The Purification of the Mind and the Encounter with Those who Suffer. A Christian View of Buddhism and Human Rights

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This article considers Buddhist critiques of the theory and praxis of human rights from a Christian theologian's perspective. It considers what Buddhism can contribute to an understanding of human rights and how Buddhism is itself challenged by human rights concerns, with particular reference to the thought of Prayudh Payutto and the Thai context. In conclusion, it considers what Christianity and Buddhism can learn from each other in their basic approach to human rights.

The Context

The secularization thesis, which predicted the decline of religion in the world, has to a large extent been discredited and rethought.[1] Even in Europe, where the forces of secularization and the predictions of doom for religion have been strongest, there is a growing awareness that what we name by the term "religion" is here to stay,

1 Peter Berger (1999) is a leading sociologist of religion who, along with others, has rethought the secularization theory he once held himself.

albeit in new and uncertain forms.[2] The role of religion is again at the center of political discourse.

Regrettably, it is often because religion is seen as a force behind social conflict, violence, and discrimination that it obtains a prominent place in newspaper headlines and in fields of public discourse. There is a growing recognition in political and intellectual circles, however, that religion can and must be understood as a tool for overcoming violence and prejudice on a societal level. Religion, thus, is widely acknowledged as having a central role to play in the promotion and furtherance of human rights.

Since the adoption of the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948, there has been widespread discussion about its "universal" claims, and about how it should be interpreted and implemented in different countries and local contexts. In recent decades, there have been a number of debates, sometimes heated, about the relationship between human rights and the religions.[3] It is also the case that people of religion have, increasingly, come to adopt the language of human rights when relating their religious teachings to the social sphere. This is not only true in the West, but also in other regions of the world and among Asian Buddhists.

The perception of human rights in the political sphere in Asia, where the great majority of Buddhists live, can be characterized as having shifted from one of suspicion to a more open acceptance. Soraj Hongladarom, commenting on how human rights have been viewed in the Thai context, wrote:

> The concept is also generally regarded as foreign, and the Thai word for human rights — *Sitthi Manussayachon* — still rings an unfamiliar sound. For most Thais, the word simply conjures up the image of someone who disregard the traditional pattern of compromise and harmonization of social relations; someone, that is, who is quite out of touch with the traditional Thai mores. [4]

2 This is grounded in extensive sociological data gathered from the European Values Study, cf. Davie 2006.

3 Rappenecker 2004. The UN Declaration has prompted the development and adoption of various international and regional human rights legislations, but it is the 1948 document that is principally referred to in this paper when speaking of human rights.

4 Hongladarom 1998, p. 97.

Hongladarom goes on to admit, however, that the language of human rights has come to be increasingly used and accepted in Thai circles. Further afield, even the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in which some of the most vociferous voices critical of human rights language were to be heard, has recently begun the process of setting up its own human rights body.

Leading Buddhist figures in Asia, who have been at the forefront of movements for peace and freedom, such as the Dalai Lama, Maha Ghosananda and Aung San Suu Kyi, have all been clear in their support for human rights legislation. In Thailand, the leading Buddhist social critic, Sulak Siviraksa, along with the various NGOs he has inspired, together with leading monks, like Buddhadāsa and Payutto, have also been keen to voice their support of human rights. In the political arena in Thailand, human rights legislation was incorporated into the 1997 Thai constitution and the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand was established a few years later.[5] There does appear to be a growing agreement, therefore, that human rights legislation is a useful, valuable, and necessary tool in today's world.

Several Buddhist commentators argue that human rights and Buddhist teachings are complementary and supportive of each other. Two basic reasons repeatedly surface to support this convergence: a recognition that human rights is concerned with the moral good, just as "morality" (P. *sīla*) is fundamental to the Buddhist path of liberation, and that human rights are concerned with reducing or overcoming suffering, the *raison d'être* for the Buddhist to undertake the religious life. The support for human rights, however, is not without qualification and criticism, and it is to this that we now turn.

The Buddhist Critique

Despite the convergence between Buddhism and human rights concerns, a number of Buddhist commentators are highly critical of how human rights are understood, formulated, and put into practice. Criticisms cover a variety of issues — the theoretical basis of human rights legislation, the language used in classical documents,

5 Harding 2007.

the socio-political interests they promote, and the scope they cover. It is possible here to cover only some of the main areas.[6] On a philosophical level, there is much criticism of the basis upon which human rights are proclaimed. The preamble of the UN *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* describes this foundation using particular language: the "inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family". This is reflected also in the German constitution, written up a few months after the UN declaration:

> Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar […] Das Deutsche Volk bekennt sich darum zu unverletzlichen und unveräußerlichen Menschenrechten als Grundlage jeder menschlichen Gemeinschaft, des Friedens und der Gerechtigkeit in der Welt.[7]

The influences of the Judeo-Christian tradition, with its notion of creation in God's image, and European Enlightenment thought, with its emphasis on the role of the individual and reason, are cited here by Buddhists. It is difficult to find a direct correlation of "inherent dignity" in Buddhist texts; indeed, the concept seems to contradict or at least stands in significant tension with the Buddhist doctrines of "impermanence" (P. *annica*) and "no-self" (P. *annatā*). In response, Buddhists have sought, in various ways, to provide a religious basis for human rights based on interpretations of their key teachings. Doctrines ranging from "buddhahood", "dependent origination" (P. *paṭiccasamuppāda*), *annatā*, and everyone being subject to *dhamma* have been put forward as possible alternatives. Another notable basis is offered in the value Buddhism attributes to being born in a human life, which is an occurrence that is considered extremely rare and, moreover, offers the precious opportunity and possibility for development towards liberation.

Some commentators, like Damien Keown,[8] have argued that agreeing on a common transcendent reference is unnecessary, since

6 For a variety of Buddhist opinions towards human rights cf. Keown *et al*. (1998) and Schmidt-Leukel (2006).

7 Official English translation: "Human dignity shall be inviolable […] The German people therefore acknowledge inviolable and inalienable human rights as the basis of every community, of peace and of justice in the world."

8 Cf. Keown 1995.

human rights are widely accepted by atheists and people of different religious convictions alike and for varying reasons. In searching for an answer in this field, it does appear that we are asking questions about the basic meaning and value of human life. The difficulty is, as witnessed in our pluralist world of different religious traditions and political ideologies, that a variety of answers are given to these questions. It is also interesting to note that no explanation for the use of "inherent dignity" is proffered in the UN Declaration. While the positive exchange of views and debate within Buddhism on this philosophical plane are fascinating to follow, the outcomes will probably be, like those in other religions, of limited application. If an alternative were ever to be agreed upon and promulgated, it would come under as much critical scrutiny by the international community as that of "inherent dignity". It is, nonetheless, a significant and necessary internal debate which highlights the limitations of conceptual language in human rights documents and the need to be sensitive towards alternative approaches. What is essential, it would appear, is that there is broad agreement on the content of human rights. On this point, it is indeed remarkable that the UN Declaration has been met with such "universal" acclamation.

Buddhists, like many in Asia and elsewhere, are critical of the emphasis on the individual person in human rights language. For "socially engaged Buddhists," however, this critique has to be distinguished from that of the so-called "Asian values" school of thought. Supporters of this school, propounded by the likes of Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew in the past and by certain current Asian governments, like Myanmar, seek to portray human rights as a Western invention, with imperialist intentions, that are insensitive to the Asian cultural values of respecting authority and putting community needs before individuals' rights. Many Buddhists, along with Asian intellectuals like Amartya Sen,[9] are highly critical of this Asian values approach. They criticize this Asian approach as a ruse for seeking to maintain the power of undemocratic ruling Asian elites. They argue that the desire for human rights has been as much a part of Asian history as that of the West. The threat to Asian societies does not come from a Western notion of human

9 Cf. Sen 1997.

rights, but rather from the importation of Western forms of consumerism and capitalism.

Some Buddhists, nonetheless, charge that human rights fail to adequately stress the essential collective character of people's existence and the responsibilities that come with belonging to a social group. Rights and responsibilities have to be seen together, it is argued. This is, however, not based on a hierarchical understanding of human society, as in the "Asian values" case, but rather on alternative notions like that of interdependence, particularly in relation to the doctrine of *paṭiccasamuppāda*. The interconnected nature of all reality, as understood in Buddhism, leads to the assertion that human rights abuses are often a result of rampant individualism, which fails to take note of the needs of other people and fails to appreciate that humanity is bound into an interdependent relationship with the wider natural environment. Buddhist activists, therefore, like the environmentalist monks in Thailand, have stressed the need to rethink our relationship with nature and to engage in environmental protection in order to effectively protect human rights.[10]

The development of human rights language is widely criticised as an ideological product of the liberal West. Without denying the Western influence on human rights formulations, the Buddhist criticisms are often, I believe, more an attack on how the UN Declaration has itself been misinterpreted and misused than on its undoubted internal inconsistencies. This abuse of the Declaration is a point made by the law professor, Mary Ann Glendon, who reminds us that the original document was shaped by people from different cultural backgrounds and that the strong social and economic aspects of the document were lost under the interpretation of liberal Western human rights organizations in the 1960s and 1970s.[11] The Buddhist critique, as represented briefly above, can be viewed as a part of an ongoing critical process that would have been welcomed by the original drafters of the 1948 Declaration. It was the hope of those drafters that the declaration would be adopted and adapted according to local socio-cultural circumstances; it was viewed as a "yardstick" rather than as a complete and perfect document.

10 Darlington 2000.
11 Glendon 2004.

It is in another area of criticism that a Buddhist concern, I believe, makes its most telling contribution: looking deeper into the causes of suffering. Buddhist critics claim that the language of human rights does not go far enough in explaining the underlying causes of suffering that lead to human rights abuses. Like others today, they point to the corrosive effects of consumerism and attachment to socio-economic ideologies that expect and demand ever more economic growth at the expense of the environment and social equality, but they locate the cause of these destructive forces deep within the lives and attitudes of people. It is perhaps unfair to expect a UN document written in 1948 to cover these issues, but it is here that Buddhism offers something particular, for it is here that Buddhism takes us a step further in locating the source of suffering in the untrained minds of individuals.

The Purification of the Mind — a Buddhist Contribution to Human Rights

Therefore, *bhikkhus*, one should often reflect upon one's own mind thus: "For a long time this mind has been defiled by lust, hatred, and delusion." Through the defilements of the mind beings are defiled; with the cleansing of the mind beings are purified. [12]

For some 2500 years, as the text from the *Gaddula Sutta* above reminds us, Buddhism has placed a particular focus on the training of the mind. This "cleansing" involves a detailed process of "attentiveness" or "mindfulness" (P. *sati*). It leads the practitioner, as outlined in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas* and elsewhere, from mindfulness into deepened concentration, insight and wisdom. A central aspect of this mindfulness focuses on the interior thought processes, desires and intentions that arise in a person's mind and determine the actions they take in life. Discernment is employed to recognize and root out the "unwholesome" causes of suffering in the mind and to encourage those that are "wholesome". Buddhism, therefore, places a premium on the purification of the mind, because it has identified this as the key way to understand the sources of suffering and to overcome them.

12 *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22:100.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the Buddhist concern for rooting out the "unwholesome" causes of suffering in the mind, and encouraging the "wholesome" causes that lead to inner peace and liberation, is raised in relation to a critique of human rights. One of the most articulate and challenging of Buddhist speakers in this regard is the eminent Thai monk, Prayudh Payutto. Often referred to as the most distinguished Buddhist scholar living in Thailand today, Payutto has taken a keen interest in relating Buddhist teachings to contemporary social ills, such as wealth and poverty,[13] and to areas of contemporary thought, such as religion and science.[14]

Payutto has also often mentioned human rights in his writings and speeches. Notably, he developed a critique of human rights in a speech he gave to the "World Parliament of Religions" on Buddhist solutions for social problems in the coming century.[15] He described human rights as important and necessary for society, but essentially limited in character. They are fundamentally flawed, he argued, in that they are built in response to a history of violence and division, are a human invention that do not exist as a natural condition, and represent a compromise in order to control social behavior and limit aggression.[16]

In a further talk, accepting the UNESCO Peace Prize in 1994, he said:

> Our current moral education, perceiving the problems and conflicts caused by the unbridled struggle for happiness, teaches restraint based on awareness of human rights. We therefore live in societies where peace is enforced through restraint. But any ethic based on fear and obligation is negative and unreliable — its prohibitive nature is inadequate.[17]

13 Payutto 1992. Payutto has gone under several names, including Rajavaramuni, which denote the ecclesial titles he has received in Thailand.

14 Payutto 1993a.

15 Payutto 1993b.

16 Hongladarom sees a difference here in the approach of Sulak Siviraksa and Payutto, with the former viewing human rights as representing an ideal of human society in contrast to Payutto who stresses their conventional nature. The difference is overstated, I believe, reflecting differences in two approaches, the activist and the scholarly, to the issue.

17 Payutto 2007, p. 3.

Apart from these historical and conceptual failings, the key critique of Payutto is that human rights offer only a limited analysis of suffering. Human rights fall short, he claims, when it comes to understanding the causes of the suffering they are designed to confront and are, therefore, of limited overall value. They fail to take account of the root causes of violence and abuses, which are to be located in the unwholesome mental processes of people.

In arguing for a better basis for human rights, Payutto brings traditional Buddhist teachings into play. He stresses that the roots of human suffering in the social sphere are situated in the interior motivations of people, directed by greed, hatred, and wrong views. These sources of suffering correspond to the three "unwholesome roots" to be found in numerous Buddhist texts (P. *lobha*, *dosa*, and *moha*) though Payutto prefers to speak in terms of "views" (P. *diṭṭhi*) rather than "delusion" (*moha*). From this standpoint, Payutto is able then to question even the commitment of human rights activists. He warns that if they are motivated by the above unwholesome mental factors they will be unable to achieve the social goals they profess and may add to the suffering. It is through the development of the mind, he argues, through the purification of interior motives and views, that a foundation for human rights is properly established. For Payutto, it is simply not enough to base human rights on good intentions and the rule of law; these measures must be complemented by giving human rights a more fundamental basis in tackling the internal workings of the human person.

Although Payutto seeks to provide a basis for human rights in the overcoming of the three hindrances of greed, hatred and wrong views, and points to the ways in which these are interwoven, he nonetheless places particular importance on tackling the problem of wrong views:

> When greed and hatred are founded on or supported by views, be they religious, political or otherwise, they will be intensified and sustained, with far-reaching results which are very difficult to put right. As long as the views upon which greed and hatred are based are not set right, it will not be possible to remove greed and hatred.[18]

18 Payutto 1993, p. 2.

Diṭṭhi, when referring to wrong views in the Buddhist texts, is often associated with greed and with a variety of mistaken opinions and approaches. He states that correct views (*diṭṭhi*) need to be developed in three areas: to see that we stand in an interdependent relationship with nature, that we appreciate our fellow human being as of equal worth to ourselves and thus care for them, and that we have a proper understanding of the true aim of life. In this last category, the emphasis is on developing an interior freedom that is deeper and more far-reaching than external political freedoms. This is to be largely achieved by means of mental development, by not being inwardly attached to material possessions and sensual experiences and in seeking a truly independent sense of happiness.

In describing what constitutes wrong views, Payutto's method here is of interest, because he omits particular Buddhist teachings. Little is said of the classic Buddhist understanding, where the preeminent wrong view is the attachment to the notion of a lasting, unchanging, substantial "self". In his "World Parliament of Religions" speech, Payutto also bypassed any mention of how developing correct views are in Buddhism closely tied to an appreciation of the "three characteristics of existence" (P. *ti-lakkhaṇa — annica*, *dukkha*, *annatā*). Moreover, he spoke of correcting "views," as mentioned above, rather than using the more religiously loaded language of overcoming "delusion" (*moha*). Payutto thus presents his argument in ways that are accessible and more acceptable to people from different religious backgrounds. There is little doubt, though, that he speaks from the basis of these core Buddhist teachings and the Theravāda's interpretation of them.

It is perhaps wishful thinking to hope that such emphasis on the development and cleansing of the mind would be incorporated into internationally recognized human rights documents. On the philosophical level, the Buddhist basis for these claims would be undoubtedly questioned. Moreover, on the socio-economic level, the Buddhist critique would surely be too radical for politicians and citizens to contemplate. It would be rejected not because of its Buddhist flavor but because, when followed through, it fundamentally questions key articles of belief in modern societies — notions of freedom, consumerism, nationalism, capitalist economic development, justice, and, of course, human rights itself. Moreover, it implies a radical change in lifestyle in a world increasingly shaped by the pursuit of individual security and wealth.

Perhaps, however, in the current global financial and economic crisis that affects us all, an opportunity is presented for religious voices on controversial and significant social issues to be heard more. It is interesting to note that the *Guardian* newspaper in Britain, which often adopts a skeptical view towards religion, welcomed the intervention of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in his detailed questioning of modern-day social values that have defined citizens primarily as consumers and allowed debt to spiral.[19] It seems important, in the increasingly globalized world in which we live in, that religious leaders such as Williams and Payutto enter into these debates and offer an analysis that seeks to influence not only religious insiders but also the wider social and political spheres as well.

Human Rights Challenges to Buddhism

Glendon describes the significance of the *UN Declaration of Human Rights* for the international socio-political sphere:

> The Declaration, with its small core of principles to which people of vastly different backgrounds can appeal, is the single most important reference point for cross-national discussions of the human future on our increasingly inter-dependent and conflict-ridden planet.[20]

She presents the original intention of most of the drafters: to provide a basic moral document with legal implications, not to create a fixed set of laws, which covered not only individual rights but also social, economic and cultural rights from the beginning. This is an important reason why the UN document has had such a wide, cross-national and cross-cultural appeal. In its own words, it represents a "common standard" for nations representing many different socio-economic, religious, cultural and political backgrounds. In light of this and the way in which the UN Declaration is constantly referred to by numerous international and local bodies, human rights must be seen as an essential dialogue partner, not only for those in authority and power but also for religious communities as they seek to promote efforts at establishing a more peaceful and just world. Human rights concerns have, therefore, a

19 Williams 2009.
20 Glendon 2004.

legitimate role to play in challenging the practices and beliefs held by religious communities. For religions to ignore this is to risk the indignation of public and international opinion.

The relationship between human rights and religious communities can at times appear ambiguous and controversial. This has often been noted in reference to the Roman Catholic Church.[21] It took quite some time before the language and concerns of human rights were fully recognized and valued in the official documents and doctrine of the Church. The concept of human rights was not embraced until the Second Vatican Council, with the document *Pacem in terries* marking a significant shift in the Church's understanding. Despite being embedded in the official pronouncements of the Church since, there remains today an uneasy tension between the church's public commitment to human rights and how some of its own practices appear to conflict with them. This is often mentioned in relation to the unequal role of women in the Church, and to the secretive and autocratic ways in which the Church is hierarchically run, especially in relation to how theological dissent is dealt with. The Church, an old and powerful institution with a global reach, can at times present a picture of disregarding human rights arguments or standing above the reasonable demands of human rights, which does little for its image and public standing.

Perhaps it is unintended but, on a similar note, the impression is given by Payutto and some other Buddhists that Buddhism has little to learn from human rights. The religious tradition is presented as self-sufficient, the teacher rather than the learner in this relationship. Payutto appears unnecessarily negative in his assessment of human rights when he says things like "the concept itself is a result of division, struggle and contention" and "they are merely conventions for social behaviour".[22] It is interesting that he rarely discusses the history of struggle to overcome suffering that has led to the defining of human rights and the ideals they seek to promote. The UN declaration cannot simply be understood as a reaction to the horrors of the Second World War, but should also be seen as representing human aspirations for peace and freedom. Nor does Payutto much discuss how human rights actually presents challenges to

21 Reinhardt 2004, pp. 33–34.

22 Payutto 1993, p. 3.

Buddhism. From within his own understanding of the nature of human rights they can be considered a welcome dialogue partner. In depicting their conventional nature, he describes human rights as a form of *vinaya* (discipline) and thus opens up a link to the religious institutions of Buddhism, which themselves are open to interpretation and reform.

In Payutto's native Thailand, it is possible to delineate some areas where Buddhism is challenged by human rights to rethink its position or lack of it. Take, for example, the place of women in society and within Buddhism. The equality that human rights grants women and men confronts the *saṅgha* authorities in relation to the status of nuns. Human rights asks those who block the reestablishment of the *bhikkhunī* order whether their arguments, based on tradition and the inflexibility of current *saṅgha* structures, are just and sustainable in the light of this "common standard". Moreover, they challenge religious leaders to examine the socio-economic and cultural roots of the sex trade. Within Thailand, prostitution is demanded as much by Thai men as it is by foreigners and tourists, though the latter are often the focus of public outcry. Human rights condemns this as a form of modern day slavery and, in light of this, asks whether a negative view towards sex and women in Thai Buddhism leads to turning a blind eye to sexual exploitation. Human rights are also concerned with social justice and with the essential equality of people. This challenges a popular and widespread understanding of *kamma,* in all levels of Thai society, which assigns social status and wealth to one's acts in previous lives, and thus marginalises groups of people like the poor and physically disabled. Another human rights related issue in Thailand is the recent trend towards a growing religious conservatism in Buddhism, in which Payutto is also implicated, which aligns itself with nationalist causes and negative portrayals of other religions.[23] This was reflected in the recent failed attempt by conservative Buddhist organizations to make Buddhism the official state religion. Human rights confront such trends with its calls for the protection of religious freedoms and minority rights.

These issues of concern in Thai society highlighted briefly above are not meant to portray Thailand negatively — all religions

23 Satha-anand 2003.

and societies have issues that contradict or are questionable in the face of human rights. It is also possible, of course, for Buddhists to discuss the issues and come to enlightened solutions from within the resources of their own tradition, as does Satha-anand.[24] However, given that human rights are widely understood as presenting a yardstick for measuring the ethical health of societies, it is inevitable that they will be used in critiquing religious views and practices. Rather than ignore or distrust them, they should, along with other external sources, be viewed as an essential dialogue partner. They enable religion to remain relevant, reasonable, and meaningful in today's world.

Buddhists and Christians, Learning from Each Other

I recall asking a Scottish man once why he had converted from being a Christian to Buddhist. The reply was brief: "Too much love, not enough wisdom." This represents a common enough critique of Buddhists when comparing their religion with Christianity. It can also be applied to their critique of human rights: lots of good intentions, not enough understanding.

In their approach to human rights, I would argue that Christians could learn from Buddhist wisdom, particularly in developing right views and on the need to purify mental states. Good intentions, well-formulated ideals and acts of mercy are in themselves not enough to ensure human rights. The Buddhist analysis calls for a reassessment of the basic attachments that we have towards material possessions. It also asks for a re-examination of the views we hold to be important and critical within society, including what we understand by key concepts associated with human rights such as peace, justice and freedom; to ensure that they themselves are not simply a front for our own selfish desires. With a clearer view of what is important in life and a commitment to eradicating our own interior selfish attachments, human rights work receives a firmer foundation, where the means meet with the intended ends of overcoming suffering.

24 Satha-anand 2003.

Buddhism, I believe, is more consistent in highlighting this need for purification of the mind than Christianity. Such a concern does, of course, exist in Christianity, which is evidenced, for example, by the teaching of Jesus in the "Sermon on the Mount" and in traditions of contemplation and discernment in various monastic orders. However, it receives a prominence and emphasis in Buddhism from which Christians could learn. Christians have indeed begun in many places to renew their spirituality through incorporating this Buddhist emphasis.[25] Christians, without difficulty, can define human rights abuses as rooted in sin and can point to human selfishness as the source of such horrors. Buddhism, though, offers a more thorough-going and systematic analysis of how selfish attitudes are rooted in mental states and desires. These are described in detail, to aid their recognition, and tools are provided, primarily meditative, in order for these to be rooted out.

The aim of purification of the mind is, of course, not limited to overcoming human rights abuses — they are simply the result of a deeper spiritual malaise of the mind. In the *Rathavinīta Sutta*, a dialogue between Puṇṇa Mantāṇiputta and Sāriputta, the purification of the mind is described as simply one of a relay of seven chariots used for the completion of a religious journey; a journey that leads to "reaching final *nibbāna* without clinging"[26] — the ultimate aim in Buddhism. This aim and the underlying philosophical framework that supports it has to be recognized and appreciated by Christians involved in interreligious dialogue and social action for human rights. It is not necessary, however, I would argue, to agree with and this philosophical basis in order to learn from the Buddhist critique and integrate aspects of it into one's own religious and social commitments.

When it comes to suggesting what Buddhists might learn from Christians in the field of approaching human rights, we could start by flipping the saying of the convert on its head: "Too much wisdom, not enough love." How are we to arrive at the right views, which Payutto emphasizes are so important? He and other Buddhists argue for a training of the mind, which would be based on meditation, the study of religious teachings, and underpinned by a

25 Cf. von Brück and Lai 1997.

26 *Majjhima Nikāya* 24.

basic moral approach to life. I would suggest that there is another helpful way of training the mind, leading to insight and wisdom, which draws primarily on the various liberation theologies and experiences of Third World Christians. In liberation theology, it is argued that we are led into a deeper appreciation of the demands of justice and compassion through a commitment to the poor and identification with their suffering. This commitment helps to liberate us from selfish desires by placing what we value and find meaningful in life within a wider social framework, characterized by injustice and suffering; it leads to insight into the social reality of suffering and the way out of it.

As with Asian Buddhist commentators, human rights concerns have been viewed in the past by liberation theologians as representing a largely Western approach to social justice issues. As the Sri Lankan theologian, Aloysius Pieris, argues, they represent the high-point of Western spirituality, which, though good in themselves, are inadequate in a world faced by mass hunger and global inequality.[27] What is required is a more radical approach based on encountering the poor in their suffering and taking their side in struggling for justice. In Christian theology, this identification is based on the long tradition of God's concern for the poor and oppressed in the Hebrew Scriptures, which is intensified in the way in which Jesus Christ carries out his prophetic and healing ministry and, then, embodied in the Christology of Matthew 25, where the sufferings of the poor are identified with Christ himself. An encounter and identification with those who suffer unjustly can lead to a profound change of view and reorientation in life; in other words, it is a means of salvation/liberation.

It is possible, of course, to find aspects of this approach in Buddhism. In the Pāli canon there are stories where an encounter with those who are suffering helps or promises to bring about new insight on the path of liberation. Here, I would raise as examples two well-known sources, the *Kalama* and *Ariyapariyesanā sutta*s. With regard to the *Kalama Sutta*, it is worth noting the interpretation of Bhikkhu Bodhi, who argues that the *Sutta* has been misunderstood under the influence of seeking to align Buddhism to a scientific and anti-dogmatic mindset:

27 Pieris 1996, pp. 113–126.

This interpretation of the *sutta*, however, forgets that the advice the Buddha gave the Kalamas was contingent upon the understanding that they were not yet prepared to place faith in him and his doctrine; it also forgets that the *sutta* omits, for that very reason, all mention of right view and of the entire perspective that opens up when right view is acquired.[28]

The purpose of the Buddha was, then, to teach the Kalamas in a way which would bring benefit to them and, eventually, lead them towards discovering the right view. The Buddha enters into a dialogue where he convinces them of the need to overcome greed, hatred, and delusion by means of the Brahma Vihāra, the four divine abodes of loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity. The emphasis, therefore, is on a moral way of practice — of compassion towards others — as the necessary grounding for developing the right view.

In the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* the Buddha recounts his earlier search for enlightenment — the "noble search […] seeking the supreme state of sublime peace," from leaving his family and home, through association with various teachers, to his final attainment of *nibbāna*. With *nibbāna* finally attained, however, he weighed up in his mind whether he should teach the *dhamma* to others and he tells his monks:

> Thereupon there came to me spontaneously these stanzas never heard before:
>
> "Enough with teaching the *dhamma*
> That even I found hard to reach;
> For it will never be perceived
> By those who live in lust and hate […]"
>
> Considering thus, my mind inclined to inaction rather than to teaching the *dhamma*.[29]

As he saw it, there was just too much ignorance and ill-will around; his doctrine would be misunderstood and abused. Fearful of seeing the Buddha withdraw from society, the *Sutta* goes on to recount how the Brahmā Sahampati rushed to the Buddha and sought to convince him of the need for engagement. It is an interesting point of debate — why a Buddha with a fully awakened mind needs to be

28 Bodhi 2008.

29 *Majjhima Nikāya* 26.

challenged in something so fundamental — but, putting this to one side, the tactic of the Brahmā Sahampati is of interest here. Brahmā asks the Buddha to view this world of suffering with compassion. It is, then, through surveying the world with compassion that the Buddha sees that there are those who will indeed benefit from his teaching and decides, thereupon, to engage with the world. Is it too much to say that it is an encounter with those who suffer which changes the view of the Buddha and convinces him to go out and teach for the sake of the many?

In Christianity, in any case, a particular concern is shown not just for those who suffer in general terms — which is all of us — but for those who suffer through poverty, injustice, and marginalization. This is a focus that is not so strong in the Buddhist texts. In liberation theology, in Latin America, this concern was memorably captured in the coining of the term, the "preferential option for the poor". This is misunderstood by Christians and Buddhists alike. Thich Nhat Hanh, for example, wrote about the option for the poor:

> But I do not think God wants us to take sides, even with the poor. The rich also suffer, in many cases more than the poor! […] We do not need to take sides. When we take sides, we misunderstand the will of God.[30]

This option cannot be correct because God's love must be for all and unconditional! However, this is to miss the point. It does not mean that the poor are closer to God or more favoured, but that such an option reveals the true scope of God's love for all and the extent to which we are called to participate in it. In this sense, it is emphasizing that liberation is as much a social event as individual; it is interdependent in nature. It does not deny the suffering of the rich but asserts that their liberation is intimately bound up with how they encounter and respond to those who suffer most through human injustice and cruelty.

Here, I would suggest, is something for Buddhists to learn, especially for those who emphasize achieving the right view before engaging in social action. This seems to already be happening in the movement of socially engaged Buddhists. There may be debates as to the primary sources of their social commitment, but there is little doubt that it has been influenced by contact with radical Christians who take the option for the poor seriously. Again, it

30 Hanh 1996, pp. 79–80.

is not necessary for Buddhists to agree with the underlying theology of this approach, but to be open to learn from it.

The Buddhist teachings of training the mind and the Christian "option for the poor" come out of different religious histories and, of course, different philosophical/theological perspectives lie at their roots. It is difficult to see how these differences can be harmonized but aspects of them can be intertwined within the spirituality of people. They can form a kind of basic common agreement between Buddhists and Christians when it comes to working for human rights within our world. This is nothing new. Aloysius Pieris has been arguing for such a complementary approach for many years,[31] where the struggle to be poor, in terms of renouncing attachments and training the mind, is joined with the struggle for the poor, in a socio-political identification with their suffering and a commitment against social injustice — both aspects are necessary in today's world. Buddhists and Christians can learn from each others' strengths in these areas. This, of course, does not exhaust efforts at developing a common religious approach to human rights; other elements, relating to nonviolent strategies, the environment, and other religions and ideologies, need also to be considered. It does, however, show that differences in religions can provide a rich resource in the struggle for human rights — where the concern to purify the mind and encounter those who suffer interconnect.

31 Cf. Pieris 1988a.