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## The Metaphysical Frameworks of Buddhism. Premises of the Dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity

### Abstract

In Buddhism, the main metaphysics' target, i.e. Ultimate Reality, is not a personal creator God, but an absolute state of being. It cannot be described by a set of attributes, for it is undifferentiated, Absolute Reality, whose name varies: sunyata or nirvana. This concept of Ultimate Reality brings about distinct understandings of other significant issues, such as liberation, life after death, evil and suffering etc. Nevertheless, the gulf between Christianity and the latter has been bridging from the last decades due to global interconnection of today's world. Buddhism is now widespread in western culture, especially since the 1960s. Although the prevalent romantic view on Buddhism sees it as



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an authentic and ancient practice, contemporary Buddhism is deeply influenced by the western culture. Today, it is not uncommon to find Jews and Christians who also have Buddhist practices in Zen, Tibetan or Vipassana traditions. Still, it can be theologically ascertained that if there is no God who can reveal truth we have to limit ourselves to our human capacity of understanding. That's why the difference between the two religions still abides also because the so-called "Buddhist salvation" and true salvation in Christ represent two absolute distinct paths with a view to salvation.

### Keywords

Buddhism, Christianity, dialogue, Ultimate Reality, metaphysics, God, being, salvation, liberation

*"He who takes refuge with Buddha, the Law, and the Church; he who, with clear understanding, sees the four holy truths: pain, the origin of pain, the destruction of pain, and the eight-fold holy way that leads to the quieting of pain; that is the safe refuge, that is the best refuge; having gone to that refuge, a man is delivered from all pain." (The Buddha, Dhammapada)*

## 1 Introduction

One of the defining notes in the history of twentieth century philosophical and religious thought is the encounter of East and West; and especially the enormous influence of Buddhism on many Western thinkers, artists, and spiritual seekers. Within the Buddhist tradition, Zen has achieved a level of prominence

which has brought it so deeply into the public consciousness that in the last twenty years one has begun to hear this word used in connection with all manner of activity as a kind of mysterious informing intuition which allows us to transcend all “otherness” and harmoniously express the inward nature of things in the face of everyday life.

But what exactly is Zen and why have so many people, across so many ranges of human endeavor, become interested in its teachings?

The celebrated Buddhist scholar of 20-th century, D.T. Suzuki is writing somewhere in his voluminous works that “Zen is not a religion (...) Zen *is* religion”.<sup>1</sup> The search for the very nature of religion, for the fundamental meaning of wisdom, and for the heart of reality which is the Eternal Religion – the *Philosophia Perennis*, or *Sanatana Dharma* – strikes at the central root of the reason why World Wisdom exist.<sup>2</sup>

Buddhism in its course of development has completed a form which distinguishes itself from its so-called primitive or original type – so greatly, indeed, that we are justified in emphasizing its historical division into two schools, Hinayana and Mahayana, or the Lesser Vehicle and the Greater Vehicle of salvation. As a matter of fact, the Mahayana, with all its varied formulae, is no more than a developed form of Buddhism and traces back its final authority to its Indian founder, the great Buddha Sakyamuni. When this developed form of the Mahayana was introduced into China and then into Japan, it achieved further development in these countries.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barry McDonald, Publisher’s Note to the 2004 edition, in: *The Buddha eye : an anthology of the Kyoto school and its contemporaries*, Frederick Franck (ed.); (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. xii.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> This achievement was no doubt due to the Chinese and Japanese Buddhist leaders, who knew how to apply the principles of their faith to the ever-varying conditions of life and to the religious needs of the people. And this elaboration and adaptation on their part has still

Buddhism developed in South Asia, so it is not surprising that Buddhism adopted some South Asian religious ideas. Karma, rebirth, and ahimsa – all of these ideas existed prior to the time of Siddhartha Gautama. Hinduism and Jainism were the two most significant pre-Buddhist religions to use these ideas.

## 2     **Buddhist Metaphysical Frameworks**

Buddhism also developed some notions that were uniquely its own – the concepts of *anatman* (no-self), of *sūnyatā* (emptiness), of *Awakening*, and of the *Buddha* may serve as examples of these. As is the case in most religions, some of Buddhism's key concepts are unique and some are shared. The distinctively Buddhist worldview contains some of both types of concepts. Moreover, in Eastern religion such as: Buddhism, Taoism, and the Advaita Vedānta school of Hinduism – Ultimate Reality is understood differently and opposite western theistic religions. It is not a personal creator God, but an absolute state of being that cannot be described by a set of attributes (such as omniscience or omnipotence) for it is undifferentiated, Absolute Reality. Taoists refer to it as the *Dao*; Hindus refer to it as Brahman; for Buddhists, the name varies – *sunyata* for example, or *nirvana*.<sup>4</sup> These different conceptions of Ultimate Reality bring with them distinct visions of other notable issues as well, such as salvation/liberation, life after death, evil and suffering, self.

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further widened the gap that has already been in existence between the Mahayana and its more primitive type. At present the Mahayana form may be said not to display, superficially at least, those features most conspicuously characteristic of original Buddhism. D.T. Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, (Grove Press: First Evergreen Black Cat Edition, 1964), p.31.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Chad Meister, *Introducing Philosophy of Religion*, (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), p. 46.

Buddhism emerged from within the Hindu tradition in India in roughly the fifth century a.Chr. and with respect to Ultimate Reality it is arguably most closely aligned with the Advaita Vedānta school of Hindu thought. However, Ultimate Reality in Buddhism, at least in one major school called Madhyamika (the school of the “Middle Way”) as developed by Nagarjuna, is neither the Absolute of Hinduism nor the personal God of the theistic religions.<sup>5</sup> Rather, it is *sunyata*, which is translated as “Emptiness” or “The Void.”

## **2.1 The three characteristics of Existence: anicca, dukkha, anatman**

Buddhism speaks of the three characteristics or marks of existence. These are: impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and no-self (*anatman*). It is incumbent on us to underscore the significance of each to the Buddhist worldview.

### **a. Life Is Suffering (*dukkha*)**

The idea that there is something “wrong” with life is certainly not unique to Buddhism. All religions are transformative, that is, they try to move us from an imperfect present condition to a

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 48. The Buddhists believe that to be called “substantial or real” a thing must be able to exist on its own. However, if we look at the universe, we find that everything in it exists only in relation to something else. A son is a son only in relation to his father; and a father similarly in relation to his son. Fatherhood does not exist on its own but only in relation to something else. The Buddhists use the word *svabhāva* to denote existence on its own, that is, nondependent existence, which alone, according to them, qualifies as true or genuine existence. But if everything in the world depends on something else for being what it is, then nothing in the universe can be said to possess *svabhāva* or genuine existence; hence it is empty. Cf., inter alia, Abe Masao, Buddhism, in: Arvind Sharma, ed., *Our Religions* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1993), p. 115; Idem, God, Emptiness, and the True Self, in: *The Buddha eye : an anthology of the Kyoto school and its contemporaries*, pp. 55-68.

better future condition. If something were not wrong – if we were not sinners or ignorant, or mortal, or suffering, etc. – there would be no reason to get started on a religious path. But, even though Buddhism’s emphasis on the trouble with life is not unique, it is a very important and pervasive part of the Buddhist worldview.

Buddhism shares Hinduism’s belief that every thought or action arises because of desire. “Desire makes the world go ‘round” could be the theme song of both of these religions. But whereas Hinduism sees this world as a “middle place” with some pleasure and some pain, Buddhism underscores the connection between desire and suffering. The very fact that we *desire*, rather than feel contentment or fulfillment, indicates that something is not right. This insight, which grounds the Buddhist worldview, provides a powerful incentive to get started on the Buddhist path so that things might improve.<sup>6</sup>

### **b. Impermanence (anicca), Emptiness (sunya)**

Early Buddhism underscored the impermanence of all elements of existence, and Mahâyâna stressed the “emptiness” or lack of “own-being” of all phenomena. Both are ways of pointing to Buddhism’s conviction that there is no changeless, permanently enduring reality. Everything comes into being, reaches a point of fullest development, and then fades out of existence. Or, as this truth is otherwise stated, everything arises depending on causes and conditions and does not persist in the absence of those causes and conditions.<sup>7</sup>

According to Buddhist teachings, man is suffering due to instability and impermanence of his existence. Regarding the world, it reveals itself as a process of continuous life that knows no beginning, a process that always appears and reappears as

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<sup>6</sup> See Abe Masao, Man and Nature in Christianity and Buddhism, in: *The Buddha eye*, pp. 147-156.

<sup>7</sup> Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism. A Survey with bibliographical notes*, (Delhi, Varanasi, Madras: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), pp. 61-72.

long as there is a contrasting tension and ceases to be experienced when this contrasting tension disappears.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike many other religions, Buddhism does not posit any unchanging reality. It has no unchanging God or eternal soul. Buddhism offers no base on which we might affix a permanent identity for ourselves or for anything else. For this reason, there is no reason to get “attached” to anything. Buddhists attempt to act mindfully in the moment; they do not attempt to secure a permanent future state. Life, for a Buddhist, can only be meaningfully lived in the here and now. If we try to live in the past or for the future, we are not paying attention to the only reality we can really have, and that is the reality that is right here and right now.<sup>9</sup>

### **c. *Anatman (No-Self)***

The Buddhist notion of no-self is not only a central doctrine of Buddhism but also one that is frequently misunderstood. When non-Buddhists learn that Buddhism argues that there is no self, they are invariably confused. Such questions arise such as, “How can Buddhism assert there is no self when clearly I am conscious of my-self?” “How can Buddhism believe there is no self and yet have a doctrine of rebirth – that is, what is it exactly that moves from birth to death to birth again?” Let’s address each of these questions and in so doing perhaps clarify what Buddhism means by “no-self.”<sup>10</sup>

To say one doesn’t have a self seems contradictory; that is, don’t I need a self to say there is no self? Someone familiar with the

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<sup>8</sup> Nicolae Achimescu, *Budism și Creștinism. Considerații privind desăvârșirea omului*, (Iași: Junimea, Tehnopress, 1999), p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Mommaers and Jan Van Bragt, *Mysticism: Buddhist and Christian/Encounters with Jan Van Ruusbroec*, (New York: Crossroad, 1995), p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Donald W. Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity*, Foreword by Keith J. Egan, preface by Masao Abe, (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), pp. 129-130.

history of Western philosophy would recall Descartes' assertion, "Cogito Ergo Sum" (I think, therefore I am). To formulate a Buddhist answer to this question, we need to go back to the idea of "self."

Buddhism recognizes the difficulty with defining the "self" and actually offers its own attempt. Gautama asserted that the "self" is made up of five parts or aggregates, in Sanskrit, the five *skandhas*. The five skandhas are the form or body (*rûpa*), sensations (*vedanâ*), perceptions (*samjñâ*), mental formations (*samskâra*), and consciousness (*vijñâna*).<sup>11</sup>

Buddhism answers the question "What is the self?" with the proposal that the self is an aggregate of body, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. The idea that I am the sum of all my "parts" seems like a reasonable solution, and one with which many people might willingly agree. Gautama Buddha once compared the individual human life to a river:

"O Brâhmana, it is just like the mountain river, flowing far and swift, taking everything along with it; there is no moment, no instant, no second when it stops flowing, but it goes on flowing and continuing. So Brâhmana, is human life like a river".<sup>12</sup>

The Buddha goes on to state that each of these skandhas is impermanent and that this results in suffering, demonstrating how all three marks of existence are interconnected.

Many people would agree that the body is not permanent, but could one not claim that the body is not the self, and therefore there could still be a permanent self? One might argue, for example, that consciousness persists after death. In terms of this argument, it matters little whether one believes in heaven or in reincarnation – either way, consciousness could be said to continue after death.

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<sup>11</sup> Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, (New York: Grove, 1959), pp. 20ff.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 25-26.



Further, why did the Buddha say that the impermanence of the skandhas produces dukkha for the human person? In fact, his assertion was in the strongest possible form: “these five Aggregates together,” he said, “which we popularly call a ‘being’, are *dukkha* itself.”<sup>13</sup>

Of the five skandhas, body and sensations appear to be physical. We can acknowledge the impermanence of physical phenomena, and we can also acknowledge that their impermanence brings with it some degree of anxiety and dissatisfaction with this state of affairs. But what about the other three skandhas? Perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness are not physical. Perceptions and mental formations are actually part of consciousness, so perhaps that is where we should focus our examination – what is consciousness and how does it relate to dukkha?

Our ordinary consciousness bifurcates the world into subject and object, I and others. Ordinary consciousness is dualistic, that is, it divides the world into an inner awareness of myself as a subject and an outer awareness of things and other persons as objects. According to Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani, who was also trained in Western philosophy, “This standpoint of separation of subject and object, or opposition between within or without, is what we call the field of ‘consciousness.’”<sup>14</sup> Consciousness as the fifth of the five aggregates simply *is* this underlying division between inner and outer, subject and object, self and others. Existence bears this same fundamental division, as existence is simply what consciousness is conscious of. The root of suffering is inherent in this dualistic structure of consciousness and existence: I can never fully know either self or other because it is impossible to look at the subject-I objectively and it is impossible to look at others and objects

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans./intro by Jan Van Bragt, (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1982), p. 9.

subjectively and still maintain my normal mode of consciousness. That can only happen when the ordinary structure of consciousness is sundered in the experience of Awakening.

However, Buddhism teaches that all sentient beings have the Buddha nature. This Buddha nature is not the self-positing of ordinary consciousness, but the genuine self or the selfless-self. *No-self* does not simply point to the impermanence of the self or the invisibility of the self, but most importantly (at least for Mahâyâna) it points to the nondual nature of both Truth and Reality. Highest truth is nondual, and therefore it is nonconceptual and unspeakable. Absolute reality is nondual, and therefore distinct selves and others do not exist there. The genuine self or the selfless-self transcends the ordinary consciousness of self to include both self and not-self.

In regard to the question of what transmigrates at death, the Buddhist could then argue it is the self (*atman*) that moves until its no-self (*anatman*) is realized in Awakening. Historically, one of the most important differences between Hinduism and Buddhism has been with respect to the notion of the *atman*. Hinduism teaches that the *atman* is permanent and that it is the same as Brahman, *Atman-Brahman* being the Self-Universe. Buddhism has argued for the nonpermanence of the self as distinct from the universe. The contention here is that the difference is a linguistic one rather than an existential one. For Buddhism, the ordinary self will continue to transmigrate until Awakening occurs whereupon the cycle ends:

Faced with the mortal illness of the problematic self, the only cure is radical surgery. The *entire* dualistic consciousness must be uprooted and “replaced” with an Awakened consciousness that is not simply nondualistic but rather a nondualistic-

dualistic consciousness, or, more succinctly rendered, a selfless self.<sup>15</sup>

This is the Mahâprajnâ (Great Wisdom) that a Buddhist expects to experience when he or she is finally awakened. The time of Awakening is also the point when *Mahâkarunâ* (Great Compassion) comes into being. How does great compassion or love manifest as a result of Awakening?

The Buddhist Awakening results in a state of nonduality between self and other, where the one is truly seen as the other and the other as the self. When the reality of “I am I *and* I am not-I” or “I am I *and* I am the Universe” is experienced, the obstacle of egocentricity that taints all interpersonal relationships is extirpated and unobstructed compassion; regard for the other is lucidly manifest. This is the Buddhist understanding of Mahâkarunâ or love.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.2 Nonattachment

Buddhists believe that what we normally call love is really attachment. In its grossest form, it is attachment to pleasure, the pleasure of being with and enjoying a sexual or romantic partner. In its subtler forms, it is attachment to a parent, a child, a spouse, or a friend. As our ordinary way of referring to such relationships reveals, they are more a matter of emotional dependence and social status than they are a matter of altruistic compassion. Such relationships form a “larger self” but only to the extent that the participants think in terms of “us” versus “you” rather than in terms of “I” versus “you.” Even more revealing is the fact that we speak of “*having* a friend,” “*having* a

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<sup>15</sup> Leslie D. Alldritt, “Masao Abe and Paul Tillich: A Dialogue Toward Love,” in Donald Mitchell (ed.), *Masao Abe: A Zen Life of Dialogue*, (Boston: Tuttle, 1998), p. 238.

<sup>16</sup> Leslie D. Alldritt, *Religions of the World: Buddhism*, Foreword by Martin E. Marty Professor Emeritus, (University of Chicago Divinity School: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005), p. 79.

wife (or husband),” “*having* children,” and even “*having* sex.” When we are dependent on something or someone, we want to “have” it, that is, to control or possess it. When we love someone without ego involvement, we want to free that person rather than control her or him. Buddhist compassion is a matter of liberating others, not forming dependent relationships with them. The monastic lifestyle, rightly lived, is a matter of freedom from such attachments.

However, a householder can be further along the Buddhist path and closer to nirvana than someone who lives in a monastery. That is because real relationships don’t work very well when they are a matter of attachments and dependencies. The relationship itself can be a guide to freeing love rather than attached love, to genuine overcoming of dualistic thought and action rather than a furthering of our tendency to want to grasp at things and persons and “have” them.

As in all religions that have both monastic and family lifestyles, the monastics embody the principle of liberation from the ordinary, deluded ways of the world, while those who live in the world without succumbing to its ways embody the nonduality of freedom from the world and compassionate commitment to it.

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”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Masao Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue* (Univ. of Hawai’i Press, 1995), Steven Heine, ed., 1995, p. 118

### 2.3 Tibetan Buddhist view of transmigration at death

Almost everyone has heard of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. It has been available in translation in the West for several decades and was a popular book on college campuses in the 1960s. This book describes what happens when a person dies, according to Tibetan Buddhism. Because the book serves as a manual to assist in both the process of living and the process of dying, Sogyal Rinpoche has called it the “Tibetan Book of Living and Dying.”<sup>18</sup>

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* provides an example of how Buddhist teachings and Buddhist beliefs about karma and rebirth are applied at this important time in a person’s life. It provides an example of how the Buddhist worldview works in practice.

The book describes the stages of the dying process. Even as one is dying, a certain consciousness is still active. Therefore, we experience different things at each stage. Tibetan Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman presents the eight stages of death in this fashion:

The stages of Death: Dissolution and Experiences<sup>19</sup>

DISSOLUTION	EXPERIENCE
1. earth to water	Mirage
2. water to fire	smokiness
3. fire to wind	fireflies in the sky
4. wind to consciousness	clear candle flame
5. gross consciousness to luminance	clear moonlit sky

<sup>18</sup> Sogyal Rinpoche is the author of a popular text on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* called *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Thurman, transl., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, (New York: Bantam, 1994), p. 42.

6. luminance to radiance	clear sunlit sky
7. radiance to imminence	clear pitch-darkness
8. imminence to translucency	clear light of clear predawn sky

The purpose of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and several other Vajrayâna Buddhist practices is to enable the dying person to retain lucidity and recognize the various stages as he or she progresses through them. Although one's physical body moves into death at stage four, one's consciousness persists. Consequently, the dying person is able to continue to benefit from his or her practice and instruction while alive. He or she can also benefit from oral instructions provided by a trained teacher who sits with the dying person. Robert Thurman writes:

The meditative practices associated with between-state training are crucial for sharpening attention so you can become aware of the process, slow down the transitions, and remain lucidly aware of the changes as they occur.<sup>20</sup>

The goal of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is to bring the dying person into Awakening and not have him or her transmigrate into a new life.

If one has been trained properly and has the guidance of a trained lama, one may still gain release from samsara even postmortem. If not able to gain this eleventh-hour release, then one moves into the next life.

Tibetan Buddhists use this book to prepare for the experience of death. Rather than fearing death, they want to use the dying experience to consolidate their spiritual prowess so that Awakening will ensue. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a fascinating treatise that challenges the dominant Western view of what happens when we die.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> Leslie D. Alldritt, *Religions of the World: Buddhism*, p. 83.

## 2.4 Nirvana

About twenty-five centuries ago in northern India, Siddhartha Gautama achieved *nirvana*. That event ultimately changed the spiritual character of much of Asia and, more recently, some of the West. That something indeed happened is an indisputable fact. Exactly what happened has been an object of speculation, analysis, and debate up to the present day.

*Nirvana* is both a term and an ideal. As a Sanskrit word (*nibbana* in Pali), it has been used by various religious groups in India, but it primarily refers to the spiritual goal in the Buddhist way of life. In the broadest sense, the word *Nirvana* is used in much the same way as the now standard English word *enlightenment*, a generic word literally translating no particular Asian technical term but used to designate any Buddhist notion of the highest spiritual experience. Of course, Buddhism comprehends a diverse set of religious phenomena, a tradition with sacred texts in four principal canonical languages (Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese), and a spiritual following throughout the world. Not surprisingly, then, when referring to the ultimate spiritual ideal many Buddhist groups prefer to emphasize their own distinctive terms instead of *nirvana*.

### 2.4.1 Nirvana in the early Buddhist tradition

In a famous story found in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, for example, Malunkyaputta asked the Buddha several metaphysical questions, including whether the Buddha continues to exist after death. The Buddha responded that such questioning is beside the point; it would be comparable to a man struck by a poison arrow that worried about the origin and nature of the arrow rather than pulling it out. “Whether there is the view that the Tathagata both is and is not after dying, or whether, Malunkyaputta, there is the view that the Tathagata neither is nor is not after dying, there *is* birth, there is ageing, there is

dying, there are grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation and despair, the suppression of which I lay down here and now.”<sup>22</sup>

In short, the early Buddhist texts primarily approached *Nirvana* as a practical solution to the existential problem of human anguish. Specifically, they maintained that by undertaking a disciplined praxis the Buddhist practitioner can achieve a nondiscursive awakening (*bodhi*) to the interdependent nonsubstantiality of reality, especially of the self. With that insight, it was believed, one could be released from the grips of insatiable craving and its resultant suffering.<sup>23</sup>

In most cases *Nirvana* is described in negative terms such as “cessation” (*nirodha*), “the absence of craving”, “detachment”, “the absence of delusion,” and “the unconditioned” (*asamskrta*). Although in the *nikayas* and subsequent Abhidharma School commentaries there are scattered positive references to, for instance, “happiness” (*sukha*), “peace”, and “bliss”, and to such metaphors of transcendence as “the farther shore”, the negative images predominate. Indeed, the word *Nirvana* itself means “extinction”, and other words used synonymously with it, such as *moksa* and *mukti*, refer to emancipation. One difficulty with the early texts, however, is that they were not always clear or unequivocal about *what* was extinguished and *from what* one was emancipated. One prominent tendency was to understand *Nirvana* as a release from *samsara*, the painful world of birth and death powered by passion, hatred, and ignorance.

According to the early texts, the Eightfold Path leading to *Nirvana* is the only way to break free of this cycle and to eliminate the insatiable craving at its root. The Path is not merely a set of moral exhortations, but rather, a program of

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<sup>22</sup> I. B. Horner (transl.): *The Collection of the Middle Sayings (Majjhima Nikaya)*, Pali Text Society, (London: Luzac & Company Ltd., 1954-1959, vol. 2), pp. 100-101.

<sup>23</sup> For details: Remus Rus, Concepția despre om în marile religii (The conception of man in the great religions), in: *Glasul Bisericii*, (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al B.O.R., 1978), no. 7-8, pp. 832-835.



spiritual reconditioning that liberates one from the pain of *samsara*.

The Buddhist view of *samsara* developed as the notion of rebirth was taking root in ancient India. So enlightenment came to be understood as the extinction (*Nirvana*) of what can be reborn, that is, as the dissolution of any continuing personal identity after death. This led to the need to distinguish between (1) the enlightenment of the person who has transcended in this world the suffering caused by craving, and (2) the perfect *Nirvana* achieved only when that person dies and is fully released from *samsara*, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.<sup>24</sup>

#### **2.4.2 Nirvana in the Indian Mahayana Buddhist tradition**

Indian Mahayana Buddhists minimized the opposition between *nirvana* and *samsara*, renouncing the suggestion that *Nirvana* was an escape from the world of suffering. Instead, they thought of enlightenment as a wise and compassionate way of living in that world. The adherents of the two major Indian branches of Mahayana philosophy, Madhyamika and Yogacara, each developed their own way of rejecting the escapism to which, it was thought, the Abhidharma (i.e. early Buddhism) interpretation led.

The typical approach of such idealistic texts as the *Lankavatara Sutra* and of its related philosophical school, Yogacara, was to assert that *Nirvana* and *samsara* had a common ground, namely, the activity of the mind. The terminology varied from text to text and thinker to thinker, but the thrust of this branch of Mahayana Buddhism was that the mind was the basis of both delusion (understood as *samsara*) and enlightenment (understood as *Nirvana*). For many in this tradition, this implied that there is in each person an inherent core of

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas P. Kasulis (1987), *Nirvana*, in: *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Lindsay JONES, editor in chief, second edition, vol. 10: *Necromancy – Pindar*, 2005, Thomson Gale, p. 6628.

Buddhahood covered over with a shell of delusional fixations.<sup>25</sup> In other cases it was considered to be part of a store-consciousness containing seeds that could sprout either delusional or enlightened experience. In either case, Buddhist practice was seen as a technique for clarifying or making manifest the Buddha mind or Buddha nature within the individual. This notion of mind and its relation to Buddhist practice influenced the later development of Mahayana Buddhism, even the schools that first flourished in East Asia, such as Chan (Zen).<sup>26</sup>

A problem raised by this more psychological approach to enlightenment was the issue of universality. Is the inherent core of enlightenment in one person the same as in another? Is it equally present in everyone? With such questions, the difficulty of the ontological status of enlightenment once again emerged. That is, if both *Nirvana* and *samsara* are dependent on the mind in some sense, the problem for the Yogacara philosophers was to explain the objective ground for *Nirvana*. Otherwise, truth would be merely subjective. Yogacara thinkers such as Vasubandhu, approached this problem by asserting a transindividual, mental ground for all experience. Other Yogacara thinkers however, rejected the existence of such a store-consciousness and tried to establish the necessary ground for objectivity within mental cognition itself, while denying the substantial reality of any object outside cognition. In general, the former approach persevered in the transmission of Yogacara's philosophy into East Asia, where the idea of the ground of enlightenment or of the Buddha nature would become a major theme.

The Mahayana ideal, on the other hand, was that of the *bodhisattva*, the enlightened (or, more technically, almost

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<sup>25</sup> Sometimes this core was called the *tathagata-garbha* – “Buddha womb, Buddha embryo,” or “Buddha matrix”.

<sup>26</sup> D. T. Suzuki, *Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist*, (New York: Harper & Row/Perennial Library, 1957), p. 289.

enlightened) being who chooses to be actively involved in alleviating the suffering of others by leading them to enlightenment. In other words, the *bodhisattva* subordinates personal enlightenment to that of others. Both Abhidharma and Mahayana Buddhism aim for the enlightenment of everyone, but whereas in the Abhidharma view enlightenment is achieved by one person at a time and the group as a whole pushes upward in a pyramid effect, supporting most the spiritual progress of those at the top, in Mahayana Buddhism the *bodhisattvas* at the top turn back to pull up those behind them until everyone is ready to achieve enlightenment simultaneously. Ultimately, the Mahayana model dominated in East Asia, partly because the collectivist viewpoint was more consistent with indigenous Chinese ideas predating the introduction of Buddhism.<sup>27</sup>

### 2.4.3 Conclusion

– *Nirvana* is the release from ignorance about the way the world is. Because one does not understand the nature of human existence and the laws affecting human life, one lives in either a state of outright suffering or in a state of disharmony. *Nirvana* is ultimately acknowledging and living by the truths of the world. In that respect, its orientation is this-worldly.

– *Nirvana* is achieved by penetrating and dissolving the slashes or virgules separating humanity/nature, self/other, subject/object, and even *Nirvana* /*samsara*. The particular pairs of opposition vary from place to place and time to time as Buddhism attacks the special dichotomies most destructive in a given culture during a specific period.

– *Nirvana* has an intrinsically moral aspect. By eliminating all egocentric ideas, emotions, and actions, the enlightened person

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<sup>27</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, *The Silence of God: The Answer of the Buddha*, Faith Meets Faith Series, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), pp. 204-205.

approaches others with either complete equanimity or with a compassionate involvement in alleviating the suffering of others. Morality can be considered the alpha and omega of *Nirvana*. That is the Path begins with accepting various rules and precepts of behavior, whereas *Nirvana* culminates in the open, moral treatment of other people and things.

– Although in any given context, one viewpoint is emphasized over the other, generally speaking, *Nirvana* can be understood from either a psychological or ontological perspective. Psychologically viewed, *Nirvana* is a radical change in attitude such that one no longer experiences the negative influence of egocentric thinking. If this perspective is misunderstood and overemphasized, however, it leads to a psychologism that holds that truth is simply in the mind without any connection to an external reality. The remedy for this distortion is to assert the ontological aspect of *Nirvana*. Ontologically speaking, *nirvana* is the affirmation of the inherent goodness of the world and even of human nature. In this sense, *nirvana* is not merely a kind of experience (as depicted by the psychological view) but is also the content or even *ground* of an experience.<sup>28</sup>

Shortly, both the *psychological* and *ontological* views contain truths about the nature of *nirvana*, but if either position is developed in such a way as to exclude the other, the result is a distortion of the Buddhist Path. For this reason, the two views coexist throughout Buddhist history, one view always complementing the other and checking any distortions that might arise out of a one-sided perspective.

### 3 The dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity

While Zen Buddhism began to have a powerful artistic and cultural influence in America in the last half of the nineteenth century, the Buddhist-Christian dialogue officially began with

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas P. Kasulis, *Nirvana*, p. 6633.

the Parliament of the World Religions in Chicago in 1896. Buddhist teachers from around the world shared their scripture, their vision, and their spiritual practice with people of other faiths. Some friendships were made, but America's brief exposure to Buddhism at the Parliament did not result in a flood of new books about ecumenism, and certainly did not cause any of the major Christian denominations to reexamine their beliefs or religious practices based on their contact with the East.<sup>29</sup>

During the twentieth century Buddhism became globally distributed and established. Buddhists have set foot in Australia and New Zealand, in the southern region of Africa, and in most countries of Europe, as well as in South and North America. Buddhism outside of Asia is marked by a heterogeneity and diversity that is observable in all thus-denoted "Western" countries. The entire range of Buddhism's main traditions and subtraditions can be found outside of Asia, often in one country and sometimes even in one major city, with some forty, fifty, or more different Buddhist groups in a single place. Buddhists of divergent traditions and schools have become neighbors - a rarity in Asia itself. Additionally, new Western Buddhist orders and organizations have been founded, signaling ambitious moves to create indigenized variations of Buddhist forms, practices, and interpretations. As the Western institutionalization of Buddhism rapidly accelerated in the closing three decades of the twentieth century, its research matured and became a recognized subject with numerous studies.

Buddhism outside of Asia is deeply marked by its plurality and heterogeneity. A multitude of schools and traditions have successfully settled in urbanized, industrialized settings. The general traditions of Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Robert A. Jonas, *Christian-Buddhist Dialogue. Introduction and Resources*, in: *Empty Bell*, 2006, p. 2. See: [www.emptybell.org](http://www.emptybell.org)

Buddhism are internally heavily subdivided according to country of origin (e.g., Theravada from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, or Laos); lineage and emphasis on specific Buddhist concepts and practices. Flourishing in the West, these various Asian-derived schools and traditions did not remain unchanged, and various subschools have evolved. In addition, a second generation of Western teachers who are disciples to Western, not Asian masters, is maturing. These multifold developments have given birth to both traditionally oriented centers and to independent centers favoring innovation and the creation of a “Western Buddhism.”<sup>30</sup>

Global interconnectedness has become greatly intensified as a result of the World Wide Web. Buddhist centers maintain their own websites, linked to sister centers and parent organizations, and facilitating the exchange and spread of information. Numerous so-called *cyber-samghas* are available online, thus establishing a new form of Buddhist community. In these ways Buddhism adapts, as it has done continuously during its 2,600 years of history, to new cultural, political, and technological environments.

### **3.1 Attempts at convergence**

Buddhism has been gaining popularity in the west. Starting with a cultural and academic elite in the 19th century, it is now widespread in western culture, especially since the 1960s. In the 20th century Christian monastics such as Thomas Merton, Wayne Teasdale, David Steindl-Rast and the former nun Karen Armstrong, and Buddhist monastics such as Ajahn Buddhadasa, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama have taken part in an

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<sup>30</sup> Martin Baumann: “Buddhism: Buddhism in the West” (2005), in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Lindsay JONES, editor in chief, vol. 2: *Attributes of God-Butler Joseph*, (Chicago: Thomson Gale, 2005), pp. 1190-1191.

interfaith dialogue about Buddhism and Christianity.<sup>31</sup> This dialogue aims to shed light on the common ground between Buddhism and Christianity.

Although the prevalent romantic view on Buddhism sees it as an authentic and ancient practice, contemporary Buddhism is deeply influenced by the western culture. With the rise of western colonialism in the 19th century, Asian cultures and religions developed strategies to adapt to the western hegemony, without losing their own traditions. Western discourses were taken over, and western polemic styles were applied to defend indigenous traditions.

### 3.2 Rejection of convergence

In 1989 the Catholic Church, through the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* rejected attempts at mixing some aspects of Christian and Buddhist practices, in a letter titled "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of Christian meditation" generally known as the *Aspects of Christian meditation* letter.<sup>32</sup>

The document issues warnings on differences, and potential incompatibilities, between Christian meditation and the styles of meditation used in eastern religions such as Buddhism. Referring to some elements of Buddhism as "negative theology" the document states:

Still others do not hesitate to place that absolute without image or concepts, which is proper to Buddhist theory, on the same level as the majesty of God revealed in Christ, which towers above finite reality. To this end, they make use of a "negative

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<sup>31</sup> Winston L. King, *Buddhism and Christianity: Some Bridges of Understanding*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), p. 158.

<sup>32</sup> *Letter on certain aspects of the Christian meditation on the Vatican Document Index*, Vatican website: Letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of Christian meditation, October 15, 1989.

theology”, which (...) denies that the things of this world can offer traces of the infinity of God.<sup>33</sup>

Although surface level non-scholarly analogies have been drawn between the two traditions, Buddhism and Christianity have inherent and fundamental differences at the deepest levels, beginning with monotheism's place at the core of Christianity and Buddhism's orientation towards non-theism (the lack of relevancy of the existence of a creator deity) which runs counter to teachings about God in Christianity; and extending to the importance of Grace in Christianity against the rejection of interference with Karma in Theravada Buddhism, etc.<sup>34</sup> Another difference between the two traditions is the Christian belief in the centrality of the crucifixion of Jesus as a single event that some believe acts as the atonement of sins, and its direct contrast to Buddhist teachings.

Though some early Christians were aware of Buddhism, which was practiced in the Roman Empire in the early Christian period, the majority of modern Christian scholarship has roundly rejected any historical basis for the travels of Jesus to India or Tibet or direct influences between the teachings of Christianity in the West and Buddhism, and has seen the attempts at parallel symbolism as cases of parallelomania which exaggerate the importance of trifling resemblances.<sup>35</sup>

While Zen Buddhism began to have a powerful artistic and cultural influence in America in the last half of the nineteenth century, the Buddhist-Christian dialogue officially began with the Parliament of the World Religions in Chicago in 1896.

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<sup>33</sup> Winston L. King, *Buddhism and Christianity*. Similar warnings were issued in 2003 in: A Christian reflection on the New Age, which also referred to Buddhism.

<sup>34</sup> Paul D. Numrich *The Boundaries of Knowledge in Buddhism, Christianity, and Science*, Series: Religion, Theology, and Natural Science, (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Van Voorst, Robert E., *Jesus outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence*, (Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), p. 17.



Buddhist teachers from around the world shared their scripture, their vision, and their spiritual practice with people of other faiths. Some friendships were made, but America's brief exposure to Buddhism at the Parliament did not result in a flood of new books about ecumenism, and certainly did not cause any of the major Christian denominations to reexamine their beliefs or religious practices based on their contact with the East.

The *next public stage* of dialogue occurred in the 1950s, when monks and nuns of the Buddhist and Christian traditions began corresponding, and visiting each other's monasteries. The first popular book about this mutual exploration was *Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist* by D.T. Suzuki published in 1957. In his Introduction, Suzuki writes that he had been reading the works of the medieval Dominican friar, Meister Eckhart, for over a half century, but was only now offering the West a glimpse of his long ruminations on the apparent similarities between Eckhart's mysticism and the Mahayana Buddhist worldview. Also in 1957, the Episcopal Priest Alan Watts helped bring Zen closer to the mainstream with his *The Way of Zen*. By now the interfaith conversation was inviting

American Jews and Christians to reflect on their own spiritual lives in new ways. Soon Buddhist teachers were establishing zendos and sanghas on the east and west coasts of the U.S., ministers and priests were reading Taoist, Hindu and Buddhist texts and admiring the spiritual depth they found, and poets were experimenting with Zen literary forms.

In 1963, the Roman Catholic priest, Dom Aelred Graham, exulting in the fresh winds of ecumenical openness at the Vatican, published his ground-breaking *Zen Catholicism*. In his *Introduction* he notes how Pope John XXIII had recently received 28 Japanese Buddhist monks in his library, recognizing their mutual hope for peace, healing and greater compassion among all peoples. Dom Graham's book, not well known, is a masterful weaving of Catholic, existentialist, Buddhist and literary meanings and metaphors. Graham's

contemporary, the man most widely recognized for bringing Buddhist ideas to the Christian mainstream was the monk and artist, *Thomas Merton*. A gifted author and spiritual master, his books included *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* and *Mystics and Zen Masters*. Merton's knowledge of the history of contemplative Christianity and his familiarity with the writings of the Desert Fathers such as Evagrius and Cassian, led him to draw rich metaphorical and practical connections between the Biblical tradition of silence before God ("Be still and know that I am God"- Psalm 46), and Buddhist mediation, between Buddhist "emptiness" (*sunyata* in Pali) and *kenosis* (the self-emptying of Christ).

In post-war Japan two important Buddhist teachers added their unique contributions to American religious culture. *Shunryu Suzuki* (no relation to D.T.), a Zen master, wrote *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, a sparse and lucid explanation of the Zen way. In a more philosophical vein, *Keiji Nishitani*, who had founded the Kyoto School of Philosophy, wrote many articles and books that explored Zen in relation to Western philosophers and religion. The first influential Tibetan Buddhist writer in America, *Chogyam Trungpa*, published *Meditation in Action* in 1969. By the time of his death 1987, *Trungpa's* literary output included fourteen books, and he had established *Shambhala* retreat centers throughout America and Europe.

Academic and practice-oriented Buddhist-Christian conferences began in the 1980's, and continue to today, sponsored by religious Orders (mostly Roman Catholic), and various universities and retreat centers. Today, it is not uncommon to find Jews and Christians who also have Buddhist practices in Zen, Tibetan or *Vipassana* traditions. Jews with dual practices have coined the term "JuBu" to designate their unique integrated path. There may be dozens of ordained Christians

(mostly in the Roman Catholic tradition) who are also ordained in a Buddhist tradition (usually Korean or Japanese Zen).<sup>36</sup>

A recent book, *Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha*, features seven Jews and seven Christians whose lives, beliefs and spiritual practices have been profoundly influenced by their Buddhist meditation experiences. More and more books about the Buddhist-Christian dialogue are being published each month.<sup>37</sup>

#### 4 Conclusion

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.<sup>38</sup> The Buddhist scholar Edward Conze affirms this very clearly: Only those people would be naturally inclined to agree with the Buddhist analysis that 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

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<sup>36</sup> These would include Fr. Kevin Hunt (Trappist), Fr. Robert E. Kennedy (Jesuit), and Fr. William Johnston (Jesuit). Other well-known Christian monastics and lay teachers who write about their gratitude to Buddhist practices include Ruben Habito, Fr. Laurence Freeman, Sr. Mary Jo Meadow, Fr. Kevin Culligan, Fr. Leo Lefebure, Fr. John Keenan (Episcopal), Beatrice Bruteau, Sr. Elaine MacInnes, Donald Mitchell, and Denise and John Carmody and Dom Aelred Graham. Cf. Robert A. Jonas, *Christian-Buddhist Dialogue. Introduction and Resources*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>37</sup> To get the latest sampling, simply "google" or do an Amazon Books search for the phrases "Buddhist-Christian", "Christian-Buddhist", "Christian Zen" or "Zen Christian". [www.society-buddhist-christian-studies.org](http://www.society-buddhist-christian-studies.org) (The best resource for Buddhist-Christian events in the academic vein is the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies).

<sup>38</sup> In this regard, in a comparative manner, one of the most beautiful books is undoubtedly: Jean-François Revel and Matthieu Ricard, *Călugărul și filozoful (The monk and the philosopher)*, (Bucharest: Editura Irecson, 2005).

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.<sup>39</sup>

From *Christian theological point of view* it can be ascertained that 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."<sup>40</sup> Precisely in this respect, Jesus 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).

Contemporary *Orthodox theology* knows, in its turn, also a wider opening to dialogue with non-Christian religions, including Buddhism. Of course, Buddhism can talk about liberation of man from suffering, a man's "perfection", but viewed in Orthodox Christian terms, these mean only natural attempts, sometimes futile of human who is right under the power of Adam's sin, a recovery of lost communion with God. The difference between this so-called "Buddhist salvation" and

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<sup>39</sup> Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 113.

<sup>40</sup> Ernest Valea, *The Buddha and the Christ. Reciprocal Views*, Copyright © 2008 Ernest Valea, p. 189. See: [https://www.academia.edu/8699161/The\\_Buddha\\_and\\_The\\_Christ\\_reCiproCal\\_Views](https://www.academia.edu/8699161/The_Buddha_and_The_Christ_reCiproCal_Views)

true salvation in Christ and in His Church is and remains the divergence between the permanent desire of non-Christian after lost God, after heavenly communion<sup>41</sup>, on one hand, and the absolute communion with God and salvation in Jesus Christ only, on the other.

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<sup>41</sup> Nicolae Achimescu, *Budism și Creștinism. Considerații privind desăvârșirea omului*, pp. 250 sq.