

# How Buddhist and Christian Liberation Epistemologies Should Inform and Correct Each Other

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**Abstract:** Buddhism has traditionally focused on epistemological and psychological causes of suffering in individuals: deluded perception, greed, and ill will. Buddhist compassionate action seeks to free people from those inner causes of suffering, through contemplative, ritual and ethical practices. Christian liberation theology focuses on oppressive social systems as main causes of suffering, and on socio-historical analysis and social activism to empower people to liberate themselves from those systems. Effective epistemological analysis and contemplative practice (Buddhism's focus) is necessary to address the first cause of suffering: deluded misperception and reaction, since social analysis alone does not remove the pervasive misperception that some persons matter more than others, an unconscious assumption that distorts everyone's attempt to build better social systems. Contemplative practices that deconstruct that delusive tendency also empower greater discernment, compassion and creative responsiveness for effective social action. On the other hand, social analysis (as in Christian liberation theology) is essential to address the second kind of cause of suffering, oppressive social structures, which, if not confronted, promulgate systemic harms while socially incorporating individuals into the first cause of suffering: delusion, greed and ill-will. This essay argues that Buddhist and Christian liberation epistemologies each have blind spots that are revealed and corrected by learning from the other.

**Key words:** Buddhist-Christian dialogue, engaged Buddhism, socially engaged Buddhism, liberation theology, Christian liberation theology, comparative theology, meditation and action, social activism.

## Introduction

Classical Buddhist thought and modern Christian liberation theologies have focused on different root causes of suffering for response. Buddhism has focused on epistemological and psychological causes of suffering in individuals: deluded perception, selfish desire, ill will and their karmic effects. Buddhist liberative action, then, aims to free people from those inner causes of suffering through practices that undercut them. Christian liberation theology, drawing on prophetic traditions of Judaism and Christianity, focuses on oppressive social systems as primary cause of suffering, and on practices of social analysis and activism to empower people to liberate themselves from those systems. This paper argues that neither Buddhist nor Christian liberation epistemology and praxis alone is sufficient to address human-made suffering. Both kinds of epistemology, and both kinds of practice, are needed for effective liberating action.

## (1) Definition of the person

For what follows, we need a definition of ‘person.’ For that, I will draw on some threads of Indian Mahāyāna and Tibetan Buddhism. I define the person here as awareness embodied—embodied subjectivity. A person’s basic awareness is the pre-conceptual basis in consciousness for all of her thoughts, perceptions, emotions, feelings, intentions, and attitudes. One’s basic awareness thus encompasses the person as a whole, not just one aspect or part. This awareness, as the basis of all contents of experience, is, in itself, primordial, unconstructed, unconfined, open to an unlimited horizon, insubstantial (empty), and cognizant. Harmful patterns of thought and reaction in persons arise out of this basic awareness, from one’s conditioning or cultivation. But this basic awareness also possesses a great underlying capacity for positive powers of mind and heart (often referred to as Buddha nature) that gives each individual great dignity and worth—capacities of love, empathy, compassion, deep peace and freedom, discernment, joy, energy, and creative responsiveness, which can be cultivated to ever-increasing power, inclusiveness, and unconditionality.

This understanding of persons as embodied awareness is a Buddhist way of establishing what Christians call a theological anthropology—the understanding that all human beings possess a great dignity, worth and potential in the depth of their being, although it is obscured by self-centered patterns of thought and reaction that are individually and socially conditioned. In Buddhist traditions I draw from, this basis of unconditional worth and potential in persons is called primordial awareness (Tibetan *rigpa*, Sanskrit *vidyā*), Buddha nature (T. *de bzhin gshegs pa’i snying po*; S. *tathāgata-garbha*), the deep nature mind (T. *sems nyid*, S. *cittatvam*), or obscured suchness (T. *dri bcas de bzhin nyid*; S. *samala tathatā*) (Makransky 2007, 34-35; Tsoknyi Rinpoche 1998, 37-8, 43, 226; Longchen Rabjam 1998, 37; Ray 2001, 267-8; Ray 2000, 421-422, 434-435; Wellwood 2002, 157, 165, 238). In Christian theology, various interpretations of the image of God in human beings (*imago dei*) support diverse theological anthropologies, some of which can be seen as analogous to the Buddhist anthropology I am using here. The theological anthropology of Karl Rahner is resonant with my Buddhist understanding of the person, in Rahner’s assertion that there is a pre-thematic, unobjectified level of awareness in human beings that is the primordial basis of all their

conscious activities, and which opens to an infinite horizon, manifest in the unlimited human urge toward greater knowledge, love and freedom (Rahner 1974, 154-156; Carr 1995, 21-22; Johnson 2007, 33-37, 41-2).

The implication of this kind of Buddhist or Rahnerian anthropology is that persons have an unconditional worth and potential given in the depth of their being, which transcends any reductive labels or concepts that we may have of them. The anthropology I use here also lends itself to the existential terminology that the philosopher Martin Buber employed. We tend, from our conditioning, to relate to others within a framework that Buber called 'I-It', reacting to them as objects of our own need or use, as tools to an end. If we become attuned to the fuller reality of persons as embodied awareness endowed with great dignity and potential, we would relate to them as what Buber called 'I-Thou', as subjects rather than reductive objects, as ends in themselves, persons who transcend all self-centered measures of their worth (Buber 1970, 53-68).

**(2) A core human problem: the pervasive habit of misperception that contributes to all human-made suffering.**

In this section, I will continue to draw mainly on Buddhism, focusing on areas of Buddhist epistemology. What I said above implies that the fundamental identity of persons, their personhood, should not be identified either with our limited thoughts of them nor with their limited thoughts of themselves. The basic identity of persons is their fundamental awareness, possessed of great dignity, worth and capacity, from which all thoughts, emotions and reactions arise according to conditioning or cultivation. Yet we do not routinely perceive or sense everyone around us in their basic identity as beings of unconditional worth and potential. If we did, we would naturally respond to them all with reverence, care and compassion.

Instead, from our conditioning, our minds tend to label everyone in reductive ways, then to mistake our own reductive thoughts of the persons for the persons, thereby impeding our underlying capacity for more stable and inclusive attitudes of care and compassion toward them all. At the root of this deluded tendency is the mind's unease with the insubstantial nature of its being, which is impermanent, empty of substance,

inter-dependent with all, and thus unlimited, unbounded. The mind's fear of its insubstantial and unbounded nature generates a compulsive urge to think up a self that would feel bounded, substantial, and thereby secure; the thought of self as a seeming refuge from the frighteningly insubstantial and unlimited nature of reality as it is. But this thought of a substantial self, *per se*, is just an ephemeral thought. So the mind, in its attempt to make passing thoughts of self seem more substantial, strings the thoughts together into a chain, thereby sustaining the impression of a narrowly delimited, unchanging self. The mind thus *reifies* its limited thoughts of self, mistaking them for one's full personhood. Correlated with this reified construction of self, the mind also reifies its thoughts of everyone else, mistaking its thoughts of them *for them*. In this way, the mind continually categorizes everyone into in-groups that support its current construct of self and out-groups that do not, routinely reacting to persons as reductive objects of possessiveness, apathy or ill-will, as what Buber called 'I-It.' (Gethin 1998, 147; Gross in Gross & Reuther 2001, 110-111; Makransky 2007, 103-107).

There is nothing wrong with thoughts of self and others, *if* they are recognized *as* very limited impressions that do not capture anyone's full being or personhood. Such thoughts help organize the elements of our experience so we can carry out our functions in relationship and community. But when the mind *reifies* its reductive thoughts of self and others, it does not recognize them *as* thoughts. Instead, the mind takes a few qualities it has attributed to a person, totalizes them as the entire person under a conceptual label, and thereby reduces the person to that one reductive label. We thus routinely mistake our own limited labels of others, in the moment, for their *whole personhood*: 'just a janitor', 'just an old guy', 'just a girl', 'just one of those people (in some out-group)' according to our social and individual conditioning. We then react to our reductive representation of the person as if it *were* the person, which hides their fuller being, life experience, dignity and mystery from us (Dalai Lama 1999, 36, 41, 94, 108-110). In authentic moments of loving connection, we momentarily commune with others in their fuller personhood, sensing them in their unconditional worth as I-Thou. Yet, far more than we are conscious we relate to others as I-It, mistaking our reductive labels for the persons, thereby impeding our underlying capacity to commune with their fuller personhood from our own fuller personhood.

Again, this pervasive tendency of deluded perception is based in the mind's continual attempt to establish a substantial self out of insubstantial thoughts. Life conditioned by this habit is a struggle, because each situation feels like it must be interpreted to establish the concreteness of a self that is actually just a series of ephemeral thoughts. Buddhist psychology calls this continual, unconscious, self-centered struggle the 'suffering of conditioned reaction' (*samskāra-dukhatā*). And this supports a second level of suffering called the 'suffering of transience' (*pariṇāma dukhatā*). The suffering of transience is felt in the mind's attempt to find firm ground by grasping at transient phenomena—material goods, pleasant experiences, supportive people, and so forth—as if such things could provide lasting safety and well-being for the concrete self, which they can never provide, since they do not last, and since there is no such concrete self (Makransky 1997, 161-162).

The social psychologist Ernest Becker identified this urge to flee from our mortality as a central motivation for the tendency of societies to inflict suffering on masses of vulnerable people. Roberto Goizueta, a Catholic liberation theologian, has elaborated on Becker's point:

[The] need to deny our mortality ... is what drives us to construct personal identities, social institutions, ideologies and belief systems that can make us feel invulnerable and ultimately invincible.... [This] process ultimately deals death, to ... others against whom the individual must assert his or her singular invulnerability.... ...we run from weak, powerless, vulnerable, [and] wounded persons in particular, for they especially threaten our sense of invulnerability. They are the mirrors of our own souls, whose very existence threatens our sense of invulnerability, security, and control. (Goizueta 2009, 15-17).

Traditional Buddhism explains the mind's reified misperceptions of persons, including its attempt to create an invulnerable self, as a root cause of suffering for that individual. But the same habit of deluded perception can also be viewed, from perspectives of social psychology and liberation theology, as a fundamental cause of social suffering, contributing to systemic structures of inequity and injustice, by directing resources to oneself and one's in-groups, misperceived as the only ones truly worthy of care. From our social conditioning, we misperceive each other according to social

location as I-It more than we notice, generating suffering not only in individual relationships but also in our ways of organizing wealth and power. When each of us is unable routinely to sense all others in their unconditional worth as I-Thou, how could we possibly create societies in which we actually treat them all as if they had such great worth? How could such an ideal be realized when, in our daily lives, we so little feel it?

**(3) Why effective contemplative practice is needed to address this pervasive problem of misperception.**

Social analysis and activism alone do not address the pervasive habit of misperception described above. A contemplative discipline is needed to expose how much our reductive thoughts have hidden the fuller identity of persons from us, as beings of great dignity, worth and potential, as Thou. When working for social justice, we may think we avoid reductive ways of perceiving others by standing in solidarity with the oppressed. Yet the same delusive tendency of perception is generally still operative, restricting the scope of our care, so we view the oppressed as the ones truly worthy of care and their oppressors as not. To view one group as more fully human than the other in this way, and to ‘choose sides,’ is to replicate the epistemology of oppression in the name of opposing it, by maintaining the perspective that some persons matter and others do not.<sup>1</sup> The problem is not only that we lose the fuller personhood of ‘oppressors’ when we mistake our reductive label of them for the persons, nor that each of us is also an oppressor in ways of which we are not fully conscious. The larger problem is that when we perceive one group as worthy of care and another group as not, we reinforce our unconscious tendency to mistake *everyone* for our own reductive labels of them. If we stay committed to a relationship of I-It with regard to some people, the ‘oppressors’, the basic framework of I-It remains in place, unrecognized and unchallenged, affecting our perception of everyone else and our actions toward them all. This often manifests in social justice activism, for example, when we view ourselves as the helpers and the oppressed mainly as objects of help, which is a kind of I-It relationship. It also manifests when we mistake our hatred of those who support oppressive systems for righteousness (Knitter 2009, 173-179).

This I-it habit of deluded perception is not solved by social analysis or activism alone, because the mind that engages in social analysis is the same mind that unconsciously mistakes everyone included in its analysis for its reductive thoughts of them, perpetuating habits of misperception that exclude many from genuine care and compassion, even when we think we are working for social justice. When those of us seeking to dismantle oppressive social systems remain unconsciously identified with our own patterns of deluded perception, those patterns become woven into whatever new social system we may create (Knitter 2009, 200). In recent history, this has been evident, for example, in the actions of communist regimes of Russia, China, Cambodia, and Eastern Europe, which came into power under high ideals of social equity, then instituted death-dealing policies against masses of people whose lives held little value within the new regime. The same can be said for globalized capitalistic corporate and political regimes that employ ideals of democracy and freedom, in part, as rationalizations for death-dealing profit-making policies that result in vast socio-economic inequalities and massive ecological devastation.

Another sign that this basic habit of misperception is operative when we work for social change is how often dysfunctional rage and anger are experienced by social justice activists, anger that lacks awareness of its own tendencies of misperception. Many social justice activists report that, over time, they become caught in recurrent painful feelings of rage and anger, making it difficult to work effectively, to attract support, and often contributing to burnout (Gross in Gross & Reuther 2001, 181; Knitter 2009, 173-179; Makransky 2016, 89-90). Such dysfunctional anger is supported by the habit of reification and misperception described above, which triggers endless reactions to our own fragmented images of self and others. Such reactive habits of anger, in themselves, lack any means to stay in touch with the fuller humanity and potential of everyone involved, especially those who oppose our positions. Such habits prevent us from accessing our fuller capacities for discernment, more inclusive care, inner replenishment, inspiration, and energy (Dass & Gorman 1985, 159-160).

By pointing out this tendency to mistake our reductive thoughts of persons for the persons, I am not arguing against the need to confront oppressive social systems and behaviors. Rather, to confront such things effectively we need a kind of knowing that

can maintain awareness of the fuller personhood of everyone involved, including those we may confront, and for this a contemplative practice is essential. The Buddhist epistemology I draw on here assumes that there is much to be confronted in persons—all their ways of thinking and acting that are harmful to themselves and others. But in the moment that we confront others out of anger, even supposedly righteous anger, we tend not to sense their deep dignity and human potential beyond the single, reified image that our anger has made of them. And to declare our anger ‘righteous’ does nothing to correct that error.

For this reason, the power to confront harmful persons in many traditional Buddhist stories is understood as a fierce form of compassion rather than any ordinary form of anger. This is exemplified in stories of bodhisattva figures that fiercely confront an individual or group, out of compassion for all involved, and is also imaged in wrathful tantric Buddhist images of enlightenment. Fierce compassion is a power forcefully to confront someone who thinks and acts harmfully, *both* on behalf of those he harms *and* on behalf of his own underlying potential, his fuller personhood or Buddha nature.<sup>2</sup>

For effective work for social change that is motivated by fierce compassion rather than dysfunctional forms of anger, we need a practice that helps us distinguish *the person* as embodied awareness, endowed with unconditional worth and capacity, from that person’s *habits of thought and action*, which may be destructive. Such a practice must also distinguish the person from our own reductive thoughts of them, revealing the contrast between I-It and I-Thou, not just as a matter of belief at a superficial level of consciousness but as a way of knowing from a deeper level of consciousness.<sup>3</sup> What I am calling ‘fierce compassion’ is also exemplified in how Christian figures like Martin Luther King, Archbishops Desmond Tutu and Oscar Romero, and Thomas Merton upheld unconditional love as a fierce power of resistance to oppressive regimes and structures. Such a fierce, confronting care for everyone involved, a care that includes both ‘oppressed’ and ‘oppressors’, is only possible if it expresses a de-reifying wisdom rather than a reifying anger. And to realize such a de-reifying awareness requires an effective contemplative practice.

An effective contemplative practice is a practice that makes our almost continual deluded misperception of persons newly conscious, by introducing a perspective that

transcends the misperception, so it can be newly recognized *as deluded* by contrast with a way of knowing that isn't. Such a transcendental perspective, in Buddhist terms, is called de-reifying awareness (or non-conceptual wisdom, *nirvikalpa-jñāna*), a kind of knowing that releases us from identification with our reductive, reified thoughts of persons to sense them in their fuller personhood and mystery, in their Buddha nature. A core purpose of Buddhist practice, then is to empower this kind of transcendental, de-reifying awareness in order to be liberated from our identification with reductive, reified misperceptions of self and others that have led to countless harmful actions and sufferings, in order to sense everyone more fully in their primal dignity and potential, their fuller personhood. I would argue that some means of cultivating de-reifying awareness must inform any attempt to work against injustice, if we are to avoid the habits of misperception that contribute to the dynamics of injustice itself.

In Buddhist terminology, the heart of contemplative awakening occurs in the moment when the cognizant aspect of our awareness glimpses the *emptiness* of all its reified perceptions. In that moment, awareness now recognizes its deluded habit of misperception as delusion, by seeing how it mistook its labels of beings for the beings, and by sensing that there is a fuller depth and mystery to them all that transcends the delusion. To realize emptiness thus provides a space of freedom for the mind's cognizance to express more all-inclusively and unconditionally its underlying capacities for love, compassion, discernment and creative responsiveness, which can be cultivated to increasing strength and stability.<sup>4</sup>

Buddhist practitioners engage in many kinds of mutually supportive practice to liberate their awareness from its habit of identifying with its reified misperceptions, in order to sense and respond to persons in their fuller personhood (their Buddha nature), as beings unconditionally worthy of care and compassion. Practitioners study and reflect on the epistemological causes of suffering, the possibility of transcending them, and various ways of doing so, such as through meditations of calm abiding (*śamathā*) and penetrating insight (*vipāśyanā*). Such meditations help practitioners access meditative absorptions of de-reifying insight into the emptiness of all reified perceptions. Devotional practices of reverence, offering, repentance, and purification position practitioners before a communal field of buddhas, bodhisattvas or other enlightened figures. This field of enlightened

beings blesses and empowers the practitioner to learn to join them in their enlightened activity to liberate beings, and ultimately to merge with them in the empty awareness of enlightenment (*dharmakāya*) that is primordially undivided from the practitioner and from all other beings in their Buddha nature. Ethical guidelines and practices discourage harmful attitudes and actions that flow from reductive misperceptions of beings, while encouraging attitudes and actions of generosity and compassion that help a practitioner's awareness become less identified with those misperceptions, instead to recognize and compassionately respond to beings in their fuller personhood, their Buddha nature.<sup>5</sup>

Such contemplative and ritual practices are prominent in Buddhist traditions, but Christian (and other theistic traditions) also provide practices that, from the Buddhist perspective above, can be seen also to help liberate the mind from its habitual identification with reductive misperceptions of beings by empowering responsiveness to their fuller personhood, as beings of great dignity, worth and potential.

As an example of de-reifying aspects of Christian practice, for brevity, I give one quote from a co-authored work by two contemporary theologians, Michael and Kenneth Himes, who relate theological understandings of poverty, creation and sacramental vision to Christian practice as a whole. The Himes's write,

The only reason for anything to exist is the free agape of God... Utterly poor in itself, creation is divinely gifted. Thus, to see creation as a whole, or any particular creature, as what it is... is to see revealed the grace which is its foundation in being. [Thus,] everything is a sacrament of the goodness and creative power of God.... The more richly developed our sacramental vision, the more sacraments crowd in upon us. ... The recognition of the other as ... that which exists because it is loved by God, cannot occur where that other is regarded as 'it.' By its nature, a sacrament requires that it be appreciated for what it is, and not as a tool to an end, in Buber's terms, a sacrament is always a 'Thou.' ... The whole of Catholic praxis is training in sacramental vision. Liturgy and social action, marriage and parenthood, prayer and politics, music ... and the visual arts, all educate us to appreciate the other as sacramental, worthy companions of our poverty and our engracedness. [All such practices] teach us to see things as they are. (Himes & Himes 1993, 111-113).

According to the Himes's, a fundamental purpose of all Christian practice is to confront our idolatrous habit of falsely identifying beings with our limited impressions of them as I-It, so we can respond to them as I-Thou, as beings of great dignity and worth who transcend our reified, reductive perceptions of them.

In making this comparison, I am not arguing that Christian sacramental vision is the very same thing as the de-reifying wisdom cultivated by Buddhists. I am only pointing out that aspects of Christian practice also implicitly promote de-reifying ways of knowing, at least to some degree. Other examples include the practices of liturgical communion and prayer that help incorporate worshippers into God's transcendental perspective and all-inclusive love, helping them recognize and respond to the dignity in all persons that transcends all reified, self-interested perceptions of them. Many other examples can be drawn from teachings attributed to Jesus, e.g., "You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so you may be children of your Father in heaven, who makes [the] sun rise on [both] the evil and the good...." Jesus's words invite us to join him in a perspective that transcends our familiar reductive labels of 'neighbor' and 'enemy', the reified labels we have mistaken for the persons, by praying for the persons beyond the labels, possessed of great dignity. Jesus thereby invites us into a kind of de-reifying awareness. (Matthew 5:45). Explicit forms of de-reifying analysis can also be found in various Christian contemplative writers, such as Thomas Merton, Meister Eckhardt, Nicholas of Cusa, the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, and Jan Van Ruusbroec.

#### **(4) What contemplative practice lacks if not informed by social analysis**

I argued above that effective contemplative practice is necessary to confront the cause of suffering emphasized by Buddhist epistemology: the mind's deluded attempt to ground itself by reifying its reductive thoughts of persons, then mistaking its reified thoughts of persons for the persons and routinely reacting to them as objects of greed, apathy and ill-will; as I-It instead of I-Thou. If this deluded perception is not newly revealed and addressed by an effective contemplative practice, any attempt to remake

unjust social systems tends to replicate the delusion at the core of injustice—the mistaken view that some persons matter and others do not.

But the greed, apathy and ill-will that proceed from deluded perception take shape not just in individual minds but also in economic and political structures that unequally distribute resources and power, causing suffering to the poor and marginalized through policies that favor the few (Loy 2003, 164-167; Knitter 2009, 200). When we participate in inequitable systems without challenging their inequities, we contribute to the harm they cause, even when we do not consciously intend harm. Contemplation that makes us conscious just of our own habits of misperception, if not informed by the experience of people in other social locations, remains too little aware of the suffering effects of social systems upon many others.

Classical Buddhist karma theory asserts that actions that flow from conscious intentions to harm others are the cause of harmful karmic effects. But, as Rita Gross argued, that understanding can prevent Buddhists from questioning their participation in destructive social systems if they do not personally intend to do harm. For example, regarding patriarchal gender norms, Rita Gross has written: ‘...usually it is not an individual man who wants to cause me suffering by ... limiting my options as a woman, but the male dominated system in which he participates, often without [any conscious] intention to do harm’.<sup>6</sup> Or, regarding systemic socio-economic suffering, Paul Knitter has noted that a person might have a good meditation of love and compassion, then put on sneakers made by children in a foreign sweatshop and go for a run while remaining unaware of those children’s sufferings.<sup>7</sup> In other words, through contemplative practice we may realize our relation to other individuals as I-Thou, yet participate in, and thereby support, social and economic arrangements that treat masses of individuals as I-It.

Christian liberation theology highlights this second order cause of suffering: oppressive social systems. I refer not just to liberation theologies that emerged in Latin America, but also to those that have taken shape in Asian, African, feminist and womanist theologies. Liberation theologians argue that the prophetic tradition of Judaism and Christianity discloses God’s special care for those who are oppressed, and God’s fierce challenge to those who exploit them. This prophetic focus culminates in the Christian assertion that God chose, by incarnating in Jesus, to live among the

marginalized and to undergo the ignominious death of the cross in oneness with society's non-persons. Jesus's life, death and resurrection reveal both the social sinfulness of the world and the power of divine love and justice to liberate oppressed communities from it.

It can be argued that, through its understanding of social sin, the prophetic tradition was the first so fully to reveal to human consciousness the social constructed and harmful nature of oppressive systems. In this way, the prophetic tradition can be viewed as foundational for all modern disciplines of critical social analysis. It can also be argued that the prophetic tradition, in part through modern Christian and Jewish social ethics and liberation theologies, has contributed to the very possibility of a modern, socially engaged Buddhism that critically addresses social problems.

Christian liberation theology contrasts with classical Buddhism in its ability to point rigorously and specifically to the suffering effects of oppressive social systems.<sup>8</sup> This ability derives from a key part of its method, the 'hermeneutic privileging of the oppressed'. Although Buddhist texts describe rebirths of bodhisattvas in all realms of suffering from their compassion for beings, Buddhism has lacked liberation theology's 'preferential option for the poor', which foregrounds the experience of the oppressed as the hermeneutic key to the social sinfulness of societies. For liberation theologians, it is the perspectives of the poor and marginalized that shine most light on the painful effects of oppressive systems, effects that go largely unnoticed by privileged groups. As Paul Knitter has noted, 'We tend to ignore those who suffer differently from us in order to avoid critically inquiring into the social systems that bring us so much benefit'.<sup>9</sup>

### **(5) Epistemology and action are mutually informing**

Thus far I have argued that epistemologies of both Buddhism and Christian liberation theology are necessary for effective action in the world. Conversely, action in the world is necessary to inform those epistemologies in ways that personal experience alone, or social analysis at a distance from others, cannot do. Taking action, in this context, means coming to know others in their human dignity and potential, learning from and empathizing with them in the specifics of their experience, and working with them for needed change. Action to address suffering also concretizes the doctrinal

teachings of Buddhism and Christianity and fundamentally informs their contemplative and ritual practices.

Within the Buddhist eight-fold path of enlightenment, for example, the three components of embodied action—right action, speech and livelihood—inform and are informed by every other component of the path, including right intention, view, mindfulness, effort, and meditation (Gethin 1998, 81). Similarly, all six perfections of the Mahāyāna bodhisattva path are included in each other, which means that embodied action in service to others, which involves the perfections of giving, altruism, patience and perseverance, is essential to inform the perfections of meditation and wisdom and vice versa (Yangsi Rinpoche 2003, 360).

One thus learns through synergistic practice of contemplation and action to stay in touch with the emptiness of one's reified projections and with the Buddha nature of persons (I-Thou), even under trying conditions of service and action that would ordinarily trigger reified I-It ways of reacting. Work with and for others is essential to inform empathy and compassion for them, to expose unconscious conditioned habits of I-It reaction, to cut through those habits with de-reifying forms of practice, and to bring out capacities for enlightened action, including de-reifying wisdom, love, compassion, equanimity, and creative responsiveness, in increasingly inclusive and sustainable forms. (Chodron 1994, 32, 48, 57-59, 102-3, 132-3). Yet the perspectives of the poor and marginalized are not foregrounded in classical Buddhist epistemology or action.

Christian liberation theology focuses more than classical Buddhism on systemic structures of oppression as the main cause of man-made suffering, which God, through the prophets, has called on humanity to take action to overturn. Therefore, social action is essential to reveal the meanings of God's love and justice for humanity in light of sinful structures. Gustavo Gutierrez wrote,

Participation [by action] in the process of liberation is an obligatory and privileged locus for Christian life and reflection. In this participation will be heard nuances of the Word of God which are imperceptible in other existential situations and without which there can be no authentic and fruitful faithfulness to the Lord. (Gutierrez 1988, 32).

Gutierrez also wrote,

The annunciation of the Gospel ... is made real and meaningful only by living and announcing the Gospel from within a commitment to liberation, only in concrete, effective solidarity with people and exploited social classes. Only by participating in their struggles can we understand the implications of the gospel message and make it have an impact on history. (ibid, 153).

Social action is thus essential for receiving God's ongoing revelation. To work in concrete ways for social justice as a Christian is to be tutored by God, through the Spirit of Christ in oneself and in the oppressed, in how to co-create God's Kingdom.

Our conversion to the Lord implies [our] conversion to the neighbor... Conversion means a radical transformation of our selves; it means thinking, feeling and living as Christ—[who is also] present in exploited and alienated persons. ... To be converted is to know and experience the fact that, contrary to the laws of physics, we can stand straight, according to the Gospel, only when our center of gravity is outside ourselves (ibid, 118).

And as Lee Cormie wrote,

... An understanding of faith informed by the notion of praxis, such as that articulated by liberation theologians, insists that the activity of God in shaping the content of faith includes the activity of believers, so that this action feeds back into their perception of the word of God (Cormie 1978, 179).

Yet, specific attention to the habit, pointed out by Buddhism, of mistaking our own reductive impressions of everyone for the persons, virtually every moment, remains largely unnoticed in the writings of liberation theologians.

Action that entails coming to know and empathizing with others in the specifics of their experience reveals many aspects of the human condition, and possibilities for positive change, that personal contemplation or social analysis alone do not reveal. To learn from and work with others in action is necessary for one's compassion to become knowledgeable in its care and empathy, more conscious of personal and systemic causes of suffering, and more aware of creative possibilities for addressing those causes. Action is also necessary to deepen one's understanding, and embodiment, of the very meanings of Buddhahood or God's Spirit. Thus, both Buddhist and Christian traditions understand that their respective epistemologies and contemplative practices must be informed by

action in the world. Yet what is missing in each tradition's epistemology in light of the other tradition is not fully corrected by action alone. Specific learning from the other tradition is also needed.<sup>10</sup>

**(6) Conclusion: Buddhist and Christian liberation epistemologies need to be informed by each other for effective compassionate action**

Buddhism points out unconscious habits of misperception in the conditioned minds of individuals, to be addressed by effective contemplative practice. Liberation theology points out unconscious habits of misperception conditioned by our locations in social systems, to be addressed by social analysis that privileges perspectives of the oppressed. Effective contemplative practice newly reveals the habit of reductive reification that is operative in our minds, which de-centers the reified self with its deadening framework of I-It, to open a space to recognize and creatively respond to persons as I-Thou. Social analysis that privileges the experience of the oppressed newly reveals the social inequities of history, thereby de-centering the dominant perspectives of powerful groups to open a space for creatively imagining more caring, compassionate institutions and policies (Cormie 1978, 168, 175).

If the tendencies of delusion, greed and ill-will in individuals, which are highlighted by Buddhism, are not confronted by effective contemplative practice and action, they keep taking expression in oppressive social systems that institutionalize apathy, greed and violence. If oppressive social structures, which are highlighted by Christian liberation theology, are not confronted with effective social analysis and action, they keep instilling tendencies of delusion, greed and ill-will into individuals by social conditioning.<sup>11</sup> Neither the delusive causes of suffering in individuals nor systemic causes of suffering in societies can be adequately addressed unless the other is also addressed.

This means that Buddhist and Christian liberation traditions each have blind spots in their epistemologies and practices, blind spots that need to be revealed and corrected by learning from the other tradition. Perspectives and practices from both traditions are needed to illumine critical elements of the process toward individual and social awakening and liberation.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For further Buddhist arguments against the tendency among Christian liberation and other social activists to frame their work for justice as ‘choosing sides’, see Nhat Hanh 1987, 70; Nhat Hanh 1995, 79-81; Knitter 2009, 173-4, 205-207; Makransky 2014, 641-644.

<sup>2</sup> On fierce compassion as a Buddhist principle of confrontation, see Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche 1975, 21; Tsang Nyon Heruka 1995, xix-l; Makransky 2007, 179-185; Makransky 2016, 89-95. This principle is depicted in many stories where a Buddhist teacher fiercely challenges his disciples or the larger community, as in several of the Zen stories in Reps, 1957 and in stories from Tibet in Surya Das, 1992. Fierce compassion as confrontation also takes form as social criticism in Buddhist cultures, e.g. Paltrul Rinpoche 1994, 204-209, 354.

<sup>3</sup> This is exemplified in Roshi Glassman’s response to Paul Knitter in Knitter 2009, 173: ‘You won’t be able to stop the death squads [in El Salvador] until you realize your oneness with them.’

<sup>4</sup> In Mahāyāna Buddhist terms, this synergistic cultivation of insight into emptiness together with cultivations of all-inclusive love, compassion and associated capacities comprises the path of enlightenment.

<sup>5</sup> For informative summaries of these diverse kinds of Buddhist practice, and ways that they inform each other, see e.g. Harvey 2013, 237-375; McMahan 2002, 143-174; Gregory 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Gross in Gross & Ruether 2001, 177.

<sup>7</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>8</sup> Early liberation theologies of Latin America have been criticized for their association with Marxist ideas and movements. I firmly reject Communism as a social solution to problems of inequality, for reasons noted in section (3). But I argue here that liberation theology’s laser-like focus on the experience of the marginalized and oppressed is crucially important to inform social ethical understanding and action.

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<sup>9</sup> Personal note.

<sup>10</sup> My thanks to Robert Sharf and Paul Knitter, whose early feedback suggested I add a section on epistemology and action, which has become section (5).

<sup>11</sup> As Rosemary Radford Ruether has written: 'Structures of privilege and oppression, and our socialization into them, dim our awareness of our larger potential [for discernment, empathy, and social challenge]'. In Gross & Ruether 2001, 136.