard's philosophical goals could be described as twofold: trying to find a way of realizing an authentic religious experience that was not subject to the rigorous rationalism prevalent at the time, and doing away with systematic philosophizing altogether. The latter was in direct opposition to Hegel's rational idealism (Dunning 35).

By way of comparison, Mahayana Buddhism's ideal of an authentic religious experience leading to salvation is characterized by the Bodhisattva path. Like Kierkegaard's "Christian", the Bodhisattva ideal is theoretically attainable by all, but few actually do. Mahayana Buddhism tends to be more hopeful in its belief that all can and should attain enlightenment. In this context, enlightenment means the coming to truth out of ignorance. The word "enlightenment" is a translation of the Sanskrit word "bodhi", denoting awakening, awareness, and wisdom. "The Buddha", refers to the founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama (563 BC-483 BCE) who lived in Northern India, and means "enlightened one." The Bodhisattva is an individual who is on the path toward enlightenment. While scholars such as Har Dayal propose many different possible definitions of the root words "bodhi" and "sattva", the term "Bodhisattva" is generally taken to mean one who is destined for or attached to enlightenment (4-8). This definition usually carries with it the idea of an individual struggle or of a warrior who is destined to overcome this world to achieve a spiritual goal; to attain enlightenment, as in Mahayana Buddhism, or arrive at the religious stage, as in Kierkegaard's thought. This notion of a Bodhisattva being a warrior for truth is similar to Kierkegaard's knight of faith who resigns himself to the paradoxical nature of God, calling him to suspend his ethical duty in order to pass into a highly subjective and intensely personal relationship with Him (Kierkegaard, Fear 23-26). The knight of faith is also struggling to overcome this world as is the Bodhisattva. Both the knight of faith and the Bodhisattva warrior of enlightenment are struggling to attain a religious ideal. But Kierkegaard is plainly stating stages which lead from one to the next without entirely losing the former stage altogether. The Bodhisattva, on the other hand, is one who arrives at his ideal only to be driven to return out of pure compassion to help others achieve as well. In Kierkegaard, we do not see this idea of struggle on behalf of someone else. For him, this struggle toward the religious goal is, and

remains, entirely personal and highly subjective by nature. By contrast, the Bodhisattva is marked by an intensely compassionate motivation to help all humanity reach enlightenment.

Historical Background and Life of Kierkegaard

Soren Aabye Kierkegaard was born May 5th, 1813, in Copenhagen, Denmark. He died November 4th, 1855, and was buried in the churchyard, which is also the meaning of his name, "Kirke" meaning "church" and "gaarde" for "yard" (Lowrie 17). He was one of seven children with the same father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, but had a different mother, Ane Sorendatter. The historical background of Soren Kierkegaard and aard is one set against the dawning of the scientific age in Denmark, where hope for the future was high, yet at the same time there was an underlying frustration by many with the status quo of religious indifference. Kierkegaard's older brother Peter became Bishop of Aalborg. They did not get along and remained estranged up until Kierkegaard's death.

The Church of Denmark was the state religion of the time. One only had to be born in Denmark to be a member of the church, and hence a Christian. There was no personal religious experience necessary to be a Christian in Denmark during Kierkegaard's lifetime. This state religion, which was a contradiction in terms to Kierkegaard, was to become his main target during his later literary output as the prime example of religious indifference and hypocrisy. Kierkegaard felt himself duty-bound and divinely called upon to expose the fallacy of "Christendom" in Denmark. His whole thought and life cannot be understood apart from this historical backdrop (Kierkegaard, Attack 84-93).

There are four major experiences shaping Kierkegaard's life and thought that this paper will focus on. Surely, there are more experiences that contributed to Kierkegaard's thought, but for the purposes of this paper only these four are relevant. The first episode Kierkegaard describes as an "earthquake". It is alluded to in his journals but never fully elaborated. Biographers have had to piece together information found elsewhere. What most scholars agree on is that Kierkegaard found out on his twenty-second birthday that his father had stood upon a rock on the Jutland Heath of his boyhood home and cursed God (Lowrie 70-72). The knowledge of this event had a profound effect on Kierkegaard. Then a few years later Kierkegaard described in his journal how his father confessed to him that he had seduced Kierkegaard's mother while she was still a maid in the family household (Lowrie 70-75). Obviously, this news devastated the young Kierkegaard and catapulted him into the aesthetic stage. Nonetheless, as these were two separate instances, for the purposes of this paper, we will assign these events numbers one and two of importance in Kierkegaard's life. Because of his knowledge of these events, and fearing they might become public knowledge, Kierkegaard reasoned that he could not enter the ministry or get married. Marriage required intimacy, and he was embarrassed of the fact that he was illegitimately conceived. He was ashamed, embarrassed, and angry at his father's sinful behavior. This could be understood psychologically to refer to many a young person's life, when one realizes the humanity and subsequent failures of what one thought to be infallible, namely, one's parents. Nonetheless, this had a profound effect on Kierkegaard, leading to the beginning of his aesthetic writings and his rebellious behavior while in college. Once again, Kierkegaard comes to our awareness time and again as a kind of "Son of Man" figure that mirrors the stages and feelings of humanity. He can be seen as a microcosm of the human experience (Kierkegaard, Stages 355).

The third event, a stage really, is a direct result, even if in Kierkegaard's case it is a result seen in hindsight, of the previous two events. This event is really more like a prolonged period in the development of his philosophy. The word "event" is used, because Kierkegaard himself described it as such. He would later call his reaction to the knowledge of his father's sins his aesthetic stage, discussed in more detail along with the other two stages in the next section. This period of his life was characterized by freedom from the domination of his father. His life up until this time had been lived primarily to try and please his father. At the

discovery that his father was not perfect, but in fact had blasphemed God and was possibly guilty of an unpardonable sin, Kierkegaard severed ties with his father. Although he continued to take his father's money for his expenses, as well as his numerous and well documented extravagances, Kierkegaard remained estranged from his father, even moving out of the family home for a period of about three years. He was free to live the life of a carefree student, while pursuing his passion for poetry, good food, leisure, and various intellectual and frivolous pursuits. He was rejecting Christianity as a rebellion against his father and God, he would later say. During this period, he would come to the conclusion that he was in fact acting out the same kind of youthful sin his father had committed that had so devastated Kierkegaard upon learning of it. He tells of his discovery that rejecting Christianity was really nothing more than rebellion, and not due to some kind of intellectual doubt. For example, he reflects later in his life ,

> "They would have us believe that objections against Christianity come from doubt This is always a misunderstanding. Objections against Christianity come from insubordination, unwillingness to obey, rebellion against all authority. Therefore, they have been beating the air against the objectors, because they have fought intellectually with doubt, instead of fighting ethically with rebellion...So it is not properly doubt but insubordination" (Lowrie 122).

This passage illustrates Kierkegaard's uncanny giftedness for personal, highly subjective claims about universal truths. He really seemed to believe that Socrates, who was one of his philosophical idols, was right when he said the biggest challenge was to "know thyself", thereby really knowing truth. This is what he meant by announcing the subjectivity of truth (Kierkegaard, Fear 23).

However, sometime around Easter, 1838, Kierkegaard had a mystical and profound experience that led him to repent and seek forgiveness for his rebellion. It was during this time that he was heard to often remark, "I am a penitent" (Lowrie 123). During this time of soul searching, he would later reflect that God had given him a "thorn in the flesh", much like that we read about in the account of St. Paul's mystical experience alluded to in the Bible in II Corinthians 12. This mystical and special religious experience some have conjectured to be his falling in love with Regina Olsen, a fair young lady of Copenhagen, which will be discussed shortly.

It was during this time that he began to search for a deeper meaning to his life, something that would give his life purpose. An excerpt from his letters during this time will serve to give a summary of what he was thinking and feeling at this point in his life: "What I really need is to become clear in my own mind what I must do, not what I must know--except in so far as a knowing must precede every action. The important thing is to understand what I am destined for, to perceive what the Deity wants me to do; the point is to find the truth which is truth for me, to find that idea for which I am ready to live and die" (Lowrie 82).

It is important to note that this stage in Kierkegaard's life is indicative of his existential framework. This period in his life serves as a watershed for all other subsequent stages and moods in his life. He later would comment that he never really left the aesthetic stage completely. But it is obvious from his writings at this time that this was a searching period of great importance and necessity. Not only was he enjoying the pleasures of life, but he was actively searching for something to give his life meaning. As the above quote exemplifies, he was searching and struggling, as the one destined for enlightenment, to have his eyes opened to the reality of what his life, and life in general, meant. This attitude, or quest for authenticity, is a hallmark of the individual at any time in history who seeks a religious experience, or, one might say an authentic, more profound awareness of Sacred Power. We will find this quest, or struggle, in the Bodhisattva path as well. The Bodhisattva, like Kierkegaard, is one bent on discovery of ultimate reality. Passion plays an important part in both of these traditions, passion for the dharma of the Buddha, and passion for the Truth of

God.

The fourth major event in Kierkegaard's life revolved around his relationship with a girl he met while in the aesthetic stage. He would meet and fall in love with Regina Olsen, a lovely young lady of Copenhagen. She was to effect his life, in one way or another, until he died. As mentioned earlier, this was something of a religious experience for young Kierkegaard. He fell deeply in love with her and became engaged to be married but was unable, or unwilling, to follow through with it. As Kierkegaard relates, he decided he could not go through with the marriage and still be able to continue his quest to dispel the illusion of Christendom in his homeland. As much as he loved her, he felt she would be "ruined by his disease". He was too melancholy and thought she would never be able to live with him once she really got to know him. He felt this melancholy spirit was a disease handed down to him by his father (Kierkegaard, Point of View 83-85). Whether this was just extreme insecurity and low self esteem on his part one can only speculate. The important thing was that he decided he had a religious obligation not to marry her. Kierkegaard would later declare this event, although under heavily disguised language, to be a "teleological suspension of the ethical" (Fear 25). In other words, God had a higher calling for him outside and beyond this world of duty, ethics, and domestic ties. He was destined for an authentic religious experience, which would be a "leap" beyond his present existence into another, final stage of existence. However, as we will find out later, the religious stage is not a static and fixed objective state where one arrives at some supposed perfected existence. It is more like a continual leaping into the unknown of subjective, individual, and non-rational relation with the Infinite God. It is a religion of inwardness. Thus, by its very nature, this event cannot be logically understood (Dunning 186). And in fact, Kierkegaard would not elaborate on this experience or seek to justify it in any way. He would later say that he was only "always becoming a Christian" up until the very end of his life (Lowrie 125).

The final area of historical background to be discussed is Kierkegaard's rejection of Hegelianism. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was a very influential German philosopher, who shaped all subsequent thought, either negatively or positively. Either way, if one was going to philosophize, one would have to start with Hegel. Hegel was the first to view history, in fact all of existence, as a dialectical process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Through this interplay of opposites, two contradictory forces are resolved in a higher, more rational state. This process then goes on until the Absolute reality is realized. He saw the history of humanity as the progressive development of human understanding toward perfect knowledge. Civilization advances in stages, or historical moments, each of which is a necessary but incomplete step in the development of human Consciousness or Reason. This idea was revolutionary, because it placed change at the heart of human history. Kierkegaard would later adapt this idea to a theory of stages that one moves through to become a Christian. However, for Hegel this was not an endless cycle of change but a spiral leading upward to Absolute Knowledge. He saw humanity as a rational progression in which all subjective elements of the understanding are eliminated, or purged, leaving only a pure, objective knowledge of the Absolute, which is pure Rationality. The Absolute, according to Hegel, is approached aesthetically by art, conceived symbolically in religion, with its highest manifestation being Christianity. He saw philosophy as humanity's highest achievement, because it relies on and can comprehend the Absolute through Reason.

Of course, Kierkegaard rejected Hegel's reliance on reason and rationality as humanity's highest example of realizing its potential. Kierkegaard was trying to formulate a subjective awareness of Truth, or God , or the Absolute. For Kierkegaard, it was not possible to build a system of philosophy to arrive at knowledge of something that was inherently absurd and non-reasonable. God could not be apprehended through reason. Therefore, any system that claimed to explain the unexplainable, prove the unprovable, or know the unknowable, was to be rejected. And this he did. Kierkegaard saw Hegel's system as squashing the individual. Hegel conceived of the State as the highest authority and a manifestation of the Absolute. He said the individual must submit to the System or State. For Kierkegaard, this hit too close to home with the systemization of Christianity by the State that had taken place in the Kingdom

of Denmark. It had become a "Christian Kingdom." This was just simply nonsense to Kierkegaard, who conceived of the individual as higher than the State and true Christianity as the antithesis of what he saw in the Church of Denmark. Under these circumstances, Christianity was an illusion (Kierkegaard, Point of View 22). He would later lament that in a "Christian Nation" no one could ever really be a Christian in any authentic sense. To equate being a Christian with one's residence within a particular State was, for Kierkegaard, completely ridiculous. In fact, the very systematic and universal nature of the State was what Christianity had adopted and therefore was no longer by definition Christianity at all (Kierkegaard, Attack 435-437). The kind of Christianity where nothing is required of the individual is a mockery to God. According to Kierkegaard, Christ died for the sins of the world, and the Church of Denmark had hijacked the sacraments and made an abomination of them by administering them to unrepentant men.

Kierkegaard's Stages

After Kierkegaard rejected Hegelianism, and based his subsequent life on experiences and events discussed earlier, he developed his own philosophy of individual human existence as consisting of three stages: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. The first two stages are characterized by a distinct set of beliefs and behavior that is easily identifiable, whereas the last stage, the religious, is characterized by a highly personal, subjective, and non-rational "leap of faith" (Dunning 182-183).

The first stage is the *aesthetic*. This stage is characterized by an indulgence in the pleasurable and beautiful that life has to offer. The aesthetic stage is a necessary one on the road to authentic religious awareness but one marked with pitfalls and illusory promises of contentment. Also, the person trapped in an aesthetic existence will usually be immature, both physically and spiritually. One emerges from the aesthetic stage by simply growing older and becoming more serious about life. One is not so easily led by his/her emotions and passions as he/she once was. Actually, one's passionate, physical, and aesthetic desires are what leads one, eventually, to the awareness that his/her existence is profoundly lacking in fulfillment and meaning. Kierkegaard has described his own existence in the aesthetic realm as a vain search for anchorage on a "boundless sea of pleasure" (Lowrie, 27). He claims he had "tasted the fruit of the tree of knowledge...but the pleasure did not outlast the moment." Such is one who is stuck in the aesthetic existence. It is an existence characterized by one fleeting pleasure after another, none giving any lasting satisfaction. This leads one to seek for meaning in a higher realm. Kierkegaard himself relates how all of his earlier pseudonymous works, up until and including the Concluding Unscientific Postscript, were designed to instill within the reader a dissatisfaction for the aesthetic and its ability to bring about any kind of authentic religious awareness. In short, he was trying to show how the aesthetic stage cannot ever lead to becoming a Christian.

Kierkegaard started his literary career as an aesthetic writer for a reason. He had to start in the aesthetic realm because that is where his readers were. In the Point Of View For My Work As An Author, Kierkegaard explains that Christianity during his time was a "prodigious illusion" that needed to be dispelled. However, a direct attack on this illusion would only make matters worse. It would only serve to further Christendom's illusion that all are Christians. Consequently, Kierkegaard develops his famous method of "indirect communication." He goes on to explain that in order to dispel an illusion, one must remove it through indirect means. As he puts it in the Point Of View, "One must approach from behind a person who is under an illusion" (24). This he sought to do by writing works that were aesthetic in nature. Kierkegaard describes all of his writings up until Concluding Unscientific Postscript, which is the transitional work between the stages, as aesthetic works. Kierkegaard described himself as an aesthetic and religious author at the same time. He wanted to write aesthetic works and be able to win the attention of those under the illusion so as to bring forth the religious. He wanted, as a religious person, to make people in the aesthetic realm take notice so as to win their attention. He always had this goal in mind--to bring to the fore the necessity of the religious stage, and by way of contrast, to cause a dissatisfaction in the hearts of the people

of Denmark and a yearning for the religious. In doing this, Kierkegaard felt the awareness of those under the illusion would be awakened, or enlightened, to be able to see their illusion for what it is: selfishness and pride at having been a "Christian" in a Christian nation. For this, according to Kierkegaard himself, was his primary and ultimate concern--to bring about the religious stage, to awaken one out of an aesthetic existence into a higher and better one, to become a true Christian. Reflecting on his literary career, Kierkegaard states clearly in the Point Of View, "So then the religious writer, whose all-absorbing thought is how one is to become a Christian, starts off rightly in Christendom as an aesthetic writer" (30).

The second stage along life's way is the *ethical*. This is a stage characterized by one's adherence to duty and obligation. This is the moral life, living by standards and codes of conduct that have been set up by society, the State, Christendom, and even oneself. This stage is mostly a transitory stage, in that one does not really stay within this realm in any consistent manner. It is an elusive category, one Kierkegaard himself does not elaborate on in depth. The best example of this stage is found in Fear And Trembling, where Kierkegaard describes Abraham as fighting within himself to transcend the ethical and "suspend" it in order to enter into a personal relationship with the Infinite God. The ethical stage is a mode of existence one lives in that allows for the religious to come about. The ethical stands in direct opposition to the religious. The ethical is safe, secure, understandable. In other words, it is dutiful. And the individual, as well as the crowd, can measure his/her adherence, or non-adherence, to the ethical norms laid down by society by his/her performance of these duties and responsibilities. The ethical person is one who has matured to be able to see the fallacy of the aesthetic and is settling down in certainty to perform the prescribed conduct. But this is not the last stage of existence. There remains the religious awakening that transcends all previous stages. The ethical is never completely left behind. It does not disappear when one "leaps" into the religious stage, but it is only "suspended." This leads to the point that all of the three stages cannot be thought of as hard and fast categories with no overlap. On the contrary, Kierkegaard himself says that he never really left the first two. They are always there and one moves in and out and through all three. There remains to be discussed the final stage--the religious.

To pass into the religious stage one must "leap." But once an individual has leaped into the religious, it is as though one can never really stay there in a fixed and static sense. The religious awakening is an Infinite and terrible experience, terrible because it has no recourse to the normal conventions that usually govern one's life: reason, rational inquiry, and objective analysis. None of these faculties that work so well in the first two stages has any meaning in the final stage. One has entered a higher realm of existence, the highest attainable on earth as a human being but one that is marked by paradox. The paradoxical nature of the religious experience is seen in the way in which it can be communicated. It cannot be discussed rationally and logically analyzed, but it is the most profound event in one's life and full of meaning. Thus, one enters the realm of subjective truth. To be in a state of subjective truth is to truly be an individual. It is a highly personal mode of existence. A religious person, according to Kierkegaard, is only truly an existing individual when the religious stage is attained. The religious person becomes aware of his own individuality in a way that is impossible while he is still in the ethical stage. It is as if the blinders are removed from one's eyes and one is able to see oneself in a completely new way. Consequently, one sees everyone else as an individual as well. Like Socrates, Kierkegaard is suggesting that to really know oneself is to know oneself as an individual. To be an individual is to be a subject and not an object. To exist subjectively means to not objectify others. Therefore, like Kant says, one treats others as ends and not as means. To be religious is to be ethical. One in the religious stage takes the ethical with him/her.

Another tradition that involves passing from one stage or mode of existence to another is the Bodhisattva tradition found in Mahayana Buddhism. The parallel between theses two approaches--Kierkegaard's and the Bodhisattva's--can be seen in the way these two traditions acknowledge a higher and more meaningful mode of existence for an individual in the world. In order to better understand this point we must first look at the Mahayana tradition of

Buddhism.

Historical Background of Mahayana Buddhism

We now turn to look at the historical background of Mahayana Buddhism. There are really two main branches of Buddhism: Theravada and Mahayana. However, to understand either of these traditions, we need to first look at the life of the founder of the religious tradition known as Buddhism.

Buddhism gets its name from the Buddha. "Buddha" means "enlightened one." Siddhartha Gautama was born in northern India, now Nepal, in 563 BCE and died in 483 BCE. He was born a prince, the son of the king of the Shakya clan. He is sometimes referred to as Shakyamuni, the "Shakya sage." As a young man he is said to have been dissatisfied with his comfortable but hollow life. While wandering one day, he encountered the "four signs" that transformed his life forever--an old man, a sick person, a dead body, and a mendicant monk, the first three signs personifying the world's suffering in the form of old age, disease, and death. These sights of suffering, and the holy man's example of simplicity and serenity, led him on a quest to understand and overcome the afflictions of existence. At the age of twenty-nine he made the "great renunciation", leaving his family and riches of royalty behind to become a wandering beggar. For six years he sought spiritual awakening, which is another way to translate "buddha", by living with various Hindu gurus and practicing severe asceticism. He proved adept at self-denial and renunciation of all worldly and physical pleasures. These all proved ineffectual to finding any lasting happiness or true liberation, and finally being repelled by the Hindu caste system, he abandoned that approach. He then turned to meditation and contemplation. After seven weeks meditating under a bo tree, he attained perfect enlightenment or Buddhahood.

In his first sermon after enlightenment, the Buddha introduced the principles of Dharma, the way of enlightenment, to five disciples who became the first members of this new community, the sangha. Thus began the "three jewels" of the Buddhist tradition, in which all followers "take refuge": the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The practice of Dharma is the way to enlightenment, or perfect awareness and understanding. It begins with accepting the Four Noble Truths as taught by the Buddha: all of life is suffering, the cause of suffering is ignorance and desire, suffering ends when desire is extinguished, which is what the word "nirvana" means, and this can be accomplished by following the Eightfold Path. This Eightfold Path, or middle way, is one of moderation which is not too severely ascetic and not excessively worldly but concentrating on right behavior that fall into eight categories: right understanding, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right endeavor, right mindfulness, and right contemplation. Also, added to the Four Noble Truths is the idea of "anatman" or no-self. As a rebuttal to the Hindu notion of "atman", the universal, permanent, and transmigrating soul, the Buddha taught the self does not really exist. It is impermanent and in a constant state of flux. However, almost all Mahayana Buddhists believe everyone has the Buddha nature within him/her. The individual does not have a continual identity as the Western mindset usually conceives of it. The buddha nature can be thought of as a kind of "ground of being". One thing is for certain--the attachment to selfhood is a hindrance to enlightenment. This only causes more suffering, because one holds on to this aggregation of a series of moments as the real self, thereby insuring a continuing cycle of a suffering existence in an unbroken chain of deaths and rebirths.

The Buddha's teachings were first transmitted orally, resulting in various interpretations and schools of thought. The Mahayana school, which means "great vehicle", arose as a liberalizing tendency among the laity within about two or three centuries after the Buddha's death. The Buddha's first followers were monks, who were very individualistic in their approach to the Buddha's teaching. It was believed one can attain enlightenment only by rigorous devotion and an adherence to the monastic way of life. Thus, Theravada Buddhism holds that enlightenment is only for the few. In contrast, Mahayana is the Buddhism of the common

people. There is one main difference between Mahayana and Theravada: the attainability of Buddhahood. Mahayana proposes that universal salvation is available for everyone. Also, Buddhahood is attainable by all beings. As mentioned previously, Mahayana teaches that everyone has the "Buddha nature" within him/her--the inner human potential that was realized by the Buddha--and is even worshipped in many traditions. Mahayana teaches that anyone can become a Buddha by following the Bodhisattva ideal, which entails the enlightened one postponing the final attainment of nirvana in order to help others along the path.

The Bodhisattva Path and Perfections

The Sanskrit word "bodhisattva" has been explained in many different ways by scholars. There is agreement that the root word "bodhi" means enlightenment, but several different interpretations have been offered for "sattva." Some scholars say it means mind, essence, or spirit. However, one of the foremost Sanskrit scholars, Har Dayal, has defined "sattva" in his monumental work, The Bodhisattva Doctrine In Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, as "a strong or valiant man, hero, or warrior" (8). He interprets the Pali "satta" as "being". It is related to the Vedic "satvan", which means "a heroic being, a spiritual warrior". It can also carry the meaning of one who is destined for enlightenment (Dayal 9). Kajiyama Yuichi also acknowledges the Mahayana idea of a Bodhisattva being one who is possessed with a brave mind. He is even called a "heroic warrior." He is brave because he is not afraid of the truth that reality is empty and everything is unreal. This seems to be why the ancient Tibetan translation of Bodhisattva, "byan chub sems dpa", means "one whose brave mind is directed toward enlightenment" (Yuichi 259). The Buddha himself taught that the Bodhisattva must be trained to understand the non-reality of all things, and therefore must have no attachment to anything. This understanding requires great fortitude and steadfast commitment to remain strong in the face of the un-reality of all things. His mind must be resolute. This heroic capacity is also seen in the Bodhisattva's warrior-like resolve to direct his mind continually to seeking the benefit of all living creatures, even at the cost of his own life.

The doctrine of the Bodhisattva probably arose around the second century BCE. Gautama Buddha spoke of himself as a Bodhisattva, referring to his present life before his attainment of enlightenment. This is interpreted by the Theravada school as proof that only the Buddha, and those few Buddhas of ages past, are Bodhisattvas. The Mahayana tradition rejects this view and believes all can, and eventually will, be Bodhisattvas. Over the course of time, later Mahayana teachers regarded the many previous Bodhisattvas as being embodied symbolically by the pre-eminent Bodhisattva, Avalokitesvara, or the Lord of Mercy (Williams 102-105). He occupies an important position in the universe and is the Bodhisattva of Bodhisattvas. He reigns as a kind of assistant over the realm of Amitabha's Pure Land, which is like a heavenly realm of existence. His ultimate essence is compassion, love, pity, and mercy (Dayal 44-46). As was mentioned, the Bodhisattva doctrine arose as a backlash against the lack of true spiritual fervor among the early followers of the Buddha. The "arhat", or one who had attained enlightenment, was the early ideal of the first monks for the first four or five centuries after the Buddha's death. They were supposed to go out as missionaries and preach the Buddha's message to the people. Evidently, about three hundred years after the Buddha's death, many arhats were neglecting their duties as preachers of the Buddha's message; they had become more and more selfish, even to the point that they had no compassion for the multitudes of people who had yet to attain enlightenment. Consequently, some of the Buddhist leaders began to teach the Bodhisattva ideal of compassion for all sentient beings. This was taught in order to counteract the arhats' tendency to isolate themselves and be spiritually egotistical.

The Bodhisattva's career begins with the thought of enlightenment. He commences on the path to becoming a Buddha by producing the thought of "bodhi." In the Mahayna tradition, as over against Theravada, eventually everyone will become a Buddha. The Buddha nature within everyone and everything will someday come to fruition and Buddhahood will be universal. There is a sort of pre-stage from which the Bodhisattva must begin his quest of

becoming a Buddha for the welfare and benefit of all living creatures. This is known, according to Dayal, as "bodhi-citt-otpada" (50). To develop the "citta" mindset is the beginning of the Bodhisattva's mind being attached to enlightenment. Moreover, there are three main events that mark the conversion of an ordinary human being into a Bodhisattva: he thinks of becoming a Buddha for the welfare and liberation of all creatures, makes certain great vows, and his future success is predicted by a living Buddha. Once one has done these three things he becomes a Bodhisattva. However, he is not finished, but only beginning his quest for enlightenment, and the life of a savior for mankind. As time went on, the Mahayana literature, especially the Sutras, began to see the Bodhisattva as being able to save from sin and to deliver from evil by calling upon them for mercy (Yuichi 263).

Bodhisattvas earn merit, and store it up, through their efforts in the "paramitas." The paramitas are perfections that the Bodhisattva must pass through. Early Mahayana texts, like the Lotus Sutra for example, list six perfections, which are dana (giving), sila (morality), ksanti (patience), virya (effort), dhyana (contemplation), and prajna (transcendental insight). Later texts, such as the Dasabhumika Sutra, add four more: upaya (skill in means), pranidhana (resolution), bala (strength), and jnana (knowledge). It should also be noted that both the Hinayana and Mahayana schools acknowledge thirty-seven dharmas or principles conducive to enlightenment. These can be broken down into four states of mindfulness, four abandonments, four elements of supernatural power, five moral faculties, five moral powers, seven components of perception, and the Noble Eightfold Path.

To this list of necessary conduct for the Bodhisattva, Mahayana adds the practice of the ten paramitas, or perfections, and the ten corresponding Bodhisattva stages, known as bhumis. The bhumis are explained as an ascent through levels or stages of spiritual accomplishments. These stages are linked with each perfection. The seventh stage is unique, in that it is the stage in which, when the Bodhisattva reaches it, he is assured of reaching Buddhahood. The previous six perfections and corresponding stages are sufficient for him to achieve enlightenment. Once the Bodhisattva has reached the seventh stage, he cannot turn back--no spiritual decline is possible from this plateau. The ten bhumis are as follows, in their English translations: joyful, pure, light giving, radiant, difficult to conquer, face to face (with nirvana), far going (or skillful means to help others to salvation), immovable, analytical knowledge, cloud of the Dharma (Nakamura 268). The tenth stage is so called because, according to author Paul Williams, the Bodhisattva at this point "lets the Dharma fall like rain and extinguishes the very subtle glow of conflicting emotions still held by sentient beings" (213). Beyond the tenth stage is the stage of a Buddha. According to some traditions, like the Tibetan, complete Buddhahood requires Tantric practice. Then again, some Japanese traditions say that all the stages are contained in the first. Since all things interpenetrate and are interconnected, and the Buddha nature is everywhere, then one is already a Buddha. As the Japanese Buddhist leader Dogen put it, "Only Buddhas become Buddhas" (Williams 214). Also, many other traditions arose that sought to divide these stages into more and more subtle divisions, some even with 52 stages. However, the majority of scholars agree with the ten-fold perfections and stages. Most of the early Buddhist Sanskrit writers devote more time to the paramitas than the bhumis, because it is precisely these perfections that make the Bodhisattva superior to the arhats. The perfections did not originate with the Mahayana school but became their central focus so as to distinguish them as superior to the thirty-seven dharmas, which were seen as too monastic and anti-social in character. The paramitas are extolled in the Buddhist scriptures as "great oceans of all the bright virtues and auspicious principles" and confer happiness on all who practice them. They are even said to be the "Father and Mother of all" and the "Teacher, the Way, and the Light." Even the Buddhas are their "children" (Dayal 169-172).

However, there is one area of convergence between Mahayana and non-Mahayana traditions pertaining to Bodhisattvas--that of the Bodhisattva Mastery. Mahayana traditions believe there have been Buddhas before Shakyamuni, and there will be Buddhas in the future. Maitreya is the only current Bodhisattva who has attained celestial status. Maitreya is accepted by some in virtually all Buddhist traditions. He represents a kind of messianic

movement within these various traditions. In the Sanskrit work Maitreyavyakarana, known as the Prophecy of Maitreya, the future Buddha Maitreya will come and set up a kingdom on earth and reign as the supreme Buddha and usher in the Buddhist millennium. In fact, in China during the fifth and sixth centuries alone, there were nine movements within Buddhism claiming to be led by incarnations of Maitreya. Just like the Buddha Sakyamuni before his last rebirth, Maitreya dwells in the Tusita heaven, awaiting the proper time to descend to earth. The Tusita heaven, most Buddhist traditions agree, is closer to the earth than a Pure Land heaven. In fact, it is possible for a monk to visit there through meditation, and they often pray to be reborn there. Maitreya visits the earth periodically in various forms to teach and save mankind.

Comparison of the Bodhisattva and Knight of Faith

There are some similarities that can be seen between Kierkegaard's leap into the religious and the arrival of the Bodhisattva at the final bhumi, or stage of perfection. Whereas Kierkegaard has only three and the Bodhisattva ten stages, there is a progression that takes place from one stage to the next. For Kierkegaard, each jump to the next stage seems to require a severe and often traumatic event; the Bodhisattva path, however, is more smoothly traversed. In Kierkegaard, one does not have to perfect the previous stage in order to progress to the next. However, the Bodhisattva must perfect the required abilities in each stage in order to advance.

Also, after the seventh stage, the Bodhisattva is destined for Buddhahood and cannot turn back. Similarly, for Kierkegaard, one cannot turn back to the ethical or the aesthetic stage of existence once he has tasted of the religious. Once one has made that leap, as Kierkegaard says, it is as if he/she must stay "out upon the deep, hovering over forty thousand fathoms." There are similarities between Kierkegaard's leap over the abyss into the Infinite unknown and the general Buddhist notion of nirvana. In Theravada, nirvana carries a negative tone, emphasizing the connotation of the word which means to "blow out", like a candle. The ignorance, desire, and pain of existence is eliminated. It is not clear what this experience would be like. They are unable to give this event any other description, only to say that it is indescribable. For them, nirvana is truly a "snuffing out" of anything we would recognize as it pertains to this life. In Mahayana, the event is described as being more positive. They emphasize nirvana, not as a "snuffing out" of existence, but as an extinguishing of desires that hinder one from achieving enlightenment. The Bodhisattva achieves enlightenment by his passage through the various stages. The Bodhisattva has an existence in another realm after nirvana.

Also, just like Kierkegaard's individual who is "always becoming a Christian", so the Bodhisattva is always only becoming a Buddha. The effort to attain the last stage of existence is one of intense personal conflict. It requires honesty, devotion, and deep probing into one's own psyche. There is an emphasis on "becoming"; one progresses, becomes, and moves into the future.

The path of an authentic religious person requires one to forsake the world and its pleasures in pursuit of a higher calling. The Bodhisattva, too, has to reject the physical, pleasurable existence of this transitory world in order to start out on the path to begin the ten perfections. The perfections themselves are meant to provide incremental progress assessments for the Bodhisattva to gauge his success along the path.

Also, one of the similarities is also a point of contrast; that of the individual effort involved in the spiritual quest. For the Bodhisattva, the quest is personally sought, but it is on behalf of all other living beings. Intense compassion is the motivating factor behind the Bodhisattva's efforts. On the other hand, Kierkegaard's knight of faith resigns himself to the knowledge that his is a personal, and therefore highly subjective, quest for salvation that no other individual can understand or discuss with him. Both require personal sacrifice and effort, but with

differing motivation. The heroic being that the Bodhisattva is can be seen exemplified in his intense personal sacrifice on behalf of others. The knight of faith also labors on behalf of others, but only as an example.

Contrast of the Bodhisattva and the Knight of Faith

One of the main differences in Kierkegaard and the Bodhisattva is the goal toward which one aims. For Kierkegaard, in the Christian tradition, the goal is salvation. One needs to be saved from something, in this case sin, in order to arrive at the desired goal. Also, in Kierkegaard, we see much ambiguity and "fear and trembling" as the individual seeks to work out his own salvation. On the other hand, the Bodhisattva's goal is self-perfection leading to enlightenment for the benefit of all other living beings. The goal is personal but universal in scope and benefits.

The knight of faith and the Bodhisattva are different in their view of the human condition. While both would agree about the existence of suffering in the world, they differ on the cause of that suffering. Kierkegaard, as a Christian, believes that humanity is in a spiritually fallen state, whereas, the Bodhisattva, with a distinctly Buddhist conception of the world, believes the world itself is the source of suffering, not the spiritual state of an individual's soul. The Bodhisattva believes there is no soul to be corrupted but only ignorance to be overcome through an enlightened mind.

This leads to the distinction between the Christian and Buddhist concepts of the self. The Bodhisattva acknowledges he has no real self. There is nothing that is static, fixed, and eternal about the "I" of our individual existence. However, the Buddha nature within everyone can be seen as a kind of selfhood. In the Theravada tradition the "I" is a mere collection of skandhas, or aggregates of fleeting moments in time and space. Therefore, there is nothing to be perfected but only false perceptions to be destroyed. Christianity, on the other hand, acknowledges the actual existence of the "I", which is synonymous with the eternal soul or self.

As mentioned earlier, in Kierkegaardian Christianity there is no borrowing of merit by any other individual based on another's efforts. The knight of faith is utterly alone in his quest for an authentic religious experience. This leads to a problem, namely, how can someone communicate an extremely important event in his/her life without being able to articulate it through discourse? Kierkegaard might answer that one communicates the experience indirectly with others. After all, Kierkegaard spent most of his life attacking the lack of personal experience of his contemporaries, as it pertained to a religious experience. He could not risk discussing his religious experience in detail; this might leave it open to refutation. On the other hand, the Bodhisattva exists for others. He is compassion incarnate. There is no meaning to enlightenment, or life in general, without the commonality of a suffering existence that all human beings share.

Personal Reflection and Summary

There are many parallels and common threads that run through the ideal of the Bodhisattva and Kierkegaard's knight of faith. However, there are also many differences and irreconcilable positions that each take. With this in mind, I will attempt to not fall prey to a cursory explanation, and common fallacy, of trying to imply that two religions are fundamentally one in essence. This paper has not been an exploration of the essence of religion, but an exploration of two fundamentally different theories of what constitutes an authentic religious existence for an individual in this world. Two religious traditions have been juxtaposed to one another and hopefully a little has been learned about both. Both traditions have valid as well as invalid aspects to be explored deeper.

Kierkegaard's theory of stages is a convincing description of the various modes of existence

one experiences as he/she passes through life. What I consider valid about Kierkegaard's philosophy of stages is the way it resonates with my own experience in the world. I have experienced similar emotions to those Kierkegaard relates in his journals, feelings of passing from aesthetic existence to a more mature and ethical life. Anyone who has ever had a religious awakening can relate to Kierkegaard's passionate understanding of his mission in life and sense of higher calling.

Furthermore, I think the need for an authentic religious experience is a universal need shared by all humanity. In my opinion, everyone, everywhere, and at all times throughout history, has felt this need in one form or another. I believe we were created with the capacity, even craving, for an authentic, personal, and passionate relationship with our creator. All humans feel this longing. Most of the world's religions agree that there is a problem that plagues humanity. We are not in contact with something valid and authentic that is missing from our lives. Yet traces of truth remain in our consciousness, even though perhaps at a distance. But the question remains, what do we do about it? What is the solution to the dilemma? I think Kierkegaard, as exemplified by his life, knew the truth from childhood, lost sight of it, then with fear and trembling found it again shining brighter than before. It was more glorious in the end because he found it for himself. He came into contact with the Infinite, although he was finite, and his concept of who he had been was destroyed in the process. He then came out the other side of this experience with the awareness that he had discovered the truth that was "Truth for him." We must all search and not stop until we find what we have been searching for. This search must include all aspects of our capacity to understand. An individual begins to walk in the truth when the truth becomes true for that individual. Tellingly, Kierkegaard referred to himself as "that individual". One must come into contact with the truth in order to more completely apprehend it. One must not leave it at arms length, but take it up into oneself. We only posess what we experience. What a tragedy it would be to discover ultimate truth only to reduce it to a trivial mental construct. Through Kierkegaard's life we all our encouraged to pursue a more profound existence than just the mundane.

The Bodhisattva path also has significant contributions to offer one who seeks an authentic religious experience. The Bodhisattva is inspired by compassion for all living beings. An authentic awareness of Sacred Power is certainly a benefit to the individual, and especially to all humanity, when compassion is the motivating factor.

Also, the Bodhisattva is a seeker of enlightenment. To be aware of a higher reality than just this temporal world is to experience hope. This is a commendable goal for an individual to have. Hope is the lifeblood of progress. And the Bodhisattva tradition is valid in its belief that all need to seek enlightenment. Spiritual awakening is not just for the few. The desire for awareness of our true potential as human beings is a worthy and hopeful goal. The understanding of the communion that all humanity shares is an important contribution of the Bodhisattva ideal. Encouraged by the example of the Bodhisattva, we can all seek to become more aware of the commonality of the human race. The Bodhisattva path lays out a universal call and promising goal for all humanity to move forward together.

In addition, this paper has, I suspect, only pointed to a greater problem than reconciling two opposing religious worldviews: the tension of how to live authentically in a world devoid of certainty. It seems intuitive to the human race that we must pursue Truth and live out our existence in this world of flux and uncertainty in some kind of meaningful way. But the essential question remains one of practice, not of theory. The question speaks to the age old dichotomy between reason and faith. Is reason the absolute way of certainty? Or is faith sufficient grounds for living one's life, regardless of the truth or falsity of the position? And even still, our language gives us away. Is truth or falsehood the right question to be asked? I still think that it is. These questions come to the forefront again and again in the study of religions. Quite possibly, religion's role in human life is nowhere more clearly seen than in the

effort to answer these basic questions of human existence.

In conclusion, these two opposing worldviews, which begin and end in widely different assumptions and views of an individual's authentic religious existence in the world, are a microcosm of the cultural divide we often find ourselves peering over. However, these worldviews grow out of religious systems, and as such, they represent and speak to a deep and often disturbing question which, I suspect, is common to all of us after we have lived more than a few years upon this earth--what do we do with what we have learned? In other words, how should we then live?

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