

Fraternity as the Way Forward

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Kenosis in Christianity and “Non-Self” or “Self-emptying” in Buddhism

Pope Francis said, “Fraternity is an essential human quality, for we are all relational beings. A lively awareness of our relatedness helps us to look upon and treat each person as a true sister or brother; without fraternity it is impossible to build a just society and a solid and lasting peace.” What is the critical prerequisite and foundation for the notion and practice of “fraternity” in Buddhism and Christianity? “Non-Self” or “Self-emptying” in Buddhism and *kenosis* in Christianity are the key dynamics in our interactions with the “other.” Self-emptying creates the space for the other to be the other, offers a form of self-donation and expresses the true meaning of Love or Compassion.

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The Buddhist doctrine of “dependent co-arising,” or “conditioned genesis” is essentially a doctrine of relativity. Nothing in the world is absolute. Everything is conditioned, relative, and interdependent. This approach, also, arrives at the doctrine of non-self. Thus, Buddhism teaches that the idea of the self is imaginary and has no correspondence with reality. Furthermore, clinging to this imaginary self can produce harmful selfish desires, cravings, attachments, hatreds, ill will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements, impurities and problems. Rahula summarizes it as a false view that can be linked to all the evils in the world.¹

The Mahāyāna tradition builds on the original and enduring insights of the Theravāda tradition by identifying “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) with “dependent co-arising” (*pratītya-samutpāda*), or the “conditioned genesis.” “Emptiness entails dependent co-arising, for it describes the essence-less being of that which arises in mutual dependency. Dependent co-arising entails emptiness, for it describes the mutual dependency of that which arises without essence.”² Non-self is a mystic notion. Human subjects “exist,” but they have no fixed essence that we would ordinarily call a substantial self. The doctrine of non-self paradoxically is designed on the one hand to protect us from a dangerous illusion of a “false self,” and on the other, to invite us into the mysterious and always essence-less experience of being a subject intimately connected in the endless web of co-dependent arising.

1. Wapola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 52–3.

2. John P. Keenan, *The Gospel of Mark: A Mahayana Reading* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1995), 17. By the same author, see also: *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989).

Three Main Ideas of the Lotus Sūtra (Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra)

The *Lotus Sūtra* is one of the main Mahāyāna sūtras. In ancient India, the Lotus was thought to be the supreme and purest flower because although rooted in mud, it opens with purity and radiance. The radiance that arises out of the mud is an allegorical expression of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which is a symbol for the original beauty of human life despite the burdens of suffering and the hazards of self-alienation in delusion. Three main ideas of the *Lotus Sūtra* are:

1. Buddha-nature

All living beings can attain Perfect Enlightenment, that is, they all have (essence-less) Buddha-nature. The key notion of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the “One Great Vehicle” teaching, is to help all living beings become aware of their own Buddha-nature. It expresses the ultimate compassion of the Buddha to save by awakening all beings to their Buddha-nature.

2. Forever Existing Buddha

The notion of an everlasting Buddha is popularly associated with the *Lotus Sūtra*. The Forever Existing Buddha is omnipresent in the universe and is the life-force that sustains and guides all sentient beings. To support and guide them, the Buddha appears for their salvation in various forms appropriate to the particular time and place by a means suited to their capacity to understand his teachings. Thus, the Eternal Buddha exists permanently everywhere from the infinite past to the infinite future, ready to help and relieve all living beings in the universe. He saves them in such a

way that all can fully develop and manifest all the good potential they have within themselves.

3. Bodhisattva

In the *Lotus Sūtra*, the bodhisattva is an ideal of the fulfillment of “true self.” At its core, the notion links benefitting oneself through benefitting others. While the notion of the bodhisattva is intrinsically altruistic, it is important to grasp how radically it expresses the Buddhist notion of co-dependent origination. The notion of co-dependent origination makes clear that what we experience as “self” arises out of interaction with others. Self and other are mutually implicated. Thus, the notion that one could somehow attain enlightenment outside of relationship with others is an illusion. So, too, is it clear that only through helping all others attain their true Buddha-nature could one realize one’s own truth.

From the First to the Second Conversion

The first conversion is well expressed in Theravāda Buddhism: The Buddha teaches emancipation from all earthly desires. Disciples are enjoined to seek *nirvāṇa*, the cessation of *dukkha*, which is suffering or impermanence. The second conversion goes to the heart of the *Lotus Sūtra*. This involves turning disciples away from merely seeking their own enlightenment and toward compassionately seeking the enlightenment of others as well.

The second conversion is a turn from “three vehicles to one” in the *Lotus Sūtra*. It is expressed in the phrase: **Opening the three,**

revealing the one vehicle is the true teaching. The three “vehicles” refer to the three Buddhist “paths” of the time. In Chapter III of the Sanskrit text of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the three vehicles as described as:

1. Vehicle of those who are following the teachings (*śrāvaka*) (“voice hearers”). This is the path of those who hear the teachings from another in a monastic community and strive to obtain Nirvana for themselves.
2. Vehicle of those who live in seclusion and obtain emancipation for themselves only (*pratyekabuddha*). This is the path of those who, having heard the Dharma from the World-Honored One, believe and accept it; who earnestly desire the quietude which is content with itself.
- 3 The Great Vehicle of those who compassionately act to assist all to awaken to Buddha-nature, the *bodhisattva* path. This is the Great Path that conveys deliverance to all.

The phrase “opening the three, revealing the one” makes it clear that the One Great Vehicle does not negate the three Buddhist ways. It includes them as ways of being on the way to supreme awakening.

Fraternity: Self-Emptying, Shared Care, and Shared Action

Our practice of self-emptying offers the basis for the genuine experience of fraternity. It creates the space for the other to be the other and calls us to work together as true sisters and brothers. *Religions for Peace (RfP)*, which I am privileged to have worked for the last sixteen years, is an international multi-religious organization

founded in 1970. Its headquarters is in New York City and it is accredited to the United Nations, advancing interreligious cooperation for conflict transformation, peacebuilding and sustainable development through its affiliated interreligious councils in more than ninety countries in six continents.

The first President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), Paolo Cardinal Marella, in 1965 invited a Buddhist leader and one of the founders of *RfP*, namely Rev. Nikkyō Niwano, to the Second Vatican Council. Rev. Niwano was president of Risshō Kōsei-kai, a Japanese Buddhist organization. In their private audience, Pope Paul VI said to Rev. Niwano, “Christians should pray for Buddhists and Buddhists pray for Christians in our shared commitment to peace.” This historic encounter paved the way for a global effort to organize an international multi-religious summit for peace and culminated in the birth of *RfP* in 1970. The *RfP*-PCID partnership has evolved into various joint initiatives on common global issues including the contemporary challenges of violent religious extremism, climate change, and sustainable development.

All around the world, I have seen and often participated in a quiet revolution of multi-religious action. As religious people, we all come to the table as we are. As we enter the room, we gather as the believers we are. We place shared problems at the center of our table: the suffering of children, the scourge of conflict including terror in the name of God, extreme poverty, and our beautiful and fragile earth.

How will we tackle these problems? We proceed as the religious people we are. In multi-religious terms, it means asking the questions: What gifts can your community bring? What is

transformed in this process? Let me share what we have found. Beyond the relative success of our projects, the practice of multi-religious cooperation results in:

1. A positive change in the image of the other,
2. A greater increase in the willingness to cooperate with the other,
3. Falling more in love with your own religion, and
4. A new way of seeing the other through the eyes of that deepened love.

How are we to explain this? This is up to each religion, but perhaps we might say that each religion is challenged to give its own account for the manifest goodness, maturity, and commitment of the believers of other faiths and men and women of good will.

In Christianity, there is the universal saving will of the Father. Surely the Father of all Light accomplishes his will. We recall Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan, which teaches that there are no monopolies on the love of neighbor, which is one of two ways we love God. In my Buddhist tradition, the practice of self-emptying and revering Buddha-nature in all living beings cultivates our minds and hearts and leads to radical openness and flexibility to welcome the other, celebrate diversity, and work together toward the flourishing of human dignity for all. We must conclude that *fraternity is our way forward*. It can truly be realized through our constant practice of self-emptying or *kenosis* and the conversion from seeking our own enlightenment to compassionately seeking the enlightenment and liberation of all.

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