

A CHRISTIAN READING OF THE BUDDHIST VIEW OF LIFE IN THE LIGHT OF VATICAN II

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1. Introduction

Vatican Council II, in its historic document on the religions of the world, *Nostra Aetate*, has made a very positive statement on Buddhism. It reads as follows: “Buddhism in its multiple forms acknowledges the radical insufficiency of this shifting world. It teaches a path by which, men in a devout and confident spirit, can either reach a state of absolute freedom or attain supreme enlightenment by their own efforts or by higher assistance.”¹ This brief statement, indeed, reflects the new outlook that the Catholic Church wants to be adopted in her ongoing interaction with other religions. This essay makes an attempt to spell out its details and the enriching elements of Buddhism from a Christian perspective.

2. “... In Its Multiple Forms”

Buddhism has its origin from Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, in India, in the 6th century BC. It was, indeed, a single movement based on his life-experiences and teachings, and its initial success and popularity were very impressive. The early Buddhism known as *Tera-vada* – the elders’ teaching – was more informal and practical than academic and speculative, a more simple and sincere style of life than an institution. Already by early Christian centuries, however, it started being ideologically divided into different schools of thought and, by the 3rd century AD, four such schools appeared on the stage. First, there were the *Hinayana* and *Mahayana*

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¹Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, §2; emphasis added. Each italicised phrase will be dealt with separately in the following sections of this essay, thus, offering a Christian commentary to the statement of Vatican Council II on Buddhism.

schools, the former being more rigid and conservative and the latter more liberal and progressive. *Hinayana* school was further split into *Vaibhashika* and *Sautrantika* with reference to the different texts (*Vibhasha* and *Sutra*) that the respective followers acknowledged to be basic. *Mahayana* also was eventually divided into *Madhyamika* and *Yogacara*. While *Hinayana* and its subdivisions maintain realism with regard to the empirical world, *Mahayana* and its subdivisions argue in more idealistic lines. Even so, the *Madhyamika* School of philosophy is more interested in logic and epistemology; the *Yogacara* is more metaphysical in approach and content. *Hinayana* retains the austere and monastic lifestyle with little place for rituals and religious practices and puts more stress on human efforts to realize the goal of life. For them, the Buddha is just a human guide showing the path, not the saviour God. In *Mahayana*, however, he is deified and is considered an *avatar* of God, not only to be imitated but even to be worshipped. Here austerity is relaxed, monastic life made optional, and human efforts are complemented or even replaced by God's grace in response to human faith.

By the early Christian centuries, however, we see Buddhism declining in India for various socio-political and religio-philosophical reasons. Lack of an organised lay community, too much concentration on monasticism, withdrawal of the royal patronage, internal divisions and groupings, strong opposition from Hinduism, gradual loss of the original identity, and, finally, the Muslim invasion of the country in the 11th century AD, which resulted in the destruction of the Buddhist monasteries and the dispersal of the monks may be held responsible for the disappearance and the near extermination of Buddhism from India.

But almost simultaneously Buddhism was carried to other countries, especially to countries around and to the east of India: Tibet, China, Thailand, Burma, Japan, and Sri Lanka. Wherever it went, in a spirit of openness and sharing it adapted to and adopted from the local cultures and religions. Thus, while it played the role of creatively transforming those religions and cultures, in each place it, by a process of self-criticism and assimilation, took a new form. Thus, today we have, in addition to the different schools of Buddhism mentioned above, a multiplicity of Buddhism in terms of different cultural and religious contexts. This accounts for Buddhism qualified variously as Tibetan, Chinese, Thai, Burmese, Japanese, and Sri Lankan. There are also cases of different forms of Buddhism named after the central concerns; for example, *Zen* (in Japan) and *Pure Land* (in China) forms of Buddhism: The former concentrates on

meditation (*zen*, *dhyān*), while the latter on faith in the Buddha incarnate as Amitabha, who is believed to carry the devotees gratuitously to the state of realization. This, indeed, is the story of Buddhism in its multiple forms.

3. “Radical Insufficiency”

“All is suffering [*dukkha*],” said the Buddha. By “all” he obviously meant the empirical reality consisting of matter (*bhūta*) and material factors (*bhautika*) as well as the mind (*citta*) and mental factors (*caitta*). This is what the *Samkhya* system calls ‘the nature’ (*prakṛti*). All this is suffering, according to the Buddha, in the sense that the empirical reality cannot at all offer anything that is absolutely satisfactory and eternally valuable. Thus, “Buddhism in all its multiple forms” – *Tera-vada*, *Hinayana*, *Mahayana*, *Vaibhavshikha*, *Sautrantika*, Tibetan, Chinese, Thai, Burmese, Japanese, Sri Lankan, *Zen*, and *Pure Land* forms – “acknowledges the radical insufficiency of this shifting world.” Indeed, this world cannot take human beings very far. “What then will a man gain if he wins the whole world and ruins life? Or, what has a man to offer in exchange for this life?” (Mt. 16:26). These words of Jesus Christ explain the Buddhist position: the truth of suffering (*dukkha-satya*).

The Buddhists speak of three levels of suffering: *dukkha-dukkhata* (sufferings as such, for example, the bodily pains and aches), *viparinama-dukkhata* (psychological sufferings arising from changes in circumstances, for example, disappointments and anxieties), and *samaskara-dukkhata* (sufferings with roots in the unconscious). Of them, the first two kinds of suffering are everybody’s experience and are comparatively superficial. They inevitably come and go, and as such they may be ignored. They will pass over sooner or later by themselves. The third type of suffering, however, is a deeper one and is more difficult to overcome. This kind of suffering is traced to some experience of remote past. One may have long forgotten the experience, but the impressions it has left in the deeper layers of mind would continue to cause pain. These deeper layers of mind are called, in Buddhism, *alaya-vijñāna* (store-conscious) because it is in it that the impressions (*bijās*, seeds) are stored up. For all practical purposes, the *alaya-vijñāna* is the same as the unconscious of modern psychology. To be healed of these deep rooted sufferings one must delve deep into the unconscious, and uncover the hidden and forgotten experiences, and be reconciled with them through positive thinking, forgiveness, repentance, rationalization, and self-acceptance. That is, indeed, liberation and

enlightenment: “For everything that is now covered will be uncovered, and everything now hidden will be made clear” (Mt. 10:26).

For the Buddhist, the experience responsible for the present suffering may belong even to the past births. The Christian version of it, however, may be that it may belong even to the past generations. This is the basic principle behind the Christian understanding of the original sin committed by the first parents of the humankind, due to which the subsequent generations are subjected to all sort of sufferings, including death. It was, however, remedied by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, God incarnate. Thus, whereas the sufferings (*duhkha*) of man are traced to the destructive act of the original sin of the first parents, his wellbeing (*sukha*) is traced to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. That is, both the negative and positive aspects of human experiences, including the destructive and constructive tendencies (*vasanas* or *samskaras*) in him, have their roots not only in his personal unconscious, but also in the collective unconscious postulated by modern psychologists like C. G. Jung and Sigmund Freud. My present sufferings and evil dispositions have their origin partially and immediately in the evil experiences, including my sinful acts, of the early part of my life, but fully and ultimately in the original sin of the first parents. Similarly, my present wellbeing and positive dispositions are rooted partly and immediately in the good experiences and virtuous acts of the early part of my life, but fully and ultimately in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

If it is certain that through one man’s fall so many died, it is even more certain that divine grace coming through the one man, Jesus Christ, comes to so many as an abundant free gift... If it is certain that death reigned over everyone as the consequence of one man’s fall, it is even more certain that one man, Jesus Christ, will cause everyone to reign in life... Again, as the man’s fall brought condemnation on everyone, so the good act of one man brings everyone life and makes them justified. As by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous (Rom. 5:15-20; see also 1 Cor. 15:20-28).

Thus, my present life, including its positive and negative aspects, is the fruit of the seeds of the experiences sown in the past, partly in the personal unconscious and partly in the collective unconscious. The latter is, according to psychologists, the common psyche of humankind, the universal man. As each individual should become enlightened with regard to his personal unconscious, so, in and through the same process of

personal enlightenment, the whole humanity becomes and should become enlightened with regard to the collective unconscious, eventually resulting in the emergence of the new creation – the new earth and the new heaven (Rev. 21:1) – with God becoming all in all (1 Cor. 15:29), when we become the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself” (Eph. 4:13), and “we grow in all ways into Christ, who is the head by whom the whole body is filled and joined together...” (Eph. 4:16). Thus, the whole universe, including human beings, along with the entire psycho-physical reality, becomes the cosmic body of Christ, “the fullness of him who fills the whole creation” (Eph. 1:23).

4. “This Shifting World”

This world and what it offers cannot satisfy the human spirit in search of liberation or realisation. Why? “All is impermanent [*anitya*],” said the Buddha again. Indeed, it is a shifting world, according to him. Nothing in the world lasts for more than a moment, neither the human beings nor the non-human. Every being, including myself, comes into being, exists and ceases to be the same moment. Consequently, every moment the reality before me is different, even new. It is like watching the flowing water at any point in a river. At any given moment, the water there is not the same as before, although one may feel the other way round. Every moment the water at the given point is quite different! This is true of the empirical world at large and all that belongs to it. All is transitory. “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities. All is vanity” (Eccles. 1:2).

Explaining further the idea of impermanence, the Buddha says: “All is momentary [*kshanika*].” This is the Buddhist *kshanika-vada*, the theory of momentariness. Apart from the fleeting character of the world and the worldly experiences, the momentariness, especially from the Christian point of view, refers to the creatures’ continuous and total dependence on the creator God. To the question whether I will live one more moment, the immediate answer would be, “I don’t know.” But I may rightly add that I will live one or many more moments provided God would give me continued existence. Life at every moment is a gift of God and, therefore, for life of even a moment I depend totally on Him. Neither the past nor the future is within my control: the past is gone totally out of hand, and the future is wholly uncertain. Hence, I have only the present moment at my disposal of which I must make sense and make the best use. Every moment, therefore, is so decisive that the entire future is going to depend

on how I live now! Every moment is unique and irrevocable! As St. Augustine has rightly put it, “Fear the Lord who passes by you, showering blessings!”

That the empirical world is *anitya* and *kshanika* (impermanent and momentary) is in effect a commonplace knowledge of science. It refers to the dynamic and ever active nature of everything in the world. Nothing in the world is static. The matter and mind alike are ever active and in motion. The state of perfect stillness is an impossibility with regard to everything on earth. Everything in the mental as well as the physical world is moving so fast that we fail to realize the movement. Stillness is illusion, while movement is reality. To anyone looking at a point in a flowing river, the latter may appear to be static, while, in fact, it is fast moving, the water at that point being replaced by a fresh amount of water every moment. “No one can step into the same river twice,” said the Greek philosophers. People watching a motion picture have the feeling that they have continuously the same image on the screen, though, in fact, it is a series of images passing before the eyes in so quick a succession that the viewers do not realize the movement! A fast rotating flame of fire gives the false impression that there is a full static circle of fire, and not a single brand. How rightly did Heraclitus say that the reality is a flux! The instant birth, existence and death of each momentary thing – physical as well as mental – reduces it to just an event so that the whole lot of empirical reality in the last analysis is nothing but a series (*vithi*) of events! Indeed, passing events! Thus, the empirical reality, the whole of it, even the tiniest particle of it, is fast moving, every moment giving way to a new world of matter and mind. How then can such an empirical world offer lasting satisfaction? Never! “You fool! This very night you will have to give up your life; then who will get all these things you have kept for yourself?” (Lk. 12:20). This warning of Jesus Christ has for a Buddhist a deeper implication than it would immediately appear to have.

“All is non-soul [*anatma*],” another statement of the Buddha, further elucidates the shifting character of the world. Construed as *nairatmyavada* (theory of non-soul), it has been misunderstood as a denial of the soul’s existence, which the Buddha never did. Instead, referring to the five psycho-physical factors, namely, *rupa* (matter), *vedana* (feeling), *samjna* (perception), *samskara* (disposition) and *vijnana* (consciousness), which, according to him, constitute the empirical human being, he said that they neither severally nor collectively are the soul (*atma*). They are each *anatma* (non-soul). His statement is not that there is no soul, but that none

of those psycho-physical factors is the soul. Thus, far from denying the existence of soul, he was refusing to identify it with any of the psycho-physical factors and was warning the followers against mistaking any of them for the soul and clinging to it.

Initially, the Creator, from the Christian point of view, had planned the three levels of the created world – the matter, mind, and spirit – to be integrated into one another and to function in mutual harmony. But something disastrous, which the Christians call the original sin, occurred, as a result of which the original integrity and harmony were disturbed, and a state of conflict and opposition between the matter-mind composite, on the one side, and the soul, on the other, arose. The former in the Indian terminology is *prakṛti* and the latter is *puruṣa*. The *prakṛti*'s presumptuous assertion of independence against *puruṣa* is ego (*aham*), which *Samkhya* system has rightly recognised as a built-in characteristic of *prakṛti*. This is the disorientation of the nature resulting from the original sin. It is in man that the *prakṛti-puruṣa* (the nature-spirit) polarity is most acutely felt. There is the danger of mistaking the *aham* for *puruṣa*, ego (the false self) for soul (the real self). Hence, the Buddha's warning which Jesus Christ has reiterated: “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself [i.e., the ego]... for anyone who wants to save his life [i.e., the ego] will lose it [i.e., the soul], but anyone who loses his life [i.e., the ego] for my sake will find it [i.e., the soul]” (Mt. 16:24-25).

Looking at the shifting character of the world, the Buddha once again said: “All is an aggregate [*samghata* or *skandha*].” That is, everything in the empirical world of matter and mind is a collection of many factors. None of them is in its identity (*sva-lakshana*), but each of them is mixed with many others (*samanya-lakshana*). We have already made mention of the psycho-physical factors making up man as an empirical being; *rupa*, *vedana*, *samjna*, *samskara*, and *vijnana*. A closer look at them will reveal that they are the factors that constitute not only the human being but also the entire empirical reality – the *prakṛti*, the nature. The Buddha says that they are each a common name standing respectively for the aggregate of matter, feelings, perceptions, dispositions, and consciousness. Take, for example, the tiniest possible particle of matter. If not an aggregate of different elements, it is certainly an aggregate of so many subatomic particles. The matter in its simplest or purest form (*sva-lakshana*, self-defined) is not ever available, says the Buddhist. So, too, are the psychic factors like feelings and dispositions. We may mention one or another

feeling such as joy, anger, love, and so on. But, in fact, there is no single moment when we have just a single feeling exclusively. For example, even when we are angry, along with it, there are also other feelings, expressed or unexpressed, with reference to the same object or different objects, such as love, fear, hope, compassion, etc. Thus, at any given moment, the matter and the mind are an aggregate of different factors: either a heap of loose elements or elementals or a bundle of passions and emotions. Solidity or substantiality in this sense is a myth, a category mistake. “You are dust and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19), God said to man in the beginning. Everything available in this world is fluid and insubstantial (*anatma*) and, therefore, shifting.

The Buddhist asks: “What is a chariot?” It is neither the pole, nor the axle, nor the wheels, nor the reins, nor the yoke, nor the spokes, nor the goad, taken singly. A chariot rather is an aggregate of all those component parts. Similarly, the empirical reality – constituted by matter and the mind – is invariably an aggregate of so many constituent parts, not the thing-in-itself. Everyone trusting in the empirical world “will be like a stupid man who built his house on sand. Rain came down, floods rose, gales blew and struck that house, and it fell; and what a fall it had!” (Mt. 7:27). In other words, we have never anything – material or mental – in its pure, unmixed, simple form. The thing-in-itself (*sva-lakshana*) is never the object of experience: it is incomprehensible and ineffable. This is the mystery of the created world! But a still greater mystery is that there is nothing that is outside God’s plans and providence! He is in full control and knowledge of all things – the most complex as well as the simplest. “Not one [sparrow] is forgotten in God’s sight. Why, every hair on your head has been counted” (Lk. 12:7). In Psalm 139, the inspired poet beautifully pours out the finest sentiments of admiration at God’s meticulous care and unfailing providence even for the tiniest of particles of matter and the innermost movements of mind.

5. “In a Devout and Confident Spirit”

It may be noted that the Buddha concentrates on the empirical reality and describes it as *duhkha*, *anitya*, *kshanika*, *anatma*, and *samghata*; he goes by empirical methods of investigation; he refuses to speak of God both positively and negatively; he dismisses the ultimate questions as unanswerable (*avyakrta-vastuni*). As a result, he is often presented as a pessimist, rationalist if not an empiricist, an agnostic, or even an atheist. But this is a gross misunderstanding of the Buddha and his teachings.

Correcting it, Vatican Council II rightly refers to the “devout and confident spirit” that the Buddha instilled into his followers. Both these qualifications – “devout” and “confident” – are significant, for while the former, on the one hand, asserts the religious and metaphysical character of Buddhism and, on the other, refutes the criticism that it is rationalistic, empirical, and agnostic or atheistic; the latter refers to Buddhism not as a pessimism but as an optimism. The pessimism, anti-metaphysical stand, and non-religiosity of Buddhism are only apparent while deep down it is optimistic, metaphysical, and religious. All the same, its immediate concerns are more practical than theoretical and it urgently addresses the practical issues of life, keeping the theoretical ones for a more leisurely time and treatment. May be in the Buddha’s view, for various practical considerations, orthopraxis took precedence over orthodoxy.

To start with, to be aware of suffering as a fact of life and to accept it as such is not necessarily pessimism. It would remain pessimism if it stopped short at the discovery that all is suffering. But Buddhism does not stop there; instead, it further proposes effective means of alleviating it once for all. Therefore, the Buddhist recognition that all is suffering is an expression of realism, rather than one of pessimism.

The Buddhist approach to suffering is characterised by the cool of a clever physician confronting an illness. He knows that an illness is a fact of life, which can be diagnosed, treated, and cured, and, therefore, seeing it he is neither upset nor puzzled, but keeps his cool and behaves with composure. Similarly, the human suffering does not take the Buddhist by surprise. For him suffering is neither a mystery nor a problem. Instead, he understands it as a fact, a painful fact though, and then he coolly but successfully employs the means to remedy it. In fact, the Buddha has been compared to a physician who diagnosed the illness of human existence as suffering, identified its cause as craving (*trishna*), discovered that the illness was curable, and prescribed a medicine, namely, the eightfold path (*ashtanga-marga*).

Again, the Buddhist approach to suffering is through and through a practical one. The Buddha’s position was rather that speculations about metaphysical and supernatural realities are of no immediate use for man in curing the illness of suffering. To cure it one should eradicate its root cause, which is within oneself, namely, the craving. So one must immediately start employing the means to stop the craving. Once the craving is stopped, and the suffering removed, then the light of *nirvana*

will at once dawn on you, in which the metaphysical and supernatural questions will be settled by themselves.

Description of the empirical reality in terms of *duhkha*, *anitya*, *kshanika*, and *anatma* for the Buddhist is not to depress the human spirit but to elevate it. Listening to the same description, one develops a sense of mystery, on the one hand, refusing to accept this world as it appears to the naked eyes, and, on the other, unable to grasp or articulate it as it is! One is also on one's guard against the temptation to mistake it for something permanent and substantial. While the awareness that it is insubstantial or non-soul (*anatma*) makes one disinterested in the attractions of the world, that it is transitory helps one to keep one's cool in the face of all experiences, pleasant as well as unpleasant. The experience, no matter whether it is pleasant or unpleasant will soon pass and, therefore, it is no use taking it seriously, either being elated or feeling depressed! One, thus, learns the art of keeping one's cool in all places, at all times, and under all circumstances, and it is the dawning of enlightenment (*bodhi*).

Again, a Buddhist does not leave the picture of the empirical world as a heap of discrete and disorderly entities and events, arousing pessimism and disgust. Even the theory of momentariness is given a more positive content in terms of dynamism and movement. This was a Buddhist insight that corrected the then prevalent Upanishadic view of reality as static and even dead. For the latter, there are only two categories of thought: *sat* (being) or *asat* (non-being). A thing is either *sat* (being) or *asat* (non-being). Correcting it, the Buddhist says that the thing is neither *sat* nor *asat*, but *bhava* (becoming). Between the momentary events of things there is a continuity based on the causal relationship called *pratitya-samut-pada* (dependent origination). Every event or thing, momentary as it is, occurs depending on and determined by the previous one. The content of each moment is carried over to the next one, and to that extent the two moments are identical, but the second one having its own characteristics, due either to the new circumstances or to the free decision of the being concerned, has a richer content and is, thus, an improvement on the previous one: it has *become* a new one. Thus, the given being goes on becoming ever newer and newer. This is the Buddhist optimism. The present, although it is the product of the past, can take or be given a new direction and, thus, the whole future can be controlled. There is, thus, no rigid determinism. The human being, even as he has inherited the past, by free personal decisions can change the quality of life and take a new direction to become more and more realized and enlightened a person. He

can change and become as pure as a child (Mt. 18:1-4) and as perfect as God the Father (Mt. 5:48).

6. “A State of Absolute Freedom”

The Buddha did not despair at the observation of the fact of suffering. Applying the causal principle of dependent origination he was convinced that there should be something depending on which suffering originates, and stopping which suffering also can be stopped with the result that one reaches a state of absolute freedom called *nirvana*.

The Buddha’s diagnosis led to the discovery that suffering in any form is only a symptom of a deeper illness, mainly, *trishna* (desire or craving). That is, suffering is the effect, the cause being *trishna*. This is known as *samudaya-satya*, the truth about the origin of suffering. Then, in order to eliminate suffering, the *trishna* should be stopped. Indeed, it can be stopped which the Buddha has put forward as the *nirodha-satya*, the truth about the stopping of suffering. A human state of existence, which is rid of *trishna* and the consequent *duhkha*, is itself *nirvana*, and it is the opposite of the empirical existence called *samsara*.

Nirvana, thus, is the counterpart of the Hindu *moksha* or *mukti* (liberation). The word *nirvana* means “blowing out” a flame of fire. The flame being blown out there results calm and cool. The Buddhist says that man is on the fire of passions and emotions, which are invariably one or other form of desire (*trishna*); the mental state of calm and cool resulting from the quenching of the fire of passions and emotions is the experience of *nirvana*.

What could it mean that desire is the cause of suffering? Is it true that all kinds of desire without exception would cause suffering? Yes, indeed, the desire in any form not only causes suffering but is itself suffering. For a desire necessarily implies that I do not yet have the thing that I desire for. To desire for a thing that I already have is irrelevant. Hence, a desire means the absence of the object concerned: it results in emptiness, a void, which necessarily causes restlessness or dissatisfaction, which, in effect, is suffering. Therefore, it is plain that to realize *nirvana* all sorts of desire should go and one should attain a state of desirelessness, i.e., no desire whatsoever should be left!

One may wonder whether such a state of total desirelessness is possible at all! Should not one at least have the desire to be desireless to realize *nirvana*? In search of an answer, we may first of all say that the

proposed state of total desirelessness is a goal or ideal that is not yet realized, but to be gradually realized. For that, one may start classifying the desires into different groups. First, there are the unhealthy (*akusala*) desires, for instance, the hatred (wishing evil for another person). They are unhealthy in the sense that as long as one entertains such thoughts, one is disturbed in mind, which may cause ill-health in the body, too. Additionally, especially for a Christian disciple, hatred being a sin, it is an illness in the spirit, too. Thus, the desire in the form of hatred is, on the one hand, no use and, on the other, causes ill-health in body, mind, and spirit alike, and, therefore, should be given up. Of course, one should neither suppress it nor act accordingly. Instead, through reasoning, rationalisation, consultation, and prayer for divine assistance, one shall become convinced of its being a cause of ill-health – that it is an unhealthy desire – and shall work towards freely giving it up and, thus, managing it and all such other unhealthy desires. A second group of desires is the unrealistic ones such as too high and, therefore, unattainable plans and projects. They, too, if entertained, can only cause restlessness and eventually disappointments. So, again, with the conviction that they are useless and harmful, one should freely give them up. Finally, there will remain only such desires that are healthy (*kusala*) and attainable. All desires to be good and to do good fall under this group. They should be managed neither by suppressing nor by giving them up, but by realizing them. However, as they may be many, realizing them one by one, one's whole lifetime may not be enough! Yet, they can be brought under a single desire – the desire for God, to put it in a Christian way. God being the *summum bonum*, desire for Him would include the desire for good in any form; realization of the desire for God, therefore, would satisfy all the desires for good so that there would not be any more desire left unrealized. In other words, realisation of the desire for God would put an end to all desires, and it will be the state of desirelessness, *nirvana*, the state of absolute freedom from passions and emotions.

In fact, there is no human being who does not have the desire for God. All men and women invariably do have it, as St. Augustine has beautifully stated: “God, you have created us for Yourself; and, therefore, our hearts are restless until they find rest in You!” In the heart of hearts, every human being naturally has the desire for God, the rightful Owner and Master. Of course, there are people who do not recognise this desire for God. Some others may take to wrong ways and means for satisfying the desire for God. For example, they may relentlessly run after riches and

possessions, name and fame! The desire for God, however, cannot be satisfied by anything but by God Himself. Hence, the Buddhist-Christian dictum that everyone should stop the desire for anything that is not God, and strive to realize the desire for God. “God alone suffices,” says the great mystic St. Theresa of Avila.

7. “Supreme Enlightenment”

The goal of life, according to Buddhism, is also called enlightenment (*bodhi*). The word *bodhi* is synonymous with *nirvana* and speaks of the other side of the reality of final realization. While *nirvana* refers to it rather negatively as a state of freedom from passions and emotions, *bodhi* refers to its positive aspect as an awakening of consciousness. The *bodhi* (enlightenment) is said to be the greatest attainment of *Siddhartha Gautama*, who, as a result, came to be called the Buddha, the enlightened. Thus, *bodhi* and *nirvana* are the positive and negative aspects of human perfection: the former referring to the attainment of wisdom (*prajna*) and the latter to the destruction or “blowing out” of all passions in the human being. These are so identified with each other that they take place simultaneously. One cannot have the enlightenment without totally getting rid of all passions, summarised as *trishna* (desire), and *vice versa*. So, as soon as the fire of passion is put out, the enlightenment necessarily dawns.

The basic presupposition in Buddhism, and in all Indian religions for that matter, holds that ignorance (*avidya*) is the predicament of human existence as long as it remains within the state of *samsara*. According to them, it is out of ignorance that a human being wanders away from his/her goal and keeps him/herself enslaved in the realm of *samsara*. Similarity, being blinded by ignorance one mistakes wrong for right, and evil for good. When the Upanishadic sages prayed, “Lead me from darkness to light [*tamaso ma jyotir-gamaya*],” they were yearning to be led from the darkness of ignorance to the light of enlightened consciousness.

It is true that the Buddha started with the observation that all experiences in this world are, in the last analysis, suffering. He immediately added that the cause of suffering is desire mostly for the objects or pleasures in this world, and that man entertains such desires because of his ignorance as to distinguish between what is ultimately real and unreal, what is permanent and impermanent, and so on. Thus, the Buddha traced all misfortunes of human existence ultimately to ignorance. This is the reason why ignorance (*avidya* or *ajnana*) appears to be the first

of the twelve factors (*nidanas*) accounting for one's *samsaric* existence, according to Buddhism.

Thus, ignorance being the fundamental cause of *samsara*, the cycle of birth and death, the means for liberation from it is naturally knowledge (*prajna*). It is called the enlightenment of consciousness (*bodhi*). In fact, while the state of *samsara* is identified with ignorance, that of liberation is identified with the awakening of consciousness. It was such an enlightenment that Siddhartha Gautama claimed to have achieved as a result of his continued and prolonged meditation. Referring to the experience of enlightenment, he later said: "Ignorance was dispelled, wisdom arose; darkness was dispelled, light arose!" That is, what happened to him was a transformation of mind: from ignorance to wisdom, from darkness to light. Consequently, he claimed to have been able to see everything as it was, in the right perspective, not through concepts but intuitively: i.e., he became a man of wisdom (*prajna*) and insight (*vipassana*).

It was on the basis of his awakened consciousness or the enlightened personality that the Buddha claimed to be an authentic teacher and demanded to be heard. This was evident in the way he approached his first audience, which consisted of the five monks who had long left his company, accusing him of going lax in ascetical practices. Now, seeing the same Gautama coming back to them, they naturally did not feel like taking notice of him, still less like listening to him. Instead, they were resolved to treat him with scorn and contempt. As he came closer, however, they could not resist the force of his "awakened" personality so much so that, as if prompted by an inner voice, they greeted him and showed him signs of respect due to a fellow monk. They addressed him by name, and called him "friend." But to their surprise, Gautama protested at this point. He refused to be called a friend and to be treated as a fellow monk. He said: "Monks, you should not any longer call me by name, nor treat me like a friend, for now I am an *arhat*, a *tathagata*, a fully enlightened one. I shall teach you the *dharma*. If you accept it, you too will attain enlightenment."

Another Buddhist conviction is that the Buddhahood or enlightenment is open to all human beings, who take the pains to walk through the path shown by the Buddha. The enlightenment (*bodhi*) attained by Gautama is not considered his exclusive right or monopoly, but a possibility open to all human beings. Every individual, therefore, is a potential Buddha, called to enlightenment. The Buddha did not claim to be God or a divine personality. He rather presented himself as just one among

the human beings, who, through proper efforts, attained enlightenment – an experience he recommended for all. He also suggested a path, the *ashtanga-marga*, which he said would surely lead any earnest human being to the same enlightenment.

8. “By Their Own Efforts”

This expression is a reference to two different emphases in the Buddhist tradition. For the Buddha and his early followers, the emphasis was on human efforts in view of *nirvana* or *bodhi*. It is well known that the Buddha hardly made any mention of God coming to human assistance in his/her spiritual pursuit. For him, as far as his explicit statements go, what matters is human efforts. It may be noted that he started his search for truth by rejecting the Hindu sacrifices and rituals. He found them empty and meaningless. Even the extreme sort of Hindu asceticism was not acceptable to him. He came to the conclusion that it is neither sacrifice nor worship nor self-torture that leads one to the final enlightenment.

As a matter of fact, the Buddha wisely avoided the very question of God. He did not claim to be God himself. He did not preach a God worthy of human worship. All he did was to show a path, which he said would definitely lead one to enlightenment. He did not ask his disciples to trust in God, nor even in himself, as Christ asked His disciples. Instead, the Buddha asked his disciples to trust in themselves: “... be ye lamps for yourselves. Rely on yourselves, and do not rely on external help. Seek salvation alone in the truth. Look not for assistance to any one besides yourselves” (*Mahapari-nibhana Sutta*). Thus, Buddhism, as the Buddha envisaged it, does not at all entertain the hope that one’s efforts towards enlightenment shall be blessed by God who can be led to do so by offering worship. Instead, every individual works out his/her salvation him/herself, through self-reliance, as neither by the grace of God nor under of an external authority like a *guru*, who can only show the path. Therefore, the Buddha insisted that his listeners should not accept even his own teaching without testing it for themselves. Thus, in early Buddhism, the emphasis was more on self-reliance.

9. “... Or by Higher Assistance”

The stress on self-reliance was gradually toned down, paving the way for another line of thinking which provided for “higher assistance” to human being, complementing, if not replacing, one’s efforts. The Buddha’s disciples soon started deifying and worshipping him. It happened formally

in *Mahayana* schools. In *Hinayana* schools, too, especially in countries like Tibet, Burma, and Sri Lanka, there have always been rituals and practices, which for all practical purposes are acts of worshipping the Buddha. Then, the belief that the Buddha is an *avatar* of the Absolute gradually became commonly accepted in the *Hinayana* circles by a kind of popular movement, and in the *Mahayana* circles by the work of professional thinkers. The acceptance of the Buddha as an *avatar* by later Hinduism made the development of Buddhology easier and quicker.

Belief in the pre-existence of the Buddha was first expressed in the famous *jataka* stories. Initially they spoke only of the many previous births and lives of Siddhartha Gautama, not as God but as an individual being. There could be similar stories about any other human beings who are believed to go through many births and deaths. Increasing faith in the divinity and absoluteness of the Buddha, however, resulted in the stories describing the miraculous circumstances of the Buddha's conception and birth: he selects the time and place of his birth, his mother, and the family. His mother Maya conceives him miraculously without the knowledge of her husband, and he is born in an unusual manner. Wise men from far off places visit the child and predict his future glory as the Buddha. All these have similarity with the descriptions of Jesus' birth and infancy as we find in the 'Infancy Narratives' in the New Testament.

The doctrine of three bodies (*tri-kaya*) of the Buddha is clearly an attempt to construct a Buddhology on Christological lines, perhaps even under Christian influence. The three bodies are, *dharma-kaya* (the transcendent body), *nirmana-kaya* (the historical body), and the *sambhoga-kaya* (the celestial body). They represent, respectively, the Buddha the transcendent being, his historical incarnation, and his glorious existence in heaven.

The development of the idea of Bodhisattva is very much in tune with the idea of a saviour God. A Bodhisattva is one who has already attained the enlightenment, the *nirvana*. He does not disappear from this world, but chooses to continue to live on earth so that he may help others attain *nirvana*. That is, he prolongs his life on earth not for himself but for the benefit of others, and he does so out of compassion (*karuna*) for his fellow-humans. The 4th century (AD) Pure Land Buddhism (belonging to the *Mahayana* tradition) of China believes that one's merit can be transferred to others. According to this tradition, a Bodhisattva can share his merits with others who place their trust in him. Salvation, then, does not depend merely on one's own power and attainment, but on the power

of another, too. The central figure of the devotion here is *Amitabha*, the Buddha of infinite light, who transports devotees to the Pure Land of freedom and enlightenment.

10. Conclusion

According to the Buddhist path, human beings with a devout and confident spirit can not only go beyond this shifting is radically insufficient world, but also realize absolute freedom and enlightenment. This way of enlightenment is also a way of perfection, integration, and wholeness. To conclude, therefore, let me recall a few general observations that I have made in my earlier work, *Comparative Theology*:

... [T]he Buddhist way is for the most part a psychotherapy. This is quite understandable, indeed, for, according to the Buddhist diagnosis, the basic illness of man is mental, namely, that his mind is badly determined and controlled by the unhealthy factors generating in him restlessness, tension, anxiety, etc., as a result of which he is unable to behave himself as a mature man. Therefore, what the Buddhist way offers is ‘to give sight and knowledge, and it tends to calm, to insight, enlightenment, *nibbana*,’ to use the Buddha’s own terminology.

... [T]he Buddhist way is significantly called “the middle path” (*Majjhima-patipada*), for avoiding the two extremes – indulgence in sensuality, on the one hand, and insistence on excessive austerities, on the other – the Buddha has taken a middle course between them. He has made it clear in the very first of his sermons, which he opened as follows: “These two extremes, oh! monks, are not to be practised by one who has gone forth from the world [i.e., a monk]. What are the two? That associated with passions, low, vulgar, common, ignoble, and useless, and that associated with self-torture, ignoble, and useless. Avoiding these two extremes, the *tathagata* [the thus arrived, which refers to the Buddha himself] has gained the knowledge of the middle path, which gives sight and knowledge, and tends to calm, to insight, enlightenment, *nibbana*” (*Dhamma-cakkappavattana-sutta*).

The Buddha, then, continued to explain the ‘middle path’, which consists of right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. What strikes us most in this list of the basic principles

of Buddhist life is the word 'right' (*samyak*) prefixed to each of them. This word refers to the rightness, correctness, integrity, and wholeness of an action. This shows that the Buddha's insistence was on the rightness, correctness, integrity, and wholeness of human thoughts, words, and deeds. That is, one should be able to look at and accept things, people, and events as they are, to face them with equanimity and to respond to them with composure. Therefore, what matters ultimately is not a set of dos and don'ts, but the right (*samyak*) attitudes. Thus, the Buddhist way seeks to form realistic personalities, neither eccentrics nor fanatics. In fact, it is in this sense that the Buddhist way is a middle path: it aims at balanced personalities.²

²Thomas Kochumuttom, *Comparative Theology*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1985, 136-37.