

Advocacy for Justice and Dialogue with Buddhism

EDGAR JAVIER, SVD

The German poet, Goethe, once said: "He who knows one language knows none." Applying Goethe's dictum to religion, Max Müller, in his book – *Introduction to the Science of Religion* – said: "The person who knows only one religion does not know any religion." Today, I dare say that a person who knows only one way of advocacy does not know any. Hence, dialogue with Buddhism is not only timely but important. Buddhism has many pieces of *good news* for Christian advocates of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. We shall develop this topic as follows.

First, we will define our terms and make them into working concepts. These terms are "advocacy," "dialogue," and "Buddhism." They are not new to us. But it is imperative that we make these concepts operational not only in our discussion of advocacy but especially in our actual advocacy of justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

Second, we will identify the pieces of "good news" in Buddhism for us Christians. The Buddhist, as we know, is not only to seek liberation interiorly, but also to practice the virtues of justice, honesty and compassion.¹ In doing so, we have to move from a doctrinal mentality and method to dialogical one.

¹ See Leonard Swidler, "Interreligious and Intrareligious Dialogue: The Matrix for All Systematic Reflection Today" in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, Leonard Swidler, ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 16-17.

Finally, we will propose practical strategies to make our advocacy real and in close partnership with Buddhism. Religions – like Buddhism – are not only explanations of the meaning of life but also “ways” to take in order to discover meaning or reach the Truth.

Working Concepts

The theme of this essay is very timely. It involves concepts that are very rich and challenging. Behind this richness and challenge, however, is yet another challenge that must be faced squarely. Such challenge is captured by the word “ownership.” This simply means that these *terms* must not only be transformed into *working concepts*. They must, above all, be *owned* by the advocates of justice, peace and the integrity of creation in Asia and Oceania.

Advocacy: It means “pleading in support of,” “advising,” “recommending,” “support for,” “backing,” “arguing for,” and “promotion.”² A closer look at the words that draw a line (*de – finire*) around the word “advocacy” shows that this word is a dynamic word indeed. As such, it involves active participation for a cause. In the context of the advocacy in Asia and Oceania, “advocacy” speaks of dynamism and demands an active participation on the part of the advocates. Moreover, “partnership” with the Buddhists in the advocacy for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation is deemed necessary if not urgent.

Dialogue: It is conversation (*colloquium*) with the “other” and learning from each other whatever is possible. It is a form of meeting and communication to bring about a better grasp of the truth and to achieve better human relations.³ In the context of religious plurality, dialogue means all possible and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrich-

² See *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2003.

³ Edgar G. Javier, *Dialogue: Our Mission Today* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2006), 7.

ment.⁴ In the context of the advocacy for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation in Asia and Oceania, the advocates must dialogue with the "other" to *learn* from each other, so that both dialogue partners can *change* and *grow*.⁵ Moreover, dialogue, nourished by the practice of meditation, is the key to peace.⁶ The advocates must use this key.

Buddhism: It is a major world religion based on the "mystical experience"⁷ of its founder. It was founded in northeastern India in the fifth century B.C.E. The immediate context of its emergence is the *sramana* movement, in which independent ascetics freed themselves from Vedic authority, brahmanic ritualism, and conservative social tradition, and established communities for the purpose of exploring new paths to spiritual liberation.⁸

As a religion it is based on the "mystical experiences" and teachings (*dhamma/dharma*) of Siddhartha Gautama,⁹ who is known as the *Buddha*, or "Enlightened One." Buddhism has been significant not only in India but also in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), and Laos, where *Theravada* (the Lesser Vehicle) has been dominant; *Mahayana* (the Great Vehicle) has had its greatest impact in China, Japan, Taiwan, Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, Korea, and Vietnam, as well as

⁴ Secretariat for Non-Christians, "Dialogue and Mission," 10 May 1984, no. 9.

⁵ See Swidler, "Interreligious and Intrareligious Dialogue," 6.

⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 2-3.

⁷ Eva K. Neumaier, "The Dilemma of Authoritative Utterance in Buddhism" in *Experiencing Scripture in World Religions*, Harold Coward, ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 139.

⁸ G. C. Pande, "The Message of Gotama Buddha and Its Earliest Interpretations" in *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, and Early Chinese*, Takeuchi Yoshinori, ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 3.

⁹ "He was born about 566 B.C.E. in Lumbini near Kapilavasthu, the principal city of the Sakyas, in present-day Nepal. At the age of twenty-nine he "went forth" to live a homeless existence. He died about the age of eighty at Kutsinara. Instead of nominating a successor, the Buddha declared that the Dhamma/Dharma was to be the one leader of the order." See Pande, "The Message of Gotama Buddha and Its earliest Interpretations," 3, 20, 22.

in India. The number of Buddhists worldwide has been estimated at between one hundred fifty and three hundred million. The reasons for such a range are twofold: throughout much of Asia religious affiliation has tended to be nonexclusive; and it is especially difficult to estimate the continuing influence of Buddhism in Communist countries such as China.¹⁰

Buddhism and Global Responsibility

We dialogue with Buddhists to *learn* from them, so that we – Buddhists and Christians – can *change* and *grow*. “Learning,” “change,” and “growth” are the important dynamics of dialogue that we have to go through. They are the dynamics of dialogue that we also have to grow into. These dynamics imply “openness” to the Buddhist teachings, to “conversion” on our part to what they stand for, and “growth” in our relationship with them.

But before anything else, we have to face the enormous task of healing the ruptured past and the task reclaiming afresh the depth and wisdom of Buddhism. Before us the early missionaries, unknowingly influenced by the colonial will to power and the subtle imperial self-righteousness of Western Christendom, were largely unaware of the sacred soil upon which they trampled, and even less aware of the sacred traditions they dismissed as primitive paganism. We have to unburden the burden of history that is in the memory of many people. We should apologize and resolve to avoid those mistakes.

Our willingness to dialogue with Buddhism and learn from its experience itself requires a conversion if we are to move from the “East versus West *dualism*” and especially the ideological *division* between Christian and non-Christian perspectives.¹¹ This

¹⁰ K. Sri Dhammananda, *What Buddhists Believe* (Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society, 1987), 51; Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1990), 260-299; Takeuchi Yoshinori, *The Heart of Buddhism: In Search of the Timeless Spirituality of Early Buddhism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 109-110.

¹¹ See Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Vows for Non-Violence* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2001).

simply means that there are always different ways of looking at things. But emphasis should be on “similarities-in-difference” (David Tracy). According to O’Murchu, “in this time of multifaith dialogue, we should be aware that our intellectual and spiritual insularism itself feeds the culture of division and violence.”¹² After all, we are now in an era where complementarity rather than dualistic opposition is of the essence.

From Home into Homelessness. The quest for true happiness and peace for all beings is a common feature of all Buddhist traditions. It all began when Siddhartha Gautama “went forth” to live a *homeless* existence. His conversion to spiritual life is said to have resulted from his perception of the suffering of old age, disease, and death on the one hand and of the peace of world-renouncing ascetics on the other.¹³ The Buddha pointed out that life, as most people experience it, “is unsatisfactory and characterized by suffering and impermanence. Most of this is caused by human greed and selfishness, and ignorance of the true nature of reality.”¹⁴

The Buddha’s spiritual sensitivity was outraged by the vanity of egoistic and sensual pursuits. It was also outraged by the universality of mutability and disquiet, strife, and suffering. His transforming experience of suffering (*dukkha*) was his discovery of the first of the four noble (*ariyan*) truths, namely: (1) the nature of *dukkha*; (2) its origination; (3) its cessation; (4) the path to this cessation.¹⁵ *Dukkha* is to be understood as “an existential suffering grounded in the temporality of human existence.”¹⁶

¹² Ibid., 2.

¹³ Pande, “The Message of Gotama Buddha and Its earliest Interpretations,” 3.

¹⁴ Christmas Humphreys, *The Buddhist Way of Life* (New Delhi: Harper-Collins, 1993), 50-54.

¹⁵ David R. Loy, “Pave the Planet or Wear Shoes? A Buddhist Perspective on Greed and Globalization,” in *Subverting Greed: Religious Perspectives on the Global Economy*, Paul Knitter and Chandra Muzaffar, eds. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 60. See also Neumaier, “The Dilemma of Authoritative Utterance in Buddhism,” 140-141.

¹⁶ Pande, “The Message of Gotama Buddha and Its Earliest Interpretations,” 4.

“What does homelessness mean for us advocates of justice, peace and the integrity of creation?” “Is spiritual liberation a prerequisite for advocacy?” “What is the role of solitude in our tasks of advocacy?” “Didn’t Buddha practice solitude, fleeing all human contact?” “Didn’t Jesus spend time in prayer to the Father during his ministry?”

Inter-Being. The Buddha taught that each of us is a relationship. We are all one big network of relationships. We do not just *exist*, but we *exist with* (*anicca/anatta*).¹⁷ Buddha taught that humans can undergo transformation from what they currently are – that is, from “selfish” to “no-self” or from “egoism” to “altruism.”¹⁸ Humans can lose their “ego” and become “empty” to redeem the world from its sufferings.¹⁹

One of the very important teachings of Buddha is the denial of the “ego” which is always caught up in a network of relationships. Contemplating this network of relationships, Bhikku Buddhassa of Thailand states that reality is itself socialist.²⁰ Buddhism is an advocate of or believer in the idea or theory in accordance with socialism. Thich Nhat Hanh, however, puts it in another way. For him, reality is *inter-being*. To be in this world is *inter-be*.²¹ According to him, “Inter-being is a new term, but I believe it will be in the dictionary soon because it is such an important word. When we see the nature of inter-being, barriers between ourselves and others are dissolved, and peace, love, and understanding are possible. Whenever there is understanding, compassion is born.”²²

¹⁷ Ibid., 26.

¹⁸ See Brennan R. Hill, Paul Knitter and William Madges, *Faith, Religion and Theology: A Contemporary Introduction* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1997), 229-230.

¹⁹ See T. Patrick Burke, *The Major Religions: An Introduction with Texts* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 72.

²⁰ Michael Amaladoss, “The Utopia of the Human Family,” *Concilium* 5 (2001): 85.

²¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 11.

²² Ibid.

"Are we promoters of inter-being and inter-existence in our advocacy of justice, peace and integrity of creation?" "Are we aware of the fact that we are one big network of relationships?" "What are the barriers to our becoming inter-beings?"

Non-violence (*Ahimsa*). Violence has not been unknown in Buddhist societies. Nevertheless, the Buddhist tradition offers rich resources for peacemaking and the cultivation of non-violence.²³ In the present century, there is a rising consciousness around non-violence. Hinduism, Buddhism, and particularly Jainism²⁴ make non-violence a central tenet of their belief systems. In the spiritual tradition of the East, *ahimsa* is often presented as a means of expediting the process of rebirth (*samsara*). *Ahimsa* can mean not only non-injury or non-violence, but also love.²⁵ By refraining from causing harm or damage to other creatures or to nature in its many aspects, devotees of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism believe they are helping to diminish the impact of negative *karma* and contributing to their own eventual liberation into a state of ultimate bliss (*nirvana*).²⁶

Ahimsa is depicted not so much as a spiritual strategy to be adopted by human beings, but rather as a central aspect of God's own life and of God's concern for the world. It is primarily a divine attribute, a central aspect of the divine *shalom*, whereby we humans are invited to live and work harmoniously and constructively to advance the fullness and wholeness of life (John 10:10) that every major religion claims as its central teaching. The way of non-violence is a radical option for life.²⁷ Non-violence does not mean

²³ Christopher Queen, "The Peace Wheel: Nonviolent Activism in the Buddhist Tradition" in *Subverting Hatred: The Challenge of Nonviolence in Religious Traditions*, Daniel Smith-Christopher, ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 25.

²⁴ See Paul Dundas, *The Jains* (London: Routledge, 1992); Padmanabh S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979).

²⁵ Hill, Knitter and Madges, *Faith, Religion and Theology*, 224.

²⁶ O'Murchu, *Vows for Non-Violence*, 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

passivity or weak pacifism.²⁸ The power of *ahimsa* can shake and transform the whole world.

Mahatma Gandhi, influenced by Hinduism and Jainism, developed his theory of passive resistance to activate a new quality of truth (*satyagraha*) across the entire spectrum of relationships – personal, interpersonal, social, and political.²⁹ According to O'Murchu, "*ahimsa* is the handmaid of true biblical justice, the righteousness that seeks to abolish all oppression and exploitation so that people can enjoy the freedom of the children of God."³⁰

"Are we promoters of the way of non-violence?" "Are we designing programs that are geared towards the attainment of the fullness of life?" "Do our advocacy programs evoke enthusiasm for life?"

Engaged Buddhism. Things are changing in Asia. More Buddhists religious leaders are becoming aware of the impact they can have as religious leaders on political and economic issues. The world has changed. Globalization has forced its way into Buddhists lands and Buddhist practice has migrated to the West.³¹ What is the Buddhist response to globalization?

The starting point is the central tenet concerning the interconnectedness of all life. Rather than focusing on economic growth, Buddhism maintains that public welfare is best served by the practice of generosity and compassion.³² Moreover, the ethical teachings of Buddhism emphasize that interconnectedness comes with a moral component. Buddhists should maintain a sense of universal responsibility in all their endeavors.³³ Buddhist skeptics of globalization regard globalization as flawed. It fosters greed, competitiveness, and consumerism. These are in contradiction to

²⁸ Hill, Knitter and Madges, *Faith, Religion and Theology*, 225.

²⁹ O'Murchu, *Vows for Non-Violence*, 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

³¹ Ira Rifkin, *Spiritual Perspectives on Globalization: Making Sense of Economic and Cultural Upheaval* (Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths, 2003), 98.

³² *Ibid.*, 99.

³³ *Ibid.*, 100.

the Buddhist values of generosity, compassion, nonattachment, community, and a deep respect for the natural world.³⁴

Engaged Buddhism³⁵ is relevant today. Its relevance lies in its criticism of the underlying economic and political mindsets that are advancing the process of globalization by encouraging ever-greater profit margins and by deifying consumerism.³⁶ Its relevance also lies in its criticism of technology's metaphysical assumption that man is a supreme being. He can destroy anything in the name of progress. This, of course, is contrary to human and Buddhist values.³⁷ Technology is not value-free.

"Do our people need more temples/churches or more clinics and hospitals?" "What is our stance towards globalization as we advocate justice, peace and the integrity of creation?" "Do we have a theology of technology and science?"

Communal Advancement

Buddhists maintain that the common good or public welfare is best served through individual attention to the practice of generosity and compassion. However, this does not mean giving up material possessions. Rather, it is the promotion of a non-attached attitude towards them. Generosity (*dana*) is a way of developing

³⁴ Ibid., 103.

³⁵ "The end of colonialism saw the birth of many engaged Buddhist movements, such as *Sarvodaya Shramandana* (a self-help organization working to revitalize villages in Sri Lanka), Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's *Suan Mokkh* (reforming Buddhism in modern Thailand), the *International Network of Engaged Buddhists* (based in Thailand, and incorporating many grassroots, volunteer groups devoted to peace and community development) and several Japanese organization including *Rissho Kosekai* and *Soka Gakkai*. The most prominent figures have been Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet, and Thich Nhat Hanh." Loy, "Pave the Planet or Wear Shoes?," 74. [Emphases supplied].

³⁶ Rifkin, *Spiritual Perspectives on Globalization*, 106-107.

³⁷ Sulak Sivaraksa, "Development as if People Mattered" in *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft, eds. (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000), 189 cited in Rifkin, *Spiritual Perspectives on Globalization: Making Sense of Economic and Cultural Upheaval*, 108.

non-attachment. It is also a way of helping others.³⁸ Hence, the stifling of personal greed is done through sharing. This creates bonds between individuals. It also encourages reciprocity and the sense of interconnectedness.³⁹

The emphasis on social justice is not found in traditional Buddhism. Their traditional solution to poverty is “giving” or “generosity” (*dana*).⁴⁰ The concept of social justice may not be original to Buddhism but it is incompatible with Buddhist teaching. Rifkin observes that a relevant development in Buddhism is the adaptation of the belief in social justice as understood in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (the Abrahamic traditions). Western Buddhists stay true to their belief in the necessity for direct action on behalf of social justice causes.⁴¹ These Buddhists are “socially engaged Buddhists”⁴² and are attempting “to incorporate such a concern for social justice into the way they live their faith.”⁴³

“What can we say about the two “ways” of promoting the common good – social justice and distributive justice (West) and generosity and compassion (East)?” “How much have we been networking with other socially engaged people in our advocacy of justice, peace and integrity of creation?” “Would you like to wake up someday and discover that you are more than a Christian, that you are a Christian-Buddhist advocating justice, peace and integrity of creation?”

The New World Order

A new world order is being created by economic globalization. This new world order has made people reflect on whether economic

³⁸ Loy, “Pave the Planet or Wear Shoes?,” 58, 62.

³⁹ Rifkin, *Spiritual Perspectives on Globalization*, 104.

⁴⁰ Loy, “Pave the Planet or Wear Shoes?,” 63.

⁴¹ Rifkin, *Spiritual Perspectives on Globalization*, 105.

⁴² Two informative books on socially engaged Buddhism are *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (1996) and *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (2000), both edited by Christopher Queen.

⁴³ Loy, “Pave the Planet or Wear Shoes?,” 64.

values are rooted in our basic human nature. On the one hand, there are those who defend capitalism and argue that its emphasis on competition and personal gain is grounded in the fact that humans are fundamentally self-centered and self-interested. On the other hand, there are those who come up and stand as critics of capitalism. They argue that our human nature is less selfish, more cooperative, and generous.⁴⁴

Buddhism, according to Loy, avoids this debate by taking a different approach. Taking recourse to what Buddha taught – that is, we all have unwholesome and wholesome characteristics – the important issue is the practical matter of how to reduce the unwholesome characteristics of human being.⁴⁵ Like the *lotus flower*,⁴⁶ there is the potential for people to purify themselves from the “three poisons” or roots of evil: “greed” (*lobha*), “ill-will,” (*dosa*) and “delusion” (*moha*).

“What concrete steps shall we take against the commodification of human life and the trafficking of human beings?” “What concrete steps can we take to prevent the de-sacralization of the Earth as our “mother” or “home?” “Are today’s symbols – money status, and power – satisfactory substitutes to the lotus flower?”

Practical Strategies

A New Vision: Integration in the Total Ecology of the Earth.

There is now a new vision that we have to realize. According to Paredes, “we are arriving to a new vision in which human beings, animals and the environment are integrated in the total ecology of our planet Earth.” What this new vision reveals is that there is no reason for confrontation, violence and despotism among

⁴⁴ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. “The lotus flower, although rooted in the mud and muck at the bottom of the pond, it grows upward to bloom on the surface, representing our potential to purify ourselves.”

human beings: we are not “tribal,” “national” beings, with frontiers, wars and weapons.⁴⁷

Borders are artificial and man-made and, therefore, should not be allowed. Our identity is neither tribal nor “national” only. We are more than tribal and national. We are always “trans-national” and even planetary. Our true and real identity is planetary and global. Planetization articulates what is diverse and builds up solidarity and a dynamically balanced humanity.⁴⁸

The new vision speaks for integration, not homogenization. There is that great longing today for humanity without confrontation and violence, wars and massacres. There is also the great longing for humanity to be in communion with nature. Uniform thinking in our advocacy for justice, peace and the integrity of creation must be substituted by integrative thinking. We should move from dogmatic thinking to dialogical thinking. Such mode of thinking is more appropriate in Asia and Oceania.

A New Method: From Tolerance to Dialogue.

Tolerance is good. But it is not enough. We have to find a new method. We have to enter the realm of what is “inter.” From pluralism we are called to enter into close relationships of dialogue. We have to adopt the new method of inter-culture, inter-religion, inter-spirituality, inter-gender, and so on. Open-mindedness and inter-connection are the new lingo of this new vision of humanity. If we are ecumenical, why not also be ecological? Both terms come from “*oikos*.” The whole Earth is a single cell, and we are all simply symbiotic particles, related to one another. There can be no ‘us’ and ‘them’. The global politics that flows (should flow) from this vision is truly a *bios* and a *logos*.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Jose Cristo Rey Garcia Paredes, “Eco-Theology: Only Wholeness is Sacred – Towards a New Theological Vision” (A conference given during the Consecrated Life Week 2008 at the Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia (ICLA) in Quezon City, on January 19, 2008), 2.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Julia Esquivel Velasquez, “Spirituality of the Earth,” in *Ecology and Poverty*, Concilium 5, Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, eds. (London: SCM Press, 1995), 59.

New Charisms: The Charisms of the Spirit for our Times.

The Spirit is always at work not only in the Church but also beyond. The Spirit is active not only in Christianity but also in the other religious faiths. The presence and activities of the Spirit are the causes of the emergence of the new charisms that we need in the advocacy of justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

Hospitality. We have to be hospitable towards other persons and things. Integral to our works of advocacy is to make other people and other forms of life feel “at home” on planet Earth.

Compassion. We have to practice compassion towards any manifestation of life – whether human, or animal, or natural. This leads to the development of the culture of life that our advocacy must promote.

Humanity. We are different, yet we share the same humanity. We, therefore, stand against any attitude of wild behavior that dehumanizes our fellow humans. Human life should not be commodified. Human trafficking should be stopped.

Shared prosperity. Self-limitation is an essential human attribute for happiness. This requires a degree of non-attachment. Without the wisdom of self-limitation we will not be satisfied.

Mutual respect. We have to promote mutual respect for the dignity and rights of the person and of life. When we respect the dignity and rights of the other, we respect our dignity and rights better. When we respect our dignity and rights better, we respect the dignity and rights of the other better.

The Spirit is the energy of God. All of us have the seed of the Holy Spirit in us. We have the capacity of healing, transforming, and loving. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, “when we touch that seed, we touch God the Father and God the Son.”⁵⁰ When we use these *charisms* in our advocacy for justice, peace and the integrity of creation, we are empowered to *heal, transform, and love* humanity and other forms of life on planet Earth.

⁵⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 15.

Conclusion

Dialogue is the key to peace. Conscious breathing is the most basic Buddhist practice for touching peace. With Thich Nhat Hanh, I would like to offer you this short exercise: *Breathing in, I calm my body. Breathing out, I smile. Dwelling in the present moment, I know this is a wonderful moment.* □