

# Buddhist Views on Overcoming Obstacles to Universal Friendship

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## 1 Hospitality and Universal Friendship

One of the principal themes of the Conference on Actualizing Human Potential has been that of hospitality. While hospitality has always been an important theme in Asian cultures, a more common theme in Buddhist texts has been the closely related notion of universal friendship, that is, friendship toward all sentient beings, without exception. The opposite of friendship, of course, is enmity or hostility. The Theravādin scholastic Buddhaghosa refers to hostility as the far enemy of friendship; that is, hostility is as far from friendship as one can get, and as the opposite of friendship, it is destructive of it. Equally destructive of universal friendship is what Buddhaghosa called its near enemy, namely, a kind of friendship that is similar enough to universal friendship to fool one into believing one has attained the ultimate in friendship when in fact one has stopped short of it. The near enemy of universal friendship, says Buddhaghosa, is preferential or particular friendship, the sort of friendship one might have toward members of one's own family or immediate neighbors or members of the same tribe or nation. This lesser kind of friendship manifests itself as a tendency to look after the needs of one's own people before (or in some cases to the detriment of) looking after the needs of strangers or people from a different people or a foreign nation.

When the Buddha's devoted personal attendant Ānanda made the observation that friendship is half the religious life, the Buddha reportedly said "Friendship is not half the religious life, Ānanda, is the the whole of the religious life." Given the importance of universal friendship as a key aspect of Buddhist practice, therefore, this paper will focus on that theme rather than the theme of hospitality. Hospitality will never be far in the background, however, since it can easily be seen as one of the natural manifestations of friendship, especially friendship toward the stranger or the perceived other. This paper will begin with a discussion of the principal hindrances to friendship, namely, the aforementioned near and far enemies of friendship. Next

there will be a discussion of how, according to the teachings of Buddhism, these hindrances can be removed, the removal of these hindrances being seen as the actualization of the human potential to achieve universal friendship. Along the way, it will be necessary to explain some of the basic teachings of Buddhism for the benefit of those to whom Buddhist teachings are relatively unfamiliar.

## 2 Hostility and xenophobia

### 2.1 The nature of the problem

Fear has arisen of him who has taken up weapons.  
Look at the people making war!  
I shall talk about my grief  
For I am deeply aggrieved.  
Seeing people contending  
like fish in shallow water—  
Seeing them in war with one another—  
I am very afraid.<sup>1</sup>

In these opening couplets of a poem entitled “Attadaṇḍa” (accumulated weapons), attributed to Gotama the Buddha, the stage is set for an investigation into the question of why there is so much conflict among people that, as he puts his situation in a subsequent verse, he found no place of safety and stability anywhere in the world. In this poem the Buddha goes on to say that as he looked into the hearts of human beings he saw there a barely visible dart, a subtle and yet deep wound that makes human beings run around frantically and crazily, a wound that tragically undermines all human efforts to find peace. The dart that has wounded us so is identified as the dart of arrogance and self-importance. It is our pathetic need to see ourselves as special that makes us set ourselves apart from others, to denigrate others and eventually to go to war with others.

In numerous other poems in the Suttanipāta, the same collection from which the poem cited above is taken, the Buddha talks at greater length about the human malaise. All conflict, whether in the form of quarrels among individuals or wars among peoples, ultimately stems from the universal tendency to measure oneself up against others. When we do this, we either feel inferior to others and then resent them, or we feel superior to others and then scorn them, or we feel equal to them and then compete with them until one gets an advantage over the other. The principal ways that the Buddha says we have of measuring ourselves against others are to compare our experiences, to compare the extent of our knowledge and the depth of our thinking and reasoning, and to compare our purity in conduct. So whoever has seen more

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<sup>1</sup>Suttanipāta 935–6. All translations in this essay, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

of the world lords it over those who have seen less. The intellect also becomes an arena in which people constantly compete against one another, each trying to show the superiority of his understanding and wisdom, each trying to show that the other's way of thinking is flawed and inadequate, each trying to show that his knowledge is better in both quality and quantity. As if that is not enough, we even compete with one another as to who can be the most pure, the most righteous and the most pious. But the wise person looks at all this competition and says "Let them contend with one another all they wish. They shall get no quarrel from me."

In this essay I shall examine several human tendencies that the Buddha saw as being at the root of all human conflict and suffering. I shall argue that xenophobia, the fear of the other, is seen in Indian Buddhism as an affliction that comes from a failure to see reality clearly. And finally I shall look at the issue of whether these ancient Indian insights are applicable in the modern world.

## 2.2 A Critique of making unwarranted divisions

Among the stock characters in the Pali canon are a pair of young man named Bhāradvāja and Vāseṭṭha, who appear in several narratives as foils to the Buddha. Both men are portrayed as being very proud of the high place in society that their being Brahman affords him, and they are often seen in narratives discussing the special duties and the privileges that are theirs as a result of the fact that they are Brahmans. Although they agree that they are special human beings, they do not always agree with each other as to what it is that makes them special.

In one of the narratives of the Pali canon, a text called Vāseṭṭha Sutta in the Suttanipāta, we find Bhāradvāja holding the view that what makes someone a Brahman is purely genetic and has only to do with pedigree. If a person's parents are Brahmans, and if all ancestors of both parents have been pure Brahmans for the past seven generations, then he or she is a Brahman. Vāseṭṭha, on the other hand, takes the position that pedigree is not sufficient; to be a Brahman, one must act like a Brahman, which means doing certain ceremonies and keeping pure by doing all the necessary purification rituals at the designated times. When neither is able to convince the other of the correctness of his position, they agree to go ask the Buddha which of them is correct. The Buddha's response, given in poetic couplets, is as follows<sup>2</sup>:

I shall explain to you in proper order and in accordance with the fact the different kinds of living things, since there are diverse species. (600)

If you look at trees or grass, although they may not be conscious of it, there are lots of different kinds and species. There are divergent species. (601)

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<sup>2</sup>The translation is that of H. Saddhatissa.

Then there are insects, large ones like moths and small ones like ants: with these creatures too you can see that they are of different kinds and species. (602)

And in four-footed animals, whatever the size, you can see that they are of different kinds and species. (603)

Now look at the creatures that crawl on their bellies, the reptiles and the snakes—you can see that they are of different kinds and species. (604)

Look at the fish and water life—look at birds and the breeds that fly—you can see that they are of different kinds and species. (605–6)

There is not among men different kinds and species in the manner that they are found among other species. (607)

Unlike in other species there is not among men differences in kind or species with regard to their eyes, ears, mouths, noses, lips, eyebrows and even their hair—all are the same type. (608)

From the neck to the groin, from the shoulder to the hip, from the back to the chest—it is all of one kind with men. (609)

Hands, feet, fingers, nails, calves and thighs are all standard, and so are the features of voice and of colour. Unlike other creatures, men do not have characteristics which distinguished them at birth. (610)

They do not have the variety of inherited features that other creatures have. In fact, in the case of humans, differences are differences only by convention. (611)

The Buddha's contention—that the racial and ethnic and cultural divisions among human beings are purely conventional and are not natural (in the literal sense of belonging to one by nativity) in the way that differences among species are—became a point that Buddhists argued with increasing sophistication for as long as Buddhism remained in India. Although it can be admitted that there are observable differences among human beings, these differences were typically seen by Buddhists as trivial in the context of the overwhelming similarities in both the physical and psychological attributes that men and women have in common. While all human beings belong to the same species, the Buddha does acknowledge that there do exist differences in name only (*samaññāya*). These differences in name, he then goes on to say, are based in differences in occupation. A man who herds cows is called a cowherd, a man who cultivates fields is called a farmer, and a man who performs religious ceremonies for a living is called a Brahman.

At first glance, it would appear that the Buddha agreed with Vāseṭṭha as opposed to Bhāradvāja, for he has dismissed the latter's claim that what makes one a Brahman is just that one's ancestors are Brahmans. But disagreement with Bhāradvāja does not entail complete agreement with Vāseṭṭha.

The Buddha would agree with Vāseṭṭha so far as acknowledging that it is behaviour and conduct, rather than nature and heredity, that makes one a Brahman. He would not, however, go so far as to agree that it is the performance of ritual baths and adhering to dietary restrictions and so forth that make one a Brahman. Rather than these external observances, says the Buddha, it is one's inner character that truly makes one a Brahman. The true Brahmans of this world are not those who observe all the purity rituals that differentiate them from other men and women. Rather the true Brahmans are those who cultivate such qualities as wisdom, compassion, tranquility and emotional and intellectual flexibility internally, and who externally promote social harmony and human unity instead of conflict and division of the human species into castes, classes, clans, tribes and races. These points are made repeatedly in Buddhist literature, but probably the best known loci are the last two chapters of the Dhammapada, entitled Bhikkhuvaggo and Brāhmaṇavaggo.

In the Bhikkhuvaggo it is argued that what makes someone a genuine monk is not a shaved head and orange robes or the taking and periodic recitation of various vows, but the cultivation of inner virtues that manifest outwardly in acts of kindness and thoughtfulness of the needs of others. In the Brāhmaṇavaggo it is argued that what makes one a true Brahman is precisely the same as what makes one a genuine monk. In an earlier chapter of Dhammapada we find this two-line summary of the teachings of the wise:

Sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ, kusalassa upasampadā  
sacittapariyodapanā, etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ.<sup>3</sup>

Not doing any harmful thing, promoting health,  
purifying one's thoughts—this is the discipline of those who have  
awakened.

A moment's observation will make it clear that not everyone in the world is dedicated to avoiding harm to others, promoting health and purifying the mind by eliminating greed, hatred and delusion. Those who are doing so, or who are at least aspiring and attempting to do so, may be seen as practitioners of goodness (*dhammacārī*). But what of those whose attention and efforts are directed to enterprises that cause harm and keep the mind disturbed with self-indulgence, animosity and muddled thinking? To those who are following his path of discipline, the Buddha recommends that they avoid too much contact with such people. In other words, while associating with like-minded people is the best way to cultivate all the recommended virtues, associating with other-minded people is the best way to undermine one's efforts to cultivate virtue. And so it would appear that after all the talk of the unity of the human species we have the basis for a distinction between self and other—between us (the good folk) and them (the bad people)—of just the sort that could undermine the project of seeing the unity of the human species. We

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<sup>3</sup>All citations of Pali texts in this paper are taken from the third version of the CD-ROM edition of the Pali canon produced by the Vipassana Research Institute.

must therefore turn our attention now to how the Buddhist self is advised to regard the non-Buddhist other.

### 2.3 Outsiders: The foolish masses

In the post-canonical Pali texts of the Theravāda school of Buddhism one encounters several references to the term *puthujjana*. This word is subject to interpretation, because the first element of the compound, *puthu*, is homonymous. That is, there are two separate Pali words with a single pronunciation, one corresponding to one Sanskrit word and the other to another Sanskrit word. Some traditional scholars in the Theravāda tradition have taken *puthu* as the counterpart of Sanskrit *pr̥thu*, which means extensive, numerous, plentiful and so forth. On this account the compound *puthujjana* means the multitudes, the masses, the majority of people. Other traditional scholars have taken *puthu* as the counterpart of Sanskrit *pr̥thak*, which means different, separated, outside. On this interpretation the *puthujjana* are the outsiders, that is, those who have not chosen to become Buddhist.<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that the logic of the texts we have examined so far lead to the conclusion that one can be a true monk, and therefore a true Brahman, only by choice, never by birth; this amounts to saying that one cannot be a birthright Buddhist but can only be a convert, and therefore being a non-Buddhist can also be only through not choosing to become a Buddhist—or choosing not to be a Buddhist. So the question that was asked earlier can now be rephrased slightly: How is a person who has chosen to pursue virtue advised to regard someone who has either not chosen to pursue virtue or has perhaps even chosen to pursue vice?

A hint to the answer to this rephrased question is found in the adjective most commonly found with the expression *puthujjana*, namely, the adjective *bāla*. This expression means childish or adolescent, immature, not fully developed. The use of this adjective suggests that the “other” is not to be regarded as other in the sense of belonging to an alien species or perhaps another race or social group, but rather as other in the sense that an adult is other than a child of the same species. The “other”, then, is just a being much like oneself in an earlier stage of development, therefore someone to be nourished and protected and helped along until maturity and refinement sets in.

That the *bāla-puthujjana* is to be seen more as an infantile or adolescent version of oneself than as an alien is supported by the fact that it is not only non-Buddhists who are referred to as *puthujjana*. The term is also sometimes used with reference to Buddhists who have not yet achieved the first fruits of Buddhist practice, the first manifestations of wisdom. Having said this, let me now turn to a brief discussion of what those first fruits are said to be.

<sup>4</sup>In Sanskrit Buddhist texts, whether of Mahāyāna or Śrāvākayāna affiliation, one finds only this latter interpretation. The *pr̥thagjana* are the outsiders. In Tibetan also one finds that Buddhists are most commonly called “insiders” (*nang pa*) and that non-Buddhists are called “outsiders” (*phyi pa*).

## 2.4 Entering the stream

The ultimate goal of all Buddhist practice is *nirvāṇa*, which is defined as the cessation of all psychological afflictions (*kilesa-nirodha*), the afflictions being such drives as appetite for comforts and possessions, animosity and aversion and the clinging to beliefs. This goal is seen as remote for most people; most people, including most serious practitioners, are usually said to be unlikely to achieve *nirvāṇa* in this lifetime. There are, however, several stages along the way to attaining the ultimate goal. The first of these important stages along the route is called “entering the stream”. This expression occurs only three times in the Pali canon, but the participial form *sotāpanno* (which means “having entered the stream” or “stream-entrant”) occurs just over two hundred times. This word is used in two different senses. First, the term “stream-entrant” can be applied to anyone who recognizes the Buddha as the best of all teachers and strives for *nirvāṇa* and recognizes that there are people who have achieved higher stages of character refinement. In this first sense stream-entry may be akin to religious conversion, since it is linked to what Buddhists call going for refuge, which is the formal act by which one becomes a Buddhist. Second, the term “stream-entry” may refer to three specific changes in one’s character. It is this second sense of the term that has most relevance to our topic.

The three specific changes in one’s thinking that constitute Stream-entry in canonical and later scholastic literature consist in abandoning three habits of thought that are known as fetters (*saṃyojanāni*):

**sak-kāya-ditṭhi** the view that collections are real or that wholes are greater than the sums of their parts, and especially the view that one has a self that is more than the collection of all the physical properties of one’s body and all the various traits of one’s mentality;

**vicikicchā** doubt, indecisiveness, irresolution, spiritual paralysis

**sīla-bbata-parāmāso** addiction to good conduct and to religious  
VOWS

The third of these fetters requires some explanation. Two standard explanations are given by the traditional commentaries. First, most commentators make the reasonable suggestion that what is meant here is that it would be a form of bondage to be as obsessed with literal observance of all the Vedic rituals as Brahmans are portrayed as being. In Buddhist texts a good deal of fun is poked at Brahmans’ preoccupation with maintaining ritual purity by following all the rules. Brahmans are depicted as people who have become so intent on following the letter of the rules that they have lost track of what the rules were designed to do, namely, to aid people in the cultivation of such virtues as thoughtfulness of others and moral integrity. But a second explanation is also given. According to it, addiction to good conduct and religious vows refers not so much to particular types of rituals as to the general human

tendency to seek for personal rewards for doing the right thing. Breaking this addiction, then, consists in cultivating virtue for its own sake rather than calculating the benefits for oneself of being virtuous.

Taking stock of what we have seen up to this point, the process of maturing is seen as a long and gradual continuum with more or less well-defined stages along the way. The transition from spiritual adolescence to adulthood, called the transition from being a foolish ordinary person to being a stream-entrant, is characterized as leaving behind the relatively self-centered preoccupation with following rules and reaping their rewards and moving into a more altruistic mood of cultivating kindness either for its own sake or because kindness makes life more pleasant for others. Typically in Buddhist texts the ritualistic Brahman is seen as being on the more childish or adolescent end of the spiritual spectrum. He is seen not as a spiritual other but more as a less sophisticated and refined version of the spiritual aspirant who has reached stream-entry.

In later Buddhism, such as in the satirical Mahāyāna text called the Teaching of Vimalakīrti, we find instances of Buddhists being aware of the danger of being excessively rule-bound that lurks within the Buddhist tradition itself. In the text, the hero is a lay person named Vimalakīrti, whose name ironically means “in praise of purity,” is portrayed as a man who apparently flouts all the conventions expected by pious Buddhists. He lives in the lap of luxury with a number of beautiful wives and servants. He spends his time in casinos, taverns and brothels, and when he studies he studies the works of non-Buddhist teachers. The story goes that when Vimalakīrti falls ill, the Buddha sends his most senior and best-respected monks to inquire after his health. The monks refuse to go, for fear of being contaminated by his impurity. The Buddha, however, insists that they go. En route to his house, the monks have a number of misadventures, all of which are illustrations of the theme that people who allow themselves to be obsessed with purity inevitably invite unto themselves the very kinds of impurity they most fear. In one comical episode, for example, some heavenly beings cause flowers to fall out of the sky and land on the monks. The monks, aware of the rule that they must not wear garlands or ornamentation, try to brush the flowers off their robes. The more they try to rid themselves of the rule-breaking flowers, however, the more persistently the flowers stick. The flowers from heaven fall from the clothing of all other people, but to the ornament-dreading monks they stick like glue. The monks, then, in the very effort to liberate themselves, become slaves to rules that not only entrap them but make it impossible for them to respond to the afflictions of others. By insisting on being monks who obey all the monastic rules, they fail to respond to another’s pains. Fortunately, the story ends happily. The apparently ailing and scandalous layman heals the monks of their scrupulosity and helps them grow up into a more mature spirituality. Once again we see the common Indian Buddhist theme of spiritual practice being a method of growing to maturity, and the recognition that another man’s practice may well be suited to his stage of development and will be a means of his continued growth—provided that he does not become stuck forever in a stage of



relative immaturity.

What we find in Indian Buddhism is not much different from what we find in religions of India in general. No matter which system of religious thought or practice one looks at, the most commonly encountered pattern is that a school will see itself as the model of maturity and will see other religious systems as being at earlier stages of development through which it is natural to pass on the way to greater maturity. There may be a somewhat paternalistic attitude towards people following paths other than one's own, but hardly ever is the practitioner of another religion seen as a threat or even as an annoyance that must be tolerated. Such is the prevailing ethos in Indian religions.

Given that we are not living in ancient India but in the modern world, what I should like to do now is to turn to a discussion of how we in the modern world might benefit from some reflection on these aspects of classical Buddhism that have been discussed above.

## **2.5 A presentation of two prognoses**

Like Gotama the Buddha, we live in a time in which one can look everywhere for safety but never find any such place. Earlier in the period that is now called modernity, Immanuel Kant also lived in dark and dangerous times. For Kant, however, it was possible to muster an almost cosmic optimism, for he was convinced that the ultimate purpose of the human race was to achieve a perfect and perpetual peace and that this would come about, oddly enough, precisely through conflict. In an essay entitled "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," Kant advanced nine theses, the first and fourth of which were as follows:

All natural capacities of a creature are destined to evolve to their natural end. (Kant 1963, p. 12)

The means employed by Nature to bring about the development of all the capacities of men is their antagonism in society, so far as this is, in the end, the cause of lawful order among men. (Kant 1963, p. 15)

Kant's hypothesis was that the special natural capacity of the human being is reason, and that it was this faculty of reason that was destined to evolve to its natural end. The natural end of reason is the development of full and lasting peace on earth. Although the faculty of reason can figure out in the abstract that peace would be a good idea, the desirability of peace is not fully apparent to people until they have had their fill of conflict. And therefore war, he argues, is the means that Nature has provided to human beings to assist their reason in finding a way to peace. It is often said of Kant that his contemporaries observed that he was a man of extraordinary cheerfulness and optimism, and this line of argument would seem to bear that observation out. Be that as it may, I would like to use the Kantian position as a standard of optimism against which to assess the classical Buddhist position described

above. I have chosen to use this Kantian standard because, as I shall argue more fully below, it seems to be that some version of his optimistic vision is still shared by many people today.

Let me begin that assessment by returning to the Attadaṇḍa Sutta, the poem cited at the beginning of this essay. After the two lines quoted above, Gotama the Buddha goes on to say this:

samantam asāro loko, disā sabbā sameritā  
icchaṃ bhavanam attano, nāddasāsiṃ anositaṃ.

The world is entirely unstable. Every quarter is trembling.  
Wishing safety for myself, I saw no such thing.

After this graphic depiction of the state of the world, Gotama sees only one solution: renunciation, leaving the world and its cares behind and seeking the bedrock stability of solitude in which one has left every form of craving and striving and struggling behind. This solution is evidently for the individual. True, society as a whole would be better off if every individual took this solution, but the solution is decidedly individualistic. Moreover, as the Buddha is said to have thought to himself shortly after his own personal liberation, the solution is one that only a very few individuals are likely to see as a living option. The vast majority (the foolish masses?) will go on striving, individually and collectively, for possessions, comforts, influence, recognition and social status. Human beings will therefore find peace only one at a time, and when they do find it, most of the people around them will not even notice that someone once in their midst has found it. The Buddha's conviction is, in this point, precisely the opposite of Kant's, whose second thesis is:

In man (as the only rational creature on earth) those natural capacities which are directed to the use of his reason are to be fully developed only in the race, not in the individual. (Kant 1963, p.13)

Human beings, then, are, according to Kant, destined to quarrel and make war together until their reason, spurred on by the painful results of this experiment with conflict, collectively matures, at which time people will collectively usher in an era of uninterrupted peace. Until that happens, admits Kant, the world will seem pretty dismal to reflective people. To them it will seem that

everything in the large [is] woven together from folly, childish vanity, even from childish malice and destructiveness. In the end, one does not know what to think of the human race, so conceited in its gifts. (Kant 1963, p.12)

Despite the fact that the world will seem bound up in folly, the philosopher of Kant's persuasion will have confidence that in the end Nature, which provided humanity with reason, will triumph. The key to Kant's optimism was that he could not admit of the possibility that Nature operates blindly and without a plan, nor could he admit of the possibility that Nature's plan is anything

but to provide what is good for all creatures. Perhaps the greatest difference between Kant and the Buddha on this score was that the Buddha could easily conceive of the natural world unfolding without any plan or purpose whatsoever. This is indeed one of the ways of taking his observation that the world is *asāro*, a term that means not only lacking stability but also lacking a foundation, lacking a plan, and lacking a purpose. The world for the Buddha was entirely pointless, so how could it be the point of the Nature, which is after all nothing but the world taken as a whole, to make everyone who happens to live there happy?

So far we have seen that Kant and the Buddha had different predictions for the future course of human history and different assessments of the relationship between the individual and the collective, but we have not yet seen why. Kant's reason for stating his second thesis, that the human being's natural capacities are fully developed only by the species as a whole rather than by the individual, is stated as follows:

Reason in a creature is a faculty of widening the rules and purposes of the use of all its powers far beyond natural instinct; it acknowledges no limits to its projects. Reason itself does not work instinctively, but requires trial, practice, and instruction in order gradually to progress from one level of insight to another. Therefore a single man would have to live excessively long in order to learn to make full use of all his natural capacities. Since Nature has set only a short period for his life, she needs a perhaps unreckonable series of generations, each of which passes its own enlightenment to its successor in order finally to bring the seeds of enlightenment to that degree of development in our race which is completely suitable to Nature's purpose. (Kant 1963, p. 13)

Kant's idea seems to have been that each generation adds to the collective wisdom of the human race until eventually the amount of wisdom achieves a critical mass and dispels once and for all the kinds of folly that lead to war. At that time each individual will benefit from the collective wisdom of the human race.

That each generation leaves a legacy of wisdom for future generations is something with which the Buddha would surely agree. He would add, however, that each generation also leaves a legacy of folly and of what Kant called childish maliciousness and destructiveness. Moreover, since the number of spiritually mature people is always going to be significantly smaller than the number of childish people, the folly and other aspects of childishness are bound to grow more rapidly than wisdom. It is no more realistic to assume that the human race will become collectively more wise and mature than it is to assume that the human race will become collectively elderly and that as this happens each individual in society will simultaneously participate fully in this elderliness. Therefore, whereas Kant's vision was one of incremental progress, the Buddha's vision of human history was one of incremental

degeneration. In such texts as the *Aggañña-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*, the Buddha is portrayed as predicting that the human race will become generally more prone to destruction and warfare. The principal reason for this, he says, is that selfishness, which is the principal feature of the childish masses, will lead to more selfishness more rapidly than generosity will beget more generosity. As people become more selfish, they will become more determined to defend themselves and their possessions and their territory against intruders, and they will perceive more and more people as intruders. As the perception of intrusion increases, people will acquire more and more weapons. As more people have more destructive weapons, fear will increase, which will in turn lead to people acquiring even more weapons. Governments will become so preoccupied with protecting their citizens against attacks from enemies that they will neglect to provide citizens the resources they need to make a livelihood. In this atmosphere of the panicky acquisition—and use—of destructive weapons, people will naturally become even more preoccupied with their own personal safety and thus less concerned with others. The downward spiral is described in sobering detail in the *Aggañña-sutta* and in several other texts in the Pali canon.<sup>5</sup>

Up to this point it would appear that the Kantian and the Buddhist views of human history are beyond reconciliation. There is, however, more to the Buddhist vision. The downward spiral into increasing violence and selfishness cannot go on forever. The Buddha's prediction is that it will continue until the average human lifespan is just barely more than the time it takes to reach sexual maturity; at this point most people will just barely live long enough to reproduce themselves once. The general human condition will be so violent and unpredictable that some people will begin to seek alternatives to selfishness and its resultant conflict. They will form small groups and retire as far away as possible from the rest of the world, and together they will develop the skills necessary to live together. On this point the Buddha's vision is similar to Kant's in that in both cases it is a weariness with conflict that is said to lead to a collective discovery (or rediscovery) of the human virtues that make peace possible. Where the two visions remain dissimilar is that Kant is convinced that Nature has provided the means for human beings eventually to achieve perpetual peace, whereas the Buddha predicts that human history will forever oscillate in large periods between degeneration and regeneration, between Dharmic peace and anti-Dharmic conflict.

The collective name for these virtues in Buddhist texts is Dharma. In a famous discussion with his aunt, who was also his stepmother and the first woman to become a Buddhist nun, the Buddha offers a brief set of guidelines on how to tell whether or not a human characteristic is a virtue. It is a virtue, says this text, if it promotes dispassion rather than passion, self-reliance rather than dependence on alliances, wishing for little rather than wishing for much, harmony rather than divisiveness, a love of seclusion rather than

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<sup>5</sup>A good translation of this text appears in Walshe (1987). A detailed study can be found in Collins (1998). Some reflections on the text appear in Hayes (2003).

a love of company, energy rather than indolence, and frugality rather than wastefulness.<sup>6</sup> In this list of criteria we see the suggestion that individuality and self-reliance tend to promote social harmony, whereas forming alliances and fostering solidarity with any group smaller than all of humanity tends to promote disunity and conflict among people. The spiritually mature fare through life alone but with an eye out for the needs of others; spiritual adolescents form gangs that contend with one another.

## 2.6 Two prognoses, two kinds of hope

Kant's views on history have been brought into this discussion because it seems to me that a good many people in our times, and particularly a good many of those who are making war or preparing to do so, are acting as if they are convinced that there will be an eventual end to war and that this will somehow come about by making war on those who are perceived as enemies of the very idea of making peace. And this conviction seems to be particularly prevalent among those who see operating behind human history something very much like Kant's Nature, that is, an intelligence that has a good purpose and that has provided human beings with the means necessary to rescue themselves collectively from the human condition, but only after making themselves very miserable.

If Buddhism has anything to offer the world in its present condition, it is a critique of that conviction. The classical Buddhist view extends an invitation to reconsider the evidence of history. It is not that Kant was blind to this evidence. Indeed, he was profoundly aware that anyone who looked at the world would see much more folly in practice than wisdom. What, then, was the source of his optimism? It was an a priori principle. If it is not the case that Nature is nudging man to greater wisdom by exposing him to unbearable conflict, said Kant, then

his natural capacities would have to be counted as for the most part vain and aimless. This would destroy all practical principles, and Nature, whose wisdom must serve as the fundamental principle in judging all her other offspring, would thereby make man alone a contemptible plaything. (Kant 1963, p. 13)

The Buddha, in looking at the evidence of history simply refrained from making this assumption that man's capacities are not for the most part vain and aimless and that man is somehow special in the world of nature.

The Buddha's message may seem bleak, particularly to those who hold on to the view that an intelligent and benign Nature has provided all the uniquely human requisites whereby human beings will eventually find peace and harmony. On the other hand, his perspective may offer a different kind of hope than that provided by Kant's a priori assumptions about what Nature must

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<sup>6</sup>This passage occurs in the Bhikkhuni-upasampadānujānanam section of the Bhikkhunikkhandaḥkama of the Cūlavagga of the Pali version of the Vinaya-piṭaka.

be like. The hope provided by the Buddha's vision is that it is possible for at least some people to attain to a state of maturity wherein they will be able to learn that dividing the naturally uniform species into unnatural divisions such as clans, tribes, races and nations leads only to xenophobia, that xenophobia leads only to conflict, and that conflict leads only to further conflict. These mature people will appreciate the words found in the opening chapter of what is probably the best-known and most frequently quoted Buddhist text, the Dhammapada:

3. "He insulted me, he hurt me, he conquered me, he robbed me." The wrath of those who think like that will never end.
4. "He insulted me, he hurt me, he conquered me, he robbed me." The wrath of those who never think like that will end.
5. For wrath is not conquered by wrath; wrath is conquered by leaving it behind. This is a universal principle.
6. Others do not know that we can live here in harmony. Those who do know it leave fighting behind.

### **3 Overcoming the hindrances**

In the preceding section we saw the claim made that partiality or less-than-universal love is regarded as the greatest hindrance to the sort of friendship that is naturally expressed as hospitality towards those who are other than oneself. We saw that an extreme form of the absence of friendship is hostility. We saw that Buddhist texts claim that there are those who know how to leave fighting behind. To do so is to learn to live in harmony with all other sentient beings, and this can be seen as what Buddhist teachings would regard as the actualization of the human potential, or at least as the most palpable manifestation of having actualized the human potential for attaining enlightenment.

Before considering the potential that Buddhism may have in the task of actualizing the human potential, it is necessary to clarify just what it means to be a Buddhist. In dealing with this issue, I shall follow a text called *Abhidharma-kośa*, a title that is rarely translated into English but could be rendered The Receptacle of Highest Principles. Written by Vasubandhu in the fourth century C.E., this Indian Buddhist treatise was studied in and considered authoritative by most of the schools of Buddhism in India. The text was written in Sanskrit and was eventually translated into Chinese and Tibetan. In Chinese translation it was widely studied by most schools of Chinese Buddhism that evolved not only in China but also in Korea, Japan and Vietnam. The Tibetan translation was, and still is, studied by most traditions of Buddhism in Tibet and Mongolia.

### 3.1 Going for refuge

According to Vasubandhu, who follows a long-standing tradition within Buddhism, being a Buddhist consists in going for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Each of these terms is explained in some detail by Vasubandhu; I shall offer an abbreviated explanation based on what he wrote. Before doing that, however, let me lay down a little background information to put this whole issue into context.

During the time when the Buddha was alive, going for refuge to him simply meant becoming his disciple, and usually the understanding was that being the disciple of one teacher precluded being someone else's disciple at the same time. After the Buddha's death, however, there was a need to redefine what it means to be a disciple of and to go for refuge to the Buddha. The principal way of redefining the act of going for refuge to the Buddha was to acknowledge that the Buddha was worth taking on as a teacher because he had a particular mentality. That is, he possessed a set of qualities that enabled him to serve as a teacher. When one formally becomes a Buddhist, it is customary to declare that ideally one incessantly honors and respects all buddhas of the past, all buddhas who may arise in the future and all buddhas who exist in the present time. This declaration that one will always honor all buddhas naturally invites one to ask: just exactly what is a buddha?

Just before his death, Gotama Buddha, the founder of the religion we now call Buddhism, reportedly told his disciples that everything he had ever taught could be summarized in several lists of practices and the virtues that those practices are designed to cultivate. This list of lists has altogether thirty-seven items. Collectively, these thirty-seven items are known as the wings to awakening (*bodhi-pakkha*) or the factors in awakening (*bojjhaṅga*). In his discussion of what it means to go for refuge to the Buddha, Vasubandhu makes it clear that it is not the physical person or the historical figure of the Buddha that one honors; rather, it is this set of thirty-seven characteristics. It was possession of these characteristics that made the Buddha a buddha, and it is possession of these thirty-seven features that makes anyone else a buddha as well. Vasubandhu also observes that there are many repetitions of individual items in the list of lists given by the Buddha. If one were to eliminate all the redundancies, then the list would in fact amount to ten items. To be a Buddhist, then, consists first of all in respecting anyone who has these ten qualities and, more importantly, striving to cultivate these virtues within oneself. Moreover, the hope of human flourishing for anyone, whether officially a Buddhist in the sectarian sense or not, is said as being commensurate with the degree to which one has cultivated these ten virtues known as the ten factors of awakening.

### 3.2 The ten factors of awakening

Let me turn now to a brief discussion of what these ten virtues are and how Vasubandhu characterizes them. The ten factors are wisdom, heroism, con-

centration, mindfulness, joy, flexibility, equanimity, faith, resolve and good moral habit. Vasubandhu explains them as follows:

1. **Wisdom** is defined as the investigation of virtue. This investigation consists in observing what kinds of attitudes and actions are helpful and beneficial to oneself and others, and which attitudes and actions are detrimental. So wisdom consists first of all in developing a discriminating awareness and then choosing the beneficial and eliminating the detrimental. On a practical level, this wisdom is cultivated by developing a clear awareness of one's bodily and mental states and their effects on oneself and others.
2. **Heroism** consists in having the energy to do beneficial actions and in having the courage to strive for virtue in a world in which virtue is not always highly valued. Heroism also consists in striving to establish harmony among people who are in conflict. The Buddha once observed "If one remonstrates, educates and leads away from rudeness, Then one will be agreeable to good people and disagreeable to bad people" (Dhammapada 77). Heroism, then, includes having a willingness to educate others and to lead them away from coarse and unrefined attitudes and behaviour, knowing that doing so entails the risk of becoming unpopular with those who are rude.
3. **Concentration** is the ability to keep a healthy mind focused on a single topic. A mind is said to be healthy when it is characterized by such attributes as modesty, humility, a sense of shame, and aversion to harmful actions. The healthy mind is always said to be free of anger and hatred and filled with love and a desire to serve and be of benefit to others.
4. **Mindfulness** is a term that one hears Buddhists talking about constantly. It consists first of all in remembering from one's previous experiences what kinds of attitudes and actions have proved to be beneficial and which have proved to be detrimental. Secondly, mindfulness consists in remembering to apply that knowledge gained from the past to situations that are currently at hand.
5. **Joy** is defined as having a zest and enthusiasm for virtuous thoughts and actions. It means appreciating the virtue in others and letting one's heart be filled with joy whenever one sees acts of kindness and generosity being done by anyone anywhere.
6. **Flexibility** is considered one of the most important qualities of the healthy mind. In the scholastic literature of Vasubandhu and others it is described as both intellectual and emotional dexterity. It is seen as the opposite of the sort of intellectual and emotional fixity and rigidity that might stand in the way of being fully open and responsive to the needs of others.



7. **Equanimity** is said to involve two things. First, as an attitude toward one's own experiences, it is described as indifference to one's own pleasure and pain. It is indifference in the sense of not having such a preference for pleasure that one is unwilling to undergo hardship in the service of others. Second, as an attitude toward others, equanimity is a spirit of impartiality. In practical terms it is said to manifest itself as not taking sides in disputes but being available to provide for the physical and psychological needs both sides in a conflict.
8. **Faith** is described as the confidence that naturally arises when one has seen the benefits of generosity, kindness, equanimity and the various other virtues that we have been discussing. It is said to be the sort of confidence and conviction that can arise only from personal experience. This conviction that arises as a result of one's own experiences naturally gives rise to having trust in those who have provided guidance and leadership.
9. **Resolve** consists in the determination to cultivate healthy, competent mental states and to eliminate unhealthy, incompetent mental states.
10. **Good moral habit** is the conduct that naturally flows from the cultivation of the mentality characterized by the virtues described so far. It manifests itself as right speech, right conduct and right livelihood.
  - (a) Right speech is described as speaking in a way that conveys the truth of a situation and that establishes harmony among people. It is the opposite of speaking in such a way that deceives, abuses, creates factions, promotes anger, encourages carelessness and destroys concentration. A famous guideline for using speech well was given by the Buddha as follows:
 

If you know that words are unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial, unendearing and disagreeable to others, do not say them. If you know that words are factual, true, and beneficial but disagreeable, then wait for the right time to say them. Even if you know that words are factual, true, beneficial and agreeable to others, wait for the right time to say them.
  - (b) Right conduct, like right speech, is action that promotes harmony and avoids harm and abuse.
  - (c) Right livelihood means following a way of making one's livelihood that involves integrity and as little harm as possible to others.

Let me turn now to a discussion of how these ten characteristics that a Buddhist is invited to admire in others and to cultivate within oneself fit in with the theme of this conference.

### **3.3 Realizing one's potentials as a human being**

The first observation I would like to make is that the cultivation of these ten virtues is said to be a goal that can be achieved by anyone who strives to cultivate them. They are not seen as virtues that only the Buddha has or that only Buddhists regard as important. Rather they are seen as the principal focal point of a serious Buddhist; that is, a Buddhist ideally makes the gradual cultivation of these virtues the main work of a lifetime. Cultivating these virtues is never seen as easy, for there are numerous obstacles along the way. It may be helpful to see all of them as being similar to a mathematical asymptote, a limit that one approaches but perhaps never realizes perfectly.

As a path of practice, the Buddhist tradition embodies a wide range of exercises and practices that are designed to help an individual cultivate these virtues. As a path of theory, the Buddhist tradition also embodies reflections on why it is that it may not be easy for an individual to experience rapid success in perfecting them. At the heart of all Buddhist theory is the observation that all things are interconnected, sometimes in obvious ways and sometimes in very subtle ways. Everything that takes place in the world has some effect on everything else in the world. As Buddhists like to put it, everything is conditioned by everything else, and this conditioning is sometimes extremely difficult to overcome. The environment in which one lives is so powerful as a source of conditioning that the most important first step for a person to take, according to the Buddha, is to seek out the company of good people. While being part of a community of good people is the most effective way to realize one's own potential for leading a helpful and beneficial life, it is not always possible to find such a community. If one cannot find one, says the Buddha, then the next best option is to seek a life of solitude. The worst thing that one can do is to allow oneself to be surrounded by those who are careless, self-centered, insensitive, abusive, destructive and violent, for unless one is very strong indeed, these qualities are contagious and will eventually undermine one's efforts. Because it is so important to be within an environment that promotes the health of all individuals who are in it, it is also important to try to create and maintain a community that will be a nurturing environment. So the second observation I would like to make is that realizing one's potential as an individual is seen as a task that cannot be separated from the task of helping all of humanity realize the human potential. It is necessarily a communitarian and cooperative venture.

The realization of the human potential is one that requires the combined efforts of all people. Moreover, cooperation is something that requires mental and emotional flexibility and a willingness to learn not only from one's own experiences but also from the experiences of others. From these two considerations, I claim that it follows that the healthiest human community is one that encourages individuals to benefit from the entire collective wisdom and experience of humankind as a whole. (I would go further and say that the healthiest community is one that also learns to benefit from the collective experiences of all species of living thing, but I will not develop that idea here.)

So this leads to my third observation, which is that when Buddhist principles are taken to their logical conclusion, they must embody a spirit of religious pluralism and can never be seen from the narrow perspective of the Buddhist tradition alone.

So let me turn now to a few further reflections on religious pluralism.

### **3.4 Religious pluralism**

Pluralism can be described as not just the recognition but the celebration of a plurality. Religious pluralism, then, is not simply the recognition that there are many religions in the world, but the conviction that this plurality of religions is a sign of health and vitality in the human race. Among the many eloquent advocates of religious pluralism in relatively modern times was Swami Vivekananda. The spirit of his type of religious pluralism is illustrated by the following quotation, taken from a talk that he gave at the Universalist Church in Pasadena, California on January 28, 1900. In this talk Vivekananda observes that there are various grades of mind. Some people are rationalists who do not care for ceremonies and whose intellects are satisfied only by hard facts. Other people have more artistic temperaments, and they thrive on beauty of lines, colors, fragrance, flowers, lights and candles in worship rituals. Some see God in these forms of beauty, while others see God with the intellect in the wonders of nature. Some people are devotional by nature, and their greatest joy comes in worship and praise of God. At the other end of the spectrum, says Vivekananda, “there is the philosopher, standing outside all these things, mocking at them. He thinks, ‘What nonsense! Such ideas about God!’ ” At the end of his talk, Swami Vivekananda said this:

Our watchword, then, will be acceptance and not exclusion. Not only toleration; for so-called toleration is often blasphemy and I do not believe in it. I believe in acceptance. Why should I tolerate? Toleration means that I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live. Is it not blasphemy to think that you and I are allowing others to live? I accept all the religions that were in the past and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian church and kneel before the Crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhist temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the hearts of everyone.

Not only shall I do this, but I shall keep my heart open for all the religions that may come in the future. Is God’s book finished? Or is revelation still going on? It is a marvellous book—these spiritual revelations of the world. The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, and all the other sacred books are but so many pages, and an infinite

number of pages remain yet to be unfolded. I shall leave my heart open for all of them.<sup>7</sup>

On another occasion, Swami Vivekananda wrote: “Books are useless to us until our inner book opens; then all other books are good so far as they confirm our book.” Although some of his language seems dated, and his way of referring to Muslims as Mohammedans is no longer used by careful speakers, the overall message is one that is still worthy of reflection. At the heart of Vivekananda’s kind of pluralism was a recognition of the importance of poetic imagery and figures of speech that suggest but do not over-specify, and also of myths as multi-layered stories that convey invitations to reflect on questions of ultimate human value. In another essay, Vivekananda wrote this:

Then, if you can, lower your intellect to let any allegory pass through your mind without questioning about the connexion. Develop love of imagery and beautiful poetry and then enjoy all mythologies as poetry. Come not to mythology with ideas of history and reasoning. Let it flow as a current through your mind; let it be whirled as a candle before your eyes, without asking who holds the candle, and you will get the circle; the residuum of truth will remain in your mind.

The writers of all mythologies wrote in symbols what they saw and heard; they painted flowing pictures. Do not try to pick out the themes and so destroy the pictures; take them as they are and let them act on you. Judge them only by the effect and get the good out of them.

Your own will is all that answers prayer; only it appears differently, under the guise of different religious conceptions, to each mind. We may call it Buddha, Jesus, Krishna, Jehovah, Allah—but it is only the Self, the “I.”<sup>8</sup>

Although I have cited Vivekananda as a person who admirably captures what I believe is entailed by Vasubandhu’s understanding of the qualities personified by the Buddha as one to whom a Buddhist goes for refuge, one can find modern Buddhist writers expressing themselves in very much the same vein. Among the best known of these Buddhists are the Dalai Lama of Tibet, the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, and the British Buddhist author Stephen Batchelor.

### **3.5 Realizing the promise of Buddhism**

In the final part of this presentation, I should like to return to the question of what kinds of things Buddhism may have to offer people at this particular time in history. The two principal features that I should like to focus on

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<sup>7</sup>Vivekananda 1953, p. 386

<sup>8</sup>Vivekananda 1953, p. 563

are the Buddhist emphasis on what we might call practical psychology and the emphasis on the importance of universal friendship. Let me begin with practical psychology.

### **3.5.1 Emphasis on practical psychology**

A statement that I have heard many times during my life is along the lines of “I am not at all religious, but I consider myself quite spiritual.” It is very much a sign of our times to be suspicious of formal institutions, authority figures and other external features of organized religions, while at the same time being drawn to exercises aimed at cultivating good character. The Catholic tradition has customarily used the term “spiritual practice” for exercises such as prayers and meditations that are aimed at cultivating personal virtue, and the word “spiritual” has now come to be used widely, even outside Christian circles. So when people say that they are spiritual but not religious, they seem to be saying that their emphasis is primarily on putting their energy into cultivating a refined mentality, a mentality so refined that it will eventually become freed of all the limitations that collectively make life less than satisfactory. Given this widespread modern Western aversion to organized religious institutions but attraction to spiritual exercises, it is not surprising that many Western people are turning to Buddhism, not as an organized religion, but as a collection of accessible and effective spiritual exercises.

In nearly all Buddhist writings, one finds the point being made that one’s mentality can be changed for the better and that there are time-proved ways of bringing these changes about. In many Buddhist books one finds detailed exploration of the mentality of an ideal person who is dedicated to the unconditional love of and service to other beings. In the abhidharma genre of Buddhist texts, one finds maps of the terrain of the human mind, maps that will help the explorer discover that terrain effectively by pointing out what one is likely to find there.

### **3.5.2 Emphasis on spiritual friendship and community**

A friendship can be called spiritual when it is based primarily on the determined effort of each friend to cultivate a mentality characterized by wisdom and compassion and other healthy mental characteristics. A true friendship features reciprocity, that is, each friend helping the other to learn and grow and find fulfillment. The British Buddhist writer Sangharakshita observes that a true friendship “can never involve any kind of power relationship.”<sup>9</sup> In speaking in this way, Sangharakshita shows his indebtedness to the psychologists Carl Jung and Erich Fromm, who wrote that all relationships are based either on love or on power, and that one is operating toward others either in one of those modes or the other but never in both at the same time, since the two modes are incompatible. The power mode consists in using others

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<sup>9</sup>(Sangharakshita 2000, p. 200)

as a means toward one's own ends, whereas the love mode consists in taking others as ends unto themselves and therefore dealing with them without any ulterior motive. Treating others as ends unto themselves and not as means toward one's own ends can have some paradoxical results, not the least of which is that, by all accounts, dealing with others in love mode rather than power mode turns out to be one of the most effective ways of doing what is really good for oneself. In the end, therefore, there turns out to be no distinction between truly serving others and truly serving oneself.

Sangharakshita echoes Carl Jung also in his recurring preoccupation with distinguishing the mass-mind, the mentality of the person who develops an emotional dependency upon a group of people, from the mind of the individual. One of the goals of psychoanalysis, according to Jung, was to help the client become an emotionally independent individual with a capacity for interacting effectively with others without becoming psychologically dependent on them. Clearly, dealing with others as an independent individual entails dealing with others in the love-mode, whereas needing others for one's own sense of self-worth usually results in dealing with others in the power-mode. When a group is formed on the basis of the neurotic needs of its members, then the group itself tends to act in power-mode toward all its own members, with the result that the survival of the group takes precedence over the health of its members.

Earlier mention was made of the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh and Stephen Batchelor as contemporary Buddhists who hint at the most promising direction for humanity as a whole. That direction, I think, consists in seeking wisdom from whatever source it can be found. Stephen Batchelor has drawn inspiration from the writings and analytic techniques of Carl Jung; he has also explored the thinking of the existentialists. Sangharakshita draws on various Western poets, especially the romantics, and on a handful of mystics and on the reflections of Jung. The Dalai Lama has expressed great hopes for the potential insight that could come of the marriage of the natural sciences such as physics and biology with the traditional religions. As mentioned before, both the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh have explored the important similarities between Buddhism and Christianity, and in this they have been followed by several prominent Buddhist academics such as José Cabezón. In a book entitled *Buddhists Talk About Jesus; Christians Talk about the Buddha*, Professor Cabezón made this observation:

I consider my Christian brothers and sisters fortunate, and I rejoice in the fact that they have at the very core of their tradition—in the very life of their founder—such a clear and superb model of what it means to be a socially responsible person, a person of integrity, in the world. We Buddhists have a great deal to learn from this aspect of the life of Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

Cabezón's admiration for Jesus as a example of passionate social respon-

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<sup>10</sup>Gross and Muck 2000, p. 20.

sibility stems from more than the fact that Cabezón himself was a Cuban Catholic before he became a Buddhist monk as a young adult. He speaks, I think, for quite a large number of contemporary Buddhists, and not only those who come from Christian backgrounds.

Finally, I should like to refer to a hermeneutical principle that is commonly used by Buddhists. It is usually given as a guideline to Buddhists who are about to embark on the study of their own tradition, but it has applicability, I think, to anyone in our times who is going to undertake the study of any religious tradition in a spirit of openness and receptivity. The Buddhist doctrine is often called the four reliances. They are stated as follows:

- One should rely on the spirit of a text more than on its literal expression.
- One should reflect on the teaching itself, more than on the personality or character of the teacher who offers it.
- One should rely on one's own intuitive understanding of a teaching more than on the exegesis of scholars.
- One should rely on texts that can be taken in a straightforward way more than on texts written in a symbolic or circuitous language that needs to be unpacked or interpreted.

The first three of these principles are especially relevant to a religious pluralist, I think. The first principle, that one should rely on the spirit of a text rather than resorting to literalism, would be a welcome corrective to trends in recent times that have discouraged open inquiry into the meanings of religious texts. The third principle, that one should rely on one's own intuitions more than on the understandings of scholars, has the potential to liberate individuals from traditions that may have imprisoned them. The second principle could be seen as a corrective to the disappointment people often feel in religious teachers whose flawed humanity has shown through to such an extent that their followers become ready to jettison the entire set of principles that the teachers teach. Following all these principles in opening oneself up to reflecting on the literature and practices of all peoples of the past, present and future would be, I claim, a sure way of realizing our highest human potentials both at the individual and at the societal level.

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