

The Buddha Was Enlightened Under a Tree

A Buddhist Perspective on Nature
and the Climate Crisis

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Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures,
... through Brother Sun, who brings the day.
... through Sister Moon and the stars.
... through Brothers Wind and Air and clouds and storms,
... through Sister Water;
... through Brother Fire,
... Be praised, my Lord, through our Mother Earth,
who feeds us and rules us . . .

—from *Canticle of the Sun*, St. Francis of Assisi, 1225

Long ago in ancient India, Shakyamuni Buddha left his life of princely privilege and wandered through the cities and forests of the north, determined to free himself from the chains of old age, sickness, and death. He became a wandering mendicant, studying and travelling in community with other *śramaṇas* or renunciates.

At the age of thirty-five, after six years practicing with numerous forest masters and adepts, the Buddha-to-be determined to awaken. At the foot of the Bodhi tree (*ficus religiosa*) on the banks of the Niranjana River, he sat on a cushion of *kusa* grass. Later the Buddha described the scene:

There I saw a beautiful stretch of countryside, a beautiful grove, a clear flowing river, a lovely ford and a village nearby for support. And I thought to myself: Indeed, this is a good place for a young man set on striving.¹

As his awakening unfolded, the Buddha was taunted by the demon king Māra, who represented our own deepest doubts, fears, and sense of powerlessness. Māra asked who would bear witness to this man's enlightenment. The Buddha remained in meditation and reached down to touch the earth. The earth responded: "I am your witness." The earth was his source of purpose and power, as she must be ours. Māra fled and the Buddha continued his practice of awakening. According to Mahāyāna texts, upon attaining Buddhahood he said, "I, together with all beings and the great earth, simultaneously achieve the Way." The earth was partner to

1. Shravasti Dhammika, *Navel of the Earth: The History and Significance of Bodhi Gaya*, (Singapore: Buddha Dhamma Mandala Society, 1996), 17.

the Buddha's work. Many years later, in eleventh-century China, the poet Su Tung-Po wrote:

The sound of the stream is his long, broad tongue;
The mountain, his immaculate body.
These evening's eighty-four thousand verses —
How will I tell them tomorrow?²

Ancient teachers lived close to nature by choice. The Buddha was enlightened under a tree. For much of the year his *sangha*, or community made their way through forests and rural villages, walking, meditating, and teaching. They lived in the open, lightly and mindfully drawing from the surrounding environment. Monks and nuns realized that food, water, medicine, and life itself were gifts of nature deserving of respect.

Some of us wish to see the Buddha as a proto-ecologist. Maybe so. But to respond to the fossil-fueled train wreck of climate emergency we need not believe that Buddhas and bodhisattvas possessed an ecological awareness ahead of their time. This disaster is unfolding right now in our Industrial Growth Society. For the first time in human history we have the agency to destroy all sentient life on the planet. Living out the dream of an Industrial Growth Society, we are creating the crisis; our children and their children harvest the suffering. We are responsible for the solutions.

I do not have space to document here the environmental emergency. Really, we have all the information we need. But Buddhists have been honing radical responses over the last decade. In May

2015, a Buddhist declaration on climate change—"The Time To Act Is Now"—was formally presented at a meeting with White House staff. In part, the statement says:

Many scientists have concluded that the survival of human civilization is at stake. . . . The four noble truths provide a framework for diagnosing our current situation and formulating appropriate guidelines—because the threats and disasters we face ultimately stem from the human mind. . . . Our ecological emergency is a larger version of the perennial human predicament. Both as individuals and as a species, we feel disconnected not only from other people but from the Earth itself. As Thich Nhat Hanh has said, "We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness." We need to wake up and realize that the Earth is our mother as well as our home—and in this case the umbilical cord binding us to her cannot be severed. When the Earth becomes sick, we become sick, because we are part of her.³

The Buddha's teachings, spanning all traditions and cultures, are grounded in ethical precepts. The first of these precepts is the *vow not to kill*, a vow that includes all others. The second precept is the *vow not to steal*. Often this precept is expressed as "*I vow not to take what is not given*." The precept of not stealing is immediately relevant to the environment. Driving automobiles, flying on airplanes, global production and consumerism—the Industrial Growth Society involves theft. Stealing labor from so-called developing nations for our benefit in the West. Stealing

2. Verse by Su Tung-Po adapted from *Keisei sanshoku* "Sound of the Stream, Form of the Mountain," fascicle by Eihei Dōgen, trans. by Carl Bielefeldt, author, 2001. <http://global.sotozen-net.or.jp/pdf/dharma-eye/hogen09/hogen09_06.htm>

3. "The Time To Act Is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change," 2015. http://www.ecobuddhism.org/bcp/all_content/buddhist_declaration/

petro-chemicals, minerals, timber, and resources from all across the planet to support our unsustainable standard of living. Stealing the human rights and dignity of peoples in order to support privileged lifestyles.

Violating the precept of not stealing is an expression of structural violence. Petroleum-based lifestyles mean drought, floods, and abnormal weather patterns, sea-level change, and chemically toxic watersheds that bring sickness, death, and social chaos to everyone, but first of all to the poor of the world who are the most vulnerable. It says that their lives are disposable. This system appears unassailable and so we acquiesce to it and allow ourselves to be its victims. Eco-philosopher Joanna Macy says of this system: “For all its apparent might, we also see its fragility—how dependent it is on our obedience and on deception, secrecy, surveillance and force.”

Those of us in the global North live in delusion. The so-called fortunate few may occupy apartment towers and beachfront homes. We may drive fine cars and fly freely if we can pay the fare. But the cost of mass consumption will affect us all. We are not separate from other beings. Drought will bring starvation. The seas will rise to engulf us all. There will be no hiding place.

Case 14 of the classic Chinese *kōan* collection *The Blue Cliff Record* says:

A monk once asked Master Yunmen, “What is the teaching of the Buddha’s whole lifetime?”

Yunmen said, “An appropriate response.”⁴

What is an appropriate response? Buddhist monks and nuns built their new society within the shell of the old. This society (the *saṅgha*) continues all these years later, an appropriate response for the ages. Echoing the sentiments of St. Francis, the twentieth-century Thai Buddhist master Buddhādāsa said:

The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon, and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees, and the Earth. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise—then we can build a noble environment. If our lives are not based on this truth, then we shall perish.⁵

If Buddha-nature is ever-changing reality, then the environment and each of us is an expression of this reality. In terms that Buddhists resonate with, His Holiness Pope Francis’s encyclical on the environment *Laudato Si’*, or “Praised Be,” speaks of “integral ecology”:

When we speak of the “environment,” what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it. Recognizing the reasons why a given area is polluted requires a study of the workings of

4. *The Blue Cliff Record*, trans. Thomas and J.C. Cleary, (Boston: Shambhala. 1977), 94.

5. Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, *Me and Mine: Selected Works of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, ed. Donald K Swearer (New Delhi: Sri Satguru Pub., 1991), 187.

society, its economy, its behavior patterns, and the ways it grasps reality.⁶

Integral ecology is not Christian or Buddhist, but truly human. We are responsible to and for the world we live in. A gift has been given to us to share with everyone. We all stand on the same ground. This ground is unstable. The planet is at risk. Those who are poorest, those with the least access to resources suffer most. In the light of interdependent reality, we all will suffer.

I have been looking for an appropriate response to the Industrial Growth Society. The answer is not in carbon trading, which allows wealthy nations to preserve our consumption levels. This is no better than rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic as it sinks. The answer is not in corporate greenwash, where more money is spent creating an environmentally “friendly” image than reducing environmental impacts. Better light bulbs will not save us. Water in “environmentally-friendly” plastic bottles will certainly not save us.

While mindful consumption and local production are commendable practices, a world population of seven billion—one quarter of whom live on less than \$2 per day—cannot sustain itself on dreams of simple living. Our needs for food, shelter, clothing, and medicine are too urgent and complex.

It is difficult for me to see an appropriate response that doesn't call for dismantling the dominant carbon-based economic system. Pope Francis writes:

6. Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter—Laudato Si'/On Care for Our Common Home*, (Rome: Vatican Press, 2015), no. 139.

We know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels—especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas—needs to be progressively replaced without delay.⁷

Or, as the pope put it bluntly elsewhere in his encyclical:

The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.⁸

Most Buddhists I know would agree. I mentioned the recent White House conference, the pope's strong position. We have seen universities, religious institutions, and even the Rockefeller Brothers Fund divest themselves of fossil fuels. We wish to be part of the solution, not part of the problem of toxic oil and coal.

Sooner or later that system will collapse, and the cost in terms of human life and the life of other species will be enormous. Looking to the north, south, east, and west, is there a political will to make this shift? While deep religious values are often at odds with materialism, among the wealthy populations, who is willing to take the first step on a path that calls for even a modest renunciation of privilege?

Who among us will form our new communities within the shell of the old? We look to create the kind of non-hierarchical communities that Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to as “the beloved community,” a council of all beings, a circle in which sentient and insentient beings are recognized.

7. *Laudato Si'*, no. 165.

8. *Laudato Si'*, no. 21.

Human life begins on the far side of despair.

—*The Flies* (1943), by Jean Paul Sartre⁹

I often find myself close to despair, even as I cultivate hope and keep my eyes and mind open. I don't have answers. Many in the past and present have lived with this despair, including all of our spiritual teachers. Each of them was tested by failure and the challenge to end suffering. When we examine the lives of the Buddha or Christ, we see that despair was close at hand. At the same time, as Sartre suggests, it brings us to a quickening of life and an understanding that all beings share this vitality. Rather than avoiding despair, I recognize an energy within it that points towards transformation. In the 1980s Joanna Macy developed what she called "despair and empowerment" work. She writes:

People fear that if they let despair in, they'll be paralyzed because they are just one person. Paradoxically, by allowing ourselves to feel our pain for the world, we open ourselves up to the web of life, and we realize that we're not alone.¹⁰

We are never alone. But the fact is that we live at a moment when the Great Turning/Planetary Awakening and the Great Unraveling/Planetary Destruction are happening simultaneously. We live in the shadow of the Sword of Damocles and we cannot simply walk away. But we are not alone. As we connect with all beings, appropriate responses will arise. I yearn for that insight

and connection. I want to walk in ease and safety upon the earth with all my friends.

I close with words from a Buddhist fable written by an old teacher of mine, Robert Aitken Roshi:

Owl said, "What are Right Views?"

Brown Bear said, "We're in it together and we don't have much time."¹¹

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9. Jean Paul Sartre, *Les Mouches/The Flies* (1943), Act III.

10. Interview with Joanna Macy by Mary Nurrie Stearns, "Transforming Despair," 1991. http://www.personaltransformation.com/joanna_macy.html

11. Robert Aitken, *Zen Master Raven*, (Boston: Tuttle, 2002), 71.

The Four Divine Abodes and Fraternity

A Theravāda Perspective

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We find in the teachings of the Buddha the “four divine abodes” that define how Buddhists should relate to one another. The kinds of relations described by the Buddha in these teachings provide a method for building relationships that Pope Francis describes as “fraternal.” These four divine abodes—loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—are described by the Buddha in the following ways:

Mettā (Loving Kindness)

This kind of love lacks the desire to possess. In the ultimate sense there is no possession and no possessor. This is the highest kind of love: it is love without thinking of oneself, knowing well that this

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so-called “self” is a mere delusion. Loving kindness comes from a deeper source within and embraces all beings, be they noble-minded or low-minded, good or evil. The noble-minded and the good are embraced because loving kindness flows spontaneously. The low-minded and evil are included because they are the ones most in need of love. In many evil persons, the seed of goodness may have died merely because warmth for its growth was lacking. It perished from “cold” in a loveless world.

Loving kindness embraces all beings, knowing well that we all are fellow wayfarers—brothers and sisters as Pope Francis says—through this round of existence, all of us overcome by the same law of suffering. This kind of love lies like a soft but firm hand on ailing beings, unchanging in its sympathy, unwavering, and unconcerned with any response it meets. It is a comforting coolness to those who burn with the fire of suffering and passion. It is life-giving warmth to those abandoned in the cold desert of loneliness; to those shivering in the frost of a loveless world; to those whose hearts have become empty and dry from repeated calls for help, from deepest despair.

Loving kindness is a sublime nobility of heart and intellect that knows, understands, and is ready to help. Loving kindness that is strength and gives strength is the highest love. Loving kindness which the Enlightened One called “the liberation of the heart,” and “the most sublime beauty,” this is the highest love.

Karuṇā (Compassion)

Compassion removes the heavy bar, opens the door of freedom, and makes the narrow heart as wide as the world. Compassion lifts from the heart the inert weight, the paralyzing heaviness; it gives wings to those who cling to the lowlands of self. Through

compassion the fact of suffering remains vividly present to our mind, even at those times when we personally are free from it. It gives us the rich experience of suffering, thus strengthening us to meet it prepared when it does befall us or another person.

Compassion reconciles us to our destiny by showing us the lives of others, often much harder than our own. Behold the endless caravan of beings, men, women, and animals, burdened with sorrow and pain! The burden of every one of them we also have carried in bygone times during the unfathomable sequence of repeated rebirths. Behold this, and open your heart to compassion! This misery may well be our own destiny again! He who is without compassion now will one day cry for it. If sympathy for others is lacking, it will have to be acquired through one's own long and painful experience. This is the great law of life. Knowing this, keep guard over yourself!

The compassion of the wise man does not render him a victim of suffering. His thoughts, words, and deeds are full of pity. But his heart does not waver; unchanged, it remains serene and calm. How else should he be in order to be able to help?

May such compassion arise in our hearts! It is a compassion that is the sublime nobility of heart and intellect, that knows, understands, and is ready to help. Such compassion is strength and gives strength! This is the highest compassion. And what is the highest manifestation of compassion? To show to the world the path leading to the end of suffering, the path pointed out, trodden and realized to perfection by Him, the Exalted One, the Buddha.

Muditā (Sympathetic Joy)

Not only compassion but also sympathetic joy with others opens your heart! Small, indeed, is the share of happiness and joy allotted

to beings! Whenever a little happiness comes to them, you may rejoice that at least one ray of joy has pierced through the darkness of their lives and dispelled the gray and gloomy mist that enwraps their hearts.

Your life will gain in joy by sharing in the happiness of others as if it were your own. Have you observed how in moments of happiness people's features change and become bright with joy? It is in your power to increase such an experience of sympathetic joy by producing happiness in others, by bringing them joy and solace. Noble and sublime joy is a helper on the path to the extinction of suffering. Not the one who is depressed by grief but the one possessed of joy finds that serene calmness leading to a contemplative state of mind. Sympathetic joy refers to a sublime nobility of heart and intellect that knows, understands, and is ready to help. Sympathetic joy that is strength and gives strength. This is the highest joy.

Upekkhā (Equanimity)

Equanimity is learning to accept loss and gain, good-repute and ill-repute, praise and censure, sorrow and happiness, all with detachment, equally, for oneself and for others. Equanimity is not to distinguish between friend, enemy, or stranger but to regard every sentient being as an equal. It is a clear-minded tranquil state of mind that is not overpowered by delusions, mental dullness, or agitation. Here are passages from a discourse of the Buddha (*Digha Nikaya*, 13) about these four divine abodes:

- Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with loving kindness, likewise the second, the third, and the fourth direction; so above, below and around;

he dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with loving kindness, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.

- Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with compassion, likewise the second, the third, and the fourth direction; so above, below and around; he dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with compassion, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.
- Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with sympathetic joy, likewise the second, the third, and the fourth direction; so above, below and around; he dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with sympathetic joy, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.
- Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with equanimity, likewise the second, the third, and the fourth direction; so above, below and around; he dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with equanimity, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.

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Fraternity in the Christian Tradition

Koinonia as an Interpretive Hermeneutic

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Introduction

I am pleased to have the opportunity to offer a brief approach to the Christian understanding of fraternity as we move into the next dimension of our theme, “Fraternity as the Way Forward.” At the outset, I am quite happy with this title, since the original name by which the disciples of Jesus were known was “The Way.”¹ My approach to doing so will be first to look at a biblical text (Acts 2:42) whose interpretation will form the basis of my proposal for a Christian understanding. This particular text also describes the fraternal experience in the church immediately after

1. Acts 9:2.

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its full manifestation at Pentecost.² Regardless of the church or ecclesial community you might encounter, this biblical approach should be universal, by which I mean that not only Catholics but also all Christians should recognize their own teaching in my interpretation.³

Next, I want to relate the text to the central doctrine of our religion, the Holy Trinity.⁴ This theological treatment of the ground of being, as Christians express it, reveals how the relationship of persons is central to anything we might say about fraternity. To do this, I use some material from Eastern Christianity. I chose this approach because Pope Francis has indicated that the theologian I will mention, Saint Gregory of Narek, is one from whom we can learn especially at this time.⁵ Finally, I want to attempt to apply both Bible and theology to interreligious dialogue, especially as seen in the writings of Pope Paul VI and the present Holy Father.⁶

2. Acts 2:42. When I speak of the church in this paper, I am focusing on its theological nature which can most simply be expressed as extending the Incarnation through time and across the earth. The church, in this usage, is the place of the continued presence of Christ in the world through the ministry of word, sacrament and community. This verse of the New Testament captures the essential aspects of faith, sacramental life and ecclesiastical governance that make the church the complex reality it is.

3. By the phrase “church or ecclesial community” I am referring to those Christian communities not in full communion with the Catholic Church. These include the Orthodox churches and the communities of the sixteenth-century Reformation. In terms of taxonomy, you could classify all Christians as divided into five groups: The Catholic Church, the Orthodox churches, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, and Pentecostal Protestant.

4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter CCC), 232–48.

5. Saint Gregory of Narek, an eighth-century Armenian monk, was declared doctor of the church by Pope Francis in February 2015.

6. See Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam: The Encyclical Letter on the Paths of the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, and Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Press, 2013).

Paul VI defined dialogue as the way the church would engage the world.⁷ I think we need to recover the notion of dialogue in a new way in the twenty-first century. Along the way I will teach you at least one Greek word and its Latin equivalent.

Acts 2:42

As a general statement, Christianity can be understood as the Way of overcoming the division between God and humankind. It is liberation from exile.⁸ It is a teaching of unity rooted in the very Christian conception of God as a Trinity of persons united in love.⁹ Consequently, when we think of the Way, which is another name for the church, we conceive the goal of this Way as the realization of the Kingdom of God, that is nothing other than the unity of all creation with Jesus, the *Logos*, who called creation into being.¹⁰

7. Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, no. 80–82.

8. The theme of exile is dominant in the Bible and usually associated with suffering and captivity. Salvation on the human level is liberation from physical captivity. Spiritually, it is liberation from the things that disrupt our relationship with God, ourselves, and our neighbor. Paul VI in *Ecclesiam Suam*, no. 70, writes: “Here, then, Venerable Brethren, is the noble origin of this dialogue: in the mind of God Himself. Religion of its very nature is a certain relationship between God and man. It finds its expression in prayer; and prayer is a dialogue. Revelation, too, that supernatural link which God has established with man, can likewise be looked upon as a dialogue. In the Incarnation and in the Gospel it is God’s Word that speaks to us. That fatherly, sacred dialogue between God and man, broken off at the time of Adam’s unhappy fall, has since, in the course of history, been restored. Indeed, the whole history of man’s salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which marvelously begins with God and which He prolongs with men in so many different ways.”

9. CCC 214–19.

10. See John 1. See also CCC 280: “Creation is the foundation of ‘all God’s saving plans,’ the ‘beginning of the history of salvation’ that culminates in Christ. Conversely, the mystery of Christ casts conclusive light on the mystery of creation and reveals the end for which ‘in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,’ from the beginning, God envisaged the glory of the new creation in Christ.”

The Bible contains a vision of what the Kingdom of God looks like. It could be described as a fellowship that has overcome the “relational causes of suffering,” which we explored in our dialogue.

Let me begin by citing the text from the Acts of the Apostles:

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.¹¹

Now, I have highlighted the word “fellowship” in my text because that is the term on which I want to focus. In Greek, the language in which Luke wrote to Theophilus, the word, *κοινωνία*, is most often translated as “fellowship,” But actually it would be

11. Acts 2:42–47. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles was part of a two-book series written by Luke. It was written, along with his Gospel, for a Roman official named Theophilus. It is a structured narrative that, across the two works, presents the person and work of Jesus and the continuation of Jesus’s presence and action in, and through the church. As Theophilus was a non-Jew, Luke-Acts is a sustained presentation of Christianity to non-Christians, by which I mean the sacred author intentionally tries to relate Jesus to all the nations (the Gentiles), and does not presume knowledge of the Old Testament or Judaism in the way that the other evangelists do.

better translated as “participation.” In this context, it has the sense of “the share which one has in anything.”¹² In secular terms, the idea is that you have invested in something and have an equity share in it. Rendered in Latin, the word is *communio*, which has taken on a technical meaning in twentieth-century theology, referring to both the inner life of the Trinity and the inner life of the church. Baptism gives the individual the sacramental participation in the divine life. This life is nourished and sustained by word and sacrament in the church by the baptized devoting themselves to the teaching of the Apostles (doctrine), to the *koinonia*, to the breaking of the bread (likely meaning both the *agape* [fellowship meal] and the Eucharist), and to the prayers, which here likely means intercessory prayers for the needs of the fellowship.¹³ Part of the life in fellowship was a notion of the universal destination of private property.¹⁴ This would be part of the participation that more fully defines fellowship.

Koinonia as a Reflection of the Trinity

This participation of persons in a communion of love is closely related to Christian notions of the Godhead. The two central doctrines are the Trinity of three Persons in one God and the Incarnation of the Son, the divine Logos, in Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁵ The

12. See Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmann, 1967), 797,447. See also James D. Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), G-2842.

13. See Richard J. Dillon and Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, S.J., “Acts of the Apostles” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 176.

14. Ibid. Dillon and Fitzmeyer equate “shared goods” with “*koinonia*” as a way of expressing “the ideal facets of the first community’s life.”

15. See CCC 456–63.

unity of the two natures, divine and human, in Jesus is the bridge that overcomes any duality between God and humankind. To explore this for a moment, I want to quote Dr. Sergio La Porta, an expert on Saint Gregory of Narek, who was just declared a doctor of the church by Pope Francis. Dr. La Porta writes:

The Trinitarian image of God in man according to [Saint Gregory of Narek] is quite different from that espoused by [Saint] Augustine. The Latin theologian looks within man to understand God, employing analogies drawn especially from the human soul and its faculties to help explain the unity and distinctions in the Trinity. By contrast, [Saint Gregory] turns to the divine to discover what truly lies within himself.¹⁶

In terms of ecumenical relations, our relationship with God is never separated from our relationship with all those who are baptized into Christ. For Saint Gregory, the doctrine reveals our real nature, men and women made in the image of God, and, here is the point, in the image of a God who is a unity of persons. We are not properly understanding what it is to be made in the image of God if we think only of ourselves as individuals. We must instead think of ourselves as individuals in relationships. By extension, then, our relational fellowship does not end only with the baptized. For Christ assumed a human nature, and therefore united himself with all humanity. Our unity with Christ by baptism also puts us

16. Sergio La Porta, “God and the Trinity,” in *Saint Grégoire de Narek Théologien et Mystique—Orientalia Christiana Analects*, no. 275 (2006), 93. Dr. La Porta is the Haig and Isabel Berberian Professor of Armenian Studies at California State University, Fresno.

into an extended relationship with other believers, the practitioners of other religions and even those who do not believe or who intentionally reject belief. By virtue of our common humanity, we are in human communion with all peoples.¹⁷

If the image of God is to be in relationship, then living solely as individuals is the definition of exile. Only when we live, and live well, in relationships are we revealing and experiencing our true nature as the image of God. This means, for example, that being a family is not a set of tasks to accomplish each week, but a complete way of life. It also means that the church is not an institution first, but a community in relationship with Christ, which brings us into relationship with the Trinity.¹⁸ Being a member of the church is to leave the exile of the secular world's individualism and to enter into the unity of Christianity, of those who practice religion and those who share our common humanity.

Koinonia as a Framework for Interreligious Dialogue

In this way, *koinonia* becomes the framework for interreligious dialogue. Fraternity is, as Pope Francis said in his Message on the World Day of Peace “an essential human quality, for we are all relational beings. . . . Without fraternity, it is impossible to build a just society and a solid and lasting peace.”¹⁹ Pope Paul VI defined dialogue as the means of engagement with all of humanity.²⁰

17. See *Ecclesiam Suam*, op. cit.

18. See CCC 795.

19. Francis, “Message for the World Day of Peace 2014,” no. 1.

20. “Dialogue, therefore, is a recognized method of the apostolate. It is a way of making spiritual contact. It should however have the following characteristics: 1) Clarity before all else; the dialogue demands that what is said should be intelligible. We can think of it as a kind of thought transfusion. It is an invitation to the exercise and development of the highest spiritual and mental powers a man possesses. This

Pope Francis describes dialogue as a social contribution to peace.²¹ What I find particularly important for our task is his notion that “the Church speaks from the light which faith offers, contributing her two thousand years of experience and keeping ever in mind the life and sufferings of human beings.”²² This notion could apply equally to Buddhists, who speak in dialogue from the insights of their religious tradition and practice. In fact, I would suggest that this insight locates the motive for interreligious dialogue within each tradition and makes the goal an exchange of gifts, for the sake of full human development, the preservation of the common good, and the promotion of a culture of human solidarity.

fact alone would suffice to make such dialogue rank among the greatest manifestations of human activity and culture. In order to satisfy this first requirement, all of us who feel the spur of the apostolate should examine closely the kind of speech we use. Is it easy to understand? Can it be grasped by ordinary people? Is it current idiom? 2) Our dialogue must be accompanied by that meekness which Christ bade us learn from Himself: ‘Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart.’ (56) It would indeed be a disgrace if our dialogue were marked by arrogance, the use of barbed words or offensive bitterness. What gives it its authority is the fact that it affirms the truth, shares with others the gifts of charity, is itself an example of virtue, avoids peremptory language, makes no demands. It is peaceful, has no use for extreme methods, is patient under contradiction and inclines towards generosity. 3) Confidence is also necessary; confidence not only in the power of one’s own words, but also in the good will of both parties to the dialogue. Hence dialogue promotes intimacy and friendship on both sides. It unites them in a mutual adherence to the Good, and thus excludes all self-seeking. 4) Finally, the prudence of a teacher who is most careful to make allowances for the psychological and moral circumstances of his hearer, (57) particularly if he is a child, unprepared, suspicious or hostile. The person who speaks is always at pains to learn the sensitivities of his audience, and if reason demands it, he adapts himself and the manner of his presentation to the susceptibilities and the degree of intelligence of his hearers. In a dialogue conducted with this kind of foresight, truth is wedded to charity and understanding to love.” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, no. 81–82)

21. See *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 238.

22. Ibid.

Conclusion

I said at the outset that my approach would begin with the short text from Acts 2:42, which gave us both the language, in the term *koinonia*, and the image of human relationships among the new believers necessary for a Christian understanding of fraternity. I argued that this view is fairly universal among Christians, regardless of the church or ecclesial community to which they belong. I then related Acts 2:42 to the central doctrine of the Trinity. While we may not agree on the theistic language, my contention is that both Buddhism and Christianity locate their particular doctrines ultimately in their notions about life. While I am skeptical about the comparative religions approach, which is always looking for similarities and equalities, I would argue that as particular as our two religions are, we are attempting something similar in grounding our ideas about fraternity in life—in living. Pope Francis's claims in *Evangelii Gaudium* are nothing short of profound in his sense that interreligious dialogue is essential for living peacefully through the fraternity of the human community. Hopefully, we can, by what we achieve here, contribute to the ultimate goal of harmony which is the condition of the possibility for such a peace.

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The Great Compassion and Fraternity in Mahāyāna Buddhist Traditions

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Buddhism appeared in India 2,600 years ago as a “moral revolution.” It inverted the accepted values and transferred the center of interest from the world without to the world within. To the Buddha himself, creed and ritual and caste were among the things that did not really matter. Buddha’s great discovery was that of the human person—the person behind the differences of creed and circumstance, of social and political status. The cultivation of Great Compassion, as one example, had the same moral task, which he had to fulfill without help from others.

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Because Catholicism and Buddhism share the same aim—peace and greatness in humanity—the Great Compassion’s emphasis on the nonjudgmental and on removing the notion of races, hostilities, sexism, sexual orientations, and even the concept of nationalism and so forth, can benefit us all, whether we are from the East or the West. Thus today I would like to share my understanding of the Great Compassion with you.

The Great Compassion is one of the important qualities of the Buddha, and it forms the basis of all perfections (*pāramitās*). It is a chief aspiration for Mahāyāna practitioners to carry on their faith to save sentient beings and to carry on the Buddhist messages from one life to another life with passion. The Great Compassion contains several important concepts in relation to human beings regardless of their race, ethnicity, economic status, gender, and so forth; and it calls us to treat everyone as their own sister or brother. Therefore, this paper tries to establish the connection between the “Great Compassion” as a perfection of the Buddha and the importance of “fraternity” for humanity today.

The Great Compassion in Relation to Perfections (Pāramitās)

The Great Compassion is one of the important qualities of the Buddha and it forms the basis of all perfections (*pāramitās*). In the Theravāda tradition, ten perfections are mentioned.¹ As to Mahāyāna, six perfections² are enumerated. It is important to note

1. They are generosity (*dāna*), morality (*sīla*), renunciation (*nekkhama*), wisdom (*paññā*), energy (*vīriya*), forbearance (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), resolution (*adhiṭṭhāna*), loving-kindness (*metta*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*).

2. Six of them are generosity (*dāna*; 檀波羅蜜), morality (*sīla*; 尸羅波羅蜜), forbearance (*kṣanti*; 忍辱波羅蜜), energy (*vīriya*; 精進波羅蜜), meditative absorption (*dhyāna*; 禪波羅蜜) and wisdom (*prajñā*; 般若波羅蜜).

that in both cases the perfections consist of those noble qualities not spoiled by craving, pride, and wrong view. They are founded on the Great Compassion and on skillful knowledge (*upāya kosalla ñāṇa*) which is skill in seeking merit.

Take the perfection of meditative absorption (*samādhi*) as one example. According to *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa Śāstra*, in a passage listing eighteen characteristic of the Mahāyāna perfection of meditative absorption (*dhyāna pāramitā*),³ the text attempts to prove that despite its ecstatic aspects and its periods of seclusion required by the practice, the Bodhisattva's meditation is an efficient method and integral part of the great being's messianic mission. To give an example, it is mentioned in the text:

Even if one has accomplished meditative absorption (*samādhi*), out of compassion to sentient beings, he is not satisfied with various types of beautiful mental meditative states as internal dharma and not satisfied with unpleasant things [like contemplation on] impurity as an external dharma. Having contemplated in such a way, he gives rise to Great Compassionate mind and vows "I will teach sentient beings to have internal beautiful meditative concentration and to be away from [temptation] in order to achieve happiness from impurity [meditation], based on those wonderful absorption, gradually one gains the happiness from the Buddha's path."⁴

This statement clearly indicates that the Bodhisattva practices meditation in order to teach the inner bliss of absorption (*dhyāna*) to those beings attached to exterior pleasure.⁵ The Bodhisattva practices "*dhyāna* which does not forsake the living beings" and "in meditative absorption (*dhyāna*) he always generates thoughts of Great Compassion."⁶ It is the same principle applied to all the perfections without fail in order to generate Great Compassion for the sake of other human beings.

Mahāyānists stress the importance of Great Compassion and tirelessly practice the perfections to attain Buddhahood. If a Mahāyānist—who vows to forsake enlightenment for himself—should so desire, he or she can carry Great Compassion from one life to another life in order to achieve the perfections needed to benefit beings whenever they are born. The idealism of the perfections accompanied with Great Compassion form the major practices of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The Great Compassion in Relation to the Bodhisattva

When the Buddha had not yet attained Buddhahood, he existed as Sumedha, the hermit in one of his past lives. Sumedha was so accomplished in spiritual attainments at the time he met Buddha Dīpankara that he could achieve his own liberation, should he so desire. Nevertheless as a powerful being endowed with Great Compassion, he bore personal suffering in the circle of life-and-death (*samsāra*) for the long duration of four incalculable aeons (*asaṅkhyeyya*) and a hundred thousand aeons to fulfill the

3. *Prajñāpāramitopadeśa śāstra*, (*Taisho* 25, no. 1509, p. 187, c15–18).

4. *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa śāstra*, (*Taisho* 25, no. 1509, p. 187, c19–25).

5. *Taisho* 25.187c.

6. *Taisho* 25.188a6–7.