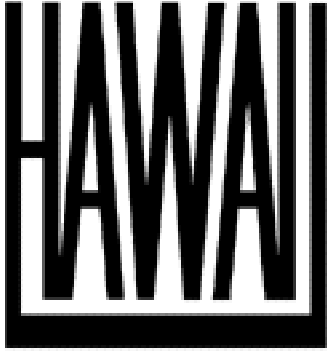

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Liberation: An Indo-Tibetan Perspective

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INTRODUCTION: ON THE NATURE OF BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

Given the wealth and diversity of theological and philosophical opinions in both the Buddhist and Christian traditions, it is incumbent upon those who would engage in dialogue to recognize the limitations of any particular dialogical setting by admitting to the fact that it is at most an interchange between individuals with specific doctrinal views.[1] That both traditions are so rich doctrinally implies, of course, a lack of univocality in both traditions. What this means is that the term "Buddhist-Christian dialogue" is meaningful only as a shorthand expression for the process of interchange between individual Buddhists and Christians, each an advocate of specific doctrinal views. What it means, too, is that there is no such thing as a normative Buddhist-Christian dialogue.[2]

This may seem trivial, but it is an inherent limitation of dialogue that has frequently been overlooked historically. Due partly to ignorance and partly to complacency, we have tended to look upon our dialogue partners as representatives of a normative tradition. What is perhaps more ironic still is that we have ended up with dialogue partners whose doctrinal stance is amazingly similar to our own. Our choice of doctrinally similar partners, whether conscious or not, is partly based on the presupposition that dialogue requires doctrinal similarity, a position that I have argued against elsewhere. Further, it serves the function of legitimizing our own sectarian perspective, for, surely, if I am the Buddhist representative in a Buddhist-Christian dialogue I must *be* in some significant way Buddhist. Such dimensions of the dialogue, especially its legitimizing fuctions, can also not be overlooked.

A final note in this preamble: is it not incumbent upon us also to ask what relevance dialogue has to individual Buddhists and Christians? Even assuming that we, as intellectuals, need not be accountable to any constituency over and above our fellow intellectuals, of what relevance is such a dialogue even to the Buddhist philosophers and theologians who share neither our doctrinal presuppositions nor our language? What I am basically arguing for here is the necessity of realizing the limitations of, and the moral responsibilities that accom-

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pany, the enterprise of dialogue. What this means is that when we engage in dialogue we must identify the perspective from which we speak. It means, as well, not exploiting dialogue to further the legitimation of any specific doctrinal position.

LIBERATION

Concerning the nature of liberation and the means of obtaining it, there is probably as much diversity among the different Buddhist schools as there is between Buddhism and Christianity. Notions range from the attainment of the paradise of Sukhāvatī due to the grace of the Buddha Amitābha to the completely self-powered individual liberation of a *pratyekabuddha*. I have chosen to focus my discussion of liberation on my reading of the texts of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism.

I. Human Nature and the Awakened State

Enlightenment (Skt., *bodhi;* Tib., *byang chub*) is a state that can potentially be attained by any being with a mind. The very nature of the mind as a clear and radiant entity, and of the defilements as adventitious entities that are not essential to our nature, is what allows for the possibility of mental purification, and hence of enlightenment. The clearest doctrinal formulation of this idea is to be found in the concept of buddha-nature *(tathāgatagarbha; de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po)*. Whether buddha-nature is the primordial presence of an enlightened state in the minds of beings, something that merely needs to be uncovered, or only a potential that permits the attainment of that state is of course a disputed point in the tradition.[3] Here, it is only important to note that the vast majority of Mahāyāna schools maintain that all beings, regardless of birth, race, social status, and gender, are capable of the attainment of the state of human perfection known as enlightenment.

II. The Nature of Enlightenment

Liberation, from an Indo-Tibetan Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective, is essentially of two kinds: the individually oriented liberation of an *arhant,* which is a state of personal nonsuffering, and the other-oriented enlightenment of a buddha, the complete perfection of the person and the most advantageous position from which to help others. It is the latter conception of liberation that will be the focus of this essay.

It would be more faithful to the Mahāyāna tradition to which I belong to discuss the concept of buddhahood in terms of the doctrines that form the basis for the classical discussions of the subject in the scriptures and their commentaries. To do this would mean presenting and commenting upon the classical list of a buddha's perfections, their having overcome the two types of obstacles (to

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liberation and to omniscience), their fulfillment of the two goals (of self and other), the theory of the three bodies, and so forth. Given the fact that this discussion is to take place in a dialogical setting, however, I opt here for another approach that I consider more interesting and fruitful for the present discussion. The categories I choose to focus on—omniscience, omnicompassion, and omnipotence—are in many ways more Christian than Buddhist, but they highlight differences between the two views of salvation in ways that seem to me to be important.

1. *Omniscience.*—That enlightened beings perceive all phenomena *(sarvajñā; kun mkhyen pa),* both in their conventional *(ji snyed pa)* and in their ultimate *(ji lta ba)* modes of being, is the classical scholastic way of depicting a buddha's omniscience. The buddha's perception is direct and nonconceptual. Although it is of a very different order from sense perception, it resembles it in that it is unmediated by images. That enlightened beings perceive all phenomena means that at each and every moment they know everything that there is to know, past, present, and future. The fact that they perceive both the conventional and the ultimate is important. The perception of the conventional, achieved vicariously, as it were, through the thought processes of sentient beings, allows them to be in touch with the world and to work on its behalf. Because their perception is direct and intuitive, their actions are spontaneous and require no forethought, as do those of ordinary sentient beings. The fact that they perceive the ultimate nature of phenomena, that is, their emptiness *(śūnyatā; stong nyid),*[4] means that they perceive the world, and react to it, as it is. What is more, it is only a fully enlightened being who has the capacity to perceive both of these aspects of phenomena, the conventional and the ultimate, simultaneously. It is exactly this simultaneous perception of the two truths which constitutes their victory over the obstacles to omniscience *(jneyāvarana; shes grib).* And it is omniscience which permits buddhas to act perfectly, which is to say nonerroneously, on behalf on sentient beings.

2. *Omnicompassion.*—Whereas buddhas' omniscience permits them to act correctly to aid sentient beings, impartial love *(maitrī; byams pa)* and compassion *(karuṇā; snying rje)* for sentient beings is what motivates them to do so. Knowledge, understood here as the realization of reality *(dharmatā; chos nyid)* or emptiness, is considered to be the principle cause of a buddha's static and immaterial body, the *dharmakāya (chos kyi shu),* whereas compassion, the wish to eliminate the suffering of others, is said to be the principle cause of a buddha's ever-changing form body, the *rūpakāya (gzugs kyi sku).* It is the acquisition of the altruistic state of mind known as *bodhicitta (byang chub kyi sems),* the desire to attain enlightenment for the sake of others, that is the beginning of the Mahāyāna path, and the principle factor differentiating that path from that of the Hīnayāna. This is why, in the classical sources, compassion is said to be "important at the beginning, middle, and end." At the beginning it is what

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distinguishes one as a bodhisattva, a follower of the Mahāyāna path; in the middle it is the primary force behind a bodhisattva's acquisition of merit; and at the end it is what motivates an enlightened being to act impartially to eliminate suffering wherever it exists.[5]

3. *Omnipotence.*—There is a famous scriptural passage that goes:

> Buddhas do not wash our sins away with water.
> They do not remove the suffering of beings with their hands.
> They do not transplant their own realizations into others
> Instead they liberate us by teaching us the truth of reality.[6]

Buddhas have the will to eliminate suffering, and they do so in the only way possible, by teaching us the way to salvation. They do not have the capacity simply to end the pain and evil in the world with a wave of their hand, because this is impossible. It is individuals who create suffering (for themselves and for others), and it is individuals who must end it. Hence, evil is not a problem for Buddhist philosophy the way it is for theologies that maintain the existence of an omnipotent and loving God in a world of evil. There is no Buddhist theodicy because omnipotence is not an attribute of a buddha. Buddhas, despite their wish to do so, cannot grant us enlightenment through an act of their will. In Buddhism, of course, this has nothing to do with a buddha's limitations. Rather it has to do with the nature of the process that brings about the end of suffering, ultimately an individual affair.

Therefore, buddhas and God share the attributes of omniscience and omnicompassion. They differ as regards omnipotence and in two other decisive ways. In the first instance, buddhas are not considered to be primordially pure. They arise from the very suffering in which we presently find ourselves, as a lotus arises from the mud of a pond. It is this fact which allows buddhas to empathize with the human predicament. Secondly, a buddha is not the necessary creator of a contingent universe. Viewed temporally this is so because the universe has no origin, no starting point. In this sense the world has for Buddhism the same attribute as God has for Christianity, namely, eternality. Nor is a buddha perceived to be the necessary ontological ground or support of a contingent world. From a Mahāyāna Buddhist scholastic perspective such a grounding in reality is neither necessary to explain the workings of the world nor rationally consistent. It is an unwarranted metaphysical postulate.

III. Perfection and Dualism

Arguably the greatest difference between traditional Mahāyāna Buddhism and Christianity on the issue of liberation lies in the fact that, from a Mahāyāna perspective, human perfection, a state referred to as "nonabiding *nirvāṇa,*" is the most exalted state in existence. There is no being more perfect than a buddha

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(or, to use the language of Thomas V. Morris,[7] a buddha partakes of maximal greatness). What is more, such a state is attainable by all sentient beings, and the responsibility for attaining such a state, our ultimate destiny as beings with minds, lies with the individual. In contrast, traditional Christian doctrine holds that there does exist a being, God, whose perfection is both infinitely superior to and infinitely removed (even in understanding) from the human realm, that *no* sentient being is capable of attaining such a state, and that the attainment of the lesser state of human liberation, conceived of variously, is dependent upon the grace of God. Hence, as regards liberation, there is a radical dualism present in classical Western theism that is missing both in Buddhism and in many other Asian religio-philosophical traditions as well.[8] In this regard, it is interesting to note that it is exactly the attempt at overcoming this dualism that makes the early Feuerbach anathema to classical theists.[9]

IV. The Question of Free Agency

Now, in a recent article, "Buddha and God: A Contrastive Study in Ideas About Maximal Greatness," Paul Griffiths refers to what he calls the concept of free agency, by which he means:

> the idea that this is something other than the agent to be acted upon; that actions are spatiotemporally located; and that, in the case of any particular action of a given free agent, the action could have been other than it was.[10]

From his reading of the Yogācāra sources he argues that buddhas, by failing to meet all three criteria, are not free agents, whereas God, as he defines God, is. Although he ends his article in a fairly neutral way that simply emphasizes the metaphysical presuppositions that lead to the divergent notions of maximal greatness in the two traditions, there is a clear, if implicit, evaluative rhetoric in Griffiths' work that extols the idea of free agency. It is better to be a free agent than not. Even in the Buddhist sources buddhas are perceived as the epitome of freely acting individuals, unbound by their karmic past. Hence, if Griffiths is right, then there is an inconsistency in the Buddhist sources that must be addressed.

My depiction of the state of buddhahood above, though it draws to some extent on Yogācāra sources, also draws heavily on the synthesis of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka philosophy accomplished in Tibet. Here, the first two of Griffiths' criteria for free agency are met. There is a notion of an external world that is acted upon, and actions are conceived of as occurring in space and time. Although a buddha's *dharmakāya* may very well be outside of any space-time continuum, the fact that the *rūpakāya* is immersed in it allows the tradition to speak of a buddha as acting in a spatiotemporal setting, a point that I think Griffiths misses, even in his reading of the purely Yogācāra sources. The problem, if there is one, lies with the third criterion.

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Can buddhas act, in any given situation, other than the way they do? Are they not constricted by their omniscience and altruistic motivation from acting in one and only one way in a given instance? There is a sense in which this is true, but this is not a constraint on a buddha's free agency. Buddhas act only to help sentient beings. In a few situations there may be many ways in which this can be accomplished, all of them leading to the same result. In most cases, however, despite the fact that there may be many adequate responses (many good ways to act), there will be one *best* way. Now in the former case, buddhas choose any one of the possible means to help others. In the latter case, buddhas, by virtue of knowing the best way to act and by virtue of wishing to help others in the best way possible, will choose the best response. Does this limit a buddha's freedom or free agency? I think not, but if it does, then it surely limits God's as well, for is not God similarly bound, by virtue of God's perfection, to act in the best way possible in any given situation? If there is any constraint here it lies simply in the fact that in most situations in which the welfare of others is at stake there is one best way to act. This is a fact of the world. That buddhas (or God) should choose that best response in no way limits their freedom. In fact, that perfect beings can, unlike ourselves, consciously so choose is an indication of this very freedom.

V. The Path to Liberation

So far we have limited our discussion of Buddhist soteriology to the nature of perfection. In the Buddhist case, at least, this is understandable in light of the fact that transformation into the state of maximal greatness is itself the soteriological goal. This is but another way of stating the soteriologically nondualistic nature of the Buddhist tradition, as outlined above. It can be argued, however, that another way to tackle the question is from the standpoint of the causal process that leads to such a state. In the Mahāyāna Buddhist, and especially in the Tantric, case the path to liberation is viewed as a path of purification in which the body, speech, and mind of the individual are transformed into the perfect body, speech, and mind of an enlightened being.

Two points come to mind as being important to the discussion of soteriology in this causal sense. The first has to do with the unitarity of the nature of the purificatory path. It is not the case, at least in the Indo-Tibetan setting, that there are many different ways of achieving *nirvāṇa*. Neither faith, nor works, nor knowledge alone will do. The path is a systematic, arduous, and complex process of study and meditative practice, *and* it is unique. Despite the fact that various Buddhist thinkers in this tradition have different notions of what the path is, and despite the fact that different individuals will travel this path in different ways, there is a sense in which the path traveled is considered unique —there is only one. It is in this sense that I call it unitary.

The second point has to do with the *radical* nature of the path. The path

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mimics the result, and insofar as what is being called for in this tradition is the complete and total transformation of the personality, the path leading to that state requires a level of commitment and expertise that is, to put it mildly, quite radical. Putting it simply, the path of scholastic Buddhism is a path for the religious virtuoso. The vast portion of even the most committed Buddhists will fail to reach the goal in this life. Such an elitism may seem repugnant to a Western, and especially to an American, mind. Why not democratize both the process and the goal through accepting the validity of various paths and a wider accessibility to liberation? Such a move, with its individualistic bias, its desire for instant gratification and a linear and terminal notion of history, would be anathema to the Indo-Tibetan tradition, for which time is cyclically endless and for which exalted, though difficult, goals are to be bought with a great amount of spiritual sweat. Hence, the unitary and radical nature of the path do make following it an elitist venture, but this is partially the tradition's way of saying (a) that human perfection is a rare and precious thing and (b) that there will be other opportunities for attaining it. Incidentally, it is this same sense of history as a cyclical and eternal process that accounts for the fact that, by comparison to Christianity and Islam, Buddhism as a whole, while maintaining the unique and exalted nature of its path and goal, lacks evangelical zeal. There is always time for others to find the one true path. There is no hurry to be saved.

CONCLUSION: FAITH AND SKEPTICISM

Personally, I find the Buddhist view of human perfection outlined above bold and challenging. It provides my life with a clear goal and with a systematic and well-trodden path to achieving it. At the same time, it appeals to my sense of spiritual autonomy, to my innate feeling that it is ultimately I who am responsible, both for my grief and for my happiness. While providing me with a model for compassionate living in the figure of the Buddha, the tradition makes it clear that it is up to me to appropriate these values within my own life. While harboring doubts as to the possibility of the complete and radical transformation described above, I find myself nonetheless committed to it for two reasons. First of all, lofty goals, even unattainable ones, give life a direction and the eye an idealistic gleam that makes living a *passionate* adventure. (This is the *Cuban* Buddhist speaking now!) Secondly, whether or not perfection is possible, improvement certainly is. Even within the tradition, in fact, the point is frequently made that perfection is no more than the end result of small, incremental improvements. What is most to the point, perhaps, is that, if it *is* possible, my attainment of the goal of human perfection is independent of my believing in its existence. The path is not personal; it does not think; it does not require my faith; and it does not punish me for my lack of it. To be a skeptic such as myself it is this, perhaps more than anything else, that is the most comforting aspect of Buddhism.

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NOTES

1. I use the word "doctrine" in the present context in a very general and all-encompassing sense that excludes neither rhetoric (the way in which a doctrinal stance is elucidated), nor the performative aspects of religion, nor ethics, nor religious experience. There is precedence for this in the literature of Indian Buddhist scholasticism. See my *Buddhism and Language* (forthcoming).

2. By rejecting the possibility of normative Buddhism I do not mean to reject the possibility of a true Buddhism, a form of Buddhism that is true to the exclusion of other forms of the religion. While committed to the foundationalist, one might even say fundamentalist, view that such a form of Buddhism exists, I do not believe either that this form of Buddhism is or should be the only form practiced, or that others should be vanquished to the hinterlands of heresy. When I reject the idea of a normative Buddhism I am rejecting both (a) that there exists any univocality to the tradition and (b) that there *should be* any.

3. For a more detailed treatment of this and related questions see D. Seyfort Ruegg, *Buddha-nature, Mind and the Problem of Gradualism in a Comparative Perspective* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1989).

4. On the doctrine of emptiness see Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1983), and my *A Dose of Emptiness* (Albany: SUNY Press, forthcoming).

5. On compassion see my translation of bLo bzang rta dbyangs' *sNying rje chen po la bstod pa, One Hundred and Eight Verses in Praise of Great Compassion* (Mysore: Mysore Printing and Publishing, 1984), and Jeffrey Hopkins, *Compassion in Tibetan Buddhism* (London: Rider, 1980).

6. *thub rnams sdig pa chu yis mi 'khru shing/ 'gro ba'i sdug bsngal phyag gig mi sel la/ nyid kyi rtogs pa gzhan la 'pho min te/ chos nyid bden pa bstan pas grol bas gyur/*.

7. On the views of Morris see Paul Griffiths, "Buddha and God: A Contrastive Study in Ideas about Maximal Greatness," *Journal of Religion* 64, no. 9 (1989): 525.

8. It might be argued, successfully I think, that the *triyāna* doctrine of some branches of the Yogācāra school also represents a dualism of a different kind, in that it maintains that not all beings are capable of attaining the state of complete enlightenment.

9. See, for example, Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity,* trans. G. Eliot (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957).

10. *Journal of Religion* 69, no. 4 (1989): 526.

Response to José Cabezón

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I appreciate Professor Cabezón's paper for many reasons, not the least of which is its candor. It is more profitable (not to mention easier) to respond to someone who writes with a great interest in clarity. José Cabezón does not mince words.

In describing Buddhist liberation, Cabezón combines scholarship and advocacy in a mixture that is neither unpleasing nor false. He first describes the state to which Buddhists interested in liberation aspire, using Christian terminology —the attributes of God—in a kind of most-exalted-state contest. The endgame of this comparison appears to me to be a draw, a draw to which both Buddhists

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