



**Viewing the Other: From Hostility to
Hospitality**
World Religions Share their Wisdom
Study Unit 6: Buddhism

The Elijah Interfaith Institute

Where Is Wisdom Found

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PART I

SOURCES FOR DISCUSSION

Below are three clusters of texts taken from the Buddhist tradition. Each cluster addresses some aspect of the attitude to the other, and of the tensions of hostility and hospitality in relation to the other. Depending on time and interest, choose one or more of the following topics for group study and discussion. The questions for discussion following each cluster of texts are helpful suggestions, but they need not limit the direction your discussion takes.

May all beings have immeasurable life. May they always live happily.

Theme One: May all Beings be Happy

1. By this merit of mine may all beings without exception desist from every evil deed and always act skilfully.

- Bodhicaryavatara 10:31¹

2. May all beings have immeasurable life. May they always live happily. May the very word “death” perish.

- Bodhicaryavatara 10:33

3. May the gods send timely rain, and may crops flourish. May the populace prosper, and may the king be righteous. May medicines be potent, and the spells of the mutterers be effective. May ogresses, demons, and their like be overwhelmed with compassion. May no being suffer, nor be wicked, nor diseased, neither contemptible nor despised. May no one be dejected.

- Bodhicaryavatara 10:39-41

4. As long as space abides and as long as the world abides, so long may I abide,

destroying the sufferings of the world.

- Bodhicaryavatara 10:55

5. Let all creatures indeed be happy and secure; let them be happy-minded.

Whatever living creatures there are – moving or still without exception, whichever are long or large, or middle-sized or short, small or great, whichever are seen or unseen, whichever live far or near, whether they already exist or are going to be, let all creatures be happy-minded.

One man should not humiliate another; one should not despise anyone anywhere. One should not wish another misery because of anger or from the notion of repugnance.

Just as a mother would protect with her life her own son, her only son, so one should cultivate an unbounded mind towards all beings, and loving-kindness towards all the world. One should cultivate an unbounded mind, above and below and across, without obstruction, without enmity, without rivalry.²

One should cultivate an unbounded mind towards all beings, and loving-kindness towards all the world.

- Suttanipata I.8

6. May I be both the doctor and their nurse, until the sickness does not recur.

May I avert the pain of hunger and thirst with showers of food and drink. May I become both drink and food in the intermediate aeons of famine.

May I be an inexhaustible treasure for impoverished beings. May I wait upon them with various forms of offering...

I make over this body to all embodied beings to do with as they please. Let them continually beat it, insult it, and splatter it with filth...

Should their mind become angry or displeased on account of me, may even that be the cause of their always achieving every goal.

Those who will falsely accuse me, and others who will do me harm, and others still who will degrade me, may they all share in Awakening.

I am the protector of the unprotected and the caravan-leader for travelers. I have become the boat, the causeway, and the bridge for those who long to reach the further shore...

Just as the earth and the other elements are profitable in many ways to the immeasurable beings dwelling throughout space,
so may I be sustenance of many kinds for the realm of beings throughout space, until all have attained release.

- Bodhicaryavatara 3:7-21

For Discussion

How realistic is it to expect or teach such “undifferentiated compassion”? Are human beings actually and realistically capable of wishing happiness for all beings without making distinctions? Can such passages as those above create a profound disharmony between one’s genuine feelings, which necessarily involve making distinctions, and one’s words? Does this kind of view succeed at propelling its adherents toward making an effort to destroying distinctions?

Theme Two: But Steer Clear of Some Beings...

7. As for the associations proper for them, bodhisattvas or mahasattvas should not associate closely with rulers, princes, high ministers or heads of offices. They should not associate closely with non-Buddhists, Brahmans or Jains, or with those who compose works of secular literature or books extolling the heretics... They should not be closely associated with hazardous amusements, boxing or wrestling, or with actors or others engaged in various kinds of illusionary entertainments, or with chandalas, persons engaged in raising pigs, sheep, chickens or dogs, or those who engage in hunting or fishing or other evil activities. If such persons at times come to one, then one may preach the Law for them, but one should expect nothing from it.

- *The Lotus Sutra*, chapter 14

8. Not associating with fools, but associating with the wise, and honouring those who deserve honour – this is supreme good fortune.

- Suttanipata 259

For Discussion

It is difficult to find in Buddhist literature passages that are directly harmful or hostile toward the “other.” Hostile passages are simply few and far between. But the above passages certainly recommend being careful about who one associates with. Does this entail an “other”? Is this paternalistic? Or, if this is the extent of Buddhist hostility in the literature, what does it say about Buddhism and its priorities?

Other traditions that we have studied have a stronger sense of the “other.” Would it be possible to cultivate an attitude such as the one described here within other traditions, or would this ideal be limited to Buddhism? Could these ideas be upheld even in relation to one considered an “enemy”? Can you provide parallels from your tradition to these attitudes?

Does the call to establish protective boundaries necessarily detract from universal friendship and compassion? What implications does the twofold Buddhist perspective of unconditional compassion and the upholding of boundaries have for our understanding of similar dynamics within other traditions?



The Lotus Buddha

Theme Three: Death as the Great Equalizer

9. Young and old, those who are foolish and those who are wise, all go into the power of death, all have death as their end.

- Suttanipata 578

10. All tremble before violence.

All fear death.
Having done the same yourself,
You should neither harm nor kill.

All tremble before violence.
Life is held dear by all.
Having done the same yourself,
You should neither harm nor kill.

- Dhammapada 129-130

11. This death pays no heed to what is done or undone; a killer of security; not to be trusted by those sick or well; a shattering thunderbolt from nowhere.

- Bodhicaryavatara 2:34

For Discussion

Buddhism places a tremendous emphasis on recognizing, meditating upon and remaining aware of death. What effect can this have on the Buddhist view of the “other”? Does reflection on death have a similar effect in other traditions? Compare the importance of reflection on death itself to reflection on the afterlife as shaping attitudes to the "other". Consider additional metaphysical and existential reflections that may be helpful to advancing from hostility to hospitality.

PART II

BUDDHISM: OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO UNIVERSAL FRIENDSHIP

Hospitality or Friendship?

Buddhist texts tend to speak more of universal friendship — that is, friendship toward all sentient beings, not only humans — than of hospitality. Hostility is the

opposite of universal friendship, but universal friendship must also be distinguished from the lesser state of preferential friendship that favors one's own family, neighbours or tribe. But while hospitality is secondary, it remains prominent as one of the natural manifestations of friendship.

The Problem of Hostility and Xenophobia

According to the Buddha's teachings, hostility grows out of the wound caused by arrogance and self-importance, the need to see oneself as special. That leads to comparing oneself to others, and thus to feeling resentfully inferior, scornfully superior, or equal and therefore competitive.

In response to a question about whether being a Brahmin is entirely a matter of ancestry or depends as well on conduct, the Buddha replied that human beings, in contrast to other animal species, are not marked by natural differences. Their caste consequently does not reflect an innate spiritual difference. The very concept of a Brahmin or priestly caste – thought to be superior to all other castes and thus reflective of a superior soul – was severely criticized by the Buddha. Racial, ethnic, and cultural divisions were argued to be purely conventional, and even trivial in comparison with what humans have in common. Differences in name are based on differences in occupation: one who cultivates fields is called a farmer, and one who performs religious ceremonies for a living is called a Brahmin. Still, external ritual observances do not make one truly a Brahmin; rather, the Buddha argued that the cultivation of internal qualities such as wisdom, compassion, tranquility, and emotional and intellectual flexibility do. There are, of course, people who fail to

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cultivate virtues and act self-indulgently in a way that causes harm, and the Buddha recommends avoiding such people, lest they compromise one's own efforts to cultivate virtue. It thus appears that, despite the affirmation of human unity, such people — who have chosen not to pursue the path advocated by Buddhism — may be said to constitute an “other.”

The “other” is much like oneself but at an earlier stage of development, requiring nourishment and protection.

Such a perception is tempered, however, by the fact that the noun used to describe one who has not chosen to become a Buddhist (*puthujjana*) is often coupled with an adjective that means childish or immature (*bala*). *Puthujjana* is used as well to refer to Buddhists who have not yet achieved the first manifestations of the wisdom that results from Buddhist practice. Seen in this way, the “other” is much like oneself but at an earlier stage of development, requiring nourishment and protection.

The ultimate goal of Buddhist practice is *nirvana*, defined as the cessation of all psychological afflictions (such as appetites, animosity, and the clinging to beliefs). A first step in that direction, referred to as “entering the stream,” entails abandoning three habits of thought, one of which is “addiction to good conduct and religious vows.” Most understand this to mean obsessive literal observance of rituals, such as the Brahmin preoccupation with maintaining religious purity. Others, however, suggest it refers to the human tendency to do the right thing for the sake of reward; breaking that habit consists of cultivating virtue for its own sake rather than for the benefits it brings to oneself. That step — which may also require avoiding the Buddhist tradition's own inclination toward being overly rule-bound — is regarded as a form of maturation. In that respect, Buddhism shares with other Indian religions the tendency to regard itself as the model of maturity and other religious systems as

representing earlier stages of development. The attitude may be paternalistic, but has the advantage of not regarding the practitioner of the other religion as in any way a threat or even an annoyance.

Life in the Human Realm

Early Buddhism can usefully be contrasted with a strain of Western philosophy exemplified by Kant. Inspired by a notion of progress, of the cumulating wisdom of the human species, and of Nature operating in accordance with a plan that would ultimately provide what is good for all creatures, Kant anticipated that the development of reason and the eventual fatigue produced by ongoing conflict would ultimately lead to full and lasting peace on earth. The Buddha saw things quite differently. In the earlier strand of the tradition, known today as Theravada, the world was characterized as unstable and the solution, for the individual, was renunciation of the world and its cares, seeking the stability of solitude. Unfortunately, most people will not do so, and thus humans will never find peace as a collective; it can only happen one at a time.

But Buddhism is not limited to one strain of philosophy or point of view. Not all Buddhist texts were as despairing about life in this world. In the *Suttanipata*, the Buddha claims to have looked into the hearts of human beings and to have seen there a barely visible dart, a subtle and yet deep wound that makes human beings run around frantically and crazily, a wound that tragically undermines all human efforts to find peace. This is the dart of suffering or dissatisfaction – the symbol of the First Noble Truth of Buddhism. It is this dart that causes human beings to create separations and divisions, to act with hostility to strangers and even to oneself. But this dart is not permanent. Also emphasized in the literature is the hopeful message that this world, with all of its suffering, is the only place in the vast realm of Buddhist

cosmology where the dart can be taken out, where human beings can attain realization. Moreover, seen from the background of the rigid division of Indian society into the fourfold caste-system, the Buddha's rejection of the deterministic and hierarchal structure perpetuated by the priestly class of the Brahmins and his opening up of his teaching and community to members of all groups, and even to women, provided not only a revolutionary message of hope for those who suffered most from discrimination and hostility, but also an alternative vision for society and human existence.

The dart of suffering or dissatisfaction...causes human beings to create separations and divisions.

Hostility in the Lived Buddhist Experience

As seen above, the textual sources of Buddhism are largely hospitable and even friendly toward the "other." Non-Buddhists are not enemies

or deemed dangerous in any way. Rather, they simply exist as fellow living beings; they are perhaps less evolved, but they do not pose a significant challenge to the Buddhist worldview. This is due primarily to the Buddhist principles of non-attachment and emptiness. All things are temporary, transient and lacking in a permanent or fixed essence. All things are therefore empty of inherent existence, including ourselves. Our bodies, minds, memories and emotions are equally transient, empty and forever in a process of change. To attach oneself too firmly to oneself, one's views, or others necessarily leads to folly, and then to harm. The Buddhist priority can be summed up as release from all attachments, and thus from all views. In this context, the concept of the "other" has little significance. The "other" has no inherent existence; to attach oneself to one's view of them is necessarily short-sighted as a result. It is primarily for this reason that so little of Buddhist literature addresses the issue of otherness with any element of hostility. Hostility is the result of

attachment to views, as is the very concept of otherness, and thus have no place in the Buddhist worldview.

But when addressing the topic of hostility and hospitality, we cannot limit ourselves exclusively to textual sources and ideal philosophical speculations. We need also to consider the living context in which Buddhism has influenced culture and society in different epochs and regions of the world. From this perspective, there is much room for self-criticism and reflection.

For example, in those regions where Buddhism has served to form the identity of an ethnic community, has it not also functioned as a principle of exclusion of others who do not share such an identity? Sri Lanka is a case in point. Theravada Buddhism came to Sri Lanka more than two thousand years ago and quickly formed the racial cohesion of Sinhalese society. One of the consequences of such racial cohesion has been a fervent nationalism that currently functions as a weapon of exclusion against the Hindu Tamil communities living therein. This has led to a gruesome civil war that seeks, from the Hindu side, an end to human rights violations committed by the Buddhist government on Hindu citizens, along with political emancipation. Even Christian communities are suffering under this regime, as it presently moves forward with its extremely controversial Anti-Conversion Legislation, developed as a means to halt the growing trend of Buddhists converting to Christianity.

Some strands of Lotus-Buddhism, specifically those deriving from the 13th century teacher Nichiren, emphasize their version of Buddhist teaching as superior over others in a way that has led Nichiren's followers to denigrate other Buddhist schools. In his letter to Akimoto, Nichiren argued that combining his suggested practices with any other Buddhist teachings was tantamount to "mixing rice with excrement." Zen Buddhism was used by Japanese nationalists to support their war

efforts, particularly during the Second World War. Equally damaging is the exclusion of women from monastic practice in numerous Buddhist contexts around the world. Full ordination is not yet available to women in the Theravada and Tibetan traditions, although steps in this direction are being taken in Sri Lanka, Thailand and elsewhere. Given the above, there is much room for Buddhists to be self-critical about their own tradition.

Loving Kindness and Compassion

Despite the above references to lived experiences of Buddhist hostility, the core message of Buddhism remains one of loving kindness and compassion. This message is contained in the early texts of Buddhism and further developed in the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. The *Metta Sutta*, for example, which is commonly recited from memory by monastics and lay followers in Theravada countries alike, says the following:

Let all creatures indeed be happy and secure; let them be happy-minded.

Whatever living creatures there are – moving or still without exception, whichever are long or large, or middle-sized or short, small or great, whichever are seen or unseen, whichever live far or near, whether they already exist or are going to be, let all creatures be happy-minded.

One man should not humiliate another; one should not despise anyone anywhere. One should not wish another misery because of anger or from the notion of repugnance.

Just as a mother would protect with her life her own son, her only son, so one should cultivate an unbounded mind towards all beings, and loving-kindness towards all the world. One should cultivate an unbounded mind, above and below and across, without obstruction, without enmity, without rivalry.³



The Lotus flower—a symbol of Buddhism

Buddhist compassion is not just an emotional attitude, but a dynamic principle based on an insight into reality, into what is. This insight is wisdom. It leads to the realization of the interconnectedness of all sentient beings. This interconnectedness is especially extolled and explained in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* – a pivotal text for the Mahayana tradition. To see everyone as intrinsically connected with one’s own being is to embrace the suffering and pain of all beings as one’s own.

The figure of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (also known as Kuan Yin in China and Japan, or Chenrezig in Tibet) is a powerful symbol of such compassion. This Bodhisattva figure embodies the later Mahayana ideal of the seeker of enlightenment who postpones his or her own entry into nirvana until he or she has saved all beings from suffering. His body of one thousand arms and an eleven heads is a body of compassion, fit to embrace all beings in all the worlds and look upon them with loving kindness. Compassion for all beings is a priority in Buddhism – regardless of what religion those beings belong to. Indeed, the very question of belonging is, on this level, absolutely irrelevant. The Buddhist ideal in this case is of undifferentiated compassion, indiscriminate compassion. The Bodhisattva’s compassion makes no distinctions. There are no “others” from this perspective.

The Buddha’s teachings ask more than to overcome hostility and practice hospitality. They ask their adherents to give the whole of themselves for the happiness of all sentient beings, which is our own happiness. This kind of happiness is the hope that the Buddha has to offer the world. It comes in the form of universal friendship, universal and undifferentiated love. In the words of the eighth century poet Shantideva:

May I be both the doctor and their nurse, until the sickness does not recur.

May I avert the pain of hunger and thirst with showers of food and drink. May I become both drink and food in the intermediate aeons of famine.

May I be an inexhaustible treasure for impoverished beings. May I wait upon them with various forms of offering...

I make over this body to all embodied beings to do with as they please. Let them continually beat it, insult it, and splatter it with filth...

Should their mind become angry or displeased on account of me, may even that be the cause of their always achieving every goal.

Those who will falsely accuse me, and others who will do me harm, and others still who will degrade me, may they all share in Awakening.

I am the protector of the unprotected and the caravan-leader for travelers. I have become the boat, the causeway, and the bridge for those who long to reach the further shore...

Just as the earth and the other elements are profitable in many ways to the immeasurable beings dwelling throughout space,

so may I be sustenance of many kinds for the realm of beings throughout space, until all have attained release.

Questions for Discussion

1. The above essay discussed the importance of universal friendship. It also emphasized the Buddhist priority of wishing well to all beings equally. What kind of impact can such views have on a Buddhist practitioner? Is it realistic to expect human beings to honestly wish all beings well? Can this not lead to disingenuousness?
2. Each of the traditions we've examined establishes a boundary, at least on the phenomenological level, between insiders and outsiders. Describe each of those boundaries and compare their degrees of permeability. Does Buddhism have boundaries in the literature?
3. Despite what the literature preaches, we have seen that in reality Buddhist countries have, at different times and places, expressed severe hostility toward the "other." How may one account for this disparity?

Buddhist compassion is not just an emotional attitude, but a dynamic principle based on an insight into reality.

4. Consider the tensions between theory or ideal and reality in other traditions. Do similar dynamics account for gaps across traditions, or should the gaps in each tradition be understood in their own terms?
5. Can the Buddhist view of reality and the “other” inspire other traditions? Can it be carried over into religious communities that have a strong collective identity, created by establishing boundaries with the “other”?
6. What critique or challenge does the Buddhist view of the “other” pose to Abrahamic religions and what challenges are posed to Buddhism, in turn?

Endnotes

1. All translations of the Bodhicaryavatara are from Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton’s translation (Birmingham: Windhorse, 1995).
2. Suttanipata translated by K. R. Norman (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2001).
3. Sutta Nipata I.8; translated by K. R. Norman (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2001).

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