

## **Al-Budd and Muslim Me**

by Mas'ood Cajee

*The human race is a single being  
Created from one jewel  
If one member is struck  
All must feel the blow  
Only someone who cares for the pain of others  
Can truly be called human  
—Shaykh Saadi, 12th-century Persian poet*

*O mankind! Lo!  
We have created you male and female,  
and have made you nations and tribes  
that ye may know one another.  
Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah,  
is the best in conduct.  
Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware.  
—The Noble Qur'an, 49:13*

Coming from a South African–Indian Muslim background, I feel relatively at ease with non-Abrahamic religious cultures. Lenasia, the racially segregated South African township for Indians in which I was raised, was dotted with Muslim mosques, Hindu temples, and Christian churches. (It was near this township, adjoining Soweto, that Mahatma Gandhi established his multiracial, multifaith experimental commune “Tolstoy Farm.”) Furthermore, my parents were intent on teaching me about a world beyond apartheid’s poisonous confines.

My family lived directly across the street from the largest mosque in Lenasia, called Nurul-Islam, “The Light of Islam.” At the five prayer times (dawn, noon, afternoon, dusk, and night) we could hear at least a dozen staggered calls to prayer coming from the amplified speakers of the surrounding mosques. Though we lived as a religious minority in a racially oppressive state governed by fundamentalist Christian nationalists, we were free to practice our faiths—within our apartheid ghetto.

As a child, I attended daily after-school religious classes. The Hindu kids had their own classes, and we Muslim kids attended what we called Madrassah (Arabic for “school”). We learned Arabic, Qur’an, prophetic history, and the basics of ethics, belief, and practice.

Many Muslim children in my community memorized the entire Qur’an, a process that usually takes about two years. In my family, my younger brother and six cousins, both male and female, have become hafidh, or Qur’an memorizers. Committing the Qur’an to memory is often the first step to advanced study of sacred knowledge. I only memorized

the most common verses, but I often spent weekends in a seminary listening to young students reciting their lessons.

My favorite part of the madrassah afternoon was storytime. The contemporary tales that my teacher told were often based on hadith (prophetic sayings). I recall the one about two neighbors. One was outwardly very religious, covered her hair, didn't wear nail polish or makeup, and made a public display of her faith. However, she always criticized her neighbor, who was outwardly very worldly and would (gasp!) even go to the movies on Fridays. The worldly neighbor was kind to her cat, generous to the sick and the elderly, and never spoke ill of anyone.

"Who would go to Heaven?" my teacher asked. The prophetic tradition told of two women, one destined for hellfire because she imprisoned her cat and refused to feed it, and the other a prostitute who attained Paradise because she once filled her shoe with water to slake the thirst of a stray dog.

Still, religious rituals are important in Islam. The Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him,\* stressed the importance of performing salaah (the five daily prayers) in congregation with others. As a child and young adult, I attended one or two congregational prayers in the mosque every day. My grandfather, who was retired, prayed all five daily prayers in the mosque. For those who worked far from home, that was difficult. But salaah can be performed anywhere; the only requirement is that one do it in a clean place. The Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "The whole earth is a masjid" (Arabic for "mosque," literally a place for prostration and worship). He prayed on a straw mat or on sand. Muslims today often pray on beautifully woven rugs; however, surfaces such as sand, grass, earth, or even concrete all suffice. As for me, I pray every day on a patch of grass under an oak tree outside my office or on a rug at home.

My childhood years revolved around the mosque and the Muslim holy days. Nevertheless, my parents were keen that I learn about other traditions. When I was of school age, they enrolled me in a prestigious white private school in Johannesburg, which forced the school's prominent and publicly liberal board of trustees to wrestle for over a year with the question of whether to admit their first student of color. I was eventually accepted for second grade, having spent first grade at a segregated government school for Indians.

After my physician father had become established in his practice, my parents were able to fulfill a long-held desire to travel abroad. On a childhood trip to Japan, I was mesmerized by the Great Buddha of Kamakura near Tokyo. We visited many temples and gardens in Japan sacred to Buddhists, but the Kamakura Buddha, in particular, struck my fancy. "Who is this big man?" I wondered. "Why does he have his eyes closed?"

I enjoyed twisting my pliable eight-year-old legs into the lotus position and puffing out my tummy, imitating the jolly, big-bellied Laughing Buddha statue in the hotel lobby. My parents told me that the Buddha was a great man, originally a royal prince, named

Siddhartha Gautama, whose followers had built the remarkable temples and gardens we were visiting. These temples were somehow familiar to me; they seemed like mosques...with statues.

My dad said the Buddha had achieved nirvana.

“You mean, like Nirvana Drive?” I asked. Our township’s arterial road was called Nirvana Drive.

“No, silly, Nirvana Drive is named after nirvana, the state of enlightenment the Buddha achieved after meditating under a fig tree.”

Figs I knew about. I had memorized the chapter in the Qur’an about figs, which were sacred in Islam. “Did Buddha receive a book under the tree, like Muhammad, peace be upon him?” I figured Buddha’s experience must have been akin to the Prophet’s time in the Cave of Hira. The Prophet, spurred on by dreams that he said were “like the breaking of the light of dawn,” sought solace in this cave, a place “uncontaminated by the world of men.” He retreated there for long periods of meditation. After several years of this, during the lunar month of Ramadan, he had the first of his encounters with the Angel Gabriel. Gabriel overwhelmed Muhammad, peace be upon him, in a suffocating embrace, and began the process of revelation of the Qur’an.

“Well, I don’t think Buddha received a book,” answered my dad, “so he wasn’t exactly like the Prophet Muhammad, but he was also very wise. Why don’t we buy you a book so you can read about him? I’m afraid I can’t answer all your questions.”

“But,” I protested, “I have one more question! Was he Japanese?”

My father chuckled. “No, he was from India. He just looks Japanese because his followers localized him.”

In Islam, any figurative representations of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him, or of God, are forbidden. The Prophet is to be emulated, and God alone is to be worshipped—devoid of human attributes like race, gender, class, and age.

That Buddha was a fellow Indian intrigued me. My family has roots in India. My childish mind imagined that perhaps Buddha was a distant relative, deep down in the family tree. Having grown up in apartheid South Africa, I was pleased that the Japanese, who had brought the world the Honda Civic and the Sony Walkman, could revere a brown Indian person—other than the Bollywood megastar Amitabh Bachchan—in this manner. To quote the United Parcel Service slogan, I felt empowered by “the power of brown.”

As I later discovered, it has been in the pluralistic religious stew of the Indian subcontinent that Muslims have encountered Buddhism more than anywhere else. The Gangetic plain was the homeland of the Buddha, and Islam, too, experienced a great flowering there.

Abu Rayhan Al-Biruni (973–1048), the Muslim polymath who spent 13 years in India exploring the land and studying ancient texts in the original Sanskrit, wrote sympathetically about Buddha and Buddhism in his epic tome, *The History of India*. He also wrote a treatise on the Buddhas of Bamiyan.

Closer to our times, the early-20th-century Indian Muslim statesman/theologian Mawlana Abul Azad published a periodical that sought to build bridges with Buddhists worldwide. He also sponsored publications that did the same for Persians and Arabs. Azad echoed earlier Indian Muslim scholarship on Buddhism by proposing that the mysterious prophet Dhul Kifl mentioned in the Qur'an could have been the Buddha.

The city of Baghdad was a great center of scholarship and translation, transmitting knowledge from Indian and other ancient sources. An unknown ninth-century Baghdad scholar translated the story of Buddha into Arabic in *Kitab al-Budaf wa Balawhar*, literally “The Book of the Bodhisattva and [his teacher] Balawhar.” Curiously, this text was subsequently translated into Georgian and Greek, Christianized, and popularized in the West as *The Legend of Barlaam and Joasaph*.

Perhaps the most notable Islamic account of Buddhism based on the Indian encounter is found in the *Kitab al-Milal wa Nihal*—“The Book of Confessions and Creeds”—written by Muhammad al-Shahrastani (ca. 1076–1153) in Baghdad. Al-Shahrastani’s history of religions contains the first accurate descriptions of Indian Buddhist traditions in Islamic scholarship. Al-Shahrastani described Buddhism as a “search for truth inculcating patience, giving, and detachment” that was “near to the teachings of the Sufis.”

Patience, giving, and detachment are indeed powerful themes in Islamic discourse, and especially in Sufism (Islamic mysticism). If Islam is an orange, a teacher once told me, then its hard, protective, and superficially bitter shell is the sharia, the religion’s vast ethical-legal corpus. Its sweet pulpy interior is Sufism, called *Tasawwuf* or sometimes *Tariqah* in Arabic. One teacher has called Sufism “the science of your Self, of fulfilling one’s fullest destiny.” Many have noted the similarities between Zen Buddhism and Sufism, especially in the storytelling and the activities of the masters.

Sufis are attached to the idea of detachment, although they generally avoid the permanent vows of monasticism and poverty that the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, frowned upon. The Prophet did not regard monasticism itself as reprehensible. Indeed, the Qur'an exhorts believers to protect those in monasteries, especially of other faiths. However, Islam emphasizes the importance of familial relationships. Thus, the right to worship and sequester oneself must be balanced with the rights that one’s parents, children, spouses, relatives, and neighbors have over you.

“The sunna (the path of Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him) is about detachment,” insists Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad, a prominent British Muslim theologian. He says that a Muslim has “confidence that, however seemingly black the situation of the world and however great the oppression, no leaf falls without the will of [God]. Ultimately, all is well. The cosmos, and history, are in good hands.”

Thomas Cleary, the brilliant American scholar of Arabic, Japanese, Pali, Chinese, and Sanskrit, has translated both the Qur'an and many Buddhist texts, like the Avatamsaka Sutra. Cleary observes that in terms of doctrinal format, "Buddhism and Islam seem to be as dissimilar as religions could be.... When we look more closely at certain underlying elements, however, we find similarities."

Indeed, Buddhism and Islam have much in common, including the centrality of compassion, and a tradition of meditative practice.

Both Buddhism and Islam share a concern for ethical social action. Adab, a critical element of the Islamic ethos meaning "courtesy, respect, appropriateness," is roughly akin to the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism. According to Shaykh Kabir Helminski, "Adab creates the context in which we develop our humanness." In this regard, the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him, said, "None of you will have authentic faith until your hearts are made right, nor will your hearts be made right until your tongues be made right, nor will your tongues be made right until your actions be made right."

Islam and Buddhism share customs, too, including a disdain for alcohol, keeping the feet bare in sacred space, sitting on the floor, touching the earth, prostrations, use of prayer beads (Buddhist malas usually have 108 beads while Muslim tesbihs usually have 99 beads), and some common sacred sites, such as Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka.

Muslims, like Buddhists, conceive of themselves as following a path of moderation. Islam, argues Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad, is "the middle way between the incarnationism of Christianity, which posits a God of love and then cannot explain natural disasters, and the impersonal Real of most forms of Buddhism.... We are 'neither of the East nor of the West,' we are the 'middle nation.'"

Of course, differences abound. David Scott, a scholar of Muslim-Buddhist interaction, says the standard Islamic critique of Buddhism is that "Buddhism suffers from the twin evils of idolatry, through its use of richly decorated visual statues and paintings; and of atheism, through not having a theistic God at the center of their religious system."

Historically, Buddhism and Islam have had a lengthy encounter that includes both conflict and harmonious coexistence. Buddhists and Muslims have found themselves at various times and places as neighbors and as adversaries, as allies and as foes.

Muslims and Buddhists have lived for centuries together in much of Asia. Today, there are Muslim communities in Buddhist lands such as Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, and Tibet. Conversely, we find Buddhist minorities in predominantly Muslim lands such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. And Buddhists and Muslims both live as minorities in China, India, Russia, Western Europe, and the Americas.

In the United States, especially in the rich cross-fertilized soils of California and New York, there are new possibilities for Buddhist-Muslim dialogue and cooperation. Buddhists and Muslims are natural partners in defending and invigorating American religious pluralism. When I was an undergraduate at the University of California–

Berkeley in the early 1990s, the Berkeley mosque was actually located in the Berkeley Shambhala Center, and Telegraph Avenue's Shambhala Books was one of the best places to get literature on Islam.

In April 2006, an unprecedented Buddhist-Muslim summit took place in San Francisco which brought together the Dalai Lama, Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, and a group of prominent Buddhists and Muslims. The convening, called "The Gathering of Hearts Illuminating Compassion," generated quite a bit of publicity, with stories appearing in The New York Times and on Al-Jazeera. "The Dalai Lama's historic gesture of solidarity with his Muslim brothers and sisters will resonate throughout the world," remarked Shaykh Hamza Yusuf. "This meeting was a reaffirmation of and a commitment to using the wisdom of our traditions as a means to help one another overcome suffering through the core teaching of compassion, and to condemn the perversion of religion that causes so much human suffering. This unifies us all."

"The prospects for increasing contact and cooperation between Buddhists and Muslims are vast," remarks the Buddhist scholar Alexander Berzin. "They have the potential to lead to more understanding between religious practitioners as well as to more political stability in areas where the two groups live in close proximity."

Rabia Harris, coordinator of the Muslim Peace Fellowship, concurs: "Muslim-Buddhist interfaith work is an area that definitely needs more attention." Dedicated to making the beauty of Islam evident in the world through peace, justice, and nonviolence, the Muslim Peace Fellowship (MPF) is a sister organization to the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. MPF has been involved in several peacemaking initiatives in recent years. We have, among other things, developed Muslim-Christian Conflict Transformation Training with the Baptist Peace Fellowship, collaborated on the Muslim-Christian Initiative on the Nuclear Weapons Danger, co-sponsored numerous Israel-Palestine interfaith peacebuilder delegations, and co-sponsored a recent interfaith delegation to Iran. We are currently working on projects for young Muslims, which include developing resources for conscientious objectors and nonviolence training based on Islamic tradition.

Muslims working in the wider community are cultivating relationships with allies and building coalitions. Since 9/11, there has been a blossoming of interfaith and intercultural activity. In many instances, the impetus for this movement has come from young people. A group of Jewish and Muslim female high school students in New Jersey jointly volunteer at a local homeless shelter. The California Council on American-Islamic Relations in Sacramento is one of the sponsors of the annual pilgrimage to Manzanar, where Japanese and Japanese Americans were interned during World War II. The pilgrimage gives Japanese-American and American Muslim high school students an opportunity to learn from Japanese American former internees. And, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, 3,000 Muslims in Houston joined with other service organizations to help Katrina survivors at the Astrodome and the George Brown Convention Center. But anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S. is growing, and many Americans fear that all Muslims are terrorists. Erik Nisbet, a Cornell University pollster, found that half of the American public favors restrictions on the civil liberties of Muslims.

How does one respond to this situation? Imam Zaid Shakir, among the most respected and influential Muslim scholars in the West, advises Muslims to uphold the ethical standard of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. The Prophet called on his followers to face adversity with patience and perseverance. According to A'isha, a wife of the Prophet, peace be upon him, he said, "Good neighborliness, maintaining blood ties, and good character are the basis of civility, and they enhance civilization."

\*Muslims always bid peace and blessings on the Prophet whenever he is mentioned by name. Muslim scholar Rookeya Kaka explains that Muslims do so "out of love for him, the desire to draw closer to him, and an indebtedness to him, for there is no good we enjoy in this religion besides what has emerged from his teachings." v

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