

BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES ON TRUTH IN OTHER RELIGIONS: PAST AND PRESENT

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[Recent Vatican documents affirm a unique salvific efficacy for the Catholic Church by establishing its representations of the Absolute as uniquely close to the Absolute. But what is the human problem necessitating salvation? Buddhist traditions have defined that problem as the human tendency to absolutize and cling to representations, in daily life and in religious reflection. The author traces the history of Buddhist perspectives on other religions in light of that central concern, concluding with a suggestion toward a Buddhist theology of religions that avoids relativism without privileging any particular representation of the Absolute.]

SINCE THE TIME THAT Gautama the Buddha passed away (ca. fifth century B.C.E.), Buddhism has had no single institutional hierarchy with a leader at the top.¹ Most of the Buddha's teaching was situation-specific, unsystematized, open to further interpretation over time in contexts of evolving individual and communal practice. Adaptations of language, cultural expression and practice followed upon the recurrent influx of new cultures into the Buddhist fold, especially from the time of King Ashoka in the third century B.C.E.

Thus, Buddhist traditions vary much across history and cultures. But

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their views on salvific truth in religions are all related to Buddha Gautama's fundamental teaching of the Four Holy Truths: the Holy Truths of suffering, the conditioned arising of suffering, ultimate freedom from suffering, and the path to ultimate freedom. According to the Four Holy Truths, the core problem of persons is their subconscious tendency to absolutize their own representations of self, other, and religious objects, mistaking the representations for the realities and thus painfully misreacting to them through entrenched habits of clinging and aversion.

The Buddha, in his recorded responses to individuals from other religious and philosophical traditions, established for his followers two basic paradigms of response to non-Buddhists. On the one hand, non-Buddhist traditions came under the Buddha's critique insofar as they might contribute to the very problem he had diagnosed, by absolutizing their religious objects and concepts of self as objects of clinging or aversion. This paradigm was developed by the Buddha's scholastic followers into critiques of non-Buddhist religious systems.

On the other hand, the Buddha was skilled at speaking his truths in remarkably accessible ways, often communicating them to others through their own (non-Buddhist) modes of thought. This second, inclusive paradigm for relating to non-Buddhists inspired a tendency within Buddhism to explore how others' symbol-systems and modes of thought might serve to communicate, in their own ways, the very truths the Buddha had taught. This tendency became formalized in the special doctrine of "skillful means," which informed the successful missionary activity of Buddhism in the first millennium C.E. as it spread to the cultures of East Asia and Tibet. The doctrine of skillful means also supported mystical, universally inclusive views of ongoing Buddhist revelation that stand in tension with the paradigm of Scholastic criticism of non-Buddhists.

Contemporary Buddhist scholars who relate Buddhist truth to other religions, such as Gunapala Dharmasiri, Buddhadasa, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, still draw upon those two basic Buddhist paradigms: Scholastic critique of the other, or inclusion of the other through skillful means. Recent Vatican documents articulate a Roman Catholic perspective on truth in other religions. I believe that a contemporary Buddhist approach to other religions can take seriously both the Vatican's critique of relativism and the traditional Buddhist critique of the human tendency to absolutize representations.

The following topics, then, in order, are elaborated in my article: (1) Gautama Buddha's Four Holy Truths; (2) the Buddha's two paradigms of response to others' traditions: criticism of their views or inclusion of them through skillful means; (3) Scholastic development of critique of the other; (4) developments in Buddhist skillful means for conversion or mystical inclusion of the other; (5) contemporary expressions of those paradigms of

critique or inclusion, and finally (6) suggestions toward the construction of a Buddhist theology of religions in response to recent Vatican writings.

THE BUDDHA'S FOUR HOLY TRUTHS

The First Two Holy Truths: Suffering, and its Conditioned Arising

The Buddha taught that all experience of ordinary beings is laced with suffering, dissatisfaction, and anxiety whether obvious or subconscious.² Ordinary persons are existentially imprisoned in dissatisfying patterns of thought and reaction that center upon a false sense of self misconceived as substantial, unchanging, isolate, and autonomous.

Each person, it is said, feels as if an autonomous self somewhere within the person, thinks, feels, and reacts—a “self” within or behind one’s mind who controls or creates one’s thoughts. But, the Buddha taught, in meditation, when rigorous attention is directed toward that very sense of self, no such substantial, autonomous self can be found. What is found are simply patterns of thought, including thoughts of “self,” causally conditioned by prior habits of thought. There is no self-existent, substantial me autonomously thinking thoughts of oneself and others. Rather, patterns of thought each moment create the impression of “me” and “other” to which our minds and bodies grasp and react. This confusion (Sanskrit: *avidya*) mistaking inaccurate thoughts of self and other for the actualities conditions a subconscious habit of clinging to self, of seeking to prop up or protect self in every situation. And that pattern of self-clinging, in diverse and changing circumstances, transforms into a host of suffering emotions through which each person continually struggles to prop up and protect his or her false sense of self.

The stream of self-clinging thought and emotion—anxiety, hostility, jealousy, pride, fear, etc.—is suffering. And because it projects narrow repre-

² Buddhist technical terms in parentheses throughout this essay are in Sanskrit. Useful introductions to Buddhism include Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (New York: Cambridge University, 1990); *Radiant Mind*, ed. Jean Smith (New York: Riverhead, 1999); and *Buddhism and Asian History*, ed. Joseph Kitagawa and Mark Cummings (New York: MacMillan, 1989). Connections between fundamental Buddhist concepts and meditation practices are accessibly explained for Theravada insight meditation in Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987). For Tibetan Buddhist meditation, see Reginald Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), Lama Surya Das, *Awakening the Buddha Within: Eight Steps to Enlightenment* (New York: Broadway, 1997); Ken McLeod, *Wake Up to Your Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001); and for Zen meditation, in T.P. Kasulis, *Zen Action, Zen Person* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1987).

sentations of others as “friend,” “enemy,” or “stranger” that hide their fullness and mystery, we continually misreact to others, causing ourselves and others further misery. The Buddha taught that those patterns of thought and emotion are one aspect of the conditioned arising of suffering. The other aspect is non-virtuous *karma*, i.e. non-virtuous actions of body, speech, and mind propelled by those patterns.

For example, in a moment of intense anger at someone, very quickly a narrow, inaccurate image of self and other is projected (e.g., oneself as simply righteous wronged one, the other as simply a demonic being). That projection is accompanied by a painful mental feeling. From that projection and feeling, the emotive energy of rage takes shape in the wish to hurt the other by word or physical action. That intention, and any actions following from it, are an example of nonvirtuous karma. Karma is activity of mind and body reacting to one’s own thought-made projections of self and other, unaware that the projections have been mistaken for the actualities. As we react in that way, it is taught, we make new karma, i.e., further imprint the habit of experiencing the world through our own projections and reacting to them unawares.

A person’s inner capacity for happiness or misery is explained as the fruition of karma, the outflow of past habits of thought, feeling, and reaction. Non-virtue (self-clinging, hostility, intolerance, etc.) patterns the subconscious mind for unhappiness, misery, even in seemingly pleasant circumstances. Virtue (generosity, kindness, patience, etc.) patterns the subconscious mind for happiness, well-being, often even in seemingly difficult circumstances.

In classical Buddhist writing, the flow of uncontrolled thought that projects a confused, distressing human world is extrapolated through ancient Indian cosmology into diverse realms of repeated rebirth. Buddhist cosmologies serve to describe both the moment-by-moment existential “worlds” of human emotive projection (“hell” in the moment of anger, “heaven” in the moment of kindness) and worlds of embodiment over different lifetimes, conceived as realms of existence distinct from the human realm (hellish, ghostly, godly realms, etc.).³

Thus, having seen deeply into the various dimensions of suffering (the First Holy Truth), Gautama Buddha’s enlightened mind is said to have discerned the Second Holy Truth: the conditioned causes of suffering within the minds and bodies of beings, the self-clinging patterns of thought,

³ See Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism* 32–46, 53–59; Herbert Guenther, *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma* (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1976) chap. 4. For a classical Buddhist source, see *Abhidharma-kosa-bhasyam* by Vasubandhu, vol. 2, trans. Louis de La Vallee Poussin; English trans. Leo Pruden (Berkeley: Asian Humanities, 1988) chaps. 3 and 4.

projection, and reaction that further imprint the habit of experiencing the world through projection and reaction. If these root causes and their subconscious tendencies are not fully cut, there can be no final freedom from cycling through lifetimes of confused projection and reaction, the flow of suffering experience called *samsara*.⁴ If those root causes and tendencies are fully cut, then freedom from bondage to self-clinging and uncontrolled rebirth is attained. Such is understood to be the attainment of the Buddha, his accomplished disciples, and their accomplished disciples to the present time.

When human beings are so little conscious of the extent to which they mistake inaccurate representations of self and other each moment for the actualities, it is questionable whether they are conscious of the subtle ways in which specifically religious representations (of God, good, evil, etc.) function to further obscure rather than express reality, further contributing to individual and social mechanisms of self-clinging and aversion instead of ameliorating them.

For this reason Buddhist scholars, when they have encountered any religion that emphasizes prayer or ritual directed to a seemingly external divine power without explaining clearly how the subtlest subconscious tendencies of self-clinging are thereby cut, have been skeptical that the actual causes of suffering are thereby addressed. The proof is in behavior: does the other religion provide means through which committed followers actually learn, in the very moment of intense anger or self-grasping, to see through the projections of those emotions, to come to rest in equanimity, empathy, and compassion for all similarly trapped in projections of anger and grasping? If so, that religion would have some real knowledge of salvific truth as it is understood by Buddhists, the truth that frees. Otherwise not.

The Holy Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Nirvana)

The Buddha likened the sufferings of mind and body to a fire that burns as long as its causes are present.⁵ When those causes are removed the fire ceases, and infinite, clear, empty space appears, unobstructed by fire, smoke, or ashes. Likewise, suffering does not cease until its root causes are cut: the confusion that mistakes one's thought-made representations of self and other for absolute realities and the habit of clinging to those representations. When such confusion, clinging and their subtlest propensities

⁴ On the conditioned arising of suffering described here, see Joseph Goldstein's essay "Dependent Origination" in *Radiant Mind* 80–85; Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism* 54–60.

⁵ *Adittapariyaya sutta*, Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1974) 95.

are completely cut, the karmic process of suffering ceases, revealing an infinite, open, unconditioned dimension utterly beyond the causes of suffering, nirvana. Direct, embodied knowledge of that is called *bodhi*, which can be translated “transcendent knowing,” “enlightenment,” or “awakening.” The fullest such realization is that of a Buddha, referred to as *samyak-sam-bodhi*, “complete, perfected enlightenment.”

Buddhist texts often point to nirvana by negating what obstructs the vision of it. Nirvana is the cessation of causes of suffering; it is the unconditioned (*asamskrta*), the uncreated. Sometimes positive metaphors are used, connoting absolute safety, refuge, and release: nirvana is freedom (*vimukti*), supreme bliss, the eternal (*amrta*), the infinite (*ananta*), in which awareness is signless, boundless, all-luminous; it is utter peace, the island amidst the flood, the cool cave of shelter. It is not an eternal thing, soul, or entity. Rather, it is eternal like unconditioned, boundless space, whose essential nature is never changed by wind, cloud, or storm.⁶

But nirvana’s most striking qualities are those embodied by holy beings far on the path to its realization, described in stories or met in person. Such qualities include deep inner peace, stability of attention, profound receptivity to others, equanimity viewing all persons as equal in their causes of suffering and potential for freedom, unconditional love and compassion, joy, humor, humility, penetrating insight that sees through others’ projections, and remarkable ability to communicate such wisdom to others as they become receptive. Such qualities of enlightenment are undivided from the qualities cultivated on the path to its realization.⁷

Holy Truth of the Path

Summing up the Buddha’s teaching thus far, there are conditioned and unconditioned aspects of being. In ego-centered life, the conditioned pro-

⁶ Rahula, *What Buddha Taught* 35–44; Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism* 60–68; Stephen Beyer, *The Buddhist Experience: Sources and Interpretations* (Encino, Calif.: Dickenson, 1974) 199–206; John Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet* (Albany: SUNY, 1997) 27–28, 320–22; *The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (Digha Nikaya), trans. by Maurice Walshe (Boston: Wisdom, 1995) 179–80. On nirvana as an unconditioned reality (not merely an extinction of conditioned existence), see Buddhagosa, *The Path of Purification* (Visuddhimagga), trans. Bhikku Nyanamoli (Colombo: A. Semage, 1964) 578–82, 819–20.

⁷ On qualities of enlightenment, see Goldstein and Kornfield, *Heart of Wisdom* 61–77, 127–37; Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism* 25–31; A. K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980) 81–106; His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso (14th Dalai Lama), *Opening the Eye of New Awareness*, trans. Donald Lopez (Boston: Wisdom, 1999) 89–99. For stories communicating such qualities, see, e.g., Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (New York: Anchor, 1968); Surya Das, *Snow Lion’s Turquoise Mane* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992); *The Roaring Stream*, ed. Nelson Foster (Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco, 1996).

cesses of mind and body, dominated by confusion and self-clinging, obscure the unconditioned aspect, nirvana. But the Buddha taught practices to re-pattern mind and body to permit the unconditioned, nirvanic aspect to be realized. All such practices as taught by the Buddha and generations of his followers are referred to as the Dharma, the holy pattern, the path to enlightenment. Put another way, the Dharma is the revelation of the unconditioned through a Buddha's mind and body, imparting practices through which others' minds and bodies may be similarly opened to the unconditioned, so as to reveal the way to freedom afresh, again and again, from the Buddha's time to the present.

Only a Buddha, someone who entirely transcends the causes of suffering and abides in such freedom, can fully demonstrate the way to it for others. And only devoted reliance upon that way in practice (the Dharma), supported by a community of such practitioners (called Sangha), can open oneself to the same transcendent freedom. Thus the path to such freedom begins by taking refuge in those three "jewels:" Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. Buddhist perspectives on other religions follow from that understanding. Do other religions know and impart to their followers precise practices to realize freedom from the subtlest, moment by moment habits of confusion, clinging, and aversion?

The Buddhist path following upon such refuge is summarized as a three-fold cultivation: of virtue (*shila*), of meditative concentration (*samadhi*), and of penetrating insight that sees through the ego's illusory projections (*prajna*).⁸ Cultivation of virtue includes cultivation of generosity, kindness, care for others, truthfulness, patience, and ethical precepts for monks, nuns, and laity. Such practice is said to generate the spiritual power of mind and body (*punya*) that may be harnessed to support meditative stability and insight. To realize ultimate freedom, all layers of confusion and clinging must be penetrated by insight. Since most of those layers are subconscious, insight must penetrate deep into the psyche. This requires great stability of attention, unmoved by habits of thought, and a laser-like power of attention, that sees through distorted representations of self and other in the instant they arise.

The cultivation of such capacities is supported by cultivation of love, compassion, joy, equanimity, and vivid attention to the impermanent processes of thought, feeling and perception. Re-patterned by such practices, one learns to experience the momentary arising and dissolving of all such processes, to see through projections of unchanging self and other even as they arise, allowing the unconditioned dimension of being, nirvana, to dawn. As the path unfolds over the course of lifetimes, the qualities of

⁸ *Long Discourses of Buddha* 171–74; Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification*; His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, *Opening the Eye* 43–74.

enlightenment, of nirvana realized and embodied, are said to manifest more and more fully and spontaneously: empathy, joy, tranquility, generosity, patience, equanimity, unconditional love, compassion, penetrating wisdom.⁹

HOW THE BUDDHA ENGAGED OTHERS' WORLD VIEWS

The Four Holy Truths are the doctrinal expression of the salvific truth that Buddha Gautama and his followers proclaimed to the world. During the Buddha's 40-year career as itinerant teacher throughout India of the fifth-century B.C.E. India, he met people adhering to a wide variety of religious philosophies who brought their questions and problems to him. In numerous such dialogues recorded in Buddhist scriptures, Gautama inquires into the beliefs of his interlocutors before responding to their questions. Does the other's belief system reinforce the inmost causes of suffering, the confusion that mistakes inaccurate thoughts of self and other for realities, clings and reacts to them? Or could the other's belief system support practices that undercut or ameliorate those inmost causes of suffering? In the first situation, the Buddha leads his interlocutor into a critical inquiry of his erroneous beliefs, causing him to give them up. In the second situation, the Buddha challenges some of his interlocutor's beliefs while re-interpreting others so as to guide him in the direction of the Buddha's freedom.

Often early Buddhist scriptures end when the Buddha's interlocutors are so overwhelmed by the power and clarity of his teaching that they have a sudden deep glimpse of freedom (*dharma-caksu*), and enter into the three-fold refuge of his religious community. Occasionally, however, the Buddha's interlocutor is profoundly effected by the Buddha's teaching, yet continues to be a participant or leader within a different religious system.¹⁰

The Buddha's Critique of Others' Views

A famous example of the first kind of situation occurs in the *Brahmajala sutta* ("scripture concerning the net of Brahmanic opinions") where the Buddha rejects 62 types of "speculative opinion" (*drshti*) prevalent in the India of his time. Here are some examples of such opinions: those who

⁹ Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism* 68–72, 121–28, 196–216, 244–79; Goldstein and Kornfield, *Heart of Wisdom*, parts 2 and 3; Chagdud Tulku, *Gates to Buddhist Practice* (Junction City, Calif.: Padma, 2001).

¹⁰ For example, on Sonadanda the Brahmin leader, see *Long Discourses of Buddha* 125–32; on Upali the supporter of the Jains, see David Chappell, "Buddhist Responses to Religious Pluralism," in *Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society*, ed. Charles Fu (New York: Greenwood, 1991) 357.

extrapolate from their memories of a few past lives that they will be reborn eternally, those who believe that one of the ancient Vedic gods of India, Brahma, is the creator of all other gods, those who believe some of the Brahmanic gods are eternal and others not, those who believe in an unchanging self-substance surviving death, those who believe that there is a substantial self which is totally destroyed at death.

In the Buddha's view, such speculative thought processes are intrinsically confused because they occur within a mode of attention that looks only outwardly, away from their own mechanisms of concept-making, reification, and clinging. Religious figures that cling to such representations of reality as absolutes are trapped unawares in the "net" of their own subconscious habits of thought which hide the unconditioned reality that transcends them. "Thus, monks, when those ascetics and Brahmins . . . proclaim [such views], it is merely the opinion of those who do not know and see directly; the worry and vacillation of those immersed in clinging attachment When a monk understands as they really are the arising and passing away of the six bases of [sense perception], their attraction and peril [as bases of distorted emotion and suffering], and deliverance from them [nirvana], he knows that which goes beyond all these views."¹¹

As the scholar K. N. Jayatilleke notes, the Buddha also severely criticized a religious figure of his time, Makkhali Gosala, whose system he characterized as a theistic form of fatalism. In Makkhali's system, all is said to be predetermined by divine will. No way of life, virtuous or non-virtuous, is better than another since salvation is eventually granted to all by God anyway. The Buddha is reported to say he knows "no other person than Makkhali born to the detriment of so many people." The reason is that by denying the causal processes behind suffering (Second Holy Truth), Makkhali negated the means to cut through them, discouraging people from entering into specific practices of the path, the way to realize the unconditioned reality beyond suffering.¹²

The Buddha's Inclusion of Others Through Skillful Means

Yet the Buddha did not simply reject theism totally in his encounters with theists. It is reported that the Brahmin priest Vasettha, a devotee of the supreme god Brahma, asked the Buddha which of the Indian traditions that claim to teach the way to union with the God Brahma is correct

¹¹ *Long Discourses of Buddha* 87–90.

¹² K. N. Jayatilleke, "Extracts from 'The Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions,'" in *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes*, ed. Paul Griffiths (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 147–48 (Anguttara Nikaya 1:33). See also *Long Discourses of Buddha* 181–86 on the Buddha's decisive rejection of the Brahmin Lohicca's belief that there is no point in teaching virtue.

(Brahma was asserted by such traditions to be the creator of the universe and lord of all lesser gods). First, the Buddha inquired whether any of the sages in those traditions had seen God face to face (comparable to the direct realization of the unconditioned in the Buddha's system). Vasettha replies no. "Well, Vasettha, when these Brahmins [priests] learned in the Vedas [the ancient Indian scriptures] teach a path that they do not know or see, saying: 'This is the only straight path . . . leading to union with God,' this cannot possibly be right." Yet the Buddha does not simply reject here Vasettha's belief in Brahma as God. Rather, he sows doubt about whether others who claim to know the path to union with such a God actually do.

He asks Vasettha whether authoritative Vedic traditions teach that the God Brahma is encumbered by attachment, hate, ill-will, impure heart, and lack of discipline. Vasettha replies no. Then the Buddha asks whether the Brahmins who trained in the Vedas *are* encumbered in those ways. Vasettha admits that they are. "So, Vasettha," says the Buddha, "the Brahmins learned in the Vedas are thus encumbered . . . , and God is unencumbered. Is there any communion, anything in common between these encumbered Brahmins and the unencumbered God?" "No Reverend Gautama." "That is right, Vasettha. That these undisciplined Brahmins should, after death, attain union with God is just not possible."

Vasettha says he has heard that the Buddha knows the way to union with God. The Buddha confirms that he does. Vasettha implores the Buddha to teach him that way. The Buddha then details four special meditations which methodically suffuse all living beings with boundless love, compassion, equanimity, and sympathetic joy. A monk who practices in this way, says the Buddha "is unencumbered [by attachment, hate, ill-will, impure heart, and lack of discipline]." He then asks Vasettha: "Has that unencumbered monk anything in common with the unencumbered God?" Vasettha replies: "Yes indeed, Reverend Gautama." "That is right, Vasettha," the Buddha concludes: "that such an unencumbered monk, after death, . . . should attain to union with the unencumbered God—that *is* possible." Vasettha rejoices.¹³ The leading commentary on the text says that Vasettha later received higher ordination as a Buddhist monk and eventually attained nirvana.¹⁴ Thus the entry point of Vasettha's particular path as follower of the Buddha was imitation of God in love and compassion, a practice which made him receptive to higher stages of the Buddhist path, i.e. more receptive to the unconditioned reality (nirvana) beyond all self-clinging patterns of thought about God.

Similarly, in other scriptures, the Buddha guides various Brahmins

¹³ *Long Discourses of Buddha* 188–95.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 559, n. 258. "DA" is Buddhaghosa's commentary on the sutta.

through inquiries into their Vedic beliefs, because of which they abandon some beliefs while accepting the Buddha's re-interpretation of others. In the Kutadanta scripture, the Brahmin Kutadanta plans a great Vedic sacrifice which consists of vast material offerings to the gods. He asks the Buddha for advice. The Buddha explains, step by step, that more fruitful offering would consist more simply of sincere generosity, three-fold refuge, upholding the moral precepts, virtue, stability of attention, penetrating insight, cessation of distorted patterns of emotion.¹⁵ In the Sigalaka scripture, the Buddha comes upon a householder named Sigalaka paying traditional Vedic homage to the six directions. The Buddha explains that a more fitting way to make homage to the six directions is to practice virtue in six types of relationship: with respect to one's mother and father (east), teachers (south), wife and children (west), friends (north), servants (nadir), ascetics and priests (zenith).¹⁶ In each such case, the Buddha's interlocutors are moved to adopt practices taught by the Buddha as the very way to fulfill their own traditions' deepest intent for virtue, salvific truth, and freedom.

The Buddha, as portrayed in such scriptures, displayed two central concerns in his critical treatment of others' religious views. First, he rejected speculative approaches to reality which pay insufficient attention to the conditioned mental processes through which concepts of self, other, God, or world are constructed and projected as absolutes (as if not thought constructed), giving rise to conditioned reactions to one's own projections in the form of clinging attachment, aversion, and non-virtuous action, all of which further obscure rather than disclose the unconditioned reality, nirvana. Secondly, he vehemently rejected any theory, theistic or non-theistic, that denies the causal genesis of suffering (Second Holy Truth), thereby denying the possibility that the conditioned arising of suffering may cease through proper practice of the path (Fourth Holy Truth) to reveal the unconditioned reality beyond suffering (Third Holy Truth).

As I have already indicated, the Buddha employed two key pedagogical methods: (1) By reinterpreting inherited Indic terms, he established a new philosophical-religious discourse engaging enough to attract traditional Brahmins and rigorous enough to guide his followers in the distinctive practices of his path. (2) The Buddha was remarkably skillful at triggering in others, right through *their own* world views and modes of thought, the distinctive insights of his path to freedom. Several of the encounters noted above exemplify that skill, traditionally referred to as the Buddha's "skillful means" for communicating salvific truth (*upaya-kaushalya*).

¹⁵ Ibid. 138–41.

¹⁶ Ibid. 466–69. See also *ibid.* 129–32 where the Buddha inquires of the Brahmin Sonadanda what qualities truly constitute a Brahmin (a priest).

Later Buddhist traditions elaborated on those concerns and methods of Gautama Buddha. His concern to refute speculative views, and the discourse he developed for such purposes, was further developed by scholastic Buddhists into detailed critiques of theism which went beyond what the Gautama had done. And Gautama's skillfulness at triggering others' insights through their own world views (skillful means) became a central tenet and inspiration for the emergence of the Mahayana movement of Buddhism that became dominant in East Asia and Tibet.

Those two approaches, scholastic *critique of* other world views and skillful means to reveal Buddhist truth *through* other world views developed in support of each other and in tension with each other. These are explored in what follows.

BUDDHIST SCHOLASTIC CRITIQUES OF THEISM

Buddhist Scholastic critiques of theism seek to assert the Four Holy Truths over against any concept of God as the single, undivided, unchanging and perfect cause of the multiple, diverse, continually changing and imperfect content of beings' experience and of their universe. Vasubandhu, an eminent Indian Buddhist scholar (fifth century C.E.), posed three lines of inquiry leading to refutation of such a God: (1) How can a single, undivided, and unchanging God be the sufficient cause of the diverse content of beings' minds, bodies, and worlds in their particular changes over time? (2) Why would a perfect being have any need to create? What sense would it make for beings to worship a God who is the ultimate creator and sustainer of so much suffering (problem of evil)? (3) If such a God is not sufficient cause but just one of many causes of creating and sustaining the universe, what need is there to posit such a God at all?

These inquiries, leading to refutation of such a God, were further developed by the renowned Scholastic Buddhist philosophers Dharmakirti (seventh century C.E.), Shantarakshita, and Kamalasila (eighth century C.E.).¹⁷

It is important to note that such refutations of "God" are not intended to refute the unconditioned dimension of being that is the Buddhist promise of salvific freedom (nirvana, Third Holy Truth), nor to refute qualities

¹⁷ Richard Hayes details these arguments in his "Principled Atheism in the Buddhist Scholastic Tradition," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 16 (1988) 5–28. Roger Jackson summarizes Dharmakirti's arguments against permanent self and creator God in his article "Atheology and Buddhology in Dharmakirti's Pramanavarttika," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999) 472–505. For Buddhist Madhyamaka critiques of Brahmanic views, see D. Seyfort Ruegg on Aryadeva's Catuhshataka and Bhavaviveka's Tarkajvala, *Literature of Madhyamaka School* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1981) 52, 62–63.

of limitless love, compassion, liberating power, and wisdom in those who embody the unconditioned or are on the path to its realization (Fourth Holy Truth). Rather, such refutations are intended to clear away constructs of “creator God” that both serve as reified objects of self-clinging and turn attention away from the ongoing causal processes of confusion and clinging that must be seen through to permit the unconditioned to actually reveal itself. In the very moment one thinks about God as the seemingly external cause of all being and experience, one is not looking directly in that moment into the causal genesis of clinging and aversion in one’s own mind, nor seeing through them to the unconditioned dimension that transcends them.

In this regard, as Richard Hayes has pointed out, Buddhist arguments against God’s unity, simplicity, and permanence are just one expression of a much broader Buddhist concern to deconstruct critically all concepts of unity, identity and selfhood that are routinely mistaken for absolute realities (as if not conceptual constructs), reified as such, and thereby give rise to clinging, aversion and reaction, the conditioned genesis of suffering that obscures the unconditioned. So the Lankavatara scripture states: “It is just mental process that is erroneously discriminated as personal self, continuum, group, condition, atom, primordial matter, and God the creator.”¹⁸

SKILLFUL MEANS OF CONVERSION AND INCLUSION

Another Buddhist development in the centuries following Gautama was the ongoing exploration of skillful means to reveal Buddhist truth to others through their own symbols, languages, and world views. This served both as means for converting others to Buddhism through forms adapted to their own cultures, and as means to see others mystically as co-participants in the salvific work of the Buddhas, sometimes in tension with the more exclusive posture of the Scholastic critiques described in the prior section. The doctrine of skillful means also focused new attention upon the Second Holy Truth, the human problem of mistaking thought-made representations of self, others, and religious objects for the actualities and clinging to them as such. According to the doctrine of skillful means, the wisdom that sees through such representations as empty, thought-made constructs can creatively use diverse representations (of language, gesture, symbol) as skillful means to cut through the human tendency to reify representations and cling to them as absolutes.

Key developments in the doctrine of skillful means accompanied the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism in India and Central Asia, contributing

¹⁸ See Hayes, “Principled Atheism” 20–24. The quotation is my re-translation of the Sanskrit text he quotes in n. 29.

to the development of Zen, Pure Land, and Tibetan Buddhist traditions in East Asia and Tibet. This section focuses on the doctrine of skillful means in Mahayana traditions.

Buddhist thought and practice developed much from the time of the Buddha to the first millennium C.E., effected by the entry of many cultures into the Buddhist fold, first within the empire forged by the Indian Buddhist king Ashoka (third century B.C.E.), then through migrations of central Asian peoples into India, then, through the trade routes (“silk routes”) within the empire established by the Kushanas in the early centuries C.E. that extended from China through Central Asia to present day Afghanistan and north India. Trade along the Kushana silk routes of Central Asia brought Buddhists, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Chinese religious, and Christians into extensive new contact with one another.

In the early centuries C.E., as evidenced by the appearance of many new Buddhist sacred texts, some learned Buddhist monks were increasingly dissatisfied with Scholastic conservatives of their own schools regarding their fixation upon old questions no longer asked, their outdated ontologies, their inability to speak afresh, attuned to diverse cultures of the time, the direct experience of enlightenment which the Buddha had embodied. The new movements, which called themselves “Mahayana” (‘great, all inclusive vehicle’ of enlightenment) gave new voice to prior centuries of Buddhist developments in philosophical analysis, meditation, and ritual praxis. There arose a new Buddhist cosmology, consisting of radiant Buddha divinities arrayed in pure, luminous realms, a development supported by the Central Asian cultural matrix and by continuing practice of ancient Buddhist devotional meditations that commune with the qualities of the Buddhas.¹⁹

The Four Holy Truths were strictly conserved as the doctrinal foundation of these new Buddhist movements. Yet, especially with regard to the Third and Fourth Holy Truths (nirvana and path), Mahayana texts expressed new shifts in emphasis that had developed over prior centuries.

Mahayana texts articulated the path of “Bodhisattvas,” those resolved to attain the most complete form of enlightenment, Buddhahood, in order to guide all beings to liberation from suffering. The Bodhisattva path centers upon two fundamental practices: cultivation of wisdom that discerns the empty nature of things, and cultivation of universal compassion. Prior Bud-

¹⁹ On the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism and its basic teachings, see Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism* 89–138; Hirakawa Akira, *A History of Indian Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1990) 247–74; Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1997); John Makransky “Historical Consciousness as an Offering to the Trans-historical Buddha,” in *Buddhist Theology*, ed. Roger Jackson and John Makransky (London: Curzon, 2000).

dhist philosophy had directed attention to the impermanent nature of conditioned things. Mahayana texts went further. Not only are conditioned things impermanent, but each such “thing” is empty of the kind of separate, autonomous existence it appears to have. This may sound abstract until we consider, for example, the apprehension of an enemy, a person who appears as such autonomously, as if there were no fuller or more mysterious person there. In the moment we falsely apprehend “enemy” as non-empty (not as a thought construct projected upon another person, but as an object inherently deserving of hatred), we feel hatred, act from hatred, and the conditioned arising of suffering goes on. Until we discern the emptiness of our moment by moment construction of reality, we reify our representations of it, cling to them unawares, grasp to some, hate others, and suffer.

Compassion for all beings caught in the subtle confusion that reifies and clings to representations, who suffer for it in all realms of rebirth, is called “universal compassion” (*maha-karuna*). Transcendental wisdom (*prajña-paramita*), by seeing through that confusion into its empty, thought-constructed nature, realizes freedom from it, eliciting even more intense compassion for all who are caught in it. Thus, transcendental wisdom and compassion, mutually empowering, are cultivated in synergy on the Bodhisattva path to full enlightenment.

Compassion impels the communication of liberating wisdom to others, the wisdom that sees into the emptiness of all one’s representations of reality. But ordinary beings are lost in habits of reifying and grasping to their representations of reality. It is the Bodhisattva’s wisdom that discerns what form the message of liberating truth must take for others to catch on to it, to release their grasping. That skillfulness at imparting salvific truth and practice is called “skillful means” (*upaya-kaushalya*), hearkening back to Gautama Buddha’s skillful means for triggering liberating insight in his interlocutors.

Other Mahayana themes further inform this doctrine of skillful means. In a Mahayana mode of understanding, nirvana is not far away. It is no longer conceived as an unconditioned reality *separate* from the conditions of ordinary life (*samsara*) to be encountered only after long practice of the path. Rather, nirvana is the empty, radiant nature *of* life, of this very mind, body, world, directly encountered in the very moment one is prepared to recognize it. For example, as soon as one’s construction of inherent “enemy” falls apart in the perception of its emptiness, accompanied by compassion for all who are trapped in such constructs, one glimpses the unconditioned freedom and joy that was always already at hand in the radiant, empty nature of one’s world.

This implies that any aspect of the experienced world can function as skillful means, sacramentally expressing the nirvanic nature of ordinary things, to whoever is prepared to perceive it. The story is told of the ascetic

Tibetan yogi Milarepa (twelfth century C.E.), whose dedication to practice was so one-pointed that he would not take time to look for food, just eating soup made from nettle bushes near his cave. One day his soup bowl dropped and shattered, leaving a film of nettle residue in the shape of the bowl; a nettle residue “bowl.” In that moment, his reifying thought habits suddenly broke apart, and the unconditioned, empty nature of experience dawned.

If a soup bowl can disclose nirvana, even more powerful is its disclosure through persons who embody the enlightened qualities of nirvana. It is for this reason that the accomplished “spiritual friend” or Buddhist teacher plays such a central role in many Mahayana scriptures. Some Mahayana scriptures, extending the principle of discovering nirvana where it had not been expected, also talk of apprehending venerable teachers of *non-Buddhist* religions as if they were Bodhisattvas, embodiments of nirvana, who use non-Buddhist means to prepare their followers for the Buddha’s path to liberation. As it says in the Vimalakirti scripture: “[Bodhisattvas], by devoting themselves . . . to all the strange sects of the world, develop all beings who have attached themselves to dogmatic views.”²⁰ Such texts communicate a theological inclusivism, subsuming the truth or virtue of venerable non-Buddhist teachers to a Buddhist world view.

In many Mahayana scriptures, practices of devotion to Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and spiritual teachers, which include ritual bowing, offering, and putting oneself in their service, develop in synergy with meditations on the wisdom of emptiness. Furthermore, to realize the empty nature of all experience is not merely to negate being per se but to become newly receptive to radiant, visionary dimensions of it previously hidden by the long habit of grasping to things. Thus, in many Mahayana scriptures, the dawning wisdom of emptiness reveals luminous pure realms of holy beings, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, whose radiant power and blessing pervade all persons. Such holy vision is supported by meditations envisioning the radiant qualities and power of such holy beings and their pure realms. The opening of such holy vision further empowers the person’s faith and courage to be released into the infinite, unconditioned, empty nature of being, into transcendental wisdom.²¹

Practice synergies of wisdom, devotion, and holy vision described in such texts reveal Buddhahood as an all-pervasive, cosmic power, blessing and drawing all beings to its realization through infinite skillful means: radiat-

²⁰ *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*, trans. Robert Thurman (University Park: Penn State, 1986) 69. Similar statements occur in the Avatamsaka, Lotus, Prajnaparamita scriptures.

²¹ Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied* 329–34.

ing liberating power to beings and manifesting as Bodhisattva saints in diverse ways to persons as soon as they become receptive.²² “In order to help beings, they voluntarily descend into the hells In order to help living beings, they become chieftains, captains, priests, ministers, or even prime ministers. . . . They become great holy men . . . thereby inducing beings to the morality of tolerance, gentleness and discipline. Well trained in skillful means, they demonstrate all activities, whatever may be a means to make beings delight in the Dharma.”²³

The wisdom-mind of the Buddhas, which pervades all existence in the non-dual awareness of emptiness (*Dharmakaya*) pervasively communicates itself through visionary dimensions of being (*Sambhogakaya*), through nature, and through persons (*Nirmanakaya*).²⁴ Indeed, as in the quotes above, Buddhahood communicates through holy persons of any tradition who impart elements of the path to freedom as understood by Buddhists: virtue, generosity, compassion, and wisdom penetrating self-grasping patterns of thought and action. Here are elements of an all-encompassing mystical pluralism inscribed within a Buddhist inclusivism.

But then why do not ordinary beings usually perceive the unconditioned freedom in the very nature of their being, the potential for any aspect of their experience to disclose the unconditioned (nirvana), or the pervasive activity of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas throughout the cosmos, radiating blessings and communicating freedom in limitless ways? Because although all beings possess the intrinsic capacity to awaken to such realities, it is obscured by their habits of self-clinging thought and reaction (as taught in the Second Holy Truth).²⁵

This brings out a further connotation of the doctrine of skillful means. In order to penetrate the self-protective habits of beings, the messages of Buddhist teachers must be adapted to their hearers. Any message is mediated by the receiver’s own distinctive thought patterns, cultural and individual. So the teaching of the Buddhas, to be effective, requires skillful means to conform the message to the mentalities of the receivers. This requires deep wisdom, the wisdom that understands how persons construct

²² Ibid. 90–108, 208, 323–35, 350–53. Luis Gomez, “The Bodhisattva as Wonder Worker,” in *Prajnaparamita and Related Systems*, ed. Lewis Lancaster (Berkeley: University of California, 1977) 221–62.

²³ *Vimalkirti* 68–69.

²⁴ On the all-pervading salvific activity of Buddhahood as active nirvana, see Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied*, chap. 13; Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism* 118–38, 170–90, 258–70; Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*, chaps. 8–10.

²⁵ On this, see, e.g., *Tathagatagarbha sutra*, trans. William Grosnick, in *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez (Princeton: Princeton University., 1995) 92–106; Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism* 114–16.

their experienced worlds, reify, and grasp to them through their own particular habits of thought.²⁶

The doctrine of skillful means has been key in the construction through history of different systematic self-understandings for Mahayana movements. It enabled Mahayanists to make ahistorical sense for themselves of the historical diversity of Buddhist teachings. For example, early Buddhist expressions of the Four Holy Truths as a dualism between nirvana and the ordinary world were explained as Gautama Buddha's skillful way of imparting truth to disciples at a lower level of readiness, gradually preparing them for his more subtle (Mahayana) teaching that nirvana and the ordinary world are ultimately undivided. By ascribing Buddhist teachings that developed later in history and in specific cultures all to Gautama in his place and time, each Buddhist sub-tradition sought to legitimate and absolutize its own culturally constructed views as Buddha's very teaching. All Buddhist teachings through history could then be arranged in a hierarchy, the "lower" teachings preparing people for the "higher" teachings, arranged differently according to different Buddhist traditions, unaware of their own cultural conditioning. In the history of various Mahayana traditions, this was sometimes extended as a hierarchy which could include non-Buddhist teachings, like those of Chinese Confucianism and Taoism, as preparation for the "higher" teachings of particular Chinese Buddhist schools. Elsewhere I have argued that these particular uses of the skillful means doctrine no longer make sense within historical consciousness and do harm to contemporary Buddhist traditions.²⁷

The doctrine of skillful means also supported Buddhist adaptation and

²⁶ See Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism* 121–22; Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism* 51.

²⁷ On skillful means as a strategy to make ahistorical sense of the historical diversity of Buddhist teachings, and as a rationale for the construction of doctrinal hierarchies through which each Buddhist sub-tradition sought to authorize and absolutize its own culturally conditioned views as the Buddha's original and highest view, see Makransky, "Historical Consciousness as an Offering" (*Buddhist Theology*, 111–135). In that essay, I argued emphatically for contemporary Buddhist thinkers to reject those particular uses of the doctrine of skillful means as erroneous in light of historical consciousness, as contradicting the central thrust of Buddhist understanding (which identifies the tendency to reify and absolutize views as the very cause of suffering), and as harmful to the continuing power and relevance of Buddhism for the contemporary world. For examples of such absolutized doctrinal hierarchies established by Japanese Buddhist teachers, through which Buddhist and non-Buddhist teachings were viewed as skillful means leading to their own teaching as the highest way, see sections on Kukai and Nichiren in Ruben Habito's article in this issue. For a Chinese example, see Tsung-mi's system as reported in David Chappel's "Buddhist Responses to Religious Pluralism" 358. For a Tibetan example, see Tsong-kha-pa's *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, ed. Joshua Cutler (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 2000) with reference to the

successful mission within diverse cultures of Asia that differ greatly from each other. The doctrine implies that for liberating truth to be authentically appropriated, persons must receive it through their own forms of thought, culture, aesthetics, not in just one rigidly standardized way from a culture of origin. The literary forms of Indian sacred texts, whose repetitious elaborations expressed Indian forms of reverence, became marginal to Chinese Buddhist culture in which Zen (Ch'an) and Pure Land (Ching-t'u) emerged as native Buddhist traditions emphasizing Chinese values: economy of expression, immediate relevance and practicality, directness, piety, aesthetics, and nature as revelatory.

The doctrine of skillful means is an implicit theme in many of the stories of Zen masters and tantric adepts which Westerners have found so intriguing. In one such popular story, a Chinese student asked his Zen teacher: "How am I truly to enter the path?" The teacher, pointing to a flowing stream nearby, replied: "Enter here." In that moment the student's habits of mind dissolved providing a sudden glimpse of unconditioned freedom. Such a story expresses the Indian Mahayana teaching that the unconditioned (nirvana) is undivided from the flow of conditioned experience, but also weds it to a Chinese Taoist appreciation of the revelatory qualities of nature, immediacy, and brevity of expression. Skillful means becomes a spontaneous expression of inculturated wisdom.

Often, however, Buddhist skillful means reverse traditional Buddhist expectations, challenging or subverting unquestioned cultural and religious forms. The story is told of a revered Tibetan monk lama, Jamyang Kyentse, who shocked onlookers by suddenly throwing stones at one of his most devoted disciples chasing him all the way to the river! The disciple dived into the freezing Tibetan waters and swam for his life! Although Jamyang Kyentse upended all expectations of what gentle, kind monks do, the disciple later reported that his mind had been powerfully blessed by the surprising encounter. To communicate a wisdom that frees, skillful means must not only meet the mentalities of persons, but sometimes radically challenge their subconscious clinging to religious forms or identities as absolute.²⁸

Given, then, that skillful means have sometimes communicated Buddhist salvific truth in ways that have upturned all expectations, is it even possible that the usual non-theistic pattern of Buddhist doctrine and praxis itself

"three types of persons" (129-41) which implicitly include non-Buddhists to the degree they develop non-attachment to this life through their own forms of practice.

²⁸ Surya Das, *Snow Lion's Turquoise Mane* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992) 161-62.

could be upturned to employ theistic forms as skillful means for Buddhist liberation? Yes, this has occurred.

For example, tantric forms of Buddhism that developed in medieval India (ca. sixth century C.E. and later) explicitly appropriated imagery and ritual forms of theistic Indian traditions. Buddhist tantric traditions taught ritual practices that focused upon Buddhist deities, theistic embodiments of enlightenment, some of whose iconic qualities paralleled Hindu deities. Yet Buddhist commentaries interpret the symbolism of such divine forms in explicitly Buddhist ways: each element of the deity expressing qualities of the Four Holy Truths, the Buddhist path, the unity of compassion and wisdom, nirvana undivided from this world. Buddhist tantric practices draw directly upon the power of Buddhahood, the all-pervasive power of the unconditioned within this world, through holy vision and devotional practice. Ritual practices directed to such theistic forms, in praising, reverencing, offering to the deity, and receiving the deity's blessing, elicit the spiritual power that finally releases such dualistic forms into the non-dual wisdom that sees into the emptiness of all constructs of "self" and "deity." That wisdom of emptiness then is manifested as a luminous divine form, a Buddhist deity, radiating salvific power to beings within an enlightened realm of activity, a mandala. Such tantric cultivations utilize theistic forms as skillful means in synergy with the wisdom of the empty (thought-constructed) nature of such forms. Thus, a uniquely Buddhist awareness of the unconditioned reality (nirvana) and its liberating power is given expression through Indic analogues of kataphatic and apophatic theism.²⁹

In sum, then, the doctrine of skillful means has profoundly informed the adaptation of Buddhist forms to new places and times, contributing to the successful missionary activity of Buddhism in diverse cultures of Asia (while ironically also providing the means for each sub-tradition to absolutize and cling to its own teaching as the highest teaching originally taught by Gautama Buddha). As we have seen, the doctrine of skillful means has also informed Buddhist mystical world views that have viewed other religions within a cosmic Buddhist inclusivism. According to that doctrine, salvific truth discloses itself in incalculably diverse ways through diverse world views, cultures and religions, non-Buddhist as well as Buddhist. But what counts as salvific truth remains the Buddhist understanding and experience of it, the Four Holy Truths. Those Truths may be expressed in accustomed or unexpected ways. But only when such expressions actually

²⁹ On tantric practice forms, see David Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, vol. 1 (Boston: Shambhala, 1987); Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1993); Reginald Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001); Chagdud Tulku, *Gates to Buddhist Practice*, rev. ed. (Junction City, Calif.: Padma, 2001).

function to liberate beings from the deepest causes of suffering (especially from the tendency to misconstrue one's representations of reality as absolutes) do they authentically communicate the power of the Buddha's salvific truth. As the Mahayana Avatamsaka scripture puts it:

In this world there are four quadrillion . . . names to express the Four Holy Truths in accord with the mentalities of beings, to cause them all to be harmonized and pacified. . . . [And] just as in this world . . . there are four quadrillion names to express the Four Holy Truths, so in all the worlds to the east . . . immeasurably many worlds, in each there are an equal number of names to express the Four Holy Truths, to cause all the sentient beings there to be harmonized and pacified in accordance with their mentalities. And just as this is so of the worlds to the east, so it is with all the infinite worlds in the ten directions.

CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS OF TRADITIONAL PARADIGMS: GUNAPALA DHARMASIRI, THE DALAI LAMA, BUDDHADASA

Contemporary Buddhist scholars who relate Buddhist truth to other religions continue to draw upon the two basic paradigms described above: scholastic critique of others' religious concepts, or inclusion of the other through a Buddhist understanding of skillful means.

Gunapala Dharmasiri exemplifies the former approach. A Sri Lankan Buddhist who studied at the University of Lancaster in England, Dharmasiri criticizes in his book, *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God*, Christian concepts in line with earlier Buddhist critiques of Hindu theism (see my earlier section, "Buddhist Scholastic Critiques of Theism"). Like his Buddhist predecessors, but now also drawing support from philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle and James Strawson to critique Christian philosophy, Dharmasiri rejects Christian concepts of an eternal soul as a substantial, eternal entity by arguing that such a substance is not observable within the impermanent minds and bodies of persons. Then how are persons to be affirmed as individual moral agents who experience the consequences of their own actions? Following his classical Buddhist forebears, Dharmasiri argues that each individual's virtuous or non-virtuous actions have consequences for his or her own causal continuity of mind and body without having to posit an unchanging substance within him or her. Since, in line with the Second Holy Truth, clinging to false representations of a permanent, substantial self or soul is a primary cause of ego-grasping and suffering, and since such representations are not observed to have any referent, they are refuted. Since a Christian concept of soul as eternal substance is correlated with the concept of an eternal, substantial God, Dharmasiri extrapolates his refutation of the former into a rejection of the latter: "Therefore, to a Buddhist, the conception of God either as analo-

gous to or as identical with the soul would not be able to make any sense.”³⁰

His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso is the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibetan Buddhism, a Mahayana tradition in which the doctrine of skillful means has had a central role. He recognizes in all the great religious traditions several broadly common purposes: to open persons to a “higher force” that transforms them toward love, compassion, inner peace, deep respect for others, and lasting happiness.³¹ But persons are tremendously diverse in their mentalities, due both to cultural and individual differences. If only one religious system or means were provided for all individuals, it would not be possible for many to really undergo such a profound inner transformation. Given this fact, the differences among religions in doctrine and practice are needed for a diverse humanity. Recall the Buddhist teaching of skillful means—messages of liberating truth must be conformed to the thought forms of the receivers if they are to be deeply realized. The Dalai Lama takes this principle, previously applied mainly to Buddhist teaching methods, and extends it beyond Buddhism: “There is a richness in the fact that there are so many different presentations of the way [to be transformed through love and compassion in different religions]. Given that there are so many different types of people with various predispositions and inclinations, this is helpful.”³²

Because the Dalai Lama draws so heavily upon the Buddhist doctrine of skillful means, and emphasizes shared goals of world religions (peace, compassion, etc.), he may appear to promulgate simply a theological pluralism, as if he assumes that all world religions realize precisely the same salvific goals. But when functioning as a Buddhist systematician, he does acknowledge that different religions certainly seem to posit different salvific goals, which would require different means of practice for their attainment. In that light, he suggests that nirvana, posited as the unique ultimate goal of Buddhism, requires uniquely Buddhist means for its attainment: “Here . . . it is necessary to examine what is meant by liberation or salvation [in different religions]. Liberation in which ‘a mind that understands the [empty] sphere of reality annihilates all defilements in the [empty] sphere of reality’ is a state that only Buddhists can accomplish. This kind of *moksha* [liberation] or nirvana is only explained in the Buddhist scriptures, and is only achieved through Buddhist practice According to certain religions, however, salvation is a place, a beautiful paradise, like a peaceful

³⁰ Gunapala Dharmasiri, “Extracts from a Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God,” in *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes*, ed. Paul Griffiths (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 153–61.

³¹ His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, “‘Religious Harmony’ and Extracts from the Bodhgaya Interviews,” in Griffiths, *Non-Christian Eyes* 163–64, 167.

³² *Ibid.* 165–66.

valley. To attain such a state as this, to achieve such a state of moksha, does not require the practice of emptiness, the understanding of [ultimate] reality."³³

Bhikku Buddhadasa, a leading Thai monk scholar of the 20th century, pioneered new ways of relating ancient Buddhist teachings to the modern world, including the problem of truth in other religions. Buddhadasa applies three levels of meaning to religious discourse. On the outermost level of meaning, religious traditions appear dissimilar in their expressions. On an inner level, all the great religions are the same in their essential concern to eliminate selfishness and to foster the inner freedom of love and humility. On the inmost level of meaning, historical religions in themselves are empty of substantial, independent existence. They are merely temporal constructs expressing the unconditioned, empty nature of things that transcends concepts of "my religion" or "your religion."

Buddhadhasa clarifies this analysis with the analogy of water. On the outer level, various kinds of water may be distinguished, since they come from different sources containing different minerals or pollutants. But on the inner level, when all such minerals or pollutants are removed, all the "waters" turn out to be the very same substance, just pure water. Finally, on the inmost level, when water is investigated most deeply, even the concept "water" dissolves: "If you proceed further with your analysis of pure water," he says: "you will conclude that there is no water — only two parts of hydrogen and one part of oxygen. Hydrogen and oxygen are not water. The substance that we have been calling water has disappeared. It is void, empty. . . . In the same way, one who has attained to the ultimate truth sees that there is no such thing as religion! There is only reality . . . Call it what you like—dharma or truth—but you cannot particularize that dharma or truth as Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam The label 'Buddhism' was attached only after the fact, as it was with Christianity, Islam and every other religion. None of the great religious teachers ever gave a name to their teachings; they just went on teaching throughout their lives about how we should live."³⁴ Buddhadasa's Buddhist way of anchoring his theological pluralism within emptiness makes an interesting contrast to those Western theological pluralists who understand diverse religions to refer ultimately to one God.

A BUDDHIST DIALOGUE WITH RECENT VATICAN WRITINGS

This section responds from a Buddhist perspective to portions of two recent Vatican documents that concern the relation between the salvific

³³ Ibid. 169.

³⁴ Bhikku Buddhadasa, "No Religion" in *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikku Buddhadasa*, ed. Donald Swearer (Albany: SUNY, 1989) 146–47.

truth of Christianity and the world's religions (already mentioned in James Fredericks's article). The documents are "Christianity and the World Religions" of the International Theological Commission in August 1997 and *Dominus Iesus*, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in September 2000.

"Christianity and the World Religions" surveys the doctrines of the Church to determine a Christian theology of religions in service to Catholic mission and dialogue with world religions. No. 13 notes a contemporary desire to de-emphasize objective truth within religions so as to counter the deleterious consequences of past inter-religious encounters: "Today one can see a tendency to relegate it [truth in religions] to a secondary level, separating it from reflection on the salvific value of religions." The document continues: "A certain confusion is produced between being in salvation and being in the truth. One should take more account of the Christian perspective of salvation as truth and of being in the truth as salvation. The omission of discourse about truth leads to the superficial identification of all religions, emptying them basically of their salvific potential. To assert that all are true is equivalent to declaring that all are false."³⁵

This position is harmonious with Buddhist perspectives summarized in the previous sections. Being in the truth is salvation. The Four Holy Truths, fully realized and embodied, constitute liberation from the causes of suffering and direct realization of the unconditioned. To say the Four Holy Truths are true for Buddhists but not others, who attain such liberation in some way unrelated to those Truths, would be to deny the Buddhist criterion of salvation for persons.

But the document also says: "Underlying this whole problematic [of theological pluralism] is also a conception which separates the Transcendent, the Mystery, the Absolute radically from its representations; since the latter are all relative because they are imperfect and inadequate, they cannot make any exclusive claims in the question of truth."³⁶

The authors of the document assume that in order to avoid falling into a relativism where truth does not count for salvation, the Absolute and its representation must *not* be so radically separated as the pluralists do. So the document identifies Christian representations of the Absolute more closely with the Absolute than those of other religions. The "Christian conception of God in its dogmatic and binding form," which is the one complete revelation of the Absolute, is not to be relativized.³⁷ The document seeks then to authenticate the uniquely close connection between Christian representations of the Absolute and the Absolute itself through

³⁵ "Christianity and the World Religions," *Origins* 27 (August 14, 1997) 149–66; section 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.* section 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.* section 16.

revelation and tradition. This supports a theological inclusivism (rather than a theological pluralism), which affirms the necessity of the church for salvation while acknowledging the universal salvific will of God that discloses the truth of Christ in mysterious ways to other traditions.

Building upon the theology of religions of that document, *Dominus Iesus* continues to emphasize the unique identification of Christian representations with the Absolute. The Absolute has been revealed fully and completely only through Jesus Christ, thence through his Church (nos. 6 and 16). Elements of other religions, although limited and incomplete in their representations of the Absolute, may fall within the divine plan of salvation. But to understand that plan requires that such religions not be understood on their own terms: "Although participated forms of mediation of different kinds and degrees are not excluded, they acquire meaning and value only from Christ's own mediation," But then if Gautama Buddha, for example, *did* provide means to reveal the unconditioned reality, the Absolute, such means are not properly understood on Buddhist terms. In practice, this may make it difficult to perceive any non-Christian means as ultimately liberating (even if they were) because their particular functions are obscured by a theological lens that only permits familiar Christian categories to be seen.

The reasoning of these Vatican documents might be summed up as follows: (1) If all representations of the Absolute were merely relative, radically separated from the Absolute which transcends them, then all such representations would become equally relative. None would be uniquely salvific. (2) To establish one representation as uniquely salvific (the Christian representation), it must be identified more closely with the Absolute than all others, necessitating that the others be viewed as *not* originating in the Absolute, and as not as complete an expression of it.³⁸

As I have sketched in my previous sections, most Buddhist thinkers, just as the authors of the Vatican documents, have *not* accepted a theological pluralism. They viewed the teaching of their tradition as uniquely efficacious in its salvific function. Yet Buddhist Mahayana traditions established such a position, not by associating their representations uniquely with the Absolute, but by taking the opposite approach. Viewed from within the Mahayana doctrine of skillful means, non-Buddhist traditions *do* originate in or fully express, in their own ways, the Absolute realized on the Buddhist path (referred to as the unconditioned, nirvana, Buddhahood). Buddhahood is speaking through the world, and through the various religions. Yet, Buddhist means for expressing that Absolute are uniquely liberating.

³⁸ Although "some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel, . . . [o]ne cannot attribute to these, however, a divine origin" (*Dominus Iesus* no. 21).

Why? Because they express a fuller knowledge of the ways that persons mistake their representations for absolute reality, not only in religious philosophy, but also in moment to moment experience and behavior. Buddhist tradition is viewed as uniquely efficacious because it transmits its messages of liberation from a fuller awareness of how its representations (all of which are relative, conceptual constructs) may be used to undercut, rather than reinforce, the human habit of absolutizing what is not absolute and clinging to it. But the significance of that is not merely to establish some sort of universal relativism. In line with the Four Holy Truths, its purpose is to cut through the reifying patterns of thought that normally obscure the Absolute, so the Absolute, the unconditioned, radiant, empty nature of reality, may actually dawn, be realized, and embodied.

This Buddhist form of theological inclusivism focuses much more than the Vatican documents quoted above on the specifics of the human problem (Second Holy Truth, analogous to the doctrine of sinfulness). Since the problem, in simple terms, is mistaking representations as absolutes (in daily life and in religious philosophies), the solution is not to uniquely identify any one such representation with the Absolute. The solution, revealed by the Buddha, is to learn to see into the empty, thought-constructed nature of all representations, which is the emptiness of one's entire experienced world. That requires special use of sacred representations as means to liberation within rigorous practice of the path. The validation of such salvific means is seen in their fruits, the qualities of enlightenment observable when the Absolute (the unconditioned, empty nature of reality) reveals itself to consciousness in ways previously obscured by the habit of clinging to relative realities as absolutes.

But is such a perspective just a surreptitious Buddhist way of doing the same thing as the Vatican documents, identifying its own representations of truth more closely with the truth than the representations of other traditions? Not exactly. Within this Buddhist perspective, it is not Buddhist representations per se that are close to the Absolute, but the direct knowledge of the Absolute that such representations express and support in Buddhist practice. Only direct knowledge of the Absolute knows how to wield representations in a way that undercuts the tendency to cling to representations as if they were absolute. Buddhist traditions have viewed their methods as uniquely liberating because they have been experienced by many as means to come directly aware of the empty, unconditioned nature of reality that the Buddha had realized and communicated. The means, the representations, are not to be confused with the reality they express or point to, as the finger pointing to the moon is not to be confused with the moon.

Someone might object: "What about the Four Holy Truths as a Buddhist representation of reality? Don't Buddhists associate certain words and

doctrines like that more closely with reality than the representations of other religions?" But recall the quote given above from the Avatamsaka scripture: "In this world there are four quadrillion names to express the Four Holy Truths in accord with the [diverse] mentalities of beings." As we have seen in this article, experiential entry into the meaning of the Four Holy Truths is supported by a great diversity of representations: a doctrinal exposition of the Four Holy Truths, certainly, but also a Chinese Zen master pointing to a flowing stream, a scholastic critique, a broken soup bowl, a Tibetan master's stoning of his disciple into wakefulness, a (tantric) ritual that offers one up to divinities who embody Buddhist enlightenment, and even (in Vaseththa's ancient dialogue with the Buddha), a way to imitate God in self-giving love and compassion. *No one such word, image or expression per se is viewed as closer to the Absolute.* Rather, each is true, salvifically effective, to the extent that it releases the person's most deep-seated self-grasping, harmonizes him with the ungraspable, the unconditioned reality of wisdom and compassion, and prepares him to be liberated unto it.

What, then, for instance, of Christian mediations of the Absolute from a Buddhist perspective? Are they to be seen as salvifically ineffective, or little effective compared to the Buddhist? Some Buddhist thinkers, such as Dharmasiri, would say so, but I would not agree. Whatever mediations actually serve to release the self-grasping at the root of human suffering, to undermine the foundations of it, to release the person unto the unconditioned, have salvific value. For example, the Catholic Mass inscribes fundamental Christian doctrines of the Cross, Resurrection, Body of Christ—the agapic dynamism of trinitarian reality. To let oneself be offered totally in faith to God and humanity through Christ in the eucharistic liturgy: Christian experience would seem to validate this as a most powerful means to be released from self-clinging unto the unconditioned, palpably embodied in agapic community. I often attend Mass at Boston College, and have found this unspeakably profound from the point of view of Buddhist praxis (especially when seen in light of the kataphatic and apophatic tantric practice forms earlier described).

Furthermore, Buddhist Scholastic critics of theism leave untouched the question of how Christian praxis and Buddhist praxis issue in so many similar spiritual qualities. We can compare the following qualities of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16) with those ascribed to enlightenment in the sections above on the Third and Fourth Holy Truths: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

From a Buddhist perspective many elements of Christian understanding and practice may be viewed, cautiously, as skillful means for liberation. To do so requires one to specify how Christian practices open receptivity to the unconditioned as it is understood in the Four Holy Truths, and also

where there may be areas of Christian thought that reinforce the human habit of absolutizing what is not absolute and grasping to it, thereby impeding such receptivity. But the same analysis must be applied afresh in each place and time to Buddhist formulations as well as I have already argued. Such has been the concern of Buddhist critical reflection throughout history, and such is also the present task.