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The Buddhist Understanding of Forgiveness and Reconciliation

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Abstract: The author deals with forgiveness and reconciliation in the social sphere, i.e., on the horizontal plane as seen in Buddhism. In Buddhism too, as in all religions, there is doubtless a gap between theory and practice, between the ideal and the existential. Nevertheless Buddhism has not been so belligerent as some other religions. Besides it can draw inspiration from its rich spiritual resources, which can enable it to shun communalism and maintain a broad-minded and dialogical attitude towards others. Be that as it may, while granting that divergent world-views result in differences with regard to the nature, motivation and expression of forgiveness and reconciliation, Buddhists and others need to hearken to the call of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation, to heal a broken world and build bridges of friendship and harmony.

Keywords: Forgiveness, brokenness, reconciliation, Buddhism, *Mettā*

In this article we are concerned with forgiveness and reconciliation in the social sphere, i.e., on the horizontal plane, and not on the vertical level, in relationship to a Supreme Being. Although forgiveness and reconciliation are related, they are distinct from each other. Forgiveness involves the giving up of resentment, anger and hatred. It paves the way for reconciliation. In forgiveness the victims unconditionally hold out the olive branch to the offenders; reconciliation takes place when the perpetrators admit their offence and respond by extending the hand of friendship. Forgiveness may be localized in one person or group, i.e., it may be one-sided, but reconciliation involves mutuality, the restoration of harmony and trust between both parties.

There are two forms of Buddhism, Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna. In Hīnayāna only one school is living, viz., Theravāda, whose original texts are in the Pāli language. In Mahāyāna there are many schools existing, and their original texts in India were in Sanskrit. We shall first present the Buddhist understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation. This will be further elucidated through concrete examples. Then we shall relate forgiveness and reconciliation with the four Buddhist virtues of friendliness, compassion, joy and equanimity. Throughout this process we shall endeavour to bring out the distinctive characteristics of Buddhist forgiveness and reconciliation, which spring from the specific world-views of Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism.

I. The Buddhist Understanding of Forgiveness and Reconciliation

In Buddhism, forgiveness forms part of the Buddhist virtue of forbearance (Pāli *Khanti*; Sanskrit *Kṣānti*). Forbearance consists mainly in the absence of anger, hate and malice, and the forgiving (*marṣaṇa*) of offences by others (*parāpakāra*). All this is included in what is normally called forgiveness. But, secondarily, forbearance also includes the patient endurance of adversity, hardship, pain and suffering, the acceptance of the Buddha and his doctrines, and the practice of the Buddhist religion (Dayal 1932: 209). In the tenfold list of perfections (*pāramitā*) that the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva[1] strives to specialize in forbearance is usually listed as the third perfection, and it is praised to the skies in Buddhist literature.

Ideally, forgiveness is absolute, complete and universal. One must forgive all types of offences (injury, insult, abuse, criticism), everywhere (in private and in public), at all times (past, present and future), in all circumstances (in sickness or health), in thought (not entertaining angry thoughts), word (not speaking harshly) and deed (not harming physically), without any exception (whether friend, enemy or indifferent person), and however wicked the offending person or however terrible the injury may be. (See the texts cited in Dayal 1932: 209-210). Even if people criticize the Buddha or his Religion (*dhamma*) or the Order (*saṅgha*), one should not be angry or bear ill will towards them, but merely point out what is wrong

(*Brahmajāla-sutta*, in *Dīgha-nikāya*, pt I, 1.1.5, p. 5). Whoever bears enmity even to thieves who sever one's limbs, one by one, with a saw, does not carry out the teaching of the Buddha. Even in such a circumstance, one should not be harsh to the thieves or hate them, but rather one should be kind and compassionate and cultivate friendliness (*mettā*) towards them as well as towards the whole world (*Kakacūpama-sutta*, in *Majjhima-nikāya*, pt I, 21.5.20, pp. 172-173).

To achieve this high ideal is no easy task, but the Bodhisattvas in particular strive to reach this cherished goal, trying all the time not to bear malice or ill will towards anyone even when their life is in grave danger. If, on the other hand, they fail to reach this lofty goal, the Bodhisattvas can repent and confess their fault and reflect how they fall short of the ideal and resolve not to engage in acrimonious disputes, not to reply harshly, not to harbour malice or bear ill will, and so on and so forth (*Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, 24, pp. 208-209).

In the Buddhist texts, one finds many reasons to motivate oneself to avoid resentment towards those who have offended oneself. Buddhaghosa, a Theravāda Buddhist, includes the following reasons in his *Visuddhimagga*: remembering the scriptural passages that exhort one to practise forbearance and avoid hatred, reflecting on the harmful effects of anger on oneself, developing compassion for one's enemies who will suffer in purgatories due to their succumbing to anger, recalling to mind the many examples of the Buddha, who in previous lives as a human adult or child and even as an animal did not entertain the slightest hatred towards his tormentors, reflecting that one's enemy may have been one's loving parents or brothers or sisters or sons or daughters in previous lives, realizing that the one with whom one is angry is not a substantial soul, but merely a series of momentary aggregates of various elements, and therefore one cannot make that person the target of one's anger (*Visuddhimagga*, 9.15-38, see Ñyāṇamoli 1964: 324-332). Similarly, Mahāyāna texts too try to motivate one to practise forgiveness. Firstly, one should follow the teaching and example of the Buddhas in forgiveness. The Buddhas will not forgive people unless they forgive others who offend them. Secondly, in reference to the person to be forgiven one may reflect in this manner: the present enemy may have been one's

friend or relative or teacher in a former birth. Since Buddhism does not believe in a finite soul, strictly speaking there is no perpetrator of injuries and insults, nor is any one injured or insulted.[2] All beings are evanescent and subject to pain and suffering, and so one should rather lighten their burden than be angry and unforgiving. The adversaries are conditioned by the results of their deeds (*karman*) in past lives, and are therefore not acting freely. Thirdly, one may also think with regard to oneself in the following vein: One is suffering insult and injury as a consequence of one's own evil deeds in previous existences. One's enemies are actually one's friends and beneficiaries for they preserve one from such worldly goods as wealth and fame, and give one the golden opportunity to practise forbearance, which leads to salvation. Fourthly, one should ponder over the ill effects of an angry and unforgiving attitude: it results in terrible punishments in various purgatories, and wipes out the merit one has gained through several lives. Hence it is better to bear up with the comparatively negligible sufferings inflicted on one in this life than face the terrible tortures in the future. Revenge always brings evil consequences on oneself. Being at peace with others results in great happiness to oneself. Often one is unforgiving because of pride, which needs to be replaced by the spirit of humble service. Finally, mercy and love urge us to forgive others (See the texts cited in Dayal 1932: 210-212). It also helps us to realize in our meditational practice that those who inflict pain on us are acting thus because of their suffering, caused perhaps by the inexperience of their parents, who in turn may have been victims of their parents. Once we understand the circumstances on account of which a person has misbehaved, our anger ceases, we become compassionate towards that person and we can forgive even without that person being present (Thich Nhat Hanh, cited by Singh 1995: 23-24).

It is noteworthy that many of these reasons are mentioned also by modern writers on forgiveness and reconciliation. They speak of shifting the focus of attention from oneself to the aggressor: instead of asking "Why me?" one asks "Why them?" In doing so, one realizes that the enemy too is driven by fear and other conditioning factors. This enables the victim to feel compassion for the offender (Botcharova 2002: 299-300). This compassion is not sympathy, but rather empathy for the aggressor's humanity (Shriver, Jr. 1997: 8).

They have also pointed out that examples of extraordinary people who practised forgiveness in extremely difficult situations and even sacrificed their lives for the cause of reconciliation can inspire victims to find the courage to forgive (Worthington, Jr. 2002: 186-187). It is also helpful to realize that we too have our faults for which we deserve punishment, and yet are often not penalized for them (Dawson 2002: 247-248). The spirit of humility is important in the process of reconciliation (Lederach 2002: 198-199).

On the other hand, we can easily see that some of the reasons spring from the specifically Buddhist world-view. For example, strictly speaking, no one offends nor is any one offended for there are no finite souls or substantial agents: every finite being is a series of momentary aggregates. In Theravāda the aggregates are real, but they exist only for a moment, so who is offending whom? The aggregates of the succeeding moment are different from those of the previous moment. One cannot therefore hold the aggregates of the succeeding moment responsible for what was perpetrated by those of the previous moment.[3] In Mahāyāna the aggregates do not even exist; in fact, nothing exists except the one Supreme Reality, the Ādi Buddha. It is interesting to note that the law of *karman* is invoked not to condemn the offender, but to understand the aggressor's predicament. Theravāda does not accept a God, so there is no question of recourse to the Christian idea that God forgives us and therefore we too should forgive others, or that God will not forgive us if we do not forgive others. But Mahāyāna does propose a similar motive. The Buddhas, who are manifestations of the supreme Ādi Buddha, will not forgive those who do not extend forgiveness to others.[4]

The Buddhist texts usually speak of forgiveness, rather than reconciliation. The latter, however, is particularly found in the Confessions made by the monks and nuns. On new moon and full moon days, the monks and nuns assemble together for their fortnightly meetings, called *Uposatha* [Sanskrit *Upavastha*], at which they recite the monastic code, called *Pātimokkha* [Sanskrit *Prātimokṣa*], which contains the rules and regulations of monastic life. After each rule is recited, there is a pause so that any monk or nun who has broken that rule may confess it and accept the prescribed penalty. The rules for the monks and nuns are not all the same. (Dutt 1941:

305-312.) A few transgressions are so serious that the sanction is expulsion from the Order. In the case of some infractions, after imposing a temporary expulsion, the Order reassembles to consider readmitting the transgressor. In this way, the one who has violated those rules is reconciled with the members of the monastic community. In some infringements one just expresses regret, e.g., for having struck another monk. In some other cases, the offenders must give up what they had wrongly appropriated, e.g., gold or silver or what was meant for the community, and must also express regret for having done so. Here we see that restitution is involved in addition to contrition. There are also practical rules for the settling of disputes about the observance of the rules. For instance, one way is that the disagreeing persons talk to each other and settle their differences, and thus become reconciled to one other.

Many modern writers on reconciliation emphasize the need for justice too and deprecate cheap forgiveness. However, in this context, it is important to lay stress on restorative justice, rather than on retributive justice. In restorative justice the aim is to restore harmony by healing the victim and rehabilitating the aggressor through a punishment that is not vengeful but reformative (Shriver, Jr. 2002: 156-157). It is worth remarking that in the Buddhist Confession, the justice is restorative, not retributive. Most of the prescribed punishments are meant to reform the one who has breached the rule and bring about reconciliation between the victim and the perpetrator.

There is a well-known Buddhist saying: "Never does hatred cease by hatred, but hatred ceases by love. This is the eternal law (*dhamma*)." (*Dhammapada*, v. 5, in *Khuddaka-nikāya*, pt I, p. 17). Anger and hatred are great obstacles to forgiveness and reconciliation. Buddhism emphatically points out that wrath and animosity affect the unforgiving enraged or hostile persons more than the ones on whom they vent their spleen. The one who is full of rancour experiences mental agony and anguish, while the one who bears no resentment does not feel such pain and grief. (*Anguttara-nikāya*, 5.18.4, pt 2, p. 451). Anger may or may not make the other person suffer, but it definitely makes oneself suffer. Moreover, in accordance with the law of *karman* [Pali *kamma*] it will not lead to liberation but to damnation in purgatories. An infuriated person is like one

who wants to hit another with a burning ember or faeces in one's hand, but actually ends up being the one to suffer burns or to stink (*Visuddhimagga*, 9.22-23; see Ñyāṇamoli 1964: 326-327).

In a programme entitled "Eye for an Eye" and telecast on 16th and 17th May 1999, CNN showed that rage and revenge not only rob one of peace of soul but also tear apart the body. Laboratory experiments demonstrated that in unforgiving conditions one's blood pressure, heart rate and sweat rate shot up. Indeed, revenge is not sweet, but bitter, while forgiveness and reconciliation take the hurt away (Sheth 2001: 76).

II. Some Buddhist Examples of Forgiveness and Reconciliation

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

Let me begin by briefly narrating the three most celebrated stories in Buddhism, illustrating the virtue of forbearance. Of these the most famous is that of Khantivādī. In one of his previous lives as a Bodhisattva, Gautama Buddha was born as Kuṇḍalakumāra, who was later known as Khantivādī [Sanskrit Kṣāntivādin], i.e., "One who preached the doctrine of forbearance". Angry with Khantivādī, King Kalābu tested his forbearance by inflicting one agonizing torture after another: he first had him scourged all over his body, then had his hands and feet chopped off, and then his nose and ears cut off. Even though he was taunted by the king after every torment, Khantivādī never got angry, declaring himself to be a preacher and practitioner of forbearance. Finally, the king kicked him on his chest near the heart and walked off in a huff. The commander-in-chief requested Khantivādī to vent his wrath only on the king, but to spare the others and the kingdom. However, instead of taking revenge, Khantivādī uttered a blessing, "Long live the king!" (*Khantivādī-jātaka-vaṇṇanā*, in *Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā*, 4.2.3, No. 313, vol. 3, pp. 34-37).[5]

Another well-known anecdote is that of Puṇṇa [Sanskrit Pūrṇa] who opts to stay in a place called Sunāparanta [Sanskrit Śroṇāparānta], but the Buddha warns him that the people there are fierce and rough and asks him how he would react if they were to abuse and revile him. Puṇṇa answers that he would consider them very good since they would not strike him with their hands. The Buddha then asks him how he would respond if they were to strike him with their hands. To which he replies that he would think of them as very good since they would not pelt him with clods of earth. And Puṇṇa proceeds in this way, every time excusing them for not being worse: for their not hitting him with a stick, and not stabbing him with a knife. And if this last were to happen, he would rejoice that he would be freed of his body without his even looking for a knife to take his own life, of which he was so ashamed and disgusted. The Buddha then congratulates him for his great control and calmness, which resulted in such a laudable attitude of forbearance (*Puṇṇovāda-sutta*, in *Majjhima-nikāya*, pt III, 45.2.2, pp. 358-360).[6]

Dharmavivardhana, better known as Kuṇāla, was the virtuous son of King Aśoka. His stepmother Tiṣyarakṣitā declared her burning love for him because of his beautiful eyes. On being rejected by him, she ordered his eyes to be pulled out. But accepting this as the fruit of his own past deeds (*karman*), he did not bear any malice towards her. He then went about with his wife begging on the streets, and making his living by singing and playing the *vīṇā* (a musical instrument). Later when Aśoka heard of her dastardly deed, he wanted to put her to death by pulling out her eyes, cutting off her tongue, poisoning her, etc. But Kuṇāla asked the king to spare her life, declaring that he harboured no anger towards her. Kuṇāla then miraculously regained his eyes. Nevertheless, the king had Tiśyarakṣitā burnt alive in a lac house (*jatugṛha*) (*Kuṇālāvadāna*, in *Divyāavadāna*, 27, pp. 261-270).

We notice in these instances that the ideal is not even to feel anger or hatred even in the most trying circumstances. We could say that, strictly speaking, there is nothing to forgive, for there is no offence taken in the first place. The ideal seems to be a sort of stoic attitude of not being perturbed at all. The ordinary person of course cannot reach such heights of equanimity. Occasionally, the Bud-

dhist texts do give more down-to-earth examples of people who get annoyed with one another but eventually do get reconciled. Two monks residing in Kosambi quarrelled with each other. Then this enmity between the two spread not only to their monastic disciples but also to their friends and others, who thus took sides with one or the other monk. In spite of many efforts made by the Buddha to reconcile them, they refused to do so. It was only when they felt the pinch of being deprived of food offerings from the lay folk that they came to their senses and decided to forgive each other and be reunited. Finally, the two factions also begged the Buddha's forgiveness. (*Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*, 1.5; see Burlingame 1921: pt I, 176-183).

On occasion the Buddha brings about reconciliation. In the Introduction to the Kuṇāla Jātaka, it is reported that when the Koliya and Sākyan tribes were about to engage in a bloody battle over the right to the waters of the river Rohiṇī, the Buddha persuaded them to desist from fighting by making them realize that there was no point in killing warriors of priceless value for the sake of some water that had comparatively little worth (*Kuṇāla-jātaka-vaṇṇanā*, in *Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā*, 5.21.4, No. 536, vol. 5, pp. 408-410). Not all, however, paid heed to the Buddha's mediations. He was unable to persuade the stubborn monk Tissa to ask forgiveness for not welcoming some visiting monks with respect and hospitality. Tissa was unforgiving because he was angry with those monks for having abused him for this fault of omission. In fact, in a previous life too he was not willing to ask pardon (*Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*, 1.3; see Burlingame 1921: pt I, 166-170).

There were times when the Buddha was harsh with some of his interlocutors, even humiliating them at times (Sheth 1988: 60). But it is explained that he occasionally used disagreeable words out of compassion, just as we would remove a stick or a stone from a child's mouth, even if it pains the child (*Abhayarājakumāra-sutta*, in *Majjhima-nikāya*, pt II, 8.1.3-8.2, pp. 68-70). Even so, one can cite some texts that speak disparagingly of other traditions or even of other Buddhist sects. For example, the followers of Theravāda are accused of not being true followers of the Buddha and hence they do not attain salvation. The Theravādins on the other hand are said to consider Mahāyāna as a heretical religion. (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-*

sūtra, at 2.37, p. 29; 2.54-55, p. 31; 12.8-9, p. 164). One of the chronicles of Sri Lanka, the *Mahāvaṁsa*, often portrays the island's Tamilians as enemies of the Sinhalese. Even though he had conquered King Elāra, King Duṭṭhagāmaṇi was disconsolate for he realized that he had slaughtered millions in the battle. But some Arahants[7] consoled him by telling him that this action of his would not prevent him from attaining a temporary heaven. He had killed only one and a half human beings, i.e., those who had declared themselves to be Buddhists, fully or partially. The rest were unbelievers and immoral, not worth any more than mere animals. He would bring glory to Buddhism and so should not let his heart be troubled. (*Mahāvaṁsa*, 25.103-111; see Geiger 1912: 177-178). To our modern sensibilities in this age of dialogue, it is shocking to read that, according to the writers of this book, which of course was composed in a different era, people who have attained liberation consider the vanquished non-Buddhists as sub-humans. Hatred often dehumanises the enemy and thus gets rid of possible qualms of conscience (Schriver, Jr. 2002: 160-161).

Let us now leave the traditional texts and cite a couple of illustrations from Buddhist history. In the 13th Rock Edict, the Emperor Asoka publicly expresses his remorse and confesses how the carnage at Kalinga caused him great anguish. He also declares that he pardons, as far as it is possible, all those who have wronged him. He makes peace with the people living in the forests. He wishes all beings to be free from injury and to enjoy gentleness or joyousness (Basak: 1959: 71-72) He even took care to omit the 13th Edict from the texts carved on the rocks in Kalinga, lest even his words of repentance would serve as a spark to re-ignite adverse emotions in the Kalingas by reviving the memory of his fateful attack on their country. (Thapar, cited by Gandhi 1999: 52). The father of Hōnen, the leader of the Japanese Jodo-shu school, was fatally wounded by a gang of robbers who attacked their home. On his deathbed, his father exhorted his son never to take revenge but rather to pray for the salvation of his father as well as of the attackers (Anesaki 1963:171-172).

We now turn to some examples in the contemporary world. The Dalai Lama, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, has al-

ways embraced the policy of peaceful resistance to the Chinese, who invaded Tibet in 1950. He refers to the Chinese as his brothers and sisters and is motivated by tolerance, compassion and love. While wanting autonomy, he admits the fact that Tibet would continue to be linked with China (Gandhi 1999: 400). He has said, "Tolerance can be learnt only from an enemy. Therefore, in a way, enemies are precious, in that they help us to grow....Compassion and love are necessary in order for us to obtain happiness or tranquillity. [Human nature is one.] When we return to this basis, all people are the same. Then we can truly say the words *brother*, *sister*...This gives us inner strength." (Cited by May 1994: 178). Realizing the oneness of humanity is one of the ways that facilitates forgiveness or at least reduces unforgiveness (Worthington 2002: 181). It should be noted, however, that this oneness in Mahāyāna is radical and metaphysical, and not just a sort of psychological unity or a common humanity shared with one another for, according to Mahāyāna, there is only one Reality, and everything else is illusion; everything is identical with that one Reality.

The Thai Buddhist Sulak Sivaraksa also appeals to the sense of the one human family: "We must come to see that there is no 'other'. We are all one human family. It is greed, hatred and delusion that we need to overcome" (Cited by May 1994: 179).

The Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh did not bear any hatred towards the Catholic Diem regime that persecuted him, nor to the Viet Cong or the American soldiers who attacked Vietnam. He could find excuses for the atrocities perpetrated by American soldiers in Vietnam, attributing these to their hard life in the swamps and jungles infested by mosquitoes and other insects, and to their being in constant danger of death. Although initially angry, he did not blame a sea-pirate who had raped a twelve-year old girl, thinking that if he had had the same historical, economic and educational background as that pirate he would probably have behaved in the same way. This attitude of Thich Nhat Hanh is based on the Buddhist doctrine of Dependent or Conditioned Co-production (*pratītya-samutpāda*; Pali *paṭṭicca-saumuppāda*), according to which no being or event arises without a conditioning factor: this (resulting) being or event is because that (preceding) being or event is; this (result-

ing) being or event is not because that (preceding) being or event is not. (Nichols 1985: 2-3). It thus helps the Buddhist to pay attention to attenuating circumstances, and hence be more understanding and forgiving. Another principle on which Thich Nhat Hanh bases his tolerant and reconciliatory spirit is the Mahāyāna doctrine of the oneness of all reality, which he interprets in practical life as an attitude of "inter-being", of identifying oneself with the other. He identifies himself with that twelve-year old girl who jumped into the sea after being raped, and with the pirate who raped her, thinking of his own heart which is not yet capable of seeing and loving, but wanting to discover his own true being and thus keep the door of compassion open in his heart. In his own words, "Interbeing means that you cannot be a separate entity. You can only interbe with other people and elements" (May 1994: 179-180).

In war-torn Cambodia Maha Ghosananda, five-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee, led nine *Dhammayietras* [=*Dharmayātras*] or Pilgrimages of Truth to promote peace. Often opponents met and walked together in the spirit of reconciliation. In his first *Dhammayietra*, he preached repeatedly, "The suffering of Cambodia has been deep. From this suffering comes Great Compassion. Great Compassion makes a peaceful heart. A peaceful heart makes a peaceful person. A peaceful person makes a peaceful family. A peaceful family makes a peaceful community. A peaceful community makes a peaceful nation. A peaceful nation makes a peaceful world" (*Letter from Cambodia*, March 2002, p. 1).

The Sri Lankan monk H. Uttarananda, who was a member of the now defunct Humanist Bhikkhus'[8] Association (*Mānava-hitavādī Bhikkhu Sangamaya*), proposed a Buddhist-Humanist view of the national ethnic problem in Sri Lanka. Following the typical Buddhist "middle path", he wanted to avoid the two extremes of a Sinhala Buddhist State and a free Eelam State. He acknowledged the inhuman atrocities perpetrated on Tamils in 1983 and thereafter by racist fanatics and governments, and was able to sympathetically understand the exasperated violent reactions of Tamils whose pent up rage boiled over due to the prolonged racist attitudes of successive governments. He called for reconciliation and strengthening of racial unity and peace (Uttarananda 1991: 6-9, 12-13). Apologies, whether

private or public, do help in the process of reconciliation (Shriver, Jr. 2002: 163).

In a Press Conference in Tokyo on 3rd June 2002, the four Mahānāyakes or "Patriarchs" of the Theravāda Buddhist Order of Sri Lanka, publicly released a Press Statement, which declared that the Order was for peace and development in Sri Lanka and solicited the support of the Japanese people in the peace process and in confidence-building measures which would benefit all three communities affected by the war, viz., the Sinhalese, the Tamils and the Muslims.[9] The Sri Lankan newspaper *The Island* (5th Nov., 2002, p. 1) reported that the Mahānāyake of Asgiriya conferred his blessings on both the UNP Government of Ranil Wickremansinghe as well as the LTTE in their efforts to restore peace through peace talks in Thailand.

On the more modest scale of the family, Heidi Singh narrates how she was able to eventually become reconciled with her estranged father by practising the meditation of friendliness (*mettā*), reflecting on appropriate Buddhist texts given to her by her Buddhist teachers, reciting Buddhist Scriptural passages, and observing the precepts of moral life (Singh 1995: 15-24).

III. The Four *Brahma-vihāras* or Sublime States

Forgiveness and reconciliation are intimately linked with the group of four Buddhist virtues called *Brahma-vihāras* (Sublime States), viz., *mettā* [Sanskrit *maitrī*] (friendliness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (joy) and *upekkhā* [Sanskrit *upekṣā*] (equanimity). While in Theravāda the exclusive practice of these virtues resulted only in rebirth in the temporary heavenly world of the god Brahmā, in later Mahāyāna it led to *nirvāṇa* or salvation. *Mettā* or *Maitrī* is practised towards those who are happy; its contrary is malice. *Karuṇā*, on the other hand, is directed to those who suffer and are unhappy. While Theravāda gives more importance to *mettā*, Mahāyāna emphasizes *karuṇā* more (Dayal 1932: 227-228). All these four Sublime States are to be cultivated or developed through meditation. Progress in these virtues helps one to be more forgiving and reconciliatory. In fact, to develop a forgiving and reconciling disposition, it is not

enough to just make a good resolution to do so. It is meditation that brings about the necessary transformation.

Mettā essentially consists in the wish that all beings may be happy. Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so one should cultivate unlimited love towards all beings (*Metta-sutta*, in *Suttanipāta*, 1.8, in *Khuddaka-nikāya*, pt I, pp. 290-291). The cultivation of *mettā* is the best way to prevent anger from arising and to remove anger in case it has arisen. (*Aunguttara-nikāya*, 1.2.7, pt I, p. 5). The mind of one who has acquired perfection in *mettā* cannot be affected even by the most hostile person, just as the earth cannot be destroyed, space cannot be painted on, and the river Gaṅgā cannot be burned (*Kakacūpamasutta*, in *Majjhima-nikāya*, pt I, 21.4.16-18, pp. 170-171).

Before embarking on the development of *mettā*, one must engage in preliminary reflections on the dangers of hate and the advantages of forbearance (*khanti*). Then one proceeds through meditation to cultivate *mettā* in order to protect the mind from the dangers of anger and lead it into the advantages of forbearance. One begins by practising *mettā* towards oneself, wishing welfare and happiness to oneself. After this one concentrates on engendering *mettā* towards one's teacher, then towards a dear friend, next towards a neutral person, and finally towards a hostile person. Several reflections are suggested to enable one to overcome resentment towards one's enemy. This *mettā* is to be perfected in such a way that eventually one makes no distinction between oneself, the dear person, the neutral person and the enemy. *Mettā* reaches its climax when more and more beings are included in the range of one's *mettā*, until it extends to all beings, human, animal or plant, and is radiated in all the directions of the universe (*Visuddhimagga*, 9.1-76, see Ñyāṇamoli 1964: 321-340).

A similar meditational order, but with some variation, is followed for the cultivation of *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (joy), and *upekkhā* (equanimity). In the development of these qualities, just as in the case of *mettā*, perfection is obtained by making no distinction between anyone, and suffusing all the directions of the universe with that particular virtue (*Visuddhimagga*, 9.77-89; see Ñyāṇamoli 1964: 340-343).

In the context of our topic of forgiveness and reconciliation, therefore, the Buddhist should practise friendliness, compassion, joy and equanimity towards a hostile person, even to the extent of not making any distinction between a hostile person, a neutral person, a dear one or oneself.

While traditionally these four *Brahma-vihāras* were generally applied only in the purely spiritual realm, nowadays Buddhists are gradually spelling out the wider social implications of these sublime states. In many countries there is emerging an "engaged Buddhism" where even monks are becoming socially involved and work towards community development. For instance, Seri Phongphit describes the social contributions of eight monks and three laymen in Thailand, all of whom are motivated by these four virtues as well as by other Buddhist attitudes (Phongphit 1988). In the context of compassion (*karuṇā*), for instance, Phongphit points out, "A rich man who does not care for the miserable conditions of the poor lacks this quality...Those who shut themselves up in ivory towers, in the midst of an unjust world, cannot be called compassionate" (Phongphit 1988: 26). We have seen that Buddhist *mettā* or friendship extends not only to one or other individual friend or enemy, but also to all human beings, nay, even to all animals and plants, and is radiated in all directions. Similar is the case with the other three sublime virtues. Thus forgiveness and reconciliation, in the Buddhist perspective, is all inclusive, encompassing not only all human beings, but also the whole of nature.

IV. The Specific Characteristics of Buddhist *Mettā*

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

With regard to Theravāda, I follow to a large extent the comparison made by King (1962: 64-97), differing from him slightly in detail and emphasis. One major flaw of King, however, is that on the basis of his study of Theravāda he makes generalized statements about

the whole of Buddhism. I shall therefore also briefly point out the specific characteristics of *maitrī* and forgiveness in Mahāyāna too, which differs from Theravāda in some important respects.

Mettā and Christian love do resemble each other, e.g., both are opposed to malice and both go to the extent of loving one's enemy and even sacrificing one's life for another. But there are many important differences, springing from their different world-views. Unlike Christian love, *mettā* is extended to all beings, not just to human beings. Buddhist *mettā* is therefore more universal. On the other hand, while in Christianity love is the highest virtue,[10] *mettā* is the lowest of the four *Brahma-vihāras*, and in Theravāda the four *Brahma-vihāras* lead at best to rebirth in the world of Brahmā; only when they are linked with Insight (*Vipassanā*) can they lead to *nibbāna* or liberation (Aronson 1980: 74-77). Moreover, the exercise of these four States is meant primarily for one's own spiritual advancement, and only secondarily for the benefit of others. In Theravāda one helps or saves others by first saving oneself.

Christians love others because God has loved them,[11] or they forgive others because otherwise God will not forgive them.[12] But Theravāda Buddhism does not admit any Supreme Being, hence the motivation is not the same. In Theravāda, charity begins at home: one loves or practises friendliness first towards oneself; only then can one extend friendliness towards others. In Christianity the person loved has intrinsic worth: the person is a child of God and has an immortal soul. In Theravāda, on the other hand, the person loved is neither created by a God nor has a soul: each person is just a series of momentary aggregates, subject to the law of *karman*, and therefore does not have intrinsic worth, but should be an object of compassion. Theravāda *mettā* is more "atomistically individualistic" and not so inter-personal and community-oriented as Christian love.

While the cultivation and expression of Christian love is spontaneous, personal, and generally emotional at least to a certain extent, Theravāda *mettā*, even if it comes naturally in the case of those who have attained perfection in it, is developed through a systematic, calculated method and expressed in a more impersonal, detached and emotionally more sedate manner. This impersonality and detachment is important not only in the fourth Sublime State, but also

in the three other Sublime States: in the practice of *mettā* one must guard against personal attachment; in the case of *karuṇā* (compassion) one must avoid aversion and sadness, and so, strictly speaking, *karuṇā* does not include sympathy or suffering with the other, but it does involve empathy for the other; and in *muditā* (joy) one must be careful not to give oneself to merriment. In fact, the exercise of these three Sublime States is governed by the highest State of *upekkhā* (equanimity). This does not mean, however, that the ideal for the Theravāda person is to have no concern for the welfare of others, as King argues.[13] In Theravāda the life of the Buddha as well as his teachings do show a certain measure of altruism and concern for the welfare of others (Aronson 1980: 86-94).

More specifically, in the context of forgiveness and reconciliation, Christian forgiveness and reconciliation is something active, it brings about a change, a healing, a restoration because it is based on an inter-personal, communitarian world-view. In Theravāda on the other hand, one can only do good or harm to oneself, for each one is reaping the fruits of one's own *karman*. One can help another only indirectly by one's example, by trying not to provoke resentment and anger in others and by the tranquil, detached vibrations of *mettā* sent out in different directions. Disagreeing with an acrobat, his apprentice pointed out that they would perform their act successfully not by watching out for each other but by each one watching out for himself (*Sedaka-sutta*, in *Saṅyutta-nikāya*, 47.19, pt 4, pp. 144-145).

Coming now to Mahāyāna, we notice that there are closer affinities with Christianity. The exclusive practice of the four *Brahmavihāras* leads one to *nirvāṇa* or salvation, unlike in Theravāda. Mahāyāna is far more altruistic than Theravāda. In fact, it is in a sense more altruistic than Christianity too, since the ideal for the Bodhisattvas is to delay their salvation until the smallest insect is saved.[14] Their compassion too is so great as to impel them to take on the sufferings of others, even in the worst purgatory. They also give others grace and transfer their merits to them. So in Mahāyāna the ideal is to think more of the other and less of oneself. Then again the Buddhas will not forgive people unless they forgive others. This too brings Mahāyāna closer to Christianity. However, it should be noted

that even here there are differences. For example, it is not the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who are the highest, but it is the Ādi Buddha that is the Supreme Being. But the dealings of the Mahāyāna Buddhists are with the former. As in Theravāda, and unlike in Christianity, the person has no intrinsic worth. In fact, compared to Theravāda, the person in Mahāyāna has even less worth, for the person does not exist; only the Ādi Buddha exists. And yet, paradoxically, the ideal is to even delay one's salvation for the sake of other persons who do not really exist even for a moment, except on the level of ignorance and from the practical point of view. In a sense, according to the doctrine of dependent co-production, interdependence or a sort of interrelatedness exists, but persons do not exist. Moreover, the interrelatedness in the Mahāyāna world-view is on the ontological level; ultimately there is absolute identity. As a result, while in Christianity one concentrates on overcoming differences between alienated people, in Mahāyāna one transcends these differences. Hence in Mahāyāna one can more easily identify oneself even with the oppressor. On the other hand, even though the Bodhisattvas take on the sufferings of others and thus lighten their burden, they must maintain detachment as in Theravāda and, in both Theravāda as well as Mahāyāna, aggressors as well as victims are exhorted to be detached from the causes of suffering (May 1994: 177, 180-181).

Thus we see that while there are similarities in love, forgiveness and reconciliation between Christianity and Buddhism, there are many distinctions arising from the divergent world-views not only of Christianity but also of Theravāda and Mahāyāna. These differences are found not only with regard to the presuppositions, but also in reference to the motivation as well as the expression of love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

In the context of the views of many Western writers on forgiveness and reconciliation, it should be pointed out that the emphasis in Buddhism is in the first place on not even feeling hurt or on remaining unperturbed by even the most cruel and vehement aggressor. In this sense, strictly speaking, there is no need of forgiveness for no offence has been taken! The ideal is to practise forbearance, to put up with the trials and sufferings inflicted by others and not bear any grudge or malice toward the opponents. If one does not

succeed in this stoic ideal, and experiences hurt and resentment, one must try and bring oneself to forgive the perpetrator. Buddhists have always maintained that anger and hatred harm the perpetrator more than the victim. A deeper realization of this has dawned on the consciousness of the modern world only in recent years. Although desired, reconciliation is not so actively sought for. If the aggressor is moved to repentance and becomes reconciled, it's well and good, but it is not the deliberate goal of every act of forbearance and forgiveness. Justice and reparation too are not insisted upon in every instance. We have seen that in the case of the Buddhist Confession, both reconciliation and justice are integral parts of it, but Confession is reserved only for monks and nuns. It should be clarified that what is not always insisted upon is justice in the near future; eventual justice will of course surely take place, for it is based on the law of *karman*. Both forgiveness and reconciliation are practised more on the plane of individuals than on the level of groups.

V. Some Socio-Political Implications of Buddhist Reconciliation and Love for the Modern World

Although Buddhist reconciliation and love are traditionally practised more on the individual plane than on the wider socio-political level, we have seen that there are instances of the latter in early Buddhism and especially in contemporary Buddhism. The deep wounds inflicted by Hindus and Muslims on each other at the time of India's Partition have not yet healed even after so many years. Unless both sides acknowledge their responsibilities, their *karman*, in the terrible atrocities perpetrated on one another, and unless they adopt the Buddhist approach of condoning or attenuating the offences of the other by realizing that circumstances have played a major role in shaping the adverse reactions, the two sides will always look on each other with prejudice, suspicion and hatred, and clash with each other even at the slightest provocation, as has been recently evidenced during the terrible Gujarat riots, which have flared up again and again. We have to learn to practise Buddhist love (*mettā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) not only towards friends but also in reference to enemies. It is indeed remarkable that India and Pakistan have recently begun making peace overtures. Both sides have been accepting a certain amount of responsibility and are extending the hand of friendship to

each other. Of course we are a long way from complete harmony between both nations, but the peace initiatives being taken by the Indian and Pakistani governments do bode well for more cordial relations between the two countries. In the predominantly Buddhist country of Sri Lanka, recent attempts at reconciliation between Sinhalese and the LTTE, with the help of Norwegian mediation, look promising. The Buddhist monks can surely set a fine example by recapturing the Buddhist spirit of forgiveness and forbearance.

If India tries to go back to its religio-cultural roots, shaped by Buddhism (and other religions), she will be able to regain her pristine non-violent and tolerant approach towards conflict situations. This would help reduce the animosity between linguistic groups, castes and religions, and bring about greater equality between the rich and the poor, between men and women.

Israel and Palestine too are slowly beginning to realize what Buddhism had understood long ago, viz., that harbouring hatred for each other only brings greater harm to oneself. The Buddha had taught and had illustrated with examples how violence breeds violence, how anger and hatred adversely affect those who are unforgiving. While revenge brings on evil consequences, reconciliation and peace bring happiness. The Buddha was able to convince the Koliya and Sākya tribes of the futility of war, for it brought greater loss than gain. We have also the shining example of King Asoka who publicly confessed the violence and carnage that he had inflicted and made peace with his enemies. While insisting on autonomy for Tibet, the Dalai Lama emphasizes the oneness of humanity, which can help bring together opposed ethnic groups in Fiji, and Protestants and Catholics battling each other in Northern Ireland. The idea of "inter-being" propagated by Thich Nhat Hanh can provide a powerful motive to people in Bosnia and Kosovo, and East Timor and Indonesia to place themselves in the shoes of their opponents, and not only be compassionate towards them but also rejoice with them.

VI. Conclusion

· Buddhism has been one of the more peaceful religions in the world. The historian Toynbee has written: "The three Judaic religions have a record of intolerance, hatred, malice, uncharitableness,

and persecution that is black by comparison with Buddhism's record." (Toynbee 1966: 167). However, Buddhism too has had its share of hatred, violence and unforgiveness. At the Buddha's death rivals fought to possess his relics. Later, Buddhists quarrelled over his tooth relic. In Burma King Anawratha of Pagan attacked the kingdom of Thaton in order to seize a copy of the Scriptures and the relics of the Buddha. A Theravāda king in Sri Lanka attacked a Mahāyāna monastery and destroyed its sacred texts. The Tibetan monk Pelgyi Dorje assassinated King Lang Darma because he persecuted Buddhism. The Gelugpa sect of Tibet often ransacked and destroyed the monasteries of other Buddhist schools. A number of Chinese messianic groups engaged in armed rebellions. In Japan Nichiren founded a militant sect, vehemently condemning other schools. Bands of Japanese monks attacked and plundered other monasteries. In Mongolia Shamanism suffered severe persecution at the hands of Buddhists.

Coming to modern times, in India there are frequent clashes between Buddhists and Hindus. In Burma monks played a part in the bloody Buddhist-Muslim riots of 1938. Terrible looting and massacres have marked the ethnic conflicts between the Sinhalese and Tamilians in Sri Lanka. In Tibet there are violent protests against the Chinese government (Sheth 1988: 44-45). Indeed, Buddhism in Asia has been labelled "a faith in flames" (Schecter 1967: xi).

In Buddhism too, as in all religions, there is doubtless a gap between theory and practice, between the ideal and the existential. Nevertheless Buddhism has not been so belligerent as some other religions (Sheth 1988: 63-64). Besides it can draw inspiration from its rich spiritual resources, which can enable it to shun communalism and maintain a broad-minded and dialogical attitude towards others (Sheth 1988: 46-60). Be that as it may, while granting that divergent world-views result in differences with regard to the nature, motivation and expression of forgiveness and reconciliation, Buddhists and others need to hearken to the call of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation, to heal a broken world and build bridges of friendship and harmony.

Notes

1. Special beings who, particularly in Mahāyāna, delay their salvation for the sake of helping others, take on the sufferings of others, transfer their merits to them and give them grace.
2. It is interesting to note the contrary case in the Hindu *Bhagavad-gītā* (2.19), where Krishna urges Arjuna to fight against the Kauravas since the soul – which constitutes the essence of a person and is inactive – is neither a slayer nor is slain.
3. Of course, by the same logic, there is no forgiver either and there is no reason to forgive, for the aggregates that were offended and hurt are different from the aggregates of the succeeding moment. Buddhists, however, chose the other alternative rather than this one.
4. Note, however, that in Mahāyāna all this is only on the practical level for, from the point of view of the absolute truth, everything is illusory, except the one Reality, the îdi Buddha.
5. A Sanskrit version is found in the *Kṣānti-jātaka* in the *Jātaka-mālā*, 28, pp. 189ff.
6. A Sanskrit version, belonging to the Sarvāstivāda School, is found in the *Pūrṇāvadāna*, in the *Divyāvadāna*, pp. 23-24.
7. Those who have attained *nibbāna* or liberation while living.
8. Bhikkhu literally means a mendicant and refers to a Buddhist monk: the initial practice of begging for food is now defunct, except in a couple of countries like Thailand and Mynmar.
9. From the text of the Press Release, sent to me by the Japanese Committee of the World Conference on Religion and Peace.
10. See, e.g., 1.Cor 13.13.
11. See 1 John 4.7-11, 19.
12. See Mt 6.12; 18.21-35.
13. King (1962: 79) points out that in equanimity, while one is not indifferent, one does not really *care* whether beings are happy (the concern of *mettā*), or are released from suffering (the concern of *karuṇā*), or enjoy the success of their endeavours (the concern of *muditā*) (Cf. *Visuddhimagga*, 9.93-95, 123; see Ñyāṇamoli 1964: 344, 352).
14. Cf in this context, St Paul's yearning to die and be with Christ, and yet, on the other hand, his wanting to stay on to help the Philippians to progress in the faith and increase their joy in it: Phil 1. 21-26.

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