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Liberation Theology and Engaged Buddhism: Challenging Each Other, Learning from Each Other¹

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As John Makransky made clear when he was organizing this panel, our hopes are to carry on and deepen the conversations that a number of us were part of at the international conference at Union Theological Seminary in April 2013, “Enlightenment and Liberation: Engaged Buddhists and Liberation Theologians in Dialogue.”² My contributions to this continuing conversation come primarily out of my Christian background—though I have been a practicing Buddhist-Christian (a “double-belonger”) for over three decades. So my primary concern will be what Christians might learn from Buddhists. Also, I’ll be speaking as a so-called progressive Roman Catholic theologian and as a student and practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. Those are the traditions and the communities I will try to speak for and to.

To structure and enliven the conversation between Christians and Buddhists about what they might learn from each other in their shared commitment to do something about the sufferings that afflict our planet and its inhabitants, I have built my reflections around what I believe are four progressively interconnecting questions: (1) What is really going on in this world of ours? (2) Why are we in the mess that we seem to be in? (3) How can we get out of the mess? And finally and more practically, (4) How can we sustain and guide our liberative praxis?

WHAT’S REALLY GOING ON?

The differences in the way Buddhists and Christians understand and go about their work of “fixing this world” are rooted, fundamentally, in their different (but I believe complementary) understandings of what is really real: how they understand and live out the relationship between (in Buddhist terms) the Ultimate and the Relative, or between Emptiness and Form, and (in Christian terms) between the Infinite and the Finite or God and Creation.

Buddhists offer Christians, I suggest, the opportunity to reclaim and deepen the nonduality of their mystical and their philosophical traditions. In saying that, however, I want to put the greater stress on “deepen.” This is not just an opportunity for

Christians to reclaim an already given but neglected nonduality within their own tradition; it is an opportunity to come to a deeper understanding and practice of it. In other words, Buddhists don't just provide Christians a flashlight to see what is already there in the dark rooms of their own house; rather, they introduce some new furniture—which is compatible with the décor of the Christian home, but still, something new.

I've discovered (or I think I have) that my conversation with Buddhists is offering Christians an opportunity to explore a more mystical, a more unitive and non-dual experience of, and therefore understanding of, the reality we call God. This is the result of exploring what Roger Haight calls "functional analogies" between the Mahayana notion of Emptiness and Form and the Christian understanding of God and Creation.³ What such analogies are asking Christians is this: If God, as Christians claim, is truly immanent and involved in the world, can they recognize that the world is just as truly immanent and involved in God? Does the relationship of God and world really go both ways? Is the world as much a part of God as God is a part of the world? Or, to use an image from the Acts of the Apostles, if we "live and move and have our being in God," can we also say that "God lives and moves and has God's being in us"? (Acts 17:28).

What I'm getting at is what might be called an asymmetrical reciprocity between God and the world. Through my Buddhist practice and study, I've come to feel and affirm a real reciprocity between God and creation, a real give and take, a real "codependence" and need of each other. But the need or the dependence is "asymmetrical," vastly different on each side. The world needs God/Emptiness in order to "receive" its very being. God/Emptiness needs the world/form in order to actualize or express God's very being. Neither can be or exist without the other, but for very different reasons. Maybe Christians could even say that while God definitely creates the world, the world also helps to create God since God can't be God without some creation (just as Emptiness can't be Emptiness with Form).

Such a nondual, asymmetrically reciprocal understanding of the God-world relationship has important, even profound as well as disorienting, implications for how Christians understand the process of fixing and liberating the world. Let me suggest four such implications:

1. *God's intention and will:* If God has an intention, and if this intention is "not teleologically predetermined,"⁴ God's intention has to be worked out together with creation. God's intention, therefore, is more a direction than a goal. Christians will say that God intends a world of greater justice; Buddhists might say of greater compassion. But just what that world will be or just what that means has to be determined through the interaction of God and creation, Emptiness and Form.
2. *Does God intervene?* This leads to some sobering but also engaging conclusions about how much God needs our human intelligence and responsibility. Can Christians recognize that a nondual God cannot intervene in the world but, as Aquinas asserted, must always act through secondary causes—that is, through, and in and as, finite beings?⁵ Instead of intervening, God co-

appears. Miracles can still happen, but instead of being purely divine, they would be divine-human productions! This implies that what Christians call “grace” is something they embody rather than receive. Nonduality, it seems, implies that the world is the godding of God.

3. *Is evil ultimately real?* Also, what are the implications of a reciprocal nonduality for Christian understandings of evil? A co-inhering God understood as the energy of interbeing would not be totally other to what is labeled as evil. Within the reciprocity of God-World or Emptiness-Form, the unnecessary, humanly caused suffering that Christians call evil is real, but it does not have an existence of its own—either in some ontological setting distinct from divine Interbeing (the Christian notion of the devil) or in the corrupted or fallen human heart. The very real suffering that is evil is included in interbeing, held in God. This would suggest that what we call evil and oppression is to be healed more than it is to be eradicated.
4. *History—eschatology:* This is an issue that strains the promise of functional analogies between Buddhist and Christian understandings of the really real. For Buddhists, it seems to me, the nonduality between Emptiness and Form focuses, and perhaps reduces, reality to the present moment. It’s all here, right now, right here. Christian affirmations about history moving forward to some eschatological fulfillment seem incommensurable with the Buddhist total embracing of the present moment. Leaving aside for the moment these apparently intractable ontological differences, I believe that Christian liberationists can accept from their Buddhist friends a warning not to cling too tightly to what they envision as the “not yet” of Jesus’s Reign of God so as to miss the power of its “already” presence. If for Christians there is always “more to come,” Buddhists admonish them that whatever it is will be discovered or determined by a mindfulness and acceptance of the present moment. Instead of announcing what the future must be, Christians are called upon to go more deeply, through wisdom and compassion, into what already actually is. But as to what Christians might learn from Buddhists (and vice versa) regarding the apparent incompatibilities between the Christian affirmation of an eschatological endpoint to history and the Buddhist embrace of ongoing impermanence that seems to rule out any ultimate conclusions—that can be the possible fruit only of ongoing conversation and study.⁶

WHY ARE WE IN THE MESS WE ARE IN?

Even though Buddhists and Christians each have different ways of describing the human predicament, even though they differ in their understandings of the root cause of humanity’s problem, even though they will have differing remedies—both traditions are in resonating agreement that we human beings are in a big mess—a mess that for the most part we ourselves have created and continue to create. We are in a mess. And we have to do something about it. On that, Christians and Buddhists are in basic and committed agreement.

But it is in the differences—striking and provocative—in the way Buddhists diagnose this mess and in the remedies they prescribe for it that Christian liberationists have much that they can, and need to, learn.

Original Sin as Original Ignorance of Original Blessings

“Why are we in such a mess?” If we ask that question of Buddha and of Jesus—or more accurately, of their followers who have tried to understand them—we’re going to get two pretty different answers. Buddhists and Christians have starkly contrasting diagnoses of why it is that humanity, throughout its history, cannot seem to get its act together—why it is that humans seem more proficient at producing suffering than happiness. Or, more analytically, scholars might say that Buddhists and Christians have starkly contrasting anthropologies—two very different views of human nature.

For Christians, the mess that humanity is in has to do with original sin. From early on—indeed, from the very beginning—something went wrong, got out of whack, profoundly out of whack. The product that God created was broken, so broken that it could no longer work the way it was intended to work. It would have to be repaired. This, basically, is how the story of Adam and Eve has traditionally been understood. They—human beings—are the reason things got broken. However it happened, it wasn’t God’s fault.

But the results are drastic: the human condition, or human nature, is fallen. Philosophers would say that for Christians, the problem is ontological. Since and because of Adam and Eve, humans are born into a state of being that is broken, fallen, sin-filled, or sin-prone.

For Buddhists, the human condition is no less messy than for Christians. But for Buddhists the basic problem, or the fundamental source, of the mess is ignorance. Humans are not fundamentally fallen or sinful. Rather, they’re fundamentally ignorant or mixed up. The crucial problem facing every human being is that we really don’t know who or what we are. And not knowing what we are, we act in ways that hurt ourselves and others. Out of this primary poison of ignorance or delusion flow the other two poisons that cause so much suffering: greed and hatred.

Buddhists, it seems, don’t really have an explanation for the causes of this pervasive ignorance. They just accept it as a fact. It’s there. We have to deal with it. For Buddhists, therefore, the basic problem of humanity is, in philosophical terms, epistemological. It’s not in our being but in our knowing. It’s not in what we are, but in what we think we are. Human nature isn’t corrupted. Rather, the human mind is clouded.

If ignorance is our big problem, what are we ignorant of? What are we missing? The answer points us to a central teaching of the Buddha: his “good news” is that all and each of us is really an *anatta*—a not-self! Because Buddha’s teaching is for Westerners so counterintuitive, and therefore for Christians so difficult to grasp, I’m going to turn to a highly respected Buddhist teacher, Walpola Rahula, to lay it out for us: In “denying the Self” as “an unchanging substance,” in announcing that my “self” or my “ego” is “only a convenient name or a label” for a reality that is beyond the label, Buddha proclaimed a message that is both “unique in the history of human thought” and at the same time “frightening.” Yet, if correctly understood and experienced, it can also be a source of deep “peace and freedom.” It is as radical

as it is complex, for it implies neither the annihilation nor the eternal existence of the self. Rather, it urges us to consider that what we really are is not contained in the feeling that “I am.”

Our real identity is not found in our individual selves but, rather, in the bigger picture of which we are constantly changing expressions. Buddha called this bigger picture “the Unborn, Ungrown, and Unconditioned.” It’s this bigger, interconnected, constantly changing picture that really matters, that surrounds and constitutes each fleeting moment of our lives. To be truly and fully and peacefully alive is not to stand out as individuals but to fit in as participants.⁷

Do these different diagnoses of our sickness and of our mess really matter? I think they do. And I suspect that Christian liberationists might have much to learn from the Buddhist diagnosis that our problem is not so much in what we are but in what we think we are. To understand our original sinfulness as resulting from our original ignorance would mean for Christians that we are not fallen, nor mortally wounded, but that we are lost. We’ve lost our bearings, our way, our original knowledge—the knowledge that is originally given to us in our very being and nature. Although the consequences of such ignorance can be horrendous, I do believe that such an interpretation of the Christian doctrine of original sin as original ignorance can stimulate a real, personal difference in the way Christians feel about themselves and the way they act for liberation in the world.

If the problem is rooted in what we are—that is, in a corruption or malfunctioning of our nature—then the repair will have to come from outside ourselves since what we have within ourselves isn’t working. We have to be fixed by a fixer. But if the problem is that something is missing in our awareness, in our knowledge, then, yes, we will need help, but the help will consist in revealing what we really and truly are; we will have to be illumined by a teacher or taught by a revealer. And the remedy will consist in revealing our basic goodness rather than our basic fallenness or corruption. In removing our original ignorance, we will see our original blessing and goodness.

And, most importantly for social activists, this will affect how we look upon and feel about those whom we have to resist and oppose. We will regard them not as inherently evil or corrupt but as caught in an ignorance that affects us all. In opposing them, we can feel connected to them. In resisting them, we can embrace them and seek for their enlightenment. In opposing them, we can bless them.

From their dialogue with Buddhists, therefore, Christian liberationists are invited to view original sin as original ignorance of our original blessing.

HOW CAN WE GET OUT OF THIS MESS?

The Ontological Priority of Compassion over Justice

One of the clearest and urgently needed fruits of the dialogue between socially engaged Buddhists and liberationist Christians is the recognition, on both sides, of the necessary connection and the necessary balancing of justice and compassion in their shared labors to “fix the world.” In this dialogue, Christians are generally

the ones who hold up the urgency of working toward just structures within society. Compassion or charity, they point out, does not necessarily assure justice. In fact, it can often be a distraction from justice: The satisfying feeling from giving a starving person something to eat today may lead us to forget that he will be hungry again tomorrow.

Charity or compassion moves us to address the sufferings of others; justice tells us that to really do that, we have to address the social or economic causes of that suffering. Justice, therefore, always demands something more than just charity. The “something more” has to do with structural change—new laws, new economic policies, such as the Civil Rights Act, such as antitrust or election reform legislation.

Many of my Buddhist friends tell me that they have much to learn from these Christian admonitions about justice. But they still insist that if all such actions for justice are not arising out of a genuine feeling of deep compassion for all sentient beings, such actions will probably not bear lasting fruit. For real societal change to take place, or for a “revolution” to really last, the demands of justice are necessary. But they are not enough. Yes, laws that embody the requirements of justice have to be passed; and they have to be enforced, even imposed. But unless the force of law is accompanied by, or eventually leads to, the power of compassion, it will not work.

Law can envision what a just society looks like, but law by itself, without spirit, can’t get there. The change of law must eventually lead to, or make possible, a change of heart. And as I have learned from my Tibetan Buddhist teachers, the most powerful means of changing hearts is compassion.⁸ Both Jesus and Buddha seem to have recognized and affirmed the necessity of compassion and love for any real change.

“For hatred can never put an end to hatred; love alone can. This is an unalterable law.” (Dhammapada 1:1)

“But I say to you: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, and pray for those who insult you.” (Luke 6: 27–28)

I suspect that the only hope we have of turning enemies into friends who will work for justice with us is to love them. It would seem, therefore, that if love doesn’t precede, or accompany, a concern for justice, justice does not hold out much hope.

So, in balancing this nonduality between justice and compassion, I suggest that Christians have a bit more to learn from Buddhists than vice versa. What I’m getting at can be expressed by an image I used earlier for the relationship between God and creation or between Emptiness and Form: Just as there is an “asymmetrical reciprocity” between God and the world, so there is an asymmetrical reciprocity between compassion and a concern for justice.

In other words, compassion bears a certain fundamental priority—I would even call it “ontological”—in the nondual balancing with justice. If we said that God and the world “need” each other, we recognized that the world’s need of God is greater than God’s of the world; so too in the necessary mutuality between compassion and concern for justice, compassion, as it were, speaks a first and last word. Buddhists are

suggesting to Christians that compassion functions as a necessary precondition for any real concern for justice.

In such a suggestion, Buddhists are reminding Christians of what is at the heart of both Christianity and Buddhism: We realize and achieve who or what we really are through loving our brothers and sisters—through living as bodhisattvas. For Christians, the “first commandment” that Jesus gave his disciples was to love each other, not to strive for justice (although, to repeat, love will demand justice) (John 15:12). For Buddhists the first and necessary result of enlightenment is compassion. We human beings realize who we are and what makes for our happiness primarily and initially by giving ourselves, not by demanding our rights (although we will have to demand our rights when they are violated). In traditional Christian language, we can truly be personal individuals (the Greek is *hypostasis*) only through emptying ourselves in love (*kenosis*). *Hypostasis* (being ourselves) requires *kenosis* (giving ourselves). That, St. Paul tells us, is what Jesus taught and embodied (Phil. 2:6).

Psychologically or experientially, we seem to feel the priority of compassion before we recognize the necessity of justice. What I’m trying to suggest here bears a reference to what Edward Schillebeeckx calls a “negative experience of contrast.” He makes the universal claim that any human being whose basic needs are being met, when confronted with the specter of some individuals unjustly and unnecessarily inflicting suffering on other individuals, will respond with a spontaneous feeling and perhaps cry that such unjust suffering must be stopped. One’s first and natural response as social beings will be “That’s wrong!” or “That’s unjust.”⁹ Buddhists, I suggest, would hold that there is a prior natural response before that of “That’s wrong.” It would be something like “How can I help? How can I alleviate your suffering?” In other words, Buddhists would say that the “natural” primary reaction to the state of suffering in a fellow sentient being is compassion—a call to extend compassion rather than a call to create justice. The need for justice follows, or arises out of, the feeling of compassion. Justice, for Buddhists, would be a way of implementing compassion.

The necessity of compassion lays the foundation for the necessity of nonhatred. While there might be grounds for controversy about whether Jesus and Buddha insisted on nonviolence, there can be no doubt that they preached nonhatred. To love our enemies means not to hate them. And nonhatred will generally, if not always, call for nonviolence.

However we understand or try to describe the “priority” that Buddhists, I believe, assign to compassion, what has become clear in the socially engaged and liberative dialogue between Buddhists and Christians is that the complex and never-finished job of “fixing the world” calls for some kind of nondual combination of both concern for justice and a commitment to compassion. Christians remind Buddhists that in order effectively to practice compassion, justice is necessary. And Buddhists remind Christians that it is impossible to achieve lasting justice without compassion.

There is, then, an essential nondual dynamic between compassion and justice. One calls forth the other. Neither can be reduced to the other. Compassion without justice can be naïve. Justice without compassion will break down.

The Personal Priority of Contemplation over Action

If Buddhists are right in assigning what I've called an ontological, or genetically foundational, priority to compassion before justice, this will require, I believe, similar priorities in the dispositions and personal practices that we bring to our work for social transformation. *The priority of compassion before justice leads to the priority of contemplation before action, or of self-transformation before social transformation.*

Let me try to make my point by way of bumper stickers: The bumpers on the cars of many a Christian activist proclaim: "If you want peace, seek justice." We have a job to do—the job of fixing the world. And the centerpiece of that job is justice. Buddhists would not deny this. But they would ask: Just how can you best go about the job of realizing justice? Their basic answer is that something has to change in you before you can effectively change anything outside of yourself. If your resolve and your efforts to remove injustice are not originating from a deeper source within yourself than just the desire to "do justice," you're not going to be able to do the job. There has to be a transformation within you before you can effect a transformation around you.

So a corresponding Buddhist bumper sticker would draw on the formulation of Thich Nhat Hanh: "To make peace you first have to be peace." He is suggesting to Christians that if justice is a prerequisite for society attaining peace, there's a prerequisite for any individual creating justice. If you're going to be able to bring about the justice that is necessary for peace, you're going to have to already have that peace in your heart.

"Peace of heart" is the fruit of enlightenment, which is the fruit of contemplation. Thich Nhat Hanh is reminding us of the Germanized Latin slug: "*Nemo dat quod non habet*"—you can't give what you don't have. You can't give peace if you don't have it. And peace, for Buddhists, is the fruit of enlightenment, which is the fruit of some form of spiritual practice. "Being peace" is another way of saying "being enlightened"—or what happens to you when you begin the process of waking up. Thich Nhat Hanh is saying that a precondition for the very possibility of bringing about justice in your society is that you have really begun the process of waking up to the reality of interbeing. To be able to work for justice you need to be in touch with the groundless ground of your interbeing, the stable but ever-changing energy that constitutes and is the reality of everything. Unless you have, at least to some incipient degree, begun to wake up and feel this reality, this groundless ground, this interconnecting spirit energy, your efforts toward justice will fail, or at least they will not bear the fruits that they can bear or that you hope they will bear.

This means that if—as one hears throughout Christian tradition—both "action" and "contemplation" are necessary for any spirituality and for all efforts to "fix the world," then Buddhists will want to give a certain priority to contemplation. While you can't really practice one without the other, while both action and contemplation make up a moving circle in which each leads to the other, still, for Buddhists, contemplation serves as the entrance point to the circle, or it provides the main energy that keeps the circle turning.

So even if Christians will point out that we experience God through our actions

for justice—or as the Jesuits put it, we can experience contemplation *in action*—Buddhists will insist that such experience of God/interbeing in social action cannot simply take the place of experiencing God/interbeing in contemplation. The experiences of God or interbeing that we have “in the streets” or “on our meditation cushions” are indeed experiences of the same God/interbeing. But they are two different kinds of experience that cannot be melded into each other. The ability to meet God or realize enlightenment “on the streets” does not dispense one from also trying to meet God or pursue enlightenment on our cushions.

An ideal realization of this co-inhering of contemplation and action—or of the mystical and the prophetic—is captured, I suggest, by Meister Eckhart in his well-known Sermon 86 on Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38–42). With an insightful mystical twist, Eckhart reverses the usual meaning of this story and holds up Martha as the ultimate ideal for a disciple of Jesus—Martha, who is “busy about many things” in the kitchen and who urges her prayerful sister Mary to leave her place at Jesus’s feet to help in the kitchen! Mary, Eckhart tells us, is “stuck in this pleasant feeling” of contemplation, while Martha is able to “accomplish external works [action] with the perfection that love demands [contemplation].”¹⁰ As the Jesuits put it, Martha has found “contemplation in action.” This is the ideal: to experience the love of God and the power of interbeing as we care for others, and to hear the call of others while we, on our knees or on our cushions, abide in the silence of presence.

But while contemplation and action, or God and our neighbor, co-inhere, and we will feel the presence of one in the other, still they cannot be reduced to each other; one cannot simply take the place of the other. Like Jesus, who retreated into the quiet of the hillside, and Buddha, who called his monks to retreat during the rainy season, we will need designated time for each—so that our prayer or meditation can call forth our action, and our action can send us back to silence.

QUALITIES OF A LIBERATIVE PRAXIS

I conclude with two big lessons that I’ve learned—or am trying to learn—from my Buddhist practice and friends about the actual task of social engagement or liberative praxis. In the day-to-day work of trying to diminish needless suffering and fix our world, these are two guidelines that Buddhists offer Christians: (1) go light on hope and goals for the future, and (2) be sure that your preferential option for the oppressed is also an option for the oppressor.

Go Light on Hope and Goals for the Future

With their insistence on the necessity of being peace in order to make peace, my Buddhist teachers have implicitly, but nonetheless discomfortingly, warned me against being too occupied with the future, or against finding the primary motivation for acting now in my hopes for what I expect my actions to accomplish in the future. This is a danger because in drawing our energy from what is to come, we miss the

powerful source for energized action that is given to us in the present moment, right here, right now.

The reason for this admonition is found, I believe, in the Buddhist understanding of the nondual identity between wisdom and compassion. To experience wisdom is to begin to awake to the emptiness of interbeing that reveals our true nature as *anatta*—as not-selves, or better as “we-selves.” This is naturally and necessarily to experience ourselves as held in compassion and ourselves as holding all sentient beings in compassion. Wisdom is compassion. Compassion is grounded in, and draws its nature and its energy from, wisdom.

Buddhists call people who have awakened to this force of compassion arising from wisdom *bodhisattvas*. These are the ideal social activists—women and men who have so connected with and been embraced by wisdom that compassion naturally and necessarily flows forth from their very being. It is a compassion that will drive them to work for justice. Compassion for the starving fisherman naturally or logically impels them to teach him how to fish or to help provide him with a boat. *Bodhisattvas*, Buddhist or Christian, work for justice not primarily because they believe that justice is possible (though that may be their belief), or because they know the reign of God is imminent, but because they have no choice!

When we gain wisdom, that is, when we wake up, or begin to wake up, to the energy of interbeing, we find that working for justice out of compassion is as necessary as taking the next breath. To be alive is to breathe. To be enlightened is to work for justice out of compassion. One does not burn out from breathing.

To wake up to our Buddha-nature, or our interbeing, is to feel a call to act for justice that is, as it were, self-sustaining. It does not depend on achieving results or reaching—or even moving toward—one’s goal. Our actions for justice are, we might say, ends in themselves. They are valuable in themselves, whether we reach our goal or not. The goal we want to arrive at is already somehow present in each step we try to take toward it.

I have realized that such Buddhist appeals to be mindful of the energy of the moment have been a helpful—for me, necessary—reminder for Christians not to neglect what New Testament scholars tell us was the chronologically paradoxical understanding that Jesus had of the reign of God: For him the reign of God was both “already and not yet.” In our expectations and hopes for the “not yet” we Christians run the risk of missing the “already.”¹¹

The Buddhist admonition to go light on hopes and plans for the future also means not to cling to them. Here Buddhists are warning Christians of the danger of making plans—that is, the danger of making them too clearly and too assuredly. What I mean by this is something that I have experienced in myself and in my fellow social activists: we agents of social justice are so often so sure about what needs to be done, about which policies are causing the exploitation, about who are the “bad guys.” In our commitment to “speaking truth to power,” we are so sure that we have the truth and that those in power don’t. This is all part of the “social analysis” that is integral to the method of Christian liberation theology. It has to be done. But so often it is done too quickly, too much according to script, too assuredly.

Buddhists would call such too hasty, too certain analysis “clinging to one’s ego-thoughts.” This is the ever-lurking danger, so well identified by Buddhism, of how clinging to our ego leads us to cling to and so to absolutize our own ideas and programs. I suspect that most people involved in social activism know what I’m talking about. We become so certain of our own analysis and our own programs that we end up not listening to others and missing better opportunities, better programs. And so it can and does happen that the “liberators” end up making the situation just as bad as, or even worse than, it was under the oppressors. Buddhists warn us that as long as we are still clinging to our ego-identity and our own ideas, there’s a little (or big!) oppressor hiding in every good-willed liberator.

Again, we’re back to the need to be peace before, or while, we try to make peace. The peace and the wisdom that come from waking up alert us to the ways our thinking and feeling so often obscure what is really going on. By sitting in meditation, we become more aware of the danger of clinging to our own ideas and plans. If we have to “speak truth to power,” we also know that we have to be as humble about what we say as we are strong in saying it. Only if we do not cling to our truth can we—and others—experience its power.

This is why in the Zen Peacemaker Order, founded by Roshi Bernie Glassman, the first principle in all their efforts to make peace and restore justice is: “not knowing and renouncing all fixed ideas.”¹² They begin every new project with “not knowing” and with the effort to silence the truth that they think they have to speak to power. In such silence, they listen; they try to be aware; they allow others to express their ideas; they seek to understand what is really going on in the particular context in which they are seeking to “fix the world.” Then, and only then, do they formulate their ideas and lay their plans—ideas and plans that they hold to but that they do not cling to.

A Preferential Option for the Oppressed That Is Also an Option for the Oppressor

One of the most discomfiting and bewildering challenges that Buddhists offer Christians in their shared commitment to peace and justice is gently but starkly stated by Thich Nhat Hanh in his little book *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, when he informs Christians that for a Buddhist, God doesn’t have favorites. He’s warning Christians that the preferential option for the poor that is so central to liberation theology can be dangerous.¹³ He is challenging Christians to recognize and overcome the duality between oppressed and oppressor. For Buddhists, as we noted above, both the oppressed and the oppressor—in what each is doing and in what each is experiencing—are expressions of and are held in and by interbeing. Their actions are clearly different. But their identities are the same.

And that means our own identities are linked to both oppressed and oppressors. Therefore, we do not respond to the oppressed out of compassion and to the oppressor out of justice. No, we respond to both out of compassion! Compassion for both the oppressed and the oppressor.

But compassion for the oppressor will be expressed differently than compassion for the oppressed. It’s the same compassion, but, as it were, in different packages.

As John Makransky puts it, the compassion shown to the oppressor will be fierce. It will be compassion that confronts, that challenges, that calls for change. It will name the poisons that cause so much suffering: greed, hatred, ignorance. He even calls it a “wrathful compassion.” But the primary motivation for such confrontation will not be the necessity of justice, but the necessity of compassion. It will be driven by a compassion for the oppressor and by the desire for his or her well-being, by the desire to free him from the illusions that drive him to greed and to the exploitation of others.¹⁴

Yes, we want to liberate the oppressed. But just as much, we want to liberate the oppressors. Buddhists are telling liberation Christians that compassion has no preferences. We love the oppressor as much as we love the oppressed. Our calls for justice intend the well-being of the oppressor just as much as the well-being of the oppressed.

And when the oppressor see this, when he realizes that he is indeed being confronted but that the confrontation arises out of compassion, respect, cherishing, when he hears from his confronter not only that he is wrong, but also, and primarily, that he is loved—then, perhaps only then, we have the possibility of changing the structures of injustice, for then there will be the possibility of a change of heart in the oppressors. Such a nonpreferential option for compassion that extends equally and clearly to both oppressed and oppressors will be the foundation on which justice can be built, on which structures can be changed.

NOTES

1. Much of the content, if not formulation, of these reflections is drawn from the book that I wrote together with Roger Haight, SJ: *Jesus and Buddha: Friends in Conversation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).

2. Most of these papers were published in volume 34 (2014) of *Buddhist-Christian Studies*.

3. Knitter and Haight, *Jesus and Buddha*, xiv.

4. This is pointed out by Roger Haight in Knitter and Haight, *Jesus and Buddha*, 45.

5. *Summa Theologica*, 1, q. 22, a. 2. See also Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness: Writings for the People of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 88–90.

6. Roger Haight and I try to do so in *Jesus and Buddha*, 97–115.

7. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1974 [1959]), 51, 56, 38, 66, 37.

8. This is the message of my teacher John Makransky in his *The Awakening of Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2007).

9. Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 5–6.

10. Meister Eckhart, “Sermon 86,” *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, Bernard McGuinn, ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 343.

11. Dominic Crosson, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 282–292.

12. Christopher S. Queen, ed. *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 98ff.

13. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 79–81.

14. John Makransky, “A Buddhist Critique of, and Learning from, Christian Liberation Theology,” *Theological Studies* 75, no. 3 (2014) 635–657, at 647–648.