

Dazzling Darkness

Buddhism and Chiara Lubich's Mystical Writings

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Abstract: *The author begins by presenting two experiences of what he terms “dazzling darkness,” one in a Christian context and the other in a Buddhist context. He then looks at the Buddhist traditions in India and China to propose an explanation for the experience in the Buddhist context. In so doing, he connects darkness to suffering and light to Nirvana and Buddha-nature. Then he turns to the mystical writings of Chiara Lubich to propose an explanation for the Christian experience and its relation to suffering and the luminosity of God in suffering through Jesus Forsaken. In the section on the writings of Chiara Lubich, the author also explores (1) her experiences of the relational arising and mutual indwelling of beings, and the indwelling of the*

light and love of God in the darkness of suffering existence, and (2) the experiences of Buddha-nature, dependent arising, mutual indwelling, and the identity of Nirvana and samsāra in Buddhism. He proposes that while there are certainly differences, considering dazzling darkness on the experiential level provides a platform for a deeper dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity.

A Personal Reflection on Dazzling Darkness

As a young man, I found myself going through a period of existential angst. One night, I decided to pray to God about my situation. I went into a church and sat in front of the altar. I asked God in prayer, “Is there anything other than the suffering I am experiencing?” I saw a thick darkness descend and cover me with an unspeakable peace. I repeated over and over, “I do not understand.” Then the words “the peace that surpasses all understanding” came into my mind.¹ I would add that I later read in Exodus: “The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.”²

The thick darkness dissolved along with the feeling, and I stood up and began to walk home. I noticed with surprise as I walked that everywhere in the natural darkness there was a shining luminosity. It did not replace the darkness, but it seemed that the darkness itself was glittering with light. I stopped to look down each street. It seemed as if the dazzling was illuminating the darkness around the objects along the streets. I had no words for what I saw. But years later I read the mystical writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the

1. Philippians 4:7.

2. Exodus 20:21. Some scholars consider this thick darkness to be and experience of the blinding light of God.

Areopagite (late fifth and early sixth century CE). In his *Mystical Theology*, he wrote:

The dazzling darkness of the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance . . . surpassing all beauty . . . that we may begin to contemplate . . . *all the light that is in existing things* . . . that is above the intellect, [thus] we pass not merely into brevity of speech, but even into absolute silence of thoughts and words.³

As a graduate student in Asian and comparative philosophy at the University of Hawaii, I joined the Diamond Sangha of Robert Aitken Roshi. He, his wife, Anne, and I became very close friends, and I helped them manage the *zendo*. At that time, our main teacher was Yasutani Roshi, who visited each year or so. At the end of my four years in Hawaii, I was sitting on my cushion in the *zendo*, and it occurred to me that this would be my last time to do *zazen* at the Diamond Sangha. So, I began sitting as intensely as I could.

Above my head and to my right was a small window that was open. Suddenly, a leaf from a banana tree outside scraped against the window screen. It made the sound of a huge explosion. I looked up to see the leaf, and each time it scraped the screen there was a loud explosion. As I sat there, it seemed to me that the entire universe was in the leaf scraping against the screen. At the end of our sitting, I thought to myself, “Is this true of everything?” I stood up and went outside on the lanai to look down the mountain toward the city and the ocean below. Everything I saw was dazzling in

the darkness. I had the distinct sense that the dazzling revealed that the whole of the universe is in each thing. For some reason, this seemed like a very simple and natural experience, so I did not share it with anyone.

Two experiences of dazzling darkness, one Christian and the other Buddhist. It is important to note that neither was based on virtue or wisdom, and neither indicated any degree of holiness or enlightenment. I see them as blessings for a young man struggling with life and in search of the truth. Now the question is: Can we find a relationship between what I call “dazzling darkness” in Buddhism and in Christianity? I will say a few things about Buddhism and then more about the mystical writings of Chiara Lubich, since I discovered certain similarities with Buddhism in her mystical experiences.

Buddhism

Let me begin with some historical reflections about Buddhism. Among the earliest *sūtras* of the Mahāyāna tradition are the Perfection of Wisdom *Sūtras* (*Prajñāparamitā-Sūtras*).⁴ A central teaching in these texts is that from a higher wisdom, one can realize that all aspects of existence are “empty of own-being” (*svabhāva-sūnya*). As the Heart *Sūtra* states, “Hear, O Śāriputra, form is emptiness, emptiness is form.” In other words, all beings do not exist as we ordinarily see them, namely, as substantial independent entities. They exist in an interrelated nexus of all existences. Nāgārjuna,⁵ the great philosopher who later reflected on this early teaching, taught that being empty of own-being, or “emptiness,” means that all things arise and exist interdependently; they have no substance

4. These texts began to be written by the first century BCE.

5. He lived between 150 and 250 CE.

3. *The Mystical Theology* 1, 3.

that makes them independent: “We declare that whatever is dependent arising is emptiness.” Here, Nāgārjuna emphasizes one of the Buddha’s key teachings: “dependent co-origination” (*pratītya-samutpāda*). All things arise and exist co-dependently. This dynamic of emptiness, of co-arising, is the true nature of existence.

After Nāgārjuna, several Mahāyāna texts were written that looked at this co-arising from a more positive point of view. For example, in India between 250 and 350 CE, a number of *sūtras* were written about the *Tathāgata-garbha*, the womb or embryo of the Buddha. This literature, which became quite influential in East Asia, taught that all beings contain an inner reality like a “womb” of the “embryo” of Buddhahood. This inner essence of Buddhahood, referred to in East Asia as “Buddha-nature,” is said to be pure and luminous. Therefore, they stressed that while all beings are empty of “own being,” the True Body of the Buddha that contains all things in the cosmos (the *Dharmakāya*) is also contained *in* all things. As one *sūtra* says:

Like a Buddha in a faded lotus flower, like honey covered by bees, like a fruit in its husk, like gold within its impurities, like a treasure hidden in the dirt . . . like a valuable statue covered with dust, so is the Buddha Embryo/Womb within all beings.⁶

The Body of perfect Buddhahood *irradiates* everything . . . so at all times do all living beings have the Embryo/Womb of the Buddha within them.⁷

In many of these texts, that which “irradiates” everything and is within all beings is described as pure and luminous, shining brightly like a “jewel.” This Buddha-nature is dazzling with light from within. And, like many faceted jewels, all beings shine, reflecting all other beings. So, returning to Nāgārjuna, Mahāyāna Buddhism concludes that the world of suffering, called *samsāra*, is at the same time Nirvana: “Nothing distinguishes *samsāra* from Nirvana; and nothing distinguishes Nirvana from *samsāra*. Between even the extremities of *samsāra* and Nirvana, one cannot find even a subtle difference.”⁸ While the world is full of suffering and darkness, it is also “irradiated” by the dazzling luminosity of Nirvana.

In East Asia, Tianti Buddhism⁹ uses the metaphor of water and waves to help explain this relation of suffering existence to Nirvana. In their view, the water does not obstruct the waves and the waves do not obstruct the water. While the waves are constantly in motion (*samsāra*), the water below (Nirvana) is always unmoved. The water represents the unmoved inner essence of Buddha-nature, while the waves represent the movement of suffering caused by the winds of the world.

Huayan Buddhism¹⁰ takes this a step further. They teach that not only is Buddha-nature with its Nirvanic essence within all beings, but also all beings exist such that they “mutually penetrate” each other and “mutually indwell” in each other. A metaphor for this identity of *samsāra*/suffering and Nirvana is a round tower of mirrors wherein the mirrors line the inside of the tower, and at

8. Mulamadhyamaka-karika, XXV: 19–20.

9. Founded around 550 CE by Huiwen.

10. Founded by Dushun (557–640 CE)

6. Ratnagotra-vibhaga I: 154.

7. Ibid., I: 40, (italics mine).

the center of the tower on the ground is a Buddha statue.¹¹ The Buddha statue luminously shines an image of itself in all the mirrors. The mirrors represent beings, and the Buddha image in them represents their Buddha-nature. Also, all the mirrors are located on the walls of the tower in such a way that they reflect into each other both themselves and the image of the Buddha contained in them. This metaphor explains how the whole universe can be in each of its parts, and at the same time each of its parts contains the same Buddha-nature. For example, the whole universe is in each being (like a banana leaf), and all things, even in the darkness of suffering, shine with the inner light of their Buddha-nature.

The Mystical Experiences of Chiara Lubich

Chiara Lubich experienced a period of mystical insight in 1949, so this period is referred to as “Paradise ’49.”¹² There are many profound dimensions to her experiences, but here I will limit my remarks just to her experiences that relate to the teachings of Buddhism mentioned above. But before I do, I should point out that in Trinitarian theology, eternally within Godself is the Word (*Logos*) in which God forms what are called the “divine ideas” of all that will be created in the cosmos. The following is how this is stated in the Prologue to John’s Gospel in the New Testament:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came to be through him and without him nothing came to be. What came to

11. The Third Patriarch of Huayan, Fazang (643–712) built such a tower of mirrors to teach Empress Wu about this concept.

12. For Chiara Lubich’s introduction to this period, along with a contextual essay, see the first issue of *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* (March 2012).

be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race: the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (Jn 1:1–5)

In her mystical experience, Chiara found herself in God the “Father.” In what she calls “the Bosom of the Father,” she says it is like being inside an “infinite Sun of light and love.” It was there that she experienced the Word of God, the Son of God:

Perhaps on the third day, as we remained in the Bosom of the Father, we had the manifestation of the Son. I remember that it had an extraordinary light. . . . I only know that from the walls inside the Sun, the Father pronounced the Word: Love, and this Word, concentrated in the heart of the Father, was his Son.

Outside in the evening, a majestic sunset displayed by nature, rendered more beautiful by the enormous Sun shining in us, seemed to confirm this “vision.” And so far as I now recall, if I recall it correctly, the long rays of the sun, that like arrows of light caressed the blue sky after the sun’s disk had gone down, gave us an idea of the Word, as the light of the Father, the splendor of the Father.¹³

Notice that in both John’s Gospel and this text by Chiara, the reality of God found in the Word is described as “Light that shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it” or as “an

13. Chiara Lubich, “Paradise ’49,” *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* (2012): 8–9.

extraordinary light . . . concentrated in the heart of the Father . . . the enormous Sun shining in us . . . the long rays of the sun . . . like arrows of light.”

In Trinitarian theology, the Father conceives in the Word—in his Love—his divine and loving ideas of all the beings that will be created from the beginning to the end of creation. Chiara notes that when God then creates beings out of the Word, they are all “linked together in his love.”¹⁴ She also writes¹⁵ that the beings in this interrelated creative process of generating the universe are in each moment flowing out of the Word with each other in light and love. This is also true of beings as they exist in the cosmos; namely, they all exist in relations of interrelatedness. And when beings die, they return, interrelated with other beings that die at that time.

Chiara gives examples of how she saw this luminous interdependence in nature during Paradise '49:

I remember that during those days, nature seemed to me to be enveloped totally by the sun; it already was physically, but it seemed to me that an even stronger Sun enveloped it, saturated it, so that the whole of nature appeared to me as being “in love.” I saw things, rivers, plants, meadows, grass as linked to one another by a bond of love in which each one had a meaning of love with regard to the others. It was something similar, but universalized, to what I had experienced while walking down from the Franciscan Institute

when I was twenty years old. . . . I seemed to see the blossom of a horse chestnut tree alive with a higher life that sustained it from beneath so that it seemed to be coming out towards me.

When we arrived in the mountains . . . I felt that I could discern, because of a special grace from God, the presence of God beneath things. Because God is present, sustaining all things. Therefore, if the pine trees—which I saw—were golden by the sun, if the brooks flowed into the glimmering falls, if the daisies, other flowers and the sky were all decked in summer array, stronger than all this was the vision of a Sun beneath all creation.

In a certain sense, I saw, I believe, God who supports, who upholds things. . . . And the fact that God was beneath things meant that they were not as we see them; they were all linked to one another by love; all, so to speak, in love with one another. So, if the brook flowed into the lake, it was out of love. If the pine tree stood high next to another pine tree, it was out of love.¹⁶

On earth all is in a relation of love with all: each thing with each thing. It is necessary to be Love to find the golden thread that links beings.¹⁷

16. Chiara Lubich, unpublished talk at Castel Gandolfo, December 20, 1999.

17. Quoted by Callan Slipper, “Towards an Understanding of the Human Person According to the Mystical Experience of Chiara Lubich in the Paradise of '49,” *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* (2012): 30.

14. Much of the text of Paradise '49 is unpublished. Where I have quotations and no footnotes, the quoted text is unpublished.

15. Unpublished text.

In a talk two years later, Chiara says that she and her companions felt a “light” at the time she was experiencing God “beneath” creation and in all things:

We saw that beneath the things of the world, like the meadows, the stars, the sky, the flowers, the waterfalls, there was Someone who linked them all together, a *light that linked everything: it was the presence of God in things*.¹⁸

Note that for Chiara, the “Sun”—God who brings all things into being—is the “higher life that sustained” them “from beneath.” The interdependent origination flowing forth in the process of creation, sustaining it in life with light and love, and bringing all things back to their Source is not “descending” from the heavens but is “arising” from a “higher life” beneath creation.

In one passage in the Paradise '99 text, Chiara writes, “The supernatural is the Nature of nature.” And in a footnote to this sentence she writes, “That is, it is that which is beneath nature. The presence of God below all things. God below nature lets Himself be touched by wise persons.” Here, Chiara confirms that the wisdom of other religions provides true insight into this Ultimate Reality.

Now that we can see how Chiara understands the interrelated linkage of all beings on the foundation of the luminous presence of God below and in all things, it is important to look at how she sees each being as containing all other beings. Here, it is important to note that for Chiara, all beings are like “words” of the Word. Therefore, all beings (words) have within them the Word,

and the Word within them contains all the words—all the beings in existence, past, present, and future. Hence, the banana leaf contains all the universe because it is a word that contains the Word that contains all things. This applies to all beings, both animate and inanimate. When I pick up a rock, I am holding the entire universe in my hand.

In Chiara’s unpublished writings, she uses a Huayan-like metaphor of a mirror to explain this mutual indwelling:

It happens as in those mirrors that, looking at one another, project themselves infinitely into one another and re-contain themselves through the reflection that returns. . . . Each particular, then, even though distinct from the others, contains in itself the universal. And since the all, the universal in itself is unity, each particular in itself is “a harmony = a unity,” and in unity is composed “the harmony of harmonies.”¹⁹

Anna Pelli reflects on this statement in the following way: “The individual is the whole, the whole is the individuals. In other words, each one (the particular, the finite) . . . bears in itself the reality of the all, of the one.”²⁰

The question now is: How are Chiara’s experiences related to suffering and to the dazzling darkness we have discussed in the section on Buddhism? First, it is important to note how Chiara always mentions “light” in reference to the Love that is God below and in all creation: for example, “Sun beneath all creation” and “a

19. Anna Pelli, “Going from the Pact to the Soul: Exploring a Metaphysical Journey,” *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* (2013): 17, 20.

20. *Ibid.*, 19.

18. Chiara Lubich, unpublished talk at Castel Gandolfo, February 23, 2001 (italics mine).

light that linked everything: it was the presence of God in things.” Certainly, this is a nirvanic reality that is the foundation of the interrelatedness between all beings and in all beings in this world of suffering; it is Love, God-Love.

But for Chiara, there is something else involved in this identity between suffering and Love/light. Returning to John’s Gospel, after John writes “this life was the light . . . the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it,” he goes on to say:

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world and the world came to be through him. . . . And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.
(Jn 1: 9–10, 14)

Chiara affirms this understanding of John about the Word, the “true light” coming into the world as Jesus Christ. In terms of Jesus’s relation to the suffering of all beings past, present, and future, she turns to his passion, his death on the cross. At the height of his suffering, Jesus cries out to the Father, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46) This cry is seen by Chiara as the moment when Jesus took upon himself the sufferings of the world from its beginning to its end. This means that he, as the incarnate Word of God full of Love and light, “emptied himself . . . becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross”²¹ where he bore the sins and suffering of all humanity.

Chiara refers to this presence of Jesus suffering with all humanity as “Jesus Forsaken.” Whenever she and her companions

21. Philippians 2: 7, 8.

suffered, they would turn into their hearts and embrace him who takes on our suffering out of an infinite Compassion, where the word “com-*passion*” means “to suffer with.” The result of this embrace, Chiara says, is that: “This presence [Jesus Forsaken] . . . very soon becomes felt, so that throwing ourselves into a *sea of suffering* we discover ourselves in a *sea of love, of complete joy*. . . . And the soul feels itself refilled with the Holy Spirit, who is joy, peace, serenity.”²²

Here, I see a similarity with a passage from the Buddhist writer Śāntideva: “May as many beings as there are who are suffering pain in body or mind find, through my merits, *oceans of happiness and joy*. . . . As long as there is space, and as long as there is the world, for that long may my life *be* tending to the sufferings of the world.”²³

In another letter, Chiara refers to her experience as a movement “beyond the wound”:

Having embraced Jesus forsaken totally, so that we found ourselves beyond pain, in love we felt like we were contemplating the immense love which God has poured out over the world . . . we were merged with love and shared in its light: the *light of Love*.²⁴

Note that the final words say that they “were merged with love and shared in its light: the light of Love.” In Jesus Forsaken, the darkness of suffering existence is identified with the light of

22. Chiara Lubich, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken* (New York: New City Press, 1985), 67–68 (italics mine).

23. Bodhicaryāvatāra, X: 2, 55 (italics mine). Śāntideva lived in India in the eighth century CE.

24. Chiara Lubich, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken*, 70–71 (italics mine).

God/Love. In Chiara's text on Paradise '49, she writes: "Suffering is love." She underlines "is" for emphasis. It is an ontological statement that Jesus Forsaken takes on the reality of all suffering, so that each suffering "is" Love and light. Here is a uniquely Christian statement that is similar to yet different from the Buddhist statement that "*samsāra is* Nirvana."

For Chiara, this is not just an inner Christian spiritual experience, but a transformation of one's life by participation in this inner reality of Jesus Forsaken. As Paul says about Jesus Crucified: "I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live no longer, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:19–20). For Chiara, Jesus Forsaken is the Compassion or Mercy of God, and so those who embrace him participate in Jesus Compassion/Mercy/Love for all humanity that lives within them. This reminds me of a time I was walking with Katagiri Roshi at my university. He had just done an act of compassion for a troubled student. I said to him, "That was truly an act of compassion for that student." As I walked, I noticed that he had stopped. I turned and walked back to him. He said to me very seriously, "I do not *do* compassion. I *am* Compassion!"

Conclusion

Pope Benedict asked the church to develop what he calls a "dialogue of truth." Indeed, *Nostra Aetate* 2 teaches that there are elements of the truth in all cultures and faiths that Catholics have a responsibility to "recognize, preserve, and promote." In the subtitle of then Cardinal Ratzinger's 1998 document entitled "Interreligious Dialogue and Jewish-Christian Relations," he wrote: "The religions can encounter one another only by delving more deeply into the truth." This "deep dialogue" is more of a journey than an event. It is exploring together in dialogue *over time* as fellow

pilgrims in an *ongoing* journey to a fuller understanding of the truth. May the life and light of Chiara Lubich's Christian spirituality and the life and light of Buddhist spirituality be sources of an ongoing dialogue of truth.

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