

7<sup>th</sup> Singapore Bahá'í Studies Conference  
The Guild House, NUS Campus  
10 am – 6 pm, Sunday, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2002

Abstract

## BEYOND A CLASH OF CULTURES A Buddhist Response

by  
Piya Tan

Following the 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, troubling fundamental questions about religion arise again among thinkers. Is religion more of a bane to mankind than a boon? In a recent article published in the Sunday Times (6<sup>th</sup> January 2002), Pervez Amirali Hoodbhoy openly remarks:

...Islam—like Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism or any other religion—is not about peace. Nor is it about war. Every religion is about absolute belief in its own superiority and the divine right to impose itself upon others.

Such honest statements call for serious reflection amongst religionists and positive concerted responses. There is hope in religion and spirituality. In a remarkable discourse called the Lion-roar at Udumbarikā, the Buddha is confronted by an equivalent of a modern evangelist who plans to “knock him down” with a question.

The Buddha’s response is surprising. Instead of rebutting the challenge, he throws back the question to the questioner and his congregation, and giving them his ear in an effort to get to know their mindset.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Buddha declares:

*...you may think that the ascetic Gotama says this in order to win disciples. But you should not think so. Let him who is your teacher remain your teacher.*

*Let your way of life remain as it was...*

*Let those things you consider wrong continue to be so considered...*

*Let whatever you consider right continue to be so considered. I do not speak for any of these reasons.*

*There are unwholesome things that have not been abandoned...productive of painful results in the future... It is for the abandonment of these things that I teach Dharma...*

(Udumbarika Sīhanāda Sutta)

# BEYOND A CLASH OF CULTURES

## A Buddhist Response

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### 1. EVERY RELIGION IS ABOUT ABSOLUTE BELIEF

Following the 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, troubling fundamental questions about religion arise again among concerned thinkers. Is religion more of a bane to mankind than a boon? In a recent article published in the Sunday Times (6<sup>th</sup> January 2002), **Pervez Amirali Hoodbhoy** openly remarks:

...Islam—like Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism or any other religion—is not about peace. Nor is it about war. **Every religion is about absolute belief** in its own superiority and the divine right to impose itself upon others.

P.A. Hoodbhoy, *The Sunday Times* (6<sup>th</sup> January 2002)

Such courageously honest statements are a healthy and happy sign that there still are, albeit rare, voices of wisdom and temperament in the growing religious madness that now threatens our planet. It also calls for serious reflection and positive concerted responses amongst the religionists. There is still hope in religion and spirituality. In this paper I hope to present to you an insight into the root causes of global religious violence and some ideas that might point to their possible solution.

### 2. ROOTS OF SUFFERING

We shall briefly examine the Buddhist notion of poverty as portrayed in **the Discourse on the Lion-roar of the Universal Monarch**<sup>1</sup>, and look at two remarkable discourses of the Buddha: **the Discourse on the Lion-roar at Udumbarikā**<sup>2</sup>, a humorous account of how the Buddha answers an “evangelist” of his own time, and **the Discourse to the Kālāmas**<sup>3</sup>, popularly known as the Buddhist “charter of free inquiry”.

**The greatness of a religion is in its ability to present axiomatic equations that have universal implications**, and a religion is the greatest when it is able to present universal statements that would be true even if that religion or its founder were not to exist at all. In this sense, religion and science overlap, or perhaps, it is more correct to say that the religious quest and the scientific method coincide.

However, any claim that religion and **science** are identical would be like saying that man and woman are identical. As **Ken Wilber** writes in the *Quantum Questions* of which he is editor: “the physicist is looking at *nothing but a set of highly abstract differential equations*—not at ‘reality’ itself, but at mathematical symbols of reality.” (1985:8). Religion speaks in immeasurable terms while science measure things. Whatever is immeasurable, such as love, compassion, generosity, or greed, hate, delusion, are beyond the ken of science, that is, insofar as these qualities are unmeasurable. But

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<sup>1</sup> **The Discourse on the Lion-roar of the Universal Monarch**, the Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta (D no. 26). The most readable translation is that by Maurice Walshe (1996:385-394). For other translations, see [Abbreviations](#): D.

<sup>2</sup> **The Discourse on the Lion-roar at Udumbarikā**, the Udumbarika Sihanāda Sutta (D no. 25). The most readable translation is that by Maurice Walshe (1996:385-394). For other translations, see [Abbreviations](#): D.

<sup>3</sup> **The Discourse to the Kālāmas**, also called the Kesaputtiya Sutta (the Discourse to those of Kesaputta) (A 3.65). The most readable is the translation by Nyanaponika Thera & Bhikkhu Bodhi (1999:64-67). Two other translations, by Thanissaro Bhikkhu and by Soma Thera, are freely available online. For other translations, see [Abbreviations](#): A.

these emotions are forever with us. As such, religion will always be with us, with or without science, before or after science.

Science is able to provide temporary comforts against our daily sufferings and our illnesses: it can explain how these problems arise. However, it cannot satisfactorily explain why these problems arise. This is the domain of religion. At least, in the case of Buddhism, it tries to explain the roots of suffering as the dislocation between our minds and the reality that envelopes us and everything.

This “dislocation” is called **ignorance**, which generates two universal mental attitudes that we, as unenlightened beings, toggle between, that is, we either like someone or something or we dislike them.<sup>4</sup> Then, the human mind weaves an immeasurable tangle of ideas and reactions rooted in these two basic instincts.

It is vital to clarify our terms here: by **ignorance** here does not so much refer to the cognitive kind, as it is to the existential kind, that is, not knowing the true reality that underlies all being: the impermanence, the unsatisfactoriness, and the non-finality of all existence. We might call this “spiritual ignorance”. From this ignorance arises our basic instinctive reactions of **attraction** rooted in greed, and of **rejection** rooted in ill-will. This is the delusion that enshrouds us each and every unenlightened moment of our waking lives.

### 3. SOCIAL CONDITIONS

Buddhism does not attribute everything that happens to us or around us to karma. In fact, **karma** is only one of **the five natural laws**<sup>5</sup> that govern our lives, that is, to say:

- (1) the physical laws (such as the climate and weather or inorganic order);
- (2) the biological laws (the law of seeds or organic order);
- (3) the psychic laws (the nature of the mind and thoughts);
- (4) **the law of karma** (the moral order of conscious actions); and
- (5) the law of causality (the nature of physical cause and effect, such as gravity).

Many, if not all, of social problems are not because of our karma, but rather arise from the conditions of society itself. Our global economics, for example, is based on the western notion of supply and demand, and that people have needs and greed. In such a system, therefore, people are driven by material gain and personal satisfaction.

In more traditional Asian society, however, work is generally motivated **the satisfaction of basic needs** (food, clothing, shelter, health) and **the general happiness of the community**. Or, at least, work is not motivated by rising consumerism. But as greed-based economics (in the form of the “globalization”) catch up with these people, their motivation become increasingly that of greed and increasing wants.

In such a scenario, we inevitably see a growing disparity between the few and privileged rich, and the majority poor. Like it or not, it is the rich who rule society, or are better-equipped to do so. It has come to a point, thanks to growing globalization, the richer nations have a greater say in global matters, and the politicians of the richest nations want to have the most say in the running of all lesser nations.

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<sup>4</sup> **Basic instincts of liking and disliking.** In early Buddhist teachings (or “Buddhist psychology”), these two basic instincts are called *lobha* (greed, lust) or *anunaya* (approval, attraction, attachment to something pleasant) and *dosa* (hatred) or *paṭigha* (disapproval, rejection of and aversion to something unpleasant). See, for example, the Great Discourse on Origination (Mahā Nidāna Sutta, D no. 15).

<sup>5</sup> **The five natural laws** (*pañca,niyāma*) (DA 2:432; DhsA 272). See W.F. Jayasuriya, *The Psychology and Philosophy of Buddhism*. Colombo: YMBA Press, 1963:24-27.

#### 4. TWO NOTIONS OF POVERTY

My point here is that when globalization and consumerism hit a traditional oriental society, sooner or later, the majority of its people begin to perceive themselves as being poor. They have become poor because they cannot afford to buy those attractive and magical new products and services, whether they need them or not. Such people see themselves as poor because they feel deprived of various wonderful things that only the rich and the wasteful can afford. This is the first notion of poverty, that is, **poverty as deprivation**.

This is, in fact, one of the theses of **Mavis Fenn** in her insightful paper entitled “Two Notions of Poverty in the Pāli Canon” (*Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 1996:98-125). The second notion of poverty is that of simplicity. The **poverty of simplicity** is, for example, found in the saintly self-sufficiency of the early Buddhist monastics and the early Christian saints outside the organized church. It is a simple life sustained by the four basic needs and motivated by the quest for spiritual realization and the divine life.

However, not everyone can or want to be saints, nor do they want to become sinners, if they can help it. A good government or ruler surely wants for more saints or saintly people under their rule, or at least sinning should be kept in company very privately limited. In fact, we have accounts from the Buddhist Canon of how progressive kings would care for the welfare of their citizens and country.

#### 5. THE UNIVERSAL MONARCH

**The Discourse on the Lion-roar of the Universal Monarch** (D no. 26) is a fascinating text belonging to a little studied area: Buddhist prophecy. Its setting is that of a mythical world ruled by a global ruler, but this scenario is becoming real in the face of globalization. The first Universal Monarch, king Dalha, nemi, and each of his seven successors, follow a set of duties known as “the noble code of the Universal Monarch”. As just and virtuous rulers, they provide shelter for all segments of their realm, including the animals and birds. To generate prosperity and prevent wrong-doings, they provide wealth for those without wealth. They have saintly religious practitioners as advisors, and they ensure that the members of this religious community do not give up their practice. And so their realm prospers materially and spiritually.

The eighth Universal Monarch, however, is a rather innovative person. He listens to his good advisors, following all that they advise, except for one—**he does not give wealth to those who have none**. As a result, poverty becomes widespread. When thefts occur, the king respond by giving wealth to those thieves with the injunction to use the wealth to care for themselves, parents, wives and children, to set up businesses, and to give gifts to the religious community that will benefit them here and hereafter.

In due course, the king reasons it out that if he keeps on giving to thieves, he would be encouraging people to steal. So he beheads the next thief he catches. From this point onward, social disintegration begins, by way of action and reaction.

So then, monks, because wealth is not given to those who have no wealth, poverty becomes widespread; because poverty becomes widespread, theft becomes widespread, because theft becomes widespread, weapons becomes widespread, because weapons becomes widespread, murder becomes widespread, because murder becomes widespread, lying becomes widespread, because lying becomes widespread their lifespan and pleasant appearance decline.

(D 3:68)

This passage then repeats itself each new vice: informing, adultery, lust, incest, lack of filial piety and disrespect for elders, and religious impiety. This cyclic repetition serves to emphasize that the entire process of degeneration is due to the king's failure to give wealth to those who have none.

It is interesting to note here that there is no mention of karma: poverty here does not arise because of karma. In fact, what poverty does here is to provoke karmically unproductive, i.e. evil, deeds. Everyone in the kingdom, rich and poor, suffer the effects of the evil deeds, raising the possibility of “communal karma” or, at least, the confluence of karma.<sup>6</sup> At this point, the discourse points towards a vital notion for our society today: “The interpretation that follows from this is that the political structure (kingship) provides the context with which *kamma* operates, and poverty causes degeneration in both the individual and his/her society.” (Fenn, 1996:102).

This downward cycle of violence culminates in a period in which humans “**acquire animal consciousness towards each other**” (*añña,m-aññam miga,saññaṃ paṭilabhissanti*, D 3:73; Fenn's tr.); that is, they perceive each other as animals and react by slaughtering each other as if threatened by wild animals. At this point, we only need to look at our war-torn societies today, especially those torn apart on account of religion. The story goes on with many more interesting details, but this will suffice for our present purposes.

## 6. THE THREE ROOTS

All this is beginning to sound familiar, a *déjà vu*. Let me summarize by restating the current problems of widespread violence in terms of **the three root causes of all human conflicts**, whether secular or religious. Take the cases of the northern Ireland Catholic-Protestant violence, the current Middle East Arab-Israeli conflicts and the tragic 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 bombing of the New York World Trade Center. Both sides in the conflicts have painful pasts (mainly religious pasts), and this past is rooted in **hatred**.

The same people dream of a future for themselves, each with their own ideology and vision. This is the **greed** or lust, a desire for future power and influence. The nightmare of past hatred and dream of future power distract them from the realities of the present. This **delusion** prevents them from seeing the sufferings of their own people and those of others. Indeed, violence and destruction are their weapons.

The **suicide bombers** are a grave lesson in the failure of religious values at its lowest level, when the very thing that is most precious and the vehicle for spirituality is destroyed. However, these people who willingly sacrifice their lives because they have been cornered, lacking the superior support and weapons of their foes by whom they feel oppressed.

Above all, their leaders have mobilized religious notions into **promises of paradise** should they die and destroy as many “enemies” in the name of their religion (read “their leader”). This promise is easily convincing when one is born into a society that has never seen a day with the sound of gunshots, bombshells and bloodshed, and oblivious of all the basic comforts and luxuries of more peaceful societies.

I have presented this story and analysis so that we have some grist for our mental mills. The clash of civilizations and of cultures is too big an area for final answers. From such teachings, we can probably obtain some insights into this global problem, of which we are ourselves (as religionists) an intimate part. Our best weapon is a peaceful one: it is that of teaching and education. We have to continue to teach that there are non-violent ways to social problems, especially when we desire long-term peace and prosperity.

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<sup>6</sup> **Group karma.** On this fascinating topic, see the discussion by James P. McDermott, “Is There Group Karma in Theravāda Buddhism?” *Numen* 23,1:Apr 1976:67-80.

## 7. THE CHALLENGE OF SPIRITUAL DIALOGUE

At this point, let me change tack and turn the probing lights upon ourselves. How can we as religionists not contribute to, promote or perpetuate such an ominous spectre as “the clash of cultures”? Hoodbhoy’s courageous and honest statement—“**Every religion is about absolute belief** in its own superiority and the divine right to impose itself upon others”—gives us a very broad hint that calls for serious reflection amongst religionists and within religions for positive concerted responses.

I’m optimistic that there is hope in religion and spirituality: perhaps less in religion, but more in spirituality, for sure. In the Fall issue of the American Buddhist magazine, *Tricycle*, **Prof. Huston Smith** (whom I had the privilege of meeting and listening to) contributed a short but useful article reflecting on the differences between religion and spirituality. “**‘Spirituality’ can’t get traction in history the way religions—spiritual containers, if you will—can.**” That is why, for all its sins, the Christian churches have been able to be a very influential social force.” (Huston Smith, *Tricycle*, Autumn 2001:30).

I agree with what Huston Smith says insofar as I understand religion. at its more palpable and symbolic (worldly) level, to be a bridge, a skilful means, that helps one to see spirituality, that is, to transcend the body and enjoy the spirit. Religion is clearly useful insofar as it guides and goads one on to higher levels of being.

In other words, religion is a means to an end, a tool for building our spiritual home. Once the home is built, we shelve our tools or even dispose of them. The classic simile here is the Buddha’s **parable of the raft**. All teachings are provisional; whatever we express, whatever we can express are only opinions and views, at least in the ears of the listener.

One of the core teachings of Buddhism is the doctrine of **not-self**. Once you have been rid of the self-notion, you do not even need the notion of not-self. After all, they are all notions. The purpose of the teaching of not-self is to get rid of the self-notion. It is a skilful means used by the Buddha as declared in the famous parable of the raft given in **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (The Discourse on the Parable of the Water Snake, M 22)<sup>7</sup> and **the Mahā,taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving, M 38)<sup>8</sup>:

Monks, I shall show you how the Dharma is similar to **a raft**, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.

(M 1:134, 260)

This famous parable continues the same argument against **the misuse of learning**. One who is preoccupied with using the Dharma (or religion) to stir up controversy and violence to win debates and wars are only carrying religion around on his head instead of using it to cross life’s floods.

Instead, we should use learning and wisdom to understand ourselves better and promote a better world around us. Religion is in the best position to serve as a tool for self-betterment and social progress to reach spiritual levels. If we understand and use our religions as lens-cleaners rather than tinted glasses, then we are able to discover more of our true selves and of the wonders of other religions and our universe.

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<sup>7</sup> The Discourse on the Parable of the Water Snake (M no. 22).

<sup>8</sup> **The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving** (M no. 38).

## 8. FRUIT SALAD

**A thousand years ago**, during the western Age of Exploration, discrete cultures live and conquer others in the name of their God or gods. Now those with eyes know that there are other gods, and that on their own heights, they get along together very well. The petty triumphalism and violence occur at the lower levels for ungodly reasons.

Thanks to the new learning of the Renaissance, the scientific and social Enlightenment of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, and the pragmatism and progressivism of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century America, we have the rise of modern science, secular education and the internet, so that wisdom is no more a monopoly of scripture and the church. But today, however, **science, technology and success** have become our Buddha and gods. So we have to seek not only the middle way, but also the Middle of the middle way, that is, to rise above worldly extremes to higher spiritual truths.

Following the trajectories of religious history so far, we can project that in **the next 500 years**, the world religions will learn more from each other. The personal motives of each religion notwithstanding, as long as we keep up our civilized and good-natured dialogues with one another, there is more hope for greater peace and less violence in our societies.

Indeed, I am confident that in due course, surely by the middle of this millennium, we would see religion liberated from itself. I don't think the world religions as we know it would disappear: there is too much worldly wealth and structures these religions own so that their outward forms would be perpetuated for a very long time to come.

However, truth-seekers would be able to speak a freer language of higher truth and greater love. But this can only happen amongst the truly open-minded and the liberated saints of our religions, not amongst our religions' janitors and propagandists. Only those who walk humbly with their God and those who become islands of themselves will be able to see eye to smiling eye (M 1:121). Our number, I know and pray, will grow for the sake of the world.

There are some happy signs of this growing dialogue. In his book, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, **Thich Nhat Hanh**, the well-known Vietnamese Buddhist monk, activist, and poet, now living in France, gives an interesting about himself:

Twenty years ago at a conference I attended of theologians, and professors of religion, an Indian Christian friend told the assembly: "We are going to hear about the beauties of several traditions, but that does not mean that we are going to make a fruit salad." When it came to my turn to speak, I said, "Fruit salad can be delicious! I have shared the Eucharist with Father David Berrigan, and our worship became possible because of the sufferings we Vietnamese and Americans shared over many years." Some of the Buddhists present were shocked to hear I had participated in the Eucharist, and many Christians seemed truly horrified. To me, religious life is life. I do not see any reason to spend one's whole life tasting just one kind of fruit. We human beings can be nourished by the best values of many traditions.

(Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 1995:34)

So it's all right to choose the best from any religion, and not worry about labels. If you must use a label, it's all right to call yourself Buddhist, Bahai, or whatever, but to be humble about it. To be humble means to respect different opinions and to readily learn from others. The vital thing is to walk the path of the master and see with his eyes.

## 9. MORE FRUIT SALAD

**One of the important roles that Buddhism has played in the West** is that in the West, the esoteric or mystical aspects of Buddhism have been taken out of Buddhism and Buddhism is taken out of the monasteries. These are made available to the laity. This has helped revitalize interest in the mystical aspects of Christianity and Judaism. In some cases, according to Huston Smith, it furthered the return of contemplative practices in those religions that had fallen into neglect. **Mystics all speak the same language.** By this wonderful contribution, Buddhism has brought new life to the Abrahamic religions in greater ways than it had ever before. (Huston Smith, *Tricycle*, Autumn 2001:30).

A very good contemporary example of this spiritual exchange can be found in the work of my esteemed friend and spiritual guide, **Ajahn Brahmavamso** (a Theoretical Physics graduate from Cambridge University), who in June 2001 gave a sermon at the Eucharist during the Mass of the St. George's Anglican Church in Perth—the first non-Christian to do so! Ajahn Brahm's monastery is also on friendly terms with a group of Catholic monks there, and they have annual visits to each other's monasteries. (*The Western Australian*, 9 June 2001)

In the same year, another Buddhist monk, **Santikaro Bhikkhu** (now working in the US and a pupil of the late world-famous monk thinker, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu) gave a series of Buddhist talks and meditation classes on the invitation of the Singapore Catholics.

The Catholics see great potential in learning from the Buddhists because the Buddhists can help revitalize their monastic tradition, and especially now that Catholics are shrouded by the dark shadow of widespread and protracted child molestations by their clergy, well-publicized in our mass media right this time. (I'm not sure if there would be so much excitement if the scenario were switched back to the days of the Holy Roman Empire.)

Buddhists, too, have a lot to learn from Christian **stewardship** on how to spread the fabulous financial Buddhist wealth beyond simony, parochialism and temple-building for the spiritual benefit of all beings. Happily, a growing number of Buddhists in Singapore are beginning to emulate the teachings of the Discourse on the Lion-roar of the Universal Monarch in their educational and social projects (such as building more educational centres, free clinics and subsidized hospitals).

## 10. COLONIALISM

During the first half of the last millennium, just before the western colonial era, the west saw devastating wars as **Christianity and Islam**, and then **church and state**, piously war on one another in the name of the same Abrahamic God. When the church blooms into full power, it then turns upon itself by way of the infamous Inquisitions. "The most fanatical, the cruelest political struggles are those that have been colored, inspired, and legitimized by religion," **Han Küng** sadly writes in his book on the path to dialogue, *Christianity and World Religions* (1993:442). As such, religions share in the responsibility for bringing peace to our torn and warring world, and it starts and progresses with honest and open interfaith dialogue.

**No one has the sole proprietorship of God**, indeed one cannot even meaningfully and profitably speak of the highest being. Perhaps we might be able to speak about such a being, but we should not make God in our own image, after our likeness. Christians have to carefully rethink the letter of the biblical statement: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over...every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Gen 1:28, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.) This has been the bedrock of western colonialism that some politicians still try to champion, causing unspeakable destruction and sorrow to so many even today.

**No religion is original, and those least original are the most successful ones.** The vocabulary and building blocks of Buddhism, for example, almost all come from pre-existing religions such as Brahmanism, Jainism and popular religion (but not of Hinduism, which as an organized religion arose only in the Gupta period). Basic Buddhist terms, such as Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, karma, nirvana, and Arhant, come from a pre-existing vocabulary shared by many if not all those religions. Understandably, the Buddha finds it easier to communicate his message to the people in their own language. Today Buddhism is sharing more and more of its wisdom with other religions in a mutually beneficial manner. After all, Buddhism, like all world religions is a fruit salad, albeit from an ancient recipe, of well-chosen ingredients, containing great nutriment, and above all, a recipe that is consistently re-worked by new chefs to delight new palates and fit different health needs.

During the last 500 years, thanks to the colonial era, we saw the clash of cultures, or more exactly, Muslim Oriental culture dominating three continents (Asia, Europe and Africa); then Christian western culture flexed their colonial muscles and dominated the whole sunlit world. These colonial masters cast great dark shadows over our ancient cultures, actually exterminating some of them.

But these very same colonial masters also opened a Pandora's box for themselves. The first great discovery these westerners made in the India is that their languages and Sanskrit have the same roots. This discovery went on to connect them to India's ancient religions, especially Buddhism, which has the unique advantage of being the earliest historical and best documented religion of India. Through its own message and the patronage of the early western scholars, Buddhism became less Indian and more global.

## 11. THE LION-ROAR AT UDUMBARIKĀ

All these good things can only happen when we have a wholesome attitude towards religious dialogue. In a remarkable discourse called **the Lion-roar at Udumbarikā**, the Buddha is confronted by an equivalent of a modern evangelist, a triumphalist, who plans to "knock down" the Buddha with only one question.

The Buddha's response is surprising. Instead of rebutting the challenge, he throws back the question to the questioner and his congregation, and giving them his ear in an effort to get to know their mindset.

Let me summarize **the Udumbarikā Sīhanāda Sutta**, the Discourse on the Lion-roar at Udumbarikā (D no. 25). This discourse is interesting not so much because it relates how the Buddha deals with evangelistic fervour but because no one in the audience was converted. That the Buddha took the trouble to teach to those who would not immediately benefit from his effort, is of great significance to Buddhist teachers and workers today in that no effort in teaching the Dharma is really wasted. It is a matter of planting the Dharma seeds and letting it grow by itself

Once the Buddha was staying at the Vultures' Peak in Rājagṛha, and the wanderer Nigrodha was staying at the Udumbarikā lodge with 3000 other wanderers. The atmosphere in the Udumbarikā lodge was raucous with the wanderers shouting and screaming talking about worldly and speculative topics. Now, it was early morning and the white-robed householder Sandhāna, was on his way to visit the Buddha. Realizing it was too early and that the Buddha and the monks were still in retreat meditating, he decided to drop in at the wanderers' lodge. When Nigrodha saw Sandhāna coming, Nigrodha told the wanderers to be quiet, knowing that Buddhists love quiet and solitude, and in that way, Sandhāna might be induced to visit them—and so he did.

After the preliminary greetings, Sandhāna sat down and commented on how noisy the wanderers were talking about worldly and speculative topics. Nigrodha replied that they were socializing, unlike

the Buddha, whom he charged was like a “wild buffalo (*go,kaṇṇa*) circling around keeping to the fringes” and that he could easily knock the Buddha down with one question.

The Buddha who had been following this conversation with his divine ear, came down from Vultures’ Peak and walked up and down in meditation in the Peacocks’ Feeding Ground in sight of the Udumbarikā lodge. Again, Nigrodha told the wanderers to be quiet, so that the Buddha would visit them.

When the Buddha came to the lodge, Nigrodha asked the Buddha his question. To the surprise of everyone present, the Buddha replied:

Nigrodha, it is hard for you, holding different views, being of different inclinations, and subject to different influences, following a different teacher, to understand the doctrine which I teach my disciples... Come on, then, Nigrodha, ask me about your own teaching, about your own self-mortification. How are the conditions of austerity and self-mortification fulfilled, and how are they not fulfilled?

The Buddha had thrown Nigrodha’s question back to him, which delighted the wanderers: “It is wonderful, it is marvellous, how great are the powers of the ascetic Gotama in holding back with his own theories and in inviting others to discuss theirs!”

The Buddha went on to point out how ascetics may outwardly practise various sorts of self-mortification and rules, but inwardly still bear various moral weaknesses (such as greed, ill-will, conceit, jealousy, etc.) The most important remark here I think is where the Buddha declares that among the non-Buddhist religionists, there are those who “**when the Dharma is presented in a way that should command an assent, they withhold their assent**”. In short, it is important to be honest and receptive to what is right in spiritual dialogue.

The Buddha then explained how his followers keep away from the noise of useless talk, and that “when the Dharma is presented in a way that should command an assent, they give their assent”. This then must be the pith of spiritual life, Nigrodha thought. No, the Buddha replies, it is only **the outer bark**.

The Buddha’s disciples train in the Precepts, in meditation until they fully develop the four divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*), full of boundless love, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity. This must be the pith of spiritual life: no, it is **only penetrating to the inner bark**.

The Buddha’s disciples, gaining the fruits of meditation, are able to recall their past lives: this **only reaches the fibres surrounding the pith**.

Finally, they gain the knowledge of seeing the death and rebirth of beings according to their karma—this is **the pith** of spiritual life. [It is interesting here that the Buddha did not go on mention the last of the “three knowledges” (*viññā*), that is, the destruction of defilements, which anyway at this point would be beyond the ken of the wanderers.]

At this, the assembly of wanderers broke into a commotion, exclaiming: “We and our teacher are ruined! We know of nothing higher or more far-reaching than our teaching!” Then, Sandhāna turned to Nigrodha and reminded him of his challenge of knocking down the Buddha, for which he thereby apologized to the Buddha. To this, the Buddha remarked:

*Nigrodha, it is a mark of progress in the discipline of the Noble Ones, if anyone recognizes the nature of his transgression and makes amends as is right, restraining himself for the future.*

*But, Nigrodha, I tell you this: Let an intelligent man come to me, who is sincere, honest and straightforward, and I will instruct him, I will teach him Dharma. If he practices what he is taught, then, within seven years...even in seven days he can gain the goal.*

*Nigrodha, you may think that the ascetic Gotama says this in order to win disciples. But you should not think so. **Let him who is your teacher remain your teacher.***

*Let your way of life remain as it was...*

*Let those things you consider wrong continue to be so considered...*

*Let whatever you consider right continue to be so considered. I do not speak for any of these reasons.*

*There are, Nigrodha, unwholesome things that have not been abandoned, tainted, conducive to rebirth, fearful, productive of painful results in the future, associated with birth, decay and death. It is for the abandonment of these things that I teach Dharma. If you practise accordingly, these tainted things will be abandoned...and by your own insight and realization, you will attain the fullness of perfected wisdom.*

At these words, the wanderers “sat silent and upset, their shoulders drooped, they hung their heads and sat there downcast and bewildered, so possessed were their minds by Māra (the Evil One).” Acknowledging this, the Buddha then rose up in the air and returned to Vultures’ Peak. And the householder Sandhāna also returned to Rājagṛha.

(D 3:36-57 abridged)

## 12. KĀLĀMA SUTTA

The Discourse on the Lion-roar at Udumbarikā should be read and studied with another, more popular but most abused, discourse—the **Discourse to the Kālāmas** (Kālāma Sutta, A 3.65)<sup>3</sup>, here given in summary of the key points relevant to our present purposes. This discourse is one of the most radical documents regarding religious freedom.

The Kālāmas, inhabitants of the town of Kesaputta, tell that Buddha how they are confused and made doubtful by ascetics and brahmins (holy men and preachers) who each give their views each claiming that only they are right and everyone else wrong. The Buddha replies:

It is proper for you, Kālāmas, to doubt, to be uncertain. Doubt has arisen in what is doubtful. Come now, Kālāmas:

- (1) Do not accept anything through what is handed down through tradition [that is, teaching that are orally transmitted, such as divine revelation].
- (2) Do not accept anything through what is handed down from the past [through teachings, legends, customs, etc. handed down in a lineage: here historically, it refers to the Vedic teachings].
- (3) Do not accept anything through hearsay [i.e. rumours and gossip, perhaps the most universal “religion”].
- (4) Do not accept anything because it accords with the scriptures [whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist, including the canons of science: no paradigm is sacred!]
- (5) Do not accept anything through logic [i.e. reasoning or rational speculations].
- (6) Do not accept anything because it is a point of view [“Every guru, his teaching.” Tibetan saying.]
- (7) Do not accept anything through having considered the reasons [reason is only one aspect of our lives.]

- (8) Do not accept anything through being convinced of some theory [read, for example, Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> enl. ed., 1970.]
- (9) Do not accept anything through the testimony of some reliable person [especially through authority, charisma, speaking in tongues, psychic powers, etc.]
- (10) Do not accept anything thinking, "The holy man (preacher) is respectable." [i.e. through status, qualifications, respectability, popularity, etc.]

What then are acceptable asspiritually useful truths? Whatever is not founded of greed, hatred or delusion, and does not promote greed, hatred or delusion. With a mind free (even temporarily) from these three unwholesome roots, one then clearly mindful and circumspect, radiate thoughts of loving-kindness (to all without reservation), of compassion (to the less fortunate), of altruistic joy (to those who are better off), and of equanimity (in the midst of life's vicissitudes).

The Buddha closes the discourse with what might today be called the Buddhist answer to Pascal's Wager, here called "**the four kinds of solaces**":

The disciples of the Noble Ones, Kālāmas, who have such a mind, free of hate, free of malice, free of defilements, and such a purified mind, in them four kinds of solace are found right here and now:

(1) "Suppose **there is an afterlife** and there is the result of deeds, good and evil (i.e. karma). Then it is possible that after death, I shall arise in a heavenly life, full of bliss."

(2) "Suppose **there is no afterlife** and there is no result of deeds, good or evil (i.e. we are not morally accountable). Yet, here and now, free from hatred, free from malice, safe and sound, happy, I keep myself."

(3) "Suppose **evil comes to the evil-doer**. However, I, think of evil to no one. Then, how can evil affect me?" [Even if we pay for our actions in this very life, I who have done no evil, fear no evil.]

(4) "Suppose **evil does not come to the evil-doer**. Then, I see myself purified in both ways." [Whether I am accountable for my actions in this life or hereafter, I fear no evil, since I have done none.]

The teaching of the Kālāma Sutta as such, is not so much a carte blanche for religious free market statements but of seeking what is spiritually profitable for oneself. Similarly, the Buddha's advice—**Be islands unto yourselves!**" (D 2:101 = 3:58, 77; S 3:42, 5:154, 163, 164)—appeals to many modern people, especially the intellectuals. Actually we find the same spirit in Christianity: "Seek and ye shall find", etc.

But in Buddhism, the lack of the idea of a personal God and the proverbial tolerance of the Buddhists "can become a license to do whatever you want and still call it Buddhism". As such, "spirituality" may mean "Don't tell me what to do!" So each person has the chance of becoming Saint Ego (Huston Smith, *Tricycle*, Autumn 2001:30). So it is best to look for a good Dharma teacher and be part of a spiritual friendship circle. In short, in the spiritual life we are all children, that is, until we are enlightened.

### 13. RETURNING THE COWS

Let me close with another spiritually humorous episodes from the Buddha's teaching. Once, **Nanda the cowherd** is standing near the Blessed One, listening to his discourse as a mere by-stander. He then interjects and told the Blessed One that he has understood what he was teaching, and on the spot decided to become a monk. The following conversation ensues:

:

"In that case, Nanda, return the cows to their owners."

“The cows will go back on their own accord, Venerable Sir, out of attachment to the calves.”  
“Return the cows to the owners, Nanda.”

The Nanda the cowherd then returns the cows...and is ordained. And soon, not long after his ordination, dwelling alone, aloof, diligent, ardent and resolute, attains to that supreme goal of the Holy Life, for the sake of which those of the families rightly go forth home into homelessness. He knows by his own knowledge: “Birth is destroyed; lived is the Holy Life; done is what had to be done; there is no more for this state of being.” And the Venerable Nanda becomes one of the Arhants.  
(S 4:181, abridged.)

We, too have to return the cows before we can truly see the teaching of our master with our master’s eyes. To return the cows means that we have to give others what is due to them: our appreciation, even in small ways, of the goodness in others, despite their weaknesses.

Sometimes, it is more difficult to have a dialogue with people in our own tradition than it is with those of another. Most of us have suffered from misunderstanding, even betrayal, from our own tradition. Our dialogue with others must surely start with positive communication with our own brothers and sisters.

Dialogue starts with deep listening, not only with the ears, but more so with the heart. When we return the cows, we also relinquish what is not ours in the first place, that is, our greed, our ill-will, our delusion. Then we begin to see the inner beauty of others, we will be able to see the beauty and value of our own faith and touch the timeless and liberating truth.



## **ABBREVIATIONS**

- A     Aṅguttara Nikāya (Pali). (1) *The Book of the Gradual Sayings* tr. F.L. Woodward & E.M. Hare, 5 vols. PTS Translation Series 22, 24, 25, 26, 27. Oxford: PTS, 1932-36. London: Luzac, 1951-55. (2) *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*. Selections from the Aṅguttara Nikāya tr. & ed. Nyanaponika Thera & Bhikkhu Bodhi. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society & Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1999. [Quoted by “Book.Sutra no.” e.g. A 3.65 = Book of Threes, sutra no, 65, or as “Volume:Page” of the Pali Text Society (London) editions, e.g. A 1:188 = vol. 1, page 188.]
- BPS   Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka.
- D     Dīgha Nikāya (Pali). (1) *Dialogues of the Buddha* [1910] tr. T.W. & C.A.F. Rhys Davids, 3 vols. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1938 (imprint); 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1959. London: PTS. (2) *Long Discourses of the Buddha*, tr. Maurice Walshe, Kandy: BPS., 1996. [Quoted by “Sutra number<.chapter>.section” e.g. D 25.23 = sutra 25, section 23, or as “Volume:Page” of the PTS editions, e.g. D 3:54 = vol. 3, page 54.]
- DA    Dīgha Nikāya Atthakathā = **Sumaṅgala,vilāsinī** [Buddhaghosa], the Commentary to the Dīgha Nikāya, ed. T.W. Rhys Davids & J.E. Carpenter, 3 vols. vol. 1 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 1968; W. Stede vol. 2 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 1971; vol. 3 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1971. London: PTS. [Quoted by Page, or Volume:Page.]
- DhsA  Dhamma,saṅgaṇī Atthakathā = **Attha,sālinī** [Buddhaghosa], the Commentary on the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī, ed. E. Muller, London: PTS, 1897. [Quoted by Page.] Tr. as *The Expositor*,

- by Pe Maung Tin & C.A.F. Rhys Davids, 2 vols. PTS Translation Series 8, 9. London: PTS, 1920-21. London: Luzac (for PTS), 1958. Reprints bound in 1 vol. [Quoted by Page.]
- M Majjhima Nikāya (Pali). (1) *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings*, tr. I.B. Horner. 3 vols. PTS Translation Series 29-31. London: Luzac for PTS. 1954-59. (2) *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, tr. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, rev. Bhikkhu Bodhi. Boston: Wisdom, 1995. [Quoted by Sutra.Section or Volume:Page.]
- PTS Pali Text Society, London. [Publishes early Buddhist texts and translations.]
- S Saṃyutta Nikāya (Pali). (1) *The Book of Kindred Sayings [or Grouped Sayings]* tr. C.A.F. Rhys Davids & F.L. Woodward. 5 vols. PTS Translation Series 7, 10, 13, 14, 16. London: Luzac, 1917-1930. Luzac for PTS, 1950-56. Vol. 3, 1954. (2) *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi. 2 vols. Boston: Wisdom, 2000. [Quoted by Chapter.Sutra or Volume:Page.]

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