

THE BUDDHA
AND
THE CHRIST

RECIPROCAL VIEWS

Front cover:
Close-up of Buddha statue face, Kamakura, Japan.
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Wooden head of Jesus Christ
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Ernest Valea

For my family

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INTRODUCTION

You will find many parables in this book. Let me start with one to introduce our topic. There once was a little worm living happily in an apple and eating it away slowly, day by day. He didn't lack anything. In fact all he needed was food, and food was all around him. But one day he started to do philosophy, or more formally – to investigate the principles of being. He wondered whether the apple core was all there was and whether the meaning of life consisted of nothing else but eating it away. He asked his fellow worms about this, but they didn't know either and had never asked such questions. They sent him to the oldest worm, but neither did he know. “Why do you ask such questions?” he replied. “There is nothing more to life than chewing up this tasty apple. I could teach you several ways of chewing it, of shaping beautiful galleries through it or of digging faster than other worms, but stop asking such nonsense”. So the little worm gave up his philosophical inquiry and dedicated himself to the routine of a normal worm's life. But one day he took a big bite and was suddenly blinded by the light of the sun. He fell out of the apple and landed on the ground. The only reality he knew had ended. But it was too late for him to learn from his experience, as the ants rapidly took him to their nest and ate him. Ignorance is not bliss.

This parable illustrates well our world. Some of us are like the little worm, wondering if eating, drinking, sex and all other pleasures of life

are all there is in store for us. Others don't bother themselves with such philosophical questions and just dig further in the apple. The Buddha and the Christ warn us against such a perspective, and both tell us there is more to life than eating up our apple. The Christ left us the *Parable of the Rich Man* in *Luke* 12,16–21, saying:

The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops." Then he said, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.

Similarly, the Buddha left us the parable of the rich herdsman Dhaniya, who argued:

I have boiled (my) rice, I have milked (my cows), I am living together with my fellows near the banks of the Mahi (river), (my) house is covered, the fire is kindled: therefore, if thou like, rain, O sky! [...]
I support myself by my own earnings, and my children are (all) about me, healthy; I hear nothing wicked of them: therefore, if thou like, rain, O sky! [...]
I have cows, I have calves, I have cows in calf and heifers, and I have also a bull as lord over the cows: therefore, if thou like, rain, O sky! [...]
Then at once a shower poured down, filling both sea and land (*Nipata* 1, 2).

In other words, ignorance is not bliss. This book is for those who are not satisfied with chewing up their apple and who, like our little friend in the parable, also started to investigate the meaning of life. Most of us look to great spiritual teachers for answers. Undoubtedly two of the greatest are the Buddha and the Christ, both of whom are followed by millions. Not only are their teachings of huge interest separately, but there is growing interest in how they relate to each other. Their teachings show some common ground, as we have seen in their warning against hedonism, and they hold in common

many other exhortations of an ethical nature. We find, for example, several very similar demands in Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* (*Matthew* 5–7) and in the Buddha's *Dhammapada*:

The Buddha said:	The Christ said:
Let a man overcome anger by love, let him overcome evil by good; let him overcome the greedy by liberality, the liar by truth! (<i>Dhammapada</i> 223)	Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (<i>Matthew</i> 5,44).
Not the perversities of others, not their sins of commission or omission, but his own misdeeds and negligences should a sage take notice of (<i>Dhammapada</i> 50).	You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (<i>Matthew</i> 7,5).
One is the road that leads to wealth, another the road that leads to Nirvana; if the Bhikshu, the disciple of Buddha, has learnt this, he will not yearn for honour, he will strive after separation from the world (<i>Dhammapada</i> 75).	No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money (<i>Matthew</i> 6,24).
All men tremble at punishment, all men fear death; remember that you are like unto them, and do not kill, nor cause slaughter (<i>Dhammapada</i> 129).	So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets (<i>Matthew</i> 7,12).

Many other such similarities can be found in Marcus Borg's book *Jesus and the Buddha*.¹ Some authors have gone far beyond noting such similarities and concluded that the Buddha and the Christ are complementary teachers. One of these is Thich Nhat Hanh, a best-selling Zen master, who writes in his *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*: "Buddha and Jesus are two brothers who have to help each other" (Nhat Hanh 1999, p. 200). To assess to what extent the Buddha and the Christ can "help each other" is one of the tasks of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, to which this book attempts to make some contribution.

This will not be a literature survey on different approaches in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, although that would be an important area of research. Rather, it will try to establish the proper tools for this dialogue. We cannot conclude that the Buddha and the Christ have complementary teachings without first making every effort to understand them as they are, each in his original setting. In other words, we must go beyond superficial similarities and appearances. Instead of quoting verses carefully selected from Buddhist and Christian texts according to a pre-established agenda and putting them side by side so that the teachings may seem equivalent or opposite, I propose that we engage in a more rigorous analysis of their teachings. We should first study the spiritual background in which they gave their teaching, understand how their teaching related to that background, what they took over and what they left out, what they modified and why, and only after understanding each one's teaching as a whole to pursue a comparative study.

This book is addressed to both Buddhists and Christians. I hope to present the teachings of the Buddha and of the Christ in such a way that they will not look like two separate booklets artificially put together under the same cover, or like two texts in languages that cannot be reciprocally comprehended. I will do my best to present the teaching of the Buddha in a most relevant way for Christians, and vice versa, to present the message of Christ in a way that would make sense for Buddhists. This doesn't mean *adapting* the teaching of one to the teaching of the other, but to always remain aware of what words truly communicate. The same words can yield different meanings in different contexts, and Buddhism and Christianity operate in very different conceptual contexts.

This book is divided into three parts. The first sets the scene for a proper understanding of the Buddha and the Christ. The first chapter introduces

Hinduism, the context in which the Buddha delivered his teaching, and thus will explain the major themes debated at that time. It will also help us see how a transition occurred in Hinduism from a theistic worldview, dealing with gods and sacrifices, to a pantheistic one, in which insight plays the major role. The second chapter introduces Judaism. It will provide the basic understanding of the context and issues addressed by the Christ. The Jews at the time of the Christ had very different expectations from the Hindus at the time of the Buddha, so we need to be aware of these differences. Therefore this first part on Hinduism and Judaism is aimed at reconstructing the contexts in which the Buddha and the Christ were teaching, as both were addressing specific issues in very different religious backgrounds.

Part two is about what the Buddha and the Christ actually said and did. Chapter 3 presents the lives of the Buddha and the Christ, identifying what they had in common and what was different. The next two chapters analyze their teaching. Chapter 4 is about the teachings of the Christ, aiming at understanding the link between what he said and who he was. Chapter 5 presents the teaching of the Buddha according to the tradition of Theravada Buddhism and its most important developments in Mahayana Buddhism.

Part three is an exercise in comparative religion. We will assess how the teachings of the Buddha and the Christ relate to each other. We will try to see how the teachings of each would work in the context of the teachings of the other. In other words, we will try to understand what a certain doctrine of the Buddha would mean in light of the teaching of the Christ and vice versa. What would it communicate? For instance, how would the Buddha view the Christ's teaching on sin? Or how would the Christ interpret the Buddha's teaching on compassion? Is there an ultimate common ground between these teachings, a meeting point beyond insignificant divergences? Did the Buddha and the Christ use two languages that spoke of the same truth? Do we need only minor adjustments in our vocabulary in order to discover an already existing common ground between their teachings? Or are there really irreconcilable differences?

The problem in attempting such a comparative approach is that the same observer has to switch sides between the two perspectives and try to remain objective and equally detached from both. But the fact is that we all approach reality through the filter of our own prejudices, religion included. Although I am a Christian and I didn't convert from Buddhism, I still think that such an approach is worth taking, as it can open the way for a better reciprocal understanding of the two religious traditions. Others may want to follow this

¹ Marcus Borg (ed.), *Jesus and Buddha: the parallel sayings*, Seastone, Berkeley, CA, 1997.

method from a Buddhist perspective, which I would encourage, as it may well provide some good feedback to my present work.

This book is to be viewed as a personal attempt to bring more light to the controversial domain of comparative religion. The story is incomplete for obvious reasons. I have just mentioned the bias of my own religious views. Another limitation is imposed by my sources. The material I used is inevitably selective, as I had to use Buddhist and Christian texts and authors in English translations. There is the further difficulty of differing varieties within each major tradition, especially in Buddhism. This makes it difficult to find a common “Buddhist” position on certain issues (like the *bodhisattva* doctrine, for instance), so a further caution will be to remain aware of the existing differences and note the alternative views.

Suggestions, comments and critiques are welcomed from all readers, with the hope that they will improve the next edition. Please make them as specific and clear as possible.² In the end, this book is an invitation for you to continue to explore this fascinating domain for yourself.

Editorial note

Following many other authors, I have not inserted the diacritical marks for Sanskrit and Pali words. Scholars do not need them to recognize these words in their original written form, and the majority of readers have nothing to gain from them. Therefore Sanskrit and Pali words are in roman type for easier reading. For instance, instead of *śūnyatā*, you will find *shunyata*. Since the Buddhist canon of scripture was originally written in Pali, I will use Pali words for the terms relevant to our discussion. But in cases in which the original scriptures were written in Sanskrit (as in Hinduism and some of the Mahayana sutras) or in Japanese (in Shin Buddhism), I will use the names as they appear in that language.

However, several terms have already become common in English, so I have used the anglicized form (for example, “nirvana” instead of the Pali *nibbana*; “karma” instead of *kamma*). Where necessary, the plural of Sanskrit or Pali words has been formed by adding the ‘s’.

Whenever a scholar’s name is first mentioned, whether in the main text or in footnotes, I will add a few words to introduce him or her.

² Please use mail@comparativereligion.com as the e-mail address.

A note on sources of canonical scriptures

All quotations from the Bible are taken from *The NIV Study Bible*, New International Version, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1985.

All quotations from Hindu scriptures used in chapter 1, unless otherwise indicated, are from Friedrich Max Müller’s *Sacred Books of the East*, now in the public domain, source: www.sacred-texts.com. The same source applies to the Buddhist *Dhammapada* and the *Sutta Nipata*.

Quotations from the Buddhist *Nikayas* are taken from the translations published by Wisdom Publications:

The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha:

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Quotations from the *Lotus Sutra* are taken from the translation of Bunno Kato, Yoshiro Tamura and Kojiro Miyasaka, published by Kosei Publishing, Tokyo, 1975, *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*.

Abbreviations used:

DN stands for the *Digha Nikaya*, as above.

MN stands for the *Majjhima Nikaya*, as above.

SN stands for the *Samyutta Nikaya*, as above.

LS stands for the *Lotus Sutra*, as above.

PART ONE

THE BACKGROUND

CHAPTER I

HINDUISM FROM THE VEDAS TO THE TIME OF THE BUDDHA

Hinduism is not a unitary religion, but a multitude of religious and philosophical trends. At the time of the Buddha, two main patterns were present. One was Brahminism, in which gods ruled the universe and human affairs, and priests interceded on behalf of humans through the performance of sacrifices. It was the religion grounded on the ancient holy scriptures called the *Vedas*, and the closest Indian correspondent to first-century AD Judaism. The other pattern was the Shramana tradition, inaugurated by the wandering ascetics who rejected Brahminism. They left the priest-dominated society and withdrew to the wilderness to attain deeper spiritual knowledge by practicing asceticism and meditative techniques.

The introduction to Hinduism that follows will be of help especially to those who are not familiar with its fundamental notions, such as *atman*, karma, reincarnation and liberation. In order to understand the Buddha's message we must be acquainted with these terms, as they form the basic religious language of his time. It will also help us see how Hinduism underwent a transition from a theistic to a pantheistic worldview. This exegetical exercise will then enable us to understand the transition to the system of thought more distant from theism, which is Buddhism.

THE VEDIC GODS

The most sacred scriptures of Hinduism are the four *Vedas* (*Rig*, *Sama*, *Yajur*, and *Atharva Veda*). They are four collections of hymns (*sambhitas*) describing deities, their works and the praises addressed to them in religious rituals. The oldest of them, the *Rig Veda*, is dated as early as 1500 BC.¹ Each of the four collections of Vedic hymns is associated with three other kinds of Vedic literature – the *Brahmanas*, the *Aranyakas* and the *Upanishads*, to which I will refer later. Together they represent the most sacred religious literature (*Shruti*) of Hinduism.

Although the Vedic hymns speak of gods mostly as Ultimate Reality, we cannot define the Vedic people either as polytheistic or as monotheistic. On the one hand, the hymns shift from the worship of one god to the worship of another, as if each in turn would be the most preferred by the worshipper. On the other hand, many divine attributes are shared by several gods, as for instance by Varuna, Mitra and Agni. They are not individuated as are the Greek gods, and hardly have unique attributes. Therefore it is hard to establish who the supreme deity at was a given stage of religious development in early Hinduism. Instead of calling the Vedic religion polytheistic or monotheistic, Max Müller called it “henotheistic,” which, according to Surendranath Dasgupta,² is “a belief in single gods, each in turn standing out as the highest.”³ Let me mention a few important Vedic gods and describe how they related to humankind.

According to Mircea Eliade,⁴ one of the oldest gods in the Hindu pantheon must have been Varuna, the sustainer of creation, omnipotent and omniscient,

¹ Max Müller, one of the founders of the academic study of Eastern religions, argues for 1200 BC (in Dasgupta 1975, p. 10), while Hans W. Schumann, lecturer on Buddhism at Bonn University in Germany, argues for 1500 BC (Schumann 2004, p. 29).

² Dr. Surendranath Dasgupta (1887–1952) was the Principal at Government Sanskrit College, Calcutta, and an important scholar of Indian religions.

³ Dasgupta 1975, p. 18. According to Macdonell, Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford in the 19th century, henotheism is “an appearance rather than a reality, an appearance produced by the indefiniteness due to undeveloped anthropomorphism, by the lack of any Vedic god occupying the position of a Zeus as the constant head of the pantheon, by the natural tendency of the priest or singer in extolling a particular god to exaggerate his greatness and to ignore other gods, and by the growing belief in the unity of the gods [...] each of whom might be regarded as a type of the divine” (in Dasgupta 1975, p. 19).

⁴ Eliade 1978, p. 199ff. Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) was Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago.

guardian of the *rita* (the universal law of order), guardian of oaths and lord of waters. A hymn in the *Atharva Veda* proclaims:

Both this earth here belongs to king Varuna, and also yonder broad sky whose boundaries are far away. Moreover these two oceans are the loins of Varuna; yea, he is hidden in this small (drop of) water. He that should flee beyond the heaven far away would not be free from king Varuna. His spies come hither (to the earth) from heaven, with a thousand eyes do they watch over the earth (*Atharva Veda* 4,16,3–4).

Varuna is deeply involved in human affairs, as he punishes sin and inflicts diseases on those who are guilty of moral transgressions. The odd thing for humans is that they do not know explicitly the nature of their sin, so they lament:

What, Varuna, hath been my chief transgression, that thou wouldst slay the friend who sings thy praises?
Tell me, Unconquerable Lord, and quickly sinless will I approach thee with mine homage (*Rig Veda* 7,86,4).

The infliction of penalties can be avoided by confessing sins and having them forgiven by him:

If we have sinned against the man who loves us, have ever wronged a brother, friend, or comrade,
The neighbour ever with us, or a stranger, O Varuna, remove from us the trespass.
If we, as gamblers cheat at play, have cheated, done wrong unwittingly or sinned of purpose,
Cast all these sins away like loosened fetters, and, Varuna let us be thine own beloved (*Rig Veda* 5,85,7–8).

Let us summarize two important elements of early Hinduism: people are responsible for their behavior before god, and moral trespasses bring divine punishment, unless forgiveness is granted. This perspective has close parallels in Judaism and thus will prove helpful in our comparative approach.⁵

According to Eliade “the most popular god” in the *Rig Veda* is Indra, the warrior god who saved mankind from the influence of demon Vritra, the embodiment of the rough aspects of nature (Eliade 1978, p. 205). Vritra had

⁵ For an in-depth discussion of this aspect see Griswold 1971.

locked the waters in the sky, which caused a catastrophic drought on earth. At human demand, Indra consumed a large quantity of ritual drink (*soma*), took the lightning (*vajra*) shaped by god Tvashtri and, with the help of other gods, killed the demon and brought back the rain on earth (*Rig Veda* 10,113). That is why he is praised and invoked in the hymns:

Indra, give us security from that whereof we are afraid.
 Help us, O Maghavan, let thy succour grant us this: drive foes and
 enemies afar.
 We call on Indra, on the liberal giver: we will be prosperous in men
 and cattle.
 Let not the hosts of cruel fiends approach us. Drive off
 the Druhs to every side, O Indra (*Atharva Veda* 19,15,1–2).

It is important to notice that Indra fulfills his role as sovereign god with much more effort than Varuna. Indra *needs* the ritual drink *soma* and sacrifices performed for him by humans, and he has to *fight* in order to restore the universal order. His sovereignty over the world is not so obvious as that portrayed by the hymns addressed to Varuna. However, people love him more than they love Varuna. They do not understand Varuna's ways, but they can influence Indra through sacrifices and therefore can obtain more easily the earthly blessings they seek.

The fire god Agni is both god of sacrifice for the Brahmin priests and the priest of the gods. As he can burn away sins through the fire ritual, people pray to him for forgiveness and also for material welfare:

Chasing with light our sin away,
 O Agni, shine thou wealth on us.
 May his light chase our sin away.
 For goodly fields, for pleasant homes,
 for wealth we sacrifice to thee.
 May his light chase our sin away (*Rig Veda* 1,97,1–2).

According to the hymns of the *Rig Veda*, humans are at the mercy of their gods. They depend completely for their welfare on the benevolence of gods and need to appease them through sacrifices. Death is not the end of one's existence; we can find in the hymns an expressed desire for eternal life in a celestial world. Here is how the worshippers of Indra convey their longing for personal immortality:

Make me immortal in that realm where dwells the King,
 Vivasvan's Son,
 Where is the secret shrine of heaven, where are those waters
 young and fresh. Flow, Indu, flow for Indra's sake.
 Make me immortal in that realm where they move even
 as they list,
 In the third sphere of inmost heaven where lucid worlds are full
 of light. Flow, Indu, flow for Indra's sake (*Rig Veda* 9, 113, 8–9).

The desire for immortality and preservation of one's identity after death is proved by the way the family addresses the departed relative in the burial ritual:

I have recalled thy life to life, to being, power, and energy.
 Let thy soul go unto its own: so to the Fathers hasten thou.
 Let not thy soul be left behind: here let not aught
 of thee remain,
 Of spirit, body, members, sap. [...]
 Each parted member, severed from thy body, thy vital breaths
 that in the wind have vanished,
 With all of these, piece after piece, shall Fathers who dwell
 together meet and reunite thee (*Atharva Veda* 18,2,23–26).

In a similar way to the ancient Chinese religion, the departed relatives constituted a holy hierarchy. The deceased was commemorated individually for a year after his departure and then included in the mortuary offerings of the monthly *shraddha* ritual (*Rig Veda* 10,15,1–11). This ritual was necessary because the dead could influence for good or bad the life of the living (*Rig Veda* 10,15,6). Beginning only with the *Brahmana* writings,⁶ which are the first to mention a primitive idea of karma and reincarnation, did the tendency appear to abandon the idea of preservation of personhood after death. However, this was not the spirit of the early Vedic religion.

Yama, the god of death (who is also mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures), is sovereign over the souls of the dead and the one who receives the offerings of the family for the benefit of the departed. He casts the wicked into an eternal dark prison from which they can *never* escape (*Rig Veda* 7,104,3 and 17). The gods of later theistic Hinduism play an insignificant role in the Vedic hymns.

⁶ They were composed from the 9th century BC (Schumann 2004, p. 29) until about 500 BC (Dasgupta 1975, p.14).

Vishnu is a “friend and ally of Indra” (*Rig Veda* 1,186,10) and Rudra-Shiva is seen rather as a demon than as a god (*Rig Veda* 1,114,15) as he inspires fear, is a source of diseases and calamities, and is lord of wild animals (Eliade 1978, p. 213).

Brahma, the Hindu creator god that will often be referred to by the Buddha, is not mentioned in the *Vedas* or in the *Brahmanas*. The *Puranas* and the *Mahabharata* mention him as a creator god belonging to a triad of gods – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva (the creator, the preserver and the destroyer of the universe). They are said to be manifestations of a supreme abstract spirit, to which I will refer next.

THE ORIGINS OF HINDU PANTHEISM

Doctrinal developments in three major areas set the scene for developing a pantheistic worldview: the exegesis of sacrifice, the nature of Ultimate Reality and the nature of the human being. To begin with the first, in the *Brahmana* writings the ritual became more and more elaborate, so that minute details were considered of fundamental importance for its effectiveness. Any apparently insignificant error in wording or gesture could not only ruin the whole ceremony, but also attract the anger of gods and put in jeopardy the well-being of the one benefiting from it, be he king or farmer. The meaning of sacrifice was elevated to such importance that it wasn't limited to the well-being of human beings but came to be seen as sustaining the world of gods as well. The reason was the belief that a special power called *maya* was being released during the sacrifice, a power which was considered to sustain the world of humans and gods alike. Dasgupta explains:

The sacrifice is not offered to a god with a view to propitiate him or to obtain from him welfare on earth or bliss in Heaven; these rewards are directly produced by the sacrifice itself through the correct performance of complicated and interconnected ceremonies which constitute the sacrifice. Though in each sacrifice certain gods were invoked and received the offerings, the gods themselves were but instruments in bringing about the sacrifice or in completing the course of mystical ceremonies composing it. Sacrifice is thus regarded as possessing a mystical potency superior even to the gods, who it is sometimes stated attained to their divine rank by means of sacrifice (Dasgupta 1975, p. 22).

As a result, not only were fertility, wealth, victory over enemies and other worldly interests at the mercy of professional performers of sacrifice (the priests), but the universal order as well. As the *Brahmanas* state, “the gods themselves depend on the sacrifice” *Shatapatha Brahmana* 14.6,8,9 (Schumann 2004, p. 33). The natural result was that, since the whole universe depended upon their skills in rightly performing the sacrifices, the priests gained the upper position in society. This religious tradition is called Brahminism, the established religion of ancient Hindu society, which was known by the Buddha and who often referred to it.

The new view of the sacrifice weakened considerably the importance of the Vedic gods. This is the second element that opened the way to pantheism. A creation hymn in the *Rig Veda* suggests that there is another kind of Ultimate Reality as the source of all existent beings and worlds:

Then was not non-existent nor existent: there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it.
What covered in, and where? and what gave shelter? Was water there, unfathomed depth of water?
Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal: no sign was there, the day's and night's divider.
That One Thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever.
Darkness there was: at first concealed in darkness this All was indiscriminated chaos.
All that existed then was void and formless: by the great power of Warmth [tapas] was born that Unit [the One].
[. . .] Who verily knows and who can here declare it, whence it was born and whence comes this creation?
The Gods are later than this world's production. Who knows then whence it first came into being? (*Rig Veda* 10,129,1–6)

There are two important aspects to be noticed here: 1) primordial water produced the *One*; and 2) the process was realized by the power of warmth (*tapas*). This impersonal essence (the *One*), which existed before the manifested world, will eventually develop into a new kind of Ultimate Reality. Both gods and humans would find their origin in it. As for the second aspect, this text is foundational for asceticism, which came to be seen as a method of producing a kind of creative energy, a power that makes the unmanifested become manifested.

In the *Brahmana* texts the One is present as an entity called “the golden egg,” from which a creator called Prajapati emerged (*Shatapatha Br.* 11,1,6). While in the *Rig Veda* the One appears as a result of asceticism, in the *Brahmanas* Prajapati creates the world by using the power released by his asceticism. His words are fulfilled as a result of asceticism and the material out of which he builds the universe is his own body.

The *Brahmana* texts link this cosmogony with the nature of Brahminic sacrifice. Eliade argues that we can find a close association of the meaning of the *agnicayana* yearly sacrifice performed by the priest with the belief of Prajapati creating the world through his own sacrifice.⁷ The universe generated by Prajapati's sacrifice is fragile, tends to degenerate and thus needs strengthening through sacrifices. Therefore the ritual performed by the priest symbolizes three stages of creation: 1) the primordial unity of Prajapati – by the animal used as sacrifice, 2) the apparition of an unstable multiplicity which is the manifested universe – by the parts of the sacrificed animal now distributed by the priest to all participants in the ritual, and 3) the “reconstitution and rearticulation of Prajapati's cosmic body”⁸ – by the building of the altar by the priest. The whole procedure manifests a spiritual power, called *maya*, which strengthens the universe and the world of gods, enabling them to subsist for the coming year.

A similar view is presented in the *Purushasukta* hymn (*Rig Veda* 10,90).⁹ According to this hymn, the product of the golden egg is a being called Purusha. By his consuming himself in the fire of creation all of the worlds came into existence, including our physical world, the four-caste system, the animals and the duality of the sexes. There is no doubt that Purusha and Prajapati are equivalent, both being produced out of the impersonal One.

The process of transition from a personal Ultimate Reality, represented by the Vedic gods, to an impersonal one is an important feature of Hinduism that was further developed by the *Upanishads*. These writings appeared in the 7th century BC,¹⁰ so their basic teachings were known at the time of the Buddha. They ignore the Vedic gods and instead claim that the origin of any existing thing is Brahman, the equivalent of the One:

As the spider comes out with its thread, or as small sparks come forth from fire, thus do all senses, all worlds, all Devas, all beings come forth from that Self [Brahman] (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2,1,20a).

⁷ Eliade 1978, p. 228–9.

⁸ Ibid., p. 229.

⁹ A similar version can be found in the *Atharva Veda* (19,6) and in the *Taittiriya Aranyaka* (3,12).

¹⁰ According to Dasgupta they appeared after 700 BC (Dasgupta 1975, p. 28).

According to the *Upanishads*, the Ultimate Reality is this Brahman (of neuter gender). A helpful illustration here would be the “Big Bang” theory of the origin of the universe. The point of infinite mass out of which all celestial bodies are said to have originated has its ideological correspondence with the unmanifested Brahman of the *Upanishads*. However, in the manifestation of Brahman, the products are not only lifeless matter, but also all living beings, gods, humans, animals and plants. The cause of the manifestation process is Brahman's desire to be multiplied: “May I be many, may I grow forth” (*Taittiriya Up.* 2,6).

The third element leading to pantheism, closely linked with the previous one, is a new perspective on human nature. In the *Chandogya Upanishad* (5,1,1) it is stated that breath is the “oldest and the best” principle that sustains all psycho-mental capacities (sight, speech, hearing, thought). From the Sanskrit *an* (breathing) derived the notion of *atman* (reflexive pronoun), which came to designate the self, one's spiritual being. This entity is of the same nature with Brahman and acts as the unifying principle of all psycho-mental faculties while being above their temporal fluctuations.

In order to avoid confusion we must be aware that this *atman* is not the seat of consciousness, it does not provide the basis for personhood, and therefore is not a soul that can interact with other souls. It is rather an impersonal essence that stands at the core of one's being as a witness of all psycho-mental processes, but who does not generate them. It is of the same ontological quality with Brahman; it does not fluctuate, it is expressionless, irreducible, eternal and pure:

And he (the *Atman* in that state) can only be described by No, no! He is incomprehensible, for he cannot be comprehended; he is undecaying, for he cannot decay; he is not attached, for he does not attach himself; he is unbound, he does not suffer, he does not perish (*Brihadaranyaka Up.* 4,2,4).

To summarize, we have identified the three major developments in early Hinduism that generated the pantheistic worldview of the *Upanishads*: 1) The meaning of sacrifice evolved from a way of appeasing gods to becoming the effective way of making the world subsisting; 2) Ultimate Reality was no longer seen as a sovereign personal god, but came to represent an impersonal being, the One, or Brahman; 3) the essence of human nature is of the same quality with Ultimate Reality.

The next step is to understand the basic philosophy of the *Upanishads*, as they shaped the meaning of several key terms we will find in the Buddha's

teaching, such as the self, illusion, karma, reincarnation and liberation. Since the Buddha was aware of the pantheistic view of the *Upanishads*¹¹ and often used these terms in his teaching, it will be of great help to understand their initial significance and then why and how he gave them a new meaning.

THE HUMAN CONDITION, LIBERATION AND ETERNAL DESTINY IN THE UPANISHADS

The nature of Brahman is to endlessly manifest the world and then absorb it back into its initial unmanifested form:

As from a blazing fire sparks, being like unto fire, fly forth a thousandfold, thus are various beings brought forth from the Imperishable, my friend, and return thither also (*Mundaka Up.* 2,1,1).

The transformation of Brahman between the manifested and the unmanifested state has no beginning and no end. The best illustration of this process is the astronomical theory of the pulsating universe, *i.e.*, a cyclic model according to which our universe endlessly expands and contracts, so that time has no beginning and no end.

The human being is an insignificant part in this cosmic play. However, one has the capacity to understand the whole process and discern between the self (*atman*) and the sensory and psycho-mental experience, and consequently to realize the ontological identity between *atman* and Brahman. This is possible by introspection: “He who thus knows that he is Brahman, becomes all this, and even the Devas cannot prevent it, for he himself is their Self” (*Brihadaranyaka Up.* 1,4,10). In order to get this intuitive knowledge one has to defeat illusion (*maya*). *Maya*¹² is a force that deceives humans about their true nature, channeling their wishes toward the phenomenal world that is ever changing. At the same time, *maya* hides *atman* under the cloak of the

physical body and of psycho-mental activity. As a result of illusion, we grant true spiritual value to what is unstable and changing instead of knowing the eternal and immutable self. This ignorance (*avidya*) is the cause of *atman*’s captivity in the world of material experience:

As people who do not know the country, walk again and again over a gold treasure that has been hidden somewhere in the earth and do not discover it, thus do all these creatures day after day go into the Brahma-world (they are merged in Brahman, while asleep), and yet do not discover it, because they are carried away by untruth [illusion] (*Chandogya Up.* 8,3,2).

As a result of ignorance, a cause and effect process develops similar to the law of action and reaction of physics. This is karma, the law of action and retribution according to one’s deeds. Its origin can be traced to the *Brahmana* writings, the exegetical treatises on the nature of the Vedic sacrifice, which first stated that while sacrifices bring good results to the one who performs them, there must be a general rule of acting and being rewarded accordingly for *all* one’s deeds. Some deeds are beneficial and bring people to heaven, while others prevent humans from entering the celestial world after death or limit their stay there, forcing them to fall back in this world and reap the fruits of their deeds. The *Upanishads* developed and perfected this concept by making the law of karma a kind of perfect accountant for all one’s deeds and intentions. All produce an effect which is reaped in this life or in further lives. This is reincarnation (*samsara*), the effect of karma and the practical way one reaps the fruits of his deeds and intentions.

According to how we act and how reluctant we are to detach from the material world, we live further lives as humans, animals or even plants. This law is first mentioned in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (3,2,13), by stating that “a man becomes good by good work, and bad by bad work.” We also find out there that the element that initiates the reincarnation chain is desire: “And here they say that a person consists of desires. And as is his desire, so is his will; and as is his will, so is his deed; and whatever deed he does, that he will reap” (*Ibid.* 4,4,5). The “desire” is that of experiencing the physical world, and consequently illusion, and what “he will reap” is the fruit reaped in a further life, as a result of karma’s retribution. Karma is the direct link between desire in this life and reward in a future life. It builds an inter-conditioning link between the previous, the present and the next lives. As a result of karma’s retribution, any thought, word or deed of this life will find its proper reward

¹¹ It is still a matter of debate whether the Buddha had actually encountered the pantheistic philosophy of the *Upanishads*. An argument against it is that he never refers in scriptures to the impersonal neuter Brahman. However, the principal *Upanishads* existed at his time, and Oldenberg gives evidence that he couldn’t have missed them (see Oldenberg 1991, p. 185 ff.).

¹² In the *Brahmanas* *maya* has two opposite meanings. There is a negative *maya*, as a force that makes the universe created by Prajapati’s sacrifice disintegrate, and a positive *maya*, as an energy generated during the sacrifice which mends the creation and makes it survive for another year.

in a future life. In the *Katha Upanishad* (5,7) it is stated: “Some enter the womb in order to have a body, as organic beings, others go into inorganic matter, according to their work and according to their knowledge.” In fact what reincarnates is not a personal soul or consciousness, but the impersonal *atman* accompanied by the karmic body.¹³ Therefore the *atman* itself is not affected by one’s living:

He is incomprehensible, for he cannot be comprehended; he is imperishable, for he cannot perish; he is unattached, for he does not attach himself; unfettered, he does not suffer, he does not fail. Him (who knows), these two do not overcome, whether he says that for some reason he has done evil, or for some reason he has done good – he overcomes both, and *neither what he has done, nor what he has omitted to do, burns (affects) him*” (*Brihadaranyaka Up.* 4,4,22, emphasis mine).

An important aspect to emphasize here is that reincarnation is not merely a perfect mechanism for punishing bad deeds. Reincarnation functions independently of the moral content of our actions. It is not only that bad deeds are punished, but also the good ones must be rewarded and thus fuel karma. Good deeds only provide a short reward in heaven, but then the soul has to return to earth and continue its struggle. Therefore those who seek liberation by good deeds are deluded:

Considering sacrifice and good works as the best, these fools know no higher good, and having enjoyed (their reward) on the height of heaven, gained by good works, they enter again this world or a lower one (*Mundaka Upanishad* 1,2,10).

Good deeds, then, are not the solution for reincarnation. They merely provide a better reincarnation in which the rewards of good deeds are consumed. The endless cycle of reincarnation continues until true spiritual knowledge is attained. Therefore, the *Upanishads* mark a transition from the point where the human condition is determined by divine personal agents (such as the Vedic gods) to that of being totally controlled by the impersonal law of karma. From the Vedic perspective of a universe governed by gods such as Varuna,

who rules through a law that is subordinated to him (*rita*), we have arrived at the pantheistic view of the *Upanishads*, in which the impersonal law of karma determines the fate of all beings, including the gods. In this situation humans are alone facing their destiny, having the duty to find a way out from the vicious cycle *avidya-karma-samsara* by their own efforts. As we will see later, the Buddha will use much of this philosophy in stating his new perspective.

According to the *Upanishads*, the fundamental human need is that of attaining true spiritual knowledge. The self is one with Brahman, but illusion prevents humans from knowing it, and karma fuels an endless cycle of reincarnation. Liberation can be attained only during a human existence, so we are in a privileged stage of spiritual evolution. As the Buddha also stated, we are in a better position than even gods. They are in a stage of reaping positive merits during a lifetime, as animals are the opposite, the stage of reaping bad merits. That is why devotion to a god is not a valid way toward liberation, as it merely perpetuates illusion. Not only are gods of no help in attaining liberation in the *Upanishads*, but they even encourage living in ignorance:

Now if a man worships another deity, thinking the deity is one and he another, he does not know. He is like a beast for the Devas. For verily, as many beasts nourish a man, thus does every man nourish the Devas. If only one beast is taken away, it is not pleasant; how much more when many are taken! Therefore it is not pleasant to the Devas that men should know this (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1,4,10).

Vedic sacrifices (*Mundaka Up.* 1,2,7) and the knowledge of the *Vedas* (*Chandogya Up.* 7,1,3) have no value in attaining liberation. As the Buddha will also conclude, the cycle *avidya-karma-samsara* can be broken only by knowing and destroying its primary cause, which is desire. According to the *Upanishads*, liberation of the self (*atman*) from reincarnation is called *moksha* and represents its return into Brahman. It is actually an impersonal fusion of *atman* with Brahman, when personhood is annihilated and the process of reincarnation ceases. The best illustration is the fusion of a drop of rain with the ocean, thus becoming one with it:

As the flowing rivers disappear in the sea, losing their name and their form, thus a wise man, freed from name and form, goes to the divine Person [Brahman], who is greater than the great. He who knows that highest Brahman, becomes even Brahman (*Mundaka Upanishad* 3,2,8–9).

¹³ The Advaita Vedanta philosophy, which is the offspring of Upanishadic thought, adopted the concept of a subtle body (*sukshma-sharira*) which is attached to *atman* as long as its bondage lasts. This is the actual carrier of karmic debts. The facts recorded by the subtle body are a sum of hidden tendencies or impressions (*samskara*) imprinted by karma as seeds that will generate future behavior and personal character.

The followers of the Upanishadic pantheist philosophy were called eternalists by the Buddha, because of their belief in the eternal preservation of *atman* as ultimate ground for human existence. But they were not the only philosophical movement at the time of the Buddha.

The Ajivikas, founded by Makkhali Gosala, preached a doctrine of total fatalism. They were skeptical about any human ability to affect destiny, considering that fate dictates one's life completely. There is a fixed progression of rebirths, so one has to surrender to whatever fate has in store for him or her. The closest correspondent to this teaching in Jesus' world was Stoicism.

Another group who rejected the Vedic tradition were the materialists of Kesakambali. The name of their philosophy – Lokayata ("directed only towards what is visible") – expresses their worldview: Nothing that cannot be experienced by the senses is true. Therefore they rejected the existence of gods, karma and reincarnation, the existence of the self and of divine revelation altogether. Since they considered that human existence is annihilated at death they followed a life of simple pleasures. The Buddha called them annihilationists.

Finally, a group that greatly influenced the Buddha's spiritual quest were the ascetics, the founders of the Shramana tradition in Hinduism, a parallel spirituality that emerged as a rejection of the Brahminic order. This trend was inaugurated in the *Aranyaka* writings – "the books of the forest dwellers", i.e., of those who withdrew from social life and lived either in total isolation or in groups under the leadership of a teacher. Following the example of the god Indra who gained power (*tapas*) by performing austerities in order to defeat Vritra, they saw asceticism as the means to attain spiritual power and knowledge. They rejected the external rituals of Brahminism, consisting in animal and vegetal sacrifices, and found that true sacrifices were those of an inner nature. They therefore sacrificed their own physical comfort and basic human needs, such as food, clothing, movement and breath, and some even adopted the lifestyle of animals such as cows or dogs. Practically the new view of sacrifice meant sacrificing one's own breath (by reducing the respiratory frequency), hygiene (by abstaining from bathing), and enduring physical extremes (heat, cold and inflicted pain). Such practices were common among the ascetics of the Buddha's day and he was himself one who engaged this path for almost six years in his quest for truth.

As a result of such incredible practices the ascetics were able to enter altered states of consciousness which were then interpreted as revealing the true nature

of the world. The various Yoga schools that we see today have resulted from systematizing ascetic techniques and the knowledge they attained. A famous ascetic group at the time of the Buddha was that of Niganta Nataputta, the founder of Jainism.

Now let us see how religion developed on the other side of the world, in Judea.

CHAPTER 2

JUDAISM FROM THE STORY OF CREATION TO THE TIME OF THE CHRIST

There are several similarities between first century AD Judaism and early Hinduism. Judaism also speaks about god, sin, sacrifices and priests. But there are important points of divergence that must be emphasized. Judaism is about the one God who is said to have revealed himself through the story of the Jewish people. We find it in the scriptures called the Torah by Jews and the Old Testament by Christians.¹ It is the story of the creation, fall and restoration of mankind. Let me emphasize the most relevant aspects for our inquiry.

¹ The Old Testament as a collection of writings is a challenge for scholars to date. Gordon Wenham, Professor of Old Testament at Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education, dates the final redaction of *Genesis* in the tenth century BC (Wenham 2000, pp. 41–43). The oldest existing manuscripts of the Old Testament were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, dating from the third century BC to the first AD. For details see Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 2001, pp. 100–118 and Ellis R. Brotzman, *Old Testament Textual Criticism: a practical introduction*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1994, pp. 87–96.

THE CREATION OF MAN

The Old Testament begins with the story of God creating the universe out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).² He does not manifest the universe out of his own substance as does Brahman, or out of a pre-existent matter as does Indra. This “nothing” is not a primordial substance, because prior to creation nothing existed except God. He is independent of his creation and can annihilate it at will without undergoing any change in his own nature. The *Psalms* state:

In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end (*Psalms* 102,25–27).

The creation presented in the book of *Genesis* is an act intended and completed by a personal God. It is not the result of an inherent necessity of an impersonal nature, but the product of the free choice of God. The *Upanishads* have a different teaching on the nature of the world. Following the concept of the fundamental unity of the world in Brahman, Hindu pantheism considers the physical world and humanity as manifestations of Brahman, manifestations of a primordial essence to which they are destined to return. The manifestation of Brahman is not a choice but a necessity derived from its very nature. It is a transformation of the Ultimate Reality from one ontological state into another, not a replacement of “nothingness” with “something”. What once existed in unity and potentiality becomes multiplicity and manifestation. In Judaism the nature of Ultimate Reality and that of creation are very different. Creation subsists through the will of God, not as his own transformation.³

The creation of human beings follows the act of creating the physical universe. The brief account in *Genesis* says:

The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (*Genesis* 2,7).

Again, as with the physical creation, there is no ontological continuity between the nature of God and that of humans, as between Brahman and *atman*, but a fundamental difference that excludes any pantheistic resemblance. According to the *Genesis* account, humans were created to have communion with God, to be witnesses of his glory and enjoy it, and to rule “over all the creatures that move along the ground” (*Genesis* 1,27). In other words, God created humans not for his own sake, but for theirs.

Hinduism presented us with a different picture. On the one hand, in Brahminism the sacrifices performed by the priests were necessary in order to sustain the universe and the gods, which meant that humans were necessary for the very sustenance of gods. On the other hand, the *Upanishads* state the *atman*-Brahman identity, i.e., that humans have an intrinsic divine nature waiting to be intuitively discovered. According to the Judaic view, humans do not have the nature of God, but only a personal way of existing resembling his. Therefore, “the breath of life” (*Genesis* 2,7), which God transmitted to human beings at creation, was not a small part of God’s essence (a kind of *atman*), but the act of life-giving, which marked the beginning of experiencing self-consciousness or personal identity by a creature whose existence is fully dependent on the creator.

The most intriguing aspect of human status is the fact that one can choose to follow the order of creation, i.e., to center one’s life upon God and develop a personal relationship with him, or to rebel against it and center one’s life upon himself or herself. This second option is called sin. The open option to disobey God is not a proof of his incapacity to create infallible beings, a proof that he is not almighty, because freedom of will is the most important element that defines personhood and makes humans different from robots. It also makes possible real communion among personal beings, including communion with God, which was the very purpose of creating humankind. The test of obedience came with the first explicit command:

You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die (*Genesis* 2,16–17).

Since this passage may cause misunderstandings (“Is God against human knowledge?”), a few remarks are necessary. The knowledge (*dab’-ath*) of good

² Both options we have for accounting for the existence of the universe – that it was created by a personal God, or that it has no beginning at all and will endlessly follow a cycle of manifestation and absorption – are accepted by faith, so none is more “scientific” or rational than the other. Our view on the beginnings of the Universe is an assumption we make by faith alone.

³ The Judaic mystical discipline known as the Kabbalah developed in Europe during the Middle Ages. It has nothing to do with first-century AD Judaism and therefore is not linked to our topic.

and evil mentioned in this verse does not have the meaning of merely getting some new information. It is not just a matter of conceptual elaboration, a science of good and evil that would explain rationally two opposite concepts without judging them morally. In this text and in *Genesis* 3,5, where the verb to know (*yaw-dab*) is used, “knowledge” and “to know” means experiencing and getting mixed with another reality.⁴ It is an ontological process rather than an epistemological one. Rather than to know as acquiring new knowledge, it means to enter into communion with something and live according to it. The same way as knowing God is not just a mental operation, but participating and subscribing to his will, the knowledge of good and evil is an existential experience, an accommodation to a state that is harmful to human nature. In this context, God’s command is not a hindrance from getting necessary knowledge or an annoying limitation of human freedom, but a warning concerning the possibility of getting involved with the nature of evil, of participating in a reality other than that intended by God. This other reality was the world of Satan and the fallen angels.

There are passages in the Old Testament that suggest that God created a world of angels before the creation of our physical world. Evil appeared when Lucifer, one of God’s most important angels, rebelled against the established order. In the book of the prophet Isaiah we can read the following metaphorical account of this incident:

How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn!
You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations!
You said in your heart, “I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High”. But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit (*Isaiah* 14,12–15).

Although these verses belong to a prophecy concerning Babylon, they are usually interpreted as having a deeper meaning.⁵ Evil is not created by God, but is a perversion of his creation, a result of using free will in the world of angels against

⁴ In the Septuagint text – the Greek translation of the Old Testament, produced in Alexandria between the third and the first centuries BC – we find *dab'-ath* translated as *ginoskein*, which means gaining experiential knowledge, while the “knowing” of *Genesis* 3,5 is its gerund form *ginoskontes*.

⁵ A similar allusion to this story is in *Ezekiel* 28,12–19.

the very purpose for which they were created (obedience to God in a communion relationship based on love). Evil was not intended to exist in God’s creation and is not linked to the essence of God, but is a parasite of good, a personal form of rebellious existence against the creator. This is the world of Satan and the demons. Since humankind is created for having communion with God, the meaning of human existence cannot be found in oneself, but only in communion with the Creator. Humans are not meant to find an inner “true spiritual nature” or a “higher self” (a kind of *atman*), but to remain in communion with God. Therefore our status in the spiritual world is more like a river bed than a spring. We are better defined as a river bed that chooses what spring will flow through it than a spring that doesn’t depend upon external resources. As a river bed is clean or dirty according to the water that flows through it, human identity (and obviously ethical conduct) is fashioned by the spiritual source one chooses to obey – God or Satan.

The story in *Genesis* reveals that Satan’s temptation has cast doubt on the justice of God’s demands, suggesting that God is not just and that rebellion against him would bring total freedom and fulfillment:

“Did God really say, “You must not eat from any tree in the garden?”
The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, “You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.” “You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman.
“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (*Genesis* 3,1–5).

The temptation can be summed up as to “become like God,” that is, to follow the same path of rebellion that Satan had followed in order to find self-determination. The *Genesis* story tells that Adam and Eve disobeyed God and that the first thing they came to know was not self-determination, but separation from God and from the perfect environment they were living in (*Genesis* 3,24). Therefore the biblical meaning of sin does not correspond to the loss of a secret knowledge (as the perception of the inner self) and the subsequent appearance of duality and illusion. The human fall is a consequence of a wrong decision toward independence from God; it is an act of perverting the order established by God in his creation.

The closest equivalent in Hinduism to this understanding of sin is found in the early hymns to the Vedic god Varuna (p. 21) as trespasses against his

moral order, which he punishes by illness and death. A major difference however, is that in the Judaic account humans always know the nature of their trespasses. They are only blamed for consciously disobeying God. The notion of sin, as stated in the Judaic tradition, has no correspondent in later Hindu pantheism. According to the *Upanishads*, the origin of “sinful” conduct is spiritual ignorance (*avidya*). Therefore, “sinners” need only instruction and not condemnation. They need help to reason the right way and realize that they are responsible for their actions, as they must pay the consequences in further lives. Since the *Upanishads* state that humans are a manifestation of the Ultimate Reality, they must have in themselves the divine nature (*atman*) and all resources to overtake their state of ignorance. But according to the Judaic tradition this is impossible, since we do not possess an intrinsic divine nature, and thus we are incapable of saving ourselves from our fallen state.

In conclusion, from a Judaic point of view, the central problem of mankind is sin, which is not a state of ontological ignorance, but a moral barrier between human beings and their creator. The difference originates in the way Hindu pantheism and Judaism have defined Ultimate Reality, impersonal vs. personal. As a result, different views on human nature and its relationship to this Ultimate Reality emerged.

THE REMISSION OF SINS IN JUDAISM VS. OTHER RELIGIOUS PATTERNS

The Bible is an account of human restoration from sin to a state of perfect communion with God. In *Genesis*, the first book of the Old Testament, God called a man named Abraham to leave his father’s household in Mesopotamia and follow him to an unknown land, promising that he would become the ancestor of a blessed nation. Abraham trusted God against all odds, and this attitude, called faith, determined that God would declare him righteous and the beneficiary of an overwhelming promise:

He took him outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness (*Genesis* 15,5–6).

The nation born out of Abraham was Israel. Through this nation God intended to make himself known in the world and correct wrong patterns in addressing him.

Although all nations had priests, offerings and temples, all ritualism was labeled as wrong and in need of correction.

The book of *Exodus* (the second book in the Old Testament) tells the story of how God redeemed Israel from Egyptian slavery through his grace (chapters 1–19), presented the law according to which they should live (ch. 20–24) and then showed the way to solve any trespassing of the law, through the office of the tabernacle (ch. 25–40), which was later replaced by the temple in Jerusalem. This given order *redemption – law – temple* was not randomly chosen. God instituted the Mosaic Law as a covenant with his people *after* redeeming the nation from slavery. The redeemed Israelites had to obey God and to live according to the demands of the law in order to have a right relationship with him (*Exodus* 19,5). The tabernacle (and later the temple) was the place where sacrifices were brought in order to atone for the trespassings of the law and to remind the people of their total dependence on God. Obedience to the law was of first importance and the sacrifices in the temple were second, prescribed only as solution for repairing the failures in fulfilling God’s demands.

The other ancient nations had a different view of worship. They were attempting to please their gods and even fulfill their needs through the religious rituals performed in temples. We have already seen that in Brahminism the priesthood reached the position of actually manipulating the gods and considered themselves through the rituals they performed the keepers of universal order, providers of fertility, wealth, victory over enemies, etc. Although human sacrifices (*Purushamedha*) were very rare, the priests held the ropes of heaven and soon became more important than the gods themselves. After all, it was their sacrifices that kept the universe properly functioning. No wonder that the Shramana tradition appeared as a rejection of this order.

The temple and the sacrifices in the Old Testament had a different meaning from those of other religions. The condition for maintaining a proper relationship with God was to obey and to conform to his revealed standards, not the performance of religious rituals that would empower him to fulfill his divine attributes. In Judaism sacrifices were not necessary for God, but for the sake of sinful people as the solution for their trespassing of the law. If not absolved, the sins of the people would bring God’s punishment on the nation. Therefore, the sacrifice had to perform its work in man, not in God. This is why the tabernacle and the sacrificial system was added to the covenant with Israel (in *Exodus* 20–24), as a *further grace*. Although Israel also had, as the

other nations, a temple, priests and sacrifices, their role was different and God commanded them not to follow the pagan pattern:

Be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, “How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same.” You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshipping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods. See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it (*Deuteronomy* 12,29–32).

Out of the many religious feasts mentioned in the Old Testament, of greatest importance and significance was the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), described in *Leviticus* 16. It was performed once a year, only by the high priest and for the benefit of all people. Its purpose was to remove all sins committed during the year and mark the rededication of the nation to God. Since it is very relevant to our comparative study, let me briefly describe the procedure and its meaning. First, the high priest had to offer a bull as an atoning sacrifice for his own sins. Only in this way was he considered cleansed of his sins and therefore capable of performing the atonement ritual for the nation. Then he took two goats, one said to be for the Lord and the other considered as scapegoat. The goat for the Lord was slaughtered and the blood sprinkled on the atonement cover, located in the Most Holy Place of the temple.⁶ As the high standards of God had been transgressed by the people, the act of the priest symbolized the covering of the transgressions with blood, as ransom price paid for their remission. Then the high priest had to

lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – all their sins – and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task (v. 21).

In this ritual the sins accumulated over the year were symbolically transferred onto the scapegoat, and then carried away, out of the camp into the desert. This was a way of teaching the people that sin is a very serious matter. Sins act as a barrier between God and his people, a barrier which cannot simply be ignored.⁷

⁶ Under the atonement cover were kept the Ten Commandments carved in stone, the summary of God’s commands given to Israel.

⁷ The prophet Isaiah says: “Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear” (*Isaiah* 59,2).

Once committed, sins are regarded almost as an indestructible creation. The atonement ritual suggests that sins can only be moved from one carrier to another – from the sinner to the High Priest through personal confession over the year, and then from the High Priest to the scapegoat. This was done once a year on the Day of Atonement. Only when sins were carried away, out of the land, was the nation righteous before God.⁸ The working principle the Israelites had to learn was that sins have to be borne by an innocent animal as a substitute for the sinner. This principle will help us understand the view Jesus had on sin, as he lived and taught among Jewish believers who had such specific convictions of the nature of sin.

In the Eastern religions this way of dealing with sins would be absurd. In a context where karma operates, nothing can act as a substitute sacrifice. The sinner must pay for his own sins in this and in further lives.

A SHORT HISTORY OF JUDAISM FROM MOSES TO JESUS

As the Old Testament testifies, the Israelites transgressed the Mosaic Law very often, especially by worshipping other gods, an act forbidden by the very first command. Long periods of religious syncretism were followed by short periods of religious restoration. Few were the kings called faithful to God, such as David, Hezekiah and Josiah. At the time the prophet Jeremiah lived (627–580 BC), the function of the Temple itself had become perverted, and those who came to worship there were condemned for performing empty rituals according to the idolatrous patterns of other religions, without any desire to obey God’s law.⁹ As a result of this constant attitude they were punished by being deported to Babylon in three waves between 597 BC and 582 BC. The temple in Jerusalem and the whole city were destroyed in 586 BC.

The prophets of the Old Testament had long before warned against this tragedy. But besides warning people against the eventual outcome of persisting into sinning, the prophets also foretold the return of the Jews from the Babylonian captivity and the beginning of a new era in their stand before God. Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and Zechariah, as well as the

⁸ This is the context in which to understand properly the Jewish concept of forgiveness. In Hebrew, one of the meanings of *nasa* (to lift up) is “to carry away an offence,” i.e., to forgive it.

⁹ See *Jeremiah* 7,1–11; 22–23.

Psalms proclaimed the coming of a Messianic figure, as the ideal ruler and religious teacher, God's own representative on earth:

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times (Micah 5,2).¹⁰

The Jews finally returned from captivity in 538 BC as a result of the edict of Cyrus, the Persian emperor who conquered Babylon. In 516 the Temple was rededicated and Judaism was “back in business.” But history was not glorious for the new Jewish nation. For centuries to come they were under the control of foreign rule. The Persian rule lasted until 332 BC, when Alexander the Great conquered Judea. After his death the Greek empire was divided among his generals. The Ptolemies of Egypt ruled over Judea until 198 BC, allowing the Jews to carry on their religious observances. The next governing empire, that of the Seleucids (the other remnant of Alexander's empire) was initially tolerant, until Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 BC) started a massive campaign of forced Hellenization to the point of prohibiting Judaism. This triggered a 24-year war called the Maccabean uprising (166–142 BC) that led to the independence of Judea. It didn't last long, as Judea was conquered by the Roman legions of Pompey in 63 BC. Priests were massacred and the temple desecrated. Such a sacrilege was not easy for Jews to forget.

This turbulent history contributed to the rise of Messianic expectations. Although the glorious age predicted by the prophets had not yet arrived by the first century AD, speculation about it was at its highest. The Messiah was expected to be a charismatic leader who would expel the Romans from the Holy Land and reinstate the former glory of Israel under King David. This portrait was seen as consistent with prophecies such as:

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness” (*Jeremiah* 23,5–6).

There were several religious sects active in Judea during the first century AD which had an important role in shaping Judaism. The Pharisees were a middle-

class movement that stressed individual fulfillment of the law in minute detail as the proper way of expressing obedience to God. The Sadducees belonged to the upper class. They were temple priests and accepted as holy scriptures only the five books of Moses (the first five books of the Old Testament). As a result they rejected the belief in resurrection, eternal life, angels and demons, and thus were in conflict with the Pharisees, who acknowledged them. The Essenes were a separatist group that lived in small communities outside Jewish society. They also stressed strict legal observances but rejected the temple ritual and its priesthood as utterly corrupted. The Zealots were a militant group who argued for an armed uprising against Rome as the way of establishing the new order. Such was the religious context in Judea at the time of Jesus' arrival.

¹⁰ See also *Isaiah* 11,1–5; 42,1–7; 52,13–53,12; *Zachariah* 9,9–10, *Psalms* 45,6–7; 110,1–4.

PART TWO

THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL SETTINGS OF THE BUDDHA AND THE CHRIST

DATES AND EVIDENCES FOR A HISTORICAL APPROACH

The Buddha must have lived about five centuries before the Christ. Most scholars believe that he died in 486 BC, based on two historical reference points. The first takes 268 BC as the year of king Asoka's accession to the throne, according to references made to Greek kings in his rock-edict, and the second is that 218 years had elapsed from the death of the Buddha till then, according to the Singhalese chronicles *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa*. Since he died at the age of 80, he must have lived from 566 to 486 BC. Schumann argues for the 563 to 483 BC period.¹ But Williams' belief is that according to the *Dipavamsa* chronicle (which mentions a lineage of teachers starting with the Buddha), it seems that fewer than 218 years elapsed from the Buddha to Asoka, and therefore the life of the Buddha should rather be placed later, about 480 to 400 BC.²

¹Schumann 2004, p. 10–11.

² Williams 1989, p. 9. Paul Williams is Professor of Indian and Tibetan Philosophy and Co-Director of the Centre for Buddhist Studies at the University of Bristol.

The earliest Buddhist writings are the sutras of the Pali Canon, which contain only secondary information about the biography of the Buddha, the major interest being his teaching. The Pali Canon was written down in the first century BC in Sri Lanka,³ which means that about 400 years of oral transmission had passed. The oldest existing original manuscripts we have today have been dated by scholars to the end of the first century AD.⁴

The earliest Buddhist texts that present a complete biography of the Buddha are the *Buddhacarita* (*The Acts of the Buddha*), written by Ashvagosha in the first or second century AD, the *Nidanakatha* of the Theravada school (second or third century AD),⁵ and the *Lalitavistara* of the Sarvastivada school (first century AD).⁶ I will not debate here whether these writings are biographies or hagiographies. A biography is expected to recount real historical facts of the Buddha's life-story, while a hagiography is an idealized life-story, one that combines how it was with how it should have been.⁷ There are no historical criteria for distinguishing between history and myth in the accounts of the life of the Buddha. No historical confirmation is available, except the edict of king Asoka issued 218 years after the Buddha's death which confirms the existence of Buddhism at that time.

I will use as sources of information for the life of the Buddha the Sutras of the Pali Canon, the *Buddhacarita* and the *Nidanakatha*. It is not relevant for our present inquiry to question the historicity of the events in the life of the Buddha, or try to establish which sayings and deeds are genuine and which were added later.⁸ Even if the biographical details of his life could be somehow proved inaccurate it would not have any serious effect upon the validity of his teaching. As Williams points out:

The effectiveness of the Dharma does not in itself depend on its discovery by a Buddha. If the Buddha did not exist then someone

³Harvey 1990, p. 3 and Williams 2000, p. 106.

⁴ These were found in Pakistan and are written in Gandhari. Fragments of the *Rhinoceros Sutra* (*Sutta Nipata* 34–74) and of the *Dhammapada* have been identified so far. See <http://www.washington.edu/alumni/columns/march97/scrolls1.html> (accessed September 29, 2008).

⁵ Schumann dates it in the fifth century AD (Schumann 2004, p.44).

⁶ Gethin 1998, p. 17.

⁷ Williams insists that we should read these writings as hagiographies, similar to those of medieval Christian saints: "The Buddha's hagiography should be read as an illustration of what is to Buddhists important. It anchors the authenticity of the teachings in a story of wonderful achievement..." (Williams 2000, p. 26–27).

⁸ For an attempt to do so, see Schumann 2004 and Thomas 1993, chapters 15–16.

else existed who rediscovered the Dharma. If it really *is* the Dharma that has been rediscovered, that is sufficient (Williams 2000, p. 22).

While a hagiographic approach to the life-story of the Buddha would not affect substantially the message of the Buddha, a similar approach would be catastrophic for the message of the Christ. As Williams emphasizes:

If Jesus could be shown conclusively not to have lived then necessarily the salvific significance of his life could not have actually, really (i.e., in history), taken place, and this would have radical repercussions for Christian self-understanding. Christianity is a religion founded by a figure in history, embedded in "sacred history", and the historicity of that figure is absolutely essential to what the Christian message is all about (Williams 2000, p. 22).

Therefore it is of utmost importance to know that Jesus was a historical figure.

THE JESUS OF HISTORY

The historical dates of Jesus' birth and death can be deduced by correlations with historical events mentioned in the gospels. A useful resource for doing so can be found in the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*,⁹ which is my source of information in this paragraph. Several events recorded in the gospels correspond to Jewish history as recorded by the historian Josephus in his classic work *The Antiquities of the Jews* and to other historical sources. According to Josephus, an eclipse of the moon occurred shortly before Herod's death. Since Herod the Great died shortly after the birth of Jesus (*Matthew and Luke*) and that eclipse occurred on March 12/13 of year 4 BC, Jesus must have been born shortly before that event, probably in 5 BC or early 4 BC. As about the date of his death, in light of the historical data we have about the offices of Pontius Pilate as prefect of Judea (AD 26–36), Caiaphas as high priest (AD 18–37), and Herod Antipas as tetrarch of Galilee and Perea (4 BC–AD 39), and with the contribution of astronomy in calculating the date of the Jewish Passover, the most likely date of his crucifixion is April 3, AD 33.

⁹ H.W. Hoehner, 'Chronology', in Joel B. Green (ed.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (The IVP Bible Dictionary Series), IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1992, pp. 118–22.

The Synoptic gospels (*Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke*) have been dated no later than AD 70, which means less than 40 years of oral transmission had passed since the death of Jesus. Here are some of the considerations that lead to such an early date.¹⁰ The literary style of Mark suggests it is the oldest gospel. Papias (d. AD 155), the bishop of Hierapolis, wrote that *Mark* was the interpreter of the apostle Peter and had recollected the data from his master. *Matthew* and *Luke* use most of the material of *Mark* and at least another common source called Q, now lost. Therefore they must be older than Mark. Matthew is already quoted by Ignatius of Antioch, who was martyred in Rome in AD 110. Luke was written by the same author who wrote Acts (see the introduction to both), and obviously *Luke* predates Acts. We know that Acts ends with Paul's captivity in Rome, not with his martyrdom in AD 64,¹¹ nor with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Both elements would have been far too important to be ignored by the author of Acts. The logical conclusion is that the writing of Acts predates these events. If Acts was written before AD 70, *Luke* is earlier, and *Mark* must be even earlier than *Luke*. As for the *Gospel according to John*, the oldest existing piece of a gospel manuscript is of this gospel.¹² It is dated AD 125–135 and was found in Egypt, although the location of its writing was Ephesus. Generally it is believed that *John* was written last, around AD 90. My source of information about the life of the Christ will be the four gospels of the New Testament.

In the second half of the first century AD the Christian religion was already widespread in the Roman Empire and persecuted under emperors Nero (AD 64) and Domitian (AD 96). In the first half of the second century AD it was acknowledged by Roman historians such as Tacitus (AD 110), Pliny the

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion on this topic see:

Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2001, pp. 22–66.

Norman L. Geisler, *The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, pp. 37–41.

F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1988, pp. 254–62.

¹¹ Other key facts that are missing are the martyrdom of James (AD 62) and Peter (AD 65) (key figures in Acts), the Jewish wars that started in AD 66, the persecutions in Rome under Nero in AD 64–65.

¹² It is a fragment from chapter 18, called *The Rylands Papyrus (P52)*, and is currently dated around AD 125. It is shown on the University of Manchester Digital Library:

<http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/insight/papyrus.htm>, follow the link to “View Rylands Papyri” and search for “Greek Papyri” (accessed September 23, 2008).

Younger (AD 110) and Suetonius (AD 120).¹³ Therefore one need not question the accuracy of the gospels as reliable sources of information about the life of Christ. To consider that Christ's true story and teaching is to be found in the Gnostic gospels or in alleged stories of his travel to India between the ages of 12 and 30 cannot be justified in any scholarly way.¹⁴ Such an attempt would be equivalent to considering the true story of the Buddha being that of the Puranas, where he is presented as the ninth avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu, incarnated in order to delude demons.¹⁵

This chapter will emphasize the lives of the Buddha and of the Christ more than their teachings, as a more detailed comparison of doctrines will follow in the next chapters.

A REVIEW OF THE BUDDHA'S LIFE

The Buddha was born as prince Siddhattha Gotama, the only son of king Suddhodana and queen Maya. They resided in Kapilavasthu, the capital city of a small kingdom located close to the present Indian-Nepalese border.

A common element in the biographies of the Buddha and the Christ is that they were miraculously conceived. According to the *Nidanakatha*, Maya had a dream of a white elephant entering her right side. The Brahmins interpreted it as a sign of great wisdom, purity and power, which would allow the baby to become either a great emperor or a religious teacher of unparalleled importance.

Maya gave birth to her son after ten months of pregnancy (MN 123,14), in the Lumbini forest while she was on a journey. Supernatural manifestations occurred on earth and in heavens in celebration of his arrival. The Buddhacarita mentions an earthquake, a brighter sun, flowers falling from the sky and many people being spontaneously healed. Immediately after birth the baby boy stood up, walked seven paces and said:

I am the highest in the world; I am the best in the world; I am the foremost in the world. This is my last birth; now there is no renewal of being for me (MN 123,20).

¹³ See Green 1992, pp. 365–6.

¹⁴ A good resource on this topic is Douglas Groothuis, *Revealing the New Age Jesus*, IVP, 1990.

¹⁵ See the appendix at page 115 on this issue.

The name he was given at birth was Siddhattha (“he whose purpose is accomplished”). Shortly after birth we are told of a similar episode in the lives both of the Buddha and of the Christ. A wise man comes and foretells the great destiny of the baby-boy. The name of the Hindu sage is Asita. He examined the bodily marks of the baby Siddhattha and prophesied that he would become a Buddha. Then he departed in great distress, saying to the king:

It is not for him that I am perturbed, but I am alarmed because disappointed for myself. For the time has come when I must pass away, just when he is born who shall discover the extinction of birth, which is so hard to win (*Buddhacarita* 2, also in the *Sutta Nipata* 679–694).

For king Siddhodana this was not good news. He was not pleased with the idea that his son would someday leave his royal duties and join the ranks of mendicant monks. Since the usual incentive for choosing such a life was the riddle of suffering, everything possible was done to keep his son away from the sorrows of life. The young Siddhattha lived in his palace tied down by sensual pleasures, surrounded by luxuries, young women and entertainment. Another measure of precaution was the decision to marry him at the age of 16, to Yasodhara, his cousin of the same age.

Appearances were saved successfully until Siddhattha reached the age of 29. At that time he had his first close encounter with the real world and his life took a new turn. The story presented in the *Nidanakatha* about the transformation of prince Siddhattha is an adaptation from the story of a legendary Buddha (Vipassi) as presented in the DN 14,2. It says he made four excursions outside the palace, in which he got to know a different world.¹⁶ In the first three he saw for the first time an old man, a sick man and a dead man. Deeply troubled, the prince found out from his charioteer that such things are normal for the human condition, and that a similar transformation awaits himself. Then, on the fourth excursion he met a wandering mendicant who introduced himself as one who, “terrified by birth and death” has adopted a homeless life to attain liberation (*Buddhacarita* 7). That very night prince Siddhattha decided to leave the palace and become such a wandering mendicant. During that night was born his son, Rahula.

¹⁶ According to the third chapter of the *Buddhacarita* the gods generated the four visions so that only Siddhattha could see them and decide to leave home.

Once he entered the world of Shramanas, he practiced meditation under the guidance of two masters: first under Arada Kalama and then under Uddaka Ramaputta (MN 26 and MN 30). With the first he attained the state of nothingness, a state of complete detachment from the surrounding world, similarly to the *prathyahara*¹⁷ in Yoga. With the second he attained the state of neither perception nor non-perception. But these attainments were not enough to provide an end to suffering, so he left these teachers and turned to the practice of severe austerities. For nearly six years he did not refrain from any conceivable ascetic practice:

Such was my asceticism, Sariputta, that I went naked, rejecting conventions... I clothed myself in hemp, in hemp-mixed cloth, in shrouds, in refuse rags, in tree bark... I was one who pulled out hair and beard, pursuing the practice of pulling out hair and beard...I was one who used a mattress of spikes...dust and dirt accumulating over the years, caked off my body and flaked off...I was full of pity even in regard to a drop of water thus: “Let me not hurt the tiny creatures in the crevices of the ground”...I would feed on the dung of young suckling calves. As long as my own excrement and urine lasted, I fed on my own excrement and urine. Such was my great distortion in feeding...I would make my bed in a charnel ground with the bones of the dead for a pillow. And cowherd boys came up and spat on me, urinated on me, threw dirt at me, and poked sticks into my ears... (MN 12,44–62).

Nor did it help to practice Yogic meditation associated with refraining from breathing for as long as possible. It only produced acute pain in his body, feelings of having his head “split open with a sharp sword”, his belly carved up by a knife, violent pains in his head and burnings in his body (MN 36,21–25). Then he even considered cutting off food completely, but the gods promised they would feed him through the pores of his skin so that he might remain alive (MN 36,27). As a result of that lifestyle his body reached a state of extreme emaciation:

Because of eating so little my limbs became like the jointed segments of the vine stems or bamboo stems, ... my backside became like a camel’s hoof, ...the projections on my spine stood forth like corded beads, ... my ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old

¹⁷ *Prathyahara* is the withdrawal of the senses in Yoga (*Yoga Sutra* 2,54–55). At this stage the senses no longer disturb the mind, so it becomes immune to all disturbances from outside.

roofless barn, ...the gleam of my eyes sank far down in their sockets,
looking like a gleam of water that has sunk far down in a deep well.
.... my belly skin adhered to my backbone... (MN 12,52).

His conclusion was:

By such conduct, by such practice, by such performance of austerities,
I did not attain any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge
and vision worthy of the noble ones (MN 12,56).

Asceticism did not hold the answer to his quest. So he bathed in a river and accepted food from a cowherd girl and regained strength. Bathing was against the way of the ascetics and thus represented his renouncement of this way. His conclusion was that liberation must be attained by the Middle Way, i.e., neither by ascetic mortification, nor by a life of self-indulgence. He sat under a pipal tree near Bodh Gaya and engaged in meditation, determined not to leave that place until he broke the bondage of suffering.

Mara, the enemy of liberation and deceiver of humans, did his best to make Siddhattha abandon his quest (SN I,4). He sent his three sons (Flurry, Gaiety and Pride) and three daughters (Discontent, Delight and Thirst) to tempt him. Then he tried various tricks such as reminding him that he had deserted his social responsibility when he left home and threatening him with his armies and grotesque figures. He even proposed that the future Buddha may transform the Himalayas into gold, as an alternative way of dealing with human suffering. But the sage remained unperturbed and Mara withdrew defeated.

Over one night he gradually discovered the way out of suffering, through a conscious process of understanding the world as it is. He experienced the fourfold absorption (MN 36,34–37) and realized how karma operates in countless beings and how its vicious cycle can be broken. This is the content of the Four Noble Truths, which we will examine in chapter 5. He rejoiced:

I attained the undefiled supreme security from bondage, Nibbana. The
knowledge and vision arose in me: “My deliverance is unshakeable;
this is my last birth; now there is no renewal of being” (MN 26,18).
I have no teacher, and one like me
Exists nowhere in all the world
With all its gods, because I have

No person for my counterpart.
I am the Accomplished One in the world,
I am the Teacher Supreme.
I alone am a Fully Enlightened One
Whose fires are quenched and extinguished (MN 26,25).

Siddhattha had become a Buddha, an “enlightened” or “awakened” one. He is also called a Tathagata, “a truth-finder.” He doubted that anyone would understand his teaching and wondered if he should preach his discovery.¹⁸ But the god Brahma himself appeared to him and asked him to preach the truth or else the world would be lost (MN 26,20). Out of compassion for all beings ensnared by illusion he decided to start what was to become a 45-year missionary journey throughout northern India.

The first disciples were five ascetics who left him when he decided to quit the path of asceticism. They became the first members of the Buddhist community, the Sangha. As he preached nationwide many others joined, either as monks or as lay followers. He accepted them regardless of caste. His followers were Brahmins, ascetics, members of the warrior nobility (*kbattiyas*), farmers and even casteless men (although it was harder for the poor and uneducated to grasp his doctrine). In the end the Buddha reluctantly accepted the foundation of the order of nuns, against the Hindu custom of considering women unworthy of entering the consecrated religious life. His disciples were sent as missionaries to preach the path he had discovered (the *Dhamma*) worldwide:

Go ye now, O Bhikkhus, and wander, for the gain of the many, for
the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the
good, for the gain, and for the welfare of gods and men, Let not two
of you go the same way, Preach, O Bhikkhus, the doctrine which is
glorious in the beginning, glorious in the middle, glorious at the end,
in the spirit and in the letter; proclaim a consummate, perfect, and
pure life of holiness. There are beings whose mental eyes are covered
by scarcely any dust, but if the doctrine is not preached to them, they
cannot attain salvation. They will understand the doctrine (*Vinaya*
texts, *Mahavagga* I,11,1).¹⁹

¹⁸ According to the *Buddhacarita* he didn't have such doubts.

¹⁹ Source www.sacred-texts.com.

The Buddha did not appoint a successor to lead the Sangha after his death. There was an attempt to take over leadership by Devadatta, one of his disciples, but Buddha rejected him and this led to a short-lived schism. No outer guide was needed, as the disciples would be led by the truth itself:

If there is anyone who thinks: “I shall take charge of the order,” or “The order should refer to me,” let him make some statement about the order, but the Tathagata does not think in such terms. [...] Therefore, Ananda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no else as your refuge, with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge (*Mahāparinibbana sutta*, DN 16,2,25–26).

At the venerable age of 80, the Buddha was invited to a meal of pork²⁰ by the smith Cunda (DN 16,4,13–19). Without the host’s knowledge, the meal was poisonous, but in order not to offend, the Buddha chose to eat it and became sick with dysentery. Exhausted and very ill he reached the city of Kusinagara, where he realized his end was near. His disciples gathered around him and were reminded that the *Dhamma* would be their master after his departure (DN 16,6,1). His last words were:

Now, monks, I declare to you: all conditioned things are of a nature to decay – strive on untiringly (*Mahāparinibbana sutta*, DN 16,6,7).

His body was cremated according to the Indian custom, and his bone remains were divided into eight parts to eight provinces that asked for a share of them.

SIMILARITIES AND CONTRASTS WITH THE LIFE OF CHRIST

Jesus was born in Judea, an obscure province of the Roman Empire on the east shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The ruler of Judea at the time of Jesus’ birth was Herod the Great (37 BC to AD 4), but Jesus was not his son. Jesus was

²⁰ This is a controversial issue, since *sukara-maddava* could mean “tender parts of pork” or truffles that pigs eat. The Buddha did not impose vegetarianism and early Buddhism did not lay much stress on it. In the MN 55, the Buddha only forbade the sacrificing of animals for the purpose of feeding the monks, but this didn’t mean refusing animal food when offered by lay people as alms.

no prince, but the alleged son of a humble carpenter called Joseph who lived in the small town of Nazareth, in the province of Galilee.²¹ Nothing made his parents special. They weren’t even married yet when divine intervention disturbed their insignificant living. The two gospels that record Jesus’ conception, *Luke* and *Matthew*, present it as a miraculous event. The angel Gabriel was sent to Joseph’s fiancée with a great demand:

Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High... (*Luke* 1,30–32).

Although she was a virgin and risked being stoned for unfaithfulness according to Jewish law, she gave her consent to be the instrument for the Son’s incarnation, saying: “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said” (*Luke* 1,38). In order to dissipate any suspicion of infidelity, the angel told Joseph in a dream of the miraculous conception and also of the fact that the child “will save his people from their sins” (*Matthew* 1,21). Joseph accepted in his turn to be part of this plan and took Mary to be his wife.

Like prince Siddhattha, Jesus was also born on a journey, while the family went to Bethlehem to be registered in a census ordered by the Roman emperor Augustus. All they could afford as a birth clinic was a stable, and Jesus’ first bed among humans was a manger (*Luke* 2,1–7). Unlike the baby Siddhattha however, the baby Jesus didn’t talk. An angel was sent to proclaim the good news to the shepherds living out in the nearby fields:

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger (*Luke* 2,10–12).

He was not announced only to the poor people of Israel. The Gospel of *Matthew* tells the story of the Magi traveling from a long distance to Bethlehem under the guidance of a star in order to find the baby and pay homage to him (*Matthew* 2,1–12).

²¹ Galilee was the farthest province from the capital, Jerusalem. Galileans were traditionally despised by other Jews for their awkward accent and were seen as least likely to produce a prophet (*John* 1,46; 7,41; 7,52).

When he was circumcised according to the Jewish law, the eighth day after birth, the name given to him was Jesus (Hebrew: Jeshua), which means “Savior.”²² Then an interesting episode follows in *Luke* 2,25–35, bearing resemblance to the story of Buddha’s infancy. A righteous man called Simeon comes and utters a prayer:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

Unlike Asita, Simeon departed as a happy and fulfilled old man. He had met the savior and that was enough for him. He also issued a word of warning that the child was “destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed” (*Luke* 2,34–35).

However, not everybody was happy hearing the news of Jesus’ birth. Although he was no prince, he was seen as an enemy to the royal house. Herod the Great heard about his birth from the Magi and understood the prophecy about him as a threat to his own throne. He tried to kill Jesus by slaughtering all male babies in Bethlehem. For this reason his family had to flee to Egypt until Herod’s death (*Matthew* 2,19–12). Here we may find further similarity with the early life of the Buddha. Both had to face opposition for being determined to solve humankind’s biggest problem. The Buddha came to put an end to the world of illusion and his father did everything possible to keep him under the spell of illusion that he may not choose the path of the ascetics. Jesus came to put an end to the reign of sin and his king did everything possible to have him killed. Before offering the solution, both had to experience the power of their enemy.

Jesus did not live in luxury. He was rather a commoner of his day. The only recorded event in his childhood is at the age of 12 (*Luke* 2,41–52), when his parents took him to Jerusalem to observe the Feast of the Passover.²³ They lost him in the crowd and found him after three days in the Temple in discussion with the rabbis, the theologians of his day. It is said that “everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers” (*Luke* 2,47).

²² Christ is a title, meaning “the anointed one of God.”

²³ This feast was held to commemorate the exodus of the Israelites from the Egyptian bondage (see *Exodus* 12–13).

When his parents rebuked him for being lost, he responded: “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (2,47). He obviously had a good knowledge of Judaism, but there was nothing supernatural in it. Nothing indicated so far that he was more than a mere man.²⁴ We have no indication that after this event Jesus went to the Far East, preparing there until the age of 30 among enlightened masters for his mission. Instead, Luke’s gospel adds that after this episode “he went down to Nazareth with them [his parents] and was obedient to them” (2,51–52). Also, to dismiss speculations of an alleged training in esotericism he might have had in foreign countries, we must remember that after he started his ministry and people were amazed at his deeds, they appeared to be familiar with his presence among them. They thought: “Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” (*Mark* 6,3; *Luke* 4,22; *John* 6,42). If he had been away for some time, his fellow Jews could not have pondered: “How did this man get such learning without having studied?” (*John* 7,15; 7,27).

Luke says in his gospel that Jesus started his public ministry around the age of 30 (*Luke* 3,23), which was the age a man reached adulthood in Jewish society. This was the year AD 29²⁵ as it is depicted by Luke with great historical accuracy:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert (*Luke* 3,1–2).

Unlike Siddhattha, Jesus was not tormented by the need to find out the truth for himself. He did not undergo training under different masters and did not try out asceticism. John the Baptist was not Jesus’ teacher.²⁶ John was a prophet

²⁴ The apocryphal gospels of Gnosticism depict the boy Jesus as performing miracles such as making sparrows out of clay and bringing them to life, turning playmates into goats, making people blind and then healing them. These are miracles done just for fun, the opposite of what Jesus does in the canonical gospels. This is one of the reasons why the Gnostic gospels cannot be accepted as veridical sources of information on the historical Christ. They present a Jesus who is very different from the one of the New Testament.

²⁵ See Green 1992, p. 118–19.

²⁶ In Thich Nhat Hanh’s understanding, “John the Baptist helped Jesus touch the Holy Spirit” (Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, p. 20). His view of Jesus’ baptism is that of an initiation ritual, according to one performed by Eastern gurus for their disciples: “When John baptized Jesus, he made it possible for the Holy Spirit to be born, or manifested, in Jesus the human being” (Nhat

appointed by God to prepare the way for Christ (*Mark* 1,2–3; *Luke* 3,4) and he did it by calling the people of Israel to repentance, by asking them to confess their sins and be baptized in the river Jordan as a sign of their repentance. The prophecy about John was that “he will go on before the Lord [...] to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (*Luke* 1,17). That John was not Jesus’ teacher is obvious from his reluctance to baptize Jesus:

Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

When Jesus came out of the water a voice from heaven was heard saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (*Matthew* 3,13–17). This is one of the first indications that Jesus was more than a mere man, that he was the Son of God. It is important to realize that Jesus had nothing to do to earn this title, no austerities and no meditation. The nature of the Christ has always been a paradox for theologians. On the one hand he was a normal young man as any other of his generation (*Mark* 6,3), but on the other hand he was proclaimed the Son of God, both at his conception and at his baptism. So who really was he? A mere man? A god under the guise of a man? A composite being, half human, half divine? Instead of giving a simple and confusing answer here, I will postpone this issue for the next chapter.

The experience of baptism was not an initiation rite for Jesus, as he was not required to abandon a state of ignorance. Nor was it a confession of sins, since he had nothing to repent for. It was rather an act of identification with the people he came to save, a way of displaying a true human nature. In order to avoid any speculation that Jesus underwent a gradual spiritual development, the gospel of *John* does not begin with his birth and childhood, but with a prologue that boldly declares his divinity and then jumps to the events of his earthly ministry.

The next point of his life-story is the temptation story. We have seen that the Buddha was tempted in order to be sidetracked from reaching

Hanh, *Going Home*, p. 45–46). However, as I point out here, Jesus did not need such “help” and his baptism was not an initiation ritual.

enlightenment for himself and thus from becoming the harbinger of truth for other people. After his baptism, Jesus was also tempted by Satan, but for a different reason. The three temptations were:

1. “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”
2. “If you worship me, it (the authority and splendor of all the kingdoms of the world) will all be yours.”
3. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here (the highest point of the temple)” for God “will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully” (*Luke* 4,3–12).

Satan’s intent was not to prevent him from becoming somebody he wasn’t already, or to prevent him from finding out some hidden spiritual truth, but to deter him from using his true identity and knowledge for the sake of others. Jesus could have his ministry warranted by God only if he remained sinless. Therefore the temptations were aimed at disqualifying him from a ministry that only a sinless one could fulfill. Jesus answered each temptation with a quote from *Deuteronomy*, the fifth book of the Old Testament, as a reminder of the need to trust and worship God alone. Similar temptations had been faced by the people of Israel in the wilderness. At the time of their journey from Egypt to the promised land they had to prove themselves to be the obedient people of God and his righteous representatives among other nations. But they failed in almost every circumstance, 1) when they were in need of food and water; 2) when tempted by idolatry; and 3) by doubting divine providence.

First, when the Israelites were hungry and thirsty in the Desert of Sin they rebelled against Moses and almost decided to return to Egypt instead of trusting God (*Exodus* 16,3). Second, very soon after being released from Egyptian bondage, while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai, they made themselves idols to worship (*Exodus* 32). The third temptation has to do both with the way the Israelites tempted God by doubting his care for them in the wilderness (*Exodus* 17,7; *Numbers* 13–14; 20,5) and with the way they expected the Messiah to make himself known in the first century AD. They were expecting a miraculous entrance into the Temple and a self-proclamation of his majesty. But while his entrance into the world was indeed miraculous, through the virgin conception, that fact was known only by a few people and could not meet the expectations of the religious

elite. What they expected was a sign of great power, a sudden assumption of religious leadership in the Temple and the overthrow of Roman occupation. However, such deeds were not on Jesus' agenda. He had chosen to come as the humble servant of whom the prophet Isaiah had written (*Isaiah* 42,1–7), not as a political or warrior Messiah. Therefore where Israel was disobedient, Jesus proved himself to be this faithful servant of the Lord. Food, worship of false gods and doubt could not deter him from fulfilling his mission.

Both the Buddha and the Christ had disciples, but Jesus didn't found a monastic order. He chose twelve apostles, a rather small number of close disciples. They were not chosen from among the priests, Pharisees or scribes, who had the best knowledge of religion, but from among commoners of his day. A few were fishermen, including Peter and John. Matthew was a tax-collector, a man despised by the Jews for being a Roman collaborator. Simon was a zealot, a militant for armed uprising against Roman occupation. Under normal circumstances such a heterogeneous group was unlikely to pursue a common goal. But after three years spent with Jesus they were transformed into missionaries and sent worldwide:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (*Matthew* 28,19–20).

Jesus' ministry was very short in comparison to that of the Buddha. It lasted only three years, while the Buddha spent 45 years with his disciples. The immediate result of their preaching was also different. While most of the Buddha's religious opponents ended as his disciples after a short debate, either as monks or as lay followers, Jesus met fierce opposition from the religious leaders of his time. Instead of ending up as converts, the Jews started to plot how to kill him. He was seen as a dangerous heretic who was questioning the religious establishment of his day, so that priests, Pharisees, scribes and political rulers all felt threatened. They considered that Jesus went too far with his new teaching and outrageous claims.

He provoked such opposition because he was doing more than just teaching a new doctrine. He was able to heal every sickness, to resurrect dead people, to drive out demons and to tame the forces of nature. Unlike the Buddha, the Christ spoke very much about himself and about the disciples' need to trust *him*, not merely his words. He did not point to a certain abstract truth to be followed, but to himself as the very embodiment of truth. In the

gospel of John we find several very provocative claims of the Christ about himself:

I am the way and the truth and the life (*John* 14,6).

I am the bread of life (*John* 6,35).

I am the light of the world (*John* 8,12).

I am the resurrection and the life (*John* 11,25).

I am the true vine (*John* 15,1).

He never taught his disciples introspective meditation, or how to be their own refuge, but instead to depend wholly on him as their source of wisdom and power.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing (*John* 15,5).

Jesus didn't reach an old age. After three years of ministry he was arrested and sentenced to death as a heretic and a blasphemer who proclaimed himself the Son of God. At his trial the high priest asked him:

“Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?”

“I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked.

“You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” They all condemned him as worthy of death (*Mark* 14,61–64).

At this point of Jesus' life we find the two most controversial elements, especially when considered from a Buddhist point of view. They are both so provocative that most comparative studies either ignore or minimize them. The first is the meaning of his death. He repeatedly declared that he would die as atonement for the sins of the world:

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (*Mark* 10,45).²⁷

The Christ was aware of his coming death and told his disciples of its meaning. He was so determined to complete his mission that he refused to be defended by his

²⁷ He also said: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (*John* 10,11).

disciples when the soldiers arrested him in Gethsemane. When Peter struck one of the them, Jesus rebuked him saying: “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” (*John* 18,11) Therefore his crucifixion was not an unfortunate end of one of the greatest religious leaders, or the supreme example of self-sacrifice for one’s beliefs,²⁸ but the very reason for his incarnation and the only way of saving humankind from sin. The contrast between the Christ’s view of salvation (by his own sacrifice) and the Buddha’s view on enlightenment (by giving the proper teaching) is obvious to the last moments of their life. On the one hand, while the Christ was dying on the cross, a criminal who was crucified together with him repented and said “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”. Jesus didn’t ignore him in his pain, but answered, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (*Luke* 23,42–43). Both were dying on a cross, a sinner and the Savior, one for his own sins and the other for everybody else’s sins. Nevertheless it was not too late for the criminal to be forgiven. On the other hand, while the Buddha was sick and about to die, a wanderer called Subhadda expressed his desire to see him. The Buddha consented despite his precarious condition and taught him the *Dhamma*, which transformed Subhadda into the last personal disciple of the Buddha. Both the Christ and the Buddha were consistent with their view of saving people up to the last minute of their life.

The second controversial and unparalleled element in the life of the Christ is his resurrection. The gospels do not end with his death on the cross and burial, but with his physical resurrection from the dead, an unthinkable and absurd element from a Buddhist point of view. The third day after his death his grave was found empty and many people reported seeing him alive. He talked to them, was touched, embraced and ate with them.²⁹ Since Jesus was resurrected nobody could claim a share of his relics. His earthly mission ended not in a grave but with his ascension to heaven.

²⁸ For Thich Nhat Hanh, Jesus’ crucifixion was the equivalent of a Vietnamese monk who burned himself alive in 1963 in protest for the war going on in Vietnam. Both were displaying compassion: “When Jesus allowed himself to be crucified, He was acting in the same way, motivated by the desire to wake people up, to restore understanding and compassion, and to save people” (Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* 1995, p. 81). His view is consistent with Zen Buddhism, but not with Christianity.

²⁹ A book that I highly recommend as a scholarly and fascinating debate on the resurrection of Jesus, between Gary Habermas, a Christian apologist, and Anthony Flew, an atheistic philosopher: Gary Habermas and Anthony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?: The Resurrection Debate*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1985, republished 2003.



This chapter has brought to light several similarities and differences in the lives of the Buddha and the Christ. But now it must be obvious that we need a more thorough assessment of the deeds, sayings and doctrines of the two religious leaders in order to avoid misunderstandings. In this assessment it will be of great help to remember the religious context in which they lived and to which they were addressing their teaching. We will start with the teachings of Christ and work toward answering the question: Who did Jesus claim to be?

CHAPTER 4

HOW DID THE CHRIST UNDERSTAND HIMSELF AND HIS MISSION?

Any reader of the gospels will sense that Jesus was an amazing person. We may call him a teacher, a compassionate healer, a wise man or a prophet that called his people to a renewed dedication to God. Judaism had many such teachers, healers and prophets, as we can see in the Old Testament and in the inter-testamental period. Was the Christ one of these or was he different? Was he one of many or one of a kind? Let's assess some of his deeds and sayings in the context of first-century AD Judaism.

JESUS AS A MAN OF MIRACLES

Jesus performed many miracles. He healed the sick, raised dead people, calmed the storm, multiplied food and cast out demons. But more than the miracles themselves, we should consider his comments on each occasion to get the right picture about him. Let us consider four particular cases and see how people of his time interpreted what was said and done.

In one instance he was teaching in a crowded house. Some men were carrying a paralytic on a mat to bring him to Jesus to be healed. Since they could not enter the house because of the crowds, they made an opening in

the roof and lowered the paralytic through the opening. Jesus healed him and then added something that sounded quite outrageous to the religious experts of the day: “Son, your sins are forgiven” (*Mark* 2,1–12; *Matthew* 9,1–8; *Luke* 5,17–26). They all knew that the forgiving of sins was a prerogative that belonged to God alone. The problem of sin was a very serious matter and it could be settled only through the atoning ritual instituted by God on the Atonement Day (p. 42). Therefore Jesus’ words were immediately interpreted as blasphemy: “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (*Mark* 2,7).

Another remarkable healing was that of a man born blind (*John* 9). Jesus told those who were asking for explanations: “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind” (*John* 9,39). He also said: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (*John* 8,12). How could he claim to be the light of the world and the judge of those who reject him?

The miracle of feeding 5000 people by multiplying a few fish and loaves of bread raised similar questions (*Matthew* 14,15–21; *Mark* 6,35–44; *Luke* 9,10–17; *John* 6,1–15). As if the miracle itself were not enough, he added: “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty” (*John* 6,35). What could this mean? Was he greater than Moses, the one who had led the people of Israel through the wilderness? How could he dare to claim to be the bread of life, “the living bread that came down from heaven” (*John* 6,51)?

Probably the most outstanding kind of miracle was the raising of dead people. In one such instance, he raised Lazarus, who had been lying dead in his grave for four days (*John* 11). Before raising him he said to those present: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (*John* 11,25–26). What could this mean? Could Jesus be one with the giver of life, with God himself? Is this what he meant? Before answering the questions raised so far, let us consider the novelty of his teaching.

JESUS AS A PROPHET

The Old Testament prophets were men with messages from God to the people of Israel. Their messages were mostly warnings against trespassing God’s laws,

warnings of the outcome of their persisting in sinning, and reassurance of God’s care. The people who were listening to Jesus immediately recognized him as a prophet:

They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us”, they said. “God has come to help his people” (*Luke* 7,16, also *Matthew* 21,11; *Mark* 6,15).

However, it seems that Jesus saw himself as more than a prophet. He claimed to be “greater than Jonah” (*Matthew* 12,41) and “greater than Solomon” (*Matthew* 12,42). He even dared to give a new meaning to the words of Moses, the greatest Jewish religious leader of all. He quoted Moses under the formula “You have heard that it was said...” (*Matthew* 5 verses 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43),¹ and then replaced the old teaching by his command “But I tell you...” (*Matthew* 5 verses 22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). For instance:

You have heard that it was said, “Do not commit adultery”.
But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (*Matthew* 5,27–28).

When he was teaching, Jesus did not use the prophetic formula “this is what the Lord says...”, but said “I tell you...”. This means that he did not understand himself as a mere prophet among others. He rarely used the formula “I was sent...” (*Matthew* 15,24; *Luke* 4,43), and preferred to say instead “I have come...”,² which implies his own initiative, an unthinkable claim for a prophet. When Jesus sent his disciples to perform healings and to proclaim the Kingdom of God, they were told to do everything in *his* name. He told them “I am sending you out...” (*Matthew* 10,16; *Luke* 10,3), not “the Lord sends you...” This means that he not only claimed to have a delegated authority from God, but was acting on his own authority, which was unheard of in Judaism.

Another remarkable thing is that Jesus claimed authority over the observance of the Sabbath, saying that “the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (*Mark* 2,28). God had instituted the Sabbath as a holy day of rest and dedication to him (*Exodus* 20,8–11). This is the fourth of the Ten Commandments. By claiming to be the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus assumed

¹ Out of the six sayings of this kind we find in *Matthew* 5, one does not belong to scripture, but to the rabbinic tradition: “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy” (5,43).

² *Matthew* 5,17; 10,34–35; *Mark* 1,38; 2,17; *Luke* 12,49–51; *John* 6,38–42; 8,42; 9,39; 10,10; 12,46; 16,27; 18,37.

the right to reinterpret the most sacred elements of Judaism. An equal consternation must have been produced by his claim to be more important than the Temple (*Mark* 11,15–17; 14,58, *John* 2,20), the sacred meeting place between God and his people.

Concerning his personal stand before God, Jesus claimed to have a distinctive relationship with him, qualitatively different and radically unique. He spoke of his Father in a direct familial way, by calling him Abba, which in Aramaic means “dear father” (*Mark* 14,36). This was quite unusual in Judaism. When speaking about God he called him “my father” in all recorded passages, not “our father” as would have been appropriate for a common man.³ The only explanation would be that he considered himself to be more than a mere man and thus entitled to initiate dramatic changes in Judaism. This would be consistent with his authority to forgive sins, to be the final judge at the Judgment Day (*Matthew* 25,31–33), the one who brings about the Kingdom of God (*Luke* 22,29–30) and the ultimate revealer of God. He said:

All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (*Matthew* 11,27).

In other words, Jesus presented himself to be on a par with God, and this was the ultimate conceivable blasphemy in Judaism. Here we must remember that he was not addressing Hindus familiar with the Upanishadic *atman*-Brahman identity, and therefore his sayings must not be interpreted from a pantheistic point of view, as being valid for anyone. When he said “I and the Father are one” (*John* 10,30), he was speaking in the context of a monotheistic culture. Anyone daring to claim divine attributes was guilty of blasphemy and had to be sentenced to death. This means that the Upanishadic formula “*Aham Brahma Asmi*” (“I am Brahman”)⁴ and Jesus’ words “I and the Father are one” have totally different meanings, because they apply in totally different religious contexts. Jesus could not give pantheistic teachings in a strictly monotheistic culture such as the Judaic one. Such a schizophrenic attitude would be the last thing of which he could be accused. On the contrary, he was always extremely explicit, using common language, so that anyone could understand.

³ In the Lord’s prayer the disciples are taught to pray “Our Father in heaven . . .” (*Matthew* 6,9). This is the way they are taught to address God, but not the way he addressed God.

⁴ *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1,4,10.

What could this mean? That he must have been either a blasphemer, or indeed what he claimed to be, the Son of God. He never gave up such claims, not even at his trial before the religious authorities, who could decide in matters of life and death for him. In order to shorten the whole procedure and accuse him of blasphemy, the high priest asked him directly:

“Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?”

“I am”, said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked. “You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” They all condemned him as worthy of death (*Mark* 14,61–64).

If Jesus was indeed the Son of God, why did he act like that? Why did he choose the role of a victim instead of that of a king, to which his power would have certainly entitled him?

JESUS AS REDEEMER FROM SIN

Judaism was expecting a savior. Malachi, the last prophet of the Old Testament, wrote:

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty (*Malachi* 3,1).

This savior, the Messiah,⁵ was not expected in the form of a poor itinerant preacher as Jesus was. What Jews expected was rather a king like David, one that would expel the Romans from Judea and reinstate the former glory of their nation. Jesus had no such political ambitions. He followed a different agenda. His goal was indeed to ground a new kingdom, but not of the kind his fellow Jews were expecting.

In the first chapter of John’s gospel, John the Baptist says about him: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (*John* 1,29). This introduces us to the top priority on Jesus’ agenda, the element without

⁵ In Hebrew, “Messiah” means “the Anointed One of God.” Its Greek translation in the New Testament is “Christos,” from which the name Christ originates.

which any portrait of him and his ministry is incomplete and wrong. Apart of having a divine nature, Jesus came to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of humankind. This is the central element of all four gospels, not only of John's. He came to establish a new covenant between God and his people. This meant replacing the old covenant, in which a personal relationship between God and humans is mediated by priests and animal sacrifices, with a new covenant, in which he was himself both the high priest and the atoning sacrifice for sins.⁶ The Christ told his disciples of this new covenant on the eve of his trial and crucifixion:

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (*Luke* 22,19–20; *Matthew* 26,27–28).

He told them these things when the Jews were commemorating Passover, the night of their liberation from Egyptian bondage, when they escaped death by the sacrifice of a lamb (*Exodus* 12). However, his disciples didn't understand quite so easily what he meant. They too were expecting him to assume political leadership over Israel and were already planning their own role in the coming (earthly) kingdom (*Mark* 10,35; *Matthew* 20,21; *Luke* 22,24). Therefore he had to help them get the right picture about him and his mission.

In the gospels according to Mark, Matthew and Luke (called the Synoptic gospels), but especially in *Mark*, Jesus seems reluctant to disclose his divine identity. He asks those he had healed to be silent and not advertise his deeds (1,44; 5,43; 7,36; 8,26). Why this secrecy? Did he not believe himself to be the Christ, the Son of God? Was the title "Son of God" inappropriately conferred upon him by the early church? There is no doubt that he wanted to prevent his followers from getting the wrong picture about himself, but what was wrong in their picture that needed correction? It was the portrait of a political Christ they had inherited from Jewish culture. Such expectations had to be corrected, so Jesus deliberately challenged his disciples to state their views about his identity:

⁶ The *Letter to the Hebrews* in the New Testament explains how the new covenant replaced the old.

He asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ" (*Mark* 8,27–30).

He considered it important that his disciples have the right understanding about *who he was*, and not only about *what he said and did*. That he was the Christ, as Peter said, was the right answer. But he added to this portrait a very disturbing element. The Christ would suffer and die:

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again (*Mark* 8,31).

Suddenly their expectations were crushed. Peter rebuked him: "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" (*Matthew* 16,22). In other words, he wanted the Christ to continue his glorious ministry of performing miracles until the whole nation would recognize him as the expected Messiah. But Jesus told them that such a picture of him was utterly wrong. He rebuked Peter in very harsh terms:

"Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (*Mark* 8,32–34).

This was the kind of Christ they had to follow – a suffering Christ that would go to death. As they still didn't have the right picture, he had to remind them the same thing twice: First after they were quarreling about who was going to be the greatest in the coming kingdom (*Mark* 9,31) and again before John and James asked for the most prominent places in this kingdom (*Mark* 10,33). Worldly glory was not part of Jesus' agenda. On the contrary, he was going to sacrifice his life for the sins of all people: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (*Mark* 10,45).

The Christ didn't take advantage of his popularity with the crowds. He had many occasions in which he could have exploited the feelings of people to promote himself as a political leader, but he did not do it. In one instance,

after the miraculous feeding of 5000 men, the Jews thought, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world” (*John* 6,14). It would have been the perfect opportunity to proclaim himself the Messiah they were expecting, if this had been his purpose. Instead, we read that “Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself” (*John* 6,15).

He chose the very opposite context in which to proclaim himself the Messiah. It was at his trial before the Jewish religious establishment, when his image was least likely to represent a man of success:

Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?”

“I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (*Mark* 14,61–62).

His trial was the moment of greatest humiliation, the most counterproductive for issuing Messianic claims for one who aspired to political success. This is the correction he had to make to the image of the Jewish Messiah. Instead of a king, he came as a servant, one that would suffer and be crucified. Instead of liberating Israel by a sudden destruction of all enemies, he came as a sacrifice for their sins.

Atonement by a man’s death through crucifixion was apparently unconceivable for the Jews. According to the Mosaic Law, it meant to be cursed by God as a blasphemer (*Deuteronomy* 21,23). Although his contemporaries were not prepared to accept the atoning meaning of the cross, this was to be the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement. As in the old covenant the scapegoat was cursed for having the sins of all people upon itself, in the new covenant Jesus was the one to bear the sins of all humankind. The prophet Isaiah had written about this seven centuries before it was fulfilled in Jesus:

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (*Isaiah* 53,3–6).

If you saw Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, you have a visual help to understand how this prophecy was fulfilled and how much suffering it involved. His suffering on the cross was no illusion, as the Gnostics claim?⁷ It was so real that none of those present at his crucifixion expected any continuation of his mission. Jesus did not die only in physical appearance, but as a poor miserable man, experiencing suffering in its fullest sense.

However, the story of the Christ does not end with his crucifixion and burial. Otherwise history would have classified him an obscure holy man defeated by injustice and suffering. Surprisingly, all four gospels end with accounts of his resurrection from the dead. It was a physical resurrection, not a mere ghostly apparition. During the 40 days he spent with his disciples after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to “more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time” (*1 Corinthians* 15,6), so that people could accept the reality of his bodily resurrection. As unexpected as his crucifixion was, so was his resurrection. After his disciples witnessed his tragic end on the cross they went into hiding. Nothing could give them hope that things were on the right track. They were so surprised by his resurrection that their first reaction was one of unbelief. Thomas couldn’t believe it even after the other apostles told him they have seen Jesus alive:

So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe” (*John* 20,25–27).

In *Luke*, we see another instance of how difficult it was for the apostles to accept the resurrection of their teacher:

They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

⁷ See Douglas Groothuis, *Revealing the New Age Jesus*, p. 83ff.

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence (*Luke* 24,37–43).

What did the resurrection prove? That his death was assumed by him for *our* sake, and was not a punishment for *his* sins. It proves that he was indeed the sinless Son of God, not a sinner as everybody else. He was the one who carried our sins away, as a fulfillment of the role of the scapegoat in the old covenant. This means that the old covenant was only a picture of what the new covenant would bring, a shadow of the true way of God’s dealing with our sins.⁸ In Christ were fulfilled all Messianic promises to Israel. This was exceptionally clear to Saul of Tarsus, the former persecutor of Christians, who met the risen Christ and thus became the apostle Paul. According to N.T. Wright, the Anglican Bishop of Durham, what Saul understood was this:

The one true God had done for Jesus of Nazareth, in the middle of time, what Saul had thought he was going to do for Israel at the end of time. Saul imagined that YHWH [God] would vindicate Israel after her suffering at the hand of pagans. Instead, he had vindicated Jesus after his suffering at the hands of pagans. Saul had imagined that the great reversal, the great apocalyptic event, would take place all at once, inaugurating the kingdom of God with a flourish of trumpets, setting all wrongs to right, defeating evil once and for all, and ushering in the age to come. Instead, the great reversal, the great resurrection, had happened to one man, all by himself (Wright 1997, p. 36).

Therefore Jesus was not a blasphemer, but indeed the Son of God. The gospels use two different patterns in telling this. The Synoptic gospels tell the story of the historical man, narrating his deeds and words, his death and resurrection, and let readers reach the logical conclusion that he was divine. The fourth gospel, that of John, follows a reversed logic and this is the reason it seems so different. It was written about two decades later than the Synoptics and views the story of Jesus from the standpoint of his divinity. John begins his gospel with the theme

⁸ Again, the *Letter to the Hebrews* in the New Testament is a good guide in explaining how the old sacrificial system was fulfilled by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

of the pre-existing Son of God and reveals how he lived among people and made his divinity known in order that people may believe in him (*John* 20,31). In other words, the Synoptics give reasons for believing that the man Jesus was divine, while *John* describes how the eternal Son of God took on a fully human way of acting.⁹ The two approaches are not to be seen as contradictory, but as complementary.

JESUS’ DIVINITY

John’s gospel provides much help in our quest for understanding the nature of God. The prologue is an abrupt but clear introduction to the divine identity of Christ. The very first verse says:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (*John* 1,1).

The “Word” mentioned here, the Greek *Logos*, is the Christ who pre-existed his human birth (according to verse 14 and the following). The *Logos* theme was a familiar concept of Greek philosophy at the end of the first century AD, but the apostle John gave it a new meaning. According to Greek philosophy, which was the cultural background of his readers, the Word (*Logos*) was considered to be either the natural law that holds the cosmos together (in Stoicism) or a middle being between the supreme transcendent One (the Ultimate Reality) and the world (in Platonism). John chose to use this term as an effective bridge to contemporary culture, but he departed from the classical meaning of the *Logos* when speaking about the Christ. He puzzled readers from the very first verse by claiming that the Christ was both distinct from and identical with God (he was “with God” and “was God”). He was not the same person as God, as he was always *with* God (v.1–2), as the instrument of God’s creation (“through him all things were made” – v. 3), and the ultimate revealer of God:

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known (*John* 1,17–18).

⁹ The two perspectives in Christology are called Christology from below and Christology from above, respectively.

By saying that the Word “was God,” John refers to Jesus divine nature. This means that the God of the Old Testament, whom Jesus called the “Father,” and the Word, the Christ of the New Testament, have the same divine nature. Just as God the Father was seen as the giver of life, *John* says that “in him was life, and that life was the light of men” (1,4). That he is referring here to the Christ, the main character of his gospel, becomes clear by the fact that the “Word” took a human nature:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (*John* 1,14).

Although John used a term from Greek philosophy (*Logos*), it had a different meaning for him. About both the Greek *Logos* and the Christ could be said: “through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” as in *John* 1,3, but only the *Logos* of John’s gospel (God the Son) could “become flesh and make his dwelling among us” (*John* 1,14).¹⁰

But how could God take upon himself a human nature? Does it mean that he replaced his divine nature with a human nature? Or that he had a mixed nature, becoming a semi-divine being as Heracles (Hercules) of Greek mythology? On the contrary, according to Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) the incarnation is not to be seen as a loss of the divine nature, but as an assumption of the human nature for the sake of our salvation. Gerald O’Collins, a longtime professor of Christology at Rome’s Pontifical Gregorian University, comments on this view:

He [Cyril] understood the “becoming” not as a change of nature (as if the Word of God could cease to be what he was/is and change into flesh) but rather as an assumption of something (humanity) for a function (salvation), while remaining what he is as divine (O’Collins 1994, p. 161).

Christ never ceased to be God, neither in his incarnation, nor in his passion. This is a unique feature of the divine Christ. Usually we think of divinity in terms of attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, omni-etc., but the incarnation of Christ points to another feature of his divinity: the ability to refrain from using

¹⁰ In Hinduism, the *Logos* of Platonism is close in meaning to Ishvara, the *Logos* of the Vedanta, who is the first manifestation of Brahman.

such attributes, assume a human nature and become part of our finite world.¹¹ The apostle Paul referred to this feature in his *Letter to the Philippians*:

Who [Christ], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! (*Philippians* 2,6–8)

This “making himself nothing” (Greek *kenosis*) does not mean that he ceased to be God the Son, or that he gave up divine prerogatives.¹² Rather he chose to not use his divine attributes for his own sake and thus to assume the limitations of ordinary human status.¹³ In Christ, God shows his majesty in humility and thus contradicts what we generally assume of him. Rather than ultimate power and immutability, he is to be seen as love, action and movement toward us. Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394) concisely summed up this thought:

It is not the vastness of the heavens, and the bright shining of its constellations, and the order of the universe and the unbroken administration over all existence that so manifestly displays the transcendent power of the Deity, as this condescension to the weakness of our nature.¹⁴

In Christ, God makes himself known to humankind. He is not a god of philosophers, a distant being that can only be known intuitively and only by the brightest minds of humanity, but one who descends into our world and reveals himself using the most suitable way for everybody.

¹¹ In O’Donnell’s remarkable words, “God is all-powerful because he can make himself weak. God is high because he can bend down and make himself low. God’s greatness consists in his vulnerability to human suffering and misery. In short, God is love. Such a statement is not a philosophical statement. It is a statement which is based on an event in which God gives himself to speech” (O’Donnell 1989, p.124).

¹² That he never ceased to be divine can be seen in his miracles, which were always done for the sake of others, not for his own safety and comfort.

¹³ Only in this way can this paragraph in the *Letter to the Philippians* be properly explained. The Philippians had to learn to conduct themselves with similar humility, not taking advantage of a better position in society and using it against their fellow Christians, but instead being servants to one another.

¹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Great Catechism*, 24 (source www.newadvent.org).

FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

Although the Holy Spirit is mentioned less in Scripture than the Father or the Son, his role and nature caused the early Christian Fathers to see him on a par with the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit was the agent of Christ's incarnation (*Luke* 1,35, *Matthew* 1,18), descended upon him at baptism (*Mark* 1,10; *Matthew* 3,16, *Luke* 3,22),¹⁵ inspired his earthly life (*Luke* 4,14–18), and was the agent of his resurrection (*Romans* 8,11). The risen Christ demanded that baptism be performed in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (*Matthew* 28,19). He promised that after his departure the Holy Spirit would continue his mission and would guide the apostles according to his teaching:

But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (*John* 14,26).

That this person is divine and must be taken very seriously is emphasized by the fact that Jesus said that sinning against the Holy Spirit is a more serious offence than sinning against himself:

And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come (*Matthew* 12,31–32; also in *Mark* 3,29; *Luke* 12,10).

Therefore the Holy Spirit was to be considered of the same divine nature with the Father and the Son.¹⁶ Starting from such facts about the relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the early Church Fathers arrived at the doctrine of the Trinity. This is the result of their attempt to express the mystery

of God on the basis of what was revealed by him in the Scripture. As McGrath¹⁷ explains, “Scripture does not contain an explicit doctrine of the Trinity, but bears witness to a God who demands to be understood in a Trinitarian manner” (McGrath 1988, p. 294).

Therefore Christians speak of Ultimate Reality as the Trinity. God exists eternally as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But how can one God consist of three Persons? The first to answer this question was Tertullian (ca. 160–220): “The three are one substance, not one person” (*Against Praxeas*, 25). This puzzle was further thought out by the Church Fathers of the fourth century (especially Athanasius and the Cappadocians – Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus). Their encounter with Greek philosophy and the conflict with heresy demanded that new categories to express the Christian doctrines be found. Following the way the apostle John had redefined the meaning of the Greek Logos, the Church Fathers made a clever move toward making the Christian doctrine intelligible by using the categories of *ousia* and *hypostasis* to express the nature of the Trinity. In neo-Platonic philosophy the Greek *ousia* denoted the impersonal essence of reality, while its determined, singular forms were called *hypostasis*. If they were to be consistent with Greek philosophy, the Church Fathers would have said that the *hypostases* – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – were mere functional aspects of the divine nature *ousia*. But the novelty brought by them was the concept that each person of the Trinity has the fullness of divine nature, and therefore the Ultimate Reality is defined by the reality and the relationship that exists between the three *hypostases* (persons) in the Holy Trinity “of one substance” (*homoousios*).¹⁸ *Hypostasis*, or personhood, is not an addition to being, it is *how* being exists. In other words, there is no Ultimate Reality above and beyond the *hypostases*. Father, Son and Holy Spirit as persons *are* the Ultimate Reality.

The difference from Greek philosophy should be obvious: On the one hand we have an ontological discontinuity between the immovable, indescribable One of Platonism and its mediating, active Logos. On the other hand we have the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit sharing the same divine essence. God's being does not exist outside the three persons, but only as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In this context it is appropriate to quote Joseph Ratzinger, the present

¹⁵ The episode of Jesus' baptism also points to a Trinitarian God: The Father declares Jesus to be his beloved Son, while the Holy Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove.

¹⁶ The Holy Spirit is not an impersonal “energy of God” or “mindfulness” as we find in the understanding of Thich Nhat Hanh (Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*, p. 5 & 89). The Spirit is not an “energy” within Jesus, and naturally present within each of us as “something to be cultivated” (Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*, p. 90). The Holy Spirit is to be understood in personal terms, as a divine Person about whom Jesus said: “When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment” (*John* 16,8).

¹⁷ Alister McGrath is Professor of Historical Theology at the University of Oxford.

¹⁸ This was the result of long debates culminating with the councils of Nicaea (325), when the consubstantiality of the Father and Son was finally stated, and Constantinople (381), when a further agreement about the consubstantiality of Holy Spirit was reached.

Pope Benedict XVI, who points to the fact that “the concept ‘Son’ is a concept of relation. By calling the Lord ‘Son’, John gives him a name that always points away from him and beyond him; he thus employs a term that denotes essentially a relationship.”¹⁹ Therefore we must remember that in Christianity the highest ontological principle is communion, not the impersonal hidden nature of the One.²⁰

A contrast with what we find in Hinduism might be helpful. In the Puranas we find the triad of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva (the creator, the preserver and the destroyer) as manifestations of the supreme Brahman. For the sake of our argument, they may be seen as *hypostases* of Brahman, the Ultimate Reality of the *Upanishads* and of Vedanta, from which they are manifested at the beginning of a cosmic cycle. This picture would be consistent with the neo-Platonic view on *ousia* and its *hypostases*, but it would not be a correct parallel through which to express the Christian Trinity. The major ontological difference between the Trinity and the Hindu triad is that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are not the product of the manifestation of an impersonal essence. In other words, there is no *ousia* beyond the *hypostases* as there is the unmanifested Brahman beyond Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

In the nature of the *hypostases* we find the origin of the term “person” (Latin *persona*).²¹ The Latin theologian Tertullian was the first to use the term *persona*

¹⁹ Ratzinger 1990, p. 133.

²⁰ This is a fundamental issue in inter-religious dialogue. We cannot go beyond the personal aspect of God to find another kind of Ultimate Reality. There is no Brahman or Buddha nature beyond the *hypostases* of the Trinity. On this issue Thich Nhat Hanh is wrong in his understanding of the Christian God. He says: “In discussing whether God is a person or not a person, you are trying to compare the ground of being with one expression at the phenomenal level. You are making a mistake” (Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*, p.11). He is right from the Buddhist perspective, but wrong from the Christian perspective. His picture of “the water and the waves” may be a good illustration for the link between *shunyata* and the phenomenal world in Buddhism, but it is not tenable in picturing the relationship between the nature of God and his creation in Christian terms.

²¹ Cardinal Ratzinger, the present Pope Benedict XVI, provides a very useful comment on the origin of the concept of person: “The confession of faith in God as a person necessarily includes the acknowledgement of God as relatedness, as communicability, as fruitfulness. The unrelated, unrelatable, absolutely one could not be a person. There is no such thing as person in the categorical singular. This is already apparent in the words in which the concept of person grew up: the Greek word ‘prosopon’ means literally ‘(a) look towards’; with the prefix ‘pros’ (towards) it includes the notion of relatedness as an integral part of itself. It is the same with the Latin ‘persona’ = ‘sounding through’; again the ‘per’ = ‘through ... to’ expresses relatedness, this time in the form of communication through speech. In other words, if the absolute is person it is not an absolute singular” (Ratzinger 1969, p. 128–9).

for the *hypostases* of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He was later followed by Augustine as the key figure in shaping Latin Trinitarian theology.

Unfortunately when we think today of three persons in the Trinity who share the same divine essence, we usually imagine three gods living in close relationship. This image is the result of later developments of the term “person”. Today the concept of “person in communion” is no longer understood ontologically, as the fundamental aspect of being, but is defined psychologically, as individual personality, or as a free center of action and self-consciousness.²² Therefore for our Western mindset a better understanding of the original meaning would be provided by the formula of Thomas Aquinas, probably the greatest Catholic theologian of all times (1225–1274), who defined the three persons of the Trinity as “subsistent relations” (*Summa Theologica* 1,29). He replaced the term “person” (the original *hypostasis*) with “subsistence” (that which subsists by itself) and so preserved the original Greek meaning. He also laid a great stress on relationship, indicating that each person is defined by its relationship to the other two. For Aquinas “person” signifies relationship. In his words, “a divine person signifies a relation as subsisting.” The very word “person” signifies in God a relationship “as subsisting in the divine nature.”

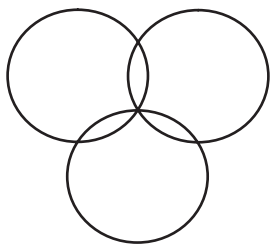
Karl Rahner, a modern Catholic theologian, has introduced a more technical term, that of “three distinct manners of subsisting” in order to avoid the understanding of three subjectivities and three essences in the Trinity. Instead of speaking of one *ousia* and three *hypostases*, he prefers to say that “the one and same divine essence subsists in each of the three distinct manners of subsisting” (Rahner 1999, p. 109ff). Although they are aimed at avoiding confusion, such theological terms are difficult to use in common language. Therefore I will continue to use the term “person,” but keeping in mind its limitations. The two extremes to be avoided are clear: neither are there three gods in the Trinity, nor can we speak of an impersonal absolute substance as defining the nature of God. In the words of Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity: “Neither the substance of the ancients, nor the person of the moderns is ultimate, but rather relation as the primordial category of reality” (Kasper 1984, p. 290).

²² According to O’Collins, in our modern understanding a person is “this rational and free individual, who is the subject and center of action and relationships and who enjoys incommunicable identity, inalienable dignity and inviolable rights” (O’Collins 1994, p. 235). This perspective was started by John Locke, who defined the person as “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places” (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II,27,9).

Of further help in understanding the nature of God and the way in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit interact is the concept of *perichoresis*. It was first used by Gregory of Nazianzus (325–389) for describing the relationship between the two natures of Christ, and then taken over by John Damascene as applying to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Catherine LaCugna, late professor of systematic theology at the University of Notre Dame, finds it an effective defense against tritheism and subordination within the Trinity:

[...] *perichoresis* expressed the idea that the three divine persons mutually inhere in one another, draw life from one another, “are” what they are by relation to one another. *Perichoresis* means being-in-one-another, permeation without confusion. No person exists by him/herself or is referred to him/herself; this would produce number and therefore division within God. Rather, to be a divine person is to be *by nature* in relation to other persons. Each divine person is irresistibly drawn to the other, taking his/her existence from the other, containing the other in him/herself, while at the same time pouring self out into the other (LaCugna 1991, p. 270–71).

The concept of *perichoresis* follows from the words of Christ describing his intimate relationship with the Father: “I am in the Father, and the Father is in me” (*John* 14,10, 17,21). The best image that could provide a clue to the nature of the relationship between the persons of the Trinity, each sharing in the life of the other two, penetrating them and being penetrated by them, is that of three circles partially overlapping. As there are not three independent individualities in the Trinity, the circles are not separated, and as there is no essence above the persons, there is nothing in the drawing except the three circles:



Although this introduction to the nature of God may seem irrelevant, unnecessary and boring Christian theology, especially for non-Christian readers, I could not leave anything out. My insistence on the doctrine of the Trinity points to the fact that God is supremely relational. He is to be understood neither as a projection of human qualities exalted beyond human limits,²³ nor in terms of Greek or Hindu philosophy. What is of utmost importance for us to understand so far is that the Ultimate Reality in Christianity is a personal God, defined by the relations existing in the Trinity. The ultimate ground and meaning of Ultimate Reality is communion among persons. Personhood rather than impersonal substance is the origin and meaning of all existence.

²³ According to Rahula, “For self-protection man has created God, on whom he depends for his own protection, safety and security, just as a child depends on its parent” (Rahula 1974, p. 51).

CHAPTER 5

THE TEACHING OF THE BUDDHA ACCORDING TO THERAVADA AND MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

On the other side of the world, in Northern India, more than five centuries before the Christ, the Buddha lived in a very different religious context. As we saw in chapter 1, the main issue was not sin, but escaping from illusion and finding a way of liberating the self from reincarnation. In his own setting, the Buddha was no less a revolutionary than the Christ in reshaping the religion of his people. He took up the role of a physician who diagnosed the sickness of our world, indicated the cause and prescribed the proper remedy. The name of the disease is suffering, the cause is craving for something that is illusory, and the remedy for this disease is giving up craving by following a path that can break its bondage. This is the content of the Four Noble Truths, to which we now turn.

THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH

The Buddha built his entire system of thought on three major doctrines: suffering, impermanence and no-self. They are very closely interlinked and introduce us directly to the heart of Buddhism. Suffering (*dukkha*) is a chronic disease that

thoroughly affects the human condition. This is the First Noble Truth discovered by the Buddha. Suffering is not mere physical or emotional pain, but something much more intrinsic to our nature. The Buddha stated:

Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering, not to obtain what one wants is suffering, in short the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering. This is called suffering (MN 9,15).

Suffering is in everything we experience because of the false way we define the human condition. We take for granted what is in fact an illusion. At a closer look nothing is what it seems to be or, in other words, nothing has a permanent nature. Everything is in constant transformation, becoming something different from what it was a moment ago. This leads us to the second major doctrine associated with the First Noble Truth, the doctrine of impermanence (*anicca*), which says that any aspect of our human nature, any aspect of our world, anything we can imagine is nothing but a momentary product and a momentary cause in an infinite chain of becoming. Our body is in constant change, our cells are constantly dying and being replaced, we grew older, the way we look changes, so physically we are not the same entity that we were yesterday or a year ago. The Buddha drew a very grim portrait of the body:

Look at this dressed-up lump, covered with wounds, joined together, sickly, full of many thoughts, which has no strength, no hold! This body is wasted, full of sickness, and frail; this heap of corruption breaks to pieces, life indeed ends in death. Those white bones, like gourds thrown away in the autumn, what pleasure is there in looking at them? After a stronghold has been made of the bones, it is covered with flesh and blood, and there dwell in it old age and death, pride and deceit (*Dhammapada* 147–150).¹

Neither can our emotional or intellectual life provide a source of stability. Our emotions are changing, our thoughts are changing, our knowledge is changing, so that emotionally and intellectually we are never the same from one minute to the next. The *Upanishads* reached a similar position, but still identified the self (*atman*) as the unchangeable aspect of our nature. But the Buddha was even more radical than the *Upanishads* in defining human nature. He denied there is an unchanging,

¹ Max Müller's translation. Source www.sacred-texts.com.

permanent, and everlasting self that would define our nature, incarnate and eventually attain liberation. This is the third fundamental doctrine associated with the First Noble Truth, called the no-self (*anatta*) doctrine. What we call a “self” or a “person” is in fact the product of five factors that depend upon each other and are themselves in a constant process of becoming. These five factors, called aggregates (*kandha*), are the following:

1. The body, also called the material form (*rūpa*);
2. Feeling (*vedana*), the sensations that arise from the six sense organs,² which can be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral;
3. Cognition (*sanna*), the process of classifying and labeling sensory and mental objects, which enables us to recognize them;
4. Mental constructions (*samkhara*), the states which initiate action and give shape to our character (as volitional acts);³
5. Consciousness (*vinna*), the sense of awareness of a sensory or mental object, the aggregate that generates the illusion of a self.

This heap of aggregates generates the illusion of personal existence, the false notions of person (*puggala*), vital principle (*jīva*) and self (*atman*). In fact there is no independent and unchanging witness behind the ever changing phenomenal world, no *atman*, no everlasting soul at all.⁴ The human being is merely a cluster of ever changing physical and mental processes, a mere heap of the five aggregates, which has no underlying self. Williams explains:

Thus the person is reducible to the temporary bundle of bundles where all constituents are radically impermanent, temporarily held together through causal relationships of the right sort (Williams 2000, p. 70).

² The six sense organs are the five senses and the mind. The mind senses the world of ideas and thoughts, just as the other five sense the material world.

³ According to Rahula, there are 52 mental activities which make the fourth aggregate (attention, will, determination, confidence, concentration, wisdom, energy, desire, hate, ignorance, conceit, idea of self, etc.). Only these can produce karmic effects (Rahula 1974, pp. 22–23).

⁴ The view that the Buddha didn't exclude any sort of self is untenable. His teaching doesn't allow us to think that he merely excluded a self in the five aggregates while accepting a self of another kind or beyond them. On the view that he denied a selfish ego and not the *atman*, expressed by authors such as Rhys Davis, Zaehner, Radhakrishnan and Coomaraswamy, see (Williams 2000, pp. 60–62, Collins 1982, pp 7–10 and Rahula 1974, pp. 55–56).

The aggregates themselves are to be seen as “impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as void, as not self” (MN 64, 9). Buddhaghosa gives us a suggestive picture of the five aggregates in the *Visuddhimagga* (XIV, 224):

Body is like a heap of foam because it cannot endure being pounded, feeling is like a bubble on water because it is enjoyed for a moment, perception is like a mirage because it is illusory, mental formations are like a banana tree because they have no core, and consciousness is like an illusion because it deceives (in Collins 1982, pp. 125–6).

In the MN 22,25–29 the Buddha analyzes each of the five aggregates and finds them to be impermanent, under the power of suffering and incapable of being labeled as the self. All five are subject to becoming and are inter-conditioned. The idea of a self is a false belief that only leads to strife and attachment (“Who am I?”), to desire (“What is mine?”), and to all related problems. We can see how the three foundational doctrines of the First Noble Truth, suffering, impermanence and no-self, explain each other. We do not merely suffer in life, but life itself is suffering because all of it is impermanent and conditioned. If all is impermanent there is no room for a self to define human nature. If there is no permanent self, nothing can give meaning to personal existence, and all experience can only be termed as suffering.

A problem of language arises concerning the use of personal pronouns such as *I*, *you*, *he*, *she*, etc. What do we mean by them, since there is no underlying self attached to the illusory persons they depict? According to Dasgupta, “when the Buddha told his birth stories saying that he was such and such in a such and such life, he only meant that his past and his present belonged to one and the same lineage of momentary existences” (Dasgupta 1975, p. 118). Rupert Gethin⁵ gives a similar definition: “My sense of self is both logically and emotionally just a label that I impose on these physical and mental phenomena in consequence of their connectedness” (Gethin 1998, p. 139). Therefore such pronouns must be seen as referring to a particular collection of physical and mental states, a temporary heap of five aggregates. As it is difficult to operate with such a way of naming a person, the Buddha continued to use pronouns as convenient conventions in order to teach his

⁵ Rupert Gethin is a Lecturer in Indian Religions in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, and co-director of the Centre for Buddhist Studies at the University of Bristol, and President of the Pali Text Society.

disciples.⁶ But we must always be aware of the reality that stands behind these conventions.

THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH

The cause of suffering is craving, the desire to experience the illusion of permanence, expressed as craving for the objects of sense desire (especially sensual desires), and as craving for existence or non-existence, i.e., for ways of being which are the product of ignorance. The Buddha stated:

And what is the origin of suffering? It is craving (*tanha*), which brings renewal of being, is accompanied by delight and lust, and delights in this and that; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being, and craving for non-being. This is called the origin of suffering (MN 9,16).

Humans are craving for such things because of their belief in the permanence of the self and of the world. They enjoy the illusion of having a self, of having personal existence and of living in a permanent world. The result is that the spiritual law of karma becomes operational. We have seen in the *Upanishads* why the self is trapped in illusion, the subject of karma and reincarnation. But as there is no self in Buddhism, what could possibly be the object of karma and rebirth? The answer is that a particular chain of conditioned causes and effects is being reborn.⁷ A more comprehensive way of explaining how suffering and rebirth are fueled is provided by the Buddha in the chain of conditioned arising (*paticca samutpada*) in the DN 15. It consists of a series of twelve links, each generating the next without the need of a permanent self. Briefly, the twelve links in causal order are the following:

1. spiritual ignorance (*avijja*) – the misperception of reality as a result of past life deeds. As a result one develops →
2. mental constructions (*samkhara* – the fourth aggregate) – actions of the will, which initiate actions in ignorance. They build up the →

⁶ In the 21st chapter of the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa says: “I am nowhere a somewhatness for anyone” (in Kretser 1954, p. 119).

⁷ The absence of a self is the reason why in Buddhism we speak of rebirth instead of reincarnation.

3. discriminative consciousness (*vinmana* – the fifth aggregate). This is the seed of a new rebirth in which it will produce →
4. name-and-body (*nama-rupa* – the first aggregate) – the mentality and materiality in a new sentient being, which is equipped with →
5. six senses (*salayatana*), the five physical sense organs plus the mind (sensitive to mental objects) which open the way for →
6. sensory stimulation (*phassa*), the basis for arising →
7. feeling (*vedana* – the second aggregate) – pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, developing into →
8. craving (*tanha*) – the desire to enjoy, prolong or get rid the feelings, developing into →
9. grasping (*upadana*), to different courses of action in order to produce the experiences we love. This leads to →
10. becoming (*bhava*), the continuation of life as a new fetus, →
11. birth (*jati*), which leads to →
12. ageing and death (*jaramarana*).

The twelve links cycle extends over three lives: from ignorance to consciousness (1 to 3) we have the origin of present existence in a past life (through karma), from name-and-body to grasping (4 to 9) we have the present life in which new seeds of karma are produced, and the last three (from becoming to death) belong to a future life. However, death is not the end of this causal process. Since ignorance hasn't been extinguished, the chain of cause and effect starts all over again in an endless cycle, until one attains enlightenment and thus is able to break it.

Therefore rebirth can occur without a self. Only karma is passing from one life to another like a fuel devoid of ontological substance. The *Milinda Panha* gives two illustrations to explain it: the flame of an oil-lamp which is lighted from another lamp and the transfer of a verse from teacher to pupil (*Milinda Panha* 5.5). Neither the flame nor the verse has a substance of its own and no transfer of substance is involved.⁸ It is certainly easier to understand how reincarnation works in Hinduism, with a self as its ground, than in Buddhism. Here we have no self to travel from one life to the next

⁸ Schumann says: "The consciousness of the person who died works in the womb of the future mother as the spark that kindles life. It kindles the factors of mother and begetter into a flame (the child), but the spark is present in the flame that it conditions, not as something substantial, but merely as a condition sine qua non. In the course of development the child evolves its own consciousness, which is not identical with the consciousness that originated it" (Schumann 2004, p. 141).

accompanied by a karmic body. In Buddhism karma is transmitted without such a ground, as the aggregates cannot act as a self and thus survive death. Schumann comments:

The successive existences in a series of rebirths are not like the pearls in a necklace, held together by a string, the "soul", which passes through all the pearls; rather they are like dice piled one on top of the other. Each die is separate, but it supports the one above it with which it is functionally connected. Between the dice there is no identity, no conditionality (Schumann 2004, pp. 139–40).

Karma simply dictates the reconstruction of the five aggregates according to the mental pattern that was developed in a previous collection of them. To the one who still thinks in terms of who is reborn, the same individual or another one, Schumann says:

We should not think: 'I will be reborn,' but rather: 'This chain of rebirths *takes place* according to karma. All the empirical individuals in the chain will have the experience of egohood, but this empirical ego is not a permanent something, a soul, is not identical with previous and subsequent existences.' The ego or self is a phenomenon of experience, nothing substantial, not an entity (Schumann 2004, p. 140).

The states of mind cultivated in a lifetime, or rather states of mind that are allowed to overwhelm one, will dictate subsequent lives. Higher mental states result in a better human rebirth or one in the realm of gods. Lower mental states are produced by the three poisons that darken the mind – greed, hatred and delusion, and therefore bring a lower rebirth in hell, in the realm of animals or in that of ghosts.⁹ One simply becomes as one's states of mind were during human existence.

THE THIRD NOBLE TRUTH

Since craving is the cause of suffering, the cessation of craving leads to the cessation of suffering. The Buddha stated:

And what is the cessation of suffering? It is the remainderless fading away and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go, and

⁹ See MN 12,35–36 and Schumann 2004, p. 135.

rejecting of that same craving. This is called the cessation of suffering (MN 9,17).

When craving ends, karma has no fuel left and suffering ceases. Craving is the eighth link in the chain of dependent causation. Once craving is stopped, the chain is broken, and one attains the only permanent state, that of nirvana.

As a state attained during life, nirvana is a specific experience in which all defilements are destroyed, and all conditioned states cease to produce new ones. The one who attains nirvana is called an *arahat* (“a living enlightened one”),¹⁰ one who has completed all spiritual training, overcome the disease of suffering and attained complete mental quietude. At physical death the *arahat* enters *parinirvana*, the state of never returning to this world of suffering. Whether the *arahat* exists beyond death or is extinct is not a legitimate question. In order to eliminate any speculation and consequently any reason for clinging to views, the Buddha said that the state of the *arahat* after death does not belong to any of the following four categories: existing, non-existing, both existing and non-existing, neither existing nor non-existing. He used such evasive language because his doctrine was not intended as a philosophical treatise to provide all answers to all unnecessary questions. All discussions and philosophical debates concerning “whether the world is eternal or not, finite or not, whether the soul is the same as body or not, whether the Tathagata exists after death or not” (MN 63,2) are hindrances in attaining liberation because they generate attachment to philosophical views and the result is persistence in suffering. When he explained this to the monk Malunkyaputta he used the famous metaphor of the man wounded by a poisoned arrow:

Suppose, Malunkyaputta, a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives brought a surgeon to treat him. The man would say: “I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble or a Brahmin or a merchant or a worker.” And he would say: “I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know the name and clan of the man who wounded me; until I know whether the man who wounded me was tall or short or of middle height; ... until I know whether the man who wounded

¹⁰ According to Conze, one of the most important translators of Buddhist texts in the West, “The Buddhists themselves derived the word ‘Arhat’ from the two words ‘Ari,’ which means ‘enemy,’ and ‘han,’ which means ‘to kill,’ so that an Arhat would be ‘A slayer of the foe’ [the foe being the passions] (Conze 1959, p. 93).

me was dark or brown or golden-skinned;... until I know whether the man who wounded me lives in such a village or town or city; ... until I know whether the bow that wounded me was a long bow or a crossbow; until I know whether the bowstring that wounded me was fibre or reed or sinew or hemp or bark; .. until I know [etc., etc...]

All this would still not be known to that man and meanwhile he would die. So too, Malunkyaputta, if anyone should say thus: Blessed one declares to me: “the world is eternal”...or “after death a Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist” that would still remain undeclared by the Tathagata and meanwhile that person would die. [...]

Why have I left that undeclared? Because it is unbeneficial, it does not belong to the fundamentals of the holy life, it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. That is why I have left it undeclared (MN 63, 5–7).

Our real problem is to escape from suffering. The Buddha discouraged speculative thinking on such issues so that one would concentrate all efforts in reaching nirvana, a state where answers lose all importance, not because they are found, but because in nirvana there is no one left to get them. Nirvana is neither a re-absorption into an eternal Ultimate Reality (as the *atman*-Brahman reunion), because such a thing does not exist, nor, as Rahula¹¹ rightly points out, an “annihilation of self, because there is no self to annihilate. If at all, it is the annihilation of the illusion, of the false idea of self” (Rahula 1974, p. 37). It is not a self that is extinguished, but the fires that sustain rebirth – greed (*raga*), hatred (*dosha*) and delusion (*moha*), and with them, birth, ageing and death.¹² The proper image to describe this is the flame of an oil lamp which goes out when wick and oil are finished. The Buddha explained it to the monk Vacchagotta using the following metaphor:

¹¹ Walpola Rahula (1907–1997) was the Professor of History and Religions at Northwestern University, and also the first Buddhist monk in such an academic position in the western world.

¹² Lynn de Silva, a Sri Lankan Methodist theologian, gives a very helpful interpretation: “The Pali term *Nibbana* (Sanskrit *Nirvana*) is composed of the particles ‘Ni’ and ‘Vana’. *Ni* is a particle implying negation and *Vana* means weaving or craving. It is this craving that weaves a cord connecting one life with another. This is the meaning that the great commentator Anuruddha gives to the term: “It is called *Nibbana*, in that it is a “departure” from the craving which is called *vana*, lusting.’ As long as the craving lasts one accumulates fresh karmic forces which bind one to the eternal cycle of birth and death. But when the cord is cut and all forms of craving are extirpated, the karmic forces cease to operate, thus ending the cycle of birth and death, and one attains *Nibbana*” (Silva 1979, p. 63).

If someone were to ask you, Vaccha: “When that fire before you was extinguished, to which direction did it go: to the east, the west, the north, or the south?” – being asked thus, what would you answer?” “That does not apply, Master Gotama. The fire burned in dependence on its fuel of grass and sticks. When that is used up, if it does not get any more fuel, being without fuel, it is reckoned as extinguished.” “So too, Vaccha, the Tathagata has abandoned that material form by which one describing the Tathagata might describe him, he has cut it off at the root, made it like a palm stump, done away with it so that it is no longer subject to future arising (MN 72, 19–20).

In the *Sutta Nipata* he says:

“As a flame blown about by the violence of the wind, O Upasiva,” – so said Bhagavat, – “goes out, cannot be reckoned (as existing), even so a Muni, delivered from name and body, disappears, and cannot be reckoned (as existing).”¹³

THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH

As the Buddha prescribed, the treatment one has to follow in order to escape suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path, a spiritual discipline consisting of the eight practices of self-training:

And what is the way leading to the cessation of suffering? It is just this Noble Eightfold Path; that is right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration (MN 9,18).

The eight practices of self-training can be classified into three categories:

- Ethical conduct (*sila*) – right speech, right action and right livelihood;
- Mental discipline (*samadhi*) – right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration;
- Wisdom (*panna*) – right view and right intention.

Ethical conduct (*sila*), the first category, aims at generating a state of perfect self-control and contentment. It states what one has to refrain from. *Right speech* means refraining from false, divisive and harmful speech. *Right action* asks for refraining from harming beings, taking what is not given and sexual misconduct. *Right*

livelihood forbids one to have a job that would cause suffering to other beings (such as trading weapons, meat, alcohol, drugs and poison).

Mental discipline (*samadhi*), the second category, aims at taming the mind, which is the key to defeating illusion.

Right effort promotes a right attitude of the mind by preventing unarisen unwholesome states, abandoning arisen unwholesome states, arousing unarisen wholesome states and developing arisen wholesome states. A mental state is wholesome or not depending on whether it is affected by the three poisons of greed, hatred and delusion. An unwholesome state of mind arises as a result of present attachments or past karma. Wholesome states are the result of proper meditation and moral conduct.

Right mindfulness is achieved through insight meditation (*vipassana*), which consists of a series of four contemplations having as object 1) the body, 2) the feelings, 3) the mind and 4) ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things (following Rahula 1974, p. 48). Each contemplative meditation is aimed at providing the right understanding of its object in terms of its arising and transformation. As a result, awareness of the impermanent nature of mental and physical processes is attained.

Right concentration is achieved in the four steps (the four *jhanas*) of calm meditation (*samatha*), as a capacity of the mind to rest undisturbed on a single object of perception. This exercise of focusing attention on a single object destroys the passions that perturb the mind and help it become clear. Practically one concentrates on a particular object, chosen according to his or her own mental dispositions. The most usual object of concentration is one's breath (the mindfulness of breathing – as taught in the *Mahāsatipathana Sutta*, MN 118). Other things one can focus the mind upon in calm meditation are material objects, like colored disks, called *kasinas*.

Calm meditation and insight meditation are complementary. The first is about controlling the defilements of the mind, while the second is about letting them go completely as a result of having understood their nature.

Wisdom (*panna*), the third category, is the result of meditation. It consists of attaining *perfection in view* (on the impermanent nature of the world, the Four Noble Truths, karma and rebirth) and *perfection in intention* (cultivating desirelessness, friendliness and compassion towards all beings).

It is important to remember that the one who engages in this path must rely exclusively on his own inner strength, as no grace is available from a personal god or from any other being. The Buddha taught:

¹³ *Sutta Nipata* V,7,6 (1073), source www.sacred-texts.com

Therefore, Ananda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge. And how does a monk live as an island unto yourself, ... with no other refuge? [...] And those who now in my time or afterwards live thus, they will become the highest, if they are desirous of learning (DN 16,2,26).

The result of perfect practice is attaining enlightenment and becoming an *arahat*, one who has completed training, conquered suffering, abandoned ignorance and craving, achieved freedom from rebirth and thus reached the supreme wisdom the Buddha himself had reached centuries ago. Whether this achievement means annihilation at death or not is a matter of debate. Several outstanding Buddhist scholars like Oldenberg, Poussin, Burnouf or Stcherbatsky have found no difficulty in accepting an annihilationist view of nirvana. Stcherbatsky explains nirvana as “‘life’s annihilation,’ comparable to the extinction of a fire when its fuel is exhausted.”¹⁴ Rahula explains the meaning of *parinirvana* as following: “*Parinibbuto* simply means ‘fully passed away,’ ‘fully blown out’ or ‘fully extinct,’ because the Buddha or an Arahant has no re-existence after his death” (Rahula 1974, p. 41). In light of the definition of human nature as nothing more than the heap of five aggregates, E. Lamotte¹⁵ writes on the condition of the enlightened one at death:

After the decease of the Holy One, all his Aggregates, impure and pure, disappear, and the Holy One is no longer to be found anywhere; he has reached complete Nirvana. [...] Secure from birth, disease, old-age-and-death, Nirvana is supreme happiness (M. I,508), but since feeling is absent from it, what causes the bliss of Nirvana is precisely the absence of bliss (A.IV, 414) (Lamotte in Bechert 1984, pp. 51–52).

The idea of the enlightened one no longer being found after death is what the Buddha preached about the monk Godhika in SN I,4,3 (the *Marasamyutta*). Godhika attained the state of supreme enlightenment six times and lost it, due to a disease. The seventh time he committed suicide so he might not lose it again. The Mara went looking for Godhika’s rebirth but could not find it in any of

the possible realms of existence. Nothing of Godhika was left. The same view is presented in the *Udana*. It ends with the following words of the Buddha:

As the fiery sparks from a forge, one by one, are extinguished
And no one knows whither they have gone;
So is it with those who have attained to complete emancipation,
Who have crossed the flood of desire.
Who have entered upon the tranquil joy (of Nirvana) –
Of these no trace remains (*Udana* 8,10).¹⁶

So far I have briefly described the message of the Buddha as interpreted by the earliest schools of Buddhism.¹⁷ Today it represents the view of Theravada Buddhism, the only surviving school of early Buddhism. As you probably are aware, this is not the only tradition that claims to have faithfully preserved his teaching. Therefore we must go on to discuss the other great tradition of Buddhism, known as the Mahayana.

DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENT IN MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

Several causes generated a new understanding of the message of the Buddha. First, new sutras appeared that didn’t belong to the early Canon, but which also claimed to recollect the Buddha’s words. They were written in Sanskrit, not in Pali, and are much longer and stylistically different from the short discourses of the early schools, proving them to be the product of a written rather than an oral culture. The most important are the *Prajnaparamita* sutras (the “Perfection of Wisdom” sutras)¹⁸ and the *Saddharma-pundarika sutra* (“the Lotus of the True Doctrine”).¹⁹ Second, the doctrine of no-self (*anatta*) was pushed beyond denying a self in the five aggregates towards new conceptual developments. Thus was grounded the doctrine of emptiness. Third, the new trend viewed *arahatship* as a limited spiritual attainment. While in the old tradition to become an *arahat* meant the end of one’s spiritual quest, this goal came to be seen as selfish. *Arahatship* was now seen as a

¹⁶ Source: www.sacred-texts.com

¹⁷ For an introduction to the schools of early Buddhism see Harvey 1990, pp. 85–89 and Thomas 2002, chapter 3.

¹⁸ According to Conze, this corpus of writings was produced from 100 BC to AD 500 (Williams 1989, p. 41).

¹⁹ This has been dated around AD 200 (Harvey 1990, p. 92).

¹⁴ Quoted in Collins 1982, p. 12. See also Collins on Oldenberg’s view in Collins 1982, p. 11.

¹⁵ Etienne Lamotte (1903–1983) was a professor at the Catholic University of Louvain, and a world authority in Buddhist studies.

limited version of perfection, preached by the Buddha for the ignorant people of his day. The new sutras portrayed him preaching a higher truth for those prepared to accept it. A perfected being cannot seek liberation just for himself or herself and leave all others behind in suffering. One's true spiritual attainment is that of becoming a *bodhisattva*, an aspirant to full Buddhahood, and thus help countless other beings to escape suffering.

The new movement was called Mahayana ("the great vehicle"), in contrast with the old teaching, which was termed Hinayana ("the inferior vehicle").²⁰ The greatness of the new doctrine consists in its superiority of wisdom; in its superior goal – that of becoming a Buddha, not just an *arabat*; and in its compassionate motivation – that of saving countless beings from suffering. Let us analyze these new developments.

A NEW WISDOM: THE DOCTRINE OF EMPTINESS

According to the Theravada Abhidharma²¹ view of the world, all physical objects and mental events consist of ultimate building blocks called *dharmas* (Pali *dhammas*). They are seen as real and reliable objects of knowledge. A helpful illustration of the *dharmas* of Theravada Buddhism would be the atoms that build up our physical world. As atoms each belong to a certain chemical element (oxygen, carbon, iron, etc.) and their combinations account for any object of the physical world, so in Buddhism the combinations of *dharmas* account for both the physical objects and mental events. According to the Theravada school there are 82 *dharmas*: 28 that account for physical phenomena, 52 for mental phenomena, one is consciousness and one is nirvana.

The Mahayana criticized this theory of the *dharmas* for being inconsistent with the doctrine of no-self. The reason is that these "ultimate" building blocks of reality must be seen themselves as lacking an inherent nature of their own. In other words, as the human being exists merely as a product of the five aggregates, *dharmas* must also be seen as mere products of interaction or else the doctrines of impermanence and of no-self are compromised.

The *dharmas* cannot be real entities that interact, but conditioned entities whose nature is given by their relationship with other entities. Their true "nature" is "emptiness" (*shunyata*),²² which is not a substance which composes the *dharmas*, a kind of Ultimate Reality like Brahman of the *Upanishads*, but rather "an adjectival quality of the *dharmas*" (Harvey 1990, p. 99). The doctrine of emptiness denies any kind of substantial Ultimate Reality and, according to Harvey, affirms that the world is to be seen as "a web of fluxing, inter-dependent, baseless phenomena."²³ To realize the emptiness of *dharmas*, the fact that nothing, at any level, has inherent existence, is the new wisdom (*prajna*) advocated by the *Prajnaparamita* sutras. The one who systematized this doctrine was Nagarjuna at the end of the second century AD, the founder of the first major school of Mahayana Buddhism, the Madhyamika.

The consequences of the doctrine of emptiness are profound. Buddhist doctrines themselves fall under its spell. The four noble truths must be seen as empty of ultimate truth. Even the doctrine of emptiness must be seen as empty of any ultimate truth. The ultimate truth then, as summarized by Harvey, is that "reality is inconceivable and inexpressible" (Harvey 1990, p. 102). Another interesting result of the doctrine of emptiness concerns the nature of nirvana. It is itself a *dharma* and therefore must be conditioned by its relationship to the *dharmas* of *samsara*, the world of suffering. While in Theravada nirvana is called the "unborn, deathless and not impermanent," according to the new doctrinal development its ultimate nature is emptiness, so it has the same nature with all other *dharmas*. The result, according to Harvey, is that "*nirvana* and *samsara* are not two separate realities, but the field of emptiness seen by either spiritual ignorance or true knowledge" (Harvey 1990, p. 103). Nagarjuna in his *Madhyamaka karika* says it this way:

There is nothing whatsoever differentiating *samsara* (the round of rebirth) from *nirvana*. There is nothing whatsoever differentiating *nirvana* from *samsara*.

²⁰ Theravada Buddhism is the only school which survived of the so-called Hinayana branch of Buddhism.

²¹ *Abhidharma pitaka* is the collection of commentaries which systematize the teaching of the sutras, one of the three sections of the canon, besides the *Sutra pitaka* and the *Vinaya pitaka* (the monastic rules).

²² The concept of *shunya* was invented by the ancient mathematicians of India, who founded our decimal notation. They used the concept of zero (*shunya*), which in itself is empty of any content, but can make sense in relation to other ciphers. 0 as itself means nothing, but 0 with a 1 before it makes 10. Similarly with the 0 of mathematics, the *dharmas* have no inherent nature.

²³ Harvey 1990, p. 99. Peter Harvey is Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Sunderland.

The limit of *nirvana* is the limit of *samsara*. Between the two there is not the slightest bit of difference (25,19–20, in Williams 1989, p. 69).

The immediate application of this insight is that one does not need to *escape samsara* to *attain* nirvana. The view that one *attains* nirvana betrays a hidden belief in a self.²⁴ The right view is that nirvana is already present in the conditioned world. It only has to be realized by the right insight on the nature of things. It needs not to be attained, but to be uncovered. This way of seeing things has immediate consequences on the way a Buddha helps beings engulfed in suffering: What the Buddha needs to do is to help these beings *uncover* their *own* hidden nature.

Another application is that there is really no one to attain nirvana. This was already anticipated in the Theravada teaching as the result of the doctrine of no-self in the five aggregates. If the human being is nothing but a temporary bundle of aggregates, it is this bundle that attains nirvana, not a permanent self. What is now made clear by the doctrine of impermanence is that the real subject of awakening is the *Dhamma* itself. Masao Abe, one of the main representatives of Zen Buddhism in the West, argues that we can see awakening in a new sense: “Dharma is the subject of its own-awakening and you are a channel of its self-awakening” (Abe 1995, p. 188). *Dhamma* is a law that resurfaces in every so-called awakened being, or in other words, nirvana actualizes itself in the illusory world of *samsara*.

A NEW MOTIVATION: BECOMING A BUDDHA FOR THE SAKE OF COUNTLESS BEINGS

Instead of viewing *arabhatship* as one’s final spiritual attainment, Mahayana Buddhism has redefined it in terms of becoming a *bodhisattva* holy being and ultimately a Buddha. A *bodhisattva* (“the one who is on the way of attaining perfect knowledge”) is a being in whom compassion has been aroused for all sentient beings in the universe and who has vowed to remove all their suffering. Such a

²⁴ In the *Dhyāyitāmūṣṭī sūtra* it is said about the one holding such a belief: “He thinks, “I am released from all pains, there is nothing more for me to do, I am an arhat.” Thus he forms the idea of a self, and at the time of death he is convinced of the rebirth (*utpatti*) of the self, so that doubt and uncertainty arise, and uncertainty about the enlightenment of an enlightened one. When he dies, he falls into the great hell, because although all things are unoriginated he imagines them as real” (quoted in Thomas 1951, p. 223).

being is determined to be reborn no matter how many times it takes to attain the highest possible goal, that of becoming a Buddha.

One is set on the right path toward Buddhahood once he or she has developed the *bodhicitta*, the mind of (or the aspiration for supreme) enlightenment. *Bodhicitta* encompasses both compassion and the knowledge of emptiness. Only as a result of having mastered the doctrine of emptiness can the *bodhisattva* engage in saving suffering beings. Only by possessing this wisdom can he or she make the vow of being reborn as many times as necessary for saving all sentient beings. Shantideva (eighth century AD) is the author that epitomizes the compassion evoked by the *bodhisattva* doctrine. Here is a fragment of a *bodhisattva* vow from his famous poem, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*:

May I be the doctor and the medicine
And may I be the nurse
For all sick beings in the world
Until everyone is healed.
May a rain of food and drink descend
To clear away the pain of thirst and hunger
And during the aeon of famine
May I myself change into food and drink.
I become an inexhaustible treasure
For those who are poor and destitute;
May I turn into all things they could need
And may these be placed close beside them (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* 3,8–10,
in Williams 1989, p. 203).

Wisdom and compassion are the two key elements that build up the *bodhicitta*. The enlightened being knows that ultimately there are no “beings” who suffer but mere heaps of five aggregates, or rather “streams of empty *dharma*s,” but he or she also knows that suffering appears to be very real for these “beings”. Wisdom reveals both sides of the story, both the ultimate truth of emptiness and the relative truth of suffering, so the enlightened one can act in both worlds. Compassion and wisdom work hand in hand. Compassion urges the *bodhisattva* to help illusory beings to escape suffering while remaining involved in the world of illusion, while wisdom breaks the power of karma and enables him or her to provide the best help to the beings to be saved. The *bodhisattva* can even visit hell in order to help the “beings” there, and can do what seems outrageous according to accepted ethical conduct because of the knowledge that ultimately all rules and

hells are empty of inherent truth.²⁵ Using whatever method is suited to teach and rescue beings, regardless of its doctrinal orthodoxy and moral value is known as the doctrine of skillful means.

Since this is a comparative study, a brief note on compassion (*karuna*) is needed here. Buddhist compassion is not to be understood in Western terms. Westerners currently understand compassion for our (real) fellow humans as becoming involved in their (real) problems and suffering. In a Buddhist context compassion has a different meaning. The *bodhisattva* acts *as if* beings are real, *as if* their problems are real. Knowing the ultimate truth of emptiness but *pretending* to be acting compassionately, the enlightened one is like an actor who suffers the death of a child but is only playing a role. In reality nobody has died, nothing is ultimately true and all actors are happy. According to Williams:

[...] the *Bodhisattva* does not, in carrying out his infinite great and compassionate deeds, consider that there is any ultimately, inherently existing being who is helped. This is final, true, and total selflessness. In a famous passage the *Diamond Sutra* says: “As many beings as there are in the universe of beings... all these I must lead to Nirvana. ... And yet, although innumerable beings have thus been led to Nirvana, no being at all has been led to Nirvana” (Williams 1989, pp. 50–51).

The only way in which the *bodhisattva* can help practically is by teaching the right doctrine in appropriate ways for the suffering beings to understand it and then to strive to attain nirvana. This effort of providing the right information is the only right understanding of Buddhist grace. Although much is said about transference of merits, there is no “being” that could transfer “his” or “her” merits to another ignorant “being”.²⁶ Ultimately there is no “one” compassionate for any “being”

²⁵ William gives two instances from the *Upayakaushalya Sutra* when the Buddha acted immorally. The first “recounts how the Buddha in a previous life as a celibate religious student had sexual intercourse in order to save a poor girl who threatened to die for love of him” (Williams 1989, p. 145). The second is when he murdered a ferryman who planned to kill all his passengers during the night. Williams says that in this way he saved not only the 500 passengers, but that he also saved the murderer from facing the consequences of his action. However, I find this daring action on behalf of the potential murderer futile, since rebirth can be seen as the effect of our mental flow and the man already had the wish to kill. The primary root for karma was his intention to kill, so he could not truly benefit from being killed right before the fulfillment of his wish. Nevertheless, the story says that the ferryman was reborn in a “heavenly realm.”

²⁶ Thomas gives the following illustration: “Just as a clever conjurer may produce the illusion of a crowd of people, but when he makes them vanish he has not killed them, so a *bodhisattva* takes

who suffers. Both savior and saved are empty of inherent existence. According to Dasgupta,

The saint (*bodhisattva*) is firmly determined that he will help an infinite number of souls to attain nirvana. In reality, however, there are no beings, there is no bondage, no salvation; and the saint knows it but too well, yet he is not afraid of this high truth, but proceeds on his career of attaining for all illusory beings illusory emancipation from illusory bondage. The saint is actuated with that feeling and proceeds in his work on the strength of his paramitas, though in reality there is no one who is to attain salvation in reality and no one who is to help him attain it (Dasgupta 1975, p. 127).

However, this way of seeing reality is not easy to realize for the beings ensnared by illusion. Therefore they need all the help they can get and so they need the “grace” of the *bodhisattvas* to advance toward enlightenment until they will finally understand the real nature of things. Suffering beings think they are helped, but the grace they get is merely a psychological crutch temporarily available for them.

The pursuit of Buddhahood is the theme of one of the most important Mahayana sutras, one that can be termed as the Bible of East Asian Buddhists – the *Saddharma-pundarika sutra*, also known as the *Lotus Sutra*.²⁷ The Buddha is depicted as the supreme teacher, the father of beings, who uses the most appropriate methods (skillful means – *upayakaushalya*) in order to save his children and establish them on the path toward Buddhahood. The difference between his status in the *Lotus Sutra* and the Theravada teaching is significant. The Buddha is no longer a hero who was striving for his own liberation and who, at his death, left his disciples with *the truth* he had discovered to be their guide.²⁸ In the *Lotus Sutra* we are given a different perspective. The Buddha has never left his disciples, he is always ready to help them in whatever ways

countless beings to Nirvana, though there is no being who attains Nirvana” (Thomas 1951, p. 216).

²⁷ The Buddha is depicted as having been, again, reluctant to give away his teaching, as he was initially after his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, being afraid that those in the assembly could not grasp it. At that time it was the god Brahma who persuaded him to teach, now it was his disciple Sariputra (LS, ch.2).

²⁸ Remember his words in the *Digha Nikaya*: “Therefore, Ananda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge” (DN 16,2,26).

he finds appropriate that they may attain a superior wisdom.²⁹ His death at the age of 80 was only an appropriate way (skillful means) to teach disciples of lesser comprehension. In the 16th chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* he tells the parable of the good physician, saying:

Like the physician who with clever device,
In order to cure his demented sons,
Though indeed alive announces [his own] death,
[Yet] cannot be charged with falsehood,
I, too, being father of this world,
Who heals all misery and affliction,
For the sake of the perverted people,
Though truly alive, say [I am] extinct.

Not only does the Buddha himself survive and continue to teach the disciples of Mahayana Buddhism, but there are many other Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* who help humans escape suffering. They teach that the higher goal of one's becoming is not merely *arabats*, but to assist others attain the same level of insight. In the third chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* the Buddha explains why this teaching hadn't yet been revealed by using the *Parable of the Burning House*. A rich man's children were playing in a house that suddenly caught fire. The children were so absorbed in their playing that they didn't realize the danger. They didn't even know what fire was. The father cried to them to get out but they ignored him. So he was forced to use skillful means to make them go out. He told them there were even more interesting toys for them to play with outside the house; goat carts, deer carts and bullock carts, according to their wish. It brought the desired result, as the children immediately got out of the burning house to get the new toys. However, when they got out only one kind of cart was available, the bullock cart magnificently adorned with precious things.

The meaning of this parable is as following: We are the children playing in the burning house. We know nothing except birth, disease, old age and death and are satisfied with this everlasting suffering (the burning house). We don't know anything else. The Buddha was born into our world to show us the

²⁹ Not only is the help of the Buddha available at any stage of spiritual development, but the sutra itself has come to be seen as having a miraculous effect for the one who recites, copies or simply reads it. In the 13th century, Nichiren, the founder of the Nichiren Shoshu movement in Japan, stated that it is the only sutra that can save beings in the present age of spiritual decline. So it has come to be worshipped itself, using the formula *Nam Myo ho renge kyo* ("adoration to the *Lotus Sutra*").

way out. Like the children in the parable, we are ignorant of our condition and in need of being taught by the Buddha by using skillful means. Therefore he teaches to some one doctrine, i.e., the Hinayana to those who seek nirvana just for themselves (the promise of goat carts); to others he teaches the attainment of Buddhahood without a teacher (the *pratyekabuddha* vehicle, the deer cart in the parable); and to the wisest he teaches the becoming of a Buddha and the engagement of saving all beings, which is the Mahayana, the vehicle of the *bodhisattvas* (the bullock cart in the parable). As the children in the parable find only bullock carts outside, *arabats* find out that true enlightenment is to become a Buddha and that they should not be satisfied with the comparatively little achievement of having experienced nirvana just for themselves. The new teaching of the *bodhisattva* vehicle was not revealed earlier because there was nobody ready to grasp its meaning. The nirvana of the Hinayana vehicle was to be seen as just an intermediary achievement for the disciples, but now they were ready to receive the whole truth. In the seventh chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* the Buddha tells the *Parable of the Magic City* to illustrate this. A group of travelers was being led by a guide to the Place of Jewels (a palace full of treasures) but they became tired and wished to go back. The guide created the illusion of a magical city for them to rest. When they were again fit to travel he made the magic city disappear and told them it was just an illusion to help them advance to the real destination. Just the same, the nirvana of the Hinayana is only a temporary destination, a starting point for achieving the real fulfillment which is Buddhahood.

At the level of popular religion, the *bodhisattvas* and Buddhas that help humans towards enlightenment have become the focus of human devotion as savior beings. Much of the devotional practices once addressed to the Hindu gods have been turned towards *bodhisattvas* and Buddhas.³⁰ This has come to be seen as the easy road to enlightenment available for the masses. The most famous *bodhisattva* is Avalokiteshvara³¹ (in Sanskrit "the Lord who looks down compassionately on the suffering world"), considered by the Tibetan

³⁰ How this trend developed is not certain. A possible reason is given by Robinson and Johnson: "Buddhism as a whole was encountering a host of new theistic religious movements in its expanding environment. The cult of Vishnu was developing in India, while Hellenistic and Zoroastrian savior cults were spreading into Gandhara in northwestern India and along the major trade routes to central Asia at the same time that Buddhist missionaries were active in these areas. No one knows for sure how and why Buddhism picked up cultic and doctrinal elements from these external sources. Buddhists may have been reacting to external criticisms that they had been orphaned by a dead god who was no longer in a position to offer salvation" (Robinson 1997, p. 83).

³¹ In Tibetan his name is Chenrezig.

Buddhists of the *Dge-lugs-pa* tradition to be reborn on earth as the Dalai Lama. To Avalokiteshvara one can pray for help in any situation of life as to a god. He saves not only humans but also demons and animals. One has only to invoke him by using his mantra *Om mani padme hum*. In East Asia, he is worshipped as Kuan-yin, a female *bodhisattva*.

The Buddhas have a very effective way of helping their followers. Each one has a domain, called a Pure Land, where those who benefit from his help are reborn. This domain can be likened to a paradise, but it must not be mistaken for a definitive destination, as the purpose of being reborn there is to provide the perfect context for hearing the true doctrine, gaining wisdom and thus attaining perfect enlightenment. The Pure Land is not the end of the spiritual path, but the most appropriate place from where one can reach the end. This is quite at odds with early Buddhism. As we have seen in Theravada Buddhism, heaven was merely a place to be rewarded for one's meritorious deeds. After a long stay there, one has to be reborn on earth and continue the struggle to reach nirvana. The new doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism adopted a different view. In their compassion for suffering beings, the Buddhas create such heavens as trampolines toward final liberation. They are not primarily places to collect rewards, but the best places to receive proper teaching and attain liberation.

The most revered Buddha in East Asia is Amitabha (Japanese Amida), "the Buddha of Infinite Light" – a name that refers to his infinite wisdom.³² In the *Larger Sukhavati-vyūha sutra* we are told that while he was a monk called Dharmakara, many ages ago, he meditated on establishing a pure land, a realm of bliss free of suffering where beings could be reborn and find enlightenment much more easily. He vowed to attain such merit that his wisdom and compassion would be available for all sentient beings in all worlds. In order to be reborn in his Western Pure Land (*Sukhavati*) one has to pray to him, to meditate on his name or at least to repeat his name with faith.³³ Pure Land Buddhism, which is the outcome of Amitabha worship, came to neglect the original path of the historical Buddha. It has diverged so much from the original teaching that it states that only Amitabha's grace can save one from ignorance. One only has to think of him ten times (according to his 18th vow

³² He is also called Amitayus ("the Buddha of Infinite Life") which refers to his infinite life span in which he saves beings.

³³ Japanese Pure Land Buddhists chant the mantra "*Namu Amida Butsu*" ("Adoration to Amida Buddha").

in the *Larger Sukhavati-vyūha sutra*), or only bear his name in mind for one to seven nights before death (according to the *Smaller Sukhavati-vyūha sutra*), in order to be reborn in his Pure Land.

The key figures in the development of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan were Honen (1133–1212) and his disciple Shinran (1173–1262), the founder of the Jodo Shinshu tradition. Shinran considered the human condition to be so depraved that it makes enlightenment impossible by one's own effort. Help from outside is the only way to escape suffering, and this outside source can only be Amida's grace. This view seems to bring us very close to the Christian view of salvation by grace.

Faith in Amida, given by Amida and rewarded by him would be the easy way of salvation, against that of meditation and reliance on self-power. However, faith is not a way of attaining merit. One doesn't have to achieve merits in order to be reborn in Amida's Pure Land since his merits are available freely to anyone. What it requires from a believer is a sudden conversion (the experience called *shinjin*), a rejection of the path of self-power in favor of entrusting oneself to the power of Amida.

This devotional trend seems to have seriously departed from the Buddha's original message. But we must remember two things: First, from the traditional Buddhist point of view, such devotional practices are intended only for the ignorant. Williams reminds us that:

From a Buddhist point of view these beings do not *really* exist, they are empty of inherent existence, or products of the mind. But then, so are we! The *Bodhisattvas* like Avalokiteshvara are as real as we are. On the level of their unreality there is enlightenment, and no one to be enlightened. But on the level of our unenlightened state they are real enough – and as unenlightened beings we need all the help we can get! (Williams 1989, p. 236)

Second, we must remember that a Pure Land is not one's final destination, a kind of permanent heaven, but rather an intermediate state where one can understand the doctrine of emptiness and reach nirvana much more easily. According to Shinran, to be reborn there is equivalent to reaching instant enlightenment. But this is certainly not the end, since the new enlightened being must return to our world of suffering to help all other sentient beings reach the same goal.

THE THREE BODIES OF THE BUDDHA

Early Buddhism viewed the historical Buddha as the wise human teacher who discovered the Four Noble Truths and thus inaugurated the path toward nirvana. He was different from other *arabats* only by being the first to discover the *Dhamma*, the same *Dhamma* anyone else could have discovered. In the MN the Buddha is declared to be “the arouser of the unarisen path, the producer of the unproduced path, the declarer of the undeclared path” (MN 108,5). He died at the age of 80 and left his disciples with the body of his doctrine – the *dharmakaya* – as their teacher.³⁴ The only resource of help left for them after Buddha’s death is the *Dhamma* (MN 108,10).

Until the *Prajnaparamita sutras* and the writings of Nagarjuna in the second century AD we still find the legacy of the Buddha as residing in the corpus of his doctrine (*dharmakaya*). His perfect physical body was the result of his virtuous previous lives. It served merely as the platform for preaching the truth, so that worshiping the monuments that contain his relics (the *stupas*) is useless. *Stupa* worship was to be seen as an aid for meditating on the truth of his words, not as a way of invoking the founder himself.

The doctrine of emptiness and the presence of many Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* in Mahayana have complicated the simple picture of early Buddhism.³⁵ On the one hand, *dharmakaya* as the truth of emptiness was now to be seen as the ultimate truth that underlies any given aspect of the universe, physical or mental. As mentioned before, it is not a substantial Ultimate Reality like Brahman of the *Upanishads*, but a quality attached to any physical, mental or doctrinal concept. Emptiness is the basis of our world, not as a substance, but as a truth.

On the other hand, the presence of many Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* in Mahayana Buddhism inaugurated a strong devotional trend that soon had to

be reconciled with the doctrine of emptiness. The result was the doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha (*Trikaya*), developed by the Yogacara school in the fourth century AD. It says that Buddhahood is expressed at three levels of understanding. The first and highest is *dharmakaya*, the essential body of the Buddha, representing emptiness itself. It is the ultimate truth that governs the world. The other two bodies are forms in which compassion is embodied for the sake of beings ensnared by illusion. It is only because ignorance blinds conditioned beings that the *dharmakaya* is manifested as the other two bodies of the Buddha, so that the conditioned beings can grow in wisdom and eventually attain enlightenment.

The second body is the *sambhogakaya*, the body of enjoyment. It is the body of the Buddhas in their Pure Lands, the appearance under which they preach the Mahayana doctrine to those reborn there. The Buddhas in this form are the objects of Mahayana devotion, the source of grace for the devotees of popular Buddhism.

What was known as the physical body of Siddhattha Gotama, is the third body of the Buddha, the *nirmanakaya*. It is a mere image manifested in our world for the benefit of the lowliest of beings, the weakest and most ignorant. Williams states:

A Transformation body can manifest in any suitable way, even as an animal (see the Jataka tales), in order to teach a particular point. Buddhists have no objection to seeing the historical Jesus Christ as a Transformation Body Buddha – a manifestation from an Enjoyment Body out of compassion in a form suitable to this particular time and place (Williams 1989, p. 178).

If the historical Jesus Christ can be viewed indeed as a transformation body of a higher reality is one of the topics of the next part. So far we have viewed the most important doctrines taught by the Buddha, according to both the Theravada and the Mahayana traditions of Buddhism. We are now ready to proceed to the next part of this work, that of comparing the teaching of the Buddha with that of the Christ.

³⁴ “Kaya” means “body,” so *dharmakaya* is the body of his teaching, the *dharmma* as ultimate truth.

³⁵ According to Thomas we can discern a development of the story of the Buddha already in early Buddhism: “When we find him mentioned in some discourses as a great ascetic and teacher without any reference to a former existence or to former Buddhas, we seem to have an earlier stage of tradition than that which puts him in the succession of former teachers. This is borne out by the fact that in the four Nikayas only six previous Buddhas are mentioned. Even this does not appear primitive, but the names are common to all schools. In the Buddhavamsa, one of the latest works in the Canon, a list of twenty-seven is given, and under Buddha Dipankara, the twenty-fourth before Gotama, Gotama is said to have first made his vow to become a Buddha” (Thomas 1951, p. 147).

APPENDIX

THE BUDDHA OF HINDUISM AND THE CHRIST OF GNOSTICISM

Some critics may accuse me of using the wrong scriptures for drawing the portraits of the Buddha and of Christ. Some will argue that we find the right portrait of the Buddha in the Hindu writings called the Puranas, while others will argue that the right portrait of Christ is that presented by the Gnostic gospels, not by those we find in the New Testament. Therefore I must add a few comments on these alternative views.

The Buddha as avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu

Some of the Puranas tell the story of the god Vishnu taking different forms, called avatars, and descending into our world during each cosmic cycle (*mahayuga*) in order to restore the balance between good and evil. Since the time of the *Bhagavata Purana*¹ the number of avatars has been uniformly recognized as ten: (1) fish, (2) tortoise, (3) boar, (4) man-lion, (5) dwarf, (6) Parasurama, (7) Rama, (8) Krishna, (9) Buddha and (10) Kalki. The first nine have occurred already and the last one is still to come. For our present inquiry it is important to assess the ninth avatar.

¹ Dasgupta dates it very late, after the 11th century AD (Dasgupta 1975, volume IV, p. 1).

As with all previous eight avatars, the incarnation of Vishnu as Buddha occurred to counteract the decline of *dharmā* and the rise of evil. The story says that at the beginning of the *Kali yuga* (the present age) the demons had stolen the sacrificial potions of the gods and practiced asceticism, so that they became so strong that the gods could not conquer them. Vishnu incarnated as a man of delusion in order to propagate false ideas and to lead the demons astray from the true religion. As Buddha, he preached that there is no creator, that the three major gods (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) were just ordinary mortals, there is no *dharmā*, death is total annihilation, there is no heaven and hell and the sacrifices are of no value. The demons became Buddhists, abandoned the *Vedas* and consequently lost their power and were killed by the gods.

The Buddha avatar is not a savior but a perpetrator of illusion for the wicked, a deceiver of heretics. This interesting attempt to assimilate the Buddha by theistic Hinduism is presented in at least four Puranas – the *Bhagavata Purana* (in at least four locations 1,3,24; 2,7,37; 6,8,19; 11,4,22), the *Matsya Purana* 285,7, the *Varaha Purana* 4,2 and the *Agni Purana* 49,8. However, the Buddha avatar of Hinduism is totally inconsistent with the historical Buddha and his teaching. The same is true about the historical Jesus and his Gnostic counterfeit.

The Jesus of Gnosticism

The Gnostic gospels convey a very different portrait of God, the Christ, human nature and all other major themes we find in Christian theology. Most of the Gnostic literature came to be known as a result of the findings in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, back in 1945. Prior to this discovery the Gnostic gospels were known mostly by the references made to them by the Early Church fathers (such as Irenaeus of Lyons, in his five-volume work *Against Heresies*). The literary style of the Gnostic gospels is very different from that of the four we have in the New Testament. They are not historical narratives but collections of alleged secret sayings of Jesus, in which the context plays no role. He is not the Jewish prophet concerned with the particular needs of his fellow Jews, but resembles an enlightened Eastern guru who teaches difficult metaphysical issues, and answers elaborate philosophical questions of his disciples.

The God of the Old Testament is presented as a deluded deity who created the physical world by mistake. Hence matter is evil and so are our bodies, mere prisons for divine souls. The Gnostic Jesus is a messenger of the true Ultimate Reality, who came to teach us how to release our souls from the delusion of matter and ignorance, and thus regain the state of heavenly bliss from which they have fallen. Jesus is the supreme teacher, a guru who helps us find inner resources and reveals esoteric truths, not a redeemer from sin through his sacrifice. In fact he did not die on the cross; it was another victim who was mistaken for Jesus. The contrast with his portrait in the canonical gospels is obvious.²

Conclusion

Early Christians and Buddhists manifested concern for the preservation of the actual words of their religious founder. When confronted with the message of Gnosticism, early Christians have responded with establishing the canonical scriptures of the Bible, against those of Gnostic influence. The Canon of the New Testament was already established by the year AD 180, when Irenaeus of Lyons listed all four gospels and the epistles in his writings. Later, when the heresy of Arianism (concerning the divine nature of Christ) threatened church unity, the Ecumenical Council of Nicea was convened in AD 325. This proves that unity of doctrine was a major concern for the early church.

A similar concern for the preservation of the initial doctrine was manifested by the followers of the Buddha. He asked them to evaluate any teaching in the light of his own (DN 16,4,8). The Sangha held a first council at Rajagriha soon after his death in order to recite together the orally transmitted sutras. A second council was held a century later at Vaisali, to deal with problems that had arisen in the monastic rules. Therefore we can be sure of a genuine concern for the right preservation of the initial teaching in both Christianity and Buddhism, and therefore the Jesus of Gnosticism and the Buddha of Hinduism cannot be tenable options.

² For further reading on this topic see Douglas Groothuis, *Revealing the New Age Jesus*, IVP, 1990, pp. 71–118.

PART THREE

RECIPROCAL VIEWS

CHAPTER 6

ON THE NATURE OF ULTIMATE REALITY

In the previous part we saw that despite several similarities in biography and ethical teachings, there are also important distinctions between the teachings of the Buddha and the Christ. In this part I invite you to an exercise in comparative religion, in which we will try to assess how serious these differences really are. Let us start with their view on Ultimate Reality.

The *Kevaddha Sutta*, the 11th sutra of the *Digha Nikaya*, tells the story of a monk who didn't find an answer to his question on where the four great elements (earth, water, fire and air) cease without remainder. In his quest he visited the heavenly realms and finally met the highest god, Brahma, who introduced himself as "The Great Brahma, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Lord, the Maker and Creator, the Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be". However, neither did Brahma know the answer. Ashamed, he had to confess his ignorance and sent the monk back to the Buddha for the right answer. The point of this story is that there is no such thing as an All-knowing god in the heavens. Only the Buddha is omniscient.

Brahma is especially important for our inquiry, as he was called the creator god by Brahmins at the time of the Buddha, which makes him the closest equivalent we have in the Buddhist sutras for the God of the Bible.

However, Brahma is wrong about his status as creator god. The first sutra of the *Digha Nikaya*, the *Brahmajala sutta*, provides the explanation for his false belief. Brahma was merely the first product of the cyclic manifestation of the world, the first to awaken at the beginning of a new cycle, and wished not to be alone. When all other beings were manifested, Brahma thought he had created them at his wish and so made himself known to them as the creator. Those who accept him as such and wish to spend eternity in a heavenly realm are the deluded theists of Hinduism, who hold the wrong view of Eternalism, along with the pantheists. They don't know that gods (including Brahma) were once humans and that they will eventually be reborn as humans as soon as their heavenly life is exhausted. The blissful life they enjoy in heaven has made them forget their need for liberation. They have forgotten that they enjoy existence as gods only as a result of the merits they achieved as humans in a previous life.

Another account of a deluded creator god can be found in the 49th sutra of the *Majjhima Nikaya*. Baka the Brahma (one of the lesser Brahmas)¹ concluded that his world was permanent, everlasting and eternal. The Buddha proved him wrong and deluded by Mara, the Evil One. Baka had forgotten his previous existences as a god of streaming radiance, was ignorant about other heavenly realms, higher than his, and thus was much inferior in knowledge to the Buddha. Since the Buddha himself was once reborn as a Brahma god, he knew that such a condition was not permanent, that it was a lie of Mara, who was happy to hold the gods captive to such false beliefs.

Another interesting example of what Hindu gods came to be in the Buddha's teaching is the case of Indra (p. 22). He is called Sakka in the Buddhist sutras, "the lord of the gods" (DN 19,19 DN 21,1,1). Far from being satisfied with his heavenly status, Sakka himself was seeking enlightenment from various human religious teachers. But to his disappointment, instead of finding answers to his doubts, the teachers he visited became his disciples and worshippers. Finally he met the Buddha, "paid homage at the feet of the Blessed Lord" (DN 21,1,8) and started to learn the *Dhamma*. In the end he declared himself satisfied with the Buddha's teaching and exhorted all the other gods under his leadership to follow it (DN 19). Nevertheless Sakka too has to be reborn as a human to find full enlightenment (DN 21,2,8). This means that Sakka, Brahma and all other gods are inferior to the Buddha and all need his teaching to find enlightenment for themselves. By no means

can they be taken as Ultimate Reality, since each and every form of personal existence is impermanent. According to Williams,

God has no place in a seamless web of natural contingency, where each contingent thing could be explained as a causal result of another contingent thing *ad infinitum* (Williams 2000, p. 64).

From the Buddha's perspective, belief in God is a form of attachment which leads only to more suffering, a false belief that hinders enlightenment. It is a direct contradiction of the doctrine of impermanence and emptiness. If we are to define again what Ultimate Reality is according to the Buddha, it is a *truth* one has to realize, the truth of suffering, impermanence and no-self. In Mahayana Buddhism it came to be formulated as the truth of emptiness (*shunyata*), of absolute Nothingness. In the words of Masao Abe, "the true absolute is the absolute Nothingness, not the absolute Being" (Abe 1995, p. 118).

Now following our method in comparative religion, let us see how the Christ would qualify such a perspective on God. What would he have thought about God the Father envying the awakened Buddhists² for being bound to nirvana, while he is just in a temporary office of being rewarded for the merits accumulated in a previous (human) life? Or what would he have thought about God the Father being deluded by Satan into believing himself to be the creator and himself in need of instruction by a Buddha to find enlightenment and liberation from impermanence and suffering?

If the answer is still not obvious, let us consider again what the Christ said on the nature of God: "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself" (*John* 5,26). To have life "in himself" (*beautou* – reflexive pronoun) means that he doesn't depend on any external factor for existing, that he is the Ultimate Reality, the source of any other existence, not just a temporary blissful existence. The concept of God having life in himself and of being the source of any other existence is a fundamental teaching of Judaism. The most holy name of God in the Old Testament is the one revealed in *Exodus* 3,14 – "I am who I am" (*'ehyeh 'aser 'ehyeh*, commonly written as YHWH). This name expresses the nature of God as changeless, and thus is the very opposite of the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence. The name YHWH bluntly expresses the *permanence* of God, the fact that he

¹ There are many heavenly realms in Buddhist cosmology and therefore many Brahma gods.

² The *Dhammapada* says: "Even the gods envy those who are awakened and not forgetful, who are given to meditation, who are wise, and who delight in the repose of retirement (from the world)" (*Dhammapada*, 181, www.sacred-texts.com).

does not depend upon anything for his existence, that he has no source and follows no process of becoming. This is the God revealed *by* and *in* Jesus Christ, as we saw in chapter 4. A review of our earlier discussion on the nature of the Trinity would be very useful here (see p. 82). The *permanent* communion of love in the Trinity is the very nature of the Ultimate Reality. In other words, in Christ's teaching, the highest ontological principle is the personal god who reveals himself as a communion of love.

Now if we return to the Buddhist perspective, the view that anything, including God, could have a permanent nature is inconceivable. Only nirvana is a permanent state, but nirvana is the very negation of personal existence. To be a god, even the highest god, is only a temporary, impermanent status, one of the five realms of rebirth. In the words of Masao Abe, an important figure in Buddhist-Christian dialogue,

In Buddhism, there is nothing permanent, self-existing and absolutely good, for everything without exception is co-arising and co-ceasing, impermanent, without "own-being," empty. The doctrine of dependent co-origination, one of the most basic teachings of Buddhism, clearly emphasizes that everything without exception is interdependent with every other thing; nothing whatsoever is independent and self-existing. Accordingly one God as absolute good cannot be accepted in Buddhism because, speaking from the perspective of dependent co-origination, a notion such as the one God as the absolute good who must be independent is nothing but a reification and substantialization of something ultimate as the only entity that has its own being (in Cobb 1996, pp. 48–49).³

We can see that the two perspectives on God are irreconcilable. On the one hand, Christ could not have conceived God as impermanent and in need of enlightenment. In fact, he was himself God the Son, who had made himself human, not to discover enlightenment for himself, but to bring people to a personal relationship with God, as the true fulfillment of human existence. On the other hand, the Buddha could not have accepted a personal God as Ultimate Reality. This would

have compromised his whole teaching. He dismissed belief in God as reminiscent of Brahminical ignorance, a source of attachment and suffering.

Despite these incompatible views on the nature of Ultimate Reality, Masao Abe proposes a way of reconciling the doctrine of the Trinity with the Mahayana doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha⁴ in an attempt to ground "a dynamic unity in religious pluralism" (Abe 1995, p. 17ff). As we saw in the previous chapter, the *trikaya* doctrine expresses Buddhahood at three levels of understanding. The first and highest is *dharmakaya*, the essential body of the Buddha, representing emptiness itself as the ultimate truth that governs the world. The other two bodies are forms in which compassion is embodied for the sake of beings ensnared by illusion. The second body is the *sambhogakaya* (the body of enjoyment), the body of the Buddhas in their Pure Lands, the appearance under which they preach the Mahayana doctrine to those reborn there and the source of grace for the devotees of popular Buddhism. The third body (*nirmanakaya*) is the physical body of Siddhattha Gotama, a mere image manifested in our world for the benefit of the lowliest of beings, the weakest and most ignorant.⁵

According to Abe, not only the person of the historical Siddhattha Gotama is to be viewed as *nirmanakaya*, but the persons of other religious teachers as well, including Jesus, Muhammad and other Buddhist masters such as Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, Shinran, etc. The *sambhogakaya* would then correspond to what these historical teachers have meant by "God", i.e., God the Father by Jesus, Allah by Muhammad, Amida by Shinran, etc. However, in accordance to Zen Buddhism, Abe argues that Ultimate Reality would be beyond these personal gods as an "impersonal, formless and nameless 'Nothing'" (Abe 1995, p. 33). This is the *dharmakaya*, Ultimate Reality for all religions as "formless, colourless, nameless, unlimited, impersonal 'Openness' or 'Emptiness'" (Ibid., p. 32). In Abe's words,

'Lord' roughly stands for *nirmana-kaya*, a historical religious figure that is the centre of faith; 'God' approximately represents *sambhoga-kaya*, a personal God who is suprahistorical but has a particular name and virtue(s); 'Boundless Openness' or 'Formless Emptiness' generally expresses *dharmakaya*, Truth itself, which is also suprahistorical

³ Masao Abe says elsewhere: "The concept of one God who is essentially transcendent, self-existing apart from everything relative, is unreal to Buddhism, in that a self-existing God cannot be spoken of without a knower. In Buddhism, mutual relativity or interdependency is the ultimate truth, and doctrines of absolute truth which exclude other views of truth as false are similarly considered unreal and illusory" (Abe 1995, p. 78). The same idea of the inconceivability of a self-existing God is expressed by the Dalai Lama in *The Good Heart*, p. 82.

⁴ A similar attempt can be found in Thich Nhat Hanh's thinking. See Nhat Hanh 1999, p. 152ff.

⁵ According to the Dalai Lama, the *nirmanakaya* is "an emanation that is assumed in order to suit the mental dispositions and needs of a particular time, place and context. That emanation comes from a preceding emanation, the *sambhogakaya*, or perfect resourceful state, which has arisen from the timeless expanse of the *dharmakaya*" (Dalai Lama 1998, p. 61).

and is the ultimate ground for both a personal ‘God’ and a central historical religious figure as ‘Lord’ (Abe 1995, p. 31).

In his view, only if this “Boundless Openness” is taken as the ultimate ground, “can a dynamic unity in religious pluralism be established without eliminating each religion’s claim to absoluteness” (Abe 1995, p. 34). But, as it should already be obvious in light of our discussion on the nature of the Trinity, Abe’s attempt to assimilate *sambhogakaya* with God the Father and *nirmanakaya* with God the Son is not tenable.⁶ His assumption is that there has to be an ultimate ground to the Christian Trinity as the “Boundless Openness”, which would transcend any personal form of God. This shows again that for Buddhists Ultimate Reality cannot possibly be viewed in personal terms.

CHAPTER 7

ON PERSONHOOD

Since a self-existing creator god is a false concept in Buddhism, human beings cannot owe their existence to a primordial act of creation. There was no original “making” of human beings because there is no real “maker” outside the beginningless cycle of rebirth. The Buddha says several times in the *Samyutta Nikaya* that “this *samsara* is without discoverable beginning” (II,15,1). In contrast, the Christ didn’t question the Jewish view of creation. When challenged by the Pharisees to state his view on divorce, Jesus grounded the sanctity of marriage on its God-given status through creation. He quoted from *Genesis* saying: “At the beginning of creation God made them male and female” (*Mark* 10,6, *Matthew* 19,4).

Although there is no similarity in the way human beings are said to have originated, might we still find common ground in the way the Buddha and the Christ have defined our nature? On the one hand, in the teaching of the Buddha we have a clear definition of what human nature is: the five aggregates and nothing more. We have already analyzed the *anatta* doctrine, the way human existence is shaped by karma and dependent co-arising (p. 93). On the other hand, Jesus didn’t provide a systematic list of components or mechanisms to describe the human being as the Buddha did. Therefore we cannot define human nature merely by compiling a collection of Bible verses

⁶ Abe does not assign any role to the Holy Spirit in his attempt to assimilate the doctrine of the Trinity.

taken from here and there, i.e., verses that speak of a body, verses that speak of a soul, of emotions, will, etc. But there is a better way of understanding what we are. The best starting point is to remember the concept of being created in God's image and likeness (*Genesis* 1,26).

At this point our discussion on the nature of the Holy Trinity (p. 82) finds its justification and application again. Since the nature of God is personhood and relationship, to be created in his image (*eikon*) and likeness (*omoiosis*) suggests that humans receive by creation a way of existing resembling that of the persons (*hypostases*) of the Holy Trinity. If God's nature is ultimately relational, so must our own nature be. As the *hypostases* of the Holy Trinity are determined only in relationship with one another, in the same way the human *hypostasis* is determined only in relationship with God and other humans. This means that human "ultimate nature" can be defined only in terms of relationships and that the personal status we have been given by creation is our most precious attribute.¹ It also means that we cannot discover what we are by introspective examination, as the Buddha did. In other words, investigating by meditative techniques hidden mechanisms that operate deep inside us will not be of help in exploring personhood. Meditation on the body, mind, emotions, will, memory, self-consciousness, etc., will not generate the right portrait of what we really are. According to the Christ, we can find meaning for our life only in a personal relationship with our creator, drawing life from him and devoting ourselves to him and to our fellow humans. When asked what the greatest command was, he said:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (*Matthew* 22,37–40, *Mark* 12,29–31).

The Christ saw the fulfillment of human beings as attaining a way of existing resembling the communion relationship within the Holy Trinity. In his prayer for the disciples at the Last Supper he prayed that his intimate relationship with the

Father would be reflected in our relationship with him and with each other. This is what he came to achieve for us. He said:

I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them (*John* 17,20–26).

Personhood is a condition for being in such a communion of love, so it cannot be labeled as an attachment we should get rid of. Only on the basis of our personal status can we love God and one another. The intrinsic value of personhood is a basic assumption in the whole teaching of the Christ. To further develop this theme let me assess the role of personhood in two major topics in the teaching of the Christ: the Kingdom of God and the problem of sin.

PERSONHOOD AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The Kingdom of God was one of the major topics on Jesus' agenda. Consider how often he mentioned it: 14 times in *Mark* and 33 times in *Luke* (in another six instances in *Luke* it is abbreviated as "kingdom"). In *Matthew* he mentioned it as such 5 times, but in another 48 instances he used a synonym, the "Kingdom of Heaven" or just "kingdom," because of the Jewish reluctance to use God's name. In the fourth gospel, John used the term Kingdom of God only in two instances, and simply "kingdom" in another two. However, for the most part, John speaks of "eternal life" (16 times we find the Greek *zoe aionios* – "life beyond eons of time"), or just "life."² Eternal life is defined in personal terms, as communion with God:

¹ According to Kasper, "Man is neither a self-sufficient in-himself (substance) nor an autonomous individual for-himself (subject) but a being from God and to God, from other beings and to other beings; he lives humanly only in I-Thou-We relations. Love proves to be the meaning of his being" (Kasper 1984, p. 290).

² "Eternal life", or just "life" is also used in the Synoptic Gospels (see *Matthew* 7,14; 19,16 *Mark* 10,30; *Luke* 18,30).

Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (*John* 17,3).

“Kingdom of God” and “eternal life” overlap in their meanings. After the wealthy man asked what he must do to inherit *eternal life* and got a disappointing answer, Jesus told his disciples that it is difficult for wealthy people to enter the *Kingdom of God* (*Mark* 10, 17–30; *Luke* 18,18–25; *Matthew* 19,16–24). He made a priority of proclaiming the dawn of the Kingdom of God and asked his disciples to do the same (*Luke* 9,2; *Matthew* 10, 7). But what is this very important Kingdom of God? In the gospels we see it explained as a state of perfect and permanent communion with God and other humans, a state in which God’s plan for creating humankind is perfectly fulfilled. Since the highest state one can attain is that of unhindered communion with God, personhood is essential in the Kingdom of God. The Christ spoke of it as being already present in the world through him (*Luke* 11,20; *Matthew* 12,28) and to be revealed in its fullness in the future (*Mark* 1,15; *Luke* 11,2; *Matthew* 4, 17). He used the image of a royal banquet (*Luke* 13,29; *Matthew* 8,11), as to be invited to a banquet in those days was a sign of high honor for a guest. The teaching on the Kingdom means that we are not just to improve our moral life here and there, or that we should just be nicer to each other, but that God wants us to have eternal life in a state of unhindered fellowship with him.

In Buddhism things cannot be like this. Eternal fellowship with a god cannot be a realistic goal for a follower of the Buddha. The highest goal is to know the truth of how things really are, to know that they are impermanent and empty of inherent existence. Only emptiness is everlasting, as a quality of everything – from God to the atoms that make up the universe. Although Mahayana Buddhism and especially Pure Land Buddhism speak of heavenly realms (Pure Lands) – these are not ultimate destinations for an enlightened person. A Pure Land is not the equivalent of the Kingdom of God proclaimed by the Christ. Rather it is an intermediary state created by a Buddha for beings to learn more easily the truth of emptiness and reach nirvana. The Pure Land is not the final destination, but the most appropriate place from where one can reach the final destination. Therefore it would be absurd to consider a Pure Land a place of perfect and everlasting communion with the Buddha; it would contradict his doctrine on impermanence.

In order to summarize the views of the Buddha and the Christ on the ultimate fulfillment of the human being, let us consider a parable we find in a quite similar form in their teachings. It is the *Parable of the Pearl of Great Price* and we find it told by the Christ in *Matthew* 13, 45–46 and told by the

Buddha in a famous Mahayana sutra, the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 lines* (Conze 1994, p. 52).

<i>Matthew</i> 13, 45–46	<i>Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 lines</i> 404–405
<p>The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls.</p> <p>When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.</p>	<p>A man who had gained at some time a very fine jewel Which he had not got before, would be contented, If, as soon as he had gained it, he would lose it again through carelessness, He would be sorry and constantly hankering after the jewel. Just so the Yogin who has set out for the best enlightenment Should not get parted from the perfection of wisdom, which is comparable to a jewel, Seizing the jewel which he has gained, with growing energy He moves forward, and swiftly he comes to the [state of] Bliss.</p>

Although the picture is similar, the meaning is different. In the first, the pearl is the Kingdom of God. One should renounce everything which prevents him or her from entering the kingdom and having eternal communion with God. In the second, the pearl is the truth of emptiness. One should give away anything which makes him ignore this truth. In the first version the pearl is the prize of personal communion, while in the second the prize is that of impersonal knowledge. The contrast is obvious and consistent with the teachers’ views on the nature of the Ultimate Reality.

PERSONHOOD AND SIN

The other significant aspect in Jesus’ teaching which is grounded on viewing personhood as the core value in human nature is his teaching on sin. Sin is a problem of relationship, of how we relate to God and to each other. To sin means to err in a relationship, while to live in righteousness means to love God, be

obedient to him, and have right relationships with other humans. Since perfection and failure, righteousness and sin, are defined only in the context of relationships, personhood is a necessary aspect of our being. The most frequently used term in the New Testament for sin is the Greek word *hamartia*, which can literally be translated as “to miss the mark.” It suggests that we have missed the mark that God intends for us – that of having a right relationship with him and with each other.³ The emphasis Jesus put on the significance of sin is paramount. While the Buddha taught that suffering is caused by ignorance, Jesus taught that our major problem is sin defined in terms of relationships.

The Ten Commandments, which Jesus upheld (*Matthew* 19,16–20; *Mark* 10,17–22; *Luke* 18,18–25) emphasize that to sin (i.e., not to comply with these commandments) is a fault in our relationship with God or with our neighbors. The cure is not to annihilate personhood so that problems of relationships would no longer exist, but to heal the broken relationships. Therefore, as LaCugna concludes, the greatest sin is to refuse the communion to which we are called and instead to seek for an impersonal fulfillment:

The cardinal sin, the sin that lies at the root of all sin (including but not reducible to pride) is whatever binds us to prepersonal or impersonal or antipersonal existence: the denial that we are persons from and for God, from and for others (LaCugna 1991, p. 383).

If we are to identify the equivalent to sin in the Buddha’s teaching, it would be ignorance (*avijja*), which is consistent with his teaching on Ultimate Reality. Where a personal God is the Ultimate Reality, the central problem of mankind is sin, whereas where there is no such permanent God but a truth on how things exist (the truth of impermanence and emptiness), the central problem is ignorance, not to recognize that truth. In Buddhism there is no room for sin as defined by the Christ, because the system denies the existence of a supreme God against whom one can sin. Therefore for a Buddhist the closest equivalent for sin would be ignorance. The “sinful” person is an ignorant person. What is needed is proper information and instruction. A “sinner” needs help to reason the right way, defeat ignorance, and realize the ultimate truth of emptiness.

In Mahayana Buddhism there is an important help available for conquering ignorance. It is an internal attribute of every human being called the Buddha nature (*tathagatagarbha*). This is not the self (*atman*) of Hinduism,

³ Another term used for sin is “paraptoma,” translated as “trespass” (ex. *Matthew* 6,14) which means a lapse or deviation from a rule.

but an intrinsic quality possessed by each of us which enables us to reach enlightenment. In other words, it is not a substance but a property of our nature. In the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, chapter 12, we find a dialogue between the Buddha and Kasyapa from which we learn that the Buddha nature is like a treasure hidden somewhere in the house of a poor woman of which she isn’t aware. A stranger comes and reveals the place where it lies hidden and her status is changed forever. Likewise, our Buddha nature is hidden by the illusions of daily life and needs to be uncovered by the teaching of the Buddha. Another parable bearing the same teaching is that of the gem hidden in a poor man’s robe (*Lotus Sūtra*, 8). The poor man bore that gem many years and lived a miserable life unaware of the great resource he always had with him. Only when a friend revealed the gem hidden in his robe was he able to escape his difficult situation.

According to the two parables we all possess the Buddha nature as an unrealized spiritual potential; that is, we all have the potential to become a Buddha. But according to the Christ’s teaching we have no such unrealized potential in our nature, no hidden treasure to be discovered inside us. On the contrary, the “heart”⁴ – which in the Judaic tradition stands for the core of an individual human being, as the headquarters of mental, emotional and volitional life – is not reliable for ensuring spiritual development, as it is thoroughly affected by sin. He said:

For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man “unclean” (*Mark* 7,21–23).

His view on human nature contradicts all optimism on so-called “inner capabilities” for attaining spiritual progress.⁵ It contradicts the Buddhist confidence in our hidden Buddha nature, and Thich Nhat Hanh’s “statement of faith” which says: “I believe in the nature of enlightenment that is inherent within myself” (Nhat Hanh 1999, p. 117).

⁴ Its closest equivalent in Buddhist teaching would be *citta*, the center of purposiveness, a (false) functional self.

⁵ It also contradicts Thomas Merton’s belief in the existence of a part of the human being untouched by sin. Merton said: “At the center of our being is a place of pure light, a place untouched by sin or illusion” (in Dalai Lama 1998, p. 129). His view is consistent with the belief in a self (*atman*) in Hinduism, but not with the Christ’s view on human nature.

In order to realize how different Buddhism and Christianity are in matters of personhood, we could try to switch the two terms and see the result of taking ignorance as the major issue in Christianity, and sin as the major problem in Buddhism. What would the Buddha say to one who interpreted nirvana as attaining eternal communion with him? Although it sounds absurd, it is exactly what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, in what way would the message of the Christ be affected if the ultimate goal were set on knowing our very nature, its impermanence, the emptiness of all phenomena, the emptiness of God himself? This also sounds absurd, but is exactly what the Buddha invites us to do. Christian sin and Buddhist ignorance are defined in completely different systems of thought and cannot be switched.

Therefore the Christ's view on personhood cannot be reconciled with that of the Buddha. The closest term we can find in the teaching of the Buddha for "personhood" is *attabhava* (Sanskrit *atmanbhava*). According to Collins, *attabhava* "refers to the fact, condition or status of being a 'self' – a 'self', that is, in the sense in which the unenlightened man feels himself to be a separate individual, confronting real others" (Collins 1982, p. 157).⁶ The term for "person" is *puggala*, and is used for describing "differences in character, ethical disposition, spiritual aptitude and achievement, and karmic destiny" (Collins 1982, p. 160). Such being the essence of personhood in the teaching of the Buddha, Jesus' call for people to join the Kingdom of God must be interpreted in Buddhist terms as inducing craving for existence or thirst for "reiterated existence" (*Nipata* 1059, 1067),⁷ which is a source of karma and rebirth. The Kingdom of God is the opposite of what a Buddhist should seek, since one should "not wish for this world or the other" (*Nipata* 779). To seek eternal fellowship with God can only be taken as reminiscent of Brahminism, a form of craving, as delusive as craving for sensory pleasures. Its result in the chain of dependent co-arising is suffering in a further existence. In proper Buddhist terms, desire for eternal life sounds as absurd as seeking immortal life in the realm of Brahma, i.e., seeking an illusory fellowship with an impermanent and (himself) deluded deity. A Buddhist must seek the contrary, to "never come to exist again" (*Nipata* 1122), to destroy the seeds of existence and go out as a lamp. In the *Sutta Nipata*, the Buddha says:

⁶ *Attabhava* can also mean the body as the basis for individuality, pointing to it as a means to differentiate between species (Collins 1982, p. 158).

⁷ In other words it can be taken as a reiteration of a "trembling race given to desire for existences" (*Sutta Nipata* 776).

The old is destroyed, the new has not arisen, those whose minds are disgusted with a future existence, the wise who have destroyed their seeds (of existence, and) whose desires do not increase, go out like this lamp (*Nipata* 234a).

PERSONHOOD AND NO-SELF

So far we have seen that in the teaching of the Christ personhood is the defining feature of the human being. His teaching on the Kingdom of God would be absurd if salvation meant escaping personhood; likewise his teaching on sin if no personal God existed as Ultimate Reality. Now if we turn to finding the ingredients of human nature in the Christ's teaching we face a major challenge. As mentioned before, he didn't reveal a clear description of what the human being is in terms of components as we have seen in the Buddhist teaching of the aggregates or in that of the chain of dependent origination. Nevertheless, a common Christian view in defining the ingredients of human nature is that we consist of soul and body, with the soul being the part that departs at death and is rewarded (or punished) as such in heaven or in hell. Although Jesus spoke of body and soul, he did not mean that these are two distinct and opposite entities.⁸ Nowhere in Scripture can we find the idea that we are immaterial souls entrapped in a material body like a ghost in a machine, and consequently that eternal life in heaven is that of a liberated immaterial entity called a soul in the presence of God. Such a dualistic view is that of Platonism and Gnosticism, but not that of Scripture. The human being is an inseparable unity of flesh (*sarx*) and soul (*psyche*), a psycho-physical unity, not a self (*atman*) which stands in antagonism to the mortal physical body.⁹

⁸ He said: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (*Matthew* 10,28). This is still not an argument for dualism in his teaching. He didn't say "rather be afraid of the One who can destroy the soul", thus making the soul more important than the body, but pointed to the difference between temporary affliction by persecutors and total destruction by God as the creator of the unity of body and soul.

⁹ An argument for a survival of the soul without the body is taken from the *Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus* in *Luke* 16,19–31. However neither this parable nor any other teaches anthropology. Almost all parables (with the exception of the allegories that Jesus interpreted in detail – as the *Parable of the Sower*) have one basic teaching. This parable is about the sufficiency of information one has in order to repent of his or her sins during earthly life.

In Jesus' teaching the soul is rather the quality of being alive. Consider the following verses:

For whoever wants to save his life (*psyche*) will lose it, but whoever loses his life (*psyche*) for me and for the gospel will save it (*Mark* 8,35, also in *Matthew* 10,39; 16,25, *Luke* 17,33).

Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life (*psyche*) or to kill?" But they remained silent (*Mark* 3,4).

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life (*psyche*) what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? (*Matthew* 6,25; also in *Luke* 12,23).

That a human does not have a soul that is immortal by its very nature (a kind of *atman*) is consistent with the concept of creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). If immaterial souls pre-existed and then were entrapped in matter (as in Platonism), the *ex nihilo* idea of creation would be compromised. A person is created by God with a physical and a psychical aspect and, as with all creation, human nature is sustained by God. In the words of the great Protestant theologian Karl Barth,

Everything outside God is held constantly by God over nothingness. Creaturely nature means existence in time and space, existence with a beginning and end, existence that becomes, in order to pass away again. Once it was and once it will no longer be.... The creature is threatened by the possibility of nothingness and of destruction, which is excluded by God – and only by God. If creature exists, it is only maintained in its mode of existence if God so wills. If He did not so will, nothingness would inevitably break from all sides. The creature itself could not rescue and preserve itself (Barth 1959, pp. 55–56).¹⁰

Therefore immortality in the Kingdom of God is not an intrinsic quality of the soul. Once created, the human being is not indestructible and self-functioning as a kind of a perpetual motion machine. Eternal life is the gift of God through Christ (*John* 5,21; 10,27–28). In other words, humans are immortal by God's grace, not by their intrinsic nature. In our ephemeral nature, we are compared to

dust (*Genesis* 3,19), grass (*Isaiah* 40,6, *Psalms* 90,5), breath (*Psalms* 39,5–6) and mist (*James* 4,14). Apart from divine intervention, the one who dies is extinct.¹¹

You may have already sensed a familiar theme in the above quotation from Karl Barth. Read it again: "Creaturely nature means existence in time and space, existence with a beginning and end, existence that becomes, in order to pass away again." Does it sound familiar? Indeed, it resembles the doctrine of impermanence as we know it from Buddhism. Despite all the contradictions we have found so far, we find a common element in the teachings of the Buddha and that of the Christ concerning human nature. Let me explain. Since the Christian view of the human being is that of a unity of body and soul, we find in it an interesting resemblance with the *nama-rupa* (mentality-materiality) definition of Buddhism, the fourth link in the chain of dependent co-arising (p. 93). The Buddha defined *nama-rupa* in the MN 9,54 as following: "Feeling, perception, volition, contact and attention – these are called mentality. The four great elements [earth, water, wind and fire] and the material form [the body] derived from the four great elements – these are called materiality." Given the absence of the immortal *atman* in Buddhism and that of an imperishable soul which can inherit eternal life by its own nature in Christianity, we can find an equivalence between the Pali *nama* and the Greek *psyche* (the soul) and between the Pali *rupa* and the the Greek *sarx* (Silva 1979, p. 4 & 84). As a result, Lynn de Silva is right in reaching the conclusion that the Bible gives a "far more radical" doctrine of *anatta* than Buddhism:

In effect Buddhism says, 'Man is nothing (anatta) but man alone can do something to save himself.' In contrast Christianity could say: 'Man is nothing by himself and can do nothing to save himself.' It is by grace that man is saved and not by self-effort.

Secondly, the Buddhist theory of karma and rebirth implies that there is 'something' within man, either his karma or an operative mental or psychic force (*vinnana*) which has the power to cause or

¹¹ That the soul is not to be understood as the immaterial entity that would survive in the Kingdom of God is further confirmed by the Christ's teaching of the physical resurrection. He said: "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (*John* 6:40, see also *John* 11,25). The apostle Paul emphasized the connection between the physical resurrection of the Christ and that of his followers. This connection is the content of the 15th chapter of his *First Letter to the Corinthians* (see especially verses 35–44). From the point of view of the Buddha, however, if grasping for existence in the Kingdom of God was not absurd enough, then a physical resurrection would be even more nonsensical. It could only mean getting another temporary body in another temporary heaven.

¹⁰ I recommend reading Barth's view on human nature in his masterpiece *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III, part 2, pp. 344–66 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1966).

perpetuate life after death in ‘persons’ or momentary ‘selves’. The Bible leaves no room for such a belief. Man has no power within himself to generate a life beyond the grave; he has no inherent right to immortality as Greek thought supposed. It is only by the power of God that man can inherit eternal life. He can do nothing to merit eternal life (Silva 1979, p. 85).

Therefore we see that it is not only the Buddha who rejects the idea of a soul existing by its own nature (an *atman*). This rejection is also consistent with the teaching of the Christ. We have nothing that is immortal by nature. Since the human nature cannot survive by itself, the soul and body have to be sustained by God. But although *anatta* is true for the Christian as well, as Silva has emphasized, we must be aware of a significant difference: By ourselves we are indeed impermanent and subject to decay and nothingness, but by the grace of God we are held in existence and are given the chance to have an eternal relationship with him. In a way that would be strange to the Buddhist, God gives the chance of immortality to the impermanent “heap of aggregates”. To use the Buddhist metaphor of the lamp that goes out when its fuel is consumed (MN 72, 19–20) as representing nirvana, in Christ the lamp is offered the chance to stay alive for eternity and not go out. Its fuel is the grace of God.

Dust, grass, breath and mist, are indeed appropriate images of what we are apart of divine intervention. But through the grace we find in Christ the ephemeral heap of aggregates we are can draw life from the Creator, not by investigating inner resources, but by reflecting his way of existing in the Trinity, i.e., by being a subject in relationship with him. It is the personal relationship with God that keeps us from extinction, not an intrinsic substance we may have in our nature.

Now to return to the idea of finding the “ingredients” that may confer us personal identity, it is not our body, feelings, consciousness, etc. that can provide the right portrait of our true identity. The Buddha has shown that all are impermanent and subject to change. From the point of view of our nature we truly are not the same for two successive moments of our existence. The element that gives us permanence and makes us the same person from one moment to the next in a fundamental sense is our personal relationship with God. To use an illustration, although I grow older and my physical appearance changes, I still remain the husband of my wife, the same entity in relation to her. Unfortunately, this illustration is far from perfect, as we will at some time die and cease to be a reference point for the other. But God is eternal

and never ceases to be a reference point to which I can relate. Therefore what truly makes us remain the same person is the fact that we remain the same in relation to God.

Since we are created in God’s image and likeness, we can only survive nothingness by reflecting divine image and likeness, as a mirror can reflect an image as long as its subject is in front of it. In ontological terms, we have the substantiality of the image in the mirror and the functionality of a mirror that can always turn towards its subject. This is an attempt to illustrate how we can have eternal life through having a personal relationship with God by his grace. However, the illustration isn’t perfect because we are *living* images and mirrors, with the ability to reflect whatever we choose. If we turn from God we reflect nothingness and truly become dust, grass, breath and mist.

CHAPTER 8

ON THE SAVIOR ABOUT HIMSELF AND HIS WAY OF SAVING US

We have already seen the most important events in the lives of the Buddha and of the Christ, what they taught about themselves and what they achieved on our behalf. Now it is time to look at these facts in a comparative manner, i.e., to assess how compatible they are with each other in matters of identity and achievements on our behalf.

HOW DID THEY BECOME “THE SAVIOR”?

In chapter 4 we saw that Jesus was a *worker of miracles* who pointed to himself as the source of power, a *prophet* who dared to reinterpret the Jewish sacred law and who claimed to be the ultimate revealer of God, and *the redeemer from sin* through his sacrifice on the cross and resurrection. In light of what he said and did, the only consistent view on his identity is to consider him God the Son who had “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (*John* 1,14). Although he was born as a humble boy in a manger and grew up in a humble neighborhood, he was not a “spiritual teacher who has gained a certain degree of realization as a result of his

or her long practice”.¹ He did not leave Judea between from the age of 12 to 30 to travel to the East for an initiation in esotericism.² People were amazed at Jesus’ words and deeds precisely because they could *not* explain how he had such power and why he made such outstanding claims about himself. He was one of their own who suddenly acted differently and talked like nobody else before. So they wondered:

“Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked. “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren’t all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” And they took offense at him (*Matthew* 13,54–57).

They hoped that the Messiah would liberate them from Roman occupation and reinstate the former glory of Israel under King David. He was expected to appear in a miraculous way, so Jesus didn’t quite fit their expectations. They were puzzled about him: “But we know where this man is from; when the Christ comes, no one will know where he is from” (*John* 7,27). As pointed out in chapter 4, he was God the Son in human form and the time had come to fulfill the purpose of his incarnation. Rather than being a human who grew toward enlightenment, he was the divine Son of God who limited himself to human status. The apostle Paul wrote (or possibly quoted) a famous hymn about this:

Christ being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness (*Philippians* 2,6–7).

This “making himself nothing” (Greek *kenosis*) does not mean that he gave up divinity, but rather that he chose not to display it, especially in matters of personal

¹ This is the view of the Dalai Lama about the Christ. In his comment on the passage in *Luke* 9,1–6, which tells of Jesus sending his disciples to teach, heal and cast out demons, the Dalai Lama says: “[...] a spiritual teacher who has gained a certain degree of realization as a result of his or her long practice should not rest content. Instead, this practitioner should set out and attempt to communicate it to others, so that they too can share in the experience” (Dalai Lama 1998, p. 95). However, this is not true for the Christ. As I hope to have pointed out clearly enough, the Christ was not acting as an Eastern guru.

² The idea that he allegedly left Judea from the age of 12 to 30 and traveled to the East where he learned from various holy men is inconsistent both with Scripture and with his own teaching. See Groothuis 1990, pp. 147–173.

safety.³ He limited himself, yet never ceased to be divine. In Christ, God shows his greatness in humility and thus contradicts what we generally assume of the nature of God. Rather than ultimate power, he is better described as love and movement toward us.

When we look at the way the Buddha became enlightened and the Supreme Teacher, we see a different situation. Since there is no permanent God as Ultimate Reality, the Buddha was not and could not be the equivalent of the Christ, God in human flesh. Gods are subject to becoming and rebirth as are all other beings. According to the Buddhist sutras they are able to descend into our world, but this doesn’t mean that they are to be worshipped or that they can help us in any way. The creator god Brahma himself needed to be taught by the Buddha of his need to escape illusion (p. 122). But humans have a much more privileged position than gods for attaining enlightenment, and a human rebirth is extremely rare.⁴ The Buddha reached enlightenment as the former prince Siddhattha in the Kingdom of Kapilavatthu in Northern India only after countless other existences. The *Jataka* tales are long stories of his previous lives, full of honorable deeds that account for his spiritual progress. The *Buddhacarita* says that “he had purified his being through many aeons” (1,11). He was not a god in the Christian or Judaic sense, but a bundle of aggregates who had evolved spiritually to the status of a Buddha. Only this way of describing his nature is consistent with his teaching. In the opening lines of the first chapter of his book *What the Buddha Taught*, the Buddhist scholar Walpola Rahula writes:

Among the founders of religions the Buddha [...] was the only teacher who did not claim to be other than a human being, pure and simple. Other teachers were either God, or his incarnations in different forms, or inspired by him. The Buddha was not only a human being; he claimed no inspiration from any god or external power either. He attributed all his realization, attainments and achievements to human endeavour and human intelligence. A man and only a man can become a Buddha (Rahula 1974, p. 1).

³ His miracles were divine interventions, displays of a divine nature, but were always done for the benefit of others. When his life was in danger he could have used the same power, but chose not to (*Matthew* 26,53).

⁴ In the *Samyutta Nikaya* (V,12,47–48) the Buddha gives the metaphor of a blind sea turtle that comes to the surface once every hundred years and by chance sticks its neck in a small hole of a yoke tossed into the ocean. This represents the probability of reaching the human state in the long cycle of rebirths.

The Mahayana tradition – which demands that a truly enlightened being is one who seeks to become a *bodhisattva* and ultimately a Buddha for the sake of all beings – argues that the founder of Buddhism had vowed to become a Buddha before many aeons of rebirths. The *Jataka* tales (which belong equally to the Theravada and the Mahayana tradition) tell the story of the future Buddha, then called Sumedha, meeting Dipankara, the first of the 24 Buddhas before him, who foretold Sumedha's eventual enlightenment.⁵ Therefore he was neither the first, nor the last to succeed to Buddhahood. There are many other beings who have become Buddhas or who are in the process of becoming such. Becoming a Buddha is a very long process which takes many lifetimes of accumulating wisdom and merit, but such becoming is open to everyone. This is not the case with the Christ. He did not follow a process of spiritual evolution over many lifetimes. He is the eternal Son of God who became man just once for the sake of sinful mankind. He does not need to repeat his incarnation for future generations, no matter how distant they might be. That only time 2000 years ago was enough. Nobody else could be or become a Savior as he was, because nobody else is divine and sinless. As seen in the previous chapter on the nature of personhood, our existence is contingent upon that of God, which means that we depend for our existence on his grace, so it is absurd that a human or any other being could transcend this condition and become divine, having life as an intrinsic quality. The ontological chasm between Creator and creature makes it impossible for a creature to become a Christ.

HOW DO THEY WISH TO BE SEEN BY US?

For the Christ it was very important that people understand who he *was*, not merely what he said or did. As mentioned already in chapter 4, Jesus deliberately challenged his disciples to state their views about his identity:

He asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ" (*Mark* 8,27–30).

⁵ Conze has calculated that it took an astronomical span of time for him to reach Buddhahood; about 3×10^{51} years (Conze 1959, p. 35).

The apostle John begins his gospel with stating the divine nature of the Christ and his unique relationship with God the Father:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. [...]

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (*John* 1,1–3; 14).

His identity, teaching and deeds cannot be separated. He could only act and speak as he did if he really was "the Word who became flesh". Otherwise he would have been a blasphemer or a mentally deranged person.

For the Buddha it was not important who he was as a particular person. Like all other human beings, he was a heap of five aggregates or a "stream of empty *dharmas*", but with a major difference: That particular heap of aggregates had discovered the truth, while others had not. What made him special was not his nature, but his discovery, the truth and the way he opened for us and the example he set. He exhorted his disciples:

Bhikkhus, dwell with yourselves as an island, with yourselves as a refuge, with no other refuge; with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as a refuge, with no other refuge (*SN* III,1,43).

In contrast, the Christ was not only a guide to the true way, a revealer of the truth and the perfect example how to live; he was the very embodiment of the way, the truth and life. He said:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (*John* 14,6).

On the one hand, we see that according to the Christ the way, the truth and the life *are* a person,⁶ they are not just revealed *by* a person because Ultimate Reality itself is personal. On the other hand, the Buddha is precisely the guide leading to nirvana, rather than the path or the goal itself.⁷ He said to a Brahmin:

⁶ This is very difficult to comprehend in Buddhist terms. For instance Thich Nhat Hanh can only see Jesus as a teacher: "Jesus is our Lord because he embodies the way, he embodies the Dharma" (Nhat Hanh, 1999, p. 150).

⁷ In the words of Rahula, "If the Buddha is to be called a 'savior' at all, it is only in the sense that he discovered and showed the Path to Liberation, Nirvana. But we must tread the Path ourselves" (Rahula 1974, pp. 1–2).

Nirvana exists and the path leading to nirvana exists and I am present as the guide (MN 107,14).

The *Dharma* is independent of a particular being that became a Buddha. The identity of the founder of Buddhism can be separated from his teaching. The same truth could have been discovered by somebody else, while no other could *speak* the words of Christ and actually *be* the Christ. The difference should be clear by now. It can be summarized as following: The Christ is to be seen as the representative of God the Father, as a person who represents a person:

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father (*John* 14,9).
while the Buddha is the image of the *Dhamma*, a person who represents an impersonal truth:

Seeing the *Dhamma*, he [the monk] sees me (*Ittivuttaka* 92).⁸

In the words of Peter Harvey, “While Christians see Jesus as God-become-man, then, Buddhists see Buddha (and Arahats) as man-become-*Dhamma*” (Harvey 1990, p. 28).

WHAT DID THEY DO FOR OUR SALVATION/ ENLIGHTENMENT?

The nature of each savior and what he accomplished is consistent with his view on the nature of Ultimate Reality and on the human being. According to the Buddha the true problem of humankind is ignorance. We do not perceive that everything has an impermanent nature, that it is subject to change and becoming, and empty of a permanent self. We do not realize we are a bundle of five aggregates that fuel the illusion of a permanent self. From this ignorance arise suffering, karma and rebirth. The illusion perpetuates itself until we realize what we are and break the vicious cycle. The Buddha is the one who did it for himself about 2500 years ago and left us detailed instruction on how to do it ourselves. He taught us to look into ourselves, understand the mechanisms that run our being and detach ourselves from delusion. No external savior is needed to succeed:

⁸Source: www.accesstoinsight.org. According to Ashvagoshā the Buddha was the “Dharma incarnate” (Lefebure 1993, p. 12).

Oneself, indeed, is one’s savior, for what other savior could there be? With oneself well-controlled one obtains a savior difficult to find (*Dhammapada* 160).

The Buddha had made himself his own refuge (DN 16, 3,51) when he discovered the path to enlightenment and urged his followers to use his teaching as their only aid:

Therefore, Ananda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no else as your refuge, with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge (*Mahāparinibbāna sutta*, DN 16,2,25–26).

According to the Christ, the problem of humankind is sin. This is not a wrong view about our true nature, but a problem of *relationship* with God and other human beings. It can be taken as a wrong view about ourselves, but only in the sense of viewing ourselves as independent from God, as autonomous centers of existence and not dependent upon him as the true source of our life and meaning. In other words, the problem of sin is not about what we are, but of *how we relate*. When Jesus was asked to name the most important of God’s commands he replied:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (*Matthew* 22,37–40, also in *Mark* 12,29–31).

To sin means to err in our relationship with God and other people. In the Old Testament we have seen that sins had to be atoned for through the ritual performed on the Atonement Day and symbolically carried away from the Jewish community by the scapegoat (see p. 41). What has been foreshadowed by that ritual has been fulfilled in the sacrifice of the Christ on the cross. He fulfilled both the role of the goat for the Lord, by the fact that he shed his blood for us, and of the scapegoat, as he took our sins away. His crucifixion follows the same working principle we have seen in the Old Testament: sins cannot be destroyed or be simply forgotten, but can only be transferred from one being to another. While he was on the cross he took upon himself the sins of humankind, and at that moment he cried: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (*Mark* 15,34; *Matthew* 27,46). The unthinkable had happened; the fellowship between God the Father and God the Son was broken because the Christ had just fulfilled the role of the scapegoat

for all past, present and future generations.⁹ The apostle Peter says that while his body was lying dead in the tomb, he went to a domain where spirits were imprisoned (*1 Peter* 3,18–20). This corresponds to the desert where the scapegoat of the Old Testament was sent. When his role as scapegoat was fulfilled he was resurrected from the dead. The resurrection was the proof that he was indeed the sinless Son of God, not a sinner like everybody else, but the one who carried our sins away in fulfillment of the role of the scapegoat in the Jewish religion.

Such a view on the meaning of Christ's death on the cross is unthinkable for followers of Eastern religions. Usually it is either negated or given another interpretation. But we can have the right view of Jesus' death on the cross only if we understand it in light of the Jewish beliefs of his day. Judaism had prepared the scene for his coming and the right understanding of his death on the cross. Therefore we cannot import foreign suppositions to explain it. Such attempts would ignore the Jewish setting. For instance, Thich Nhat Hanh sees the crucifixion as the supreme example of self-sacrifice for one's beliefs. It would be the equivalent of a Vietnamese monk who burned himself alive in 1963 in protest against the war going on in Vietnam. Both were displaying compassion: "When Jesus allowed himself to be crucified, He was acting in the same way, motivated by the desire to wake people up, to restore understanding and compassion, and to save people" (Nhat Hanh 1995, p. 81). His view is consistent with Zen Buddhism, but not with Christianity. Another example of misunderstanding is that of the Zen master Suzuki, who cannot accept the historical act of Jesus' crucifixion as having spiritual significance:

The crucified Christ is a terrible sight and I cannot help associating it with the sadistic impulse of a physically affected brain. Christians would say that crucifixion means crucifying the self or the flesh, since without subduing the self we cannot attain moral perfection. This is where Buddhism differs from Christianity. Buddhism declares that there is from the very beginning no self to crucify. To think that there is the self is the start of all errors and evils. Ignorance is at the

⁹ The cry on the cross cannot be translated in Buddhist terms and thus is a sticking point for Buddhists. Thich Nhat Hanh says: "In the Gospel according to *Matthew*, there is one sentence that makes me very upset also. That sentence is found also in *Mark*. It is the question asked by Jesus just before he died. He called out, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' [...] It is a very distressing sentence. If God the Son is, at the same time, connected to God the father, why speak of abandonment? If the water is one with the wave, why complain that the water is abandoning the wave?" (Nhat Hanh 1999, pp. 166–67) Atonement cannot be understood in Buddhist terms, nor can the relationship between the Father and the Son be understood in terms of "water" and "wave".

root of all things that go wrong. As there is no self, no crucifixion is needed, no sadism is to be practiced, no shocking sight is to be displayed by the road-side (in Lefebure 1993, p. 50).

However, the crucifixion has nothing to do with the problem of the self as Buddhists see it. It is not about what the human being *is*, but about how it *relates*. The crucifixion is a matter of repairing a broken relationship, not of establishing or denying belief in a self. It is not a matter of ignorance, but one of mending personal relationships. Suzuki asks:

Could not the idea of the oneness [with Christ] be realized in some other way, that is, more peacefully, more rationally, more humanly, more humanely, less militantly, and less violently? (in Lefebure 1993, p. 50).

In light of Judaism and its beliefs, with Christ declaring himself to be the one who fulfills the Mosaic Law, salvation could be realized in *no* other way. Therefore from a Buddhist perspective, Jesus' sacrifice is indeed absurd. This was also true in the Greek culture of his day. The apostle Paul said:

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God (*1 Corinthians* 1,22–24).

The crucifixion is foolishness also for Buddhists, since sins (or ignorance) cannot be paid for by another. Each one must bear his or her own karma and struggle for liberation. What one has to do for his enlightenment/salvation in light of what the Savior has done for us is our next topic of debate. For now we need to understand that the mere ethical teaching of Christ was not enough for our salvation. If it were, he could have just preached the *Sermon on the Mount* (*Matthew* 5–7), performed some miracles to draw attention to the new teaching and then ascended to heaven without being crucified. But this was not the case. He didn't say, "Be islands unto yourselves. Let the Sermon on the Mount be your guide." The crucifixion, as horrible as it was, is the proof that words were not enough.

In conclusion, we see two very different situations in what the Buddha and the Christ actually did for the salvation of humankind. What they did

for us is consistent with what they thought to be wrong with us. One thought that our problem was ignorance and thus brought the right teaching, while the other thought it was sin and brought the right sacrifice. On the one hand, the Buddha was a human who conquered suffering in his own life and left us his teaching by which anyone can attain the same spiritual perfection after numerous rebirths. On the other hand, the Christ was the suffering Son of God, who redeemed the world through his suffering and death. The Buddha could not suffer for others, just as the Christ could not achieve our salvation by just leaving us higher ethical standards.

CHAPTER 9

ON WHAT THEY ASKED US TO DO FOR OUR SALVATION/ENLIGHTENMENT

We have seen that according to the Christ we cannot mend our broken relationship with God by ourselves. He had to descend into our condition and be himself the sacrifice that clears away our sins. If humans had the slightest chance of rehabilitating themselves through their own resources, such a solution would have been absurd. The tragedy of the cross demonstrates the reality and gravity of human sin, the spiritual misery in which we are all stuck and the impossibility of saving ourselves. But as in any other relationship, it is not enough that one party offers the solution for reconciliation. The other part has to accept that solution and act accordingly. The same principle is true in Buddhism. It is not enough that the Buddha discovered and taught the *Dhamma*. One has to engage personally and follow the requirements of the Noble Eightfold Path in order to attain nirvana for himself or herself. In this chapter we will assess the meaning of faith and compassion in the teachings of the Buddha and the Christ as part of what we are required to do and see how consistent they are with each other.

THE MEANING OF FAITH

In the context of Jesus' teaching, in which the mending of broken relationships between God and humans is the greatest priority, faith is defined as trust. To have faith means to trust God that his promises will come true and that he is in charge of our life. In the Scripture we are given several examples of people who embodied this virtue. The two most important figures of Judaism are Abraham and Moses. Abraham trusted God's promise that he would be blessed with a son and become the ancestor of a whole nation (*Genesis* 12–22, *Hebrews* 11,8–19). This promise was made against all odds, as Abraham was 99 years old and his wife was 90. Nevertheless, Abraham expressed his faith by trusting God in what he had promised: "Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (*Genesis* 15,6; *Romans* 4,3; *Galatians* 3,6). Moses trusted God that he would free the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage and lead them into the promised land (*Hebrews* 11,24–28). His faith was the practical way in which he engaged himself as the leader of his people for 40 years.

As we can see in these two examples, faith means trusting God by responding appropriately to his demands. It can only be defined in the context of a personal relationship with him. However, as with any other personal relationship, the one with God must have a beginning. How such a relationship starts is explained by the Christ in his dialogue with a Jewish man named Nicodemus: "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (*John* 3,3). Nicodemus was puzzled and asked: "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" (v. 4). Jesus rejected the idea of physical rebirth and explained our need for spiritual rebirth, during this life, by referring to a well-known episode in Israel's history. He said: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up" (*John* 3,14). That episode had taken place while the Israelites were traveling in the wilderness toward the Promised Land under the command of Moses (*Numbers* 21,4–9). They spoke against God and against Moses, and God punished them by sending poisonous snakes among them. Grasping the gravity of the situation, they recognized their sin and asked for a saving solution. God's solution was for Moses to make a bronze replica of such a snake and put it up on a pole. Those who had been bitten by a snake had to look at this bronze snake, believing that this symbol represented their salvation, and so were healed. To make the connection between that episode and his teaching, Jesus said: "Just as Moses

lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (*John* 3,14–15). In other words, as Moses lifted up the bronze snake in the desert, Jesus to be lifted up on the cross, in order to be the only antidote to the deadly bite of sin. As the Jews had to believe that the bronze snake was their salvation from death, the same way Nicodemus and all others have to believe that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is the only solution¹ provided by God for the sins of humankind. The kind of rebirth he was teaching was not *samsara* but a spiritual rebirth that any human being can experience in this life.

The personal recognition of a sinful state and a commitment to trust him as the redeemer from sin is called repentance. It is the starting point of a personal relationship with God. The apostle Peter used this term in his preaching on the Day of Pentecost (*Acts* 2,38). In that context, repentance had a wider meaning than simply regretting the mistakes of the past. Repentance meant to be sorry for rejecting Jesus as the Christ, accompanied by a subsequent change of mentality: If until then the Jews considered Jesus to be a blasphemer who pretended to be equal with God, this attitude had to be changed into accepting him as the Savior. The same change of attitude toward Jesus is required today. He is not a mere prophet or guru, but the one who has mended our broken relationship with God. What he has done for us is a free gift. We must accept it by faith and then live by faith and obedience to God.

Now if we turn to the meaning of faith according to the Buddha, it cannot be the same, since there is no God as Ultimate Reality and no need to relate to any god to attain enlightenment. Faith (Sanskrit *shraddha*, Pali *saddha*) is rather trust in the efficiency of the doctrines of the Buddha, in the sense of expecting them to bring the desired effect in one's spiritual path toward enlightenment. The Buddha has formulated the Noble Eightfold Path and one must trust (have faith) that it will lead him or her to nirvana. The only personal agent in this process is the Buddhist follower, so he must place himself in the hands of the Buddha's *teaching* to find enlightenment. To have confidence in its effectiveness is the first condition for following the Buddha (*Nipata* 182–3). This kind of initial trust will lead to practical knowledge, which in turn will deepen one's trust in the efficacy of the Buddha's teaching.

¹ For the Christ to be the only alternative one has for being saved and entering the Kingdom of God, according to his words, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (*John* 14,6), is not offensive for Buddhists, as it is for Muslims. For Buddhists, since there is no God (or heavenly Father) as Ultimate Reality, a way to him is not to be sought at all.

Finally when one becomes an *arahat*, he no longer needs faith, as his knowledge is supreme. Walpola Rahula writes about faith:

Almost all religions are built on faith – rather ‘blind’ faith it would seem. But in Buddhism emphasis is laid on ‘seeing’, knowing, understanding, and not on faith, or belief. In Buddhist texts there is a word *saddha* (Skt *śraddha*), which is usually translated as ‘faith’ or ‘belief’. But *saddha* is not ‘faith’ as such, but rather ‘confidence’ born out of conviction (Rahula 1974, p. 8).

Faith in Buddhism is like the confidence we have in a tool for achieving a practical purpose.² For instance, I trust my computer to transform my thoughts into this written text. But this kind of confidence requires some work on my behalf. I must provide the computer with power, have it set properly to avoid annoying crashes, make sure that everything is plugged in and type the words correctly on the keyboard. In all this, I have the initiative. The computer is just a tool, which I have the responsibility to handle correctly. I cannot talk to the computer as to a person (unless I’m mad), and beg it to recover lost data. If an internal error occurs, it will stop responding without asking me how I feel about it. In a similar way, the wrong way of meditating will bring about wrong results or none at all.

Speaking of faith in the Buddhist tradition, the Dalai Lama mentioned three different meanings it can take:

The first is faith in the form of admiration that you have toward a particular person or a particular state of being. The second is aspiring faith. There is a sense of emulation; you aspire to attain that state of being. The third type is the faith of conviction (Dalai Lama 1998, p. 112).

However, none of these corresponds to the faith taught by the Christ. Faith in God is not “admiring” God or the Christ for what he is, as one would admire a saint. You can admire saints as examples of embodying faith, but this is not faith itself. Admiring somebody does not require having a personal relationship with them. Neither does faith mean to aspire to attain Christ-hood, as a Buddhist may aspire to attain Buddhahood. We cannot aspire to attain “the state of being” of

the Christ.³ And for the same reasons, we cannot “develop a deep conviction” of attaining such a state of being.

This is because the Christian meaning of faith is entirely different. God is a person who initiates a personal relationship with me. My faith is my response to his initiative, my part of our dialogue. He loved me first and I love him in return (1 John 4,19). From a Buddhist point of view, to love God and thus to have faith in him is a form of delusion (*moha*), as it involves clinging to personal existence. It is one of the three poisons that darken the mind, as dangerous as greed (*raga*) and hatred (*dosha*). It has to be given up or else it would sustain rebirth.

But what the Buddhist must reject, the Christian must embrace, for rejecting faith means forsaking God. For the Christian, not all forms of attachment are necessarily wrong. According to the teaching of the Christ, attachment to the things of this world such as riches and lust are sins, whereas love, as attachment to God and one’s neighbors, is the highest demand. This is obvious if you read the *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5–7). If any form of attachment were wrong, love and faith could not work. For the Buddha however, any form of attachment is evil, including attachment for nirvana. Love for God is an obstacle to enlightenment, since it perpetuates the craving for existence. Even attachment to the Buddha is wrong. For this reason the Zen master Linji (d. 866) coined the formula: “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!”

What is usually taken as the equivalent of faith in the Buddha’s teaching is the act of taking refuge in the Three Jewels – the Buddha, the *Dhamma* (the teaching of the Buddha) and the *Sangha* (the community of Buddhist followers).⁴ Many of the sutras which present debates of the Buddha or of his

³ By no coincidence, this expresses the view of Thich Nhat Hanh: “We are all, at the same time, the sons and daughters of God and the children of our parents. This means we are of the same reality as Jesus. [...] The only place we can touch Jesus and the Kingdom of God is within us.” (Nhat Hanh 1995, p. 44). He is obviously referring to our shared Buddha nature. A few pages further he writes: “Expecting parents have to be very careful because they carry within them a baby, one who might become a Buddha or Lord Jesus.” (Ibid., p. 47). And elsewhere: “It [“the body of Christ, the body of God, the body of ultimate reality”] resides deep in our own being.” (Ibid., p. 31). His view is obviously consistent with the Mahayana perspective on Buddhahood, but not with the teaching of the Christ.

⁴ A good explanation of what taking refuge in the Three Jewels means is given in the glossary of terms of the Dalai Lama’s *The Good Heart*: “Among these three, the actual refuge is the Dharma, for it is only through one’s experience of the truth that liberation can take place. Buddha is the enlightened teacher who shows the path through his or her expertise and experience, while the Sangha, or spiritual community, provides the precious companionship of friends on the journey.

² According to Thich Nhat Hanh, “In Buddhism, faith means confidence in our and others’ abilities to wake up to our deepest capacity of loving and understanding” (Nhat Hanh 1995, p. 12). Elsewhere he says: “In Buddhism, the source of our energy is faith in our daily practice” (Ibid., p. 178) and “The well is within us” (Ibid., p. 179).

disciples with skeptics end with their taking refuge in the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*. For instance, at the end of the 12th sutra of the *Digha Nikaya*, the Brahmin Lohicca says:

I go for refuge to the Lord Gotama, The Dhamma and the Sangha. May the Reverend Gotama accept me as a lay-follower who has taken refuge from this day forth for as long as life shall last!⁵

Although taking refuge in the Buddha sounds like entering a personal relationship with the Buddha, this cannot be the case. According to Williams, “in taking refuge in the Buddha one takes refuge in just this *dharmakaya*, those qualities which the Buddha’s doctrine sets forth and teaches” (Williams 1989, p. 171). The Buddha did not ask for faith in himself,⁶ but in his teaching, which should only be accepted if it can be experienced. Ultimately faith is in ourselves, in our capacity to follow his teaching and to find the truth in ourselves. Thich Nhat Hanh clarifies what it means to take refuge in the Buddha. He says: “I take refuge in the Buddha within myself” (Nhat Hanh 1999, p. 111). He refers to our innate Buddha nature, which a serious practitioner is expected to discover and understand:

The Buddha is within us, because the substance that makes up a Buddha is the energy of mindfulness, of understanding, and compassion. If you practice well and you listen to the Buddha, you know that you have the Buddha nature within you (Nhat Hanh 1999, p. 111).

There is no external help available (*Nipata* 790) and even if there were, the Buddha discouraged the use of it (*Nipata* 813). Faith in an external help can only be an unhealthy attachment, or a way of involving skillful means for those who need such psychological crutches. The latter seems to be the case in Pure Land Buddhism, where faith means trust in the merits of the Amida Buddha, which would be enough to bring one into his Pure Land. This is the path of other-power (Japanese *tariki*), that of reliance on the merits of another being, or in other words, on grace. The traditional Buddhist path is that of own-power (Japanese *jiriki*) that

of being “islands unto ourselves.” Therefore the Pure Land view seems close to the Christian view of faith and grace. But are the two views really close?

The faith one needs to cultivate in Pure Land Buddhism is the attitude of letting go of all trust in own-power, of renouncing all confidence that we can attain anything by ourselves. But at a closer look, the power to do so and to trust Amida completely comes from within us. The power of Amida shining through from within and clearing away all detachments is nothing but our very own Buddha nature. Therefore, instead of truly accessing other-power, one cultivates what is already present inside. The recitation of the *Nembutsu* is not about invoking external help, as that of a Hindu god, but a way of cleansing oneself of egoism and everything else that obstructs our Buddha nature. According to Williams,

We cannot enlighten ourselves, for the ego cannot bring about egolessness. Only Other Power can help us. This is because within us all, at our very core, is Other Power itself, or the Buddha-nature which is Amithaba. It is Other Power beyond the ego of Own Power. In other words, we can become enlightened through faith. This is not possible if faith is Own Power. Therefore faith is Other Power. Only Other Power can save us. We can only have faith because faith is a shining forth of our innate Buddha-nature, which is Amithaba himself (Williams 1989, p. 272).

Therefore in Pure Land Buddhism faith is nothing but a way of putting inner resources to work and discovering what we already are, our Buddha nature. It is called grace because it cannot be earned. The Buddha nature is already there. Compared to the Christian perspective this is obviously a different kind of grace – one that lies within us waiting to be discovered. It is not granted by a historical savior as the Christ, since that would contradict the Buddha’s teaching. Therefore the similarity between Pure Land Buddhism and Christianity concerning the meaning of faith is only apparent. Under its language of faith and grace we find traditional Buddhist values.⁷

These three are called ‘jewels’ because they are considered to be rare and precious (Dalai Lama 1998, p. 189).

⁵ Many other sutras end like this one, see DN 13; 31; MN 7; 27; 30; 41; 54; 58; etc.

⁶ Faith in the Buddha at best can lead to a (temporary) heavenly rebirth, but not to enlightenment. He said: “Those who have sufficient faith in me, sufficient love for me, are all headed for heaven” (MN 22,47). This is not enlightenment, the supreme goal, as the previous verse explains that the “Dhamma followers” are truly those “headed for enlightenment” (MN 22,46).

⁷ This is confirmed by the reluctance of Jodo Shinshu Buddhists to translate *shinjin* by using the consecrated English term “faith”. Malcolm Eckel, Associate Professor of Religion at Boston University, writes of this problem on the occasion of translating Pure Land Scriptures into English at Harvard University: “We were surprised, then fascinated to hear Japanese members of the translation team argue that *shinjin* should be left untranslated to avoid confusion with the Christian concept of faith. [...] They said that *shinjin* was the human reflection of the mind of Amida Buddha, and since the mind of Amida was made present in a very specific way, it was misleading to equate *shinjin* with the Christian term “faith” (in Lopez 1992, p. 48).

Since Amida is not an external savior, but a reality within any of us, there is no actual transfer of merits from Amida to his followers, similar to the transfer of Christ's atonement for sins to his followers. Pure Land Buddhism is thus consistent with the teaching of the Buddha in his demand for using inner resources. For the common believer in Amida it may sound like being saved by him, but in fact it is only skillful means to help uncover hidden potential by renouncing pride. Therefore faith in Pure Land Buddhism is not a variant of the Christian formulation of faith, but another way of talking of Buddhist reliance on self-power.

If such is the meaning of faith in Buddhism, it is obvious that the meaning of repentance must also be different. Repentance is a concept less mentioned in Buddhist scriptures. However, it is clearly referred to in the *Meditation Sutra*, which is closely related to the *Lotus Sutra*, as a kind of epilogue to it. It says:

What is sin? What is blessedness? As one's own mind is void of itself, sin and blessedness have no existence. In like manner all the laws are neither fixed nor going toward destruction. If one repents like this, meditating on his mind, there is no mind he can seize. The law also does not dwell in the law. All the laws are emancipation, the truth of extinction and quiescence. Such an aspect is called the great repentance, the greatly adorned repentance, the repentance of the non-sin aspect, and the destruction of discrimination. He who practices this repentance has the purity of body and mind not fixed in the law [but free] as flowing water (Kato 1975, p. 363).

Since there is ultimately no God before whom to repent and thus no sin to repent for, repentance is defined as the very act of perceiving sin as illusion and of detaching oneself from the duality of good and evil. Repentance is a matter of knowing how things really are, of how we really are, so it cannot work in the context of a relationship with a personal god.

To summarize, faith and repentance are closely linked to each other in both Buddhism and Christianity. But as we have seen, their meaning is very different in the two traditions. On the one hand, for a Christian, faith and repentance are defined in relation to an external reference point, which is God. Faith is a matter of trust in the context of a relationship, while repentance is a way of mending this relationship when sin breaks it down. On the other hand, for a Buddhist, faith and repentance are defined in relation to our inner nature, as means of putting inner resources to work. Faith, as defined in Buddhism,

cannot work for a Christian, and vice versa. For a Buddhist, Christian faith is an attachment, while for a Christian, Buddhist faith is forsaking God. The two stand in irreconcilable opposition.

BUDDHIST COMPASSION AND CHRISTIAN LOVE

According to the Christ a renewed relationship with God must be accompanied by a renewed relationship with our neighbors. When he was asked to formulate the greatest command, he stated that love should be at the core of all our relationships. He didn't separate "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" from "Love your neighbor as yourself". In fact they are a single commandment with two aspects. In the last hours before his crucifixion the Christ gave his disciples the command to love each other: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (*John* 13,34–35). The term used here for "love" in Greek is *agape*, which is not a natural feeling, of the kind we have toward the opposite sex, a family member or a friend, but rather a self-sacrificing attitude, a volitional involvement which seeks the highest good of others.

As already mentioned, from a Buddhist perspective the requirement to love God and each other faces a fundamental difficulty: There is no permanent god to be loved and humans are just temporary bundles of aggregates. How could two such bundles of aggregates love each other?⁸ Therefore the Buddha never asked his disciples to *love* him or each other. For a Buddhist to love God must have a different meaning. Here is how Robert Thurman, Professor of Indo-Tibetan studies at Columbia University, New York, interprets Jesus' command to love God:

In the very statement of "love God" the whole meditation of *sunyata* is contained, because what is it to love God? Is it to love some dogma? No. Is it to love some particular denomination or label or badge that one has in one's pocket? No. To love God is somehow to acknowledge the transcendent absolute, that which goes beyond the individual's conceptual grasp, that which is greater than the self, so to love God

⁸ According to Dumoulin there is no equivalent to *agape* love in Asian languages (Dumoulin 1994, p. 66).

actually you have to be open to *sunyata*, as the Buddhist would see it (in Lopez 1992, p. 242).

Being consistent with the Buddhist view that Ultimate Reality is not the personal God of the Bible but the Mahayana *shunyata*, Thurman can only view love for God as being open to the truth of emptiness. Since there is nothing permanent and all beings must be seen as empty of inherent existence, loving God means loving a philosophically acceptable dogma, that of *shunyata*. As a result, the requirement “to love your neighbor” must also take on another meaning. The Buddhist equivalent of the Christian *agape* love is the teaching on compassion (*karuna*).⁹ According to Thurman, *karuna* is:

not merely imposed upon by the believer or the pro-religious person as an ethical injunction, as a command. It is imposed as a command, in many cases by the Buddha and the *Bodhisattvas*, but along with that comes a technology, a technology of becoming less selfish (in Lopez 1992, p. 241).

Now let us see how this technology of showing Buddhist compassion actually works. Compassion is one of the four “divine abidings” (*brahmaviharas*) which can be taken as the focus of calm meditation (*samatha*). As mentioned earlier (p. 99) calm meditation is a method of stilling the mind and making it rest undisturbed on a single object of perception. The four divine abidings one has to develop in meditation are: 1) loving-kindness (*metta*) – the wish for happiness for all sentient beings (*Nipata* 145–49); 2) compassion (*karuna*) – the wish that no being may suffer; 3) sharing in joy (*mudita*) – to be happy of others’ happiness; and 4) equanimity (*upekka*) – the quality of remaining undisturbed by both joys and sorrows.¹⁰ These are successive stages one has to follow in calm meditation as the right attitude toward all sentient beings. But perfecting relationships cannot be the goal of Buddhist practice, since ultimately persons are just bundles of aggregates. Therefore the four stages are to be realized and experienced *in meditation* and lead one towards *detachment* from personal relationships on the way to nirvana. If compassion towards beings is primarily a matter of insight, it bears little effect upon social relations, which is the reason why Westerners criticize *karuna* for not resulting in practical action. Loving kindness and compassion are rather about

⁹ Masao Abe confirms: “Compassion is a Buddhist equivalent to the Christian notion of love” (Abe 1995, p. 15).

¹⁰ See Williams 2000, p. 83 and MN 62,18–21; 50,14; 55,8; DN 13,76–79.

having positive feelings toward other beings, instead of getting involved in a practical way in their hardships. Harvey Aronson, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia, explains:

Love is epitomized, however, by the wish, “May all beings be happy,” which stops short of *necessary* commitment to action. The reason for this is perhaps that in the discourses the teachings on love and compassion involve the cultivation of these attitudes in meditation (Aronson 1980, p. 64).

Compassion is rather about *wishing* that others be happy and free of suffering, instead of getting involved in *social action*.¹¹ At most, social action was required for lay followers of the Buddha,¹² and exhortations to direct action on behalf of those whose suffering is very visible are very rare in the sutras.¹³ Lama Thubten Yeshe explains why:

True love does not depend on physical expression. You should realize this. True love is a feeling deep within you [...] (Yeshe 1978, p. 24).

According to the famous Buddhist commentator Buddhaghosa (fifth century AD), the four divine abidings, of which compassion is one, are compared to the feelings of parents toward their child in four consecutive stages: during pregnancy, as a helpless toddler, a young teenager and a married man settled at his own house:

When a youth is in the womb, the parents think with a *loving mind*, “When will we see our son healthy and endowed with all his major and minor limbs?” Then, when this tender creature lies on his back

¹¹ This doesn’t mean that Buddhists are not involved in charitable work. Especially Western Buddhists have developed practical ways of social action. One example would be that of Robina Courtin, a Buddhist nun who teaches meditation to imprisoned criminals (Mackenzie 2003, p. 1ff.). However, this was not the spirit of early Buddhism. Buddhist charitable action has started only very recently.

¹² For instance, in the DN 5,11 the Buddha in a former life instructed a king to give food to the poor and to distribute grain to farmers and money to traders, so that crime in his kingdom might be uprooted.

¹³ I am aware of a single instance when the Buddha was involved in charitable activity. In the *Mahavagga* section of the *Vinaya Pitaka* (*The Basket of the Discipline*), in the *Kucchivikara-vatthū sutra*, we find the story of a monk who was sick with dysentery. He lay fouled in his own urine and excrement unattended by his fellow monks. The Buddha discovered him lying there and decided to act on his behalf. He sprinkled water on the sick monk, his disciple Ananda washed him off and then they put him in his bed. The Buddha then said to the careless community: “Whoever would tend to me, should tend to the sick” (*Mahavagga* 8,26,1–8, www.accesstosight.org).

and cries or wails because of being bitten by lice or fleas or because of being bothered by troubled sleep, the parents hear this noise and feel simple *compassion*. Furthermore, when the parents observe the youth in his most desirable years, either at the time of his play when he runs and races or at the time he rests, their minds become tender, like a hundred fluffy balls of cotton soaked in the finest clarified butter. The parents' minds are satisfied and joyous. They have *sympathetic joy* at that time. Then, when the son is able to provide adornments for his wife and settle in his own house, the parents become even-minded and think, "Now our son can live on his own." In this way, they have *equanimity* at that time (in Aronson 1980, p. 70, emphasis mine).

The focus of Buddhist practice is detachment from illusion, and therefore compassion is primarily about having the right thinking, rather than the right action. Compassion must ultimately lead to equanimity which is peace, impartiality, freedom from concern, ultimate tranquility and indifference to any mundane concern. One has to develop equanimity toward both happiness and suffering, as only this position is consistent with our true nature and the need to escape ignorance. The peace of mind one has to attain by the practice of the *brahmaviharas* leaves little room for getting involved in the real world of suffering beings. In fact, as long as we are nothing but "bundles of aggregates" or "streams of empty *dharmas*", we cannot really interact. Thus we must rather realize what we really are and avoid unhealthy attachments. According to Conze,

The meditation on Dharms dissolves other people, as well as oneself, into a conglomeration of impersonal and instantaneous dharmas. It reduces our manhood into five heaps, or pieces, plus a label. If there is nothing in the world except bundles of Dharms – as cold and as impersonal as atoms – instantaneously perishing all the time, there is nothing which friendliness and compassion could work on. One cannot wish well to a Dharma which is gone by the time one has come to wish it well, nor can one pity a Dharma – say a 'mind-object,' or a 'sight-organ,' or a 'sound-consciousness' (Conze 1959, p. 129).

Nevertheless compassion plays an important role in Mahayana Buddhism. The *bodhisattva* is aware of the truth of emptiness and impermanence, but must show compassion to suffering beings so that they, too, can find enlightenment. At this

point wisdom (*panna*) offers help. Wisdom keeps one from developing attachments while remaining firm in equanimity (*upekkha*). For this reason it is said that wisdom and compassion work hand in hand. On the one hand, one knows that beings are ultimately not real, that suffering is produced by a false view, but on the other hand compassion moves him or her towards the suffering beings who do *not* know that truth and who really *feel* that they are suffering. Therefore the *bodhisattvas* must have a very special way of acting in the world. In chapter 5 we saw that the *bodhisattva* acts *as if* beings are real, *as if* their problems are real. He knows the ultimate truth of emptiness, so he *pretends* to be acting compassionately, like an actor who suffers for the death of his child, but in reality is only playing a role. In reality nobody died, nothing is ultimately true and all actors are happy.

Wisdom keeps the enlightened follower of the Buddha from developing attachments and falling into delusion while using skillful means to awaken suffering beings. As a matter of fact, compassion is beneficial not only for the "beings" ensnared by illusion, but also for the compassionate helper. It is a way of using skillful means both for the sake of others and for his or her own sake, since it is a good antidote against getting stuck in enlightenment and against clinging to nirvana, which itself could be viewed as a selfish attainment.

Another way in which compassion and wisdom cooperate is by providing the proper help when people hurt us. Wisdom helps us understand that we are all connected, since emptiness is our true nature. So instead of manifesting anger toward people who hurt us, wisdom helps us to see them as ultimately not existing. How could we, a bundle of aggregates, hate another bundle of aggregates? Since we have examined our body and feelings and found them empty of inherent existence, so must we see our "enemy" and our anger. After all, anger is only a temporary feeling of a temporary bundle of aggregates. This way of seeing hostile individuals is provided by wisdom and should lead to detachment and peace. However, there is a side-effect to this procedure. We must follow the same reasoning for the people who love us. They must also be seen as "ultimately not existing" or else an unwholesome state of bondage may develop. Wisdom must dissolve *all* relationships, enemies and friends alike.

To sum up, compassion (*karuna*) is a way of *viewing* suffering beings, a mental attitude towards them, which does not necessarily involve action on their behalf. Ultimately a true Buddhist is to cultivate equanimity (*upekkha*), and not to become stuck in compassionate behavior in service to his or her neighbor.

Now if we return to the meaning of Christian love (*agape*), we encounter a very different situation. Let me explain by starting with Thurman's view of

the lack of a proper “technology” for becoming less selfish in Christianity.¹⁴ There is indeed no teaching of Christ concerning any method of cultivating compassion as a *state of mind*. The Christ did not ask for visualizations of body processes, mechanisms of mind, states of consciousness, etc. No analysis of human nature in terms of functional components is available in the gospels. If this were the way to love each other, Thurman would be right, the “technology” is missing. But there are good reasons why the Christ didn’t leave us meditation techniques for achieving peace of mind and love. In his view we are to define our identity in personal relationships with God and with other people, not by introspection. In other words, we are to look outside ourselves for meaning, not inside. The ultimate fulfillment of human life is in a personal relationship with the personal God, not in the knowledge of what our nature really is. For this reason, the command to love God cannot mean “to become open to the [impersonal] truth of *shunyata*” and the command to love our neighbor as ourselves cannot be the equivalent of Buddhist *karuna*. Our love of God is the response to God’s love for us. As for the proper “technology” for learning to love each other, what better way could the Christ have left us than giving his personal example? He performed miracles only for the sake of others, for fulfilling their basic needs and making them understand their greater need of God. He embodied the way we should love each other by showing us how to serve instead of expecting to be served. At his last supper with the disciples, the Christ washed their feet and said:

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you (*John* 13,14–15).

Minutes later during the same evening, he told them:

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends (*John* 15,12–13).

¹⁴ According to Thurman: “The thing is, however, that in the Christian tradition, except within certain monastic traditions in certain centuries, this injunction of God was not unpacked in a technological, meditational, systematic manner to make it something feasible for everyone to do. It was just told to them. If you can take all of the Madhyamika and Buddhist sunyata science of selflessness and pour it into the injunction to love God as the indispensable prerequisite to loving thy neighbor as thyself, Buddhism has done Christianity a great favor” (in Lopez 1992, p. 242).

He didn’t leave us only with a magnificent teaching, but gave his life for us on the cross. Christ’s sacrifice was the ultimate “technology” in showing us what love means in practice. While they nailed him to the cross, Jesus prayed for his executioners saying: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (*Luke* 23,34). His way of loving hostile individuals was not by understanding what they are in terms of impermanent aggregates, but by dying for them. This is the best clue to understanding the meaning of compassion in the view of the Christ. To have compassion means to take part in someone else’s pain, to rescue the person from a destructive force.¹⁵ This is exactly what the Christ did. He entered our world of suffering, suffered along with us and then, following the pattern of the Old Testament, took upon himself our sins as the atoning sacrifice. We saw in chapter 4 how this worked. Thus he truly expressed compassion as he dealt with our most serious problem. As a result, for us compassionate behavior means following his example of love in service to our neighbors, by engaging in practical ways of alleviating their suffering.

Another significant difference between the teaching of the Buddha and that of the Christ concerning compassion is found in the Buddha’s requirement to show compassion to *all* beings, human and non-human alike, as all are somewhere in the endless cycle of rebirth and in need of finding enlightenment, while the Christ has made humans the focal point of his salvation. Animals are not to be despised or treated with cruelty, since they also belong to God’s creation, but nevertheless only humans are created in his image and likeness and called into the Kingdom of God. According to the Christ we are far more important to him than other creatures:

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? (*Matthew* 6,26)

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. [...] So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows (*Matthew* 10,29–31).

¹⁵ The Webster Dictionary defines compassion as “a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by suffering or misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the pain or remove its cause” (*Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary*, Gramercy Books, New York/Avenel, 1994).

If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! (*Matthew* 12,11–12a)

The Buddha did not discriminate in this way. According to his teaching humans are not worth more than animals, as animal life is only one of the realms of rebirth, along with ghosts, gods and demons. All beings will ultimately be reborn as humans and so will have the chance to follow his doctrine. The *Jataka* tales tell stories of the Buddha's past lives when he showed compassion to animals in distress and sacrificed himself for their welfare. For instance, as prince Mahasattva, he sacrificed himself for a hungry tigress and her five cubs. She was about to devour her cubs to feed herself when the Buddha (in his former existence) sacrificed himself for them. He cut his own throat and fell down near the tigress, to make her feeding of him easier (in Conze 1959, pp. 24–26).¹⁶ Or the *bodhisattva* can even take the form of an animal since, according to Gomez, “aspirants to the *Bodhisattva*’s virtue must accept every form of sentient being as inherently sacred” (in Lopez 1992, p. 166).

In conclusion, *karuna* and *agape* have different meanings. *Karuna* is about having the right feelings about all other beings, while *agape* is about doing the right things for humans. *Karuna* is displayed in solitary meditation, while *agape* is displayed in active communion, never in solitude or autonomy.

Let me end this section on love and compassion by recalling two instances in the lives of the Buddha and the Christ when they were faced with similar challenges by the people around them. Each was faced with a similar need and showed compassion in a way consistent with his teaching. In the first instance they were each in the situation of helping a woman who had lost her only son:

<i>Therigatha</i> 10 (in the <i>Khuddaka Nikaya</i>) – paraphrased	<i>Luke</i> 7,11–16
<p>Kisagotami was a young woman whose two year old son had suddenly died. She refused to believe that her child was dead and went looking for medicine for him.</p> <p>So she came to the Buddha with her plea. He said he would prepare medicine for the child if she could only fetch him mustard seed (the cheapest spice). But this was not the only condition. The mustard seeds had to be obtained from a house where nobody had deceased relatives.</p> <p>She went from house to house asking for mustard seeds. All the people she met had plenty of such seeds, but nobody could fulfill the requirement of not having dead relatives. So she gradually realized that death was universal and nobody could escape it. So she buried her son and went back to the Buddha to tell him her of her finding. Then the Buddha taught her the truth of suffering and impermanence, to help her understand that worldly expectations only lead to more suffering. The only way out is nirvana, the end of all sorrows. Kisagotami accepted his teaching and entered the order of Buddhist nuns.</p>	<p>Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him.</p> <p>As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out – the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.” Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.”</p>

The contrast is striking. On the one hand, the Buddha offered counseling on the inevitability of death. For the Buddha it was normal to do so. It would have been absurd to resurrect the child of Kisagotami and so to keep her under the spell of ignorance. The highest gain for her was to learn the lesson of the universality of death and so to take refuge in the Buddha’s teaching. In this way the suffering caused by the loss of her child was transformed into enlightenment.

¹⁶ Thurman identifies the hungry tigress and her four cubs with the five ascetics that were the first disciples of the Buddha at Sarnath. That act of self-sacrifice on their behalf made it possible for them to hear the *Dhamma* expounded by the Buddha eons later and thus find liberation (in Lopez 1992, p. 67).

On the other hand, the Christ resurrected the dead young man and gave him back to his mother. It was nevertheless a temporary resurrection, since that man was to die again at old age. So what was the Christ's lesson about? By doing the miracle of the resurrection, the Christ did not prolong the mother's ignorance. On the contrary, he drew attention to what true life and its source are. Another significant aspect is that he gave the resurrected man back to his mother, pointing to the importance of human relationships, family and community.

In the second instance they were again confronted by the death of a child. Once again they were consistent with their teaching:

<i>Ekaputta Sutta, Udana 2.7</i>	<i>Mark 5,22–42; also in Matthew 9,18–25; Luke 8,41–55</i>
On a certain occasion, the Blessed One dwelt at Savatthi, in the Jetavana, the garden of Anathapindika. Now, at that time, a little child, the only and dearly loved son of a certain lay disciple, died. And a number of lay disciples, with garments and hair wet (with tears) went, at inconvenient hours, to where the Blessed One was, and drawing near, they saluted the Blessed One and sat down respectfully apart. And as they thus sat apart, the Blessed One spoke to them saying: "Wherefore, O disciples, do you thus approach me at inconvenient hours, with garments and hair wet with tears?" When these words had been spoken, the lay disciple said to the Blessed One: "Sire, my only and dearly loved little son is dead, for this reason we come, at unseasonable hours,	Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." So Jesus went with him. A large crowd followed and pressed around him. [. . .] While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher any more?" Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe." He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James.

with garments and hair wet (with tears)." And the Blessed One, in this connection, on that occasion breathed forth this solemn utterance:
 "The retinue of the gods and the unconverted,
 Clinging to the joys and delights of form,
 Depart into the power of the King of Death,
 To wither and to weep.
 But those who keep vigil by night and by day,
 And forsake all that is loveable in form;
 They truly dig up the root of sorrow. Hard is it to overcome the temptations
 That lead unto Death."
 (source: www.sacred-texts.com)

When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished.

Once again, the Buddha provided teaching, while the Christ resurrected the child as a sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God.

To sum up this whole section on Buddhist compassion versus Christian love, we have seen that on the one hand we have compassion (*karuna*) defined as an attitude of good-will toward all beings, a state of mind which should help rid oneself of unhealthy attachments, while on the other hand love (*agape*) means practical engagement in the needs and suffering of fellow humans, following Christ's example of supreme sacrifice on our behalf.

CHAPTER 10

“THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON” AS TOLD BY THE CHRIST AND BY THE BUDDHA

Most Westerners are familiar with the “Parable of the Prodigal Son” as it appears in the *Gospel according to Luke*, but probably few are aware that it has a Buddhist parallel in the fourth chapter of *Lotus Sutra*. Although both parables seem to convey a similar message regarding our need for spiritual transformation, a closer look will reveal fundamental differences in their teaching. Let us first see what they say:

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, “Father, give me my share of the estate.” So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, “How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven

and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.” So he got up and went to his father.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. “Your brother has come,” he replied, “and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.” The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!” “My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (*Luke 15,11–32*).

The Buddhist parable is much longer, so here it will be paraphrased:

A young man ran away from his father’s house. For many years he tried to make a living in foreign countries, but all his efforts ended in failure and disappointment. Poverty proved to be his only faithful companion. In the meantime the father searched for him in vain. He moved to a different city and there he became very rich. He didn’t tell anyone that he had a runaway son. As he grew older he became worried that he had nobody to whom to leave all his riches.

One day, as the son was wandering through the wide wild world he came to the city where his father was living. By chance he arrived right at the gate of his father’s palace and was amazed to see an old man living in such luxury. He didn’t recognize him as his father. Instead he worried that he could be arrested for staying there and staring at all those riches, so he ran away. But

his father saw him standing at the gate and recognized him. He rejoiced at the thought that he would finally have an heir. He sent his servants to arrest him and bring him to the palace. As they approached him, the son became terrified, screamed with fear and thought he would die. He fainted.

The father saw the scene and decided to try another course of action to restore his son. He realized that after all those years of wandering through the world, his son needed special treatment. In other words, he had to use skillful means to recover his lost son.

The father sent two of his men to the village where his son was now living to offer him a job as a scavenger. They introduced themselves as scavengers who needed a fellow worker. He was delighted of their offer and accepted. For the next twenty years he worked as a scavenger and lived in a small hut. The father was watching him from a distance to see if his character is improving. Once he went to him in disguise and encouraged him to work more diligently. He promised to increase his salary as the son proved to be an earnest worker, but didn’t tell him anything about being related. He called him a son, but only to encourage him to work harder.

As time passed, the father became ill and felt he would die soon. So he had to hurry with his son’s training and promoted him as accountant over all his riches. The son again had to prove himself worthy of the promotion. He did a good job as an accountant and his father was happy with his progress. He noticed that he had renounced his old dispositions and became a different person.

As the father felt that his death was approaching, he gathered all his relatives and officials of that country and made the official announcement that the man who served him so well was actually his son and heir. Fifty years had passed since he had left home, but now he was fit to be called his heir. The son was filled with joy, as he never thought he would be promoted from accountant to heir of all his father’s riches. The story tellers conclude with the following words:

World-honored One! The very rich elder is the Tathagata, and we are all as the Buddha’s sons. The Buddha has always declared that we are his sons. But because of the three sufferings, in the midst of births-and-deaths we have borne all kinds of torments, being deluded and ignorant and enjoying our attachment to things of no value. [...] The Buddha, knowing that our minds delighted in inferior things, by his tactfulness taught according to our capacity, but still we did not perceive that we are really Buddha’s sons (Kato 1975, p. 115).

The parable in its context

In *Luke*, the parable reveals the character of God and his desire that all sinners return to a father-son relationship with him. Most of all it expresses God's willingness to forgive sinners no matter how far they have gone in rejecting him. The Christ told this parable to a large public consisting of both the "religious experts" of the day, the Pharisees, and the people most despised by them, the tax collectors, prostitutes and other outcasts (*Luke* 15,1–2). The Pharisees considered these "sinners" to be outside the acceptable boundary of God's kingdom and criticized Jesus for enjoying their company. As a rebuke of their contemptuous attitude, he told the previous two parables in *Luke* 15 (*The Lost Sheep* and *The Lost Coin*), in order to emphasize God's initiative in seeking and saving such sinners. In response, the "outcasts" acknowledged their sinful lives and came to Jesus for healing and forgiveness, while the Pharisees considered themselves good enough according to God's standards (see the *Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector* in *Luke* 18,9–14). Thus the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* reveals both God's love for those ready to accept it (the prodigal son who returns to his father), and his rejection of the Pharisees' self-righteousness (the older son in the parable).

The Buddhist parable is in the fourth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, a key scripture that reveals the new teaching of Mahayana Buddhism regarding the *bodhisattva* ideal. Although it is not the Buddha himself who tells the parable, but a group of *arabats*, in the next chapter he acknowledges it as reflecting his own teaching, so we can take it as his. The audience consisted of *arabats*, both male and female, *bodhisattvas*, gods and other beings. This teaching was addressed both to those who had reached the *arabat* stage of becoming and were supposed to advance further to becoming *bodhisattvas*, and to those who already were *bodhisattvas* and would eventually become fully enlightened Buddhas. As the son in the parable shouldn't have been satisfied with his low social status, the Buddhist disciples should also aspire to a higher position, that of becoming a Buddha themselves. It will eventually be attained after a long process of learning and acquiring merits.

The characters

In the *Gospel* the father represents God, while the prodigal son is the individual obstinately living in sin who finally repents and returns to a personal relationship with him. In the *Sutra* the father is the Buddha, while the son is the individual (a particular "stream of empty *dharmas*") on the way to become a *bodhisattva* being and ultimately a Buddha himself.

The son's departure and miserable condition

The prodigal son in *Luke* declares that he has had enough of staying home in obedience to his father and wants to be on his own. Not only does he want to leave home, but he even dares to claim his inheritance, the fortune he is supposed to receive at his father's death. It would have been the equivalent of saying: "Father, I wish you were dead, so that I could cash in my inheritance." Such a demand is obviously outrageous, especially in the Middle Eastern context. However, instead of rebuking or even forsaking his son, the father grants his request.

The son leaves for a distant country where he squanders his entire fortune in wild living. This is an exciting experience, but it brings him to bankruptcy. Now he must find a job to make a living in that country, and the best offer he has is to feed someone's pigs. In a Jewish context, pigs are considered unclean animals; therefore being hired to feed them and even being hungry enough to long for their food illustrates the worst possible situation one can reach.

The prodigal son's outrageous demand and his leaving home represents the attitude of human rebellion against God, the heavenly father. God does not oppose one's freedom of will in choosing how to live. As the son in the parable claims his inheritance and then squanders it, humans use all that God has granted them (wealth, health, time and relationships) not for serving him in obedience, but for selfish interests. This attitude is called sin, and brings humans to the lowest possible stage of decadence. Although living a sinful life is at first very attractive and pleasurable, in the end it leads to destruction, not only spiritually, but also physically, emotionally and socially.

Although the father in the parable gives a large amount of money to his son, he is still rich after the son's departure. His only concern proves to be for his son's personal safety and his eventual return. Wealth plays no role for him. As the rich father in the parable doesn't become poor by his son's departure, God is not impoverished by our decision to live in rebellion against him. Unlike the gods of the Hindu pantheon, he does not depend in any way upon our rituals and sacrifices. The Trinity is a perfect and self-sufficient relationship in itself, while its opening towards humans is only by grace and only for *our* good. The only one who is losing everything by living in rebellion against God is the sinful individual.

The prodigal son of the Buddhist *Sutra* leaves home without any fortune from his father. His departure looks more like running away in secrecy. He also becomes poorer but is still able to make a living. The father doesn't appear to have been rich at the moment of his son's departure; he becomes rich after this episode, in a city other than the one in which he lived with his son.

Therefore the son has no wealthy origins to which to return. Even if he had, the father has left it, so there is no place for him to return. Regarding the father's concern in this story, he seems more worried about having an heir for his huge fortune than about making his son happy again. He is more interested in training his son than in his restoration in the family.

The meaning of the son's endless wandering in the Buddhist tale would be that there is no initial privileged position to lose in one's spiritual becoming. There is no departure from a perfect relationship with a heavenly Father, since there is no such Father as Ultimate Reality. As the son leaves his home poor and remains poor, humans have no other inheritance than karma, which makes them wander from one rebirth to another, rarely attaining a human state. The only truth that governs human existence is suffering, and ignoring it brings about karma, which leads to an endless wandering in multiple worlds, hells and heavens, with no original position to return to. The only spiritual solution is to exit the vicious cycle, and this not by reaching a position of personal safety, but by ceasing to exist as a personal wanderer. Since the parable is addressed to those who have already attained *arabhatship*, the supreme state in the Theravada tradition, the new goal is now set to becoming a Buddha and thus to lead innumerable other beings to escaping from the illusion of personhood.

The way back home

The prodigal son of the *Gospel* finally comes to his senses and acknowledges his degraded condition. Ashamed, he plans to return to his father, confess his sin and ask to be hired as a servant. No matter how humiliating it might be in front of his brother and the other servants, this would be a much better choice than staying with the pigs.

The process of "coming to one's senses" is called repentance, as we saw in the chapter on the meaning of faith. It involves acknowledging the bankruptcy of living in sin and making the decision to leave it.

The Buddhist prodigal son makes no decision to return to his father. He has no place to return to, so he wanders from town to town until he unexpectedly arrives at his father's palace. The son doesn't even recognize his father, whose situation has changed greatly since his departure. The father's wealth inspires fear, causing the son to run away again in order to avoid more trouble. But the father recognizes him and sends his attendants to seize him and bring him to the palace against his will.

The son's wandering in the world can be interpreted as the effect of karma and rebirth. They "seize" the individual and bring him or her into circumstances one cannot logically understand. Therefore we constantly experience suffering until we accept that the only solution is nirvana. Although reaching the status of a *bodhisattva* in Mahayana Buddhism seems to confer a personal destiny in the afterlife, the ultimate stage of becoming is that of realizing *shunyata*, the emptiness of all things, including personal existence.

What happens back home?

In *Luke's* parable, the father is waiting for his son to return home. He knew that the son couldn't find true fulfillment away from home. Instead of punishing him for his foolish behavior, the parable says that "while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (v. 20). Instead of humiliating the son for the shame he caused him on his departure, the father humiliates himself by running to meet him. Such behavior is degrading according to Jewish standards. When the son has recited just half of his prepared speech, acknowledging he was wrong, the father interrupts him and commands the servants to bring him the best robe, to put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet, to slaughter the fattened calf and to prepare a feast to celebrate his son's return. These symbols show full forgiveness and restoration of the son to his prior status. The robe is a sign of great distinction, the ring the sign of authority, the sandals a luxury (slaves were barefoot) and the slaughter of the fattened calf the sign of a very important celebration in the family. Instead of becoming a hired servant as he hoped, the son is fully restored to the position he abandoned long before.

The *Sutra* presents the prodigal son's return home in a whole different way. The father unexpectedly recognizes him standing at his gate and sends his attendants to seize him and bring him to the palace. The son doesn't understand the situation and is terrified. Initially he is treated like a stranger because of his "inferior disposition." Any sudden restoration is out of the question.

Understanding his son's ignorance, the father hires him as a scavenger. Although filled with compassion, the father cannot reveal his identity until the son earns back his place in the family. So he meets him in disguise and encourages him to be honest in his work in order to be promoted. He promises to increase his salary and provide for his basic needs. The process of restoration is very slow. The son lives for 20 years in a small hut while he works as a

scavenger. He must first prove to have improved his character before being accepted back into the family.

The testing process would probably continue, but the father becomes ill, feeling his death to be imminent. Even at this time the son is not yet accepted into the family but only promoted to a higher position, that of accountant over all his father's riches. Without abandoning his sense of inferiority, the son becomes acquainted with all the goods. Noticing that his son's perspective has gradually improved and that he despises his former status, only then does the father gather all his relatives and friends and declare the former servant to be his son and heir. The long process of training has ended only after the son has earned his new status.

The teaching of the parable in Christianity and Buddhism

The Christian meaning of the parable is clear: We all need to return to God in repentance and faith. He does not compel us, so it must be a personal decision. God's forgiveness is not granted through attaining merits, but only by repentance. The price for our reconciliation with God was paid by Jesus Christ, through his death on the cross. There is nothing more that we could add. Thus the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" depicts God's amazing readiness to forgive and restore us, his great love that accepts us independently of our status and past. It encourages us to come to him in repentance and faith, without fear, and so inherit personal communion with him in his everlasting kingdom.

The Buddhist parable has a different message. One cannot simply reach nirvana and Buddhahood at once. The process is very long and demands a progressive accumulation of wisdom. Escaping from ignorance and suffering, attaining first *arabatship* and then Buddhahood, is accomplished gradually, by a day-by-day and life-by-life effort in training the mind and overcoming karma. Grace, in Buddhism, cannot be shown directly, but only as the disciple deserves it, which in fact is no grace at all. All the resources one needs to attain the ultimate goal are already present inside us, as our Buddha nature, so all we need is the proper training to discover it.

There is also a major difference in defining the status of the perfected being. Personhood has no room in nirvana. Although the *bodhisattvas* act as personal beings, they are only temporary catalysts for the sake of other beings so that they too may attain nirvana. The ultimate stage of spiritual progress is that of realizing *shunyata*, the emptiness of all things. The best illustration

to portray Buddhahood, given the meaning of nirvana in the *Nikayas*,¹ is that of the flame of a candle that postpones its own extinction by autonomous means, only to help other candles go out themselves. If I wanted to use similar imagery to express the Christian concept of salvation, it would be to become a flame that keeps burning forever to reflect the image of its Maker, while helping others do the same thing. And it is not achieved by autonomous means, but by the Maker's grace.

¹ Recall the illustration of nirvana as going out like the flame of a candle for lack of fuel (p. 98).

CHAPTER 11

THE CHRIST AS A *BODHISATTVA*

In light of everything that has been said so far, with all the contradictions we have found between the teachings of the Christ and that of the Buddha, could it still be possible to find a way to see them as complementary, or as fulfilling a similar spiritual need in different parts of the world? In other words, from a Buddhist point of view, could the Christ have been a *bodhisattva* for the Jews, an embodiment taken as skillful means for enlightening the Jews of the first century AD in Judea? Could he have been a *bodhisattva* attempting to turn them from animal sacrifices and temple rites toward insight and the development of inner peace and selflessness, by following his example of self-sacrifice? Given our topic of debate, our task now is to assess this possibility in light of all information we have gathered so far. If the Christ can be seen as a *bodhisattva* for the Jews, they are complementary religious teachers of our world.

According to the teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*, a *bodhisattva* can take as many forms as needed in order to help beings escape suffering.¹ In chapter

¹ Nagarjuna, the master mind of Mahayana Buddhism, says in his *Ratnavali* (IV,94–95):

“Just as a grammarian [first] makes
His students read the alphabet,
So the Buddha taught his disciples
The doctrines they could forbear.
To some he taught doctrines

24 the Buddha tells the story of the *Bodhisattva* Wonder Sound, who attained transcendent powers as a result of planting the roots of goodness in many previous lives. He paid homage to the Buddha King of Cloud Thundering for 12,000 years, and was thus reborn in the domain of the Buddha King Wisdom of the Pure Flower Constellation. He met countless Buddhas of the past and appeared in many kinds of bodies, divine and human, in order to preach the *Lotus Sutra* to suffering beings:

Sometimes he appears as Brahma, or appears as Sakra, or appears as Isvara, or appears as Mahesvara, or appears as a divine general, or appears as the divine king Vaisrayana, or appears as a holy wheel-rolling king, or appears as one of the ordinary kings, or appears as an elder, or appears as a citizen, or appears as a minister, or appears as a Brahman, or appears as a bhikshu, bhikshuni, upasaka, or upasika, or appears as the wife of an elder or a citizen, or appears as the wife of a minister, or appears as the wife of a Brahman, or appears as a youth or a maiden, or appears as a god, dragon, yaksha, gandharva, asura, garuda, kimnara, mahoraga, man, or nonhuman being, and so on, and preaches this sutra (LS 24).

The same way of saving beings, by appearing in the appropriate body and teaching the appropriate doctrine, is a feature of Avalokitesvara, as the Buddha teaches in the next chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. Since *bodhisattvas* are said to be able to take so many forms to teach suffering beings, the natural question when thinking of the Christ is: Could he have been one of the many forms a *bodhisattva* has taken for the sake of unenlightened Jews? Could he have thus adapted his teaching to the beliefs of the Jews of first century AD in Judea?

The Dalai Lama considers Jesus Christ to have been “either a fully enlightened being or a *bodhisattva* of a very high spiritual realization” (Dalai Lama 1998, p. 83). Paul Williams speaks of the ability of the *bodhisattva* Avalokitesvara to appear in manifold different forms, “whichever are most suitable for aiding, converting, and saving sentient beings”:

If a Buddha form is suitable, then he appears as a Buddha; if a Hearer form, then he appears as a Hearer; if a god, then as a god. We might

To turn away from wickedness;
To some, doctrines for acquiring merit;
To others, doctrines based on duality” (in Lopez 1992, p. 36).

add, if the form of Jesus is suitable, then he appears in that form too” (Williams 1989, p. 231).

Robert Thurman applies the parable of the burning house (in the *Lotus Sutra* chapter 3) to a *bodhisattva* taking the form of Jesus Christ and teaching a “little white lie” to the Jews (in Lopez 1992, p. 254). He had to use such skillful means to enlighten them because of their egocentric view of possessing the only way to God, which is a teaching he might have given to other people as well.² In his introduction to *The Christ and the Bodhisattva*, Donald Lopez, Professor of Buddhist and Tibetan Studies at the University of Michigan, says:

Hence, it is doctrinally consistent to hold that Buddhas appear also in the guise of teachers of other religions for those beings for whom such religions are appropriate. Through the practice of virtue set forth in another religion, these beings would then be in a position to be reborn in circumstances that would bring them in contact with the Buddhist teaching in a future lifetime. Following such a line of argument, it could almost be said that all beings are “anonymous Buddhists.” The Mahayana would not assert, then, that all paths lead to the same mountaintop but that all paths lead to Everest base camp from which there is a single path to enlightenment, the Mahayana (Lopez 1992, pp. 36–37).

We can assess the claim that the Christ was a *bodhisattva* by looking at the results of his use of such skillful means in Judea. Did it help the Jews escape suffering and the illusion of self and permanence? Was it wise for a *bodhisattva* to teach such doctrines in Judea in the guise of Jesus Christ? To answer these questions we must first recall some of the key elements in the teaching of the Christ. He sustained the belief in a personal God as Ultimate Reality and himself as being one with God. He taught that the ultimate destiny of human beings is the Kingdom of God, defined as a perfected and eternal relationship with God. This was not to be seen as a magical city, as in the *Lotus Sutra* chapter 7, a psychological crutch for those of little understanding,

² Thurman says: “So this is my notion of the idea that a *Bodhisattva* could be a Christ, and that Christ could be a *Bodhisattva*, and this is my appeal from the Buddhist tradition to those who feel very attached to the unique sonship of Jesus, and my appeal to them that they not demand that God keep to the letter of His own scripture. Could He not Himself give another one, a new one? Could He not Himself maybe fudge a little here and there? Who are we to tell Him not to, if you do believe in Him?” (in Lopez, 255)

but as the permanent destiny of perfected human beings. And not only is the Kingdom of God to be seen as permanent, but entering it is only possible by faith in him. He taught us that loving God and each other as he loved us is the highest demand, but also that there is a fundamental problem in human nature called sin, which prevents us from gaining any merit by our own power. He did not differentiate between humans, giving different teachings according to different levels of understanding, but claimed that all have the same problem. The Christ saw the cross as the only means for dealing with sin and repentance as the only proper human response.

Most of this makes no sense from a Buddhist point of view. Could it have been the message of a *bodhisattva*? Could he have taught so many “little white lies” to save the Jews? What was the effect on them? What was the effect on the rest of the world?

The enemies of the Christ – Pharisees, Sadducees, priests and Roman authorities, put him to death. They saw him as a threat and hated him so much that they viewed his death as the only way to preserve the religious and political status quo. Such hate must have been very counterproductive to their spiritual development, causing further bondage and alienation from the truth. Hate is one of the three poisons³ that are viewed as fundamental causes of bringing a lower rebirth in hell, in the realm of animals or in that of ghosts. Such hatred was manifested not only during the three years of Jesus’ ministry, but also throughout Christian history. Because of following the Christ, Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire first by Jews, and then by Romans, until the Edict of Milan given by emperor Constantine in AD 313. Many were martyred, and being a Christian meant living with the sword hanging over your head.

Then the persecuted became persecutors in the name of Christ, and it was the Jews’ turn to be persecuted (mainly) in the name of Christ. Again bad karma and bondage were sown (and had to be reaped) by the perpetrators of religious persecution. Religious wars were fought, the Inquisition hunted down so-called heretics, and “pagans” were converted by force in “Christian” colonies, all in the name of Christ. Although these episodes could be called, and I think they are indeed, perverted applications of Christ’s teaching, they created anguish and misery instead of mental peace. The enemies of Christ have all stayed far from the road towards

enlightenment and have not benefited at all from the work of Christ as a *bodhisattva*.

One could argue that a religious teacher should not be blamed for the perversion of his message, and therefore the above episodes in human history cannot be taken as arguments against the possibility of the Christ acting as a *bodhisattva*. However, a bodhisattva is expected to be wise; a better teaching would have avoided such disasters. He was much more successful in Asia, where Buddhist history is not littered with so many regretful events. If the Christ was a *bodhisattva*, it seems he could have found a better way for the Western world.

But what can we say of Christ’s true followers, of the martyrs and saints of Christian history? Did they draw closer to nirvana and benefit by a better start in a subsequent life? Well, although they were not poisoned by hatred towards their oppressors, they were still poisoned by the delusion of holding false views and by clinging to them at the cost of their lives. They viewed eternal life with Christ in the Kingdom of God as the ultimate fulfillment of their earthly life, and dying as martyrs as a way of honoring Christ, the everlasting God.⁴ Therefore they were ensnared by the poison of delusion, by holding wrong views and craving for personal existence (MN 9,16). They clung to the Kingdom of God instead of seeking nirvana, as the worshippers of Amida may also mistakenly view his paradise as the ultimate destination. In other words, they took the Kingdom of God as real, not as a kind of magic city (as in the parable in the *Lotus Sutra* chapter 7), i.e., as a spiritual crutch to help them advance toward the real destination which is emptiness (*shunyata*). As a result of their good works they may have been reborn as gods, but nevertheless this is also a form of rebirth and is also subject to impermanence and illusion.

The poison of delusion continues to work in all Christians, saints and common believers alike. They all (should) follow the commands of the Christ to love God and each other, to strengthen their relationship with God, to pray to him, to trust him, repent for sins and conduct their life in a way that would mirror the Kingdom of God on earth. Such views can only further

⁴ The apostle Paul wrote before his martyrdom: “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 *Timothy* 4,6–8).

³ The other two are greed and delusion.

alienate one from attaining true enlightenment by strengthening bondage to false views.

In the end, nobody has actually benefited from Christ as a *bodhisattva*. All people, enemies and followers alike, have been deluded. Instead of being drawn closer to what a *bodhisattva* should have achieved for them, they have been even further alienated from the truth.⁵

⁵ When assessing the “traditional way” of viewing Christ and his claims of being the only way to God, Thurman says: “It is a doctrine that has led to many deaths. It has not contributed to human benefit; it has contributed to much misery and suffering and the dismissal of much of humanity by a certain section of humanity. I think we must remain aware of that” (in Lopez 1992, p. 253).

CONCLUSION

In the introduction of this book I expressed my intention to assess the complementarity of the teachings of the Buddha and the Christ, and thus to evaluate claims such as those of Thich Nhat Hanh, who said: “Buddha and Jesus are two brothers who have to help each other” (Nhat Hanh 1999, p. 200). My work was planned as an exercise in comparative religion for both Buddhists and Christians, so that they might be able to determine the significance of such syncretistic claims. In the closing pages of *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, Thich Nhat Hanh says: “There is no conflict at all between the Buddha and the Christ in me. They are real brothers, they are real sisters within me” (Nhat Hanh 1999, p. 196). In an imaginary dialogue between them, the author suggests that the Buddha may ask the Christ: “My dear brother Jesus, is it much more difficult in our time?” [...] “What can I do to help you, my brother?” (Ibid., p. 198). Can it be a realistic view that “the Buddha should help Jesus to restore himself completely” and that “Jesus should also help the Buddha restore himself completely” (Ibid., p. 210)?

I have done my best to argue that such views are not tenable. Both the teachings of the Buddha and those of the Christ each work in their own setting, but any “help” from the other would only compromise the integrity of their doctrine. Buddhist-Christian syncretism cannot improve either of the two traditions, and claiming to have a kind of “double spiritual citizenship” must mean having a religious citizenship that is in fact neither Buddhist nor Christian. The Buddha and the Christ both made exclusivist claims that leave no room for reciprocal “help”. Let us recall just two. The Buddha said: “I

have no teacher, and one like me exists nowhere in all the world with all its gods, because I have no person for my counterpart” (MN 26,25). In his turn, the Christ said: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (*John* 14,6). In this light we can only imagine how each would have seen the idea that they might “help each other”. The few similarities we have seen in their ethical teaching, such as the parallel mentioned in the introduction between the *Dhammapada* and the *Sermon on the Mount*, are not enough to validate syncretistic views.

Should this rejection of syncretism be taken as a rejection of Buddhist-Christian dialogue? Or even worse, should it fuel intolerance and hatred between Christians and Buddhists? It might do, but only for those who don't really understand and practice their own religious tradition. Christians should be loving towards all people, no matter what their religious beliefs may be. At least this is what Jesus taught by: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (*Mark* 12,31 and *Luke* 10,27). The parable he used when he taught this (*The parable of the Good Samaritan*, in *Luke* 10,25–37) proves that one's neighbors are not necessarily people of the same religious beliefs. Jews hated Samaritans for their religious beliefs, but Jesus deliberately used a Samaritan as his main character in the parable in order to emphasize this point. To be tolerant doesn't mean to embrace your neighbors' religion, but to respect them as human beings created in the image and likeness of God. Buddhists should also be tolerant toward people of other faiths. After all, according to the doctrine of karma, these people will eventually reincarnate and have another (and maybe better) chance to understand the ultimate truth. Being intolerant to others would only fuel hatred and thus bondage.

This book is not aimed at fueling intolerance. It is rather to be seen as a tool for a better understanding of the uniqueness of the two religious traditions. Even if our religions are not compatible, Christians can still love Buddhists, and Buddhists can still have compassion for Christians. Tolerance cannot be achieved by being ignorant or superficial, but rather by understanding each other's faith. The result of ignorance, of half measures of religious understanding, is not religious tolerance, but religious syncretism. And I hope to have shown that Buddhist-Christian syncretism is not credible.

Another important point to clarify is that rejecting Buddhist-Christian syncretism does not mean trying to prove that either Buddhism or Christianity is *wrong*. As should be obvious by now, *each* is wrong when seen through the eyes of the other. Therefore my aim has been to show that they are *different*,

that their teaching cannot be blended, and that one cannot belong to both traditions. From here follows the obvious conclusion that one has to choose which tradition to follow, that of the Buddha *or* that of the Christ.

Why we decide to follow one or the other is the result of an initial act of faith. We choose one set of initial assumptions against another. We choose between viewing the world as either sustained by the grace of God or characterized by suffering (*anatta*), between accepting there is such a thing as divine revelation or not, and ultimately between accepting there is a personal God as Ultimate Reality or not. If there is no God who can reveal truth we have to limit ourselves to our human capacity of understanding. An anthropocentric system has no place for God, so the Buddha is consistent in his findings on impermanence and suffering. But if revelation is possible from outside our capacity of understanding, this would be consistent with the claim that the Christ reveals a personal God as Ultimate Reality, that our major problem is sin and that he came to restore our broken relationship with God. None of the initial sets of assumptions we accept by faith is more rational or logical. Both ways imply that their followers will know they have chosen the right path *after* taking the initial step of faith. The Christ said:

If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own (*John* 7,17).

This means that faith comes first and the confirmation of its effectiveness next. The Christ set forth the challenge to follow him, we respond with faith, and only then do we experience the result as a personal relationship with God. Although the Buddhist may argue that there is no faith required in following the Buddha's teaching, the procedure is similar. The initial trust required in the Buddha's teaching is also a step of faith. The Buddhist scholar Edward Conze affirms this very clearly:

Only those people would be naturally inclined to agree with the Buddhist analysis who are extremely sensitive to pain and suffering and possess a considerable capacity for renunciation. In order to do full justice to the Buddhist point of view, and to see the world as they did, we must, however, be willing to go through the prescribed meditations, which alone are said to foster and mature the conviction that this world is completely and utterly worthless. In this argument we must take the meditations and their result for granted (Conze 1959, p. 113).

The Buddha discovered the path and set forth the challenge that we follow the same path, we engage on it, and only then do we experience its effectiveness. Therefore only when we engage in the practice of meditation will we have the full proof of the Buddha's view on impermanence, no-self and suffering. The steps are the same in both religious traditions. Therefore we admit or reject by faith a set of initial religious assumptions when we decide to follow either the Buddha or the Christ.



I will close this book as it began – with a story. This time it will be my story, a personal confession on where I stand on the great divide between the Buddha and the Christ. I will use the story of a pantomime I saw years ago on a student campus.

Imagine the main character in the pantomime standing alone in his room, staring into space, sad and disappointed with his life. Let's call him John. He is too tired to go on looking for answers to life's questions in a hostile world. This dramatic atmosphere is emphasized by melancholic music in the background. Suddenly there is a knock at the door. Roused from his lethargy, John approaches the door and looks through the peephole. It is a friend, his drinking companion, in a very good mood, coming to have a drink together. Before opening, John goes to the wardrobe, opens a drawer and takes out an object that he puts on his face. It is a mask. Suddenly his mood changes and he becomes as cheerful as his visitor is. He opens the door and the two have a nice party together, with a lot of drinks, jokes and fun. Then John sees his dear old pal off and closes the door. He approaches the wardrobe, takes off his mask and puts it away. Instantly he returns to his initial icy state.

Another knock at the door follows. Again John looks through the peephole and sees his girlfriend dancing to the rhythm of music. (However, the only musical background in the play is the same sad and monotonous music, which makes her appearance even more ridiculous.) Before opening, he takes another mask and puts it on. His transformation into her likeness occurs immediately. They dance and have a good time together. But this episode also has to end and the mask is put back where it belongs, in the wardrobe. Again there is loneliness and iciness, as if nothing had happened.

The next knock at the door is from a humped beggar. The mask of pity is put on and John opens the door. Very compassionate and merciful, he gives

some money and gently directs him to other neighbors. Finally a wandering mendicant comes to visit him, holding his hands together as if he were praying. Our man takes a similar mask, spends some time miming the same "godliness," but gently invites "the holy man" to go, pushing him toward the door with his prayer postured hands.

At last John is again alone, in his normal "state of consciousness," with all masks carefully stored in the wardrobe. Unexpectedly, a new knock at the door is heard. Exhausted, John goes to see who is next to bother him. Through the peephole he sees an unknown fellow, all dressed in white. It is the Christ. Very confused, our man isn't sure which mask to choose. Finally he takes the first one and opens the door. Failure. Instead of accepting the invitation to have a drink together, the stranger snatches John's mask and breaks it. Getting even more confused, John takes the next mask and puts it on. But the stranger snatches this mask as well and breaks it. The third and the fourth masks are also tried on but with the same result. Dreadfully afraid, John searches for another mask in the wardrobe, but there is none left. In his despair, he feels a gentle touch on his shoulder and reluctantly turns his face to the stranger, beginning to understand who he really is. Christ makes a sign of rejection toward the broken masks lying on the floor and draws the sign of the heart on his chest, pointing his hands toward John in a demanding attitude. Yes, Christ is pointing to his heart, the core of his true identity, which is beyond all masks. John repeats this sign as if testing that he truly has understood Christ's demand. The answer is affirmative and Christ keeps waiting with his hands outstretched. After a moment of uncertainty, John puts his hands on his chest and then stretches them toward Christ, as if offering his heart to him. Christ accepts it and then stretches his hands horizontally, miming the crucifixion, the price he paid for renewing John's heart. Our man falls to his knees before Christ and is transfigured. His face becomes shiny; all despair is gone and replaced by real joy, gratitude and hope. Paradoxically, although the music is the same in the play, it seems to produce a different feeling, as if it is accompanying the new life that has begun. Although my masks were slightly different, something similar has happened with me. I too am indebted to the Christ for liberating me from the burden of wearing masks and for giving me a new life. He liberated me from the yoke of being a stranger to myself, from the uncertainties of life, from pride and competition for prestige, from the fear of not being accepted by worldly standards – in other words, freedom from the power of sin. Although the world I live in is the same, as the musical background in the play, life with Christ is different. It is a life full of hope and meaning. Unlike the worm of

the parable with which I started this book, I found out that there is more to life than “eating up my apple.”

I would probably have become a devout follower of the Buddha, as he presented such a clear and almost non-religious view of human existence. But one day Christ knocked at my door and I made my choice. Perhaps many of you will look contemptuously on this confession. Many may be skeptical or be smiling tolerantly. I would only ask them to recall the scene of Jesus’ healing of the man born blind (*John* 9), so wonderfully portrayed in Franco Zeffirelli’s film *Jesus of Nazareth*. Remember how people laughed at the blind man while he sought to reach the Pool of Siloam with his eyes covered with mud. Although it was quite a show, the eyes of the blind opened, and the laughter froze. It is possible that I too may be ridiculed for what I have written here, but, as the healed man once said, I have to confess at my turn: “One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!” (*John* 9,25)

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