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# Paradigms of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity

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## I. INTRODUCTION

How does Buddhism, or how do Buddhists, conceive of the “self”? Does it exist or not for them? What are the conceptual consequences? How can we compare and contrast Christian conceptions of the self with Buddhist ones? Are there discernible paradigm shifts in the development of Buddhist thought?

With the desire to address and answer these questions, I have chosen a rather wide topic, a comparison of “paradigms of the self” in Buddhism and Christianity, in order to maintain a certain symmetry of proportion, which, hopefully, will help to clarify the situation. Buddhism and Christianity is used here technically to refer to the two religions—and not East and West—so as to avoid further generalizing the subject under discussion. This is, in a sense, a philosophical discussion of “theological” content, if I might apply the word theological to Buddhism as well as to Christianity; my points of departure are drawn especially from the respective scriptural texts and their commentaries. However, because of the vastness of the scope, I do not attempt to cover all the ground, and shall limit myself to a discussion of certain representative views on each side. While preparing this paper, I have had very much in mind Hans Küng’s essay on paradigm change in Christian theology<sup>1</sup>; it is against this perspective that I shall reflect upon the subject of my choice.

The English word *self* as principle of subjectivity is more closely associated with modern Western philosophy, especially with and since Descartes, than with the Biblical heritage. To refer to the “self” is to point to a delimited individual as distinct and separate from the “others,” to posit a distance between the subject and the object, the knower and the known. Modern psychology has pushed further this tendency by dwelling on the “alienation” of the self, not only from others, but also from itself. However, when applied to the study of another tradition, the same word may be used to translate other words, each of

which may have a range of meanings not exactly identical to that commanded by the English word *self*.

It is my intention to discuss in comparative perspective the *self* paradigms in Christianity and Buddhism, taking the word *paradigm* to refer to an organic complex of beliefs, values and techniques focusing on the biological and psychic human individual whom we call here the self. I am taking for granted that certain historical shifts did take place with regard to these paradigms, within both Christian and Buddhist thought—albeit ambiguities remain, especially in the case of Buddhism. This paper will use a more structural comparison of the *self* paradigms, in the hope of clarifying the conceptual convergences and divergences of the Buddhist and Christian positions, and therefore of understanding a little better certain consequences flowing from these positions. As it will become clear in the course of this study, by the word “Buddhism” I refer to the tradition as a whole, without always distinguishing between Theravāda and Mahāyāna—except when it is useful to make such a distinction. Likewise, by the word “Christianity”, I mean the entire Christian tradition, while taking care to refer to Scriptural sources before discussing philosophical developments. I believe that such an approach will also provide a better framework for the recognition and discussion of paradigm shifts in a comparative perspective.

It is important also to point out how much has already been written on this subject, both regarding the concept of the self in Buddhist teaching, and regarding possibilities for dialogue with Christianity. Such studies include Joaquin Perez-Rémon's *Self and Non-self in Early Buddhism* (1980), which attempts to treat the problem as one for Buddhism, and Lynn A. de Silva's *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (1975) as well as Masumi Shimizu's *Das 'Selbst' im Mahayana-Buddhismus in japanischer Sicht und die 'Person' im Christentum im Licht des Neuen Testaments* (1981), both of which are conscious efforts to promote dialogue, the former with Theravada Buddhism, and the latter with Japanese Mahayana. My effort here will be to sum up the discussion to date of the question and to evaluate this discussion, in the light of our use of paradigm shifts as a heuristic tool in Buddhist-Christian dialogues. I shall do the same for the Christian paradigms of the self as well; indeed, for purposes of convenience, I shall begin with these, although I shall dwell at greater length on the Buddhist positions if only because their ambiguity requires more careful consideration.

## II. THE CHRISTIAN PARADIGMS

### *The Biblical Images: the "Self" as Creature and Sinner*

If we search the Bible, we shall find no developed doctrine of the self as such in the Old and New Testaments. What emerges is the common sense assumption of the self as an empirical entity, that which is conscious of its own existence and its limitations and finitude, and its radical dependence on God. The Hebrew term used, *nephesh* referred to the “self” as the principle of life: “the Lord

God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being [*nephesh*]” (Gen 2:7). “And Jonathan . . . loved [David] . . . as he loved his own soul [*nephesh*]” (1 Sam 20:17). So too did the Greek word, *psyche*: “What will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life [*psyche*]?” (Mtt 16:26, Mk 8:36)

In each case, it is presumed that the “self” is one: body and soul distinct but integrated, a whole human. It is also presumed that the self is finite and mortal. “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:20). There is, as yet, no clear concept of an “immortal soul.”

There is, however, an acknowledgement of the self as a creature of God in need of Divine help and sustenance, and a sinner requiring Divine mercy; and in the New Testament as a *redeemed* being who is saved and renewed by and in Jesus Christ. “We know that our old self [*anthropos*] was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed . . .” (Rom 6:6). The term used in the Scriptures, besides soul as life-principle (Hebrew *nephesh*, Greek *psyche*) is “human being” (Greek: *anthropos*), rather than “self.”

What follows is clearly a paradoxical understanding of human dignity and human misery: we are made by God, and reflect his goodness; we spoil his handiwork by our sins; we are saved and “made new” by Jesus Christ. And the Good News (Gospels) brings with it an exhortation: to renounce sin and return to God in Jesus. This is not a philosophical assertion. It is rather a call to radical conversion of mind and heart.

### *The Philosophical-Theological Definitions: the “Self” as Person*

A shift occurred in the “self” paradigm as Hellenistic philosophical ideas were introduced into medieval Christian theology. It becomes obvious in the definitions given to the words “soul” (Latin: *anima*) and “person” (Greek and Latin: *persona*), and these two words, though maintained to be different, are sometimes used almost interchangeably. This term “person” is seldom mentioned in the New Testament, and did not become a technical term for Christian thought until the advent of Greek conciliar theology. Strangely enough, this took place with the discussions and debates surrounding the dogmas of Trinity (three Persons in one Nature) and Incarnation (two Natures in one Person).<sup>2</sup> As Hellenistic reflection in philosophical theology turned from the subject of God to that of the human being, the human person as image of God takes on an inner core of spiritual substance: in the words of Boethius, “an individual substance of a rational nature.”<sup>3</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas further developed this definition to explain that “individual substance” is that which is complete, subsists by itself, and is separated from others.<sup>4</sup> And the Western person has tended since to take himself or herself as a being with unique individuality and immortal personality, distinct and different from one another and from God. He or she has now become aware of his or her own “immortal soul,” the ground of his or her personhood. At the same time, however, the distinction between soul and body has been made rather radically, and the dualist tendency is increased.<sup>5</sup>

The question of the immortality of the soul is primarily decided in *a priori* fashion: the soul is immortal because it is not material, and therefore spiritual and imperishable. The reasons for this decision are however moral and theological: to explain the fact of human freedom, and to assure moral responsibility and justice after this life. While "soul" and "person" are not exactly identical, the person owes his or her worth mainly to the immortal soul. But the definition of the soul's immortality tends to separate it more and more from the body, which is corruptible. A dualist tendency in defining personhood is entrenched, although the unity of the person is never entirely abandoned. However contrived this may be to a rationalistic mind the doctrine of the resurrection of bodies gives an example of how the eventual union of soul and body is to be expected, and will bring back the reintegrated person.

The very development of Christian doctrine with regard to personhood shows how "reason" and "faith" worked hand in hand: reason illuminating faith (in this case faith in the hypostatic union), and producing on the side a definition of the *human* person, based much more on theological speculation than on the data of experience. And the resurrection of bodies is again an example of how faith in turn could also be alleged to illuminate reason and explain a basic unity in the human person.

The Christian teaching of the person is generally considered as the foundation of the West's regard for human dignity and human freedom, even if oscillations have occurred in philosophical preferences between more or less emphasis on the "substantial core", as with the Thomists, or on "existential freedom", as with Duns Scotus in the past, and with Kierkegaard, Tillich and others more recently. A case might be made here for the shift into another paradigm of the self, which takes much more account of existential interpretations, and represents also a return to the Biblical sources. But neither the Whiteheadian emphasis on process and attacks on substance, nor the Kierkegaardian, Heideggerian and Tillichian preference for human activity and existential becoming, has significantly altered the basic Western assumptions concerning selfhood. On the other hand, the absence in the East of a corresponding doctrine of personhood might continue to be taken as the reason for the relative lack of regard and concern for human dignity and freedom.

*The Ascetical-Mystical Teachings: the "Self" as Nothingness*

The scholastic effort has been to define personhood philosophically, albeit for purposes of clarifying dogmatic positions on the Trinity and the Incarnation. There is also another effort, in spiritual and ascetic writings designed for the practical guidance of the Christian soul, to emphasize the dimension of human misery described in the Scriptures that was never denied by Conciliar theology. This is visible in such writings as Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, in which the soul is exhorted to consider itself as nothing—and worse than nothing, because of sinfulness—in the presence of the overwhelming greatness and

holiness of the Creator God. It is an effort especially encouraged by those spiritual writers, who prefer to emphasize human contingency and dependence on God rather than the dignity of personhood, in order to nurture humility and total surrender to God. One way of doing this is to meditate on death, so that the remembrance of our last state will help to instill in the individual its own sense of nothingness and helplessness; Christian ascetics are known to have encouraged meditation on death with the help of the human skull. "Each morning remember that you may not live until the evening, and in the evening, do not presume to promise yourself another day." And, "Keep yourself a stranger and pilgrim upon earth, . . . your heart free and lifted up to God, for here you have no abiding city" (*Imitation of Christ*, ch. 23).

Paradoxically, spiritual and mystical writers also claim that if humility is nurtured and the self is surrendered to God, then human beings as Divine images, may become transformed by grace and become more and more like God. In other words, we are encouraged to allow the Divine image, present in us like a seed, to grow into fruition. On this subject, Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-c.395 A.D.) of Greece wrote:

For he who has truly come to be in the image of God and who has in no way turned aside from the divine character bears in himself its distinguishing marks and shows in all things his conformity of the archetype; he beautifies his own soul with what is incorruptible, unchangeable, and shares in no evil at all."<sup>6</sup>

Here, the separation between creature and Creator is almost transcended, although the personal distinction between the two is allegedly maintained.

The ascetical-mystical paradigm of the self takes into account both the Biblical images and the philosophical-theological discussions, even if the Bible gives no explicit doctrine of asceticism.<sup>7</sup> The core message of the paradigm, to deny oneself and convert to God in Jesus, may be regarded as representing a "constant" behind the historical shifts in thinking. However, varying emphases could be made on either human "nothingness" as creature and sinner—for the purpose of stirring up dispositions of dependence on God and repentance of one's own sinfulness—or on human glory as divine image, in order to strengthen spiritual morale by holding up the possibilities of self-transformation. Presumably, for the believer, the tension will always remain, until the spiritual combat of this life is over. However, emphasis on either one or the other end of the spiritual spectrum still makes a significant difference to one's own self-image and social behaviour as well as to how one might regard Buddhism.

I have called this the "ascetical-mystical" paradigm, while explaining that it differs from the other paradigms so far mentioned because of its historical constancy. I am associating the writers of ascetic and spiritual theology with the practical as well as speculative mystics, whose number is always fewer, on the

presupposition that the former serve to prepare for mystical development. Historically speaking, this has not *always* been the case, and many ascetical writers have expressed reservations and even distrust of mysticism. If a distinction is to be made, one might say that the ascetical writers tend more to *humble* the soul, while the mystical writers tend more to *exalt* it. But they are usually regarded in association as representing more the dimension of transcendence in religion, over and against that of immanence. Sometimes, they may even be considered as antagonistic to the representatives of humanism, including Christian humanism, since they appear to demand more of human nature where the humanists seem to be satisfied with following human nature.

Interestingly, where Buddhism is concerned, and in spite of its primarily non-theistic character, we find plenty of demands made on human nature in terms of self-renunciation, even to the point of renouncing the “reality” of the self. Comparison with the spiritual-ascetic side of Christianity is therefore illuminating, especially since the *language* of asceticism and spirituality is not a precise one, but intended for a certain psychological conditioning. To be always told that one is nothing may be injurious to one’s basic self-esteem and self-reliance, and we can understand why Nietzsche regarded God and religion as the enemy of the life-instinct. Nietzsche wanted a superman, one equal to the gods, to use the language of the mystics. Curiously, Nietzsche found Buddhism attractive. Did it have anything to do with his final intellectual conclusion of nihilism, “the conviction of the nullity of the internal contradiction, futility and worthlessness of reality”?<sup>8</sup>

### III. THE BUDDHIST PARADIGMS

Turning from Christian to Buddhist paradigms, we shall discover that there are even more doctrinal ambiguities, disputed points on which there is, as yet, no firm scholarly consensus. What is clear is the absence of any positive teaching about an “immortal soul”, or about substantial personhood, both in Theravada and in Mahayana. This is all the more significant on account of the Vedantic meaning associated with the Sanskrit word *ātman*, (Pali: *atta*)<sup>9</sup> which literally means breath/life, and is comparable to the Greek *psyche*. In the Upanishads, the *ātman* is described as conscious, intelligent, and immortal. Indeed, the Vedantist sees the *ātman* as fundamentally one with the *Brahman*; in Western language, the individual soul is regarded as one with the world soul.

The Buddhist scriptures continue to make mention of words like the self (*atta*, *atman*) or the person (Pali: *puggala*, Sanskrit: *pudgala*), but give the words no philosophical meaning. The human individual is said to be made up of *nāma* (literally, name), referring to the mental and emotional aspects, and *rūpa* (literally, form), referring to the physical aspects and the combined word, *nāmarūpa*, represents the entire psycho-physical organism.

Is there the equivalent of a soul in Buddhism, and is this soul immortal? In fact, is there anything at all permanent about the *nāmarūpa* that one may call the self which goes beyond the aggregation of physical, sensory and supersen-



sory experiences? Are there differences between Theravada and Mahayana on these points? Such questions require answers before comparisons could be made with Christian ideas.

*The Theravada Insistence: the "Self" as Absent?*

In what regards the self, the Buddhist doctrine is formulated in negative terms. We hear of the doctrine of No-self (Pali: *Anatta*, or Sanskrit: *Anātman*). This doctrine is allegedly the fruit of the effort to analyze individual existence—not just *human*, but that of all *dharmas* or elements of existence—in the light of their “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*). According to this theory, all things and events (*dharmas*) are said to be “empty” or “void” of reality, and the recognition of their voidness can bring real understanding. Human existence is itself analyzed according to the components of its experience, classified as five aggregates, twelve sense fields, or eighteen sense elements. The doctrine which became established is called “the Five Skandhas”, that is, the Five “Heaps” or Aggregates of Body (*rūpa*), and of Feelings, Perceptions, Sensations, and Consciousness which make up *nāma*.

For Buddhism, the Five Skandhas are not merely philosophical analysis, but the corollary of religious insight into the meaning of life. For life means suffering (*dukkha*), and suffering comes from attachment to the Five Skandhas. Indeed, according to the Nikaya, the Five Skandhas themselves *are dukkha*.<sup>10</sup> A denial of a Self as giving substantial unity and permanent identity to the Five Skandhas is therefore regarded as the “right view” (*sammadhitthi*).

(I) THE CASE FOR NO-SELF:

The Five Skandhas refer to the established doctrine in Buddhism which has been subject to minute analysis especially by the scholastics of the Theravada school. Together, they refer to the stream of sensory and supersensory experiences which make up the life of consciousness. The word *Skandhas* (Pali: *Khandhas*; literally, “heaps”) refers to the physical body or form (*rūpa*), that is, all that makes up sense data, sensations or feelings (*vedanā*), sense perceptions (*saññā*), impulses (*samkhāra*, including both conscious and repressed tendencies and volitions and consciousness or the differentiating mind (*viññāna*). When together, the Five Heaps or Aggregates take a certain shape or form; this is given a name, hence, *nāmarūpa*. But when the elements disintegrate, there is no more person or ego, since the *nāmarūpa* will just disappear.<sup>11</sup>

A well-known illustration of the absence of a permanent self comes in the metaphor of the chariot. In the *Milindapañha* (*The Questions of King Milinda*), [Bk 2], the monk Nagasena led King Milinda to deny the existence of the self in each and all of the Five Skandhas, and proposed the metaphor of the chariot as explanation for the extrinsic unity in the individual. For just as a chariot is made up of different parts, such as the pole, the axle, the wheel, and so on, so too the *nāmarūpa* is merely a total of parts:



Even as the word 'chariot' means/That members join to frame a whole./  
So when the groups (*skandhas*) appear to view,/We use the phrase a living  
being.<sup>12</sup>

From this analysis, one may infer the denial of the pre-Buddhist belief in the *atta* or *ātman*, which is sometimes translated as "soul" or "self", suggesting a permanent substrate in the *nāmarūpa*. But the question which then emerges regards the continuity of individual identity. Has the Buddha, or Buddhism, been led into an untenable situation by preaching the doctrine of *anatta* on the one hand while accepting the prevailing belief in rebirth on the other? C. A. F. Rhys Davids seems to think so.

We have thus arrived at a deadlock: to save what it holds to be a psychological truth Buddhism rejects the notion of a soul; to save what it holds to be the necessity of justice, it retains the belief in transmigration.<sup>13</sup>

Theravāda orthodoxy appears to have insisted on denying any permanence to the self. An early attempt on the part of certain Buddhists themselves to give more "reality" to the self, by using the term *puggala* to signify some dimension of "personhood", only ended in becoming labelled a heresy.<sup>14</sup> Contemporary Buddhist scholars have continued to recognize this. As Walpola Rahula, himself a monk from Sri Lanka, puts it:

Buddhism stands unique in the history of human thought in denying the existence of such a Soul, Self, or *Ātman*. According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality. . . .<sup>15</sup>

The Thai monk, Khantipalo Bhikkhu, supports this assertion:

There is no reincarnation in Buddhism because there is no unchanging spiritual entity; no soul can ultimately be found which can re-incarnate. Buddhism does not make a dichotomy of the perishable body on the one hand and an eternal soul on the other. The Buddha's insight discovered that both mind and body are inter-related and continually changing streams of events in which no unchanging soul or self as an ultimate principle, can be found.<sup>16</sup>

## (II) THE CASE FOR A SELF:

But is this necessarily the case? Is the only "self" merely this composite of aggregates, and is such a composite adequate to assure what we may call, for lack of other words, personhood, individuality, and the continuity between life cycles in *samsara*?

Interestingly, Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids has insisted, against her husband's

apparent views, that the doctrine of *anatta* only came with the “monkish tradition”, and is not in accord with the Buddha’s original message as given in his “folk gospel.” According to her highly controversial thesis, the original goal of Buddhism was a positive goal: the affirmation of the self—she would prefer the English spirit as translation for *atta*—as a kind of immanent deity in the human being, making him or her a “real self.” According to her, such a religious quest was no negative hankering after Nirvana.

[What was taught in Early Buddhism] was not *nibbana*, a vanishing Less in a vanishing *atta*. It was a persisting living on in that more which saw the quest as a man becoming more in the worlds. . . .<sup>17</sup>

T. R. V. Murti raises a very pertinent question in this regard. Insisting on the truth of the No-Self doctrine as essential to Buddhism, he says: “If the *ātman* had been a cardinal doctrine with Buddhism why was it so securely hidden under a bushel that even the immediate followers of the master had no inkling of it?” And:

Buddha came to deny the soul, a permanent substantial entity, precisely because he took his stand on the reality of moral consciousness and the efficacy of Karma. An unchanging eternal soul, as impervious to change, would render spiritual life [to] lose all meaning; we would, in that case, be neither the better nor the worse for our efforts. . . . Denial of Satkaya (atman or Substance) is the very pivot of the Buddhist metaphysics and doctrine of salvation.<sup>18</sup>

He goes on to quote Bhattacharya on the same subject:

Thus and in various other ways, too many to be mentioned, the existence of a permanent Self or *ātman*, as accepted in other systems, was utterly denied by the Buddha, thereby pulling down the very foundation of desire where it can rest.<sup>19</sup>

Walpola Rahula also criticizes as vain attempts the efforts “to smuggle the idea of the self into the teaching of the Buddha, quite contrary to the spirit of Buddhism.”

It is better to say frankly that one believes in an *Ātman* or Self. Or one may even say that the Buddha was totally wrong in denying the existence of an *Ātman*. But certainly it will not do for any one to try to introduce into Buddhism an idea which the Buddha never accepted, as far as we can see from the extant original texts.<sup>20</sup>

In spite of the teachings of contemporary Theravāda scholars and monks, the question of Self or No-Self continues to trouble enquirers and scholars. Perez-

Rémon's recent book is another attempt, following in C. A. F. Rhys Davids' footsteps, to prove the reality of a self in early Buddhism. After sifting through conflicting evidence in the scriptures—and he amasses all the evidence possible—he concludes that nowhere is this reality absolutely and explicitly denied, that the *anatta* doctrine given in the Nikāyas does not actually deny the self as such but only selfhood as “empty of any ultimate value and to be repudiated.” Besides, the denial is only of the “wrong” self, identified with the skandhas; the true self is never brought into question. And, according to him, this “true self” is transcendent and ineffable.<sup>21</sup>

For our purposes, whether Buddhism originally believed in a permanent self or not is mainly a historical question. What we may not neglect is the fact of Theravāda belief not only through a long period of history but also as it stands today.

Given this fact then, how does Buddhism explain rebirth and even Nirvāṇa? And how do believing Buddhists function in society, given their belief in *anatta* or *anātman*?

The answer to the first question lies in the doctrine of dependent origination, which explains the origin as well as cessation of pain. It is assumed that when ignorance exists, the aggregates come to be . . . , and so on down to birth, old age, death, grief. In the process of rebirth, it is not the *atman* that transmigrates, but the *karma*, the good and evil deeds themselves. And what happens when liberation from samsāra takes place? What actually *is* Nirvāṇa, and is there a “who” to enjoy it? These are again the difficult questions, to which various answers have been given, without arriving at any real consensus.<sup>22</sup>

As to the second question, Steven Collins, author of *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism* (1982), affirms that the conceptual universe of the Theravada tradition is built for the most part on the *anatta* doctrine and does not seek to prove that the original message was different. But he acknowledges Buddhist psychological analyses of the self presented in systematic categories or traditional lists are “unlikely religious vehicles for the worldly and other-worldly aspirations of the ordinary man.” However, such ideas and related practices derived from it, coexist in a society with a different but complementary religious system.

In this complementary range of religious thought and practice, interaction with gods and spirits, and the use of alternative explanations of good or bad fortune . . . are of more immediate concern than the conceptual subtleties of Buddhist intellectualism.<sup>23</sup>

### *The Mahāyāna Interpretation: the “Self” as Absolute?*

The doctrine of the No-Self is usually taken as a Theravada teaching. How about Mahayana Buddhism? Has it rejected or transformed this doctrine? Has there been any kind of paradigm shift?

On this subject, Walpola Rahula quotes Helmut von Glasenapp:

The negation of an imperishable *Ātman* is the common characteristic of all dogmatic systems of the Lesser as well as the Great Vehicle, and, there is, therefore, no reason to assume that the Buddhist tradition which is in complete agreement on this point has deviated from the Buddha's original teaching.<sup>24</sup>

But is this the last answer? Let us examine here also the arguments for each side.

(i) The case for a No-Self:

In the texts of the New Wisdom school, we continue to read about the illusoriness of the self, which is compared to a reflection on a mirror. "As without the mirror one cannot see the reflected image of one's own face, so also the I without the medium of the skandhas."<sup>25</sup>

In *The Awakening of Faith*, attributed to Aśvaghosha, we also read:

Those who practice the various types of dhyāna (meditation) . . . which are popular in the world will develop much attachment to their flavors and will be bound to the triple world because of their perverse view that atman is real. They are therefore the same as heretics. . . .<sup>26</sup>

As to Nāgārjuna's position, we have these words: "The self is not different from the stages [skandhas], nor identical with them; (there) is no self without the states, nor is it to be considered non-existent." And also: "The self does exist, the Buddhas have declared; they have taught the 'no-self' doctrine too; they have (finally) taught that there is neither self nor non-self."<sup>27</sup>

Murti develops these paradoxical statements by saying:

Buddha's teaching is adjusted to the need of the taught as the medicine of the skilled physician is to the malady of the patient. He does not blindly . . . prescribe the remedy to all and sundry. He corrects those with a nihilistic tendency by affirming the self, as there is continuity of karma and its result; to those addicted to the dogmatic belief in a changeless substantial atman and who cling to it, he teaches the 'no-self doctrine' as an antidote; his ultimate teaching is that there is neither self nor not-self as these are subjective devices.<sup>28</sup>

After such an explanation, one wonders whether it is still necessary to pursue the question.

(ii) The Case for a Self:

However, while the five skandhas continue to be accepted, and the reality of the self continues to be denied, a vocabulary of the absolute has also crept into

the language of the Mahayana sutras. In *The Awakening of Faith*, a key book for Mahayana Buddhism, especially for the Yogācāra, Hua-yen, Ch'an and Pure Land schools, it is especially the term *Tatbatā* (Suchness), as given in the chapter entitled "Revelation of True Meaning":

The revelation of the true meaning [of the principle of Mahayana can be achieved] by [unfolding the doctrine] that the principle of One Mind has two aspects. One is the aspect of Mind in terms of the Absolute (*tatbatā*; Suchness), and the other is the aspect of Mind in terms of phenomena (*saṃsāra*; birth and death).<sup>29</sup>

In the *Laṅkāvatāra sūtra*, which also is important for Ch'an Buddhism, there is the term of "mind only" (*cittamatra*): "Up to the realm of Brahma, all is mind-only, I say. Outside mind-only, Brahma and so forth cannot be apprehended."<sup>30</sup>

So long as these terms are used with reference to the universe as a whole, with no subject/object differentiation, it is difficult to see the particular reference to the self. But the Chinese Ch'an (Japanese: Zen) school, with its practical bent, focuses on the *quest* itself for direct intuition into nature, especially human nature, regarded as the abode of the absolute and the seat of enlightenment (Sanskrit: *bodhi*, Chinese: *wu*, Japanese: *satori*).

In Ch'an Buddhism, there is the expression "your original face"—the face before your birth—basically a riddle or *kung-an* (Japanese: *kōan*). As an expression, it represents a more "personalized" form of pointing toward the ineffable, a form which evokes an original "self." It is said that the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng confronted his enemy Hui-ming with this question: "Not thinking of good, not thinking of evil, just at this moment, what is your original face before your mother and father were born?"<sup>31</sup>

The context in which the "original face" is mentioned is also significant, as there is reference here to "someone" who is thinking of neither good nor evil. There is, of course, also the reference to a possibly "transient" discovery of the "original face", made "just at this moment". But the metaphor of the original face, the face one had before one's birth, or even the birth of one's parents, is tantalizing, and intended for "waking up" the consciousness to the bridging of any gap between the self and the other, the relative and the absolute.

Daisetz Suzuki, the great Japanese interpreter of Mahayana Buddhism in the West, has asserted that just as early Buddhism denied the existence of an "ego-substance" called the *atman* and applied a rigorously analytical method to individual existence which came up with the theory of the "non-ego", later Buddhism reasserted the existence of the *atman*, by its teaching of a "metaphysical Self which casts its reflection on ordinary consciousness."<sup>32</sup>

Masumi Shimizu (1981) has sought to present the case for the Self in Mahāyāna Buddhism, as this is understood by Japanese Buddhists—especially Suzuki and the philosophers of the so-called Kyoto school. Following a paradoxical logic, he asserts that the No-self doctrine should be understood with the

help of the Emptiness doctrine of Nagarjuna, which emphasizes the dialectical identity of Samsara and Nirvana. According to Shimizu, the Mahayana Buddhist understands the insistence given in the *Anatta* doctrine regarding the illusoriness of our presumed substantial Selfhood, that to which we cling, and because of which we suffer anxiety, only as a means to help us live in such a way as to recover our True and Original Selfhood, that which is also called Thusness (Tathata).

Actually, the term True Self (Chinese: *chen-wo*) does not appear to have been technically a Buddhist term. It is better considered as a metaphor, either for the acceptance of the truth that the self is absent, as in Theravada, or for “moral transformation,” that of realizing a morally authentic existence which is more in accord with the Buddhist dharma, or for such more specifically Mahayana notions as “thusness,” “mind,” or “your original face.” In one or another way, these have been used to refer to the ultimate reality which lies at the heart of the teachings of all the major schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The problem with such a “thusness” when referring to ultimate reality is that it is beyond differentiation, including the subject/object duality. Should it be called the True Self, then it is also the “self” transcended, no longer separate from other “selves”. It is a metaphysical Absolute, very close to the Western idea of God, except for not having a personal character. But can it also designate the individual, considered as that which gives unity to particular *skandhas*, that which is distinct from other individuals?

### *Spiritual/Mystical Experience: Discovery of True Self?*

To interpret the Tathatā as Absolute is to interpret it metaphysically. But there can also be a psychological interpretation. For example, the Buddhist might seek the “True Self” in meditation or contemplation, paradoxically, of course, by contemplating the impermanence of all things, and the insubstantiality of one’s own self. He or she may contemplate the body as a composite of elements subject to decay, of feelings as merely automatic responses to sense impressions, of the mind as vulnerable to agitation from within and distraction from without, and so on, and thus come to triumph over the former illusion of a “self,” if only in a few fleeting moments of insight. These are the transient moments during which the individual awakens to the truth of things—and this includes the meaning of his or her fundamental character as “no-self.” These are the moments when he or she may be said to have also achieved the state of “True Selfhood”—the word “selfhood” referring here more to a transient understanding of truth than to any permanent substrate. This is a state which may be lost, if the necessary precautions of moral and spiritual cultivation are not followed; conversely, it is also a state which may grow with the individual’s deepening insights.

To understand such a view, let us remember that Buddhists see life not only from the perspective of suffering, but also from the perspective of death. Just as Christian spiritual teaching has encouraged meditations on death, so too did

the Buddhist. In Edward Conze's translations, *Buddhist Meditation*, we have vivid suggestions for arousing a sense of recollection of death, and of distaste for the body and its functions. The climax is the meditation on corpses on the charnel field.<sup>33</sup> The Japanese *haiku* poet Basho allegedly gave expression to insights into the fleeting quality of life with the help of such contemplation. And the distinguished philosopher of the Kyoto school, Keiji Nishitani refers to T. S. Eliot's description in "The Wasteland", of the procession of the dead in Dante's *Inferno*, as taking place in London.<sup>34</sup>

Keiji Nishitani also uses the metaphor of a photograph with double exposure. For him, true reality is twofold:

The aspect of life and the aspect of death are both equally real. Reality is that which appears as life and as death. It is life, it is death, and at the same time, in itself, is not life, and not death. It is to be called the non-duality of life and death.<sup>35</sup>

In this sense, we may represent Buddhism as viewing reality even more from the viewpoint of death than does Christianity, although the latter does it also.

True Selfhood need not only be realized in mystical experience. It could be achieved in ordinary life. For

Spiritual life is lived in practical life; within the structures of existence, but without the bondage of these structures. The awareness of 'emptiness' is not a blank loss of consciousness, an inanimate empty space; rather it is the cognition of daily life without the attachment to it. . . . Wisdom is not to be equated with mystical ecstasy; it is, rather, the joy of freedom in everyday existence.<sup>36</sup>

If however, wisdom is not limited to mystical experience, then there is no reason to exclude wisdom from mysticism. Certain schools of Buddhism, especially Mahayana, are more attuned to the mystical than others. Ch'an Buddhism, in particular, is oriented to the enlightenment experience.

Understood in this way, the True Self is common to both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, being identified by some in the latter, as the metaphysical Absolute, especially as perceived in mystical experience. Here we see the convergence of a "smaller" self, or the "no-self" that is experienced in spiritual insight, and a "larger" self, or "absolute nothingness" that is identified with the universal Buddha-nature, and especially realized in mystical enlightenment.

#### IV. CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

Speaking historically, the earliest Christian paradigm of the self is much more of a common sense one, without much separation between soul and body.



Although we find ascetical language in the New Testament regarding self-denial, we have no ontological rejection of the self; neither do we have the explicit doctrine of asceticism, which came later.

It is not clear what the Buddha's original message concerning the problem of the self might have been. Hence, we have discussed, as the first Buddhist paradigm, the question of self *versus* no-self. In comparison, orthodox Christian scholasticism strengthened the individual's *substantiality* while tending to a dualism of soul and body, and orthodox Buddhist scholasticism insisted on the individual's *lack* of substantiality, thus strengthening a sense that there is no self. This gives rise to the Christian's discomfort with Buddhism, in what concerns freedom and moral responsibility. And yet, Buddhism has never denied what common sense also affirms about freedom and moral responsibility. The doctrine of *karma*, which asserts that our good and evil actions give rise to *samsara* and its inequalities, obviously implies such, even if it seems to project an inexorably mechanistic rendering of cosmic justice.

The mention of *samsara* calls to mind the very divergent conceptions of life itself, and the place of the human in the whole of life; Buddhism has given a special place to human life, in its vision of *samsara*. It has been asserted that only human beings—not animals, not gods—can labour to change their karma and merit nirvana. All the same, where philosophical developments are concerned, the effort of theorizing about individuality, together with presuppositions regarding human uniqueness on the one side, and the equality of all sentient beings on the other, led the two religions further and further apart. Buddhist teachings tend to represent the self dialectically, either as the existential self of momentary experience without any substrate, or as the metaphysical self which is one with the universe, as this has been understood by some Mahayana Buddhists. How can the Christian relate to each of these paradigms?

A particular current in Western, including Christian, thought, which tends to define the self in terms of becoming rather than being, demonstrates a certain kinship with the existential self in Buddhism. A prime example is A. N. Whitehead and his interpreter Charles Hartshorne. They claim that a person consists of a series of momentary selves, each intimately related to the preceding self. These "selves" refer, of course, to concrete human experiences, which are said to have a particularly personal character. But what about personal immortality? Sensitive to this problem, Hartshorne has sought to insight on the belief in God: "We can 'live forever' if, and only if, we are cherished by an imperishable and wholly clear and distinct retrospective awareness which we may call the memory of God."<sup>37</sup>

If one is to accept the concept of the True Self, a question may yet arise regarding interpersonal relationships; namely, how does this True Self relate to others? Why would it even be interested in doing so—in engaging in dialogue, for example? Would there not be the danger of impersonalizing human relationships, if one does not recognize the other as other, but dwells instead on the oneness of all things? J. A. Cuttat mentions this problem in his description

of a visit made to Hindu ascetics on the Himalayan foothills, in whom he discerned an “abysmal” profundity, which spiritualized the face of the master, as well as a complete withdrawal into the self, both on the part of the master and of his disciples. To his question, whether there are close relationships between yogis, came the answer: at this level, such relationships are excluded, “le Soi de tous les délivrés est un seul et même Soi, sans second.”<sup>38</sup>

To this, of course the Buddhist might respond with another question: does not the Christian accent on personhood as “individual substance” bring the opposite danger of demarcating too much the separation between the self and the others? How can the “incommunicable” self of scholastic theology communicate itself, and give itself, to others, as well as to God?

The Buddhist can also offer as an answer, as did Shimizu, that only the True Self is free from selfishness, sensitive to that which unites him or her to others. This True Self is, in this sense, much more capable of true I-thou relationships than the Buddhist or Christian conventional self which is bound by illusory consciousness. This, however, will bring the Buddhist idea of the True Self very close to the Christian idea of the True Self, of a person who has the same mind as Christ Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6–8).<sup>39</sup>

Keiji Nishitani comments on the Christian teaching of *Kenosis* and its similarity to the Buddhist teaching of *sunyata*, and of “non-differentiating love beyond enemy and friend”, which bears resemblance to Christ’s command of love for the enemy.

This compassion is a compassion grounded in “Emptiness.” It is the so-called Great Compassion. “Emptiness” takes on here the character and meaning of *anatman* . . . , of non-ego or selflessness. . . . Buddha, being originally “empty” and “formless”, takes the form of the Thus-Come. . . . This means essentially an *ekkenosis*. . . . The concepts of emptiness, compassion and selflessness are seen to be inseparably connected.<sup>40</sup>

Returning once more to our paradigms, I have proposed in each case a third paradigm, less for historical contrast than for existential rapprochement. Both Christianity and Buddhism have used a language of the no-self to make ascetical and spiritual exhortations. Contemporary Christian scholars have approached Buddhism either to learn from its spiritual techniques or to find inspiration from its very spirit. Studies exist comparing Christianity and Theravada Buddhism.<sup>41</sup> Mahayana, Ch’an (Zen) and Pure Land have been the popular among Christian scholars interested in dialogue.<sup>42</sup> Their choice of focus on existential and practical rapprochement confirms for us where the common ground is to be found.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

We come here again to the question of what precisely is denied and what is affirmed by each of the two religions about the human person. I find this question difficult to answer precisely but venture to say that the weight of tradition has helped to shape two rather different positions about the self, strengthening its identity and reality in the one case, and de-emphasizing it in the other. I do not, for example, perceive quite as much rapprochement as does de Silva. I believe that it is just as important to take account of the Theravadin effort to deny the self, as to discover an "original" affirmation of the self, or an eventual dialectical transcendence of the idea of the self. This is all the more so in a comparative study of paradigms which should not lose sight of the shifts of paradigms. Besides, the question posed by Mrs. Rhys Davids is an important one; by denying the self, whether ontologically or psychologically or religiously, Buddhist philosophy could be encouraging anti-humanism, even if the great Buddhist spiritual masters are able to find and live their "True Self".

There are some clearly basic theological differences underlying Christian and Buddhist teachings. In one tradition, there is the fundamental difference between the creature and the Creator; in the other, the absence of any creation theory, as well as the affirmation of a rebirth theory which embraces all sentient beings. But these differences have not obscured the quest shared by the two religions: the spiritual quest for self-transcendence, which begins with a recognition of one's own "nothingness," in order to grow in Godlikeness or True Selfhood. This impulse for self-transcending, albeit moved by differing intellectual persuasions, is common to both Christianity and Buddhism. Both traditions use similar topics of meditation to induce similar mental and spiritual states of awareness, such as human nothingness.

Fundamentally, Buddhism and Christianity resemble each other most as practical doctrines, aimed at helping the human person. Christianity has tended in its history to do so after first offering the answers to the big questions about the nature of personhood and the existence of God. Buddhism has offered certain analyses of the human condition, and of ways of coping with it, but without as much emphasis on doctrinal clarity or unambiguity. Until today, we have no firm scholarly consensus on such questions as the Buddhist doctrine of the self—or is it the non-self?—and of its survival after nirvana—is it extinction or bliss? Indeed, we do not yet have a clear and firm scholarly consensus as well on the meaning of the Buddhist Nirvana.

The Japanese scholar Hajime Nakamura has this to say:

In Buddhism the entire stress lies on the mode of living, on the saintliness of life, on the removal of attachment to the world. A merely theoretical proposition, such as "There is no ego", would be regarded as utterly sterile and useless. All Buddhists follow the Buddha in wanting to teach how to lead a selfless life. Rational analysis is no more than a tool which is justified

in its products. That is why there are so many teachings even on one subject. . . .<sup>43</sup>

Turning the No-Self teaching into a question, Suzuki claims that “the Buddhist teachings of whatever school, . . . Theravada or Mahayana, Tibetan or Japanese, Indian or Chinese . . . all center around the question, what is ‘I’? What is the true self . . .?” He explains that Zen Buddhism has developed the method of “question and answer” called the *mondo* to help answer this question. It is a way of extracting an answer from within the mind of the questioner himself, because the answer lies potentially in the question.<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps this is the way we should regard the Buddhist approach to all the big questions of life. Perhaps Buddhism seeks, not to give answers, but to ask us to look for the answers from within the depths of our own beings, not by reasoning but by going beyond reasoning, an intuitive meditation. In that sense, doctrine is to be regarded as skill-in-means, to awaken the seeker to a higher truth. Allegedly, the historical Buddha always emphasized the importance of healing one’s wounds rather than of finding out who has inflicted them. To the probing questions of his disciples, he has often responded with silence. He cuts the figure, not of a metaphysician, not even of a theologian, but of a compassionate teacher and saviour. He comes not to give answers, but to tell us where and how to find them.

On the other hand, Christianity has offered its believers answers to many big problems about life and the world: creation, trinity, incarnation, redemption, resurrection. In the past, it has even defined these answers in precise dogmatic formulas, as though it had resolved all the mysteries surrounding these problems. Only the mystics have cried out, with Meister Eckhart, that “God cannot be named,” and with John of the Cross, “Nada, nada.”

And in fact, how much does Christianity know for sure, that it could say so much: about there being a God, about that God being personal, being three-in-one, and about the human soul being a “spiritual substance?” Might it, perhaps, learn from Buddhism to be content with more doctrinal ambiguity, to show diffidence of language, to move beyond the efforts of theological definitions, and to regard doctrinal propositions as human parables, “skill-in-means,” that awaken us to a higher truth? And when this happens, we might perhaps have better answers to the questions regarding the future prospects for dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism.<sup>45</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Unpublished paper, with subheading: “A Proposal for Discussion”. As can be seen in the development of my own study, I am only making use of paradigm change in a very general way when applying it to the specific comparative inquiry of Buddhism and Christianity on the subject of the self on account of the ambiguity of interpretations surrounding Buddhist doctrines.

2. See Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean*, 12; 27, given in Max Müller and Alois Halder, “Person,” in

*Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. by Karl Rahner and others (New York, Herder and Herder, 1969), Vol. 4, p. 404.

3. This is taken from his discussion of the two natures and one person present in Jesus Christ as God Incarnate; see his *Opera Theologia* in *Opera Omnia, Patrologiae Cursus Completus* (Paris, 1847 ed.), Vol. 64, p. 1345.

4. *Summa Theologica* English trans. by the Fathers of the Dominican Province, Vol. 2 (New York, Benziger, 1947), Part 3, Q.16, art. 12, Reply to Obj. 2, p. 2122. This is also given in the context of a discussion of the Incarnation and the Hypostatic Union.

5. See also Anton Charles Pegis, *St. Thomas and the Problem of the Soul in the Thirteenth Century*, (Toronto, St. Michael's College, 1934), p. 121.

6. *Gregory of Nyssa: the Life of Moses* English trans. with introduction and notes by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York, Paulist Press, 1978), Introduction, p. 11.

7. See *The Bible on Asceticism*, by H. Wennink (St. Norbert Abbey Press, De Pere, Wisconsin, 1966), Introduction, p. 1.

8. For Nietzsche's nihilism, see Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?*, English translation by Edward Quinn (London, Collins, 1980), p. 388.

9. Pali terms will usually be used when discussing Theravada Buddhism, and Sanskrit terms when discussing Mahayana Buddhism, except when otherwise mentioned.

10. *Samyutta Nikāya 3* (London, Pali Text Society edition), III.

11. See especially the *Mahā-Nidāna-Sutta* (256.21) of the *Digha-Nikāya*, and other passages, given in *Buddhism in Translations*, trans. by Henry Clarke Warren (New York, Atheneum, 1963), pp. 135–50.

12. This translation comes from Henry Clarke Warren, op.cit., p. 133; see also *The Questions of King Milinda*, trans. from the Pali by T. W. Rhys Davids, Sacred Books of the East series, ed. by F. Max Muller (Delhi, Motilal Barnarsidass, 1890 ed., 1969 reprint), Vol. 35, pp. 44–46.

13. "On Nirvana, and on Buddhist Doctrines of the 'Groups', the Samsara, Karma and the 'Paths' ", *The Contemporary Review* 29 (1877), 249–70, quoted in Lynn A. de Silva, op.cit., p. 37.

14. See Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 128, and E. J. Thomas, op.cit., p. 100.

15. *What the Buddha Taught* (London, Gordon Frazer, 1959), p. 51.

16. *What is Buddhism?* (Bangkok, Social Science Association Press of Thailand, 1963), p. 35, Note 1.

17. *Wayfarer's Words* (London, Luzac & Co., 1941), p. 656–657. See also her book, *The Birth of Indian Psychology and its Development in Buddhism* (London, Luzac & Co., 1936).

18. *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1960), p. 17.

19. See *The Basic Conception of Buddhism*, p. 70, quoted in Murti, *Central Philosophy*, p. 18.

20. See *Central Philosophy*, p. 56.

21. *Central Philosophy*, p. 304.

22. See Guy Richard Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvana and Its Western Interpreters* (University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 297–304.

23. Op.cit., (Cambridge Univ. Press), p. 164.

24. See von Glasenapp, "Vedanta and Buddhism", *The Middle Way* (February, 1957), p. 154, quoted in Rahula, op.cit., p. 55.

25. *Prasannapada*, xviii, 344, given in Edward Conze et al., trans., *Buddhist Texts through the Ages* (New York, Harper & Row, 1954), p. 167.

26. English translation by Yoshito S. Hakeda (New York, Columbia Univ. Press, 1967), p. 99.

27. Quoted in Murti, *Central Philosophy*, pp. 206–207.

28. *Central Philosophy*, p. 207.

29. *Central Philosophy*, p. 31.

30. Conze, *Buddhist Texts . . .*, p. 209.

31. See Philip Yampolsky, trans., *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1967), p. 110.

32. "Zen and Psychology," *The Eastern Buddhist*, n.s., Vol. 8 (1975), pp. 1–3.

33. (London, Allen & Unwin, 1956), pp. 86–106.

34. Keiji Nishitani, "The Personal and the Impersonal in Religion," *The Eastern Buddhist* 3 (1970) pp. 6–7.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

36. Frederick Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (New York, Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 160.

37. Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 285.

38. *Expérience chrétienne et spiritualité orientale*, p. 112. It should be said here, however, that Christian asceticism and monasticism have also discouraged close interpersonal relationships as being injurious to spiritual progress.

39. On this teaching of *kenosis* and its closeness to the Buddhist doctrine of self-emptiness, see Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, English trans. by J. W. Heisig (New York, Paulist Press, 1976), Ch. 10.

40. *Op. cit.*, p. 15, n.3.

41. Besides Christian scholars like Etienne Lamotte, who devoted his life to the study of Indian Buddhism, we have persons who engage Christianity and Buddhism in dialogue in their works. These include: Winston L. King, *Buddhism and Christianity* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1962); Donald Swearer, *Buddhism in Transition* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1970); Roy C. Amore, *Two Masters, One Message* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1978).

42. To name but a few works: Henri de Lubac, *Aspects of Buddhism* (New York, Sheed & Ward, 1953); Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1961); Dom Aelred Graham, *Zen Catholicism* (New York, Haracourt Brace, 1963); William Johnston, *The Still Point* (New York, Fordham University Press, 1970); Heinrich Dumoulin, *Christianity Meets Buddhism* (Chicago, Open Court, 1974); Joseph J. Spae, *Buddhist-Christian Empathy* (The Chicago Institute of Religion and Culture, 1980).

43. "Unity and Diversity in Religion," in Kenneth Morgan, ed., *The Path of the Buddha* (New York, Ronald Press, 1956), p. 373.

44. "What is the 'I'?" *The Eastern Buddhist* 4 (1971), p. 13.

45. Here, I agree with Paul Knitter that Christian theological teachings in themselves are not sufficient as heuristic principles for the study of world religions, that these principles must be confronted with the facts of the religious world, through study, dialogue, and experiential knowledge, before one may come to any final critical judgment. *Toward a Protestant Theology of Religions* (Marburg, N. G. Elwert, 1974), p. 232.