

Ethical Teachings of the Buddha and Jesus: Resources for a Universal Ethic?

By J. Bruce Long

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will explore the basic teachings of The Buddha and Jesus in juxtaposition, with a focus on the ethical dimensions of the two bodies of teachings. We will attempt to delineate the similarities and differences with regard to the general orientation of the ethical instructions of each teacher, and the nature of specific doctrines that compose their instructions, such as their understandings of the relationship between ethics and salvation and the relative importance given to "belief" or "faith" and "practice" within each tradition.

We will conclude with a consideration of the question, "Are there elements in either of these two ethical traditions that might provide useful contributions to the formation of a Universal Ethic?" In posing this question, we will consider both the "culturally specific" nature of their respective views of their missions and messages and the "language" each uses in articulating the moral and spiritual contents of their teachings.

Avoiding all (forms of) evil.
Accomplishing all (forms of) good
The purifying of one's own mind.
This is the teaching of the Buddhas."

(Dhammapada, v. 183)

"The first commandment is this: The Lord our God is one;
and you shall love the Lord your God with all your
mind, and with all your strength. The second is this:
You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

(Mark 12: 29-31)

Introduction

One of the fundamental principles in the field of the History of Religions is this: "He who knows only one religion, understands none." The primary implication of this hermeneutical principle is that it is crucial, when attempting to understand one's own religion, to place at least one other religion alongside it in order to bring into sharper relief the beliefs, practices, social customs, etc., that characterize each tradition. Only in this way can one highlight, prominently, the marks of similarity and difference between the two traditions.

The two statements quoted above could be viewed as the signatory emblems of the teachings of two of the greatest and most influential teachers/founders in the history of religions. The defining mark of Jesus' message is that through faith in God, as Creator, Ruler and Redeemer of the universe, one comes to a life that is pervaded and guided by love—love of God, love of one's "neighbor," (meaning here, all of humanity), and love even of one's, so-called, "enemies."

The core message of The Buddha is that by refraining from all thoughts and actions that are unwholesome (*akusala*) and cultivating the wholesome (*kusala*), and through the purification of one's mind of the five hindrances (i.e., sensuality, ill will, sloth and torpor, agitation and remorse and skeptical doubt), and the cultivation of the five precepts (avoid killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication), a person will, ultimately, come to a place of perfect understanding, peace, and harmony and, eventually will achieve release from the perpetual rounds of rebirth—all of this by means of their own efforts.

In this paper we will explore the fundamental ethical teachings of The Buddha and Jesus, as recorded in the earliest strata of written sources within each tradition, namely, Jesus' teachings in the Sermon the Mount in the New Testament (Mt. 5-7)¹ and The Buddha's teachings in the *Dīgha Nikāya*,² and the *Dhammapada*.³ We will consider both the *texts* through which the teachings were communicated to the earliest disciples and the *contexts* or cultural environments which shaped and directed those teachings. In this way, we hope to determine, not only the straightforward semantic intention of each message, but also the so-called, unexpressed layers of meaning embedded in the cultural setting that formed, what Martin Heidegger called the "forestructure" of each man's mission and message. We will then raise the question as to whether, based on our limited study, we have delineated any principles in the teachings of either man that might be construed as potential contributions to a Universal Ethic.

Buddhist and Christian Soteriology

Modern scholars who have studied these two great religions have contended that both Buddhism and Christianity, as distinct from many other religions of the world, are fundamentally *soteriological* in orientation.⁴ That is, they believed that the primary goal of each teacher was to lead human beings to "salvation" from their entrapment to an egocentric existence, by means of a spiritually transforming experience as depicted in their teachings (*redemption through faith*, in Christianity, and *enlightenment* or *liberation through moral and spiritual purification*, in Buddhism).⁵

In past centuries, theologians, scholars, and monks within the Christian and Buddhist traditions have debated the question as to whether the cultivation of moral behavior is preparatory to the experience of salvation or the byproduct of that experience itself. A close reading of the Christian gospels reveals that, according to Jesus, true ethical behavior can only emerge from the experience of the redemptive power of God's grace through belief in his (i.e., Jesus') own mission and message. For his part, The Buddha declared that moral behavior (*sīla*) is both the disciplined practice of mental and spiritual purification that prepares a person for arahatship and a manifestation of the achievement of that state itself.

The three major stages comprising the Buddha Dhamma can be viewed either as a linear sequence of practices, with each successive discipline to be undertaken

with the fulfillment of the previous one(s) or as a cluster of interlinked facets of the one discipline. Viewed sequentially, morality (*sīla*) is the basis for the development of mental concentration (*samādhi*), and together, these form the support for the cultivation of wisdom (P., *paññā*, S., *prajñā*). Viewed as mutually supportive practices, all three types of cultivation are to be pursued simultaneously.⁶

Whether viewed as a lineage of practices to be undertaken in tandem order or as an interlocking cluster to be cultivated simultaneously, The Buddha viewed the cultivation of moral behavior as the indispensable point of entry to the dhamma path. In contrast to Jesus, who believed that genuine morality could only emerge from an act of faith, The Buddha enjoined his disciples gradually to purify the body, mind, and heart through the practice of moral principles as a means of both entering the path and progressing continually toward the ultimate experience of enlightenment and liberation from rebirth.

Jesus' Ethic in the Sermon on the Mount

The largest collection of Jesus' core teachings in the New Testament is contained in the Sermon on the Mount, delivered at the beginning of his ministry to multitudes of people gathered on a hillside in the area of Palestine, called, Galilee. This text contains numerous teachings that, also, served as the basis for the later development of Christian beliefs and Church theology.⁷ For these two reasons, at least, the Sermon on the Mount has been viewed, historically, as the core foundation for the whole of Christian ethics.

Jesus begins with a series of declarations called, "The Beatitudes," or "Proclamations of Blessedness." Typical of Jesus' entire mission, he designates the poor and the disadvantaged in society as blessed (*makarioi*) in a special manner because of their enduring faith—the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, seekers after righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, peacemakers, etc. (5:2-12)

He continues by declaring that his mission in the world is not to overturn the Mosaic Law (the moral and spiritual basis for the whole of the Hebrew faith), but to reestablish that law as an ethic of love and forgiveness. This higher ethic will demand the pursuit of a more deeply spiritual life—namely, not only to avoid taking another's life but also to avoid even responding to a wrongdoer in a spirit of anger; not only to ask for a divorce solely because of unfaithfulness, but to avoid looking upon a woman, lustfully, in one's heart and not to swear an oath on heaven, earth or even the hairs of one's own head but to speak in a direct and straightforward manner, without regard for the consequences. (5:17-32)

Also, the ancient Hebraic law, based on the principle of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," is to be replaced by an ethic of a generosity of spirit that enables one to go beyond whatever another person requests: turn the other cheek; give your cloak, as well as, your coat; and go the second mile when only one mile is requested. (5:33-42)

Believers are commanded to go beyond the limited capacity of nonbelievers in giving love to others: love your enemy, as well as, your friends and pray for those who harm you on account of loyalty to Jesus' cause. In short, "you must be perfect (Grk.: *teleioi*), even as your heavenly Father is perfect." (5:43-48) Jesus, further, admonishes his listeners to practice acts of piety (Grk: *dikaio sunan*) in private, away from public view and without seeking public approval, "so that your Father who sees you in secret may reward you," as he sees fit. (6:1-7)

Jesus concludes his sermon by declaring that those who hear his words and obey them, can be compared to a person who builds a house on a solid foundation, such that it cannot be destroyed by the winds of difficulty and misfortune. On the other hand, those persons who hear his words and reject them are to be likened to a fool who builds a house on the sand, only to see it demolished by the winds of contrary circumstance.

General Features of the Buddha's Ethic in the Dīgha Nikāya

Like Jesus, The Buddha treats ethics, not as an isolated set of principles governing human action but as an integral part of a complete spiritual discipline, the cultivation of which will, ultimately, lead to enlightenment (*bodhi*) and liberation (*vimutti*).

The most succinct formulation of the Buddha Dhamma is this: "Avoiding all (forms of) evil, accomplishing all (forms of) good, and purifying one's own mind. This is the teaching of the Buddhas." (*sabbapāpassa akaraṇam kusalassa upasampadā/ sacittapariyodapanam etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ*, Dh.p., 183) All specific do's and don't's that govern the life of the monastics and the laity are elaborations of these three basic practices.⁸

According to the "Sāmaññaphalasutta" in the *Dīgha Nikāya* (I. 215, 233)⁹ the bhikkhu's cultivation of morality (*sīla*) and concentration (*samādhi*) includes the abolition of the five hindrances (*pañca-nīvaraṇa*: lust, malice, sloth, restlessness, worry and doubt) and the projection of good will (*mettā*) upon every creature in the cosmos, beginning with himself and then moving out to embrace all other human beings and finally, all other living beings throughout the universe. "Above, below, across, everywhere, the entire world he suffuses with loving kindness from the mind, extensive, becoming unlimited, without ill-will or a trace of hurt and so remains." (SN 149-50) From his thoughts imbued with loving-kindness (*mettā*), the bhikkhu proceeds to cultivate acts of compassion (*karuṇā*) for others' sufferings and misfortunes, sympathetic joy (*mudītā*) in concert with other peoples' happiness, and equanimity (*upekkhā*), completely devoid of all feelings of self-aggrandizement.¹⁰

The laity are commanded to follow, to the best of their ability, the same line of practices as the bhikkhus, with regard both to basic moral principles and the practice of mental purification. The differences between the practices of the worldling and the monk lie not

in the techniques employed but in the differences in their ultimate goals and the relative degree of commitment that each makes to the moral and spiritual discipline laid down by The Buddha.¹¹

In the “Sigālovāda sutta,” the Buddha lays out for the laity the most specific and comprehensive set of ethical injunctions in the whole of the Pali tradition. He begins with rules of purification, preparatory to the cultivation of positive moral values. He urges his listeners to avoid the four defilements of action (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and lying), the four causes of evil (attachment, ill will, folly and fear), and the six forms of self-destruction (intoxication, slothfulness, petty entertainment, gambling, bad company and idleness). (DN 31.3-13)

These avoidances are preparatory to engaging in the “Protection of the Six Directions.” Through this protectionary rite, the practitioner provides a variety of services appropriate to those persons on whom they have depended for life and welfare. In the east stands the mother and father; in the south, teachers; in the west, wife and children; in the north, friends and companions; at the nadir, servants, laborers and helpers; and at the zenith, ascetics and Brahmins. (DN 31.27-33) The person is enjoined to render physical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual services to each category of persons as a means of reciprocating the services they’ve previously given to that person. In this way, the person earns a great store of merit and comes, increasingly, to embody the principles of the Buddha Dhamma.

Here again, the singularly unique feature of The Buddha’s ethic is, that he appeals neither to a feeling of personal obligation to a universal law nor to the fear of divine retribution from an angry God, as a motivation of ethical behavior. He quite explicitly declares:

By one’s self alone is evil done,
 By one’s self alone is one defiled.
 By one’s self is evil avoided,
 By one’s self is one purified.
 Purity and impurity depend upon one’s self alone,
 No one can (defile or) purify another.

Views Common to the Ethics of The Buddha and Jesus

Disregarding for the moment the significant differences that distinguish the lives, missions, worldviews and teachings of Jesus and The Buddha, there are numerous elements their teachings share in common with regard to both content and intentionality.¹²

The Buddha	Jesus
1. Consider others as yourself. (Dhammapada 10.1)	1. Do to others as you would have them do to you. (Luke 6:31)
2. If you do not tend one another, then who	2. Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it

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| <p>is there to tend you? Whoever would tend me, he should tend the sick.
(Vinaya, Mahāvagga 8.26.3)</p> | <p>to one of the least of these, you did not do it for me. (Matt. 25:45)</p> |
| <p>3. Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings. Let your thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world.
(Sutta Nipata 149-150)</p> | <p>3. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.
(John 15: 12-3)</p> |
| <p>4. Abstain from killing and from taking what is not given. Abstain from unchastity and from speaking falsely. Do not accept gold and silver.
(Khuddakapāṭha 2)</p> | <p>4. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and mother."
(Mark 10:19)</p> |
| <p>5. Whatsoever a person commits, whether it be virtuous or sinful deeds, none of these is of little import; all bears some kind of fruit.
(Udanavarga 9.8)</p> | <p>5. No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit... The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. (Luke 6:43-5)</p> |
| <p>6. Giving is the noble expression of the benevolence of the mighty. Even dust, given in childish innocence, is a good gift. No gift that is given in good faith to a worthy recipient can be called small; its effect is so great.
(Jātakamālā 3. 23)</p> | <p>6. He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."
(Luke 21:1-4)</p> |
| <p>7. Let the wise man do righteousness: a treasure that others cannot share, which no thief can steal; a treasure which does not pass away.
(Khuddakapāṭha 8.9)</p> | <p>7. So do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. (Matt. 6:19-20)</p> |
| <p>8. " 'These children and riches are mine'; thinking thus the fool is troubled. Since no one even owns himself, what is the sense in 'my children and riches'? Verily, it is the law of humanity that though one accumulates hundreds of thousands of worldly goods, one still succumbs to the</p> | <p>8. He told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops'? Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.</p> |

spell of death. All hoardings will be dispersed, whatever rises will be cast down, all meetings must end in separation, life must finally end in death.”

(Udānavarga I. 20-22)

9. A monk who is skilled in concentration can cut the Himalayas in two.

(Anguttara Nikāya 6. 24)

10. There are these two gifts, the carnal and the spiritual. Of these two gifts the spiritual is pre-eminent. He who has made the spiritual offering—such a one, the best of mankind, is honored by all beings as one who has gone beyond.

(Itivuttaka 4.1)

And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry’. But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.” (Luke 12: 13-21)

9. Truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.

(Matt. 17: 20)

10. No one can enter the kingdom of heaven without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.

(John 3: 5-7)

The presentation of even these few parallel passages reveals a remarkable degree of commonality between the instructions of these two teachers. We will briefly summarize the main points of those common elements, before passing on to delineate some of the significant differences that distinguish their teachings from one another.

First, both agree that, before taking action a person should put himself in the place of another person and treat them exactly as he himself would like to be treated by them—that is, with friendship, not animosity; with compassion, not hatred; with kindness, not abuse.¹³ Buddhism stresses the continual comparison of one’s own state with that of others in order to foster compassion: “Since the self of others is dear to each one, let him who loves himself not harm another.” (Udāna, 47) Also, basic for the cultivation of ethical action is to avoid inflicting upon others what you yourself find distressing. (SN, 353-4) And, finally, there is the injunction to view one’s own life in comparison to the lives of others: “Everyone fears violence, everyone loves life; comparing oneself with others, one would never slay nor cause to slay.” (Dhp. 130)

Second, one should respond to all people (and, the Buddha specifies all living creatures) with kindness and compassionate understanding, especially those who are unfortunate, sick or needy. Jesus commands his followers to “love one another as I have loved you (i.e., with an unqualified love), and to embrace all enemies, as well.” The Buddha requires all dharma followers “...to cultivate a

boundless heart toward all beings,” and to let their “thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world.”

The underlying objective here in both traditions is to break through the confining and self-serving limits of the ego, to cease acting out of an “I-and-Mine” point of view and to behave in a way that is beneficial to other individuals, groups or, indeed, the whole of humanity.

Third, both teachers proclaim that there are no trivial or fruitless actions; all actions produce results—good or evil. This is due to the fact that all action is expressive of the state of mind, heart, and will that motivates it. For this reason, the intention and not the action itself is determinative of the moral quality of the results. In this regard, Jesus declares: “Thus you will know them by their fruits.” (Mt. 7:20) St. Paul echoes this idea with the words: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that will he also reap.” (Gal. 6:7)

Succinctly stated, the Buddhist concept of karma holds that all *intentional* human acts, good or bad, produce a correspondingly positive or negative result, either in this or in a future lifetime. The Buddha declared: “It is mental volition, monks, that I call karma. Having willed, one acts through body, mind and speech.” (AN II. 415) The *Dhammapada* identifies the human mind as the determinative force in defining the moral quality of all actions: “If one speaks or acts from a mind defiled, suffering follows as a wheel the draught ox’s foot... If one speaks or acts from a pure mind, happiness follows as a wheel the draught ox’s foot.” (vss. 1-2)

Elsewhere, three detrimental mental states are said to be the causes of action: greed, hatred and delusion. (DN 33.1.10) Once completely freed of these three poisons, a person ceases to produce karmic-results and achieves Nirvana. (AN III.33, 68) The primary feature of the Buddha’s concept of human action that distinguishes his notion from that of Jesus is the belief that human action (*karman*) creates and perpetuates the cycle of rebirths and the state of ignorance that results from each birth and continues to do so until such time as the individual achieves full Realization.¹⁴ In both traditions, it is to the benefit of the actor to consider the motivations of each and every action before performing that action. Only in this way will they be able to avoid those actions that arise out of evil intentions and the pain and misfortune that inevitably follow in the wake of such evil deeds.

Fourth, while the wealthy and the powerful may demonstrate their magnanimity through large public gifts and thereby, impress the admiring public with their largesse, it is the person of meager means who gives the small, and apparently trivial gift with a generous heart that is, morally, the most significant, particularly when the gift represents a high percentage of a person’s total assets and “when (it is) given in good faith to a worthy recipient.” (AN III.57; J 3.23)

Fifth, in view of the vulnerability of all earthly things to robbery or corruption and, more crucially, the inevitability of death, both teachers warn their disciples against investing themselves in the accumulation of material wealth and

worldly renown. According to The Buddha, a man who buries a treasure in the ground, may reap only regret and disappointment. But, “by generosity, goodness, restraint and self-control a man or woman alike can put by a well-hidden treasure, which cannot be taken by others and which robbers cannot steal. A wise man should do good, for that is a treasure that will not leave him.” (*Khuddaka Pāṭha*, 8)

And finally, both Jesus and The Buddha exhort their disciples to avoid responding to evil actions directed toward oneself, one’s family or friends, with other evil actions. Rather, one should respond to evil with good, both to avoid provoking yet another, even more destructive response from the other person and to avoid contaminating one’s own mind and heart further with feelings of anger, resentment and hatred. In the words of the Dhammapada, “Not by enmity are enmities quelled, whatever the occasion here. By the absence of enmity are they quelled. This is an ancient truth.” (vss. 3-6, 223-27)

The Buddha and Jesus: a Parting of the Ways

a. Salvation and the Transformed Life: Buddhist and Christian

The core message of the gospel or “Good News” that Jesus brought into the world is that through belief in his life, teachings and death, God, the Father, grants redemption from all past sins and the gift of eternal life. Jesus’ presentation of his message took on an added sense of urgency by his own belief that the end of the world was imminent. He issued the warning: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of heaven is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mk. 1:15) Following his resurrection, he consummated his mission on earth by charging his disciples to, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned.” (Mk. 16:16; cf. Mt. 28:19-20)

The Buddha contended that Liberation from suffering and rebirth can come only through rigorous self-examination and self-healing. He continually asserted that he himself was only a human being who, after countless rounds of rebirths, had, by means of his own persistent efforts, come to a direct and full knowledge of reality.¹⁵ Likewise, he declared, all persons who have the wisdom and persistence to pursue the same path, can be confident that they, too, will eventually arrive at the same knowledge of the truth by means of their own conscientious efforts. As one writer states it: “Dharma practice starts not with belief in a transcendent reality but through embracing the anguish experienced in an uncertain world.”¹⁶

Viewing these passages side-by-side, it becomes evident that the teachings of The Buddha regarding salvation stand in sharp contrast with those of Jesus in at least three respects: (1) that the knowledge of the Truth is not revealed to mankind by an all-knowing, all-powerful celestial being or God, but is the product of a profound spiritual insight into the nature of the universe that each person acquires through the *cultivation* of the principles that The Buddha himself discovered under the Bo-tree, (2)

nor does salvation come to the individual through a belief in the Buddha himself, or his teachings, but through the *practice* of the principles that he brought to mankind after his own enlightenment, and (3) that a full and direct personal experience of this truth is possible in the here and now, in the very midst of this “vale of tears,” and not, only, after death.

b. ‘Faith’ and ‘Action’ in The Buddha’s and Jesus’ Teachings

Although “right views” regarding the nature of the world and man’s place in the cosmic scheme of things is the initial step in the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha’s instructions to the laity tend to emphasize right actions over right beliefs. The person who practices the precepts in thought, word and deed, produces good deeds that stand as an enduring source of merit (*S. puṇya, P. puñña*) in this life and lead to a happier birth in the next life—a store of merit that will also give that person an added advantage in their quest for the ultimate goal of Enlightenment. Therefore, while Christianity places the primary emphasis upon *faith* or *belief* in God through Christ, as the gateway to salvation, Buddhism views *action* in the form of moral and spiritual *practices* as the indispensable means of attaining Illumination (*bodhi*) and Liberation (*vimutti*). Or in the words of Stephen Batchelor, “While /the term/ “Buddhism” suggests another belief system, “dharma practice” suggests a course of action. The four ennobling truths are not propositions *to believe*; they are challenges *to act*.” (emphasis added)¹⁷ Hence, the essence of the Buddha’s teachings is not something to *believe in* but rather, *something to do*.

Limitations of space allow for only a few typical instances in the Christian gospels of Jesus’ declaration that faith and belief in the “gospel of God” and in his own mission to deliver that “good news” to the world, leads to salvation. The gospel of John—the gospel in which the words “believe,” “faith,” and their derivatives appear with greatest frequency—declares that Jesus “came /into the world/ for testimony to bear witness to /the word of God/, that all might believe through him,” and that “to all who...believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God.” (John 1:7, 12) Elsewhere, the same gospel writer portrays Jesus as saying: “...he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come to judgment, but has passed from death to life.” (John 5:24) And finally, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him.” (John 3:36)

Before proceeding, we should introduce one important caveat: despite the repeated emphasis throughout the New Testament on the centrality of belief, faith and its spiritual cognates, one should not conclude that Jesus required of believers a faith that is devoid of good works. Indeed, faith without works is dead. This having been said, however, we must return to our original contention that the gospels, as well as the rest of the New Testament, declare that faith or belief is the gateway to salvation. This, we contend, stands in marked contrast to the Buddha Dhamma in which injunctions to *practice* the Dhamma appear with far greater frequency than urgings to *believe* in the Dhamma.

Do either The Buddha's or Jesus' Ethic Contribute to the Formation of a Universal Ethic?

Many of the statements in the gospels attributed to Jesus indicate, unequivocally, that he believed that he had been sent to earth to bring redemption to humanity and to take the Redeemed with him back to heaven at the end of time. His sense of mission was rendered even more urgent by his belief that the cataclysmic end of the world order would occur during his lifetime, or shortly thereafter. This conviction that the "end is near" would surely have rendered unnecessary any and all attempts to establish a social ethic (to say nothing of a Universal Ethic) for the improvement of life here and now. (See Mt. 16:28) "Both Jesus and St. Paul preached an ethics devised for a short interim period before God finally inaugurated the Messianic kingdom and history was brought to a conclusion." ¹⁸

Like Jesus, Gotama preached about one overriding concern: the experience of "salvation" through the extinction of human suffering (*dukkha-nirodha*). He even refused to address a number of metaphysical questions in the belief that, the determination of the answers to those questions, whether positively or negatively, "would not be conducive to edification." His sole concern was that all human beings work toward the eradication of suffering and the termination of the round of rebirths.

One writer has, even, called into question the claim that The Buddha intended to establish an ethic that would form the basis of a model society. He contends that, properly understood, The Buddha's intention, "was not basically or consciously /to establish/ a social reform movement aiming at the production of a certain type of society—save perhaps a society of believers, i.e., monks, who were called upon to forsake the historical-political world and its concerns."¹⁹ Again, concern was with the liberation of the individual from a life of suffering, death and rebirth.

Given the central emphasis on the experience of *salvation* in both Christianity and Buddhism, it follows that neither tradition sought, primarily, to establish a social ethic that supports the improvement of the physical and moral quality of individual life (or that of society), in this world. Rather, the central focus was upon the liberation of the individual from the ordinary, untransformed life and to bring them to a life of compassion, peace, and harmony.

Also to be considered, in exploring the relevance of their teachings to a Universal Ethic, is the historical and cultural specificity of the teachings of these two founders. There is a grand paradox at the heart of each tradition and it is this: while each founder addressed his mission and message to a particular people, at a specific time and place, each man was confident that his message was applicable to all people everywhere. But on the flip side, although each man envisioned his teachings to be universally applicable, each of them drew upon an ethnically and culturally specific store of spiritual orientations, cultic principles, moral concepts and even religious vocabularies in formulating their messages. Historically speaking, both Jesus and

The Buddha spoke out of cultural universes that are far more circumscribed, from a geographical and cultural point of view, than is our multi-ethnic and multi-cultural world. Again, from a strictly historical viewpoint, we can say with confidence that our use of the term, "universal," encompasses the whole of the world's population and all its cultural systems, in a way that The Buddha and Jesus could not have known.

There are certain words and phrases, certain insights and statements in the two bodies of teachings that might be construed as marks of a universal vision but on closer examination, they prove to be too culturally specific, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, devoid of even a rudimentary awareness of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural world, that are necessary prerequisites to the production of a truly Universal Ethic.

A few of Jesus' sayings that seem to suggest a universal scope, might include: his prediction that the gospel would be preached throughout the world, "as a testimony to all nations," just before the end of the world; (Mt. 24:14) that "God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. And God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him;" (Jno. 3:16-17) and his famous, final charge to his disciples, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations..." (Mt. 28:19) But, we see from these examples, that it is the "evangelistic vision" that is universal in scope and not the audience addressed or the ethical principles to be employed.

Likewise, The Buddha declared that "all of life is suffering," (meaning, the life of all peoples everywhere); that one should protect all six directions through loving service to one's fellowmen (again, embracing the entire universe), and all people everywhere should extend loving kindness to everyone in the world. But again, The Buddha's cultural and ethical framework lacks most of the key ingredients that make the formulation of a Universal Ethic both desirable and feasible. Hence, if there is a "universal ethic" in The Buddha's teachings, it is implied but not stated outright.

Regarding the matter of the cultural specificity of the life and message of each man, there is this additional factor to be added to the mix: both teachers' "universal" message required that their followers separate themselves from the mass of their own society in adhering to the cause to which they were being summoned. A statement of one Christian ethicist can speak for both traditions, in this regard: "The paradox of Christian ethics is precisely that it has always tried to devise a code for society as a whole from pronouncements which were addressed to individuals and small communities."²⁰ Hence, any attempt to apply their teachings to the formulation of a Universal Ethic, will surely have to take into account the culturally specific and limited scope of the audience to which each addressed his message.

Conclusion

This preliminary study of the teachings of The Buddha and Jesus with reference to their ethical instructions, has pointed toward a number of tentative, but, we believe, valid conclusions:

1. The central and overriding goal of “the Good News” and the Dhamma is the achievement of individual salvation and not the development of a social ethic to be pursued for the betterment of human life on earth.
2. According to Jesus, redemption *from* a life of sin and death and the consequent deliverance *to* a life of righteousness and eternal life, comes about through the acceptance of God’s gift of salvation through his Son’s life, message, death and resurrection. By contrast, in Buddhism, enlightenment/liberation results from a person’s own conscientious efforts to avoid evil and achieve liberation from ignorance and rebirth through the cultivation of moral precepts (*sīla*), the practice of mindfulness or concentration (*samādhi*) and ultimately, the achievement of wisdom. (*paññā*)
3. The teachings common to both founders include: do unto others as you would be done by, love others (including, wrongdoers) as you do yourself, adhere faithfully to the primary commandments/precepts, know that all actions produce consequences, invest only in the accumulation of “inner” treasures and find redemption/liberation through the experience of a spiritual transformation.
4. We have found that both ‘faith’ and ‘action’ play a role in the plan for salvation in both traditions. But, while ‘faith’ or ‘belief’ occupies a central and definitive place in the message of Jesus, ‘practice’ or an ‘ethic of action’ is central to the message of The Buddha.
5. As we noted above, while the two ethics are too limited in scope and area of distribution to qualify, in an obvious manner, as a Universal Ethic, they do contain certain elements that may be said to have universal implications.
6. Finally, even though both The Buddha’s and Jesus’ ethic contains certain principles that might be construed as potential contributions to a Universal Ethic, two contrary facts remain: the primary focus of their missions was to provide human beings with a pathway to salvation and they delivered their message to a limited community and couched it in terms that were peculiar to their own time and place.

Hence, the universal applicability of their teachings is far from self-evident. Given the cultural limitations on the concepts and terminology that they utilized in presenting their messages, even the, so-called, “universalistic” features of their teachings are significantly qualified by the cultural specificity of their time and place, especially in contrast to the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural world in which we live today...

One final word: if enough people of vision and good will in places of authority are able to amass enough collective wisdom, patience and creativity in the years to come, they may be able to develop, out of the chaos of modern life, a truly Universal Ethic to which a significant majority of the world's population can subscribe. We do not believe that a genuine Universal Ethic exists at the present time anywhere in the world. But, this much is certain: if and when such an ethic were to emerge, there is no question but that significant contributions will have been derived from the teachings of the "Man from Nazareth" and the "Sage of the Shakya clan."

Notes

¹ The version of the Bible used in this study is the Revised Standard Version.

² Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 1995.

³ John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana, *The Dhammapada*, 1987.

⁴ On this topic, see Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 1990; Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Story of Buddhism*, 2001; and Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs*, 1997.

⁵ Stephen Batchelor, *Idem.*, 1997, p. 9; Ananda W.P. Guruge, *What in Brief is Buddhism?*, 1999, pp. 6-7; Peter Harvey, *Idem.*, 1990, p. 2ff.

⁶ Hammalawa Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics*, 1991, pp. 59ff; A.K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, 1980, p. 106

⁷ Carl Vaught, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 2000; Richard Rohr and J.B. Feister, *Jesus' Plan for a New World*, 1996; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Divine Rhetoric*, 2000. Concerning the general features of Christian ethics, see Charles E. Curran, "Christian Ethics," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, volume 3, pp. 340-8.

⁸ Ananda W.P. Guruge, *op. cit.*, p. 38ff. For a general discussion of the central concepts in Buddhist ethics, see Frank Reynolds and Robert Campany, "Buddhist Ethics," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, volume II, pp. 498-504.

⁹ Consult H. Saddhatissa's more extensive discussion of this passage, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-42.

¹⁰ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, 2000, p. 69ff. and H. Saddhatissa, *op. cit.*, p. 59ff. See also MN II.77, 195, 207.

¹¹ H. Saddhatissa, *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹² All of the quotations in these boxes are drawn from Marcus Borg, *Jesus and Buddha*, 1999. For comparisons of the teachings of Jesus and The Buddha, consult Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 1995 and *Going Home. Jesus and The Buddha as Brothers*, 1999.

¹³ Master Hsing Yun, *Being Good*, 1999, pp. 90-4. See also the *Analects of Confucius* (XV.23) in which the "Golden Rule" is presented in a negative form, but with the same moral implications: "Tzu Kung asked: 'Is there any one word that can serve as a principle for the conduct of life'? Confucius said: 'Perhaps the word 'reciprocity': Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you.'"

¹⁴ Cf. AN iii.2: H. Saddhatissa, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁵ DN 2.40, "...having fully realized /the Truth/ by means of his own super-knowledge...."

¹⁶ Stephen Batchelor, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁷ *op. cit.*, p. 7. See also Master Hsing Yun, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-70 and Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India*, 1967, pp. 47-55.

¹⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 1999, p. 115.

¹⁹ Winston L. King, *In the Hope of Nibbana*, 1964, p. 177.

²⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

Abbreviations

Christian Sources

Mk	Mark
Mt.	Matthew
Jno.	John
Lu.	Luke

Buddhist Sources

AN	Anguttara nikāya
Dhp	Dhammapada
DN	Dīghanikāya
It	Itivuttaka
J	Jātakamālā
MN	Majjhimanikāya
Samy.	Samyuttanikāya
SN	Suttanipāta
U	Udāna

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Realize that this world is impermanent, that nations are unsafe and unstable, that the four elements cause suffering and are empty, and that there is no self within the five skandhas; that all things that arise must change and decline, and that they are but false appearances without any stable essence; that the mind is the source of evil, and that form is a congregation of wrongdoings.

Contemplate all of this, and gradually you will disentangle yourself from the cycle of birth and death.

Buddhism: Pure and Simple, Hsing Yun, p.23