

Common or Garden Dharma

Essays on Contemporary Buddhism, Vol. I

by

Michel Clasquin-Johnson

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Introduction

The emergence of e-books has created new opportunities for academic authors. Like many academics, there are a number of shorter works that I have published over the years for which I never signed away the electronic publishing rights - mostly because they didn't exist at the time!

Some of these started out as academic articles and have needed to be rewritten extensively to appeal to a broader audience. Others were always written in a more popular style, but were tucked away in newsletters that were not archived effectively, or appeared in now-defunct websites. A few were published in books that went out of print years ago.

I am making a few of these available as a free e-book on Smashwords. It does not

include articles that can easily be found online, even if they are stuck behind a paywall. If you would like to see a volume 2 in this series, drop me a note: my email addresses are listed at the back of the book.

These essays have served their purpose: they appeared where they needed to appear, they were read by the people whom I needed to read them. They brought me to where I am today. So why dredge them up and rework them for a new audience?

Academics are funny creatures: most of us are used to working for below-average salaries, and we can labor on for years with no realistic hope of tenure. The one thing academics can't stand is being ignored, having no-one read their work. So, is this a vanity project? Why, yes, of course it is. I am a Buddhist. I never said I was a good one. This is an attempt to get my thoughts onto the perpetual backlist of e-books, my pathetic little shot at immortality. Thank you for participating!

The essays that follow are not arranged from oldest to newest. They don't pretend to form any sort of coherent whole. Each essay stands (or falls, more likely) on its own. Each one expressed my opinion at the time: I may have changed my mind since then, but you will have to wait for my new publications to find out. And here and there I have sneaked in something that doesn't deal with Buddhism at all, but which I still think is worth sharing.

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Buddhism vs myth

The original version of this essay was published in Clasquin, M., Ferreira, J., Marais, D. & Sadowsky, R. (eds.) 1993. Myth and Interdisciplinary Research. Pretoria: Unisa. This book is now out of print and only about 100 copies were ever produced.

The western world of the late twentieth century is one in which many of the "eternal truths" that supported our ancestors have been undermined by science. They could unflinchingly believe in the creation of the universe in six days, but now only a fringe element in the intellectual establishment believes our universe to be less than several billions of years old.

No longer can we see ourselves as the lords of creation: I do not know who originally said it, but the witticism which informs us that "Galileo robbed humanity of its throne, then Darwin took its crown and Freud its mind" demonstrates the way in which we have cast ourselves adrift on the ocean of knowledge, without the myth to act as a

rope that anchored our ancestors to the shoreline of certainty.

It is true that some recent scholars have pleaded for the remythologization of society. Others have maintained that society has never really been demythologized, but has merely adopted myths that are not recognizable as such because of our very closeness to them.

A few hardy mavericks have gone so far as to suggest that science and myth are both arriving at a point where they must converge in a shared sense of mystery. Their efforts, however, can hardly be said to constitute the mainstream of intellectual effort in our society. The cruder sort of positivism may have been philosophically discredited, but it remains the quietly accepted methodology of large numbers of working scientists.

Nevertheless, the role of irrationality in our lives has not abated. "[Observe] any professor of philosophy at play in a bowling alley: watch him twist and turn after the ball has left his hand, to bring it over to the standing pins" (Campbell 1988a: 11).

In art, as in science, the mythic images that nourished humanity for millennia are now considered irrelevant: Stanley Hopper (1970: 119), for instance, recalls that when he was asked to write an introduction to a volume of poetry by college students, "I was much astonished, on reading the poems, to discover the virtual absence of traditional mythic appeals - almost nothing from the Greeks, and half a dozen or less from the Old Testament".

The modern work of art, since the time of the Impressionists, is not expected to refer to anything beyond itself. The great mythical symbols of the past have been debased into advertising images or incorporated in the terminology of transport and weapons systems, which shows both our longing for and our arrogance towards them.

But if the old myths no longer have power over our intellect, the need for the moral and social support which they always provided continues. Nearly every day new mythologies are formed by ambitious religious entrepreneurs. When one considers contemporary religious developments such as the Unification Church, with its complicated theological mixture of Christian and Taoist symbols, it becomes clear that there exists a real need for mythic structures to help individuals in their quest for meaning.

Alternatively, consider the phenomenon of science fiction literature. At first sight, this is a purely secular form of entertainment, dealing with spaceships and extraterrestrial monstrosities rather than with Gods and ancestral role-models. But, as David Halperin (1983: 257-56) has pointed out, a close examination of the narrative structure of a large number of science fiction stories reveals elements that are equivalent to those found in the ancient Gnostic religion. "May the Force be with you"!

We have, then, a situation in which the intellectual establishment is at odds with the mythopoeic needs of the population. I shall not immediately suggest a cure for this schizophrenic situation in our society. I shall rather ask whether there has ever been a similar situation, and how the divergence was handled there.

The question is somewhat rhetorical. The title of this essay shows that believe there to be at least one historical parallel to our own situation, namely the Buddhist world. The split between the beliefs of the intelligentsia and those of the population at

large is inherent in the very concept of an intellectual elite. It would therefore occur wherever society has achieved a level of sophistication that allows a small subculture of intellectual specialists to exist. This is certainly the case in those cultures that existed and still do exist within the Buddhist world.

In Buddhism, as in our own world, there is a considerable divergence between the worldview of the philosopher-monks and "theologians" on the one hand and popular forms of Buddhist belief and observance on the other. In the world of the philosopher-monks, we find a rigidly empirical observation of the human condition, with particular emphasis on the psychological level, highly abstract speculative extrapolations of these observances into the rarefied stratosphere of ontology and a series of meditative exercises that help to clear up our misunderstanding of the true nature of reality. This is the Buddhism that is usually taught in universities.

In the world of popular Buddhism, we find vast pantheons of divine and semi-divine beings, heaven-worlds, hell-worlds and forms of existence that have no exact equivalent in Western mythology. Here we also find the belief in the power of good deeds in order to obtain a favorable rebirth. To explain all of these fully is vastly beyond the scope of this essay; I shall be able to mention only a few examples. As far as we are concerned, the interesting aspect of Buddhism is the way in which it developed specific principles and strategies which ensured that the unity of Buddhism was maintained.

Theravada Buddhism

The oldest form of Buddhism that has come down to us is known by its adherents as the Theravada, or "Teachings of the Elders": to its opponents, it is more commonly known as the Hinayana, or "Small Vehicle". Of all the forms of Buddhism that exist today it is probably the closest to the original teachings of Gautama Buddha. That does not mean that it is exactly the same, just that it is the closest.

Theravada Buddhism is centered on a single foundation myth: the life of Siddhatta Gotama, who renounced his status as the crown prince of a small Indian state in what is now called Nepal, meditated in seclusion for a number of years, and finally broke through to an utterly different mode of perceiving life. From this moment onwards he was known as the Buddha, "the one who is awake".

For some forty years he taught others the method of attaining this same vision. Unlike common mortals, he was never to be reincarnated again. At first sight, this myth is very different from the kind of myths we are used to in the western world, but Campbell (1988a: 23-9) has shown how this myth and that of the first few chapters of Genesis show a formal correspondence in terms of the symbols involved.

The scriptures of this school, collectively called the Pali Canon, abound with instances of the old Hindu gods coming down to Earth and conversing with the Buddha and his disciples. A slightly modified version of the Hindu cosmic geography, with its its gigantic central mountain, multiple heavens and hells and alternative dimensions of existence was adopted and used to explain the principle of reincarnation. In the *Agañña*

Sutta, we even find a myth of the creation (and continual re-creation) of the world.

Nevertheless, Theravada Buddhism transcends these mythical structures. To be reborn as a god in one of the heaven-worlds might well be possible for one who had performed innumerable good deeds, and indeed the traditional account has the Buddha-to-be living in the *Tusita* heaven prior to his last birth, but the ultimate goal is to be free from this cycle of birth and death altogether. One who has awakened to the true nature of reality sees it as unstable, impersonal and forever unsatisfactory: he no longer has any desire for physical existence and is reborn no more.

That is the conventional explanation, anyway. Recently, Theravadin philosophers like Bhikkhu Buddhadasa have removed Buddhist philosophy even further from its Brahmanic origins by declaring that the "birth" referred to is not a physical birth, but the coming into being of consciousness from one moment to another, that is, the arising of the concept of self (Buddhadasa 1967: 147f.) Thus it is quite possible to be a good Theravadin Buddhist, yet not believe in the existence of Brahma, Sakka and other traditional divinities, or even in physical reincarnation.

But this is a minority opinion; most Theravadin Buddhists, indeed the majority of Buddhists of any kind, do believe in physical rebirth. Campbell has suggested that the rebirth theory, apart from its philosophical implications, is itself a powerful mythical motif, suggesting as it does that

There are dimensions of your being and a potential for realization and consciousness that are not included in your concept of yourself. Your life is much deeper and broader than you can conceive it to be here ... you can live in terms of that depth. (Campbell 1988b: 58).

The seeds for Theravada philosophical skepticism were sown quite early: Kalupahana (1984: 65f.) shows that the Buddha himself regarded the belief in supernatural beings as being only an ethically regulative concept, not an objectively true description of reality.

One could almost equate it with the firm belief of young children in western society in Father Christmas (Santa Claus, for my North American readers). The belief itself does no harm, and can be used by parents to regulate the children's behavior into desired patterns. But eventually children need to be told that Father Christmas does not exist, and eventually the Buddhist philosopher must explain to his student that there is not really another world in which he or she will be reincarnated.

The various other worlds of Brahmanic cosmology were equated with specific mental states. Four desirable emotional states for instance, are known as the "Abodes of the god Brahma". Similarly, the concepts of heaven and hell as human destinations after death were reinterpreted and placed in an ethical and psychological context: "According to the Buddha's view, hell is another name for unpleasant feelings ... " (Kalupahana 1984: 66). Krüger, in one of his in-depth studies of the *Tevijja Sutta*, has shown how the Buddha used the *reductio ad absurdum* method to reduce the importance of the god Brahma as a symbol of transcendence:

There is a chute in the *Tevijja Sutta* which is intended to fall open, somewhat

hidden underneath the very ideal of companionship with Brahma. Ultimately, the wind unleashed by Gotama will sweep away this longing. Even the Tevijja Sutta itself, with its relative endorsement of the religious longing for Brahma, is only a moment in this momentum of de-attachment, which follows from the insight that all things, including Brahma, are merely conglomerations of events in the stream of impermanence and conditionality. (Krüger 1988: 59)

In this, the Buddhist tradition is fully in line with the broad Oriental vision of reality, for

"In the Orient (the) ultimate divine mystery is sought beyond all human categories of thought and feeling, beyond names and forms, and absolutely beyond any such concept as of a merciful or wrathful personality, chooser of one people over another, comforter of folk who pray, and destroyer of those who do not" (Campbell 1988a: 94).

Elsewhere, Krüger talks of Buddhist philosophy as a "metatheology" and calls it "the most radical, most consistent demythologizing and deconceptualizing programme in the history of religions." (Krüger 1989: 56). It is this aspect of Buddhism that could be exported to non-Indian countries, rather than the Indian pantheon which was still worshipped by most Indian Buddhists.

Wherever Buddhism went, it did not reject local divinities; it co-opted them, eventually to become local Buddhist protection-deities who no longer inspired awe, but a certain devotional familiarity. It is this that gives Buddhism much of its apparent variation when we see it purely as an anthropological phenomenon. On the philosophical level the differences between the various Buddhist sects are far smaller.

Mahayana Buddhism

With the rise of the other major school of Buddhism, the Mahayana or "Large Vehicle", the need for a stable relationship between the abstract, philosophical Buddhism of the intellectual elite and the devotional Buddhism of the masses became more urgent than ever: This school prided itself on being less narrowly monastically based and more all-embracing than their rivals.

The relationship between the two Buddhisms, philosophical and popular, was now explained along the lines of three new, interrelated theories: Emptiness, The Two Truths and Skillful Means. Although the diligent student may find traces of these theories' beginnings in the Theravada scriptures, it was here that they were brought to full bloom.

Buddhism had always maintained that all events were conditioned by other events, with the sole exception of Nirvana, the state of enlightenment. Working from this premiss, the Mahayana philosophers declared that the infinite regression implied by this meant that all events and so-called "things", up to and including Nirvana itself, were without permanence or substantiality: they were "empty" - they did not really exist in any absolute sense (Murti 1987; 121-208).

This was the highest, absolute truth, but there was also a relative level of truth, on which it was quite appropriate to regard things as really existing. This may strike us as strange at first, but a little consideration will show that it is a stratagem that we use every day.

We are aware, for instance, that the Earth is a sphere and that the shortest route between two places on a map is not a straight line but an arc which follows the plane's curvature along a "great circle". But when I walk from my home to the corner store, I walk in as straight a line as possible, using as my central hypothesis the idea that the Earth is flat! Or consider the case of water:

In our daily lives we think of water as something that is wet, quenches our thirst, keeps our plants growing and glimmers romantically in the moonlight. But the scientist thinks, on a higher level of abstraction, of water as H₂O - two molecules of hydrogen and one molecule of oxygen. For his effective thinking it is essential that he disregards all the everyday properties that we normally associate with water. But at the end of his day's work, he will probably ask for water in his drink, and not for H₂O! (Jordaan & Jordaan 1984: 387)

The most immediately noticeable difference between this two-level hierarchy of theories and that of Buddhism is that the scientist is not supposed to regard, the latest in scientific fashions, like relativity or quantum theory, as an Absolute Truth. It is merely a working hypothesis which is almost certain one day to be superseded by a new, improved hypothesis. Is the Buddhist Absolute Truth then some transcendent reality which governs existence?

On the contrary, it is precisely the assertion that all empirical reality is transitory and therefore "empty", including our theories of how this reality works. To put it more bluntly, the *Buddhist absolute truth is that there is no absolute truth*. It is the assertion that we should stop seeing phenomena in absolute terms and see the relative as exactly what it is; relative.

The purpose of Mahayana Buddhism is to lead people from their complete involvement in relative truth to a point at which they are completely aware of the absolute truth of emptiness. To accomplish this, the Buddhist teacher uses "skillful means", which removes any dogmatic restrictions on the teachings in favor of an "if it works, use it" methodology. Buddhist philosophical theory is therefore in principle anti-mythical, since mythical activity, like all other aspects of the phenomenal world, takes place on the level of relative truth. But in order to nudge the Buddhist follower towards the absolute level, mythical material may be freely used in a skillful way.

The floodgates were now opened to the re-mythologization of Buddhism. The very concept of Buddhahood was altered. No longer was the Buddha a human being who was born, became enlightened and died in India in the fifth century BCE. He was now the merely human appearance of the universal principle of Buddhahood. Insofar as he had a human history, it was only as one who had achieved enlightenment millions of years ago and was to all intents and purposes divine. His death was itself a piece of skillful means, he had never died and never would, it was only a way by which to

impress the urgency of achieving enlightenment on his followers.

What had been the central foundation myth of the Theravada became something quite different to the Mahayana. The historical aspects of the Buddha's life were played down in favor of their symbolic content. The Theravada had always acknowledged the existence of mythical prehistoric Buddhas, who had preceded Gotama by thousands of years. They had always agreed that there would be Buddhas in the future. The Mahayanists expanded this scheme immensely, speaking at times of Buddhas as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges riverbed

Buddhas, in this new development, did not restrict themselves to sending apparitional bodies to Earth: they also, by virtue of their immense power, established entire worlds of their own, known as Buddha-fields, in which a faithful worshiper might hope to be reborn after death.

The best-known of these is Sukhavati, the Western Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha, which is described in glowing terms in a number of texts. The majority of Japanese Buddhists today belong to one of the various Buddhist sects which aspire to rebirth there, a goal which they hope to attain by constantly repeating a formula praising Amitabha.

At first sight, it would seem that the philosophical form of Buddhism has capitulated here, but this is not the case. The Pure Land, admirable and desirable as it may be, is not the final goal. Indeed, the whole point behind rebirth in the Pure Land is that the conditions there are so ideal that one can hardly help but become enlightened. And once enlightened, one perceives the inherent emptiness of all reality, including the Pure Land! Once again the Buddhist philosophers utilized popular mythical ideas to further their own ends.

As if to complete the circle, the Zen sect now proceed to allegorize and demythologize the Pure Land theory for their own purposes, much in the same way that the historical Buddha demythologized Brahmanic cosmology. The Pure Land, they declared, was wherever one found oneself, if one perceived one's situation without preconceived ideas and preferences. Thus, any place is inherently "pure" and can serve as an appropriate springboard for enlightened action.

... What is there outside us,
what is there we lack?
Nirvana is openly shown to our eyes.
This earth where we stand is the Pure Lotus Land,
and this very body the body of Buddha.
(Hakuin, quoted in Kapleau 1980: 183)

Perhaps even more popular than the Buddhas in popular Mahayana Buddhist mythology are the *Bodhisattvas*. Originally, this term referred to the Buddha before his enlightenment; now, it denoted a supernatural (though formerly human) being who would strive for the enlightenment of all the world's sentient beings before accepting the peace of Nirvana himself.

There are many Bodhisattvas in the Mahayana pantheon, and to some extent they specialize in different ways of saving the world. Perhaps the most universally loved is

Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion. His name translates as "The lord who looks down from above (with compassion)". This being is believed by Tibetan Buddhists to be currently reincarnated in the Dalai Lama. An impressive corpus of mythological material has accumulated around him over the centuries, especially in Tibet. In China and Japan, this Bodhisattva has shown himself to be above such mundane realities as gender: he has become transmuted into *Kuan-Yin*, the goddess of mercy, with an equally impressive bibliography of her own.

Does this acceptance of "divine" saviors imply a radical change on the part of the Buddhist philosophers? On the contrary, the Bodhisattva ideal has been fully integrated into Mahayana philosophical thought.

In the first place, it is an ideal to be striven towards. It is considered rather inferior to trust in the Bodhisattva's grace. This may serve as a starting-point, but it is expected that somewhere in his long reincarnational career, every Mahayana Buddhist will take the four Bodhisattva vows, in which he solemnly declares this intention to *become* a Bodhisattva and personally bring all beings in the world to enlightenment.

Secondly, and on a more subtle level, it is also an ideal in a philosophical sense. The Bodhisattva is not a personal savior, but rather the personified representation of a particular type of impersonal force. This is not as difficult as it may sound to those raised in the Judeo-Christian tradition, since it is a fundamental tenet of Buddhist philosophy that *all* phenomena can be reduced to impersonal forces.

Avalokitesvara, for instance, would be considered to be the force or potentiality of compassion, which is given a more personal name and an artistically produced shape for the benefit of those whose imagination does not extend to the understanding of abstractions.

And everyone, it appears, is happy. The intelligentsia have their integrated system of philosophical assertions and arguments and the lay Buddhists have "divine saviors" with whom they can have personal relationships.

It could be said that the system is elitist and paternalistic, and there would be a large amount of truth in this charge. It is however also true that the Buddhist symbiosis of *mythopoeia* and *philosophia* has been remarkably successful and that no murmurs of resentment against such "paternalistic" treatment have emerged from the Buddhist population itself.

Conclusion

It is therefore not quite true that Buddhism is an anti-mythical environment in the sense that it aggressively destroys any incompatible myth with which it comes into contact. The more common Buddhist strategy is to allegorize the mythical themes with which it comes into contact into internal, psychological states or to integrate them into a larger cosmological scheme which is consonant with the fundamental philosophical tenets of Buddhism, namely impermanence, non-substantiality and unsatisfactoriness or, as these three are summarized by the Mahayana, emptiness.

In the end, mythic existence is something the Buddhist expects to transcend, but

for most of us that end is still quite a long way off. If mythical themes, skillfully applied, can help us along the way to their own abandonment, so much the better.

This should encourage us in our quest for a solution to our own problematic situation. Buddhism has been going for 25 centuries, and the tension between the philosophical rejection of the mythic dimension and the layman's need for that very dimension has existed within it from the very beginning. If Buddhism could develop the necessary techniques to overcome that tension, then there is no reason why we should not be able to do likewise.

This does not mean that we should simply take over the Buddhist solutions to the problem, though that is of course one possibility. Even less does it imply that we should adopt the Buddhist mythical worldview *in toto*.

What it does imply is that there is every reason to believe that with some effort, science and mythology will be able to arrive at a way of living together that will benefit both.

It is noticeable that in the Buddhist case, the initiative for such a rapprochement was derived almost exclusively from the rational end of the spectrum, while the Western approach has always been to demand concessions to be made by the faithful. Perhaps this is a valuable clue to how we should approach our own predicament.

The tension will always be there: that is an inescapable result of the very existence of these very different aspects of human existence which we call the mythic and the rational. With the development of appropriate philosophical techniques, it should however be possible to prevent this tension from developing into the kind of open warfare between faith and rationality that has wrought so much havoc in Western intellectual and emotional life in the last five centuries or so.

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Compassion for the Earth

This short article was initially published in the December 1997 newsletter of the Faith & Earthkeeping project at the University of South Africa. This newsletter is now unavailable.

Buddhism rests on two main pillars, wisdom and compassion. It is true that much of the popular literature on Buddhism tends to stress wisdom, insight, quiet meditation. But the second aspect is equally important, perhaps even more so.

Many people who are not even vaguely interested in Buddhism will know the story of the Buddha's life: how he renounced the throne of Kapilavastu to go on a lonely search for truth. After many years of trying out all known philosophical and meditative approaches, he decided simply to sit down beneath a tree and not to get up until he had found the answer to the question "why do people suffer?" He found it in a great event called Enlightenment or Nirvana. This is the defining moment of Buddhism, the experience which all Buddhists hope one day to have, the condition to which all Buddhist philosophy points.

But shortly afterwards, there was a second moment, less well known, perhaps, but of equal importance. He was not the first person to find the solution to the riddle of life and death, but other who had found it had remained where they were, content to live and die in the knowledge that they had passed beyond life and death. In the Buddhist tradition they are called "Silent Buddhas".

The Buddha, however, was filled with compassion for all the unenlightened beings who would continue to be born, suffer and die. He considered the possibility of teaching others how to attain nirvana. At first, it seemed a hopeless task. How could he impart such a profound teaching to anyone? It had taken him years of unrelenting effort, not to mention thousands of previous lives, to arrive at this. Surely it was impossible to teach that which was, by definition, beyond words and concepts?

Then he was struck by an idea, or as they would put it in ancient India, inspired by a god. Perhaps there might be a few people with "just a little dust in their eyes", people who would be able to appreciate what he had to say. He got up from his seat under the tree and, no doubt with a resigned look on his face, set off on his mission of forty years of teaching. If the first moment marks the start of the Buddha's enlightenment through wisdom, the second marks the start of Buddhism, and all because of his compassion.

What can this mean to us? We are, presumably, not Buddhas. But to the extent that we have gained some insight about the environmental mess we have made for ourselves, we do have some insight - let us be bold and even call it wisdom. Is that enough?

What is our motivation for telling others about the environment and how we can make a difference to our lives and that of others? Is it to set ourselves up as "experts", as important people whose opinions need to be sought whenever environmental matters come up in conversation? If so, we are feeding into the same attitude that created the environmental problems in the first place: the feeling that "I" am somehow important, that what "I" achieve will endure forever.

Far better to forget about "I" and teach what we know out of compassion. We who have important jobs in academia, in government or in business can afford to preach about the environment without considering whether that company car really needs to be replaced already. The rich can export their pollution. To where? To where the poor live. We cannot all be Buddhas. We cannot all be Mother Teresa. Not yet, anyway. But each one of us can develop our ability to respond to situations wisely, creatively and compassionately.

Enough jargon. How does this work in practice? If I am truly compassionate, and I am asked to contribute in time or money to an environmental project, then I will not first ask about the project's tax-exempt status, or consider how it will affect my image. I will do it simply because beings are suffering and there is something I can do about it. Or I can decide not to participate if I think it will be counterproductive - that too can be an act of compassion. But the reason for the decision in either case will not be "I". Nor will it be "they": pity is not compassion. It will be "we", it will be "us". Compassion is "feeling with" others, entering their world, feeling their suffering. The Buddha taught that as we have passed from life to life, every single being has been our mother, our father, our lover, our friend. How quickly we have forgotten those close ties! Yet once the scavenger eating from the dustbin was our dearly-loved child. This is a meditation in its own right: try to see every being as one's own mother, and act accordingly.

Too tall an order? Then consider this: by leaving future generations a planet in working order, I am extending compassion to untold millions of sentient beings. Who are these beings? My own future incarnations! As long as we remain unenlightened, we will have to face the consequences of our actions. Hopping to another planet between incarnations is rare - if we destroy this one, we will have to live on it.

The Buddha had nothing to gain by his long years of teaching. As an enlightened being, he lacked nothing, desired nothing, detested nothing. He could just have opted to exit into the unfathomable depths of nirvana, leaving no trace behind. That he did not is

a sign of his limitless compassion. Every day, Buddhists around the world recite, whether out loud or in their hearts, the "bodhisattva vows":

All beings, without number, I vow to liberate
Endless blind passions, I vow to uproot
Mysteries beyond measure, I vow to penetrate
The great way of Buddha, I vow to attain.

Even to non-Buddhists, the great compassion of the Buddha can serve as an exemplar. Let us not merely clean our own backyards. True, we must do that first, or our words will not carry much weight. But let us not stop there, for there are many other backyards that need cleaning. Perhaps the bodhisattva vows can be recast for our own age. Perhaps we can evolve a set of affirmations of our own, to confirm to ourselves that we will not stop until the world is at peace with itself:

All species of beings, I vow to respect
Endless selfish desires, I vow to uproot
Ecological disasters beyond measure, I vow to avert
The compassion of the great religious teachers, I vow to attain.

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The pope and Buddhism

Now this is an interesting one: it was originally a message on the RIME Religion bulletin board conference, one of the liveliest online discussion forums in the days before the Internet swept away all other forms of electronic communication. Bulletin boards were the original "social networks" and the contribution they made should be remembered. I am presenting it here as it was originally written, but please remember two things as you read it: I was very young, and the RIME Religion style of debate was civilized, but robust.

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Msg#: 8 Date: 07 Feb 95 21: 45: 25

From: Michel Clasquin

To: All

Subj: The pope on Buddhism 1

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Hi all

The following is an extract from Pope John Paul II's book "Crossing the threshold of hope" (1994: London: Jonathan Cape). It is this that caused the Sri Lankan Buddhist establishment to withdraw from a planned interreligious meeting during the pope's recent visit to that country.

I've only extracted the actual piece on Buddhism (pp. 84-90) so some of this might be slightly out of context. I have provided it with comments from an orthodox Buddhist point of view, so forgive me if I do not write "But from the Buddhist point of view..." on every second line, but state Buddhist teachings rather more bluntly.

"Before moving on to monotheism, to the other two religions (Judaism and Islam) which worship one God, I would like you to speak more fully on the subject of Buddhism. Essentially - as you well know - it offers a 'doctrine of salvation' that seems increasingly to fascinate many westerners as an 'alternative' to Christianity or as a sort of 'complement' to it, at least in terms of certain ascetic and mystical techniques."

This book is apparently a transcription of a live television interview. The above is the interviewer speaking. It should be remembered that the pope is here not speaking *ex cathedra* - that this does not necessarily carry the stamp of infallibility which official church pronouncements carry. The idea of Buddhism as a complement to Christianity is held mostly by those who feel that by embracing Buddhism they have to jettison too much of their entire western cultural heritage, and who are therefore not ready to renounce Christianity entirely. Of the western Buddhists I know, and this is a quite unscientific sample, some were Protestant, quite a few were Jews and only very few were Catholic. But the vast majority were only nominal members of those traditions. Those who are still dedicated to Christianity but nevertheless find a certain attraction to Buddhism are generally the ones to come up with ideas of 'complementarity'. While this is not impossible, it is tricky, and should not be done on without a lot of thought. We now turn to JP II's answer.

Yes, you are right and I am grateful to you for this question. Among the religions mentioned in the Council document *Nostra Aetate*, it is necessary to pay special attention to Buddhism, which from a certain point of view, like Christianity, is a religion of salvation. Nevertheless, it needs to be said that the doctrines of salvation in Buddhism and Christianity are opposed.

The *Dalai Lama*, spiritual leader of the Tibetans, is a well-known figure in the West. I have met him a few times. He brings Buddhism to the people in the Christian West, stirring up interest both in Buddhist spirituality and in its methods of praying. I also had the chance to meet the Buddhist "patriarch" in Bangkok, Thailand, and among the monks that surrounded him there were

several, for example, who came from the United States. Today we are seeing a certain diffusion of Buddhism in the West.

One hopes that the pope is basing his assessment of Buddhism on more than a few meetings with his ecclesiastical counterparts. One also does not know whether the rather sardonic quotation marks around the word patriarch were placed there by translators and/or editors or whether this accurately reflects his tone of voice. That there are American bhikkhus in Thailand is not much of a surprise these days. You'll also find them in Japan, Korea, even among the Tibetan refugee community. But equally, there are Chinese Catholics in the USA. What's sauce for the goose ...

The Buddhist doctrine of salvation constitutes the central point, or rather the only point, of this system. Nevertheless, both the Buddhist tradition and the methods deriving from it have an almost exclusively negative soteriology.

This is a bit like saying that vicarious redemption is the only point of Christianity. It may be central to (some parts of) it, but it ignores the entire civilization that has grown up around that tradition. The same is true of Buddhism - it has been the source of an enormous amount of Asian culture, and to reduce it to soteriology is to oversimplify far too much. More on the "negative" comment further on.

The "enlightenment" experienced by Buddha comes down to the conviction that the world is bad, that it is the source of evil and of suffering for man. To liberate oneself from this evil, one must free oneself from this world, necessitating a break with the ties that join us to external reality - ties existing in our human nature, in our psyche, in our bodies. The more we are liberated from these ties, the more we become indifferent to what is in the world, and the more we are freed from suffering, from the evil that has its source in the world.

Again, we don't know who put those quotation marks around the term enlightenment. I'll ignore such issues from here on. The idea that the Buddha's enlightenment was the insight that the world is bad is incorrect. He had this insight before setting out on his quest, and his enlightenment was precisely the insight how the cycle-of-birth-and-death could be broken, and his subsequent performance of that very action. The ties that are to be broken are not those that "join us to external reality", but the ties of clinging to both our illusory notions of the "external" and "internal" worlds, and our attachment to the idea that there is a qualitative difference between the two. To cling to anything, even a notion of God or Good, is not to be free. Evil does not have "its source in the world", but in this incorrect view (avidya = ignorance) of the world to which we cling so desperately. Still, the pope is not doing too badly for someone whose main preoccupation is with his own tradition and whose opportunity to study other traditions

in-depth has probably been quite limited. If he was a first-year student of mine, I'd probably pass him with a mark of about 55-60%.

Do we draw near to God in this way? This is not mentioned in the "enlightenment" conveyed by Buddha. Buddhism is in large measure an "atheistic" system. We do not free ourselves from evil through the good which comes from God; we liberate ourselves only through detachment from the world, which is bad. The fullness of such a detachment is not union with God, but what is called nirvana, a state of perfect indifference with regard to the world. To save oneself means above all, to free oneself from evil by becoming indifferent to the world, which is the source of evil. This is the culmination of the spiritual progress.

Some of my objections to this paragraph are the same as those in the previous note and will not be repeated. A few points, though:

- (1) One may call Buddhism atheist if one likes, but Buddhists themselves prefer to speak of their tradition as "non-theistic". i.e. it is not a question of negating a previous theism, but of seeing the world as it is, without presuppositions either of god or mechanism. But I imagine that from a conservative Catholic point of view such as the one held by JP II, this is so much semantic hair-splitting.
- (2) The pope here presents us with a definition of nirvana, which even the Buddha refrained from doing. All language, and all possible language, fails to describe nirvana. If you must talk about it, you can only say what it is not. For instance, it is not suffering, yet this does not mean that it is happiness. It is not clinging, yet this does not imply indifference. I have myself had a very minor first taste of what nirvana could be, and I could never describe it without immediately contradicting myself. To describe nirvana is, to the Buddhist, more or less what ascribing partners to God is to the Muslim, bar the legal implications - an utter impossibility
- (3) However, the pope is certainly correct on one score - nirvana is NOT, in any Buddhist tradition, regarded as union with God.

At various times, attempts to link this method with the Christian mystics have been made - whether it is with those from northern Europe (Eckhart, Tauler, Suso, Ruysbroeck) or the later Spanish mystics (Saint teresa of Avila, Saint John of the Cross). But when Saint John of the Cross, in *The ascent of Mount Carmel* and in the *Dark night of the Soul*, speaks of the need for purification, for detachment from the world of the senses, he does not conceive of that detachment as an end in itself. "To arrive at what now you do not enjoy, you must go where you do not enjoy. To reach what you do not know, you must go where you do not know. To come into possession of what you do not have, you must go where now you have nothing" (Ascent of Mount Carmel 1.13.II). In Eastern Asia these classic texts of Saint John of

the Cross have been, at times, interpreted as a confirmation of Eastern ascetic methods. But this Doctor of the Church does not merely propose detachment from the church. He proposes detachment from the world in order to unite oneself to that which is outside the world - by this I do not mean nirvana, but a personal God. Union with Him comes about not only through purification, but through love.

Carmelite mysticism begins at the point where the reflections of Buddha end, together with his instructions for the spiritual life. In the active and passive purification of the human soul, in those specific nights of the senses and the spirit, Saint John of the Cross sees, above all, the preparation for the human soul to be permeated with the living flame of love. And this is also the title of his major work - *The living flame of love*.

Well, what can one say? For a Catholic speaking to Catholics, no doubt this is quite correct. From a Buddhist point of view, on the other hand, the situation is reversed: theistic mysticism is just another form of clinging, another trap, if perhaps one of the last ones, to be sprung. However, here the Pope is blasting away at something of a straw man - those who extol the Spanish mystics tend to be the semi-Christian Buddhists (or semi-Buddhist Christians) referred to above. Other Buddhists, DT Suzuki for example, like the German mystics much better, especially Eckhart. The Spanish mystics were always much more explicitly theistic, I believe. I must admit that I have never heard of St John of the Cross's "major work", but then, I am not a Catholic.

Therefore, despite similar aspects, there is a fundamental difference. Christian mysticism from every period - beginning with the Fathers of the Eastern and Western Church, to the great theologians of scholasticism (such as Saint Thomas Aquinas), to the northern European mystics, to the Carmelite mystics - is not born of a purely negative "enlightenment". It is not born of an awareness of the evil which exists in man's attachment to the world through the senses, the intellect and the spirit. Instead, Christian mysticism is born of the Revelation of the living God. This God opens himself to union with man, arousing in him the capacity to be united with Him, especially by means of the theological virtues - faith, hope and, above all, love.

The pope here really seems to confuse the "negative" descriptions of nirvana with a view of enlightenment itself as being somehow "negative". I do not believe that he means it in a pejorative sense: but how does he think that millions of people could have adopted Buddhism if they regarded the "salvation" it offers as "negative". There are millions of less-educated Buddhists, I suppose, who would describe nirvana in glowingly positive terms, though such people are more likely to focus their efforts on a happy rebirth (which is a quite respectable, if less-than-ultimate religious goal). But Buddhist

teachings make it quite clear that nirvana is not describable in terms of positive/negative, or any shade in-between. Nirvana is both prior to and beyond these oppositions, these labels. But he is quite correct when he points out that Christian (read Catholic) mysticism inescapably has to employ theistic concepts. Or maybe we should say "ought to employ" - whether it always has remains debatable.

Christian mysticism in every age up to our own - including the mysticism of marvelous men of action like Vincent de Paul, John Bosco, Maximilian Kolbe - has built up and continues to build up Christianity in its most essential element. It also builds up the Church as a community of faith, hope and charity. It builds up civilization, particularly "Western civilization", which is marked by a *positive approach to the world*, and which developed thanks to the achievements of science and technology, two branches of knowledge rooted both in the ancient Greek philosophical tradition and in Judeo-Christian Revelation. The truth about God the Creator of the world and about Christ the Redeemer is a powerful force which inspires a positive attitude towards creation and provides a constant impetus to strive for its transformation and perfection.

This, to me as a Buddhist, is laughable. For the RCC, which has fought every scientific advance since before Galileo tooth and nail, to claim science and technology for its own is just ridiculous. "Its transformation and perfection"? With its current policies on family planning, all we may end up with is a world "transformed" into a seething mass of starving people, killing each other for a crust of bread. And how a religion that until very recently taught that "extra ecclesia nulla salus", that still teaches that people are inherently unable to effect salvation by their own power, even if this may help a bit after the divine effort has been given, can describe itself as "positive" is beyond me. Humorous aside: One little boy to another, "You are only miserable sinners, but **we** are **totally** depraved!" To me, it is Buddhism that can be called a positive message, for it teaches that, whether there is a creator or (more likely) not, there is a way out of impermanence that requires no outside intervention, that is within every human being's power.

The Second Vatican Council has amply confirmed this truth. To indulge in a negative attitude toward the world, in the conviction that it is only a source of suffering for man and that he therefore must break away from it, is negative not only because it is unilateral, but also because it is fundamentally contrary to the development of the world, which the creator has given and entrusted to man as his task.

Buddhism has never taught that the world "is only a source of suffering for man". Happiness is real enough. What Buddhism does insist on is that happiness and

suffering are both *impermanent*, that no state of bliss or perdition is going to last for ever. You may lead a thousand exemplary lives and take rebirth as the king of the gods, but when your good karma has run out, you die and return to a human or animal form to start the process all over again. This teaching may be interpreted literally or symbolically by the individual Buddhist, as s/he wishes - it does not affect the essentials of the teaching. But, to return to the point, the world provides pleasures that are real enough - it is not "only a source of suffering for man".

We read in *Gaudium et Spes*: "therefore, the world which [the Council] has in mind is the world of men, of the entire human family considered in the context of all realities; the world which is the theatre of human history and which bears the marks of humanity's struggles, its defeats and its victories; the world which the Christians believe has been created and is sustained by the Creator's love, a world enslaved by sin but liberated by the crucified and resurrected Christ in order to defeat evil, and destined, according to the divine plan, to be transformed and to reach its fulfillment (*Gaudium et Spes* 2).

These words are clearly addresses to a specifically Catholic audience and do not necessarily have authority to anyone else, particularly Buddhists I suppose. I shall therefore refrain from commenting, except to note that (1) to restrict reality to humanity is quite myopic in Buddhist eyes and (2) I do not really see how this follows from the preceding discussion of "positive" and "negative".

These words indicate how between Christianity and the religions of the Far East, in particular Buddhism, there is an essentially different way of perceiving the world. For Christians, the world is God's creation, redeemed by Christ. It is in the world that man meets God. Therefore he does not need to attain such an absolute detachment in order to find himself in the mystery of his deepest self. For Christianity, it does not make sense to speak of the world as a "radical" evil, since at the beginning of the world we find God the Creator who loves His Creation, a God who "gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life (Jn 3: 16)

As they say in Missouri, "show me". by the way, in Buddhism it makes no sense to speak of the world as a "radical evil" either. It simply is what it is, with its pains and pleasures. It is we who insist on calling it "good" or "evil". Reality is quite neutral, quite unconcerned with the petty affairs of homo sapiens. Any meaning in the world was put there by us, "negative" or "positive", and what we have done we can undo. But I would agree with the pope that there is an essential difference between the world views of Christianity and Buddhism: it is just that I don't think the pope has pointed out just what it is.

For this reason it is not inappropriate to caution those Christians who enthusiastically welcome certain ideas originating in the religious traditions of the Far East - for example, techniques and methods of meditation and ascetical practice. In some quarters these have become fashionable, and are accepted rather uncritically. First one should know one's own spiritual heritage well and consider whether it is right to set it aside lightly. Here we need to recall, if only in passing the brief but important document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith "on certain aspects of Christian meditation" (10/15/1989). Here we find a clear answer to the question "whether and how (Christian prayer) can be enriched by methods of meditation originating in different religions and cultures" (n3).

For those who are unaware of it, the "Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith" is what used to be called the Roman Inquisition. Its methods have changed a lot since Galileo et al, of course, but its function is still to maintain the purity of Catholic doctrine. As for the question of "whether it is right to set (one's own spiritual heritage) aside lightly", well, this goes right back to the question whether one can be both a Christian and a Buddhist simultaneously. I would say that this is not easy: either one of the two would have to be distorted beyond recognition. I imagine the Pope would agree.

A separate issue is the return of ancient gnostic ideas under the guise of the so-called New Age. We cannot delude ourselves that this will lead to a renewal of religion. It is only a new way of practicing gnosticism - that attitude of the spirit that, in the name of a profound knowledge of God, results in distorting His Word and replacing it with purely human words. Gnosticism never completely abandoned the realm of Christianity. Instead, it has always existed side by side with Christianity, sometimes taking the shape of a philosophical movement, but more often assuming the characteristics of a religion or para-religion in distinct, if not declared, conflict with all that is essentially Christian.

This may not be as separate an issue as the pope maintains. One of the most influential forms of Gnosticism in the ancient world, Manichaeism, was clearly influenced by Buddhism. Moreover, Buddhists strive to develop prajna or jnana, insight into reality. "Jnana" is a Sanskrit word that is etymologically closely related to the Greek word "gnosis".

Personally, I believe that the Sri Lankan Buddhists overreacted by boycotting the pope's visit. I do not believe that anywhere in this chapter he uses "negative" in the sense of "bad" or "evil". Also I see no defamatory intent in the way he uses "atheist". His knowledge of Buddhism is not that of an academic specialist in the subject, or even a well-read Buddhist layperson, but he is speaking as a Catholic Christian to other Catholic Christians and the chapter should be read in this context. What he says is as

far as I can see accurate enough from within a (Catholic) Christian paradigm, and it gives us an interesting view of how one influential Christian views Buddhism. For the Buddhist view of Christianity, keep watching this conference!

In short, I believe that the Sri Lankan affair was very much a storm in a teacup. One may surely, in this century anyway, agree to differ on theological matters and yet attend interreligious meetings to discuss matters of common concern?

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Asian reactions to HIV/AIDS

Not previously published - I gave this paper at a conference but the organizers were never able to get their act together and produce the book they had promised. It then went to a journal. The editor died and the journal was discontinued soon afterwards.

In this essay we shall look at the Hindu and Buddhist reactions to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. One could ask why. While South African Hindus make up one of the largest communities of their faith outside India, they are nevertheless just a small percentage of the total South African population. Buddhists make up an even much smaller percentage of our population.

But perhaps we should recall the environmentalist dictum "Think globally, act locally". If HIV/AIDS is going to be stopped, it will be by each of us acting in our local contexts. But to do that effectively, we need to be aware of the global context. Around one fifth to one quarter of the world's population follow the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. This fact presents us with two inescapable conclusions. Firstly, these billion and a half people are not naturally immune to the virus. The pandemic needs to be fought among them as well as elsewhere, or we risk leaving a pool of infection from which the disease can spread once again.

Secondly, and perhaps more interesting from the academic point of view, examining how different cultures have faced up to the threat of HIV and AIDS, or even how they have failed to do so, can give us a new perspective on our own presuppositions, our own approaches to the problem, even our own failures. I trust that this paper will be a small contribution in this regard

Buddhism

Buddhism is a religion, or a philosophy, or maybe a way of life, that is primarily concerned with the way to enlightenment for a small, celibate elite. That does not mean that there is no place for the laity in Buddhism, but traditionally, lay concerns have been a secondary matter. Sexuality was considered a worldly weakness, something to be given up eventually. Indulgence in it was not regarded as especially sinful, as it is so commonly regarded in western traditions. But it was typical of the kind of worldly nuisances that prevent us from being enlightened.

Given this, Buddhism found itself badly placed to respond to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. As late as 2004 we can find a prominent Buddhist monk and scholar asking "why is the religion of compassion so quiet" (on this issue of HIV/AIDS)? (Mettanando 2004). The problem, as Mettanando sees it, is that far too many Buddhists cling to an outmoded and simplistic understanding of karma, seeing the pandemic as somebody else's problem right up to the moment when it actually affects them. Similarly, O'Hara (1998) warns that

Over and over again in the traditions which have come to this country there is the admonition to not get stuck in a romantic idea of oneness, in the view that since we are not separate from anything, then things are fine just as they are. . . . This solipsistic tendency can often be transformed by tempering the elegant quiet of a mediation centre with a visit to a local homeless shelter or prison or crisis centre. To take that same quality of openness and readiness, to plunge into the lives of other beings, can awaken an even deeper compassion. The responsibility rests on the teachers and mature students to maintain a middle path, between the deep personal desire for enlightenment and the equally deep drive to serve others.

When the pandemic seemed to be restricted to homosexuals, it was easy enough for Buddhist leaders such as the Dalai Lama to declare that homosexual behavior was forbidden in Buddhism not only for monks and nuns, but also for laypeople, despite a complete lack of unambiguous textual evidence for such a ban (Peskind 1998, Jackson 1995, Cabezon 1998, 1999). In fact, historically, the Buddhist attitude towards homosexuality has often been to turn a blind eye to it. But the fact that in mediaeval Japan the same word was used for "temple novice" and "catamite" does hint at its existence, and not only in lay circles.

Denial can only go so far, and eventually Buddhists in various countries had no choice but to take notice of the seriousness of the situation and to figure out some sort of response. Perhaps the greatest eye-opener was the death of Osel Tendzin, Chogyam Trungpa's successor. Shortly before his death in 1990. Tendzin admitted to having had unprotected sex with a number of men and women after having been diagnosed as HIV positive. The news send shockwaves through the entire Buddhist community worldwide, not limited to Tendzin's particular Tibetan sect. And Buddhists started to respond to the pandemic at last.

Practical problems immediately emerged. For example, Buddhist monks remain in positions of considerable social influence in traditional Buddhist countries, and their participation is crucial. But in a country like Cambodia, it would be unthinkable for monks to discuss sex in front of women. In fact they can only discuss it in front of men

in an extremely formal variant of the Khmer language (Ward and Chanthon 2004). But at least one complication has been avoided: in principle, Buddhism has no problems with birth control as a by-product of the fight against HIV/AIDS. Some lip service may be given to the ideal of abstinence, but the average Buddhist monk seems to be aware that handing out condoms will likely be the more effective method.

There has been some cooperation between Buddhism and other religions, mainly Christianity, and Buddhist temples and monasteries are now serving as distribution centers for information, condoms and medications. There is also some literature on the use of meditation as a coping mechanism (Dane 2000). But for all of this praiseworthy work, it is only an adjunct to the general secular fight against the disease, it is not yet a specifically Buddhist response.

The specifically Buddhist response to the pandemic has centered not on how one contracts HIV/AIDS, that is, not on the beginning of the process, but on its end. For Buddhism, the pandemic has become a gigantic meditation on death and dying. It was instrumental in the creation of Kapleau's (1989) book *The Wheel of Life and Death*, of Gavin Harrison's (1994) *In the Lap of the Buddha* and works by many others such as Stephen Levine and Ram Dass. In a sense, this was to be expected. Cultivating the mind to the point where one can face death calmly has always been one of the main features of Buddhism.

What is less clear is why this particular aspect of Buddhism should have been re-activated right now, by this particular pandemic. Malaria and tuberculosis kill millions every year, but they did not trigger a renewed interest in the dying process among Buddhists. Perhaps, as I have argued elsewhere (Clasquin 2000: 167-186), Buddhism has a special attraction for the middle classes, and it was when these started dying of AIDS that it became a relevant topic for Buddhists. Unlike tuberculosis, AIDS is not a disease of poverty. Unlike malaria, it is not restricted to the tropics. HIV/AIDS was not a disease of "them", of the global Other. It was a disease of "us".

The most striking aspect of the Buddhist response has been the establishment of hospices. This started around 1987 in San Francisco (Cabezon 1998: n11), and has since become a worldwide trend. Schneider (1992) gives the founding histories of some of the earlier ones. Today, the Buddhnet directory lists about 30 Buddhist-run hospices worldwide, and there are thought to be many more. Nor is this a development only among trend-conscious western Buddhists: in Thailand, for example, a temple outside Bangkok has been specifically constructed to serve as a hospice. Where resources are too low to establish a Buddhist hospice, individual Buddhists may volunteer their services at a local non-Buddhist one.

Buddhist involvement in the hospice movement may yet outlive the AIDS pandemic itself and become a permanent legacy of our times. Even if HIV becomes an expensive, but manageable chronic disease like diabetes, it seems likely that Buddhists will continue to establish hospices of their own and volunteer to work in others. After all, people will continue to die of *something*.

And yet, there remains work to do for the Buddhists, conceptual work. A re-interpretation of traditional Buddhist views on sexuality is long overdue. As Cabezon

(1998) points out, the traditional Buddhist point of view holds that casual sexual intercourse with a prostitute is permissible, but that a committed homosexual relation is not. He asks if this attitude can be upheld in the light of what we know about the transmission of the HI virus. He writes, "The true Buddhist solution . . . is not the blanket condemnation of . . . specific forms of sex, but the encouragement of relationships that have the capacity to keep sexuality within bounds, that diminish promiscuity, and that reduce attachment to a minimum. Relationships that, while satisfying sexual desire, help to control it by providing such boundaries, can serve as the basis for human spiritual flourishing. As such, they must be supported, both at the theological and at the institutional level."

Corless (1998) goes even further in extending the boundaries of Buddhist thinking about AIDS. He asks, is the HI virus a living being in terms of Buddhist philosophy and if so, where does it fit in with Buddhist notions of compassion for all living things? His conclusion on the matter illustrates the kinds of issue that come up when we start seriously thinking about HIV/AIDS from a perspective that is neither Judeo-Christian nor secular-medical:

[H]owever bizarre it might seem at first, it is appropriate for a Buddhist infected with HIV to have compassion towards the being that is surviving by destroying its host. However, this does not mean that a PLWA should invite death by refusing therapy and allowing the virus to multiply unchecked. Only from the human rebirth is the attainment of Buddhahood possible. . . . [Therefore], it is taught, the human rebirth is more fortunate than other rebirths. A virus rebirth, we may imagine, is one of the three unfortunate rebirths (the realms of animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings) and a virus is unlikely to be able to practice Dharma. It can only live out its karma, part of which is to be attacked and killed by the cells of the host's immune system or by a medicine. In these circumstances, we can speculate that killing the virus is not a failing of compassion. But, the killing should be done with regret.

Hinduism

Hinduism too has recognized the seriousness of the situation. As far back as 1987, an editorial in *Hinduism Today* was warning that

Hindus may feel safely insulated from AIDS. They're not. While AIDS is grinding the sexual revolution in the West to a halt, sexual freedom in the East is snowballing. Youth sexual activity is rampant in India and Malaysia, both countries with easy access to prostitution. To deny the specter of AIDS is like denying the million abortions performed on Hindu women every year. (*Hinduism Today* 1987)

In the main, official Hindu publications have not diverged much from mainstream recommendations: in 1999, *Hinduism Today* quoted Yale University's Dr Michael Mersonas saying at an AIDS conference in Atlanta, "Tell the people of India that to confront the epidemic effectively we need to talk openly and factually about sexual

matters. Cultural silence about the realities of sex in India will cost too many lives." (Hinduism Today 1999) True, of course, but not specific to any religion.

We find the same approach in an article in the Trinidad Guardian, where Satnarayan Maharaj (2004) emphasizes that Hinduism, a religion and culture has produced erotic manuals such as the famous Kama Sutra and other, less well known texts, should be able to speak openly about sex in its schools and temples, especially in the face of a looming disaster: "... the Hindu community can no longer pretend that we are immune ... our young people may be as sexually active out of marriage as any other group." The solution, if it is one, is to use religious resources to spread information and to promote abstinence and sexual restraint, and in Trinidad and Tobago, "The Maha Sabha has instructed that sexual informations [sic] should not only be imparted in our schools and educational institutions, but also our temples; other religious occasions should be used to educate our people ...".

What one fails to see here is a call to arms, any sense of political involvement in getting the cost of ARV's down and ending discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS. And of course not a word about condoms. And it is a little hard to see what about all this makes it a specifically Hindu reaction to the disease.

But in the tiny village of Menasyakethana, in southern India, a response to HIV/AIDS has been witnessed that was both authentically Hindu and completely fake. In this area, there is widespread worship of "ammas", literally "mothers" but in fact goddesses, each associated with a specific disease. Thus the amma of cholera would be both the cause of an outbreak of cholera if angered, and of the cure if placated. The most famous of the ammas is probably Mariyamma, the goddess of smallpox, chicken pox and (in some localities) the plague.

By 1999, it was reported that the people of this particular village had started to pay homage to a new amma, the "AIDS-amma". In fact, when a Harvard student investigated, she found that this new amma was not very popular yet and had in fact not emerged spontaneously from the popular imagination, but had rather been the deliberate creation of a local high school science teacher. Indeed, other local Hindus were opposed to this new goddess and her minuscule cult (Gewertz 2000, [sa]).

But from a scholarly point of view, this is precisely the historical point at which the disease stops being an vague, abstract horror and starts to become a real entity that can inspire action. This is a truly religious response, which, if handled responsibly, can potentially be more useful in combating the disease than a thousand dry lectures, even if by religious functionaries, that merely repeat secular information. Information on how to avoid HIV infection surrounds the shrine and reinforce the message with each puja (act of worship) that is performed there.

That AIDS-amma was literally and rather cold-bloodedly invented by a high school science teacher does not detract from her reality as far as her worshippers are concerned. And indeed, how many of the great religious thinkers of the past did not make their living as the equivalent of high school teachers? Only the large spans of time between them and us, and a residual respect, prevents us from knowing just how cold-blooded their inventions may have been (cf Adler [sa]). With smallpox and plague under

control, but HIV infections in India seemingly on an unstoppable rise, who knows if AIDS-amma may yet surpass her elder sister Mariyamma in the Hindu pantheon?

Conclusion

There are many differences between Hinduism and Buddhism. That is, after all, why they are different "isms". But they share two crucial aspects. First, both proclaim the ideal form of existence to be that of the celibate, ascetic male who is engaged in a single-minded pursuit of the religious Ultimate. This is the Buddhist bhikkhu (monk) or the Hindu sannyasin (renouncer). Lay life with its messy relationships and sexual activities is secondary. Not negligible, not to be despised, but secondary. This meant that both Hinduism and Buddhism were caught off-guard when the HIV/AIDS pandemic hit. Of course, both religions have weathered epidemics, famines and other disasters over the centuries. Yet there was something different about HIV. It spreads precisely through the activity that more than any other keeps sentient beings trapped in this world: sex. But precisely because they have been advocating withdrawal from sexual activity for so long for purposes of their own, Buddhist and Hindu leaders know that messages of abstinence are unlikely to be successful.

Secondly, both traditions maintain that there is a continuity between moral action and one's later experiences, even to the extent that the balance of moral and immoral acts in previous lives determine who I am today. In a word, karma.

Philosophically speaking, there is no reason why this must necessarily lead to a fatalistic acceptance of one's present condition. Any Hindu or Buddhist teacher worth his or her salt will explain that there is a delicate balance between determinism and freewill, that we can make karma work for us as well as against us.

But in practice, both Buddhists and Hindus can easily fall into the trap of fatalism. We have seen bhikkhu Mettanando argue against such attitudes. We have also seen Corless explain how it is proper to feel compassion for the HI virus even as we kill it. No doubt the same kind of debate is happening within Hinduism, though perhaps not in English.

But such conceptual reappraisals of our place in the world will tend to remain in the scholarly realm if practical efforts are not made to incorporate them into daily worship and meditation. And that is exactly what we have seen happening in the Hindu tradition, with the creation of the new goddess AIDS-amma. In Buddhism, the incorporation of theory into practice is indirect: by working within the hospice movement, Buddhists are re-activating a powerful traditional practice of meditation on death and dying.

And finally, I should now like to step outside my customary role as detached, neutral academic observer and end this paper on a more personal note:

May all those attending this conference, and all those reading the proceedings later on, be able to formulate and execute their personal response to the pandemic. May the Hindu and Buddhist traditions serve as valuable resources in the global fight against the virus, and against ignorance and prejudice towards people living with

HIV/AIDS. May those traditions also eliminate ignorance and prejudice within their own ranks. May AIDS-amma watch over us all and keep us safe. May all beings soon be enlightened.

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Buddhism in South Africa

A much shorter version of this essay was published in Baumann, M. & Prebish, C. 2002. Westward dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 152-162. This version is based on the original concept for the article and contains a lot of theoretical background without which the published version made little sense in the end (sorry, Martin, but it is the truth).

South Africa is a country with many different religious traditions. African traditional religions maintain an important, if sometimes obscure, hold on the minds of millions of people. Christianity has sent down solid roots. It has even given birth to new, original interpretations of its central message in the African Initiated Churches. Islam, Hinduism and Judaism have all made their influence felt and are securely settled. More recently, so-called New Religious Movements have entered the country, mostly from the outside, to add further color to the South African religious mosaic.

This article deals with one of these "new" religions. In fact, it is a very old faith, dating back two and a half millennia. But it is only in recent times that there have been practicing Buddhists in South Africa, and only in the very last decade of the twentieth century that it could be said to have struck firm roots in South African soil with the arrival of permanent teachers at Buddhist centers at Ixopo, Robertson and elsewhere. Buddhism is a "new" religion in South Africa, and how it relates to the other religions and South African society in general remains unclear.

It is also a small religion in absolute terms. Official estimates of the number of Buddhists in the country are unreliable, but perhaps there are between five and ten thousand Buddhists, of varying degrees of commitment, in the country today. Still, the numbers do seem to have grown over the last two decades, and this leads us to ask the question what its prospects are, given its history, its paradigms and the people who are currently attracted to it.

Is there any affinity between Buddhist thought and that of traditional African religion? Can Buddhism, supposedly a religion of renunciation and other-worldliness, contribute meaningfully to the religious mosaic of South African society? Is the appeal of Buddhism a mere happen-stance in contemporary South Africa, to be noted and filed away for future reference? Or is there something in the interaction between Buddhism and South African society that leads to the adoption of Buddhism as a personal religion by certain South Africans and that may lead to the wider diffusion of Buddhist ideas in South African society? And if so, can we extrapolate from the present situation and state the prospects for South African Buddhism?

In any situation where a new, unfamiliar religion, philosophy or ideology comes into contact with people of different persuasions, tension is bound to arise. My intention is to explore the tension caused by Buddhism and its interaction with Africa. In this, we shall be viewing the past, present and, tentatively, the future of South African Buddhism.

Methodological considerations

The above implies that we are looking at what in other religions, most notably Christianity, would be called "mission", or perhaps "dialogue". My primary intention, however, is not to draw up a "to-do" list for Buddhist "missionaries" or even a Buddhological reflection on the missionary enterprise, but to create an understanding of South African Buddhism that will look back, in that it is based on Buddhist history, and look forwards, enquiring into the role of Buddhism in contemporary and future South African society - all the while maintaining a theoretical stance that is informed by

Buddhist philosophical concepts.

Perhaps an analogy will explain this better: In this century, telescopes have enabled us to see far-off galaxies colliding with each other. Individual stars in these galaxies do not necessarily collide, but given time, the spiral shapes of the two galaxies disappear and a new structure can be seen, with the ghostly structural remains of the two old ones visible only to the most knowledgeable astronomers. This serves as a visual metaphor for what happens when two civilizations and their ideas meet. Does anyone care much which stars were the first to be assimilated into the new galaxy? No, in the majesty of the greater process, such details are irrelevant.

Likewise, in the meeting of collective minds that is intercultural and interreligious communication, the identities and activities of the pioneers rapidly become trivial details, mere footnotes into history. We marvel at the new, giant galaxy: we marvel at the edifice of thought, belief and action of the new society. It is this fusion of two worlds of thought that interests me, that tantalizes me with its enormity while simultaneously restricting my ability to deal with any more than one small aspect at a time. In this, "mission" is an aspect, but far from the whole story. So is "dialogue".

The analogy can be extended: Galaxies may seem to us to be vast conglomerations of matter, but closer examination shows them to be mostly empty space with only one star every few light-years, and vast clouds of interstellar dust which may look solid, but which would be counted as hard vacuum in any earthbound laboratory.

Similarly, concepts like "Buddhism" and "Africa" seem at first glance to describe concrete social, geographical and historical entities, but as soon as we try to grasp them, their edges melt into other concepts. Like all concepts, they are "empty" in a profoundly Buddhist sense: they have no intrinsic meaning apart from those we assign to them as a (hopefully) skillful means.

Let us take "Africa" first. At first, it seems the easier of the two, since it refers to a discernible land mass, the warmest and second largest of the continents, a continent that since the construction of the Suez canal floats freely in the ocean. But "Africa" is also used to denote the people living on this land mass, and a philosophy, lifestyle and ethic purported to be shared by those people. Sometimes, it is restricted even further to mean only the people who can trace their ancestors to African soil before the colonial period.

And then the restricted definition may again be expanded to include the "African diaspora"; black people living in the Caribbean, the Americas and elsewhere. An ironic footnote to the apartheid era is that when white people calling themselves "Afrikaners" (i.e. "Africans") needed an English term to translate the signs reserving public amenities for "blankes" (i.e. "whites"), they often used "Europeans". This shows a certain split in the psyche of the Afrikaner; and more, it shows us the fluid boundaries of the term "Africa". Sometimes it includes European, Indian and Chinese settlers, sometimes it does not. Sometimes it includes the Arabic-speaking Muslim populations north of the Sahel, sometimes not.

"Buddhism" turns out to be an even more vague term. A minimal definition would

have to include the historical Buddha. Any religious or philosophical system that claims to draw on the Buddha's teachings might then be called Buddhism, as long as we conveniently forget that Buddhism is a western term for which there is no exact equivalent in many Asian languages. Even so, we may ask whether the limits of "Buddhism" are reached when we have described its organizational, doctrinal, even its "ecclesial" manifestations.

My understanding of Buddhism is of an interlocking, threefold series of processes or "traditions". The first two of these are the "little tradition" and the "great tradition" found in any religion with a long history and a culture of learning and literacy. The terms "little tradition" and "great tradition" were first put forward by the anthropologist Robert Redfield, and seem to have been adopted in Religious Studies largely through the work of Melford Spiro.

The little tradition is the Buddhism of popular piety, of parades, prayers to bodhisattvas and offerings of incense before statues. Its paradigmatic text is the Jatakas, the collection of stories about the Buddha's former lives. It is by no means a Buddhism to be denigrated or despised, and many who belong properly to the other two traditions can gladly and joyfully participate in the rituals of the little tradition. Little tradition Buddhism appeals to the heart, to the emotions. It is what makes it worthwhile for the average Buddhist to get up in the morning, ready to "make merit" and strive for a better rebirth.

The little tradition gets its impetus from "great tradition" Buddhism, the Buddhism of scholarly disputes between learned monks, of the Abhidharma and the Lotus Sutra. Here we find Buddhist doctrine, complicated teachings on the nature of the mind and the illusory reality the mind experiences. It is the domain of the great systematizers of Buddhism, such as Buddhaghosa. It not only influences little tradition Buddhism, but in its turn is also influenced by it, for example when doctrinal sanction is sought for new inventions and lifestyles. Much of contemporary Buddhological scholarship can be seen as a continuation of great tradition Buddhism.

But Buddhism was a philosophy before it was a religion. Other religions may *have* or *use* a philosophy, but Buddhism *is* a philosophy, in the oldest and truest sense of the word as "love of wisdom". There are two paradigmatic moments in the Buddhist foundation myth: the moment of the Buddha's enlightenment and his subsequent decision to teach.

The first exemplifies pure wisdom, a direct existential insight into the dilemma of sentient existence and a breaking of all psychic bonds; the ultimate "Aha experience".

The second is a willingness (we can no longer speak of desire) to share this insight with others. Insight and compassion: love of wisdom, yes, but also a wise love. On these two pillars stands the edifice of thought and practice we call Buddhism.

But how could such an intensely personal experience be communicated to others? Only through the creation of verbal, artistic or gestural communicative approximations that are ordered in a more or less systematic structure - that is, through the creation of a great tradition.

We can see throughout Buddhist history individuals and texts who use the tools of

the great tradition to undercut that very tradition itself, to draw us back to the primal experience of unity-in-emptiness which stands at the starting point of the Buddhist adventure, expressed in its dual aspects of wisdom/compassion. In keeping with the existing terminology, I shall refer to it as the "meta-tradition", for it is the tradition that defies tradition, that overturns traditional modes of thinking to point directly at the truth we already know. It is the Buddhism of the Heart Sutra and Nagarjuna, of Milarepa and Dogen, the iconoclastic, relentless Buddhism that exhorts us to kill the Buddha if we were to meet him on the road. Always few in number, meta-tradition Buddhists are Buddhism's direct link back to the Buddha's primal aha experience.

The meta-tradition in Buddhism should not simply be conflated with "enlightenment". Certainly one may concede that any enlightened being could contribute to the meta-tradition, given that the meta-tradition points towards enlightenment. What is unclear is how many actually do so. Nor is it clear whether full enlightenment is a precondition for such participation, though one can say without fear of contradiction that at least some measure of insight would be required.

The threefold structure of little, great and meta-tradition describes my understanding of how Buddhism functions. My understanding, like all concepts, is "empty". It stands as a temporary place-holder which I hope will have a measure of utility, of skillfulness, in the discussion that follows.

One should not think of the three traditions as being arranged hierarchically, with the meta-tradition perched at the pinnacle of a pyramid, the little tradition forming its base, and the great tradition in-between. They exist side by side, informing and influencing each other. The uniqueness of Buddhism lies in its successful incorporation of the meta-tradition into a harmonious structure, in the way it has continually reincorporated its own "heresies" back into its own great tradition structures, and from there into the little tradition observances.

What then, do I mean when I say that "Buddhism has entered Africa"? Is it that Buddhist ideas, from all three interacting traditions, have now begun to make an impact on the people of Africa? All the people of Africa, though to various degrees in different social and ethnic groups.?

As may be expected, we can find Buddhism among Asian immigrants. They brought Buddhism with them from their countries of origin and their Buddhism is comparatively unproblematic, barring the usual problems of practicing a minority faith. We also find it among middle-class whites, echoing developments in the western world. Few black Africans have so far shown an interest in Buddhism, and a section will also be dedicated to finding similarities, if any such exist, between Buddhism and black African religion and philosophy.

What we find in (South) Africa, then, is a Buddhism that exists in a field of forces produced by three different cultures: Asia, Europe and Africa. Even ignoring the various strains existing within each of these, we can see a complex pattern of influences, of conditionality, acting together to produce a kind of Buddhism as unique as any other, yet with a traceable lineage to the roots of Buddhism itself, the Buddha's experience under the bodhi tree two and a half millennia ago. Is this Buddhism predominantly of the

little, great, or meta-traditions? Or, to put it differently, what combination of these is evolving in South Africa to meet a peculiarly African situation? Are impulses from Europe and Africa, and indeed impulses from non-Buddhist Asia, playing a role?

My understanding of the transplantation of Buddhism to South Africa is based on a theoretical model of religious transplantation that builds on the efforts of other scholars, most notably Michael Pye (1969), Frank Whaling (1981) and Martin Baumann (1994). In their writings on the subject, we see a clear developmental line of thinking about the transplantation of religion, and of Buddhism in particular. Both Whaling and Baumann, in their different ways, build on the foundation laid by Pye. All three use broadly the same terminology, though sometimes with subtly different shades of meaning, and all three seek to explain the spread of Buddhism with reference to a historical, but not necessarily chronological set of social factors. I regard my own model, to be presented below, as being positioned squarely within this tradition, but I differ from all of them in three respects, sufficiently so to require the creation of a scheme of my own .

My view of the transplantation of Buddhism is conditionally chronological. In line with the Buddhist conditionalist teaching of *paticcasammupada* (When this is present, that appears, when this is absent, that does not appear), I maintain that each of the stages I shall outline below follows logically, hence chrono-logically, on the previous one(s). This does not mean that the previous stage can then disappear, its job having been done. In terms of *paticcasammupada*, that would imply the disappearance of the effect as well as the cause.

Instead, while the precise nature of the preceding stage may change (say, from translating suttas to translating existing commentaries and producing new ones), the broad activity it represents must continue if it is to provide a base for later developments. If the earlier activity ceases, so gradually will the later ones built upon it. Thus, all stages of transplantation are ongoing processes, but we can nevertheless say that one follows upon and is conditioned by the other.

Transplantation of religions has normally been seen as one-way, a movement of Buddhism from the "transplanting" to the "new" society. Here I would ask whether there is no place for a consideration of feedback, of a counter-movement from the new to the old. To use a non-Buddhist example for the moment: North America received Christianity from Europe, developed from it new, strains such as Mormonism, Seventh-Day Adventism and the Jehovah's Witnesses. Today American evangelists from these and similar groups may be found transplanting these forms of Christianity back to Europe!

In the case of Buddhism, too, transplantation can be seen not as a linear process, but as a complicated process in which diverse influences are exchanged between societies and cultures. An example of this is the retreat centre, which has overtaken the more traditional model of the monastery as the paradigmatic locus of spiritual activity in contemporary western Buddhism. There are already a few instances of this model being applied in Buddhist Asia.

Thus, transplantation can be a more complicated process than just a movement of religious beliefs and practices from one society to another: it can be seen as a complex series of moves and countermoves. I wish to problematize the issue by including such a

counter-process in my analysis of the transplantation of Buddhism. Let us call it "reflexive feedback" and examine how it functions in each of the stages discussed below.

Representation. - The first step in transplantation is that a representation of Buddhism needs to be created or selected to present to the non-Buddhist society. An existing form of Buddhism may be presented, or a complicated process of translation, reduction and reinterpretation (to use Baumann's terminology) may take place in which a new representation is gradually hammered out. These options are not mutually exclusive: one Buddhist organization may present itself as a direct continuation of an existing tradition, while another may consciously create a new kind of Buddhism, as Mellor (1991), for instance, has pointed out in his comparison of the English Sangha and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). An intermediate position - partly traditionalist, partly innovative - is also possible, and informal observations on my part suggest that this is in fact the most common strategy. To be successful, representation must find an unoccupied "niche" in the new society; it must fulfill a religious need that, before the transplantation, was either not fulfilled at all or not satisfactorily fulfilled. Representations of Buddhism compete not only with existing religions, but also with one another.

Regardless of which precise strategy is followed (and we should not let the terminology seduce us into thinking that this is necessarily a deliberate process), the important point here is that the non-Buddhist society is presented with a specific representation of Buddhism, or even a range of competing representations, that will have a definite effect on the future development of Buddhism in the new society.

These developments may lead to reflexive feedback, for a new understanding of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha that emerges from the creation of a new representation may well find its way back to the originating culture. A contemporary example of this can be seen in the work of modern Buddhologists and the authenticity of Mahayana scriptures. It now takes a considerable intellectual effort to maintain that all of these texts were once uttered by the Buddha himself (the same is true of the Pali texts, of course, though perhaps to a lesser extent), and I have heard Chinese Buddhists explain to novice monks that even if the Pure Land Sutras were not spoken by the Buddha in person, this does not necessarily invalidate their spiritual import. In other words, contemporary (largely western) textual and historical analysis is forcing people from a traditional Buddhist culture to reconsider their accepted representation of Buddhism.

There are both "push" and "pull" factors to be considered at the representation stage. Among the push factors are the kind of Buddhism practiced in the society from which the transplantation occurs, the political conditions under which transplantation takes place, and so on. Pull factors include the kind of society into which Buddhism is being transplanted, and the particular individuals who first happen to become interested in it. If a society which prizes a cool, rational approach to life is presented with a representation of Buddhism that emphasizes loyalty to the teacher and devotion to deities, for example, Buddhism is likely to appeal only to an "irrational" counterculture.

Croucher (1989), for instance, describes a period in which Australian Buddhism was dominated by a few highly rationalist personalities, and in which Buddhism was seen in Australia as a kind of Oriental humanism, a philosophy devoid of feeling or devotional elements. When new leading personalities emerged with a different approach, different types of Buddhism began to be practiced in Australia.

Indeed, as language, societies and individuals change, the representation of Buddhism will change with them. If Buddhism ever attains a position of dominance in the new society, one might think that there was no further need for representation. But that would be true only if language did not change and evolve, if society itself remained static, if individual Buddhists ceased to ask questions. In fact, translation of scriptures, (to name but one aspect of representation,) is a never-ending process, changing and evolving with the language of the host society and with new understandings of the inner workings of the original languages. No religion ever fits its host society so perfectly as to become truly invisible; if it did, one could question whether it still served a religious function at all. Thus, representation is, indeed must be, an ongoing process. The amount of representation in a transplantation process may vary through time, but can never cease completely. Indeed, representation continues even after the demise of a religion in a given society, if only in an attenuated form, in the writings of historians and in the arts and literature.

I see the representation of Buddhism mainly as a function of the great tradition. It is the scholar-monk, and in a modern context to some extent the academic Buddhologist, who decides what will be represented to the new society as "Buddhism" and what will not. The little tradition's role in representation is mainly reactive: it may decide to accept the representation, and hence accept "Buddhism", or it may decide to reject it.

Relational positioning - Since *Homo sapiens* is always also *Homo religiosus*, any religion about to be transplanted will encounter pre-existing ideas and practices analogous to its own, - in other words, other religions. What, if anything, should then be done about these?

Buddhism has not escaped this problem. From the outset, Indian Buddhism was at variance with proto-Hindu and Jain strains of thought. In China, a *modus vivendi* with Confucianism and Taoism needed to be worked out. The emergent western Buddhism seeks to define its position vis-a-vis Christianity. And if an African Buddhism is ever to be, it will have to arise within the framework of an understanding of African Religion.

By and large, relational positioning is a great -tradition affair, an attempt by religious philosophers to work out the apparent or real contradictions between two or more religions and either smooth them over or accentuate them. This attempt to relate religious forms to each other can take many forms: assimilation, co-existence and a "fundamentalist" rejection are among the possible approaches. But we should not lose sight of the fact that all these strategies amount to the same thing: an attempt to place one's (transplanted) tradition in a stable relationship with other major forms of thought, belief and action.

Of course, on the level of the little tradition, people of different religious faiths also

come into contact, and they, too, need to work out a relationship. But in this case, the relationship generally only comes to public (and academic) attention when it boils over into violence. When last did one see a newspaper headline like "Christian and Buddhist live peaceably as neighbors for thirty years"? Only if the neighbors come to blows does relational positioning in the little tradition come to the fore.

Besides, relational positioning also goes beyond the usual understanding of "religious" and/or "interreligious dialogue", for it is not only other religions that need to be related to, but also the prevailing social, political, economic and intellectual trends of the time. In taking a relational position towards these, policies of acquiescence, accommodation or outright opposition may be followed, as in the relational positioning towards other religions.

Relational positioning can also create a reflexive feedback cycle. An example can be seen in Abe Masao's 1989 article *The impact of dialogue with Christianity on my self-understanding as a Buddhist*, in which he states that dialogue with Christian theologians has led him to new insight into emptiness, Buddhist ethics and the Buddhist understanding of history. Of course, he is just one person, and one cannot foresee to what extent his new understandings will spread through Japanese Buddhist society. Nevertheless, we can see that interreligious dialogue, which is one aspect of relational positioning, can potentially trigger feedback into the originating culture.

Like representation, relational positioning is not a task that can ever be said to have reached a final destination. New non-Buddhist ideas will arise to challenge the Buddhist thinker, new interpretations of old non-Buddhist practices will be revived and need to be dealt with.

But what one can say is that over time, in a given society, one can expect a general social consensus on the place of Buddhism in that society. A stable platform or plateau is reached in which relational positioning ceases to be the main concern. It gracefully slides into the background as an ongoing, but no longer central, activity. By now, Buddhism has become respectable. And this very respectability signals the beginning of the next stage.

Respectability and establishment. We have now reached a stage where Buddhism has been at least partially transplanted. In the next step Buddhism gains social and cultural respectability in its new home, and to a greater or lesser extent becomes established within that society.

This stage is the triumph (temporary, as we shall see) of great tradition orthodoxy over meta-tradition radicalism. It is a peaceful, even placid period in which the main tasks of representation and relational positioning have been accomplished, leaving only minor adjustments to be made to deal with social and linguistic developments.

Great tradition Buddhism can now fully exert its influence over little tradition ritualism as well, directing popular devotions into channels approved by orthodoxy. It is a time of temple-building and intense scriptural study, of deep learning and a thorough ingrainings of Buddhism in the social fabric, but not, perhaps, of great spiritual advancement in the Buddhist understanding of the word. The lack of innovation during this stage implies that little reflexive feedback is likely to occur.

Although it is a strongly loaded term, I believe we are justified at this stage to talk about the reification of Buddhism. Buddhism has become a religion, a social category, an object, a "thing". But this is precisely the kind of essentialist thinking that Buddhist philosophy undercuts so radically. And it is in reaction to established Buddhism that the next stage of transplantation takes place.

Re-enlightening. At some stage, establishment reaches a point where it becomes abundantly clear, - to those who will stop to consider, - that in becoming dominant, Buddhism has become a stale, status quo religion.

Into this peaceful state of affairs bursts a new explosion of meta-tradition insight: a return to the radical anti-metaphysics of the Buddha. In Buddhist myth, legend and history, this is usually presented as the appearance of a single enlightened individual: we see the appearance of a Nagarjuna, a Milarepa, a Bodhidharma or a Dogen, all pointing the Buddhist world back to the Ur-moment of the Buddha's enlightenment, to the experience of the utter interdependence, and hence emptiness, of all phenomena. More recently, we can see the same process in the re-establishment of the Forest tradition of Thai Theravada Buddhism by Ajahn Chah.

In our own time, when we have largely abandoned the "great man" understanding of history, we may ask whether one individual, even an enlightened one, could really have much of an effect unless social conditions were somehow ripe for the message to be heard. I am content to let the matter rest, since it does not really affect my argument. Whether it is a single individual, a religious organization or a more general and dispersed movement that initiates re-enlightenment., the crucial point is the way the meta-tradition reasserts its primacy.

The effect of this re-enlightening stage is an almost immediate reinvigoration of Buddhism, which may take the form of new schools being founded, or which may be more diffuse. But the net effect is not to destroy the established great tradition, for even as the enlightened teacher speaks the message that will re-enlighten Buddhism, he has no choice but to speak in the set of concepts developed over generations by the great tradition.

For example, Nagarjuna expressed his understanding in terms of "emptiness" - a term we encounter not only in the Perfection of Wisdom literature, but even in the Pali Canon. This is the double bind in which meta-tradition Buddhism finds itself: it explicitly rejects textuality in favor of direct experience, but must perforce express itself in textual terms. In time, the great tradition will reassert itself, taking the teacher's words and analyzing them in time-honored fashion until the "poetry" in them is once again lost. And then another enlightened teacher arises ...

Thus, establishment and re-enlightening follow each other cyclically. Indeed, I would argue that re-enlightenment is not merely a meta-tradition reaction against great tradition reification, but that it actually needs establishment, even to the point of reification, to set in before a new outburst of radical insight can occur. Without great tradition orthodoxy, the meta-tradition has no terminology with which to announce the advent of a new stage of transplantation.

More fundamentally, until some degree of establishment has occurred, there is no

need for re-enlightenment. Establishment serves re-enlightenment to some extent as a substratum, but more essentially as a foil for the renewed message of a lived, experienced (as opposed to read-about) enlightenment. If there was no reified, established tradition, the re-enlightenment process would have nothing against which to act.

This mutual dependence between the two processes makes for a Buddhism that is a subtle dialectical interplay between the forces of establishment and re-enlightenment. It comes across as a tension between meditation and scholarship, between the simultaneous desires to abandon the world and to increase the knowledge found within it.

We see alternating periods of static orthodoxy and dynamic expressions of the enlightened spirit, as now the one force, then the other becomes dominant in a Buddhist society. They should not be seen as opposing forces, but rather as complementary. Both are needed to give Buddhism its unique character, and when a society has reached the stage where both can be seen at work in their complicated interplay, we may consider Buddhism in that society as mature and the transplantation as "finished" (though ongoing).

It will probably not have escaped the reader that this same interplay between reification and re-enlightenment could as easily be used to describe, not merely the transplantation of Buddhism from one society to another, but the very founding of Buddhism itself. In this case, the Buddha himself serves as the "great man" who re-discovers (and I stress *re-discovers*) the ultimate nature of reality.

Nor is he the first, or even the last. Prehistoric Buddhas before him taught the same radical anti-metaphysic, and a future Buddha will re-establish the dharma after it has been established and reified by the great tradition (and increasingly ignored by the little) to the point where it might as well be said to have become extinct.

But in the Buddha's own case, Brahmanism serves as a foil for the Buddha to launch his campaign of radical deconstruction, and it is Buddhism itself which is then slowly reified as it becomes an established religion. The same pattern then takes place on a smaller scale, within Buddhism itself. This is to say that the transplantation and subsequent development of Buddhism follows a paradigmatic pattern closely modeled on Buddhist mythology.

Re-enlightenment is such a radical development in the transplantation of Buddhism that any form of reflexive feedback would appear to us as a counter-transplantation, an effort to bring Buddhism from the newly revitalized area back to the originating culture(s), where Buddhism would presumably have become even more moribund than it had been in the other culture before re-enlightenment. For the moment, this remains only a theoretical possibility, since no clear-cut examples can be found in Buddhist history. On the paradigmatic level, of course, this is precisely what we find in the Buddha's momentous decision to teach, and on a more mundane level it can be found wherever someone returns home after being engaged in monastic training for many years. But there are no clear records of, say, the Buddhism of Dogen being brought back to China, fountainhead of Japanese Buddhism.

Buddhism in South Africa

Buddhism in South Africa is largely a late twentieth-century phenomenon. Nevertheless, it not only has a history, but even a prehistory of sorts, both going back much further. Whether it will have a future will depend largely on its ability to position itself in relation to indigenous African thought. But that will be the topic of our next section. Let us examine the history and present state of South African Buddhism.

Early days

The story of South African Buddhism goes back to 1686. In that year, the Portuguese ship *Nossa Senhora dos Milagros* was shipwrecked off the west coast. Among the stranded passengers who had to make their way south to Cape Town were three Thai bhikkhus who had been sent to Europe as emissaries of the Siamese king, and their retinue of perhaps another half dozen persons. For four months, they were quartered in the house of a free burgher until a passing ship enabled them to continue their journey. This was the first representation of Buddhism ever in South Africa (Wratten 1985: 32-35). In the restrictive religious circumstances then current at the Cape it is not surprising that the moment passed without leaving a trace.

There may have been other Buddhists who landed at the Cape during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but there are few or no records of them and they left little evidence of their stay. For the citizens of the Cape colony during this period, the only information on Buddhism was to be had from travel writings, often wildly fanciful ones like those written by Olfert Dapper and George Psalmanaazaar.

By the nineteenth century, however, continuing western explorations in, and commercial and political dealings with, Asia started to produce far more accurate information on Buddhism, and one starts to see literature produced at the Cape that describes Buddhism more or less accurately.

Accurate description, of course, does not imply freedom from bias in the evaluation of what is described. Thus, a curious debate raged at the Cape that tried to place the historical Buddha in Africa rather than India. This debate seems to have started with the English orientalist William Jones and later found an echo in the writings of Gutzlaff. Even when the theory was completely discredited in the rest of the world, a subliminal racism seems to have kept it alive in South Africa as late as the mid-twentieth century:

Delegates at a congress ... in 1956 learned from the ethnologist J.P. Bruwer that "The black Buddha of India originated in the physical image of the Negroid" (Wratten 1999: 21).

If the Buddha himself, was not an African, then perhaps there had been Buddhists in Africa? In 1911, James McKay suggested that there were artistic similarities between Chinese paintings and the rock paintings of the San (Bushmen) and that the San must therefore be descended from a mixed Chinese/Egyptian people living in East Africa who would have been Buddhists! (Wratten 1999: 22)

We can surmise that these attempts to conflate African and Asian otherness, much

of which was the work of missionaries, served to accentuate the uniqueness and importance of the Christian (and, later, the Christian Nationalist) message. By confusing Buddhism with African traditions, the representation became a misrepresentation, one with negative connotations to those who would otherwise be most attracted to Buddhism, that is, the nominally Christian white middle class

Despite this, positive evaluations of Buddhism started to appear in South Africa by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, mostly from Unitarian and Theosophical quarters. Both these new traditions were far more widespread and numerically stronger in South Africa at the time than their present positions might indicate, but they were still a small, liberal corner of alternative religiosity.

Nevertheless, from the first countrywide census in 1911 onwards, Buddhists start to appear in the official records of the Union, later the Republic, of South Africa. These official statistics have long been regarded with suspicion by the local Buddhist community, mostly because of the persistent appearance in them of a few thousand black Buddhists whom no-one has ever been able to trace "on the ground". It seems that statistical manipulation of data have skewed the picture fatally. Today, informal estimates of the number of Buddhists in South Africa vary from 6 000 to as many as 30 000 (Van Loon 1999: 40).

Ethnic Buddhism

The first South African Buddhists were from ethnic communities where Buddhism was an established religion. There had been a large Chinese community at the Cape from the eighteenth century onwards: "Out of a total of 1 417 seamen at the Cape of Good Hope in 1792, for example, there were almost as many Chinese sailors as there were Europeans". But these constituted a transient community, and left no trace of their religious practices behind. Lasting settlement of Chinese in South Africa did not commence until early in the twentieth century. Among these Chinese settlers, conversions to Christianity were frequent and what Buddhist practice existed among them slowly faded away. Not until 1992, with the establishment of the Nan Hua temple near Bronkhorstspuit, was there a clearly defined Chinese Buddhist presence in South Africa. We shall meet the founders of this temple again later on in our story.

Another interesting development was the conversion to Buddhism of low-caste Hindus in kwaZulu-Natal in the 1920's and 1930's. This process started in 1917 with the establishment of the Overport Buddhist Sakya Society by Rajaram Dass. By that time there may already have been Buddhists among Indian immigrants - the 1911 census report shows 394 Buddhists of Asian origin.

However, immigration from India was halted by the South African authorities around the time of the First World War, and the escalation of the Asian Buddhist presence to 12 487 ten years later was due not to a sudden influx from the east, but to South African low-caste Hindus attempting to escape from their social position by rejecting the religious context in which that position was imbedded. It was a transplantation fueled almost entirely by relational positioning. This process ran parallel

to the revival of Buddhism in India itself, but it is unclear what links there were between the Ambedkarian transplantation of Buddhism and the South African equivalent.

To some extent, the South African Indian Buddhist experience can even be said to predate that of Ambedkarian Buddhism in India, and to be more directly related to a less well-known revival of Buddhism in South India somewhat earlier, in which Rajaram Dass' s father had been a prominent figure.

Thanks to the research done by Van Loon (1979,1980), we do know the kind of representation of Buddhism that survived among the Indian Buddhists in and around Durban. It was not a transcendental faith: only 25% of those interviewed regarded nirvana as the goal of religious practice, while most gave pride of place to the improvement of one's quality of life.

The low level of "great tradition" involvement in this manifestation of Buddhism is evident in the fact that, out of all Van Loon's respondents, not one "could conceive of karma operating without an inner 'self' through which alone it could become motivated and effective". Only much prompting by the interviewer produced an answer closer to Buddhist great tradition orthodoxy. Thus, this was entirely a little -tradition Buddhism, created perhaps by some input from literature, but with no contact at all with the classical Buddhism of Asia.

From the height of its popularity in the 1920s and 1930s, Buddhism in the Indian community steadily declined. Many reasons have been suggested for this: the small numbers of the community led to intermarriage with Hindus; there never was any support forthcoming from Buddhist countries, nor could the impoverished community import monks or scriptures at their own expense; and, perhaps most significantly, the importance of caste itself declined steadily in South African Hindu society, thus depriving the Indian Buddhists of their prime reason for adherence.

By the time Van Loon studied them, there were only about 40 families left still calling themselves Buddhists. In many cases, even this represented a nominal allegiance to family tradition rather than actual practice. By that time, however, a new form of Buddhism was starting to emerge. It was found almost exclusively among the urbanised middle class, which, at that point in South Africa's history, meant that it was almost entirely restricted to white South Africans.

The 1970s: founding of nonsectarian Buddhist groups

Little is known about the position of white South African Buddhists prior to about 1970. Most likely they were solitary practitioners, gaining some support from books and correspondence with institutions such as the Buddhist Society in London. Others may have found their spiritual homes within Theosophical lodges.

It is known, however, that literary figures such as Olive Schreiner and C. Louis Leipoldt were, if not practicing Buddhists, at least highly sympathetic to the Buddhist cause. Later in the twentieth century, the poet, painter and activist Breyten Breytenbach continued this tradition of artistic involvement in Buddhism by identifying himself as a Zen Buddhist. Sheila Fugard is another important figure in this trend. Unlike

Breytenbach, she has been actively involved with Buddhist organizations in the country. Actor Tobie Cronje should also be mentioned in this regard.

There seems to be, therefore, a small but significant interest in Buddhism in the South African artistic community. This could be a significant factor in the evolving representation of Buddhism in South Africa. It could liberate that representation from the restrictions of an intellectualized interpretation into a more expressive mode.

At South African universities, too, there has been some interest in Buddhism from an academic angle. While researching South African publications on Buddhism, I found twelve master's and doctoral dissertations dealing with Buddhism in one way or another. In terms of books, contributions to collective works, and academic articles, South African academics are also well represented, considering that the country's universities have not a single academic department devoted exclusively to Buddhist studies.

From about 1970 onwards, small Buddhist groups started to spring up in the main metropolitan centers of South Africa, each one generally associated with one or two founder members, who in many cases are still leading figures in the Buddhist community. Although many of these groups were in some way associated with the main streams of Buddhism encountered in western Buddhism, at this stage they tended to be open to practicing Buddhists and sympathizers of all persuasions. Not until 1990 did sectarian divisions start to harden and official affiliation to overseas institutions to play a more important role. Similar small groups have come into being since then and have disappeared, eventually to be replaced by others.

The range of representations on offer to South Africans did not differ much from those available elsewhere in western Buddhism. Viewed at a sectarian level, they included Theravada, Tibetan Buddhism, Nichiren and Zen. But South Africa was lagging behind the west where the transplantation of Buddhism was concerned. By this time a new western understanding of Buddhism was starting to emerge, based largely on a modern interpretation of Theravada, but with large infusions from Zen and an outward-looking concern about social and environmental issues. Since then, especially under the influence of people like the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh and the scholar/activist Joanna Macy, it has become known as "engaged Buddhism" and has become a major influence, especially in North American Buddhism. In South Africa, engaged Buddhism in this developed form has yet to make an impact.

In the 1970's and early 1980's, however, nondenominational Buddhism was still at an earlier stage of development, best exemplified by the vipassana teachings of Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, and this was the kind of Buddhism that became one of the main forces in South African Buddhism. Although largely based on Theravada teachings, it discarded most of the associated ritual.

This became the basis for the typical South African Buddhist group of the early to middle 1980s. No robes were worn, pre-meditation ritual was cut down to a bare minimum, and links with western science and philosophy were stressed. It was an attempt to create an entirely secular Buddhism based only on meditation, a relational positioning not towards Christianity, but towards liberal western culture. In these groups, it was almost impossible to tell if one was attending a nominally Tibetan, Zen or

Theravada meeting.

Even today, this is still the dominant representation of Buddhism to be found at the Buddhist Retreat Centre near Ixopo. Set in the countryside of KwaZulu-Natal, the BRC first started to operate in 1979 and was formally inaugurated in 1980. Under the direction of Louis van Loon it has survived the political turmoil of South Africa's transition to democracy to become the closest South African approximation of a central point for Buddhists. Buddhists who started out there but who have since moved into more doctrinally oriented groups affectionately refer to it as the "kindergarten". Nominally oriented towards Theravada, the BRC has expanded its vision considerably since its founding, and also offers retreats in which some meditative practice is combined with artistic expression, nature awareness and work on interpersonal relationships.

Indeed, although Theravada was one of the prime representations of Buddhism available in South Africa during the formative stages, and the BRC was visited by many Theravada monks, it was only in 1997 that authentic Theravada was formally established on South African soil, with the creation of a monastic centre for the small Burmese community in Pietermaritzburg. Other "Theravada" groups, including many local groups affiliated to the BRC, in fact support the westernized vipassana approach.

The 1980s: the direction of relational positioning reversed

In the late 1980's, South African Buddhist organizations entered a new phase. From a relational positioning towards liberal western culture, the emphasis reverted to a positioning towards the Asian homeland. Links to overseas organizations were established or strengthened and the ritual and monastic, or at least quasi-monastic, elements of Buddhist practice were re-introduced.

The Dharma Centre in Somerset West, for example, had long been one of the "free-form" South African groups that had hosted teachers and adherents from various traditions since its inception in 1982. Although Heila Downey, one of the founders, was a direct student of Philip Kapleau Roshi, the centre never became a formal subsidiary of the Zen Center in Rochester, NY.

In 1989, however, the Dharma Centre became an integral part of the Korean Kwan Um school, headed by Zen master Seung Sahn. Within a year or two, robes, although not compulsory, had become accepted practice; prostrations and chanting increased in number and duration, and a semi-monastic discipline was more clearly implemented. Chants that were formerly performed in English were now done in Korean.

There are other Zen groups in the country, notably in Johannesburg, but the Dharma Centre, now headquartered in the Western Cape town of Robertson, is clearly the leading Zen-based organization in South Africa. The institutional support it receives from the international Kwan Um organization means that it is able to import teachers with relative ease. In their case, the change in emphasis to a relational positioning to traditional Asian sources has been a success.

However, it should be noted that in a suburban subsidiary centre in the Cape Town

suburb of Rondebosch, they have been forced by popular demand to re-institute, once a week, a meditation session shorn of all Zen ritual, much as things were before 1989. This, plus the continuing success of an independent though nominally Theravadin group in nearby Claremont, indicates that the demand for a less sectarian presentation of Buddhism survives.

A similar process has occurred among South Africa's Vajrayana ("Tibetan") Buddhists. Both the Kagyudpa and Gelugpa schools are represented in the country. Of these, the Kagyudpa have had the longest presence, dating back to the founding of a Tibetan Friendship group in 1969. Kagyu groups were established in most of the main cities over the next ten years, but at this early stage, they maintained close links with the Theravada- and Zen-oriented organizations, and both membership and hosting of teachers were widely shared. As in those organizations, meditation rather than ritual was stressed as the main representation of Buddhism.

By 1982, the organization was strong enough to set up a meditation centre in the Karoo town of Nieu Bethesda. At this stage it was also used to host teachers from other traditions, but by the mid-1980's, precedence was slowly being given to Tibetan, and particularly Kagyudpa, teachings.

When Rob Nairn, one of the founding figures of Vajrayana Buddhism in South Africa, left in 1988 for a four-year retreat in Scotland, the centre slowly fell into disuse. It had always been a controversial place for a meditation centre: unlike the BRC, it was not in the countryside but right in the middle of a very conservative community.

When Nairn returned, the Nieu Bethesda centre was sold and the Kagyu establishment started to concentrate on strengthening its urban structures. While accurate figures are hard to come by, I would estimate that they make up between one third and one half of all non-Asian South African Buddhists, most of them in the main urban centers. The Kagyu establishment is mainly under the direction of Akong Rinpoche. It is directly linked with the Samye Ling temple in Scotland, and is regularly visited by Tibetan monks from that source.

In 1992, the Kagyu establishment was joined by a Johannesburg Gelugpa centre under the direction of Geshe Damcho, who visits it regularly. The centre was established with substantial financial assistance from the Fo Kuan Shang school, which at the same time was launching a massive temple complex (the Nan Hua temple and the associated African Buddhist Seminary) just outside Bronkhorstspuit.

The Fo Kuan Shang school presents a conundrum: its traditional Chinese representation of Buddhism paradoxically offers Africa the most radical representation to date. The temple complex serves two main purposes: it ministers to the needs of the Chinese Buddhist community in South Africa, and it has established a seminary where young African men can train to be Buddhist monks in the Fo Kuan Shang order.

While the seminary is open to South Africans, it actively recruits novices in Tanzania, Congo and elsewhere. It is unique in South African Buddhism in that it was actively brought here in a missionary spirit.

All other forms of Buddhism in the country, from the Indian Buddhists in KwaZulu-Natal to the Zen Buddhists of Robertson, were fetched from elsewhere: in all those

cases, it was South Africans who established various representations of Buddhism in the country and embarked on the tasks of relational positioning and, eventually, respectability and establishment. Even if the relational positioning they accomplished, and continue to accomplish, was limited to the needs of the small circles of their respective memberships, they were in principle prepared to adapt teachings to local needs.

At the Nan Hua temple, however, the representation is uncompromisingly Chinese. Novices are required to learn the Chinese language, participate in Chinese rituals, practice Chinese martial arts and so on.

Although the founder of the local temple has acknowledged that a relational positioning towards Africa will be required, he believes that this is best left to Africans, and that the Chinese monks and nuns here should rather teach what they know (Hui Li 1999: 59). The reasoning may be sound, but in my work with the students over a period of three years it became clear that learning language, a religion and a whole new culture at the same time may just be too much of a stumbling block.

Van Loon (1999: 39) has expressed his doubts about the long-term success of the project: "It is still too early to assess how successful this overtly missionary movement will eventually be in Africa, but evidence so far indicates that it seems altogether too grandiose, too culture-bound, and its articles of faith too foreign and difficult to integrate into a modern western or, for that matter, African cultural environment".

While I would largely agree with Van Loon's assessment, the Fo Kuan Shang school is to be commended for at least one thing: the vast majority of its students at the African Buddhist Seminary are black. This is the first real attempt to transplant Buddhism in South Africa beyond the boundaries of the white community, even if most of the students come from Tanzania, the Congo and other countries beyond the borders of South Africa.

This is not to say that there are no Buddhists at all among other communities than the ones we have so far discussed, but their numbers are extremely low. The Kagyu Buddhists, in particular, have from time to time conferred with African traditional healers, and they report a number of black members in their Harare (Zimbabwe) branch. In South Africa, however, the only group to have attained significant success in attracting black members has been the Soka Gakkai International (SGI).

In keeping with the international situation, the SGI has few ties with the rest of the South African Buddhist community, and little is known about them except the information on their website and what can be gleaned from Wratten's doctoral research. According to Wratten, the establishment of the SGI in South Africa dates back to 1983. By 1994 there were about a hundred members divided among nine groups. This is quite modest compared, for example, to Ghana, where the movement claims to have over 50 000 adherents (Wratten 1985: 231-235).

The 1990s: first beginnings of respectability and establishment

The 1990's saw a new development in South African Buddhism: the emergence of

permanent teachers. Until then, Buddhist organizations had depended on the services of itinerant instructors, some of them monastics, others lay teachers, augmented by the unofficial teaching efforts of leading members of the organization. During this period, however, the BRC obtained the services of two Theravadin ex-monastics, Kittisaro and Thanissara, who committed themselves to spending at least six months of the year at Ixopo. They later went on to establish a new retreat center of their own.

At the Dharma Centre, Heila Downey was given the title Poep sa Nim (dharma teacher) which allowed her to teach as an official instructor of the Kwan Um school, empowered to conduct koan practice and certify her students' attainments (she has taught as far afield as Russia since then).

Among the Tibetan Buddhists, there are no official homegrown teachers yet, but Rob Nairn has occupied this position de facto ever since his return from a four-year retreat in Scotland, and Tibetan monks now visit South Africa more regularly and for longer periods than in the past.

Added to this has been the arrival of Chinese monks at the Bronkhorstspruit temple and of Burmese bhikkhus at the monastery in Pietermaritzburg. Although we cannot yet speak of Buddhism in South Africa as having entered into the "respectability and establishment" phase, this is an important first step in that direction.

Another important development in white South African Buddhism in the last ten years or so is the increasing isolation of the Vajrayana Buddhist establishment from the others. While the Zen and Theravada (both traditional and modernist) organizations in South Africa have worked out an unspoken agreement that allows each to maintain its organizational integrity, while still sharing teachers and venues, the Vajrayana Buddhists have become ever more detached from the free and easy association of South African Buddhism as it was in the 1980's. This is not to say that there is animosity between the two camps or even between their leaders: a spokesman for the Kagyu school expresses it as follows:

(Akong) Rimpoché has often told us that we should examine the teachings and teacher and whatever tradition and then make some sort of commitment to practice those teachings in some depth ... Choose your mountain and then climb it ... Rimpoché's second admonition is to have respect for all other traditions and religions. However, he has seen that trying to mix traditions and practices at one centre does not work but only confuses - especially beginners. So only teachers approved by Rimpoché can teach at our centers - and the rest of us are only facilitators, not teachers (Wratten 1985: 231-235).

The implication of this is that Vajrayana Buddhists and those from the Theravada/Zen group see less and less of each other, for South African Buddhism has not developed any kind of social activity outside the meditation session. Thus, without any conscious effort, an internal relational positioning is occurring within South African Buddhism, an "us" and "them" division that threatens in the long run to create two separate camps whose members are unaware of each other. This, too, can be seen as a first step in the direction of respectability and establishment.

While this policy closes the door on joint practice, it does not necessarily prevent the various Buddhist groups from co-operating at an organizational level. To this end, it was decided at a conference in July 1998 to set up a steering committee to look into the possibility of setting up a national Buddhist organization. Since the committee members live right across the country, discussion would be conducted on an e-mail list. However, after some initial interest, enthusiasm for the project waned quickly among the committee members and the idea was quietly dropped. Perhaps the time was not yet right for the formation of such a body.

Where, then, does South African Buddhism fit into our theoretical model? Representation remains the major task awaiting South African Buddhists, for one still meets many people in this country whose knowledge of Buddhism is, at best, restricted to the awareness that the poet and painter Breyten Breytenbach is a Zen Buddhist.

South African Buddhism is still largely restricted to middle-class whites, and representations of Buddhism have by and large been taken over from English-speaking western countries without much awareness of the problems this poses for the practice of Buddhism in an African context. Relational positioning, therefore, occurs only towards Christianity, and to some extent towards western liberal culture. Few attempts have been made to initiate a relational positioning towards African Traditional Religions.

Explicitly westernized Buddhist movements like the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) are present in the country, but have not yet influenced South African Buddhism to an appreciable extent. However, the slow westernization of Buddhism can be seen elsewhere in South African Buddhist groups: in their organizational structures, the sequence of events at their retreats, - even in the kind of questions asked of visiting teachers, the issues that emerge are clearly western issues.

An example: it has become customary for South African Buddhist groups to stress that the dharma is available freely to anyone who is interested, but nevertheless to set a fee for each retreat. When pressed on this issue, they point out the difference between the (idealized) orient and contemporary South African society: "In the east, people naturally put some money in the dana bowl, but here they'll probably think it is there to put the rubbish in".

South African Buddhism cannot be said to have reached the stage of respectability and establishment yet, much less that of re-enlightenment. It is precariously balanced between the need to adapt Buddhist teachings to local needs (currently the needs of the mainly white, middle-class people who practice Buddhism) and the desire to stick as closely as possible to various original Asian models. In other words, South African Buddhism is still mainly engaged in relational positioning.

Buddhism and African thought - a tentative relational positioning

As Buddhism ventures onto African soil, it encounters a number of competing ideologies and religions. Western secularism has not entered the African psyche beyond the ranks of a few urbanized intellectuals, but the indigenous philosophy and religion of Africa is still strong. Christianity and Islam, too, have made a number of

converts on the continent, and both have been established here for so long, especially in North Africa, that they may well be regarded as indigenous religions in their own right. Since my focus is not only on Africa, but on Southern Africa in particular, I will not deal with Islam. Christianity and Buddhism have been engaged in dialogue for some years, though not much in the African context. That leaves us with indigenous African religious and philosophical thought.

Apart from the seminal work by Krüger (1995) on the connections between Buddhism and San (Bushman) religion, little attention seems to have been paid to the relation between Asia and Africa, and my suggestions here will therefore be exploratory rather than definitive. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider how a Buddhist concept like *anatta* or *sunyata* might be received in an African culture deeply based on very different metaphysical ideas. One would also have to consider how Buddhism and Buddhists would react to such ideas. Is there something, not only that Buddhism could give to Africa, but that Africa could give to Buddhism?

It would simply be asking too much to hope to find explicit references to Buddhist concepts such as the Four Noble Truths in the thinking of African sages. The two protagonists in our tale have been isolated from each other for too long. Yet we may nevertheless hope that we can find points of similarity, thought-patterns that do not diverge from the Buddhist ones so far as to make communication impossible. Simultaneously, it should be possible to find areas in which Buddhism and African thought are so far opposed to each other that they could be significant stumbling blocks unless handled very skilfully indeed.

What is "African thought"?

The first question, then, is to define what we mean by "African thought" and "African religion". Above, we have seen that even the term "Africa" is defined and used in a number of ways. The use made of African religious concepts by African philosophers makes it quite difficult to differentiate between these terms in a clear and consistent way. I shall use "African thought" and "African philosophy" generically, and "African religion" to indicate cultic practices.

There has been an ongoing debate among African academics whether there is such a thing as an indigenous African philosophy. Two distinct camps have emerged: the first looks towards the past, to traditional African society, religion and folk wisdom, and tries to draw out a coherent philosophy from these.

A significant part of this group has a deep interest in Egyptology, attempting to show not only that there is a link between the beliefs and thoughts of ancient Egypt and those of contemporary African people, but also, and more controversially, that Egyptian (i.e. African) philosophy was directly responsible for creating Greek (i.e. western) philosophy. This effort came to public attention most recently with the 1987 publication of Bernal's (1987) *Black Athena*, but has been ongoing at least since the appearance of Diop's work *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa* in 1959.

Western scholars and other African philosophers have not received this line of

thought with much enthusiasm. I do not intend to enter this debate here, except to note, with Mbiti (1969: 7), that "a balance between these extremes is (surely) more reasonable".

The other group is more interested in the future of African thought than in its past - it looks to an African philosophy that will assist in the modernization of African society. Wiredu (1977: 136) speaks for the latter group when he criticizes the way African traditional thought has long been compared with that of western technocracy - he believes it would be more apposite to contrast it to the folk wisdom of Europe:

... the least that African philosophers and foreign well-wishers can do ... is to refrain, in this day and age, from serving up the usual congeries of unargued conceptions about gods, ghosts and witches in the name of African philosophy. ... The habit of talking of African philosophy as if all African philosophy is traditional carries the implication, probably not always intended, that Modern Africans have not been trying, or worse still, ought not to try, to philosophize in a manner that takes account of present day developments in human knowledge, logical, mathematical, scientific, literary etc. ... African nationalists in search of an African identity, Afro-Americans in search of their African roots and Western foreigners in search of exotic diversion - all demand an African philosophy that shall be fundamentally different from Western philosophy, even if it means the familiar witches' brew.

This directly affects my argument, for if he is correct then African thought, as commonly perceived and presented by the traditionalists, would be more nearly comparable to little tradition Buddhism than to the official Buddhist teachings of the great tradition. Nevertheless, while keeping this qualification in mind, let us see if we can find points of contact between Africa and Buddhism.

It is commonly stated that Africans are monotheists in essence. And it is certainly true that authors such as Mbiti have given us much anthropological and linguistic material on god-concepts among African peoples. But some scholars have questioned whether this is not really a case of reading the Christian monotheistic God-concept back into African thought. And Kamalu's (1990: 40) explication of the African concept of God differs considerably from most western ones: he explains that African thought is monotheistic in its view of the Godhead, yet simultaneously "symbolically polytheistic and pantheistic".

But is Buddhism completely incompatible with the theistic world-view? There is one case of a deep relational positioning debate between Buddhist and theistic thinkers: it is the ongoing dialogue between Buddhists and Christians that is happening right now as Buddhism finds a new home in the western world. It is true that much of the conversation has been between the "left wings" of both Buddhism and Christianity. Whiteheadian process philosophers and theologians such as John Cobb, for instance, have been prominent in this process. I am not aware that any church has adopted process philosophy as its official doctrine.

On the Buddhist side, matters are less idiosyncratic, due perhaps to the more fluid nature of Buddhist (esp. Mahayana) doctrine. Abe Masao and his predecessors in the

Kyoto school may have been deeply interested in, even influenced by, their reading of Nietzsche and Heidegger. but their creative reinterpretations of Mahayana Buddhist views, especially when seen in a Zen context, are quite mainstream Buddhist in nature. Yet it remains unclear whether this highly theoretical kind of dialogue has exerted much influence on the practices of rank-and-file Buddhists and Christians.

Confluence has also been happening at a more sectarian level. Christian (mostly Catholic) and Buddhist monastics have engaged in joint meditation retreats to study one another's methods. Even here in South Africa, Father Sepp Anthofer, a Catholic priest, has been conducting Zen meditation retreats at a Christian retreat centre near Hartebeespoort Dam. Simultaneously, Buddhism has discovered an interest in social and ecological upliftment (often called "engaged Buddhism") that formerly was conspicuous by its absence. It cannot be proven that this occurred as a direct result of interfaith dialogue with Christians, but the timing of this event suggests that this may well have been one of the factors involved.

All of this suggests that perhaps the experience of actually meeting with a person of another faith in an open, trusting atmosphere, or of reading another religion's texts without trying to "disprove" or disparage them, can transcend the supposed "core beliefs" of one's religious tradition. Whether or not a Buddhist believes in God, whether or not a Christian believes in karma; - these considerations pale beside the discovery that the other, like oneself, is a fallible human being searching for the truth. I see no reason why the same may not apply to Buddhism and African thought.

Indeed, digging deeper into African thought we do find tantalizing snippets of information that suggest similarities rather than differences. Kamalu (1990: 24-27, xi) explains the African worldview as a "concert of opposites" between Being and Becoming, the Self and the External World, or Ethics and Moral Experience, and acknowledges that "It is an idea also found in Asian philosophies, notably the Taoist principles of Yin and Yang". In Buddhist terms, his explanation of the African worldview bears a striking resemblance to the Hua-yen teaching of the interaction of *li* and *shih*. True, such items are few and far between, and it remains unclear to what extent they represent mainstream African thought. But the fact that such views do exist may be seen as a hopeful point of entry for the coming Buddhist interaction with Africa.

African reincarnation

The concept of reincarnation or rebirth is not unknown in Africa, though it is far from universal, being reported in only a few African societies. Mbigi (1997: 49), speaking as a member of the Shona people, says "The concept of reincarnation is central to our religion. The author personally believes in it." But a close examination of his writing shows that what he refers to as reincarnation is more like the appearance of an Avatar in Hinduism, that is, a superior spirit taking residence in a human body.

Mbiti (1997: 164-5) mentions that there are cases where it is believed that a person has reappeared in a new body, and the infant may even be given the name of the supposedly reborn person. This kind of reincarnation is thought to occur chiefly within direct family lineages and there is no apparent reference to reincarnation into

non-human bodies.

In a striking parallel to Buddhist thinking on the subject, African thought does not posit an immortal soul that is reincarnated: "This is ... only a partial reincarnation, since not the entire person is reborn, but only certain of his characteristics or physical distinctions" (Mbiti 1969: 85). But the parallel is incomplete, for even if certain characteristics were to reappear in a new form, another part of the deceased person lives on in the spirit world, as an ancestor.

Ancestors and bodhisattvas

The belief in ancestors, or the "living-dead", as Mbiti calls them, is posited by writers on the topic as a cornerstone of traditional African thought. Details vary from one African society to another, but in general it can be said that departed family members are thought to continue to exercise influence on their relatives as long as there is someone alive who remembers them by name. This is a stage of personal immortality.

Once they are forgotten as individuals, they subside into an impersonal form of immortality as part of an amorphous ancestral line. This shows a resemblance to the Mahayana Buddhist understanding of the "three bodies of the Buddha", where "personal immortality" would correspond to the samboghyakaya, the glorified or enjoyment body, and "impersonal immortality" to the dharmakaya, that is, to suchness itself.

Just as many Buddhists may be said to revere the dharmakaya, but direct actual worship and veneration to historical or mythical Buddhas, so do Africans revere God, but approach him mainly through the ancestors. And indeed, here we have another point of contact between the two traditions: like the African ancestors, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of Buddhism were once human beings like ourselves. Not in our direct line of descent, of course: the Buddhist emphasis on clerical celibacy would hardly make that feasible.

But the mere fact that these great figures were, at least at one level of understanding, once humans like ourselves puts them closer to the African ancestors than the distant, ineffable deity of theistic religion. In a more philosophical perspective, of course, they can be seen as idealized personifications of desirable qualities (wisdom, compassion etc) or as glorious manifestations of suchness itself (a "top-down" rather than a "bottom-up" view), but at the level I am working at here, I choose to take the many legends and tales of bodhisattvas, their initial vows, and their subsequent spiritual development at face value to facilitate a comparison between them and African ancestors.

In the belief in ancestors, we also find one of the main African explanations of the issue from which Buddhism derives its very *raison d'être*: the question of suffering. While the ancestor is still in a state of personal immortality, the dead person is capable of communicating with and affecting the living. A displeased ancestor may send sickness, death and natural disasters to his living relatives.

At first sight, this seems to be in conflict with the Buddhist diagnosis of suffering as being derived from selfish desire caused by ignorance. But let us not forget that the

Buddhist universe has its own spirit-world, its own pantheons of gods and spirits, and, indeed, in popular tradition its own place for ancestors, though perhaps not in as clearly defined a sense as in African societies. In eastern domestic shrines, pictures of grandparents are sited next to those of the Buddha, indicating a deep reverence for one's ancestors. However, to what extent this practice would be seen as specifically Buddhist and to what extent it correlates to the African conception of the ancestors remains a question that awaits empirical research.

Thus, while the philosophical cause of suffering may be craving, this does not preclude the possibility that sentient beings, human or otherwise, may act as causal agents to bring about the actual working-out of karmic effects. A truly indigenous African form of Buddhism would have to deal with the belief in ancestors and incorporate them in some way.

This indeed has been one of Buddhism's greatest strengths: it has always seemed capable of incorporating indigenous beliefs in divine beings into its own system of belief and practice through the relational positioning process. One of the most telling examples of this was in the indigenization of Buddhism in Tibet, where pre-existing deities were adopted by the incoming Buddhist establishment and reinterpreted as protectors of the dharma. In mythological terms this was expressed as a great figure like Padmasambhava engaging in psychic battles with demons:

When Padmasambhava met the White Fairy of the Glaciers ... , a demonic lady who wished to destroy the foreign intruder, he drove her into a lake which he brought to boiling point through his magic power, boiled the flesh off her bones and plucked out one of her eyes, whereupon she finally sued for mercy and Padma assigned her the guardianship of some sacred books. [But] it is of the highest importance that ... the national gods were not killed. Although Padma sometimes boiled them, he was not really allowed even to wound them, only to subdue them ... Even for the Buddhist it was true what an inhabitant of Sikkim once said of the national gods: "We had better not leave them out: they are very, very old" (Sierksma 1966: 113).

One can foresee a similar development in a future African Buddhism, with the ancestors, revered as always but now understood within a Buddhist paradigm, continuing in their task of guarding and leading the community. I will here only speculate briefly on one possible way that this might be done.

In African religious thought, we may recall, the concept of reincarnation is not completely unknown, and ancestors are thought to remain actively involved for as long as they are remembered and revered by their descendants.

Similarly, in Buddhist mythology, the various realms of existence are not separated by impenetrable walls. We read of the Buddha and other enlightened beings communicating with gods and spirits, even ascending into the heavenly realms to do so.

From the Buddhist point of view, therefore, one could see the ancestors as residing in a blissful state of existence and kept there by the transmission of karma by their descendants as long as they are remembered and propitiated. In such a position, they would be able to influence the lives of their descendants (and other people) just as

the Indian devas were thought to be able to do, yet when their karma (and the further karma transmitted ritually by their descendants) was exhausted, they would be reincarnated in accordance with Buddhist teachings.

Such a scheme, no doubt more fully developed than I am able to do here, would encapsulate African beliefs within a Buddhist framework in a way that would do justice to both. But that would be looking at the problem from the Buddhist angle. Whether it would be emotionally, spiritually, *religiously* acceptable to Africa remains to be seen.

Respect for elders: an African filial piety?

African traditional reverence for ancestors has led, as one might expect, to a concomitant respect for those who are soon to become ancestors. Buddhism, too, has had a long tradition of respect for parents and elders. The consent of one's parents was needed to become a monk as far back as the time of the Buddha, as we can see in the *Ratthapalasutta*. In the Mahayana, evidence of the importance of revering one's elders can be seen in the production, or discovery, of texts such as the "Filial Piety Sutra". At times, the language used in these texts becomes quite intense:

If there were a person who, for the sake of his father and mother, used a sharp knife to cut out his heart and liver so that the blood flowed and covered the ground and if he continued in this way to do this for hundreds of thousands of kalpas, never once complaining about the pain, that person still would not have repaid the deep kindness of his parents (Nicholson [sa]: 23).

Sutras like these can be seen to be highly consonant with traditional Chinese, and especially Confucianist, ideas about the importance of filial piety. But there are indications in the Pali Canon, too, that Buddhism took one's duties towards the parents seriously. In the *Singalovada Sutta*, for example, the layperson's duties towards parents are described as follows:

O householder's son, the mother and father, as the eastern direction, are to be tended by the child in five ways:

- (1) [He thinks:] 'I, once supported, shall support them'
 - (2) 'I shall fulfill my duties towards them'
 - (3) 'I shall maintain the family lineage'
 - (4) 'I shall regulate my inheritance wisely'
 - (5) 'Then, later, I shall give offerings to propitiate their spirits'.
- (Clasquin 1992: 198,302)

In this context, it is the last of these duties that is of special interest, for how does one "propitiate the spirit" of a dead relative who may already have been reborn in a new body? It may be a deferential gesture to popular religious practices at the time, or it may be a precursor of the Buddhist "transference of merit" ceremony still practiced in certain Buddhist countries today after the death of a relative.

If the only hope of immortality is to become an ancestor, then it stands to reason that fertility and procreation will be highly prized. And so it is in African society:

Unless a person has close relatives to remember him when he has physically

died, then he is nobody and simply vanishes out of human existence like a flame when it is extinguished. Therefore it is a duty, religious and ontological, for everyone to get married ... Procreation is the absolute way of ensuring that a person is not cut off from personal immortality (Mbiti 1969: 26).

It is in one's family that the living-dead are kept in personal memory the longest, after their physical death. I have heard elderly people say to their grandchildren who seem to wait too long before getting married, "If you don't get married and have children, who will pour out libations to you when you die?" This is a serious philosophical concern among traditional African peoples. Unfortunate, therefore is the man or woman who has nobody to remember him (her) after physical death. To lack someone close who keeps the departed in their personal immortality is the worst misfortune and punishment that any person could suffer. To die without getting married and without children is to be completely cut off from the human society, to become disconnected, to become an outcast and to lose all links with mankind (Mbiti 1969: 134).

Here lies a major potential clash between Buddhism and African thought. In conversations I had during 1998 with Tanzanian students at the African Buddhist Seminary in Bronkhorstspuit, it quickly became clear that monastic celibacy is the single greatest stumbling-block in the way of the development of an African Buddhism.

Buddhism has throughout its history been at best neutral towards sexuality and procreation. More typical has been the idea that procreation, more than any other human activity, keeps the "wheel of birth and death" spinning and prevents us from attaining nirvana.

For householders, procreation was accepted, if grudgingly, as a duty: above, we have seen one of the householder's duties to be to "maintain the family lineage". But the ideal of a celibate monastic existence was regarded as being in toto superior to that of the householder. Though this emphasis on monasticism was somewhat lessened in the Mahayana, it never came to the point where the two lifestyles were regarded as soteriologically equal. The Mahayana accepts that a householder may become enlightened, but this does not take away from the fact that the more regulated lifestyle of the monk or nun is far more conducive to the pursuit of enlightenment. And one of the prime regulations in that lifestyle is the requirement that monastic life must be celibate.

While it is true that certain Tibetan schools have allowed lamas to marry, this must be seen in light of the development of Tantric Buddhism, in which a strictly defined form of sexuality was one of the ways in which enlightenment might be sought. Insight, not procreation, was the goal aimed at here.

Similarly, while certain Japanese Pure Land priests are married, and may even pass on the care of the local temple to their sons, this has to be understood with reference to the deferred enlightenment posited in Pure Land belief. In the Pure Land afterlife, where conditions are such that enlightenment is almost inevitable, there will be no sexuality or procreation. Until then, the Pure Land priest lives a life closer to that of the householder than that of the typical Buddhist monk. Chinese Pure Land schools

have not followed this line of reasoning and by and large maintain the celibate monastic ideal

Yet this is not a new challenge: much the same problem existed when Buddhism entered China. There too, the maintenance of the familial line was thought to be one of the cardinal duties of people:

We must pay close attention to the fact that a person who accepted these (Buddhist) ideas was snatched away from the moral-ethical political system of family and nation, and given a wholly new and independent way of viewing reality, a method quite the opposite of traditional Chinese thinking. Buddhism looked on the family as a sort of imprisoning cage, and on all acts proper to human nature, including marriage, as sources of human suffering. Because of this it advocated shaving the head, celibacy, poverty and cutting off all connections with family and society, in order to attain a life of peace and quiet away from the world. This sort of spiritual ideal China had never seen before, even from the most ancient of times. It was a complete and total reversal of a religious and ritual system based on blood ties and their relationships ... (Du 1992: 27-28 cf Singhal 1984: 61,86, Pachow 1980: 91-92).

We can see the parallels between the Chinese and African situations clearly. The celibate ideal in Buddhism, on the other hand, lay deeply embedded in Buddhist values. Not that this ideal was never transgressed: when an imperial decree in 842 ordered more than three thousand monastics returned to lay life, one of the reasons given was that some of the monks maintained wives. But the ideal remained, even if the execution was lacking in places.

By and large, the Chinese Buddhists did not abandon the ideal of clerical celibacy: instead, they integrated it with the Chinese worldview by positing it as an even higher form of filial piety. Hui-Yan, for example, wrote that "... within the family, they deviate from the veneration due to natural relationships and yet do not swerve from filial piety" (Singhal 1984: 87), implying *contra* Confucius that a deep feeling of veneration for one's parents is *more* central to filial piety than the performance of prescribed familial rituals. Thus we see an interiorization of the exterior requirements. Others went even further and stretched the orthodox understanding of the Buddha's life to include an element of filial piety. Tsung Mi wrote:

Prince Siddharta did not assume the kingship, but left family and country because he wished to cultivate the Way and become enlightened, so as to repay for the love and benefactions of his parents. Siddharta thus becomes a filial son entirely acceptable to the Chinese (Singhal 1984: 88).

Buddhist texts stressing the importance of respect and love for one's parents were found, translated and, according to some authors, even forged, and this, too, was an important aspect in the popularization of Buddhist ideals in China. In the end, these stratagems seemed to have been successful in persuading the Chinese that leaving the family circle and becoming a monastic was more meritorious than Confucius might have

thought. The best way to serve one's family, it now appeared, was to leave it and prevent its continuation! The family ideal was not abandoned, but was sublimated in a particularly Chinese Buddhist relational positioning.

It is clear that while reverence for one's forebears and familial line has not been as central to Buddhist thought as it has been to the African, the theme does exist and has been accentuated in certain Buddhist societies. One possibly fruitful avenue of representation of Buddhism in Africa might therefore be to develop this theme further in Buddhist teaching. This would not in itself solve the problem of sexuality per se, which remains a touchy issue even in western Buddhist society, but it would go a long way to addressing the procreation issue.

Blowing out different candles

It is striking that, in the first of the above quotations ("Unless a person ..."), Mbiti uses the simile of a candle being extinguished to illustrate the most undesirable fate possible. In Buddhism, of course, the same figure of speech is commonly used to illustrate nirvana, which in that system is the most desirable outcome of human endeavor. Technically, one could say that nirvana is beyond desirability and undesirability, but in practice it serves as the much-to-be-desired *summum bonum* of Buddhist activity. Does this imply that there is a basic irreconcilability between Buddhism and African thought? Or am I exaggerating the importance of different uses of the same metaphor?

Even in the western world, which has its own traditions of social and sexual withdrawal into monastic seclusion, and its own mystical traditions that stress the otherness of God, it can be difficult to explain the Buddhist idea of enlightenment. Often it comes across as a rather complicated way of committing suicide. But let us recall that metaphysical speculation on nirvana was discouraged by the Buddha. This is expressed in many places in the Buddhist scriptures, most famously in the Culamalunkyasutta, often called the "Parable of the Arrow" in the western world.

The dharma, for all the metaphysical subtleties that have grown up around it, can be presented quite simply: Nirvana is both indescribably complex and as simple as the everyday mind. It is presented in all of Buddhism as no more and no less than the end of suffering. And suffering, whether we think of it as caused by craving or as the result of the ancestors' displeasure, is universal.

Therefore, in creating an African representation of Buddhism, Buddhists would do well to stress this pragmatic aspect of the Buddhist teachings rather than speculate on the existence or non-existence of the enlightened person, etc. This is not a subterfuge: quite the contrary, it is consonant with some of the oldest, most traditional instructions that Buddhism has to offer. It is a skillful means, yes, and also the literal truth as understood by Buddhists for over two millennia.

Enlightened one or super-ancestor?

If translating the dharma into African expressions is difficult, the same is true of the

Buddha. Other religious traditions have experienced this dilemma. It may be difficult to describe the position of the Enlightened One in indigenous African terms, but Islam and Christianity have encountered the same problem: "The position of Muhammad ... seems difficult to relate to traditional concepts, just as Africans find it impossible to relate Jesus Christ to anything from their traditional concepts and histories" (Mbiti 1969: 251). Such difficulties have not prevented Christianity and Islam from making millions of converts in Africa. In the process, Islam seems to have been more successful at maintaining its doctrinal purity than Christianity, or, to put it another way, Africans have been more ready to use Christianity as a base for the creation of a creative synthesis with African religion.

How Buddhism will approach this matter cannot be accurately predicted, but it does not seem unreasonable to assume that the second option, that of a creative synthesis with existing ideas and practices, will be closer to the Buddhist style. Even within Buddhism, one will find different answers to the question "who was the Buddha?", not to mention to the deeper question "what is Buddha?"

A truly African understanding of the Buddha may see him as a "super-ancestor", a position already occupied by Christ in some streams of African Initiated Church thinking. Without abandoning the traditional tale of Siddharta Gautama's quest, it will see him in terms that make sense to Africans, relating him to known and locally religiously acceptable concepts of ancestorhood. There may well end up being more than one African understanding of the Buddha, but they will be African understandings, not imported metaphysical exotica.

Communalism and Ubuntu

Another aspect of African thought that crops up quite often in the literature is that of communalism. Africans, it is said, think and act not as individuals, but as members of a community. Of course, it was not too long ago that the same point was made about Asians, and it is an easy position to parody. The point of the argument seems to be rather to act as a rhetorical counterpoint to the presumed "individualism" of the western world. African men and women are certainly not worker bees or termites with no sense of individuality apart from their membership of the hive - they are thinking human beings who are perfectly aware of their individual existence, just as westerners are fully aware that they are members of a community.

Perhaps the difference lies not in levels of awareness, but in the value attached to individualism or communalism: "... individuality is not negated in the African conception of humankind. What is discouraged is the view that the individual should take precedence over the community" (Teffo 1996: 103). Perhaps we could think of this as constituting a continuum with the practically untenable, but theoretically important, extreme positions of total individualism and complete immersion in the mass at the extremes. All human beings would then be positioned somewhere in between. Gyekye (1987: 31) describes the situation as follows:

That the African social order was communal is perhaps undeniable.

Nevertheless, I think it would be more correct to describe that order as amphibious, for it manifests features of both communality and individuality. To describe that order simply as communal is to prejudice the issue regarding the place given to individuality in African social thought and practice.

It is of course dangerous to generalize on the population of an entire continent or a whole civilization. Those who insist that all westerners are rugged individualists have yet to explain the legendary cohesion of the Italian family! But let us, for the sake of argument, accept that Africans, on average, do attach greater importance to their membership of a social group than westerners.

In Southern Africa, the popular expression of African communalism is *ubuntu*, from the Zulu proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye*, meaning "a person is a person because of other persons". The Sotho equivalent of the term is *botho*. The word *ubuntu* was included in the "postamble" to the 1993 "interim" constitution of South Africa. The term did not, however, survive into the 1996 constitution.

In recent years, much attention has been given by the business community to how *ubuntu* can be used to create an indigenously African management strategy. There has also been some attention from the legal fraternity, and attention to its possible application in politics, education and public administration, yet so far surprisingly little from philosophers and from the side of organized religion. Surprisingly, because inspection of the proverb shows that, far from being merely an expression of social solidarity, it contains metaphysical implications. If we are to construct a complete worldview from this proverb, as some claim able to do, then it demonstrates certain presuppositions about the universe and our existence within it.

And these presuppositions are surprisingly close to certain Buddhist ones: they include a view of the world as being primarily a web of relationships, not a monadic universe of distinct individual objects. If I exist because of you, equally you exist because of me. Let us try a little thought experiment: If we were to ask people from a variety of religious and philosophical backgrounds to complete the sentence "People are people because of ...", what might be the range of answers?

Materialist: "people are people because of chance mutations and material conditions"

Theist: "people are people because of God's act of creation"

Buddhist: "people are people because of the mutual interpenetration of all phenomena, sentient beings included"

The above is of course a vast oversimplification: each of the three trends of thought could produce a dozen alternative endings to the sentence. But the sentence endings given here are not implausible ones, and they do indicate a certain nearness of Buddhist to African thinking. From a Buddhist point of view, *ubuntu* points towards an understanding of non-duality, of interconnectedness and *anatta*. Of course, one possible Buddhist critique might be that *ubuntu* is yet limited in its understanding, since it restricts its analysis to people only. But we can then ask: who are these people? And it will become clear that they do not include only living persons but also the ancestors, who are regarded as full members of the community for as long as they are

remembered by the living. The ancestors are closer than we are to God the creator and his act of creation than we are. And so ubuntu is not merely an expression of social solidarity. It is that, but it also expresses a mystical connection with unseen beings and, indirectly, therefore, an intimate connection with the all-that-is, what in Buddhism would be called, in positive terms, suchness, or, in negative terms, emptiness.

In recent years, ubuntu has become something of a bandwagon, and already dissenting voices have sprung up. Even Mbigi (1997: 2), the most prominent proponent of ubuntu in the business world, warns against the danger of letting ubuntu be hijacked, trivialized or "bastardized into an exclusive racial concept".

There are many questions we could ask about ubuntu. Can one really deduce an entire philosophy from a single proverb, even if that proverb appears with minor variations in a number of related languages? Is ubuntu really the working philosophy of millions of people? And how unique is it anyway? Proponents of ubuntu freely admit that it is not unique, that it is the African equivalent of statements of interconnectedness and solidarity in other world-views:

Ubuntu is both a particularistic African concept and a universal concept found in other humanistic philosophies and religions such as Christianity. The British humanist philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, wrote extensively about it. His slogan was "The greatest good for the greatest number". This captures the essence of ubuntu. It is a positive aspect of African personhood (Mbigi & Maree 1995: 40).

My contention is that Buddhism, especially in its Mahayana form, is in some respects closer to ubuntu than, say, Christianity. Like Buddhism, ubuntu does not require a theistic element to make it work. People are people because of other people - sentient beings are dependent and interdependent on each other - these insights remain equally true with or without mentioning deities. Or, for that matter, Buddhas.

After this examination, it is not possible to say that Africans are "anonymous Buddhists", to misquote Panikkar. African thought and African religion have their own beauty and uniqueness; they cannot be reduced to another religious form.

But neither can we say that Buddhism and Africa have nothing to learn from one another. Buddhism can offer to Africa a compendium of thousands of years of learning - a philosophical legacy which has the undeniable political advantage of having come from people who never colonized Africa, indeed, many of whose adherents have suffered under colonialism themselves. It offers a radical insight into reality and a clearly defined way to attain this insight.

Africa, too, has something to offer. Like Confucianism in China, its main concern is with the question of people (alive and dead) living in a community, with the maintenance of social harmony in that community. Social atomism, extreme individualism, is frowned upon as an aberration. Western Buddhism, in particular, might do well to listen to African sages as well as to Buddhist ones in this respect.

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An outsider's view of Christianity

Paper read at a meeting of the Gespreksgroep Eksperimentele Teologie (Discussion Group on Experimental Theology), University of South Africa, 13/10/93. This was the one my mentor told me to kill and never, ever publish if I wanted to make a career in academia. But that was a long time ago in a different world ...

My name is Michel Clasquin and I am a Buddhist. So what am I doing here at what is still a faculty of Christian theology? How do I experience Christianity and Christians?

Some months ago I was invited by a theologian in this faculty, who shall remain nameless, to address this very question. But if I am to speak about Christianity, the religion I have not adopted, I will also have to speak about Buddhism, the religion I have. This can not be a neutral, objective look at Christianity, as if such a thing were

possible. My "outsider's view" of Christianity will be a specifically Buddhist one, and my personal religious history will inevitably become part of it. Maybe if this paper were the first in a series, a more nearly complete "outsider's view" might eventually be obtained. It should also be kept in mind that what I have to say will necessarily be on a broad level of generality; this is inevitable when one dares to discuss a subject as wide as "Christianity".

Yet a facile comparison between the two would be too easy. I could simply take the best aspects from my religion, the worst of yours and play them off against each other as if I was a third-rate politician. And six months later, one of you could do the exact opposite and present a paper on "An outsider's view of Buddhism". I do not think that this will get either of us very far. So, there will be no fundamentalist-bashing on display here today.

Or I could tackle what, to the "non-Christian", seems to be the more logically indefensible truth-claims of Christianity - things like the virgin birth, the flood (where did all that water come from?) and so on. But there are two reasons for not doing so. Firstly, I am fully aware of the demythologization that has been going on in Christianity since the work of Bultmann. Why fight something that at least the more philosophically-inclined Christians now recognize as a matter for contention and debate? Secondly, I once again open myself to exactly the same kind of attack which I mentioned before: Buddhism also contains many elements that are seen as beautiful, even poetic, mythical embellishments of the core teachings, but not necessarily literally true as far as my 20th century bourgeois and technocratic upbringing allows me to see.

It may surprise some of you to hear that the Buddha is also supposed to have been borne by a virgin. I have yet to meet a Buddhist who takes this literally, but I imagine there are a few somewhere in the Mongolian hinterland. And the more literal Buddhist understandings of cosmology and rebirth are, from where I stand, no more logically or empirically defensible than the more fundamentalist Christian teachings on heaven, hell and the afterlife. Here we certainly have you "beaten": even the most conservative school of thinking in Buddhism knows about seven different kinds of hell-worlds, some hot, some cold, and the equivalent number of heaven-worlds. The liberal schools multiply this a hundredfold. Of course, the Buddhist philosopher tends to smile and explain the symbolic, rather than literal, meaning of such notions.

It would be a lot easier, not too mention safer, to join what is by now a classical academic and interreligious dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. One could talk for hours on end about God and Nirvana as the two faiths' respective symbols of ultimacy; Buddhist rebirth and Christian resurrection of the body, and so on and so forth. There is a vast literature on this: if you are interested, I suggest that you start by perusing that excellent journal *Buddhist-Christian Studies*. But I do not intend to join in this fashionable intellectual pursuit, at least not today.

Instead, I wish to share with you some more existential, "gut-level" observations of Christians in the practice of their faith. Whether you take this as criticism (con- or destructive), as pointers to the peculiarities of your own faith that may have been hidden to you by their very closeness, or as the unenlightened ramblings of a pernicious and

persistent pagan will be up to you. All I can say is that I offer these vast generalizations about two equally diverse traditions in a spirit of friendship and in the hope of loosening some of the rigidities that all of us tend to develop in an area as existentially important to us as religions, that some fruitful discussion may emerge from all of this.

One of the most immediately apparent observations one can make about Christianity is how it is totally attached to its texts. Other religions, including my own, have their sacred texts, but it is amazing to the "non-Christian" to observe the extent to which the oral tradition has withered in Christianity. For example, when we get a Buddhist teacher from, say, Sri Lanka, he enters the room, sits down and starts talking for up to an hour at a stretch - with no prepared text.

In one Zen school with which I am familiar, an advanced student may be told "You're giving the sermon today" at less than half an hour's notice. A Buddhist teacher who brings a prepared text with him would simply be laughed out of the room. Novice teachers may be excused for bringing a single page of notes along with them, but they must still speak, not read, the sermon. This is also what happens in my own Buddhist group here in Pretoria: After an brief chant in which we reaffirm our commitment to the Buddha, his teaching and his community of followers, I read a short extract from the Buddhist scriptures which I may never have seen before, and then discuss it for five to ten minutes before we start the meditation.

Now compare this to my recent experiences with Christianity - since I have been here, I have twice been to the funeral of a Christian colleague; in both cases, I was surprised at the extent to which the eulogists had worked ahead of time to prepare their speeches. In one case, one could almost hear the quotation marks and brackets being pronounced as the speaker not only quoted sections of scripture in his prepared texts, but also indicated precisely where in the Bible they were to be found.

This is perhaps the greatest difference between the teaching methods of our respective faiths: in Christianity, the preacher has far more opportunity to polish the profundity of his sermon; in fact "preparing sermons" appears to be what Christian ministers do most Fridays and Saturdays. The Buddhist teacher is expected to speak from where he is at a particular moment, and if he or she is not up to it on a given day, he or she is just as capable of sprouting nonsense as the next person.

In a sense, this gives the Christian preacher an "unfair advantage", since he has the ability to prepare a beautifully coherent written text that is free from the ums and ahs of everyday speech. But it also means that the Christian sermon is at one remove from the existential reality of that particular moment. Only a Christian society could ever have given rise to the postmodernist doctrine that "everything is text".

Where did this text-bound nature of Christianity come from? How did Christianity diverge so far from its origin in mystical experience and prophetic declamation? Can one imagine Jesus reading a prepared speech while delivering the Sermon on the Mount? Naturally, religious philosophizing has its place, but my impression is that in Christianity it is not merely an intellectual adjunct to religious experience, but part and parcel of the experience itself. This, I must admit, is something I do not understand. Of course, every great revolution in Protestant Christianity for the last four centuries, from

the Quakers to the Charismatics, has attempted to redress the balance by emphasizing religious action rather than words, but sooner or later the textual dominance of Christian tradition returned to take over once more.

But perhaps it is bound up with the peculiarly Christian emphasis on historicity, on the reality of both the creation and the end of the universe. Concurrent with the importance of historicity in the abstract is the importance of the concrete historical claims of Christianity. Without this, however symbolically it might be reinterpreted, one could really doubt if Christianity could remain true to its particular genius. To a large extent, Christianity shares this emphasis with its siblings Judaism and Islam, of course, but it has nevertheless been raised to a position of importance that it never attained in those other two children of Abraham. Moreover, it forms a tremendous contrast with the religions of the east, all of whom emphasize the cyclical eternality of the world.

Let me actualize this in a rather dramatic example; if someone were to demonstrate beyond any possible doubt tomorrow that the historical Buddha Shakyamuni never existed, this would make no difference at all to my practice of the Buddhist way of life. The validity and value of the Buddhist teachings lie not in the fact that they are supposed to have been stated long ago by the Buddha and written down in a "sacred" book, but in the facts that for 25 centuries people have tried this way of approaching reality and found that it works; in the collective brother- and sisterhood of knowing that 500 million other people are slowly edging their way to Enlightenment along the same path; and above all in the existential reality for me, here and now, that I have tried it and found it to be experientially satisfying. The Buddha-statue in my home to which I bow each day is not a depiction of a historical person but a symbolic rendering of the very idea of enlightenment itself.

In Christianity, however, as it has evolved through the centuries, the personal encounter with the personal aspect of the transcendent is paramount, and for this to occur, it is necessary that a historical guarantee be given of the personal, individual existence of that aspect. It is quite clear that if it was discovered, again beyond any possible doubt, that there never was such a person as Jesus Christ, Christianity would collapse. The historical aspect is not just an outcrop of Christianity, but its very reason for existence.

Another clear characteristic of Christianity, at least in its Protestant form, is the overriding importance of belief. I deliberately say "belief" rather than "faith" here, for faith is both deeper and wider than belief; in fact belief is only one small part of faith, that all-encompassing orientation to the what-is. But in Protestant Christianity, what seems to matter is that one assents cognitively to certain statements. From belief comes faith and from faith salvation. Compare this to the situation in Buddhism: from certain actions comes salvation and once this has occurred, all mental activities will reflect perfect faith-knowledge and there will no longer be any need for belief. Even more puzzling in the same context are your rites of passage known as catechism and confirmation: It seems that one cannot enter the church fully until one has passed what is quite literally an examination. Again, we find this complete domination of the text, of cognitive assent to the written proposition, over all other forms of religious experience.

Given all this, it will probably not surprise you that as a Buddhist I feel a closer kinship to the kind of worship that occurs in the Orthodox and certain segments of the Catholic and Anglican traditions, where the great mystery of existence is symbolized and experienced in fixed liturgical rite, than to the Protestant, where everything is explained, and explained, and explained once more in the most erudite terms the preacher is capable of. One would hardly be surprised to see the congregants in a Protestant church taking notes like university students! Some of my fellow-Buddhists have also remarked that, on entering a Catholic or high Anglican cathedral, they were able to "sense" the lingering presence of a kind of spirituality not unlike our own, but that they were unable to do so in a Protestant church. I must admit that I share this prejudice. To me, religion is primarily something to do, not something to believe, to read about or to have lectured at me.

If it is true that there is more of a "family resemblance" between non-Protestant and Buddhist spirituality than is true in the case of Protestantism, this may explain why the most ardent Christian participants in Buddhist-Christian dialogue have been Catholics. However, the best Christian analogue to Buddhism is probably the worship of the Quakers, in which the Mystery can only be approached in absolute silence. Whether I agree with the philosophy that underlies (or perhaps lies on top of) all of these is, of course, another matter.

Speaking of philosophy, I shall continue to shock you, the professional theologians, by saying that my first impression of Christian philosophy/theology was that it was not really very complicated, compared to the profundities of my own faith. But the truth, I have found, is more involved than that: what is really happening is that Buddhist philosophy has spent centuries perusing aspects of reality that Christianity has largely neglected, but that at the same time Christian philosophy has concentrated on things that Buddhist thinking, because of the very axioms it started from, has never regarded as important enough to think about.

For example, I am now working on a doctoral thesis that will attempt to create a Buddhist missiology. I use the word "create" deliberately, for my preliminary research has showed that, despite the fact that Buddhism has always been a missionary religion, in twenty-five centuries hardly anyone in the tradition could be bothered to devote much thought to the problem of how and why the Buddha's teaching should be disseminated to people who had not yet made contact with the dharma. Similarly, Christians have not felt it worthwhile to devote as much time and effort to the analysis of the human mind as the Buddhist philosophers have, but have spent considerable trouble on trying to work out the relationship between church, individual and state.

It is undeniable that Christianity has been experiencing a crisis for the last two to three centuries. Many of you, I know, have studied theology in the Netherlands. It may perhaps surprise you to hear that when I was growing up in that country in the sixties, the very first time I ever heard the word religion was when I was seven years old: I was going on a weekend camp with the cub scouts and my mother quickly taught me a little table-prayer so that I wouldn't be caught out when grace was said before meals. She needn't have bothered: the Dutch cub scouts had given up praying years before. This

illustrates the crisis of Christianity: it is slowly but steadily losing its grip on people's hearts and minds in what was once its heartland. Of my relatives still in the Netherlands, none ever attends church. I do not believe they are the exceptions they would (still) be in South Africa.

But this crisis, I believe, goes much deeper than a mere conflict between religion and science. For over a thousand years, Christianity grew used to being the only cosmological and ontological explanation of reality. If necessary, it could change, but the changes were always made in the name of Christianity itself. The problem is not that a competitor, science, has appeared on the scene; Christianity surely has the ingenuity, the internal fortitude to assimilate modern science, just as it assimilated Greek philosophy at an earlier stage. No, the real problem is to get used to being just one actor on a very crowded stage. The real problem is pluralism.

And pluralism is what we all face today. Not just religious pluralism, but a wider diffusion of possibilities of thought, belief and behavior that we might just as well call cognitive pluralism. A hundred years it would have been almost unthinkable for a Buddhist to be here and present this paper, and even less likely that he would find an audience. And if one did, it would almost certainly have been an oriental person, not a blue-eyed, blond-haired European. And next year, there might be a Marxist, or a Muslim, or a agnostic technocrat. By the same token, Christians outside Europe are no longer accepting that the white missionary's way of doing Christianity is necessarily the only way. The old days, when one inherited one's religion along with the shape of one's nose, the color of one's eyes and the family homestead, are gone. It looks unlikely that they will ever return. No-one can now feel any assurance that their children and grandchildren will continue in the same religious or philosophical tradition as themselves.

But how can this situation be accepted by a philosophy like Christianity that regards its exclusive proprietorship of religious truth, based on its historical claims, as its very reason for existence? It appears as if Christianity is the only major religion without a built-in mechanism for dealing with other religions. For instance, it is still common in this faculty to hear people referring to religions other than Christianity as "non-Christian religions" or, even worse, "other religions". This is, of course, precisely the same as calling a black person a "non-white". In both cases, something is defined by what it is not; an invisible, yet ultimate and inflexible yardstick is put up against which everything else is measured (and usually found wanting). If Christianity is to survive in a pluralistic world, it must come to terms with the relativity of all truth-claims in this, our shifting, impermanent (post)modern society, not only in a few isolated pockets of academia, but at all levels from the grassroots up. I hope that you will be able to work this out. The world would be poorer without Christianity.

Yes, poorer indeed. You may ask whether I, as a Buddhist, would not like to see all adherents to all religions but my own to see the error of their ways and convert to Buddhism. And if I am honest, yes, of course I would. But not if this was to mean that all the good that has come from Christianity and indeed from all other religions was to be swept away. For Christianity has much to teach the rest of us; it is probably the most

advanced among religions in terms of social commitment and activism and political theorizing; it has shown how the personal attachment to the ultimate, conceived as a personal presence, can be a fulfilling means of religious expression; it has produced great works of visual and musical art without which we would all be impoverished. It would be better, I believe, if we could all learn from one another until terms such as "Christian", "Buddhist" and so on would become, not exactly meaningless, but simply indicators of the primary focus in a life lived gladly in the fullness of the multitude of influences that is the reality we have to live in whether we like it or not.

Perhaps one last example will serve to symbolize the vast gulf of understanding that still exists between us. Appropriately, it concerns symbols. If there is one religious symbol in the entire Bible that appeals to the Buddhist in me it is this: an empty cave, with the stone rolled away. Here we can see perfect freedom, absolute liberation, the vast emptiness that unites life and death. What have Christians done with this paragon of religious symbols? Well, apart from a handful of Renaissance painters, nothing, really.

Instead the central Christian religious symbol is the cross; an instrument of torture and death. Let me try an analogy to clarify my feelings at seeing this symbol; what would your reaction be if I turned up for work one morning with a suitably stylized electric chair suspended from a silver chain around my neck? You will probably say that I do not understand the passion of Christ, and you will be right. If I did understand it, I might have been a Christian.

* * * * *

Where are all those black Buddhists, then? Buddhism, social class and elitism.

I presented this paper at a conference at the University of Cape Town around 2004. The organizers declined to publish it with the rest of the proceedings. I was not surprised: it didn't really fit in well with the rest of the conference. I really must get up to date on the latest academic buzzwords.

From the first countrywide census in 1911 onwards, Buddhists start to appear in the official records of the Union, later the Republic, of South Africa. They do not always feature prominently in the statistical reports – in some publications, we must assume that they have been lumped with other small communities to form "Other Religions". But when we do find them, they are of course classified by race. This is South Africa, after

all.

In the 1982 edition of SA Statistics, for example, we are informed that the Buddhist community in this country consists of 1100 whites, 200 coloureds, 640 Indians and 8840 blacks. By 1995, the same source informs us that there were 615 white, 139 coloured, 1097 Indian and 540 black Buddhists in the country.

The problem is that no-one in the Buddhist community has ever been able to find those black Buddhists: indeed, even the coloured and Indian figures are suspect. While one cannot dismiss the possibility out of hand, it seems more likely that the official figures have been fatally skewed by statistical manipulation. Some anonymous statistician in a dark office back in the apartheid era must have thought that if there were Buddhists in the country, then there must be Buddhists equitably distributed among the four groups that dominated apartheid thought.

From about 1970 onwards, small Buddhist groups started to spring up in the main metropolitan centers of South Africa, each one generally associated with one or two leading founder members, who in many cases are still leading figures in the Buddhist community. Although many of these groups were in some way associated with the main streams encountered in western Buddhism, at this stage they tended to be open to practicing Buddhists and sympathizers of all persuasions. Only by 1985 would sectarian divisions start to harden and official affiliation to overseas institutions start to play a more important role. Similar small groups have come into being since then and many have disappeared, eventually to be replaced by others. The range of representations on offer to South Africans did not differ much from those available elsewhere in western Buddhism. Seen from the sectarian level, they included Theravada, Tibetan Buddhism, Nichiren and Zen. But South Africa was lagging behind the west where the transplantation of Buddhism was concerned, and by this time a new western understanding of Buddhism was starting to emerge, based largely on a modern interpretation of Theravada, but with large infusions from Zen and an outward-looking concern for social and environmental issues.

In each of these groups, activities have been going on quietly, with no active attempts to convert people, but with positive outreach to explain Buddhist ideas to society at large where this was thought appropriate. Not all the "members" of these groups would call themselves Buddhists. Informal observation suggests that, as elsewhere in western Buddhism, the South African form is characterized not only by a small number of committed Buddhists, but also by a much larger group of sympathizers, or what Tweed (1999) calls "night-stand Buddhists". Some continue to practice their original religion (mostly Christianity) in addition to practicing Buddhist meditation.

Significantly, all the forms of Buddhism practiced at these centers were introduced not from their original areas of origin (Thailand, Tibet, Korea), but through intermediary Buddhist organizations in western countries, where Buddhism is only slightly older and more established than it is in South Africa.

It was therefore not necessary for the founders of these groups to create new representations of Buddhism, as this had already been done in Europe and America and they could simply use the existing presentations. The reverse side of this is that the

Buddhism they have presented has appealed only to people whose demographic profiles mirrored those of existing western Buddhists: well-educated middle-class people, which, in the South African situation, meant mostly whites.

Black South Africans have not really been affected by it. This was thrown into clear relief by some field research I did in 2003 on the Buddhist Retreat Centre (BRC). The oldest Buddhist establishment in the country and in many ways the one from which most others have sprung, the BRC is situated near the town of Ixopo in Kwazulu-Natal province.

Like most South African Buddhist organizations, the BRC has yet to draw significant support from outside its traditional white, middle-class following. As one respondent put it, When I go out there, all the cars are like mine, only a lot newer; everybody comes from a similar background, and I do think that is a pity; it isn't necessarily wrong, but it is a limitation (interview: Antony Osler).

It is a problem that is not unique to the BRC nor even to South African Buddhism. However, the rural setting of the BRC throws the dilemma into sharp relief: the divide is not only white vs black, and middle vs working class, but also urban vs rural.

That is definitely not to say that the BRC is in any sense a racist organization. In fact, it threw its doors open to all races from the very beginning, a time in South Africa's history when it could be dangerous to do so - and was in fact visited by government agents for its pains (Van Loon 1999:42-43). The problem is rather that few non-white, non-middle class, non-urban people have felt the need to go through those doors.

As a black middle class develops, the BRC is only now starting to see the first beginnings of black interest in Buddhism and black attendance at retreats. But it is early days yet, for some time to come the BRC will be living with the typically South African situation where "The blacks are still the servants, while the whites are called staff" (interview: Antony Osler).

Again, it must be stressed that no staff position at the centre has ever been restricted to whites; it is rather the case that no black has ever applied. In a sense, this is understandable: to take a "gap year" at a retreat centre is an action that presupposes a comfortable middle-class existence into which one can easily fall back. As another respondent noted, even among South African white Buddhists there is less of a tendency to take out major periods of time for self-development than among their overseas counterparts: "There is no safety net, so one can't easily say, I'll just take a year off" (Interview: Thanissara). One can only speculate how much more this would apply to black South Africans. It is just not something that is easily done by people whose memory of poverty and repression is only one or two generations old.

The result of this is that the BRC's social upliftment activity, like so much charitable work in South Africa, always runs the risk of appearing as noblesse oblige. However good the relations between individual staff members and the nearby Zulu village are (and there have been many such relations over the years) the centre and the village remain separate entities that remain unintegrated. The BRC's sangha (community) lives in the suburbs of Durban and other major cities, not on the hill across the valley.

It is not necessarily a problem, but it certainly is something that people need to be aware of; it mirrors South African society very clearly. It seems unsettled to me, but then again the whole country is unsettled that way. The more specialized Buddhist centers avoid the problem by having the retreatants do all the work, but that only "solves" the problem in that particular situation (interview: Antony Osler).

This is not to say that there are no South African Buddhists at all except among whites and Indians, but the number of Black Buddhists are extremely small. The Kagyu Buddhists, in particular, have from time to time conferred with African traditional healers, and they report a number of black members in their Harare branch. In South Africa, however, the only group to have attracted significant numbers of black members has been the Soka Gakkai International (SGI).

We must now consider firstly whether this is an anomalous situation, both in western Buddhism and in the context of broader Buddhist history, and secondly, regardless of whether it is an anomaly or not, why this pattern has developed. If we find that this is a pattern unique to South African Buddhism or the western Buddhism of which it is a part, then the reason must be sought in the particular nature of South African (or western) society. If it reflects a pattern widely found elsewhere in Buddhist history, then a deeper reason must be sought, one that reflects something unique to Buddhism itself.

Of course, South Africa does have a particular social setup, as which place does not? But what makes South African society stand out is the extent to which class distinctions coincide with racial or ethnic divisions. Appiah (1992:43-73) gives us a cogent argument why the entire concept of race is false and pseudo-scientific, but while his argument is philosophically sound, it still leaves us to deal with the public perception of "race" as a real entity, a perception that has had enormous implications in the history of the twentieth century, from the holocaust to apartheid. Indeed, while one can see the apex of the peculiarly South African confluence of class and race in the apartheid state, it has a much longer history, one that reflects the entire colonial history of the country and going back to the first contacts between Africa and Europe. The result, certainly up to 1994 and to a very large extent even since then, was that the middle and upper classes of society were overwhelmingly dominated by whites. Not all whites were middle-class, but almost all middle-class people were white.

It is to this factor that we must look when we try to explain the predominance of whites in the transplantation of Buddhism to South Africa. When we view it not in racial terms, but in terms of a differentiated class receptivity to Buddhism in favor of the educated middle classes, we will be able to see a pattern that has played itself out not only in the recent development of a western Buddhism, but throughout Buddhist history. The question then becomes, not "why are white South Africans more interested in Buddhism than black ones?", but rather "Is there something intrinsically elitist within Buddhism that attracts the middle and upper classes rather than the working class?" The challenge for me is to explain such an anomaly.

Let us start at the end, with the contemporary situation, and work our way

backwards. South African Buddhism must be seen in the context of a wider spread of Buddhist ideas and cultic practices to the western world and its developmental stages mirror those of western Buddhism, even if they are delayed by about a decade. We can therefore ask what kind of people these western Buddhists are.

Even the most cursory look at western Buddhism clearly shows it to be an overwhelmingly middle-class phenomenon. Bell (1994) remarks: "Though Asian monks and lay people have provided encouragement and some material assistance, the growth of Theravada Buddhism in Britain has been instigated and fostered by mostly white, middle class and well educated people . . ." and again, "There are also British people of Asian and mixed Asian-British descent, but the majority of the visitors are relatively prosperous and educated British middle class people without Asian antecedents". Croucher (1989:45), commenting on Buddhism in Australia, states that a Buddhist spokesperson in the early 1970s

. . . often used to tell the press, not without some pride, that "professors at the universities at Sydney and Canberra are Buddhist. Eminent doctors, architects and a few politicians . . . are secret worshippers of the Buddha." As research in America would indicate, those attracted to Buddhism and other Eastern religious philosophies were then, as now, generally well-educated—their backgrounds equipping them with an interest in novel ideas and a greater awareness of new cultural developments.

In a fascinating earlier parallel, Australian census figures of a hundred years or so earlier show that "the Theosophical Society consisted of the best-educated women of any religious persuasion, and the second-best educated men, after atheists" (Croucher 1989:9).

Such a pattern, once set, would tend to become self-perpetuating: Morgan (1999: 94-95), in a study of the spread of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, found that the tendency was for people to convert their friends, that is, people with most likely similar interests, backgrounds, levels of education and a comparable class background.

Already we can see some pointers to the meaning of "middle-class" in this context. In each of the cases cited above, the high average level of education is stressed. It is, then, not simply control over the factors of production that define this Buddhist bourgeoisie, as it would be in a classical Marxist definition, but the specific factor of education, or as it might be put in this computerized age, access to information.

The most recent research in the demographics of western Buddhism is a survey of American Buddhists conducted by Coleman. Although this survey was not conducted on a truly representative random sample of Buddhists in America, but instead used a "cluster" design that focussed on seven groups from different Buddhist traditions, the results are strikingly similar to the more informal observations discussed above:

Ethnically, the memberships of these Buddhist groups is overwhelmingly white. Only about one in ten respondents identified himself or herself as Asian, Black or Hispanic, a matter that has been of some concern to Buddhist leaders. . . . [The] data indicate that American Buddhism clearly has

its strongest appeal to the middle and upper middle class. About one-third of the respondents reported their family income to be between \$30 000 and \$60 000, while another 19 percent fell into the \$60 000 to \$90 000 range. About 20 percent of the respondents had incomes over \$90 000 and about 30 percent [made] less than \$30 000. While those income levels are somewhat higher than the national average, the educational level of American Buddhists is very high. Of the 353 people who responded to the question on education level, only a single person reported having failed to finish high school, and less than one in twenty said that their education stopped with high school graduation. Eleven percent reported that they had some college experience, 32 percent were college graduates, and, surprisingly, more than half of the respondents (51 percent) had advanced degrees (Coleman 1999: 94-95).

Coleman continues to typify his respondents as predominantly to the left of the American political spectrum, and shows once again their high level of educational attainment by stressing the importance of reading in their involvement with Buddhism. "When asked directly about [how they first became involved with Buddhism] a majority reported that it was through reading a book", and "Sixty-three percent said they 'frequently' read books or articles relating to Buddhism, and another 32 percent said they 'occasionally' do" (1999: 95, 97). Coleman concludes that

The results of this preliminary examination . . . can hardly be considered definitive. They do, however, paint an interesting picture of the practitioners of the new Buddhism which is quite consistent with the comments and observations I have gathered with [Buddhist] leaders and senior practitioners . . . around the country. Demographically, the members of these new Buddhist groups tend to be white, middle and upper-middle-class people in their middle years, with a strong left/liberal leaning in their political views. One of the most striking characteristics of the respondents was their extremely high level of education. It would not seem unreasonable to conclude that these Buddhists constitute the most highly educated religious group in the United States (Coleman 1999:98).

It would be a fascinating exercise to see if Coleman's findings could be duplicated among South African Buddhists, and this may yet figure as a future avenue of exploration. Although such empirical figures are lacking, informal observations on my own part over the last fifteen years suggest strongly that very similar patterns exist here, at least among the white (i.e. western) Buddhists. Perhaps not quite so many South African Buddhists may have advanced degrees, but then, university education is less ubiquitous in South African society than among Americans, even among whites.

Is this middle-class nature of contemporary western Buddhism an anomaly? It would appear not. When we look at Buddhist history, we will see a number of references to merchants and scholars, even to aristocrats, but only much later in the story do we hear of what would now be called the working class-the peasantry on whose labour all classical Asian societies, and indeed all pre-industrial societies,

including much of contemporary Africa, ultimately depended.

In ancient China, for instance, "the Buddhist view of crossing over to the other shore . . . found a market and was spread first and foremost among the scholar official class. Only then did it enter into the belief of the common folk and the court" (Du 1992:31). Given the social role of this scholar class at the time, it is clear that the process there mirrors the contemporary one. Note once again the importance of education.

In India, in China, in Tibet, wherever one looks, it seems that Buddhism as a mass movement started only after it had become well entrenched among the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. It seems almost pre-ordained, so fixed is this historical pattern: a Prince Shotoku in Japan or a King Srongtsen Gampo in Tibet imports Buddhism into a new realm, or a Mahinda Thera brings it to the local king's attention. It spreads like wildfire among the middle and upper classes, but it then takes five to six hundred years for a Shinran or a Nichiren to develop it into a form that appeals to the masses.

After an initial period of spreading among the Asian elite, Buddhism gradually became popular among a wider cross-section of society as new, simplified versions of the dharma, such as Pure Land and Nichiren Buddhism, evolved. Needless to say, as time progressed, these popular traditions inevitably developed their own deeper layers of complexity. Indeed, by the time of the T'ang dynasty (618-907 CE) in China, it was thought that the majority of monks were from a peasant background (Singhal 1984:90).

But by then, of course, Chinese Buddhism was well on its way to the stage of respectability and establishment. The attraction that Buddhism seems to hold for an educated middle class appears to be a specific feature of a Buddhism still mainly engaged in representation and relational positioning. Of course, as indicated above, such a description perfectly fits western Buddhism in general, and South African Buddhism in particular.

And in the very beginning, in the days of the Buddha? Even then, it was accepted that receptivity to Buddhist teachings was differentiated. The *Anguttaranikaya*, for example, describes how not everyone who hears the dhamma will benefit from it (Woodward 1979:103-104). Theoretically, of course, the sangha was open to all, even to notorious criminals such as Angulimala. But who actually listened to and conversed with the Buddha and who actually joined the order?

Here I am indebted to the work of Sarao (1989), who has indexed the settlements and persons mentioned in the Vinaya and Sutta Pitakas of the Pali Canon according to a variety of criteria. By reinterpreting Sarao's data in the light of the above discussion, we can obtain a fairly clear picture of who the early Buddhists were. In appendices II and VI of his work, Sarao classifies the place-names of all settlements mentioned in the Pali canon into 173 urban and 49 rural places and indicates where and how often they are mentioned in the canon. For the sake of brevity, only the ten most frequently occurring centers in each category are listed in the following table:

Urban settlements

- | | | | | |
|----|---------------------|----------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 1. | Savatthi - 13772. | Baranasi - 8013. | Rajagaha - 5664. | Vesali - 243 |
| 5. | Takkasila - 1476. | Kapilavatthu - 1177. | Mithila - 1098. | Kosambi - 1079. |
| | Pataliputta - 6610. | Alavi - 60 | | |

Rural settlements

- | | | | | |
|----|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| 1. | Ñaika - 322. | Pataligama - 183. | Beluva - 164. | Icchanangala - 155. |
| | Andhakavinda - 96. | Uruvela - 97. | Kotigama - 88. | Sala and Hatthigama - 6 |
| 9. | Candalakappa and Ekanala - 510. | Bhandagama, Dunnivittha and Thuna - 4 | | |

Perhaps we should not be too surprised: if someone were to do the same analysis on the Bible or the Koran, one would expect the names "Jerusalem" and "Mecca" to crop up quite often. Also, some of these cities are highly dependent on a single part of the canon for their high numbers. Baranasi (Benares), for example, owes its second position to the fact that it is mentioned 712 times in the Jatakas. Nevertheless, we can see that cities play a more important part in the Pali Canon than villages.

There are other clues to the urban genesis of Buddhism. Harris (1991:108), in his analysis of the relationship between Buddhism and modern environmentalism, remarks that the *Cakkavatisihanadasutta*

. . . describes an idealized future in which the degradation of human nature has been reversed and humans live to 80 000 years of age. This time is said to be right for the return of a new wheel-turning king (*cakkavati*). In *Jambudvīpa* cities and towns are so close to one another that a cock can comfortably fly from one to the next. In this perfect world only urban and suburban environments are left. The jungle has been fully conquered.

To the extent that we can identify urban life with the bourgeoisie, all this shows that early Buddhism was favored by an urban middle-class elite. And yet, early Buddhism did not favor city life: in the *Anguttaranikaya*, for example, we find a comparison between the city and the jungle, in the latter's favor (Hare 1979: 223-227), and elsewhere it is said that "the way of going forth is of the open air" (Woodward 1986:142).

But just as Romanticism received its first impetus from the dry intellectualism of the Aufklärung and the grimy reality of the industrial revolution, so can we see this idealization of life outside the city as being, paradoxically, an indication of the urban origins of the early Buddhists.

In Appendix IV Sarao analyses the Jataka tales according to the form (man, animal, deva), place of birth, professional background and caste of the bodhisatta described in these 547 stories of the former lives of the Buddhas. Not all these stories give the bodhisatta's place of birth, but of those that do, 231 (85%) describe it as being in a city and just 40 (15%) as in a village. As far as the caste of the bodhisatta in that particular life is concerned, the following figures emerge from this analysis:

Brahmin (priestly caste) 163 (49.4%)
Khattiya (warrior caste) 90 (27.3%)
Vessa (merchant caste) 56 (17%)
Candalla and other low castes 21 (6.4%)
Total 330 (100%)

The most telling figures, however, come from Appendix V, where Sarao has compiled a list of all persons mentioned in the Pali Canon (a total of 2 485) and classified them according to the following categories:

- (1) Caste,
- (2) Rural/Urban,
- (3) Name of Settlement and
- (4) the parts of the Canon in which the person is mentioned.

If we look at the rural/urban category (analogous to the city/village category used above), we find the same bias towards urban life as in Appendices II and VI, with 1 302 persons described as urban, 83 as rural and 1 100 persons unclassified. If we remove the unclassified names, using the assumption that, if they could be classified, they would not alter the statistical picture significantly, this leads us to a staggering 94 percent as the percentage of people mentioned in the Pali canon who are described as "urban".

These figures are open to criticism on a number of scores. How exactly does Sarao distinguish between a "city" and a "village"? Certainly the cities of ancient India were not the vast conglomerations that bear that appellation today. Then, how do these categories relate to the "urban" and "rural" categories he employs elsewhere?

Sarao admits that it was sometimes necessary to use commentaries and other external texts to determine to which caste a given person belonged. This would imply that texts were used that might date to as much as a thousand years after the Buddha, and possibly indicates a reliance on an unknown oral history.

No thorough consideration is given to the difference between Pali and Chinese versions of these texts. One should also keep in mind that if a person is said in the texts to have come from a specific city, it might mean only that he came from that general area. It is possible, of course (though we are given no reason to believe so), that all or most of those listed here as "unknown" were actually members of the lower castes, in which case the statistical pictures would change completely. However, we can only work with the data that are available.

What is clear, however, is that these proportions cannot reflect the actual demographics of ancient India, unless we are to suppose that this pre-technological society had worked out how to survive with only 6 to 11 percent of its population (the low caste) engaged in food production. What this list and the above tables do reflect is the social milieu in which early Buddhists moved. In it we see, not India as it was, nor even the actual composition of the early Buddhist subculture, but certainly that subculture's self-image, its own understanding of itself.

We must therefore conclude that the early Buddhist subculture, at least in its own

eyes, consisted overwhelmingly of an educated urban elite, a group of Brahmins, rulers/administrators and some merchants, a group with access to knowledge, power and money. This is, of course, precisely the kind of group that Bell describes as the current generation of British Theravada Buddhists and that Coleman typifies as contemporary American Buddhists: in modern terms, the middle, even upper- middle, class. Which in apartheid South Africa meant whites.

It seems that Buddhism has had a special attraction for this social group from its earliest days, and it follows that Buddhism would be (and historically has been) most successful in highly literate cultures where this group is dominant. Conversely, Buddhism has not shown itself to be particularly adept at converting people living in pre-literate societies. Consider the Karen people: for hundreds of years, they have been sandwiched between the overwhelmingly Buddhist countries of Thailand and Burma, but the vast majority of them still practise their traditional "shamanistic" religion. Yet in little over a hundred years, Christianity has made deep inroads into Karen society.

Indeed, while this is not a comparative study, Buddhism and Christianity seem to be mirror images of each other as far as their missionary efforts are concerned. In a nutshell, Christianity has learned how to spread its message among people who are less advanced, at least in terms of the literary, and lately technological, culture that carries the Christian gospel. In its own terms of reference, of course, the non-Christian receiving culture may be quite sophisticated, but these terms are soon swept away. But Christianity has been less successful in spreading its message to cultures on an equal level of cultural development. Christian missionary efforts in the far east predate those in Africa by centuries, but,

Even though thousands of missionaries have spent their lives in China and Japan, and millions of dollars have gone to build schools, hospitals, churches and orphanages, the response has been slight. In Japan, Christians comprise less than one percent of the population. Chinese Christians are a tiny fraction of one percent. Chinese and Japanese cultures are sophisticated, complex and resilient. Their cultures are so coherent, powerful and adaptable that they have resisted or assimilated outside threats for thousands of years ... (Rambo 1993:36).

As a general rule, most Christian scholars of conversion agree that few conversions take place in areas with well-organized, literate religions supported by the economic, political and cultural powers of the region. Christianity gains few converts from Islam. In fact, few converts are made from any of the so-called world religions. The most "fertile" field of conversion in the missionary setting has been among the so-called animists, such as the various tribal groups in Africa, South America and India.

Yet it was precisely in such "sophisticated, complex and resilient" (and, one could add, urban and literate) cultures that Buddhism scored its major successes. Sri Lanka was already an urban-based civilization when Mahinda introduced Buddhism to it. The same was true to an even greater extent in China. Buddhism, we must conclude, is very good at disseminating its message to cultures that are at least on the same level of literary and technological development as the sending culture, but fails miserably at

converting the pre-literate.

After all this, it should come as no surprise to us that the modern expansion of Buddhism westwards displays the same tendencies once again to target the middle class and intelligentsia (the Vessa, Khattiya and Brahmin "castes" of western society) as its primary "market". Paul Badham (1994: 496) expresses it as follows:

Buddhism differs markedly from all other non-Christian religions in Britain in that its primary impact comes not through immigration but through western conversions. Deirdre Green points out that there is some evidence that Buddhism is 'the fastest growing religion in Britain at the present time'. It must be admitted that this growth is from a small base. One hundred and twenty Buddhist centers does not compare with 39 000 Christian churches, and their total UK membership of 27 000 is half that of the Hare Krishnas. However, it is significant that Buddhism is increasingly attracting intellectual interest among both philosophers and theologians as well as the religiously minded but metaphysically skeptical inquirer. Don Cupitt explicitly described his own position at one stage as being a form of Christian Buddhism, and in the philosophy of mind, Buddha's denial of the substantial self has been seen as anticipating many of the insights of post- Wittgensteinian philosophy. In a department of religious studies, Buddhism appears to be the only other faith to exercise a significant intellectual pull on Christian or post-Christian students.

Even the timing of the development of western Buddhism becomes intelligible if we accept that Buddhism has a particular appeal to this class. While there had been some western Buddhists and western Buddhist organizations in the first half of the twentieth century, the real "boom" only started the late 1950's. One could cite many reasons for this: the development of a "youth culture" (and a closely associated drug culture that fostered an interest in all kinds of altered states of consciousness), the relaxation by many western countries of visa requirements for Asian teachers, even the ease of communication with the widespread adoption of telephones, air travel and so on. But another factor may have played an even greater role: the gradual disappearance of the working class and the rise of the educated communication worker.

The affinity between Buddhism and the bourgeoisie also explains the predominance of whites in the South African Buddhist community. Under the apartheid system, whites were officially favored and successive governments made concerted efforts to have "poor whites" elevated into the middle class. Educational facilities for whites were far superior to those for blacks.

In South Africa, there was an officially sanctioned convergence between class and race, with whites forming the upper and middle classes, and blacks, coloured and Indians occupying, at best, the lower-middle class, and more likely the working class slots. Similar situations exist in other countries, of course, but in South Africa it was bolstered by direct government intervention. It was therefore only natural for white South Africans, who constituted the middle class and much, perhaps most, of the intelligentsia, to be the first major group to evince an interest in Buddhism.

This does not mean that the situation will remain like this for ever: it will be interesting to see whether an interest in Buddhism comes about once a black middle class arises in the country (as is slowly happening already) and black intellectuals are relieved of the burden of having to act as what Sono (1994) calls the "political intelligentsia". In terms of the process described above, such a development would seem highly likely, but it is impossible to predict when this might actually happen.

To explain why Buddhism has this special appeal for the middle-class forces one into the realm of speculation. What is it about Buddhism that appeals to the educated elite rather than to the masses? If we saw this pattern only in one instance of Buddhist transplantation, we might be able to explain it in extrinsic terms.

We might then be able to explain the predominance of high-caste persons in the Buddhist scriptures in terms of tendencies in ancient literature to feature the mighty rather than the humble. We might point to the disintegration of the sociopolitical status quo with the expansion of the Magadhan empire, the precursor to the even greater Mauryan empire, and so on.

But that way is not open to us, for the pattern is too pervasive. It appears and reappears throughout Buddhist history and this indicates that it requires an explanation that deals with the problems in intrinsic terms, intrinsic to Buddhism, that is. Perhaps Ninian Smart (1984:582) can be read as referring to all of Buddhism when he writes about Zen:

Zen accords with some intellectual and artistic tendencies in the modern West. Its anti-intellectualism is a blessing to those who have intellectual difficulties about the truth of religion. It thus has a special appeal to the intellectual, since it is precisely the intellectual who has intellectual doubts.

Something of this affinity for the intellectual and commercial elite of society can be seen to exist paradigmatically in the very foundation myth of Buddhism, when one contrasts it with those of other religious and philosophical traditions: before they embarked on their respective careers, Jesus was a carpenter, Confucius a minor bureaucrat, and Mohammed led caravans across the desert. But the Buddha was born a prince, born to rule and educated accordingly. Even after his renunciation he sought out the two greatest philosophers known in the region to further his education.

Something of the aristocratic tenor of his upbringing seems to have survived to this day in the system of thought named after him. To understand, even partially, a concept like conditioned co-arising (*paticcasamuppada*) requires a certain level of education: Buddhism was not designed from the outset as a simple abandonment of the self to faith, gaining philosophical depth only when later circumstances required it. On the contrary, it started where Upanishadic thought of the day left off, and built an imposing philosophical system on this long before any thought was given to the spiritual needs of the masses.

The Buddhist philosophical tradition is deeply counter-intuitive. In the end, perhaps, the enlightened person will see mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers, but before that, he or she must learn to see mountains as non-mountains, rivers as non-rivers. Buddhist teachings talk about rebirth with no "thing" actually being transmitted;

about insubstantiality and impermanence where our experience is of substantial objects and if not permanence, then at least relative stability. It even says that happiness is suffering!

These are hardly doctrines designed to capture a mass audience. They are sophisticated philosophical musings that in structure, if not necessarily in content, are much like those produced by the Stoic and Epicurean philosophical schools in the Hellenistic world. Neither Stoicism nor Epicureanism ever developed a mass following; the wonder is that Buddhism eventually did, by developing a popular tradition that could serve other religious needs, without ever quite losing its links to the original mystical/philosophical impulse.

With such a paradigm for its genesis, it is hardly surprising that Buddhism continues to exhibit an elitist streak, or that it should be the educated elite of any given society that first shows an interest in it. To understand such teachings, even only at the conceptual level, requires a certain amount of initial understanding of the conceptual basis on which Buddhist arguments rest, and this would generally be provided by education.

In various Buddhist texts we can find examples of illiterate or otherwise uneducated people attaining enlightenment. Hui Neng, the sixth patriarch of the Chinese Ch'an (Jap. Zen) tradition, is perhaps the most celebrated example. But Hui Neng went on to produce the highly erudite Platform Sutra. We can see the claim that he could not read as a rhetorical counterpoint to much of the scholarly Buddhism of the time, which was more concerned with the copying of sutras than with re-enlightenment. Undercutting all we have learnt in our conventional education is part of what the Buddhist philosophical tradition entails, but before such an action can be undertaken, there first has to *be* a previous conventional education.

Just as modern environmentalism arose largely as a city-based movement, so philosophical Buddhism, as opposed to popular Buddhism, is an intellectual revolt against intellectualism; rationalism calmly and *rationaly* destroying itself and coming out of the process as a trans-rationalism rather than irrationality.

In view of this, it should not surprise us that the first people in a given society who show an interest in Buddhism are its bourgeoisie and even its elite. It is not because of their elite status itself that they are attracted to Buddhism; but rather it is their level of education (always relative to the time and place in which they live) that influences both their social status and their interest in Buddhism.

It is irrelevant in this context whether this education or the lack of it was obtained by means of family tradition and social customs (as in the caste structure of ancient India), forced upon the population by legislative inequalities in providing education (as in South Africa) or won through sheer ability in an egalitarian society (the modern west, at least in theory). All that counts here is that a group of people have obtained the factual knowledge and analytical skills that will both make them more affluent than the societal average and enable them to appreciate the philosophical subtleties of Buddhism. This relationship, one suspects, would hold even in the case of the "self-made man" who acquired an education outside the confines of formal educational structures.

In this sense only can we call Buddhism elitist: in the short term it will tend to create representations of itself that lean towards the radical philosophical tradition and thereby attract people who, because of their relative level of education, are able to handle such a representation. Only once this "elitist" Buddhism has gone through the process of relational positioning towards other traditions present at the time and enters into a phase where it becomes an established religion does a more widely based form of Buddhism emerge.

Thus, from a given position early on in the process of transplantation, we see Buddhism forming new representations and engaging in relational positioning, and nearly all the people doing this are highly educated, middle-class people. We compare this to an old, settled Buddhist society like China or Tibet, where Buddhism is spread across a wide spectrum of the population, and are led to ask why Buddhism in this new society exhibits such an elitist streak. But a due consideration shows us that this is a necessary phase in the development of the newly transplanted Buddhism. It stems from something intrinsic to Buddhism, something we might describe as its particular genius: its insistence on maintaining a link to the Ur-experience of enlightenment, as known and transmitted by Siddharta Gautama.

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Being well, well-being, being a well being

The next two articles were published on a short-lived web site called Collective Dharma Insight.

When we ask what "well-being" could mean in a Buddhist context, immediately we see a huge gap opening up within Buddhism. Buddhism was founded as a philosophy and way of life for a handful of heroic men (and later women) who regarded anything short of nirvana as non-well-being.

It cannot be emphasized often enough: The Buddha never had any intention of founding a religious mass movement to be called "Buddhism". His teachings were reserved for the monks and nuns who were prepared to ditch everything in a single-minded pursuit of Ultimate Well-being, nirvana. Lay followers had their place, which was to support the monks and nuns materially. Even a prominent lay supporter like king Bimbisara was only allowed to hear a sutra recited when he was on his deathbed.

This has left Buddhism without any sort of theology of a lesser kind of well-being.

Take Buddhist teachings seriously (and literally), and there is no justification for the sense of well-being that comes with eating a simple, hearty meal, reading a good book, feeling the warm sun on your skin. There is no justification for rejoicing in the love of a good woman (or man), or on hearing the laughter of children. All of those are, at best, dukkha, and at worst, hindrances to the attainment of nirvana. A real Buddhist drops those things, renounces them, puts them away as childish preoccupations.

Now, we all sort of believe that enlightenment, nirvana, call it what you will, is real and that attaining it is possible. If not, there would be little sense in attaching the label "Buddhist" to ourselves. But most of us are not quite ready to take the plunge, to drop everything and devote our lives entirely to a single-minded search for it. The question is, what constitutes well-being until then? Is there such a thing as "the good life" for the luke-warm Buddhist?

At this stage, up pipes a voice from the peanut gallery: "But isn't Buddhism the Middle Way? The middle between extreme asceticism and extreme indulgence?" Well done, grasshopper, that's what it says in all the textbooks. There's just one problem. Try advocating extreme asceticism today and see how quickly you get locked up in the nearest institution for the criminally feeble-minded. In the context of his time, the Buddha was a moderate. But times have changed and goalposts have shifted. Today, the traditional Buddhist monastic life has itself become an extreme endpoint, and a new middle needs to be found.

One strategy that could be used is to scour the scriptures for passages that seem to support a lesser form of well-being, ignore their historical context and blow them up, exaggerate their prominence way beyond their traditional importance. You see a lot of that in contemporary Buddhism. Who hasn't come across that line where the Buddha says that "having good friends is not half, but the whole of the holy life"? It sounds very nice, but let us not forget that the sangha was set up on strict lines of seniority. We are here not talking about an association of equals (which is what we nowadays think of as friendship) but of a kind of monastic mentorship programme.

Alternatively, we can do what religions have always done. If your philosophy lacks something and someone else's has what you lack, you steal it. Buddhism has been remarkably adept at this. If Buddhism didn't give much advice on everyday life, then one could look for it in the works of Confucius, or the Laws of Manu, or whatever other resource your culture had to offer. Contradictions and incompatibilities between the various systems were simply accepted as a fact of life.

But for the western Buddhism now taking shape before us, this simply won't do. We remain deeply rooted in a Christian culture that insists on there being a single integrated system of thought and belief. Deeper still, we are still trapped in Aristotle's dualistic logic. Black or white, yes or no. No third and fourth positions. Even if we personally reject the Christian religion that was that culture's most visible manifestation, we are still bound by the deeper cultural restraints.

The self-appointed avant-garde can talk a great game about postmodernism, the variety of narratives and so on, but if they were really free from Christianity and Aristotle, why did they feel the need to gather all their narratives, bundle them up into a

single system, and call it by the single name "postmodernism"? It is a promising beginning, but cultural roots run deep. Western society, perhaps unique among cultures, insists that philosophical reflection must be presented as a clear-cut, unambiguous system, an "ism". Call it the west's true original sin, our "Ismism"

Therefore, if we are going to look elsewhere for guidance on living the good life as a lay Buddhist, we need to find some sort of well-developed philosophy that deals with it and is, at least on some levels, compatible with Buddhism. Of the major religions, Judaism probably has the best-developed theology of common-everyday well-being, closely followed by Islam. But both receive their philosophies from the basic idea of the distant-but-close personal deity, an idea which cannot be imported into Buddhism without a lot of philosophical dexterity. Hinduism also gives well-being a place in its scheme of things: kama (literally, pleasure) is a perfectly acceptable goal, it says, at a certain stage of life. But again, the broader stages-of-life scheme in which this occurs is tied up with so many other Hindu doctrines that it would be difficult (though not impossible) to extract just that one aspect.

I would like to propose another candidate: Epicurus of Samos, the Greek philosopher. Epicureanism has received a bad press over the centuries, mostly from late Hellenistic and early Christian writers who were going through an ascetic phase of their own at the time. But Epicurus (whose name means "the good advisor") was never an advocate of unbridled consumerism, nor the advocate of wild orgies of excess. He did teach that pleasure was the basis of all human action:

"I do not know how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste, withdraw the pleasures of love, withdraw the pleasures of hearing, and withdraw the pleasurable emotions caused by the sight of a beautiful form"

But what he had in mind were simple, easily attainable, everyday pleasures. To eat some goat's cheese and drink spring water while sitting in the winter sunshine, at ease with the world, that was the Epicurean ideal. One needs food to survive, and eating is pleasurable. But while one should not spurn extravagant dishes if those are what is available, neither should one become dependent on them and refuse to eat simpler, but still nutritious food. Epicurus allowed marriage and sex as a civic duty, but regarded sex as one of the lesser pleasures since it was not required for individual survival. It could be avoided with no adverse effects (It seems he was not entirely consistent in this: not only did he raise a family, but he also had a relationship with the courtesan Leontis. We may never know the details of this relationship).

Beyond physical pleasure, there was mental pleasure derived from the company of like-minded people and above all from giving up all fear of divine retribution and of death. Pleasure was not a mere physical sensation, but is tied up with wisdom, honor and justice in a complicated causal web of relations not unlike that put forward by the Buddha:

"It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking, when, for instance, the man is not able to live wisely, though he lives honorably and justly, it is impossible for him to live a

pleasant life."

Mental pleasure at the highest level was *ataraxis*, freedom from mental disturbance. Wait a minute, doesn't that start to sound familiar? Can we not imagine the Greek philosopher meeting the Indian arahant and exchanging a few knowing nods and smiles?

Actually, we know very little about Epicurus. According to Diogenes Laertius, he wrote three hundred books. But only about 70 to 80 pages of these have survived. Even so, from these and from the writings of his followers, we can reconstruct his philosophy. He followed the atomic theory of Democritus, but introduced an element of free will into it.

Like Buddhism, Epicureanism is a finely balanced mixture of freedom and predetermination. Epicurus believed that gods might well exist, but if they did, their perfection lay in their complete ignorance of and non-involvement with mere earthlings. Therefore, to fear the gods and try to appease them was superstitious and useless. Serious people should rather turn towards the enjoyment of a sober, but not severe, lifestyle and the attainment of a serene mind. Once again, we see Buddhism and Epicureanism moving in parallel. The difference lies in what one regards as a sober (i.e. middle way) lifestyle.

In the Buddha's India and the Greece of Epicurus, the extreme of indulgence was much the same in both places. But the extreme of asceticism in India was far more developed, far more extreme, than in Greece. Diogenes the Cynic was probably as near as any Greek ever came to the ideal of the Indian sannyasin, but even his lifestyle would be called lax by Indian standards (Diogenes did not avoid sex, for example - he scandalized Athenian society by performing it in public).

So, what we can see from this is that the concept of a middle way is a social construct that depends on the extremes between which it is placed. These extremes vary from one era to another. Admittedly, the extreme of indulgence seems to be depressingly the same everywhere, but even that can vary. Epicurus freed some of his slaves in his will, but he seems to have had no scruples about owning them in the first place. A middle way is a living, evolving conceptualization, which needs to be constantly created and recreated as circumstances change. It is not something that was laid down once and for all in Iron Age India.

The Buddha seemed to have recognized this: on his deathbed he gave his monks permission to alter or abolish the minor regulations. Unfortunately, nobody had the presence of mind to ask which regulations were minor, and it was later on decided that they had better hang on to all of them! An unfortunate failure of nerve on the part of the arahants, it seems. When the Mahayana arose several centuries later and felt it necessary to make changes that would lead to greater lay involvement, the result was a schism that remains with us to this day.

Like the Buddha some 200 years earlier, Epicurus seems to have died of food poisoning, a common enough cause of death in those days, when he was already suffering from kidney stones. But physical pain did not lead to mental suffering. On his deathbed, he wrote in a letter to his friend Idomeneus:

"We have written this letter to you on a happy day to us, which is also the last day of our life. For strangury has attacked me, and also a dysentery, so violent that nothing can be added to the violence of my sufferings. But the cheerfulness of my mind, which arises from there collection of all my philosophical contemplation, counterbalances all these afflictions."

We should not push the parallels too far. Epicurus apparently believed that death meant annihilation, a view that the Buddha specifically rejected. But still . . . Over the centuries, as we saw above, Buddhists have adopted insights from other philosophies, and that included the adoption of personalities. Tibetan demons were tamed and re-appointed as Protectors of the Dharma. Chinese demi-gods were reinterpreted as manifestations of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Perhaps in the distant future, our descendants will light incense to the memory of the bodhisattva Epicurus, who, out of his infinite compassion, taught the dharma of everyday well-being.

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Peaceful Mind, Mindful of Peace

What is peace? Is it simply the absence of war and conflict? If that is the case, then promoting peace is easy. All we have to do is prevent the conditions that lead to war. Sure, that is still a lot of work, but it is not difficult. A lot of the peacemaking efforts that we can see around the world are based on this idea. If we can prevent war from happening, then what is left must be peace. Even if the people living in that "peace" are starving and riddled with preventable diseases, even if they live in constant fear for their lives from government agents and common criminals, well, at least their government has not declared war on anyone.

Or is peace something in its own right? Is it perhaps something that can be developed without reference to its polar opposite? Is peace purely a situation that refers to a relationship, a state of affairs between you and me, or is it also something within ourselves, a specific state of mind that will naturally lead to peace in our relationships?

The Dhammapada tells us, right in its opening chapter, that hatred does not stop because of more hatred. Instead, hatred only stops when it is displaced by love. By analogy, we can therefore say that there can never be a "war to end all wars". War only breeds further war, even if it is a more subtle kind. Only when it is replaced by peace does war fade out of the picture. Peace, therefore, is not the opposite of war. It is a different set of factors that negates war. Think of it this way: water is not the opposite of fire, but can extinguish it. Fire is not the opposite of water, but can evaporate it. Water

and fire affect each other in so many ways, but each exists, for now, as a temporary bundle of factors with its own reality. You can define fire without mentioning water; you can describe water without referring to fire.

So, if you and I are at peace, we cannot be at war. Now the question arises, can I be at peace with you if I am in a state of war within? Oh, I can pretend that I am, but that is just changing the open war into a covert one, a Cold War between you and me. Only if both of us are at peace within our own minds can we be at peace with one another. If even the slightest bit of inner war remains within one of us, there will be war. Not necessarily the violent war of blows and bullets, but at the very least, the war of innuendo, of sarcasm, of wittiness at other people's expense, of thinking highly of ourselves compared to the other. Yes, it is an improvement over physical violence, but it is not yet peace.

What is this inner war that leads to the outer war? In Buddhist terms, it is a contradiction between the way things are and the way we want them to be. Everything is impermanent: I want them to last forever just as they are now. Everything is impersonal and insubstantial: I really want my "soul" to be real and substantial. All is unsatisfactory: Never mind that, let's have some fun!

We really want things to be different than they are, and we are disappointed time and time again. And those "things" include you and even me. I want you to be different. I want myself to be different. And the universe, which cares absolutely nothing at all about my wishes, just keeps on going as it was going to anyway. Never mind that, though. If things don't go the way I want them to, I will simply refuse to see them. In psychology, this is called Cognitive Dissonance. The genius of the Buddha was to see just how deep this refusal to see what is right there in front of us goes, just how much it colors every thought we have. We are at war with the way things really are, at war with reality itself. Small wonder, then, that I am at war with you!

But suppose I could, somehow, learn to see reality as it is. Suppose I could stop wishing that things were fundamentally different. Then at least I would be at peace. And I might show you how to do the same. Then there would be peace between us. No doubt you see where this is leading to. True peace is only possible between two perfectly enlightened beings. Peace is the natural habitat of Buddhas. The rest of us are at war. Perfectly enlightened beings tend to be a little thin on the ground at the moment. This is, after all, the Kali Yuga.

So, where does that leave us, the imperfectly unenlightened beings? Taking one step at a time, that's where it leaves us. Breathing in, breathing out. Putting one foot in front of the other. When sitting, just sit; when eating, just eat; when writing article for CDI, just write the damn article. There is a little peace in that, a small, temporary armistice. string the little pieces of peace together, and somewhere in the far future they will outnumber the moments of war. And permanent, everlasting, universal peace? Put such thoughts from your mind. Take the next step. Breathe in, breathe out...

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About the author

Michel Clasquin-Johnson is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of South Africa and was, until recently, the entire Buddhological establishment on the continent of Africa (There's a new guy down at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University: he writes good stuff but let's wait and see if he sticks with it). He lives in Pretoria, South Africa with his wife, son and two motorcycles. He likes to think that he practices Buddhism (in his own way) as well as thinking about it. The entire Buddhist world disagrees, but is too polite to say so.

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