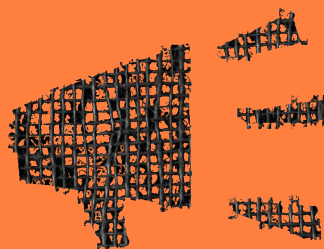
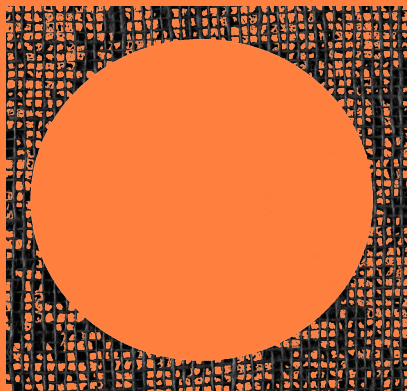


**booklets**

**THE SILENCE  
AND THE OUTCRY**  
**Buddhism and the Prophets  
of Israel**



171

**José Ignacio González Faus**



**THE SILENCE AND THE OUTCRY**  
**BUDDHISM AND THE PROPHETS OF ISRAEL**

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And in Your silences you forge  
the Outcry that I sustain  
and the Silence that I am.

PEDRO CASALDÁLIGA

Buddha meditates, Jesus cries out.

JOHANN BAPTIST METZ

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# INTRODUCTION

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Well-known of Karl Jaspers' thesis about the "axial age," which states that more than 2500 years ago there was a decisive turn in history, one that produced a new consciousness of what it means to be "human." This new awareness appeared about the same time in several different places, some quite far apart. Our present interest is in the Buddhism of the Far East and in the Hebrew prophets of the Middle East.

This theory of the "birth of the human" now needs to be questioned because of the inhuman cruelties of our present time: the wars in Syria and South Sudan, the violence in Mexico, the abandonment of refugees in Lesbos, the cruel laws of "labor reform," the widespread terrorism, the racism of North America, the unspeakable savagery of drug trafficking, the scourge of human slavery, and an economic system as efficient as it is lethal. It would appear that we are witnessing another turn in our history, the advent of the "inhuman." Are we able to speak, as the Buddhists do, of "the illusion of selfhood" when brutal pain (such as in torture, bone cancer, or third-degree

burns) shows us that something only too real is there? *The suffering subject is not mere appearance, nor is it an illusion.*

## **What pain?**

Buddhism first appeared as a "heretical" form of Hinduism, a religion which negated the reality of all that exists, save the profound awareness of "non-duality" between God and self. So insistent was Hinduism's negation of reality that it seemed to deny or ignore the reality of suffering. In contrast, Buddha began his teaching while fully acknowledging the reality of pain. But what pain?

The world Buddha knows is one that is relatively tolerable and peaceful. It is one in which the only suffering worthy of consideration is the suffering we inflict on ourselves. Little heed is paid to the suffering we cause others or to the suffering that oppressors inflict on their victims. Compassion, that most basic of Buddhist categories, seems oriented more toward people in general than toward the countless victims of history. The Buddhist texts stress “old age, sickness, and death” much more than they do oppression, exploitation, and murder.<sup>1</sup>

Many claim that the same ideas about suffering became more and more prevalent in Christianity as it deemphasized the Bible’s clear focus on unjustly inflicted suffering and instead made sin the central focus of theological attention.<sup>2</sup> Others rejoin that sin is emphasized because it is the real cause of pain and suffering, just as for Buddha it is desire that causes suffering both to oneself and to others. Both theses may be true, but the capacity of the human mind is limited, so that concentrating on one pole of this reality easily leads to neglect of the other. In the light of this contrast, we now turn our reflection to the prophets of Israel, who also appeared during the “axial age,” more than 500 years before Christ.

### **From instruction to indignation**

The texts of the Hebrew prophets arose from a genuine mystical experience as they beheld the reality of victims and their victimizers. That experience produced in the prophets an emotion seemingly unknown to Buddhism: indignation. As we shall see, such indignation is not merely an ethical response to what is

morally offensive; it is indignation at the suffering caused to God himself! That is what most provokes the anger of the prophet, and we find it reflected in God’s sorrowful complaints about his people’s infidelity. When the prophet is speaking for himself, his tone is one of denunciation and accusation, but when he speaks in the voice of God, the tone is one of lament and instruction: “My people, what I have I done to you?” (Micah 6,3). Isaiah records God’s sad lament: “The ox knows its master, but my people do not know me” (Isaiah 1,3). There are also the repeated complaints found in Jeremiah 2, Hosea, and Ezekiel 16, all texts which dare to compare God to a husband betrayed by a spouse he loves; she is compared to an adulterous woman who prostitutes herself.

This sexual metaphor was not used by the prophets only because the Semitic peoples considered sexuality a matter of honor and dishonor. More important was the idea that sexuality implied a prior relation of equality between the offended person and the offender. As mere creatures, human beings could not possibly offend God even if they wanted to: a stone heaved toward the sky will never reach the sky but could end up falling on the head of the one who threw it. However, when God places himself on the human level, when he becomes the spouse of a people and promises to be eternally faithful, then the evil that some people commit against others harms not only them but God himself. In this way, ethics becomes mystical, and ignorance becomes infidelity. In the oracles of the prophets God uses one type of language when addressing his people and another very different type when speaking “against the nations.” In both there are

warnings, but only in the former are there complaints.

This booklet will compare some key texts from the book *The Teaching of Buddha* with the social justice texts of the prophets, which culminate in Jesus who is “more than a prophet.” Such a comparison will allow us to justify (at least partially) the now commonplace classification of Buddhism as wisdom and Christianity as love, but we will also try to reassess the relationship between

the two. Love is not absent in Buddhism—remember the classical term for compassion, *karuná*, which we mentioned above. Nor is wisdom absent from the biblical texts, which speak eloquently about the “light” and the beauty of wisdom. However, that biblical wisdom language is overshadowed by the prophets’ harsh diatribes against the rich and Jesus’ angry censures against those who would impede the doing of good on the Sabbath (Mark 3,1-6).

# 1. THE SILENCE (BUDDHIST TEXTS)

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We will now present a comparison of some key texts from Buddhism and the prophets, commenting more extensively on the Buddhist texts since they are less familiar.<sup>3</sup> I have organized the material by themes to allow for a more synthetic overall vision.

## 1.1. Crisis and change in the life of Buddha

“The pleasures of this palace, this healthy body, this rejoicing youth! What do they mean to me? Buddha thought. Some day we may be sick, we’ll become aged, from death there is no escape. Pride of youth, pride of health, pride of existence –all thoughtful people should cast them aside.

A man struggling for existence will naturally look for something of value. There are two ways of looking –a right way and a wrong way. If he looks in the wrong way, he recognizes that sickness, old age, and death are unavoidable, but he seeks the opposite. If he looks in the right way, he recognizes the true nature of sickness, old age, and death, and he searches for meaning in that which

transcends all human suffering... beyond the reach of old age, sickness, and death” (p. 5).

For Buddhism, therefore, death, old age, and sickness appear as the starting point.

*1.1.1. The way (Dhammapada: “the foot of truth”)*

1. Resentment is not calmed by resentment. Only with patient love does it cease to exist. This is a constant truth.
2. There are those who lament their dullness. They are no longer dull. More dull are those who, without knowing themselves, say they are intelligent.
3. The true victors are not those who overcome thousands of enemies in battle but those who overcome themselves.



4. It is difficult to be born as a human. It is difficult to live as a mortal. It is difficult to hear the sublime truth. It is difficult to attain the Buddha state (p. 2).

From the start it is clear that this path is something very difficult. It requires self-control, patient love, and insight into one's own nothingness. It is something quite different from the simplistic versions of Buddhism that are popular in the West.

### 1.1.2. *The four noble truths*

- The truth of suffering. A life that is not free of desires and attachments is always one of suffering. (Note that there is no mention of the suffering inflicted on others, which is almost more frequent than that inflict on oneself.)
- The truth of the cause of suffering. Suffering is born of human desires, desires which arise from our intense attachment to life and seek to possess all that we see and hear.
- The truth of the end of suffering. If we destroy the roots of those desires and free ourselves from all attachments, the suffering will end.
- The truth of the path to end suffering:

Right Vision  
 Right Thought  
 Right Speech  
 Right Behavior  
 Right Living  
 Right Effort  
 Right Mindfulness  
 Right Concentration

Enlightenment and freedom from suffering are reached only by following these eight paths (p. 39).

This list of eight paths describes a chain that goes from a way of looking (“thought”) to a way of desiring, and from there to words and deeds. The second part of the chain broadens out, but in inverse order (thus the graphic in which I present them: 1,2,3,4-4,3,2,1).

Further on, where the text speaks more extensively of those eight paths (pp.66-67), we find four points that further develop that attitude of correct *vision and concentration* (which include desires, words, and deeds). Although they repeat what was said previously, they bring us closer to a very basic category of Buddhism, the one called “mindfulness”:

- Consider that the body is impure, and feel no attachment to it. [Western Neoplatonism would say something similar.]
- Consider the senses as a source of suffering.
- Consider that the mind is in a constant state of flux.
- Consider that all that exists is the consequence of causes and conditions, and that nothing remains unchanged forever. (p. 168).

Historically, this attitude of mindfulness was favored by the development of Zen Buddhism in Japan. The Zen practice of keeping the mind blank with the help of respiration is extremely pacifying; it helps people understand that the more they empty themselves, the more relaxed they can become.

These considerations are accompanied in the text by other ascetical recommendations with many parallels in Christian asceticism. The aim of Buddhist spirituality is to endow the soul with four basic qualities: “mercy, love, joy, and

equanimity” (p. 172). Given the theme of this booklet, we highlight one of those qualities: “The correct work of charity is not to have any idea of what is ‘mine’ and what is ‘yours’” (p. 170). This dictum is developed further in one of the practical counsels offered toward the end of the book: “People should not think that what they have earned by their efforts is only for them and can be spent only on themselves. A part of what they earned must be shared with others, and another part should be left for emergencies” (p. 220).

This small detail is, in my opinion, overlooked by many fans of Buddhism in the West.

## 1.2. Buddhist anthropology

### 1.2.1. *Soul and self*

“All human beings have pure souls, which are their ultimate substance, but the souls are covered with the dust of doubt and illusion, which arise from external conditions and causes. Such grimy souls are not our true nature; they are guests who cannot be identified with their owner (p. 68). Behind that floating dust is a pure, genuine soul, spotless and free of conflict (p. 70). The difference of sex is not something essential: women as well as men, if they follow the true path, will reach enlightenment (p. 65). Goodness is never lost until you cast it away from you (p. 220).”

Despite the great distance between the two linguistic universes, these ideas can be compared with the experience Christians call “original sin,” or with Paul’s lament in Romans 7,15-25. The coexist-

ence of pessimism and optimism with regard to the human race characterizes Christianity as well as Buddhism. Mindful of what R. Panikkar calls “homeomorphic equivalents,” I also see here a parallel with Etty Hillessum’s “discovery” that God was present deep within her, despite being covered over with tons of gravel and trash.

However, the Buddhist notion of “soul” cannot be identified with the “soul” of Platonic philosophy. While it may be understood as mind or spirit, it is opposed not to the fleshly body but to the “self.” In this sense Buddhism reflects Paul’s conception of “spirit” as something opposed not to “the flesh,” the material dimension of human beings, but to selfishness, whether material or spiritual.

We thus arrive at the great thesis of Buddhism: the self that is opposed to the soul is unreal.

### 1.2.2. *The non-existence of the self*

“The concept of “self” is produced in souls that are attached to worldly things. This adhesion to the self needs to be negated by those who seek illumination (p. 76). Since people think that the ‘self’ exists, they feel attachment to what is ‘mine,’ but there cannot be anything that is ‘mine’ because the ‘self’ does not really exist (p. 61). Good and evil are only momentary reactions that result from impurities accumulated in the past. They are like the dust that floats and moves from one side to the other like a rambler (p. 70).”

“Human beings think that their true nature is the discriminating mind, which is found at the root of this life

of birth and death. They do not know that they possess within themselves a pure soul that is their ultimate substance. Instead, their souls are covered with the dust of doubt and illusion, which arise from external conditions and causes (pp. 67-68). The soul is the nature of Buddha, that is, the seed of Buddhahood.”

Here we find another parallel with the biblical “divine image,” which according to Genesis is the sublime part of human nature but can also lead to a perverted desire to “be like God.”

Also, does not that last sentence seem to imply a certain anonymous divinization of Buddha, in the midst of Buddhist agnosticism?

Even though we say that the nature of Buddha exists in all human beings, the sludge of the passions is so deep that is not easy for fresh shoots to emerge. That is why suffering is so universal and why there is this endless recurrence of miserable lives (p. 88).

This precious paragraph suggests further parallels with Christianity: Paul wrote that “we are all sinners,” and Jesus spoke of “sheep without a shepherd,” the “narrow gate,” etc. The question of the nature of Buddha (whether divinized or not) gave rise to two types of Buddhism: the Mahayana (great vehicle) and the Hinayana (small vehicle). It is the former that we will be considering in this booklet.

Christianity found itself with a similar problem: let us recall the Buddhist language of precepts and counsels:

“People in this world are prone to being selfish and unsympathetic; they do not know how to love and respect one another; they argue and quarrel over

trifling matters only to their own harm and suffering, and life becomes but a dreary round of unhappiness (p. 95).”

Here Buddhism appears to open a door to the concerns of the prophets and to the human need for redemption, liberation, salvation, forgiveness—however we want to call it. Furthermore:

“The delusions of reasoning are based on ignorance, and the delusions of practice are based on desire, so that the two sets of delusions are really one set, and together they are the source of all unhappiness (p. 81).”

This text captures well that tremendous paradox of human beings, who are at once “finite and insatiable.” The essence of the finite is to be limited, restricted, and therefore satiable.

Finally, let us highlight a certain “Socratic” tone which locates the ultimate root of evil in ignorance rather than in wickedness (“they know not what they do,” said Jesus). This is a very complex problem about which, for now, we can say only that wickedness and ignorance are intimately intermingled in us human beings.

### 1.2.3. “Causality”

“Everything in the world is the result of a vast concurrence of causes and conditions, [and so] there is no difference between things (p. 52). Human beings hold onto the products of their imagination; Buddha sees the world as a passing cloud (p. 53). Buddha explains that things are outside the idea of being and not-being; they are neither existence nor non-existence;

they neither are born nor do they die. Things exist due to a concurrence of causes and conditions; therefore, that being in itself has no existence. [There are only] apparent forms that present themselves to human eyes (p. 54). [Here the French translation adds: 'By their desires human beings hold onto appearances.']”

These texts go beyond the teaching of Buddhism; they are characteristic of almost every primordial worldview of the East and so deserve extended commentary.

- a) The repeated expression “concurrence of causes and conditions” seems to me to be an attempt to express what Western philosophy calls “contingency.” Parmenides experienced “being” as necessary and absolute, so that everything else becomes mere appearance and lacks substance (the *panta rhei* of Heraclites is now seen as a consequence of Parmenides’ ideas rather than opposed to them). I make this allusion to Parmenides in order to help the Western reader understand the thinking, but it might have been better to refer to early Hinduism (perhaps before Yajnavalkya), which has undeniable metaphysical force but is less well-known to us.
- b) The problem is that, although things have very little substance, it is among things that we human beings find ourselves, and human suffering is felt as something very real and at times unbearable.<sup>4</sup> Can suffering be overcome simply by saying that it is “mere appearance”? Perhaps that would be possible in a world where there was
- c) no evil but only finitude and contingency, but what about this concrete world? Let us think, for example, about the victims of the war in Syria or the atrocities of ISIS. Perhaps it would be possible to lessen their immense pain by drawing on profound consciousness, but would the pain be eliminated? It is quite possible to soften the pain of the three original negativities (sickness, old age, death) –Buddhism is correct in this regard –but what about the suffering of the consequent evils derived from those negativities?
- c) The expression “concurrence of causes and conditions” remains at the level of mere phenomenological description: it does not ask about the nature of the concurrence or about its origin. And if we do not know that, we cannot know why the things born of the concurrence lack substance, to the point where there is no longer any difference between existence and non-existence, between life and death, etc. This objection does not deny that the experience of “emptiness” (*Sunyata*) is a real, authentic experience. The problem is that the experience is not one that is unique, global, and complete.
- d) Important also is the expression “non-duality,” whose meaning in Buddhism is different from its meaning of Hinduism. Whereas Hinduism believes in God (or in The One), Buddhism does not hold to such a belief. The non-duality in Buddhism is not, as in Hinduism, between God and oneself (*Brahman* and *atman*) but between “mine and not-mine”: “the self feels attached to what is ‘mine,’ but there can be

nothing that is ‘mine’ because there is no such thing as the ‘ego’” (p. 61).

- e) The expression “non-duality” (frequently misunderstood in the West, in my opinion) originated in a primordial experience of the East, which was different from the primordial experience of the West. To state it graphically: the West opened up to the world through sight, while the East did so through breathing. As a result, the West thinks and structures the world through the experience of “subject and object,” which implies duality and opposition. In contrast, the East thinks and structures the world through the experience of “human breath-divine breath” (*atman-Brahman*), which is more unifying and helps a person to perceive better the insubstantial nature of the ego.
- f) Finally, the word “causality” seems to be a way of expressing the fact that things (and humans) do not possess the source of their existence in themselves: they could have *not* existed, and they will cease to exist. As I just said, in Buddhism there is a profound grasp of the identity that exists between *being* and *necessity*, so that non-being can be said to be “non-necessary.” The same idea is expressed in this other text: “Where there is life, there is death. Where there is good fortune, there is misfortune. Where there is good, there is evil. Everyone must know this. The foolish seek only happiness and fear unhappiness. Those who seek the true way must overcome these two things and not feel attachment toward either of them (p. 145).”

This paragraph is fundamental for Buddhist anthropology, and it has universal value. It asks us to accept our condition as contingent, finite beings. It is easy to point out its similarity to Ignatian “indifference” and to Saint Paul’s declaration, “I know how to live in any circumstance,” but there are two questions that remain unanswered.

The first question is whether seeking after happiness is something *only* the foolish do. Do only the foolish strive after growth and improvement (Gen 1,27)? How do we distinguish between indifference and resignation? In the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius and in Saint Paul, indifference is born of attraction to and preference for a greater good, an ultimate goal; it should not be confused with a “couldn’t-care-less” attitude. What is the greater goal for Buddha? Could we say that it is the attractiveness of true freedom, as another text suggests: “Only by overcoming one’s desire can a person be called free” (p.192)?

The second question concerns the difference between poverty and the poor. You can be indifferent to poverty, but you cannot be indifferent to the poor. Social concern is essential. Is Buddhist compassion the way for overcoming the lack of such concern?

At the same time we find in our text this observation, which may be decisive: “The true riches are not treasures; they are the soul itself” (p. 146). Here we catch a glimpse of something that goes beyond mere indifference (to “treasures”). But what is the richness of the soul? Is it simply the consciousness of our contingency, or is it something more? The biblical teaching of the soul as the “image and likeness of God” does not solve the problem but rather exacer-

bates it, for that likeness is also the cause of problems:

“Oh my soul, why do you rush about in this worthless world? Why can you not be quiet for even a moment? Why do you unsettle me and make me collect so many things? ... You have awakened in me for the first time the desire to seek the true way. Why do you now want to retreat, attracted by the pleasures and glories of the world? You will find tranquility only when you sever the bond of desires by reflecting on the mutability of all things. You will achieve peace only by distancing yourself from greed, anger, folly, and the illusion of the ‘ego’ (pp. 154-55).”

### **1.3. Compassion**

#### *1.3.1. Its object*

“The origin of human sorrows, griefs, sufferings, and anxieties is found in the stubborn attachment to things. Pain exists because desires exist. Our insatiable longing makes us desire what is unattainable. ... Since its beginning the world is full of sorrows, even apart from the three inevitable sufferings of old age, infirmity, and death (pp. 42-43).”

As I said before, those three inevitable sufferings are independent of desire; they precede desire and probably contribute to creating desire. Buddhist compassion appears to be directed above all toward these fundamental sufferings which affect every human being.<sup>5</sup>

#### *1.3.2. Its form*

Buddhist compassion seems to point to a certain transcendence that pre-exists the human person: “The soul of Buddha is mercy” (p. 15). And the soul of Buddha speaks thus:

“Your suffering is my suffering, and your happiness is my happiness. So says the Buddha, who remains by our side at every moment. The Buddha’s spirit of compassion is born of contact with the human, and faith in the human is born of contact with the Buddha. Human beings do not know the compassion of Buddha. ... It lasts from all eternity; it exists from the moment that human beings are born. ... [It therefore exists before Buddha himself was born.] Because the depth of human sin is unfathomable, the mercy of Buddha is infinite (pp. 15-16).”

“The mercy of Buddha is directed toward all humans equally, but it has greater compassion for sinners and those suffering for their ignorance (pp. 21-22).”

In this world full of injustices, sufferings, ignorance, unattainable desires, disputes, struggles to survive, it is difficult to preach. Buddha overcomes these difficulties by his great compassion (p. 29).

### **1.4. “Agnosticism” about the ultimate questions**

“How is the universe constituted? Is it finite or infinite? How is human society constructed?”

Buddhism does not answer these unsolvable problems:

“If someone delays seeking and practicing enlightenment until these questions are resolved, he will die before reaching enlightenment.

Human beings must first choose which problems they must solve. What is the principal problem of each individual? After learning what it is, one must begin by controlling the soul (p. 152).”

Prescinding again from purely individual projection, this warning may evoke Marx’s Thesis XI on Feuerbach: “Until now the philosophers have devoted themselves only to interpreting the world. What is important is transforming it.”

On the other hand, no consideration is given to the hypothesis (or the possibility) that, without resolving all the ultimate questions, the Supreme Being might manifest herself on her own initiative (in the Christian case, to tell human beings that she loves them and wants to help them to be united with her). That hypothesis is precisely what has produced in religious discourse the word “revelation,” which refers to something received rather than to something attained.

Curiously, nonetheless, Buddhist agnosticism does not prevent the existence of authentic faith,<sup>6</sup> defined in one text as “believing in the wisdom of Buddha. Nothing is as valuable in this world as believing in Buddha” (p. 177). Is this a Buddhist version of the Pauline principle of justification by faith? The text continues as follows:

“All human beings, solely by having faith in Buddha, achieve salvation

and reach enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> Buddha loves all humans as his own children. Therefore, if they think of Buddha as their mother, they will be Buddha and will reach salvation (p. 178).”

Here there reappears human impotence and the need to be helped. The question remains, however, whether faith consists in believing in the person of Buddha or only in the doctrine of Buddha. If faith means believing in the person of Buddha, who is that Buddha who saves? Is he alive? Or is he only the memory of the past? And if so, how can a simple memory help us now? If faith means believing in the teaching of Buddha, what is the significance of the language about loving Buddha? Can it be said that, just as in Christianity we speak of the movement from the historical Jesus to the Christ of faith, we find here a movement from the historical Siddhartha to the Buddha of faith?

In any case, the impression remains that where Buddhism preaches “faith, wisdom, and love” (p. 177), Christianity preaches faith, hope, and charity. In that triad is to be found true wisdom (cf. 1 Cor 2,7).

## 1.5. Enlightenment

### 1.5.1. *The need for enlightenment*

“The activity of human beings is contrary to the principles of nature. The true image of this world is this: human beings are born in suffering, and evil is their nature; they do not know how to do good. Everything is for their benefit, yet they do not know what it means to give (p. 99).”

The first sentence seems to be enunciating what in the West is called “natural law,” a concept rejected as too static and inflexible by much of modern thought. However, the paragraph seeks to describe Buddhist thought as a whole, stressing concern for finitude as a form of closing in on oneself. It also prepares for the following text:

“Buddha is the one who has reached the state of Buddha. Human beings are future Buddhas; there is no qualitative difference between them. However, while human beings are Buddhas in process, they are not yet Buddhas. They therefore commit a great error if they think they have reached the end of the path of enlightenment (p. 74).”

In contrast to the earlier text, this one is dynamic, evoking as it does the Christian dialectic between the “already” and the “not yet.” It can be appropriately compared with New Testament texts like 1John 3,1ff. or with the passages where Paul affirms that “we have already” risen with Christ (Col 3,1ff).

### 1.5.2. *The work of Buddha*

“Buddha, knowing the nature of humankind, became *Bodhisattva*,<sup>8</sup> and to save human beings he made the following vows: even though I become the Buddha, if all human beings are not enlightened, I swear I will not reach enlightenment. If my radiance does not reach all the corners of the earth; if my life does not serve to save an unlimited number of other humans; if people everywhere, when they hear my name, do

not have a profound faith that frees them from the idea of life and death; if they do not have the wisdom by which they can overcome all obstacles in the way of their duties, ... I swear I will not reach enlightenment. For an incalculable period of time Buddha kept doing virtuous works and built a Pure Land. In very ancient times he became *Amida*, the father of Infinite Light and Eternal Life. Now he is found in his Land, enlightening all human beings (pp. 102-105).”

Here also we find parallels with Christianity (at least in language): the *kenosis* of Christ through love and the notion of the “whole Christ.” In Buddhism, however, redemption (or enlightenment) does not come about through the agency of Buddha (since there is no one with whom humans need be reconciled) but through a teaching. This perspective make Buddha more like the Hebrew prophets, who will be our point of reference in this booklet. Buddhism does have some expressions which seem to allude to a God or a “Being Beyond,” but they are only suggestions, without concrete reference.

We will end this section by pointing out one further parallel: “Buddha appears accompanied by two *Bodhisattvas*: the *Bodhisattva* of Compassion and the *Bodhisattva* of Wisdom (p. 109).” In Christian language might these not be the *Pneuma* and the *Logos*?

### 1.5.3. *The work of human beings*

“All those who hear the name of Buddha can be reborn in his Land if only they desire it, believe, and are happy with the Buddha. ... The heart of Buddha, full of mercy, saves all those



who have faith, even those who do not know him. Those who are reborn in that Pure Land have eternal life. Their souls are filled with the desire to save human beings, and they devote themselves to that labor. ... They work for the happiness of their neighbors as much as for themselves, and they live as missionaries of mercy. ... They know the unlimited force of the Buddha's mercy. No attachment exists in the souls of these persons, nor any difference between 'self' and neighbor. ... This state requires the assistance of Buddha, who grants the opportunity to be one with him (pp. 105-107). ... All have to memorize the words: *Namu-Amida-Butsu* [total confidence in Buddha] (p. 110)."

Again we find parallels with Christian theology, not only at the level of experience but even at the level of language. However, the Buddhist formulations are more formal and less concrete in their expression than are the Christian ones. In fact, Buddha is called "The Buddha of Infinite Light and Unlimited Life" (p. 112).

### 1.6. The Buddhist praxis

"The path entails five points. The first is a correct idea about things, which means knowing that all sufferings are caused by earthly passions. The second is that these passions come from a false idea of the 'self' which ignores the law of causality (p. 116)."

In more Western language, this means that we should not disregard our contingent, limited nature so as to be left with the sensation our ego gives us: of being

someone absolute. In Christian language: we should recognize that, rather than being divine images, we are mere creatures who have received all that we are. But let us continue enumerating the five points:

"The third point is that we need to control our desires in order to pacify the passions. This means the proper use of things (clothing and food should be related to the body's needs and not used just for comfort or pleasure). The fourth point is learning to endure all, and the fifth is avoiding danger, for those who pursue fame, fortune, and power are like children who lick the honey spread on the edge of a sword: as they lap up the honey, they risk cutting their tongues (pp. 116-117, 119)."

These points demonstrate that the Buddhist critique of economic capitalism is even harsher than the Christian critique, given that capitalism is founded on the pursuit of maximum return and on a consumerism that misuses things. Humanly speaking, the triad of "money, fame, and power" explains a lot, and it coincides with a similar triad which Saint Ignatius calls the road to perdition (cf. the "Two Standards" meditation in the Exercises).

At the same time, it is noteworthy that in Buddhism there is no explicit movement toward solidarity with the countless victims produced by those who follow that ruinous road. It is true, of course, that those who faithfully follow the Buddhist path will avoid producing any such victims. But our problem is that we have not begun our journey just today; rather, humankind has already been traveling many centuries on the wrong road.<sup>9</sup>

Solidarity with the victims is often a means for liberating the ego and for attaining a correct view of what was mentioned in the first point. This solidarity can be useful when we are faced with the difficulty presented in our text:

“The path is rough, but even more painful is not having a heart that seeks after the path. ... When the heart grows muddled, action becomes impure, and when action is impure, there is no way to avoid suffering (p. 120).”

Again the question is raised: are we concerned about our own suffering or the suffering of others? Also: where can we find help for this difficulty?<sup>10</sup> After considering the problems enumerated in this quotation, one is moved to cry out with Paul of Tarsus: “What a wretched person I am! Who will save me from this situation?”

Given this difficulty, some types of Buddhism have tended to rely on the help of the eternal Buddha, as several quotes above indicate. Belief in a need for help has led some types of Buddhism to move from agnosticism toward a kind of implicit theism or divinization of Buddha. Other Buddhists, however, have adopted the formula, “If you find the Buddha, kill him.” This saying means that Buddhism does not entail a personal relationship but is simply true teaching about silence and interiority.

### **1.7. The last teaching of Buddha**

“My disciples, make yourselves into a light. Realize that pleasure, just as much as pain, is the cause of suffer-

ing, and do not indulge in it. Realize that there is no ‘self’ within your soul, and do not be worried. If you act this way, you will be able to free yourself of all suffering.

The most important point of this teaching is control of the soul: the soul can make a person be not only a Buddha but also an animal. If evil besieges the soul and if desire tempts you, you must subdue them.

Be cordial, respect one another, and don’t engage in disputes. Live in harmony, like water and milk in a pitcher, and do not reject one another, like water and oil.

I achieved the teaching I give you by following the path myself. The demon of desires is always seeking the opportunity to make trip you up: if a venomous serpent crept into your room, surely you would not be able to sleep peacefully.

The time of my end has come. Do not forget that this death is fleshly death. During these forty-five years I have preached all that I had to preach. There is no secret left in me (pp. 10-14).”

### **1.8. Opening a door to the prophets of Israel**

We may add other citations that show how Buddhism developed a social sense and social critique, though its style was more wisdom-oriented than prophetic (it taught, for example, that the rich harm not only others but themselves as well).

“If the rich possess lands, they are worried about them. If they have houses, they are worried about them. They worry because they are attached to things. ... The poor suffer because they lack things. They desire houses and lands, and being consumed in endless desire, they end up weary in body and soul. Unable to continue living, they die without having completed their lives (p. 96).

It is necessary to cast out the selfish soul and strive to help one’s neighbor. An act that makes others happy inspires them to spread their joy to even more people (p. 132).”

The wisdom-infused tone of these texts allows them to be applied also to the poor, in line with the evangelical notion of the “poor with spirit.”<sup>11</sup> Some correction therefore needs to be made about what was said earlier about Buddhism’s lack of a social awareness, and a definite spirit of solidarity should be recognized. We will leave for another moment a comparison of Buddhist teaching and the Bible’s wisdom texts about justice and the poor. But now let us sum up all that has been said so far with a splendid phrase of Japanese Zen Buddhism: “When you are excited, you are being used by your body; when you are enlightened, you use your body.”

## 1.9. By way of conclusion

### 1.9.1. *Buddhism and modernity*

Buddhism has the great merit of highlighting human fragility and sinfulness, realities that our modern age has refused

to acknowledge, thus aborting some marvelous human (and Christian) promises. The result has been a “post-modernity” that is skeptical and indifferent.

As I have said, the left tries to ignore original sin (what the Buddhists call “folly”), while the right acknowledges it, but only to take advantage of it for its own covert interests. It is argued that both civil and ecclesiastical powers seek to accentuate human sinfulness in order to impose themselves with moralistic arguments and imperatives and thus slow down progress. However, the proper reaction against such abuse of authority is not to deny the reality of our moral impotence but rather to denounce and correct the ways in which the powerful abuse it. Otherwise, we end up with the striking verdict of biblical scholar G. Lohfink: “Our progress has not brought human beings to the point where they have stopped eating one another. It’s just now they do it with a knife and fork.”<sup>12</sup> The naïve Marxian dream –that people would automatically change as soon as the structures changed –could have used a good dose of Buddhism.

Buddhism stresses the truth of human sinfulness, but it has no interest in taking advantage of it or in pronouncing moralistic condemnation. Rather, it stresses this truth out of compassion for human beings and a desire to help them. Western Catholicism really needs to learn this lesson: the moral outcry and the denunciations of Jesus and the prophets of Israel were not directed against human weakness as such; rather they were aimed at defending the victims of those who took advantage of that weakness. Jesus plainly proclaimed that he did not seek to address the “righteous” but sinners, not the healthy but the sick, not the blind

but those who thought they could see: “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains” (John 9,41).

We would do well to question seriously a certain “oriental trend” that has recently become popular among us. It seeks to use the wisdom of the Orient (Buddhism concretely) not as a way to change one’s life or to seek enlightenment, but as a “warrior’s furlough,” a chance to discharge the tensions arising from the class struggle so as to be able to continue oppressing with tranquility. “Yoga for executives” will never be able to tranquilize consciences, not even when it has the advantage of not bothering to confront people with any Superior Being to whom accounts must be rendered. Nor will it lead the executives to a profound and lasting peace; at best it will provide a few fleeting moments of relaxation.

Our text outlines a clear Buddhist trajectory: ignorance (or folly) –greed– anger (because of failure). It is a trajectory paralleled in Christian language: blindness –idolatry– perversion (or “punishment”). In large part, that has been the trajectory of our modern age, but it would be unjust to reduce everything to that. Modernity also glimpsed a promised land (human rights and the construction of history), and we should not let our disillusionment make us lose sight of that promised land today.

### *1.9.2. Buddhism and social structure*

We have already alluded to Buddhism’s radical critique of the capitalist system. In a society such as ours, which defines itself as a “consumer society,” Buddhist turns out to be a very oppor-

tune (perhaps indispensable) way of addressing consumers. The prophets of Israel aimed more at the promoters and beneficiaries of consumerism; they were the ones who caused great suffering and committed countless injustices. Buddhism could possibly motivate people to call a “general consumer strike,” which would cause the economic system to collapse. The role of prophets is to expose all those who deceive people by creating false needs in order to benefit from them. Working together, Buddhism and prophecy could help produce a Church which, while remaining community (like the Buddhist community), is also a “field hospital,” something that today is essential, as Pope Francis has stated. One of the best critics of our economic system, E. F. Schumacher, was an admirer of Buddhism, thanks to his experience of working in Burma. Buddhism led him to Catholicism, and he eventually published that little jewel of a book whose title says it all: *Small is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered*.<sup>13</sup>

### *1.9.3. The prophet’s fate*

There is, nonetheless, a noticeable difference between the texts we have presented so far and those that will follow: Buddha was viewed favorably and well received by his society. In contrast, the prophets of Israel were almost always rejected: the authorities told Amos to go home; they did their best to silence Micah (2,6); Jeremiah was accused of betraying his country, and attempts were made to kill him. Such was the fate of the prophets, culminating in Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified as a blasphemer and a terrorist.

## 2. THE OUTCRY (TEXTS OF THE PROPHETS)

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In this part we will order the texts by authors and not by subject matter, as we did in the previous chapter, since the matter being treated is a protest, not a teaching.

### 2.1. The principal prophets

#### *Amos*

The prophet Amos lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, during the reign of Jeroboam II. The northern kingdom (Israel) had recently separated itself from the southern kingdom (Judah), and it was experiencing a time of economic prosperity. Amos came from the south but preached in the north, from which he was eventually expelled.

“Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals (2,6).”

“Hear this word, you cows of Switzerland!<sup>14</sup> (4,1). There are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast

righteousness to the ground (5,7). I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (5,21-24).”

“Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and noint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! ... The Lord God has sworn

by himself (says the LORD, the God of hosts): I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his strongholds; and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it (6,4-8).”

“Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.’ The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds (8,4-7).”

Amos denounced things that were not prohibited by the Law (such as sleeping in beds of ivory) but made manifest the oppressive structures by which the wealthy inhabitants of the cities robbed the small farmers of their lands and established large estates. That is why some scholars call Amos the first prophet who was not “reformist” (as Elijah was) but was instead clearly opposed to the “system.” Amos was noteworthy also in giving the sensation that it was God himself speaking, using the prophet’s voice.

### *Hosea*

Hosea appeared shortly after Amos; he was from the North. Living at a time of great political upheavals, he made social injustice comparable to idolatry.

“Israel is a luxuriant vine; he produces fruit for himself. The more his

fruit, the more altars he made; the richer his land, the better he made the sacred pillars (10,1-2). ... There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. ... They feed on the sin of my people; they are greedy for their iniquity (4,1.8).”

“Gilead is a city of evildoers, tracked with blood. As robbers lie in wait for someone, so the priests are banded together (6.8-9).”

To drive home his message, he drew on his own personal history, comparing the unjust and idolatrous Israel to his unfaithful wife, who had prostituted herself. Nevertheless, God pledges never to abandon his beloved: “I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. ... and you will acknowledge the Lord” (2,19-20). Hosea joins together one classical pair, “righteousness and justice,” with another, “love and compassion” (*rahamim* = entrails). “I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath” (11,9). Therefore, “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (6,6).” Jesus cites this passage from Hosea on two occasions.

### *Micah*

Micah lived and prophesied around 700 B.C. He came from the South, but his criticisms were directed at both the northern and southern kingdoms since corruption had spread from Israel to Judah. He criticized not only concrete injustices, especially the huge estates,

but also the false theology that was used to defend them.

“Alas for those who devise wickedness and foul deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they do evil, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. ... You rise up against my people as an enemy; you strip the robes from the peaceful, from those who pass by trustingly with no thought of war. The women of my people you drive out from their pleasant houses; from their young children you take away my glory forever (2,1-2.8.9).”

In this situation of oppression the prophet speaks of God’s people (‘my people’), seeming to refer only to the oppressed, not the oppressors.

“And I said: Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice? You who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron. ... They cry ‘Peace’ when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths. ... Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its

priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the LORD and say, ‘Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us.’ (3,2.3.5.9-11).”

“Your wealthy are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, with tongues of deceit in their mouths (6,12). ... The faithful have disappeared from the land, and there is no one left who is upright; they all lie in wait for blood, and they hunt each other with nets. Their hands are skilled to do evil; the official and the judge ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire; thus they pervert justice (7,2-3).”

The sinner superstitiously asks, “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?” and the prophet’s response is as simple as it is cutting: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (6,8).

### *Isaiah*

The prophet Isaiah and his school carried out their activities from the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C. He was a great poet, much inspired by Amos. Of all the prophets Isaiah was the one most concerned for social justice. The epoch in which he lived was tremendously complicated due to the threats on all sides.

“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of

rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. ... Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. ... I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. ... Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (1,11.13.14.17).”

“The Lord expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry! Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land! (5,7-8). ... Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! (5,20). ... Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! (10.1-2).”<sup>15</sup>

“The Lord, the Lord Almighty, called you on that day to weep and to wail, ... but instead there was joy and festivity, killing oxen and slaughtering sheep, eating meat and drinking wine. ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die (22,12-13).’ ....

The earth staggers like a drunkard, it sways like a hut; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again (24,20). ... But you have said, ... ‘When the overwhelming scourge passes through it will not come to us; for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter’ (28,15).”

“They are a rebellious people who say to their intellectuals [literally: seers], ‘Think no more thoughts!’ and to the prophets, ‘Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions. Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!’ (30,10-11).

“Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales; see, he takes up the isles like fine dust (40,15).”

“Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers (58,3). ... Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (58,6-7).<sup>16</sup> ... See, the LORD’s hand is not too short to save, ... but your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue mutters wickedness. ... Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance;



for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter (59,1.3.14).”

“Whoever slaughters an ox is like one who kills a human being; ... whoever presents a grain offering is like one who offers swine’s blood;<sup>17</sup> whoever makes a memorial offering of frankincense is like one who blesses an idol (66,3).”

### *Jeremiah*

Preaching in the years before and after 600 BC and also inspired by Amos, Jeremiah was the first prophet who dared to denounce the kings directly. At first he was filled with hope but gradually became very pessimistic: the only hope for humankind would be when the law of God was written not on stone tablets but on the very flesh of human hearts.

“Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, ‘I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,’ and who cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Do you think you are a king? Your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence. Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Is not this to know me? says the Lord (22,13.14.17.15.16).”

“Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the

Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’ For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. ... Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? (7,4-7.11)”

“Thus says the LORD: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth. But let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight (9,23-24).”

### *Zephaniah*

This 7<sup>th</sup> century prophet issued strong statements against the ruling classes, and he promoted the reforms of King Josiah after the long, dissolute reign of Manasseh.

“On the day of the Lord’s sacrifice I will punish the officials and the king’s sons. ... On that day, says the LORD, a cry will be heard, for all the traders have perished; all who weigh out silver are cut off. At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs. ... Their

wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste (1,9.12.13).”

“Ah, soiled, defiled, oppressing city! It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no correction. ... The officials within it are roaring lions; its judges are ravenous wolves that leave nothing until the morning. Its prophets are reckless, faithless persons; its priests have profaned what is sacred, they have done violence to the law. ... But the unjust know no shame (3,1-4.5).”

A German scholar wrote that in Zephaniah we find “the authentic prophetic condemnation of the economic evolution that gave birth to the capitalist system.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it is enough to say that such is the evolution of greed.

### *Habakkuk*

A prophet well-known for his “woes,” Habakkuk uttered a fearsome condemnation of the imperialism of his day. He preached toward the end of the seventh century B.C.

“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? ... Why do you make me see wrongdoing and behold trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous; therefore judgment comes forth perverted. ... Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing; why do you look on the treacherous? Why are you silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they? (1,2-4.13).”

“Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion!”

“How long must this go on? Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain, setting his nest on high to escape the clutches of ruin! (2,6.9).”

### *Ezekiel*

Serving as a priest in Jerusalem during the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Ezekiel was severely critical of his city. Some scholars suspect that, given Ezekiel’s priestly status, some of his condemnations of social injustice were subsequent additions to the text, but Ezekiel was not unsparing in his denunciations of his own priestly establishment.

“The princes of Israel, all according to their power, have been bent on shedding blood. Father and mother are treated with contempt in you; the alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and the widow are wronged in you. ... They take bribes to shed blood; you take both advance interest and accrued interest, and make gain of your neighbors by extortion; and you have forgotten me, says the Lord GOD. See, I strike my hands together at the dishonest gain you have made, and at the blood that has been shed within you. ... I will scatter you among the nations and disperse you through the countries, and I will purge your filthiness out of you (22.6-7.12-13.16).”

“Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves!

Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. ... And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet? (34,2-4.19).”<sup>19</sup>

“Thus says the Lord GOD: Enough, O princes of Israel! Put away violence and oppression, and do what is just and right. Cease your evictions of my people (45,9).”

### *Malachi*

Malachi prophesied in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., after the exile, when the Temple had been rebuilt and proper worship resumed. He is identified by some scholars with Ezra.

“Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts (3,5).<sup>20</sup> ... ‘Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape.’ Thus spoke those who revered the LORD. The LORD took note and listened, and a book of re-

membrance was written before him (3,15-16).”

### *Baruch*

Considered to be the last prophet of Israel, Baruch lived around 200 B.C. and imagined himself to be the companion and spokesman of Jeremiah. Some Bibles attribute to him the so-called “Letter of Jeremiah,” which was clearly written at an earlier time.

“Where are the chiefs of the nations, those who hoarded up silver and gold in which people trust, and there is no end to their getting? (Baruch 3,17).”

“They deck their gods out with garments like human beings –these gods of silver and gold and wood that cannot save themselves from rust and corrosion. When they have been dressed in purple robes, their faces are wiped because of the dust from the temple, which is thick upon them (Letter of Jeremiah 1,10-11). ... So beware of becoming at all like the foreigners or of letting fear for these gods possess you (1,5). ... The priests sell the sacrifices that are offered to these gods and use the money themselves. Likewise their wives preserve some of the meat with salt, but give none to the poor or the helpless (1,27).”

## **2.2. Buddhism and the prophets: divergent languages?**

We will leave aside for now a question posed by many biblical scholars: were the solutions offered by the prophets

effective? Such a question will always arise when trying to assess any historical situation. What interests us here is something else.

The language of Buddhism and that of the prophets are certainly different! The contrast remains even when we acknowledge that the prophets expressed not only condemnations (such as the texts we cited) but also messages of hope, consolation, and assurance. But even with this consideration, are these two languages in conflict? Or can they be understood as *complementary* languages, such that neither one could be sustained and fulfilled without the other? Any cry that does not emerge from the authentic “silence” of rich interiority may be “political” but it will not be prophetic.

The language of the prophets always maintains a pattern of *denunciation*, *threat of punishment*, and *final promise*. When the prophets delivered their oracles against the pagan nations, these were condemned only for their ethical failures (cruelty, injustice), even as God “made use of them to punish his people. In the denunciations against Israel, in contrast, the main complaint concerned the treacherous behavior of the people chosen by God as his “personal possession” (Ex 19,5). The prophets saw Israel as the people God loved in special way, so that their betrayal was described as a type of adultery. Thus, the threat was always followed by a promise of reconciliation: despite the harshness of many of the condemnations, there was always the assurance of a bright future ahead.

Since the prophets were convinced that justice was the only possible source of both inner and outer peace, their principal concern was always compassion *for the victims*. People needed to be

protected not only from their capacity for self-deception (as in Buddhism) but also from the atrocities and the suffering produced by human evil. It was not enough just to “let the nations know they are only mortal,” as the psalmist prayed (9,20) and Buddhism stressed. Jewish prophecy did not so much seek *liberation* from human desire as the reverse: it sought to maintain desire and passion but *converting* them, by *transforming* them into desire for justice and passionate concern for the victims.

Buddhism, in contrast, imposes no obligation; it seeks only to illuminate the truth of our reality. Once that happens, it teaches, people will no longer need commandments. Or if they need them, it will be only because of their tremendous fragility, which Buddhism also acknowledges. Such a teaching would be valid “even if God did not exist,” as the famed Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it (*etsi Deus no daretur*). That is why it can be useful for people today, even for non-believers.

Having recognized these differences, we will now try summarize the teaching of the prophetic texts in the form of “four noble truths,” like those of Buddhism. I believe the truths would be these:

- The oppressed, the defenseless, and the victims are the favorites of God.
- For that precise reason, solidarity with them and commitment to them are the only true worship that human beings can give God, even if they do not believe in him.
- God rejects all worship that does not flow from that solidarity and that commitment, or that is used as an excuse to neglect them.<sup>21</sup>
- True faith and true “knowledge of God” are to be found in the accept-

ance of the foregoing theses, even for those who do believe in God.

Are these four theses opposed to the four noble truths of Buddha? Or do they rather complement them and carry them to a higher stage? Depending on places, times, and persons, we have to begin with one set of truths or the other,<sup>22</sup> but for ma-

ture people of faith, both of them should dwell together in harmony. As I tried to explain on another occasion, believing in God, for Christians, can only mean “believing in Love”<sup>23</sup> –understanding, of course, that we are talking about love with a capital letter (since the word “love,” like the word “God,” is among the most falsified and misused words in human language).

# CONCLUSIONS

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Let us cite a Christian text that could well be a Buddhist one; it shows how Christianity does not deny the principles of Buddhism but adds something special to them. The verses are the following:

When you dwell upon anything,	→ stop throwing yourself at everything
in order to pass from the all to the All,	→ you must leave yourself completely
you must deny yourself wholly in all.	in the All.
And when you come to possess it	→ you have the All while desiring
wholly,	nothing
you must possess it without	→ there the spirit finds its rest
desiring anything	
And in this nakedness	→ upward striving causes no fatigue
nothing oppresses you when you	→ because the spirit is centered in
are cast down	humility. <sup>24</sup>

## Integration

Faith in Jesus Christ has something to add to that reflection, so authentically Buddhist and so fully Christian. It is not a question of negating (as is often done these days) but of integrating. In other words, an effort must be made to preserve what is essential in both traditions, especially as regards the word “compassion” (or “mercy”), which is common to both.

I have remarked in other places that the expression most used in the gospels about Jesus is that “he was viscerally moved with compassion.” This visceral reaction on the part of Jesus was awakened above all by the people of his society who were victims. In chapter 6 of Luke Jesus enunciates four “beatitudes,” and they are followed by four “woes,” uttered against the people who create victims. There is no contradiction, how-

ever, between the compassion (of Jesus) arising from holy indignation and the more “empathetic” compassion (of Buddha) toward the incredible capacity human beings have to deceive themselves. We fashion history to our liking and remain blind in our desires for affirmation and recognition. Jesus was moved with compassion at the sign of that immense multitude whom he saw as “sheep without a shepherd.” These are the ones whom Buddha would have seen as blind people without a guide.

*We stress, though, that only the more empathetic form of compassion is able to keep our purely ethical indignation from becoming self-righteousness and from turning us into smug judges of all the world’s oppressors. When we assign ourselves a task that belongs only to God, we simply fall into another form of self-deceit.*

## Transcendence

Our analysis seems to confirm the thesis of the Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris: when religious experience is authentic (i.e., produced by the Spirit), it is an experience of poverty and a call to poverty. Moreover, the manifestation of God in Jesus Christ reveals that God has made his “covenant” with all the impoverished folks of history and with all the victims of those persons who may be pious but who do not heed to call of the Spirit to sobriety and solidarity. “Live for them and die for their sake” was the splendid slogan of Father Múgica, martyr of the *villas-miseria* of Argentina.

In this sense, it might be said that Buddhism speaks from a “pre-lapsarian” perspective (that is, prescinding from

what we misname “original sin”), whereas the Judeo-Christian tradition speaks from a perspective that is “post-lapsarian” but knows itself redeemed. That is why even the wisdom literature of the Bible has sayings about the poor and the rich which are remarkably blunt even if they do not make accusations or denunciations.

## Consummation

The question remains open whether the very dynamic of Buddhism does not reveal an opening toward a Transcendence that would be at once its Absolute Fundament and its Full Consummation. This is what later forms of Buddhism call *Dharmakayā* (the Universal Body), which is something like the essence of the universe. Even though Buddhism is agnostic with regard to God, it contains currents which seem to divinize Buddha. In another place I have spoken of Buddhism as Christianity’s “universal Precursor.” We might well apply to Buddha the words Jesus spoke about the Baptist: “There is none greater among those born of this history,” for Buddha is surpassed only by the One who “has been born of heaven” (Mat 11,11).

I simply cannot accept, because it contradicts my most basic human experience as a believer, the statement made by a modern theologian: “We are liberated not by any creed, but only by the recognition of our own truth.” Of course, we are not liberated by a creed. We are liberated by a *faith*: faith in God’s love. Such faith will then seek the best possible way to express itself. The theologian’s statement misconstrues the misconception it seeks to combat. Moreover, knowledge

of my own truth does not liberate me but rather leads me to cry out with Paul: “Who will free me...?” I will be freed only by knowing that I am loved as I am. And it is precisely here, I believe, that Christianity can crown Buddhism.

## Harmony

We thus gain a better idea of the true mission of the communities or churches. The Buddhist community (*Sangha*) is not “missionary,” in the sense that it does not seek to change the world. Rather, it seeks only to communicate the teaching of Buddha and to create groups that follow it. It feels confident that, when that happens, the world will change on its own. In this sense the *Sangha* might be compared to those early Christian communities described in chapters 2 and 4 of the Acts of the Apostles. Like the *Sangha*, the Christian community seeks to communicate a teaching (that of Jesus) and to create groups that follow it, but it is also missionary in the sense that it denounces the injustice in our society

and works to transform the “world.” It does this by seeking what Jesus called “the reign of God and the justice of God” (Mat 7,33), which is the reign of gratuity and fraternity in a civilization of sobriety and solidarity.

This comparison of the two communities derives from our analysis of the last part of the book under consideration, which is dedicated to describing how believing Buddhists should live and form community. We can find many parallels here with the life of Christian churches. For example, there is the distinction between lay people and vowed religious, and there is a series of norms about daily life, family life, the role of women, etc. Finally, the book offers a type of ecclesiology in the section titled “Construction of the Land of Buddha.”<sup>25</sup> We have no space to treat that theme here, but I would like to conclude by offering a marvelous example of Buddhist wisdom that seems to be very relevant to our world today: “A small misunderstanding can cause a great misfortune. That should be taken into account, especially in family life” (p. 220).



1. But remember that the letter to the Hebrews (2,15) also recognized the fear of death as a source of human bondage.
2. Cf. CASTILLO, Jose María (2007), *Víctimas del pecado*, Madrid: Trotta.
3. All the citations in the text come from the book *La enseñanza de Buda* [The Teaching of Buddha], edited by Bukkyo Dendo Kyōkai of Tokyo (5th edition, 1998). They are accompanied by my commentaries.
4. As a Christian parallel we can sing with Saint Teresa, “Nothing is lacking to one who has God.” But is this enough for the undocumented immigrant woman whose husband is in prison, who eats in soup kitchens, and who is about to be evicted from her hovel for not paying the rent?
5. The text cites a parable of a father with two sons, which can be compared with the parable in chapter 15 of Luke’s gospel. We cannot treat of it here, except to note that the lost son (symbol of humankind) is said to be wayward, not prodigal.
6. Just as Marx, despite his atheism, had an unshakable faith in the laws of nature and the victorious dynamic of dialectical materialism.
7. Here is a succinct anthology of the Buddhist texts on faith (from the section “The Way of Faith,” pp. 176-82): “The faith of disciples is to believe in the wisdom of Buddha. Faith is the best companion of life; it is nourishment for the long journey of life; it is the greatest of goods. Faith is fire: it burns away every filth of the soul and sets it ablaze with desires for enlightenment. Faith enriches the soul and teaches charity without attachment. Faith encourages people when the path is long and tiresome, and it leads to enlightenment. Faith makes us feel as though we are in the presence of Buddha. Faith gives us the wisdom to understand that this world is no more than a momentary game and that there is no immutable truth in it. Faith makes us always be with Buddha, always act with Buddha, and always desire to live with Buddha. The hand of Buddha, by overcoming the obscurity of doubt that beclouds the soul, introduces the light of faith.” There appears to be here a process that moves from believing Buddha to believing “in” Buddha—a passage from believing in the teaching to believing in the person. What might be the basis for this progressive evolution?
8. This word means “seeker of light,” a typical Buddhist expression that is often applied to human beings.
9. Something similar could be said of the Decalogue: it is too late in the day to observe only those commandments.
10. This difficulty is acknowledged in the text’s subsequent enumeration of “twenty difficult things in this world,” which reveal a profound knowledge of the human soul: “It is difficult to be generous; it is difficult for the proud to learn the way of enlightenment; it is difficult to listen to the teachings of Buddha; it is difficult to keep the soul free of the body’s instincts; it is difficult not to desire beautiful and agreeable things; it is difficult for the powerful not to use their power; it is difficult not to get angry when insulted; it is difficult to stay pure when one is tempted; it is difficult to study broadly and in depth; it is difficult not to belittle beginners; it is difficult to keep pride at a distance; it is difficult to find a good friend; it is difficult to follow Buddha’s teaching and reach enlightenment; it is difficult not to be disturbed by external circumstances; it is difficult to preach when one knows human nature; it is difficult to keep peace of soul; it is difficult not to argue about good and evil; it is difficult to find and learn a good method” (pp. 133-34).
11. The first beatitude of Matthew may signify those made poor by the Spirit (those impoverished because of their option for justice) or the

- poor who have spirit (though poor, they do not fight for justice out of resentment or hatred or simply to seek their own advantage.)
12. For further explanation, see chapter 13, “Progreso, maldad y bondad,” in GONZÁLEZ FAUS, José I. (2010). *Otro mundo es posible... desde Jesús*. Santander: Sal Terrae.
  13. SCHUMACHER, Ernst Friedrich (2010), *Small is Beautiful*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc. Originally published in 1973.
  14. Of course, the original does not say that but says “cows of Basan,” a region famous for its rich pastures, much like our modern Switzerland.
  15. With some changes in vocabulary, this paragraph could be a good description of a large part of Spain.
  16. It would be worthwhile to read the whole of this chapter, which is too long to cite here in its entirety.
  17. The impurest of impure animals.
  18. *Das Alte Testament Deutsch*, 25, 65.
  19. The text is clearly allegorical: the sheep of the Lord are the people of Israel.
  20. In biblical language, these (like immigrants) are the defenseless people who have absolutely no one to help them and so are poorer than the poor themselves.
  21. It is amazing how little effect this truth has had on “Christian worship,” despite the insistence of the prophets and psalms on this message. Instead of approaching the house of God to be nourished by his Word and to try to do his Will, people go there to placate God or to keep him at a distance so that they can follow their own will.
  22. For example, in teaching Christian doctrine to children, it would be of little pedagogical advantage to begin directly with the prophets, at least in the first world.
  23. Cf. GONZÁLEZ FAUS, José Ignacio (2015). *God?*, Barcelona: Cristianisme i Justícia, Booklets no. 157.
  24. De la Cruz, Juan (1991). «Introducción a la Subida al Monte Carmelo», *Obras completas*, Salamanca, pp. 117-118. We could also add verses 19-20 of chapter 3 of John’s gospel, with their insistence on the need to “go to the light.” This image evokes Buddhist enlightenment. See also chapter 28 of Job, with its contrast between true wisdom and mere technical knowledge.
  25. “The Kingdom of Buddha” is the term used in the Spanish edition, perhaps seeking analogies with Jesus’ use of the expression “Kingdom of God.”



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