The Distinctive Character of Buddhist Forgiveness and Reconciliation

S.J. Noel Sheth

ANNALS of the University of Bucharest
Philosophy Series

Vol. LXVI, no. 1, 2017
pp. 71–95.
THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTER
OF BUDDHIST FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

S.J. NOEL SHETH1

Abstract

In this article, I intend to bring out the distinctive features of Buddhist forgiveness and reconciliation, springing from the specific spirituality and the underlying worldview of living Buddhism in India and Asia. While there are similarities in forgiveness and reconciliation between Christianity and Buddhism, there are many distinctions arising from the divergent world-views not only of Christianity but also of Theravada and Mahayana. These differences are found not only with regard to the presuppositions, but also in reference to the motivation as well as the expression of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Keywords: Buddhism, Christianity, reconciliation, forgiveness.

Introduction

One could speak of reconciliation with a Supreme Being, with oneself, with other human beings and with nature. In this article we are mainly concerned with forgiveness and reconciliation on the horizontal plane, and not with reconciliation on the vertical level, in relationship to a Supreme Being. Although forgiveness and reconciliation are related, they are distinct from each other, specifically in reference to other human beings. Forgiveness involves the giving up of resentment, anger and hatred. It paves the way for reconciliation. In forgiveness the victims unconditionally hold out the olive branch to the offenders;

1 Professor of Indian Philosophies and Religions at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pontifical Institute of Philosophy and Religion, Pune, India. Email: nsheth43@gmail.com.
reconciliation takes place when the perpetrators admit their offence and respond by extending the hand of friendship. Forgiveness may be localized in one person or group, *i.e.*, it may be one-sided, but reconciliation involves mutuality, the restoration of harmony and trust between both parties: this is the case in relation to other human beings, and not necessarily with regard to the Supreme Being or nature.

In this article, I intend to bring out the distinctive features of Buddhist forgiveness and reconciliation, springing from the specific spirituality and the underlying worldview of living Buddhism in India and Asia.

There are two forms of Buddhism, Hinayana and Mahayana. In Hinayana only one school is living, viz., Theravada, whose original texts are in the Pali language. In Mahayana there are many schools existing, and their original texts in India were in Sanskrit. We shall first present the Buddhist understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation, particularly in reference to other human beings, but also with regard to nature and, in passing, also in connection with oneself. This will be further elucidated through concrete examples in relation to other humans. Then we shall point out how meditation, specifically on “Loving Kindness”, helps cultivate an attitude of universal forgiveness and reconciliation. After this, we will endeavour to bring out the distinctive characteristics of Buddhist forgiveness and reconciliation, chiefly through comparison with Christian forgiveness and reconciliation.

Before I proceed with forgiveness of, and reconciliation with other human beings, I would like to briefly mention the following: Since in Theravada there is no Supreme Being, there is no question of asking forgiveness from, and getting reconciled with the Supreme Being. However, Mahayana accepts a Supreme Being; in fact, it is the only existing Reality. This Reality manifests itself in the form of unreal

---

2 Unless otherwise stated, all references to the Buddhist Pali texts are from the Nalanda edition, published by the Government of Bihar. However, references to the *Dhammapada-atthakatha* and the *Jataka-atthakatha* are from the Dhammagiri edition published by the Vipassana Research Institute, Igatpuri, Maharashtra.  

3 Unless otherwise stated, all references to the Buddhist Sanskrit texts are from the Darbhanga edition, published by the Mithila Institute, Bihar.
supernatural beings, which help ordinary beings to attain salvation. Now, for instance, in the popularly titled *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, in Chapter 7, which is entitled “Natural Liberation through Acts of Confession”, we have a whole series of confessions, asking forgiveness from various divinities of the Mahayana tradition. Thus, here we have an example of reconciliation with the Supreme Being through being reconciled with the manifestations of this Supreme Being, with whom of course the penitent, who is repentant and resolved not to commit the faults again, is actually identical, since there is only One Reality in Mahayana. After this brief remark about reconciliation with the Supreme Being, let me proceed to my main topic.

I. Forgiveness of and Reconciliation with Other Human Beings

In Buddhism, forgiveness forms part of the Buddhist virtue of forbearance (Pali *khanti*; Sanskrit *ksanti*). Forbearance consists mainly in absence of anger, hate and malice, and the forgiving (*marsana*) of offences by others (*parapakara*). All this is included in what is normally called forgiveness. But, secondarily, forbearance also includes the patient endurance of adversity, hardship, pain and suffering, etc. (Dayal 1932, 209)

---

4 *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, tr. by Gyurme Dorje, ed. by Graham Coleman with Thupten Jinpa, with an Introductory Commentary by the Dalai Lama (New York: Viking Penguin, 2006), ch. 7, pp. 113-150. The original Tibetan title of the book is *Bar-do Thos-grol Chen-mo*, which in English is translated as *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*. Tibetan tradition holds that the author is Padmasambhava who came to Tibet from India; the present text is an abbreviated version of a longer text buried in the ground by Padmasambhava for the benefit of future generations, and later discovered and revealed by Terton Karma Lingpa.

5 These confessions are open to monastics as well as laypeople, and should be distinguished from the twice a month Rite of Confession, which is meant for monks and nuns.

6 However, the individual realizes this, not just notionally, but really, only when the individual attains salvation or liberation.
Ideally, forgiveness is absolute, complete and universal. One must forgive all types of offences (injury, insult, abuse, criticism), everywhere (in private and in public), at all times (past, present and future), in all circumstances (in sickness or health), in thought (not entertaining angry thoughts), word (not speaking harshly) and deed (not harming physically), without any exception (whether friend, enemy or indifferent person), and however wicked the offending person or however terrible the injury may be (Dayal 1932, 209-10) Even if people criticize the Buddha or his Religion (dhamma) or the Order (sangha), one should not be angry or bear ill will towards them, but merely point out what is wrong. Whoever bears enmity even to thieves who sever one’s limbs, one by one, with a saw, does not carry out the teaching of the Buddha. Even in such a circumstance, one should not be harsh to the thieves or hate them, but rather one should be kind and compassionate and cultivate friendliness or loving kindness (metta) towards them as well as towards the whole world.

To achieve this high ideal is no easy task, but the Bodhisattvas, in particular, strive to reach this cherished goal, trying all the time not to bear malice or ill will towards anyone even when their life is in grave danger. If, on the other hand, they fail to reach this lofty goal, the Bodhisattvas can repent and confess their fault and reflect how they fall short of the ideal and resolve not to engage in acrimonious disputes, not to reply harshly, not to harbour malice or bear ill will, and so on and so forth.

In the Buddhist texts, one finds many reasons to motivate oneself to avoid resentment towards those who have offended oneself. Buddhaghosa, a Theravada Buddhist, includes the following reasons in his Visuddhimagga: remembering the scriptural passages that exhort one to practise forbearance and avoid hatred, reflecting on the harmful effects of anger on oneself, developing compassion for one’s enemies

---

7 Brahmanala-sutta, in Digha-nikaya, pt I, 1.1.5, p. 5.
8 Kakacupama-sutta, in Majjhima-nikaya, pt I, 21.5.20, pp. 172-73.
9 In Mahayana Bodhisattvas are special beings who delay their salvation for the sake of helping others, take on the sufferings of others, transfer their merits to them and give them grace.
10 Astusahasrika Prajnaparamita, 24, pp. 208-209.
who will suffer in purgatories due to their succumbing to anger, recalling to mind the many examples of the Buddha, who in previous lives as a human adult or child and even as an animal did not entertain the slightest hatred towards his tormentors, reflecting that one’s enemy may have been one’s loving parents or brothers or sisters or sons or daughters in previous lives, realizing that the one with whom one is angry is not a substantial soul, but merely a series of momentary aggregates of various elements, and therefore one cannot make that person the target of one’s anger.\(^{11}\)

Similarly, Mahayana texts too try to motivate one to practise forgiveness. Firstly, one should follow the teaching and example of the Buddhas in forgiveness. The Buddhas will not forgive people unless they forgive others who offend them. Secondly, in reference to the person to be forgiven one may reflect in this manner: the present enemy may have been one’s friend or relative or teacher in a former birth. Since Buddhism does not believe in a finite soul, strictly speaking there is no perpetrator of injuries and insults, nor is any one injured or insulted.\(^{12}\) All beings are evanescent and subject to pain and suffering, and so one should rather lighten their burden than be angry and unforgiving. The adversaries are conditioned by the results of their deeds (\textit{karman}) in past lives, and are therefore not acting freely. Thirdly, one may also think with regard to oneself in the following vein: One is suffering insult and injury as a consequence of one’s own evil deeds in previous existences. One’s enemies are actually one’s friends and beneficiaries for they preserve one from such worldly goods as wealth and fame, and give one the golden opportunity to practise forbearance, which leads to salvation. Fourthly, one should ponder over the ill effects of an angry and unforgiving attitude: it results in terrible punishments in various

\(^{11}\) Visuddhimagga, 9.15-38; see Nyanamoli, \textit{The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Colombo: A. Semage, 1964), pp. 324-332.

\(^{12}\) It is interesting to note that a similar reason, but with a different presupposition, is given in order to fight against one’s enemies, in the Hindu \textit{Bhagavad-gita} (2.19), where Krishna urges Arjuna to fight against the Kauravas since the soul – which constitutes the essence of a person – and, in some Hindu traditions, is inactive, and is therefore neither a slayer nor is slain.
purgatories, and wipes out the merit one has gained through several lives. Hence it is better to bear up with the comparatively negligible sufferings inflicted on one in this life than face the terrible tortures in the future. Revenge always brings evil consequences on oneself. Being at peace with others results in great happiness to oneself. Often one is unforgiving because of pride, which needs to be replaced by the spirit of humble service. Finally, mercy and love urge us to forgive others (Dayal 1932, 210-12).

It is noteworthy that many of these reasons are mentioned also by modern writers on forgiveness and reconciliation. They speak of shifting the focus of attention from oneself to the aggressor: instead of asking “Why me?” one asks “Why them?” In doing so, one realizes that the enemy too is driven by fear and other conditioning factors. This enables the victim to feel compassion for the offender (Botcharova 2002, 299-300). This compassion is not sympathy, but rather empathy for the aggressor’s humanity (Shriver 1997, 8). They have also pointed out that examples of extraordinary people who practised forgiveness in extremely difficult situations and even sacrificed their lives for the cause of reconciliation can inspire victims to find the courage to forgive (Worthington 2002, 186-87). It is also helpful to realize that we too have our faults for which we deserve punishment, and yet are often not penalized for them (Dawson 2002, 247-48). The spirit of humility is important in the process of reconciliation (Ledarch 2002, 198-99).

On the other hand, we can easily see that some of the reasons spring from the specifically Buddhist world-view. For example, strictly speaking, no one offends nor is any one offended for there are no finite souls or substantial agents: every finite being is a series of momentary aggregates. In Theravada the aggregates are real, but they exist only for a moment, so who is offending whom? The aggregates of the succeeding moment are different from those of the previous moment. One cannot therefore hold the aggregates of the succeeding moment responsible for what was perpetrated by those of the previous moment.13 In Mahayana

---

13 Of course, by the same logic, there is no forgiver either and there is no reason to forgive, for the aggregates that were offended and hurt are different from the
the aggregates do not even exist; in fact, nothing exists except the one Supreme Reality, the Adi (First) Buddha. It is interesting to note that the law of karman is invoked not so much to condemn the offender, but to understand the aggressor’s predicament. Theravada does not accept a God, so there is no question of recourse to the Christian idea that God forgives us and therefore we too should forgive others, or that God will not forgive us if we do not forgive others. But Mahayana does propose a similar motive. The Buddhas, who are manifestations of the supreme Adi Buddha, will not forgive those who do not extend forgiveness to others.\footnote{Note, however, that in Mahayana all this is only on the practical level for, from the point of view of the absolute truth, everything is illusory, except the one Reality, the Adi Buddha.}

The Buddhist texts usually speak of forgiveness, rather than reconciliation. The latter, however, is particularly found in the Confessions made by the monks and nuns. On new moon and full moon days, the monks and nuns assemble together for their fortnightly meetings, called Uposatha [Sanskrit Upavastha], at which they recite the monastic code, called Patimokkha [Sanskrit Pratimoksa], which contains the rules and regulations of monastic life. After each rule is recited, there is a pause so that any monk or nun who has broken that rule may confess it and accept the prescribed penalty. The rules for the monks and nuns are not all the same (Dutt 1941, 305-12). A few transgressions are so serious that the sanction is expulsion from the Order. In the case of some infractions, after imposing a temporary expulsion, the Order reassembles to consider readmitting the transgressor. In this way, the one who has violated those rules is reconciled with the members of the monastic community. In some infringements one just expresses regret, e.g., for having struck another monk. In some other cases, the offenders must give up what they had wrongly appropriated, e.g., gold or silver or what was meant for the community, and must also express regret for having done so. Here we see that restitution is involved in addition to contrition. There are also practical rules for the settling of disputes about the observance of the rules. For instance, one way is that the disagreeing
persons talk to each other and settle their differences, and thus become reconciled to one another.

Many modern writers on reconciliation emphasize the need for justice too and deprecate cheap forgiveness. However, in this context, it is important to stress on restorative justice, rather than on retributive justice. In restorative justice the aim is to restore harmony by healing the victim and rehabilitating the aggressor through a punishment that is not vengeful but reformatory (Schriver 2002, 156-57). It is an interesting remark that in the Buddhist Rite of Confession, the justice is restorative, not retributive. Most of the prescribed punishments are meant to reform the one who has breached the rule and bring about reconciliation between the victim and the perpetrator.

There is a well-known Buddhist saying:

Never does hatred cease by hatred, but hatred ceases by love. This is the eternal law (dhamma).\(^{15}\)

Anger and hatred are great obstacles to forgiveness and reconciliation. Buddhism emphatically points out that wrath and animosity affect the unforgiving enraged or hostile persons more than the ones on whom they vent their spleen. The one who is full of rancour experiences mental agony and anguish, while the one who bears no resentment does not feel such pain and grief.\(^{16}\) Anger may or may not make the other person suffer, but it definitely makes oneself suffer. Moreover, in accordance with the law of kamma [Sanskrit karman] it will not lead to liberation but to damnation in purgatories. An infuriated person is like one who wants to hit another with a burning ember or faeces in one’s hand, but actually ends up being the one to suffer burns or to stink.\(^{17}\) In a programme entitled “Eye for an Eye” and telecast on 16\(^{th}\) and 17\(^{th}\) May 1999, CNN revealed that rage and retaliation not only deprive one of peace of mind but also harm the body. Laboratory experiments confirmed that in unforgiving conditions one’s blood

\[^{15}\text{Dhammapada, v. 5, in Khuddaka-nikaya, pt I, p. 17.}\]
\[^{16}\text{Anguttara-nikaya, 5.18.4, pt II, p. 451.}\]
\[^{17}\text{Visuddhimagga, 9.22-23; see Nyanamoli, Path of Purification, pp. 326-327.}\]
pressure, heart rate and sweat rate soared. Indeed, “revenge is not sweet, but bitter, while forgiveness and reconciliation take the hurt away” (Sheth 2001, 76).

II. Some Buddhist Examples of Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Concrete examples not only spell out and explain a little more the Buddhist understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation, but also complement the theory to some extent. They also illustrate the ideal as well as other levels of forgiveness and reconciliation. We shall mention a few instances from the texts, from history and from the contemporary world.

1. Examples from the Texts

The most famous example is that of Khantivadi. In one of his previous lives, the Buddha was born as Kundalakumara, who was later known as Khantivadi [Sanskrit Ksantivadin], i.e., “One who preached the doctrine of forbearance”. Angry with Khantivadi, King Kalabu tested his forbearance by inflicting one agonizing torture after another: he first had him scourged all over his body, then had his hands and feet chopped off, and then his nose and ears cut off. Even though he was taunted by the king after every torment, Khantivadi never got angry, declaring himself to be a preacher and practitioner of forbearance. Finally, the king kicked him on his chest near the heart and walked off in a huff. The commander-in-chief requested Khantivadi to vent his wrath only on the king, but to spare the others and the kingdom. However, instead of taking revenge, Khantivadi uttered a blessing, “Long live the king!”

Dharmavivardhana, better known as Kunala, was the virtuous son of King Asoka. His stepmother Tisyaraksita declared her burning love

---

for him because of his beautiful eyes. On being rejected by him, she ordered his eyes to be pulled out. But accepting this as the fruit of his own past deeds (*karman*), he did not bear any malice towards her. He then went about with his wife begging on the streets, and making his living by singing and playing the *vina* (a musical instrument). Later when Asoka heard of the stepmother’s dastardly deed, he wanted to put her to death by pulling out her eyes, cutting off her tongue, poisoning her etc. But Kunala asked the king to spare her life, declaring that he harboured no anger towards her. Kunala then miraculously regained his eyes. Nevertheless, the king had Tisyaraksita burnt alive in a lac house (*jatuagrha*).\(^{19}\)

We notice in such instances that the ideal is not even to feel anger or hatred even in the most trying circumstances. The ideal is to practise forbearance, to put up with the trials and sufferings inflicted by others and not bear any grudge or malice toward the opponents. If one does not succeed in this stoic ideal, and experiences hurt and resentment, one must try and bring oneself to forgive the perpetrator. Although desired, reconciliation is not so actively sought for. If the aggressor is moved to repentance and becomes reconciled, it’s well and good, but it is not the deliberate goal of every act of forbearance and forgiveness. Justice and reparation too are not insisted upon in every instance.\(^{20}\)

The ordinary person of course cannot reach such heights of equanimity. Occasionally, the Buddhist texts do give more down-to-earth examples of people who get annoyed with one another but eventually do get reconciled. Two monks residing in Kosambi quarrelled with each other. Then this enmity between the two spread not only to their monastic disciples but also to their friends and others, who thus took sides with one or the other monk. In spite of many efforts made by the Buddha to reconcile them, they refused to do so. It was only when they felt the pinch of being deprived of food offerings from the lay folk that they came to their senses and decided to forgive each

---

\(^{19}\) *Kunalavadana*, in *Divyavadana*, 27, pp. 261-270.

\(^{20}\) However, in the case of the Buddhist Rite of Confession, both reconciliation and justice are integral parts of it, but Ritual Confession is reserved only for monks and nuns.
other and be reunited. Finally, the two factions also begged the Buddha’s forgiveness.\textsuperscript{21}

On occasion the Buddha himself brings about reconciliation. In the “Introduction” to the \textit{Kunala Jataka}, it is reported that when the Koliya and Sakyan tribes were about to engage in a bloody battle over the right to the waters of the river Rohini, the Buddha persuaded them to desist from fighting by making them realize that there was no point in killing warriors of priceless value for the sake of some water that had comparatively little worth.\textsuperscript{22} Not all however paid heed to the Buddha’s mediations. He was unable to persuade the stubborn monk Tissa to ask forgiveness for not welcoming some visiting monks with respect and hospitality. Tissa was unforgiving because he was angry with those monks for having abused him for this fault of omission. In fact, in a previous life too he was not willing to ask pardon.\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{2. Examples from Buddhist History}

Let us now leave the traditional texts and cite a couple of illustrations from Buddhist history. In the 13\textsuperscript{th} Rock Edict, the Emperor Asoka publicly expresses his remorse and confesses how the carnage at Kalinga caused him great anguish. He also declares that he pardons, as far as it is possible, all those who have wronged him. He makes peace with the people living in the forests. He wishes all beings to be free from injury and to enjoy gentleness or joyousness.\textsuperscript{24} He even took care to omit the 13\textsuperscript{th} Edict from the texts carved on the rocks in Kalinga, lest even his words of repentance would serve as a spark to re-ignite adverse

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
emotions in the Kalingas by reviving the memory of his fateful attack on their country. 25

The father of Honen, the leader of the Japanese Jodo-shu school, was fatally wounded by a gang of robbers who attacked their home. On his deathbed, his father exhorted his son never to take revenge but rather to pray for the salvation of his father as well as of the attackers (Anesaki 1963, 171-72).

3. Examples from Modern Times

We now turn to some examples in the contemporary world. The Dalai Lama, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, has always embraced the policy of peaceful resistance to the Chinese, who invaded Tibet in 1950. He refers to the Chinese as his brothers and sisters and is motivated by tolerance, compassion and love. While wanting autonomy, he admits the fact that Tibet would continue to be linked with China (Gandhi 1999, 400). In his Nobel Peace Prize Lecture, in speaking of the atrocities committed by the Chinese against Tibetans, and their country and culture, he said that he did not speak with a heart filled with hatred or anger against the Chinese for, he added, they too were human beings striving for happiness and were entitled to compassion. Elsewhere he also points out that enemies are valuable because they help us to advance in spiritual qualities such as forbearance and mental fortitude. He admits that had he stayed in Lhasa he might have been isolated and conservative. So he is indebted to the Chinese since his exile helped broaden his perspectives. He felt very sad that Tibetans were infuriated against the Chinese and took part in burning Chinese vehicles. 26 His purpose in narrating the trials and tribulations of the Tibetan people was not out of vindictiveness or hostility towards the Chinese, but in order to

26 See Dalai Lama, The Dalai Lama: A Policy of Kindness: An Anthology of Writings by and about the Dalai Lama, comp. and ed. by Sidney Piburn, with a Foreword by Claiborne Pell, Ithaca (NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1990), pp. 16, 105-106, 133.
inform the public. He also felt that many well-meaning Chinese were simply not aware of what was going on in Tibet. He admits, however, that when people exploit the sincerity of a person, it may be necessary to retort. Although on the surface level an apt reaction is resorted to, there should be an underlying spirit of forbearance, compassion and tolerance, without bearing any ill-feelings. Our real enemies are not outside us but inside us, e.g., arrogance, wrath and envy, and we have to wage a war against these internal foes. World peace cannot be achieved without realizing that we are all sisters and brothers, without cultivating kindness and compassion. But this is not possible without inner transformation.

One of the principles of Mahayana is that there is only One Reality. Realizing the oneness of humanity is one of the ways that facilitates forgiveness or at least reduces unforgiveness (Wortlington 2002, 181). It should be noted, however, that this oneness in Mahayana is radical and metaphysical, and not just a sort of psychological unity or a common humanity shared with one another for, according to Mahayana, there is only one Reality, and everything else is illusion; everything is identical with that one Reality.

The Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh did not bear any hatred towards the Catholic Diem regime that persecuted him, nor to the Viet Cong or the U.S. soldiers who attacked Vietnam. He could find excuses for the atrocities perpetrated by U.S. soldiers in Vietnam, attributing these to their hard life in the swamps and jungles infested by mosquitoes and other insects, and to their being in constant danger of death. Although initially angry, he did not blame a sea-pirate who had raped a twelve-year old girl, thinking that if he had had the same historical, economic and educational background as that pirate he would probably have behaved in the same way. This attitude of Thich Nhat Hanh is based on the Buddhist doctrine of Dependent or

---

30 Dalai Lama, *Bodhgaya Interviews*, p. 47.
Conditioned Co-production (pratitya-samutpada; Pali patticca-saumuppada), according to which no being or event arises without a conditioning factor: this (resulting) being or event is because that (preceding) being or event is; this (resulting) being or event is not because that (preceding) being or event is not (Nichols 1985, 2-3). It thus helps the Buddhist to pay attention to attenuating circumstances, and hence be more understanding and forgiving.

In war-torn Cambodia Maha Ghosananda, five-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee, led nine Dhammayietras [Khmer or Cambodian for the Sanskrit Dharmayatras] or Pilgrimages of Truth to promote peace between rival Cambodian groups. Often opponents met and walked together in the spirit of reconciliation. In his first Dhammayietra, he preached repeatedly, “The suffering of Cambodia has been deep. From this suffering comes Great Compassion. Great Compassion makes a peaceful heart. A peaceful heart makes a peaceful person. A peaceful person makes a peaceful family. A peaceful family makes a peaceful community. A peaceful community makes a peaceful nation. A peaceful nation makes a peaceful world”. When, returning from his monastery in Thailand, he paid his first visit to the Sakeo Cambodian refugee camp, he distributed copies of the Metta-sutta, a Buddhist Theravada scriptural text on loving kindness or friendship, and exhorted the refugees to forgive their persecutors. A leader of the Khmer Rouge requested Maha Ghosananda to visit Thailand and build a Buddhist temple on the border of Cambodia, and the latter readily agreed. Many were scandalized that he was helping an “enemy”. But he pointed out that love did not discriminate between good or bad; in fact, it was those who were deviants who needed loving kindness all the more because often enough virtue vanished from them because they did not experience the

33 The name of the communist group in Cambodia that carried out a massive genocide under the leadership of Pol Pot.
warmth of empathy from others. Quoting Mahatma Gandhi, he said that reconciliation consisted in destroying enmity, not enemies; loving kindness removed ignorance from adversaries as well as from us: we all needed to be freed (Ghosananda 1992, 62; 68-69)

The Sri Lankan monk H. Uttarananda, who was a member of the now defunct Humanist Bhikkhus34 Association (Manava-hitavadi Bhikkhu Sangamaya), proposed a Buddhist-Humanist view of the national ethnic problem in Sri Lanka. Following the typical Buddhist “middle path”, he wanted to avoid the two extremes of a Sinhala Buddhist State and a free Eelam State. He acknowledged the inhuman atrocities perpetrated on Tamils in 1983 and thereafter by racist fanatics and governments, and was able to sympathetically understand the exasperated violent reactions of Tamils whose pent up rage boiled over due to the prolonged racist attitudes of successive governments. He called for reconciliation and strengthening of racial unity and peace.35 Apologies, whether private or public, do help in the process of reconciliation (Schriver 2002, 163).

In a Press Conference in Tokyo on 3rd June 2002, the four Mahanayakes or “Patriarchs” of the Theravada Buddhist Order of Sri Lanka, publicly released a Press Statement, which declared that the Order was for peace and development in Sri Lanka and solicited the support of the Japanese people in the peace process and in confidence-building measures which would benefit all three communities affected by the war, viz., the Sinhalese, the Tamils and the Muslims.36 The Sri Lankan newspaper The Island reported that the Mahanayake of Asgiriya conferred his blessings on both the UNP Government of Ranil Wickremansinghe as well as the LTTE in their efforts to restore peace through peace talks held in Thailand.37

34 Bhikkhu literally means a mendicant and refers to a Buddhist monk: the initial practice of begging for food is now generally defunct, except in a couple of countries like Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia.
36 From the text of the Press Release, sent to me by the Japanese Committee of the World Conference on Religion and Peace.
So far I have given examples of Buddhist men. I wish I had more time and resource material at hand to outline a modern Buddhist woman’s spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. I am referring to Nobel Peace Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar or Burma. Still, something is better than nothing, so here are a couple of stray references that I could glean by quickly skimming through some pages in a book I could lay my hands on. In 1998, at a public rally at the Shwedagon Pagoda, she appealed to the people to let bygones be bygones, to manifest their innate ability to forgive, not to abandon their traditional love for the armed forces and to resort to peaceful means of walking hand in hand with the authorities to build a united Burma (Kyi 1995, 195-96). When she was freed in 1995, after six years of house arrest by the military, and that, too, in spite of a landslide victory of her party, she expressed appreciation for the conciliatory tenor of the announcement of release by her captors, and highlighted the need for dialogue rather than confrontation for the restoration of peace. She declared that she did not harbour any bitterness against anyone for the treatment she received during those six long years (Kyi 1995, 360-61).

III. Reconciliation with Nature

Although the conscious effort to reach out to vegetative and animal life is primarily to avoid unnecessary violence even to plant life and to develop sensitivity to the whole of nature, the natural result of such behaviour is reconciliation with nature. Nevertheless, we do have explicit references to a conscious reconciliation with nature.

1. Reconciliation with Vegetative Life

A monk should abstain from destroying the growth of seeds and vegetables. The destruction of plant-life by monks is a pacittiya

38 Culahatthipadopama-sutta, in Majjhima-nikaya, pt I, 27.2.8, p. 230.
type of offence which requires Confession. So those who have committed such an offence towards plants are becoming reconciled to them by confessing their fault. In fact, it is a pacittiya fault even to dig the earth or cause it to be dug: this is in order to avoid doing violence to the living organisms and seeds in the earth. Monks were of course permitted to eat vegetables, to use twigs to brush their teeth or to use herbal medicines.

2. Reconciliation with Animals

The Buddha died of blood dysentery after eating a dish called in Pali sukara-maddava (soft pork). Scholars have different opinions as to whether this sukara-maddava was pork or a vegetarian dish made from such items as a sprout or a mushroom, etc. However, the earliest Pali commentaries identify it as pork (Thomas 1927, 149, n3). In the Amagandha-sutta it is pointed out that destruction of life, cutting, binding, injustice, harshness, anger, envy, slander, injury, cruelty, disrespect, greed, hostility etc. have the foul odour of rotting meat, but not so the eating of meat. When Buddhist monks went on their begging rounds, they were expected to accept whatever was put into their begging bowls. Early Buddhists were therefore not strict vegetarians. Nevertheless, in time Theravadins became increasingly vegetarian. A monk had to avoid eating animals which were seen or heard by him, or suspected to have been deliberately killed for him.

---

40 Pacittiya, no.11, pp. 54-56.
41 See Horner, tr., The Book of the Discipline, p. 229, n. 4.
42 Pacittiya, no. 10, pp. 52-54.
45 Amagandha-sutta, in Sutta-nipata, 2.2.22-28, pp. 305-306.
46 This does not mean that they were not sensitive to animal life.
Buddhists should not be butchers, hunters and fisher folk, and should avoid any job that entails cruelty such as being an executioner or jailer. If they take up such occupations, they are tormentors of others. Buddhism also reacted against the sacrificial killing of animals. In his 5th Pillar Edict King Asoka exempted several animals from slaughter, e.g., parrots, geese, swans, bats, boneless fish, etc., and certain animals when they were pregnant. He also prohibited the killing of fish and certain animals on particular auspicious days. In his 1st Rock Edict he forbade the sacrifice of all animals in his palace. Formerly very many living beings were killed daily for his table; but he decreed that only three would be slain: two peacocks and one deer, and the latter would not be killed invariably. In fact, he said, even these would not be slaughtered in the future.

In Theravada there developed the practice of setting up sanctuaries for birds and animals as well as tanks for fish, where they could move about freely without being hunted or caught. This was called abhaya-dana (the gift of fearlessness).

Similar to the case of Theravada, the custom, and even ceremony, of freeing living creatures arose in Mahayana too. It consisted in purchasing birds, animals and fish that had been captured and setting them free in their own habitats. In China and Japan, too, different kings prohibited the eating of meat and advocated non-violence towards animals, birds and fish. It should be noted, however, that some Mahayana schools are non-vegetarian, while Theravada is vegetarian.

It is noteworthy that, in such acts of reaching out to plant, bird, fish and animal life, quite often the person doing so is actually making up for the lack of solidarity with nature by others. Hence the reconciliation

---

with nature is frequently a sort of collective or corporate reconciliation, and not so much an individual, reconciliation with nature.

IV. The Role of Friendliness or Loving Kindness in Reconciliation

Forgiveness and reconciliation are related to the group of four Buddhist virtues called Brahma-viharas (Sublime Abidings or States), viz., metta [Sanskrit maitri] (friendliness), karuna (compassion), mudita (joy) and upekkha [Sanskrit upeksa] (equanimity). All these four Sublime Abidings or States are to be cultivated or developed through meditation. Progress in these qualities helps one to be more forgiving and reconciliatory. In fact, to develop a forgiving and reconciling disposition, it is not enough to just make a good resolution to do so. It is meditation that brings about the necessary transformation. Of these, metta has the closest link with our theme, so I focus on it.

Metta essentially consists in the wish that all beings may be happy. Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so one should cultivate unlimited love towards all beings. The cultivation of metta is the best way to prevent anger from arising and to remove anger in case it has arisen. The mind of one who has acquired perfection in metta cannot be affected even by the most hostile person, just as the earth cannot be destroyed, space cannot be painted on, and the river Ganga cannot be burned.

Before embarking on the development of metta, one must engage in preliminary reflections on the dangers of hate and the advantages of forbearance (khanti). Then one proceeds through meditation to cultivate metta in order to protect the mind from the dangers of anger and lead it into the benefits of forbearance. One begins by practising metta towards oneself, wishing welfare and happiness to oneself. Notice that this

54 Metta or maitri literally means friendship or friendliness, but is often translated as loving kindness.
56 Aunguttara-nikaya, 1.2.7, pt I, p. 5.
involves reconciliation with oneself. In Buddhism, only after this, does one proceed to reconciliation with others.

Next one concentrates on engendering metta towards one’s teacher, then towards a dear friend, subsequently towards a neutral person, and finally towards a hostile person. It should be remarked that this procedure is eminently psychological: if one starts with first focussing on an opponent, one is not likely to be moved to forgiveness and reconciliation. Several reflections are suggested to enable one to overcome resentment towards one’s adversary. This metta is to be perfected in such a way that eventually one makes no distinction between oneself, the dear person, the neutral person and the enemy. Metta reaches its climax when more and more beings are included in the range of one’s metta, until it extends to all beings, human, animal or plant, and is radiated in all the directions of the universe. Thus forgiveness and reconciliation, in the Buddhist perspective, are all inclusive, encompassing not only all human beings, but also the whole of nature.

V. The Unique Traits of Buddhist Forgiveness and Reconciliation

While dealing with Buddhist forgiveness and reconciliation we have already highlighted a number of unique features. It will be helpful now to make a brief comparison between Buddhist and Christian forgiveness and reconciliation. This will serve to bring out the distinctive characteristics of Buddhist reconciliation and, by implication, further elucidate the nature of Buddhist forgiveness and reconciliation.

Buddhist and Christian forgiveness do resemble each other, e.g., both are opposed to malice and both go to the extent of loving one’s enemy. But there are many important differences, springing from their different world-views. Christians forgive others because otherwise God will not forgive them. But Theravada Buddhism does not admit any Supreme Being, hence the motivation is not the same. In Theravada,

---

59 See the Gospel according to Matthew, 6.12; 18.21-35.
charity begins at home: one loves or practises friendliness first towards oneself; only then can one extend friendliness towards others. Hence, we must first be reconciled with ourselves. In Christianity the person forgiven has intrinsic worth: the person is a child of God and has an immortal soul. In Theravada, on the other hand, the one who is forgiven is neither created by a God nor has a soul: each individual is just a series of momentary aggregates, subject to the law of kamma [Sanskrit karman] (results of past deeds), and therefore does not have intrinsic worth, but should still be forgiven. In Mahayana the human being has even less worth, for the individual does not even exist; only the Adi (First) Buddha, one of the technical terms for the Supreme Being, exists. And yet, paradoxically, the ideal is to unilaterally forgive others who do not really exist even for a moment, except on the level of ignorance and from the practical point of view. In a sense, according to the doctrine of dependent co-production, dependence exists – which, in modern times, is further interpreted even as interdependence or a sort of interrelatedness – but individuals do not exist. Moreover, the interrelatedness in the Mahayana world-view is on the ontological level; ultimately there is absolute identity. As a result, while in Christianity one concentrates on overcoming differences between alienated people, in Mahayana one transcends these differences. Hence in Mahayana one can more easily identify oneself even with the oppressor.

While the cultivation and expression of Christian forgiveness is, in some measure, spontaneous, personal, and generally emotional, Theravada love and forgiveness, even if it comes naturally in the case of those who have attained perfection in it, is developed through a systematic, calculated method and expressed in a more impersonal, detached and emotionally more sedate manner.

Christian forgiveness and reconciliation is something active, it brings about a change, a healing, a restoration because it is based on the inter-personal, communitarian world-view. In Theravada on the other hand, one can only do good or harm to oneself, for each one is reaping the fruits of one’s own past deeds (kamma or karman). One can help another only indirectly by one’s example, by trying not to provoke resentment and anger in others and by the tranquil, detached vibrations of metta sent out in different directions. Disagreeing with an acrobat, his
apprentice pointed out that they would perform their act successfully not by watching out for each other but by each one watching out for himself.\(^{60}\)

In Christianity it is often said that God will not forgive us unless we forgive others. In Mahayana, too, the Buddhas will not forgive people unless they forgive others. However, it should be noted that even here there are differences. For example, it is not the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who are the highest, but it is the Adi Buddha that is the Supreme Being. The dealings of the Mahayana Buddhists, however, are with the former.

The Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation motivates one to forgive and be reconciled, but Christianity does not believe in rebirth. On the other hand, for Christianity the person has intrinsic worth, but this is not the case with Buddhism. Hence the motivation for practising forgiveness and reconciliation is also different in the two traditions.

Unlike Christian reconciliation, Buddhist reconciliation is more universal, since it is extended also to nature and not just to human beings. However, possibly due to influence from Buddhism and other Eastern religions, and with a growing awareness of the environment in the West, modern Christianity is moving in the direction of getting reconciled with nature too and even making restitution by efforts to heal the earth and by recognizing the rights of animals and plants.

One of the practical differences between Christianity and Buddhism is that Buddhism prescribes meditational techniques to help one develop a forgiving and reconciliatory disposition: merely making a good resolution is not enough. Christianity, on the other hand, only exhorts people to forgive and be reconciled, but there are no methods or techniques that enable people to become more forgiving and reconciled. Similarly, too, in the Buddhist confessional practice, the sanctions are meant to reform those who have breached the rules and bring about reconciliation between the victim and the perpetrator. By contrast, in Catholic Confession or, in current terminology, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, often enough the penance is just to say the prayer, “Our Father” or “Hail Mary”: this does not prove to be an antidote to the

---

\(^{60}\) Sedaka-sutta, in *Samyutta-nikaya*, 47.19, pt 5, pp. 144-145.
wrong habit and thus is not psychologically conducive to bringing about restoration and reconciliation.

In the context of the views of many Western writers on forgiveness and reconciliation, it should be pointed out that the emphasis in Buddhism is in the first place on not even feeling hurt or on remaining unperturbed by even the most cruel and vehement aggressor. In this sense, strictly speaking, there is no need of forgiveness for no offence has been taken!

Buddhists have always maintained that anger and hatred harm the perpetrator more than the victim. A deeper realization of this has dawned on the consciousness of the modern world only in recent years. Although desired, reconciliation is not so actively sought for. If the aggressor is moved to repentance and becomes reconciled, it’s well and good, but it is not the deliberate goal of every act of forbearance and forgiveness. Justice and reparation too are not insisted upon in every instance. However, we have seen that, in the case of the Buddhist Rite of Confession, which is meant only for monks and nuns, reconciliation and justice are essential parts of it. It should be clarified that what is not always insisted upon is justice in the near future; eventual justice will of course surely take place, for it is based on the law of karman. Both forgiveness and reconciliation, in Buddhism, are practiced more on the plane of individuals than on the level of groups.

Conclusion

Thus we see that, while there are similarities in forgiveness and reconciliation between Christianity and Buddhism, there are many distinctions arising from the divergent world-views not only of Christianity but also of Theravada and Mahayana. These differences are found not only with regard to the presuppositions, but also in reference to the motivation as well as the expression of forgiveness and reconciliation.
The historian Toynbee has written: “The three Judaic religions\(^6^1\) have a record of intolerance, hatred, malice, uncharitableness, and persecution that is black by comparison with Buddhism’s record.” (Toynbee 1966, 167) However, Buddhism too, like Christianity and many another religion, has had its share of hatred, violence and unforgiveness, in the past as well as the present. Be that as it may, while granting that divergent world-views result in differences with regard to the nature, motivation and expression of forgiveness and reconciliation, Buddhists, Christians and others need to hearken to the call of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation, to heal a broken world and build bridges of friendship and harmony, for without forgiveness and reconciliation there is no hope for the future (Tutu 1999).

REFERENCES


\(^6^1\) Judaism, Christianity and Islam.


