

“Soul-Less” Christianity and the Buddhist Empirical Self: Buddhist-Christian Convergence?

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Buddhist-Christian dialogue seems to founder on the shoals of theological anthropology. The Christian concept of the soul and concomitant ideas of life after death appear to be diametrically opposed to the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*, no-self. The anthropological terminology, with its personalist implications in Christianity and its impersonal meanings for Buddhism offers perhaps the greatest challenge to interreligious understanding. The two traditions have built up stereotypical interpretations of one another’s (and their own) vocabularies to such an extent that “personal” and “impersonal” have at times operated in dialogue as “party slogans and fighting words.”¹

In this paper I explore the plausibility that new interpretations of the human being in both traditions may overcome this problem. There is no agreement across denominations on the meaning of soul for Christianity and likewise no single orthodox interpretation of no-self for all forms of Buddhism. There are of course basics for both traditions that serve as the starting point for all interpretations, and these will be identified below. During the last decade interesting and innovative ways of elaborating on the basics for both Buddhism and Christianity approach something of a middle ground in religious anthropology. It is my thesis that the moves made by Christian theologians toward emphasis on the person as a body-soul unity, and by at least one Buddhist scholar toward the idea of an empirical (not metaphysical) self, are closing what has been perhaps the most problematic gap between the two traditions.

THE STATE OF THE PERSONAL SOUL IN CHRISTIANITY

The stereotype of Christian anthropology is of the human constituted by a separable body and soul. Although there have been important voices expressing otherwise in history, for the average believer the immaterial soul separates from the physical body at the moment of death, and most assume that the soul goes immediately to its eternal reward or punishment.² (While the issue of the timing and nature of resurrection is an important and contested one, attention cannot be given to it here, since the present issue is the soul before death.)

Early Christians agreed that the human being is more than just a physical body. However, there has never been agreement on the number and kind of “ontological ingredients” it takes to make a person.³ Trichotomy, dichotomy, and monism have all been proposed at one time or another. The trichotomist position, usually attributed to Paul, was first popular among Greek and Alexandrian Christians. In this view, the human is made up of body, soul, and spirit: the parts function in concert, with soul mediating between the spirit and body. Here, the spirit is the essential self that exists in relationship to God. Dichotomists say that we are made of two substances, body and soul/spirit. This dualism of separable metaphysical substances with soul animating the body came to dominate the Western theological scene, in part due to Augustine’s influence. Although there are significant differences in detail between trichotomist and dichotomist positions, what matters for our purposes is the underlying common anthropological assumption that “persons survive apart from their bodies.”⁴

Strong challenges to dualist anthropologies came in the seventeenth century in the form of materialism and monism. Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, argued for materialism, saying that there is no such thing as incorporeal substance. Nothing survives death, he said: it is through divine grace that we will be resurrected into eternity. Present-day descendants of materialism include psychological behaviorism, brain-mind identity theory, and epiphenomenalism. The second strong challenge to dualism took the shape of monism, as in the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. He believed that reality is a single substance, and matter and spirit are properties of it. All of creation manifests the absolute substance, God. Each entity exists as idea in the mind of God, and so the soul can be said to be eternal when it becomes one with the mind of God at death. Variations of monist anthropologies appear in nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers like Hegel, Schelling, Whitehead, and Teilhard de Chardin.

Science and medical research have offered a robust challenge in the recent past. Darwinian evolution presented a radical problem for religious teachings on the soul. If humans evolved from mindless lower life forms, then mental capacities must be by-products of nervous system physiology. Medical developments in brain studies clearly show that what happens in the mind is directly affected by brain events. Even more problematic, without certain brain functions there is no consciousness. If mind or consciousness is a result of brain activity, what else could the soul be?⁵ Bombardment from all directions, then, has resulted in serious confusion. “When it comes to making rational sense of the concept [of soul] the Christian remains stymied, transfixed, paralyzed, mesmerized, fascinated, dumbfounded and dogged by that nagisterial sneer—‘the ghost in the machine.’”⁶ Science seems to demand materialism, while the average believer tends toward dualism.

Historical criticism of the scriptures has also brought dualist anthropologies into question, but with unclear results. During the late nineteenth century, when literary critical techniques called into question many heretofore presumed “truths,” the dualist Christian body-soul came into question as well. Body-soul dualism was said to be a product of Hellenistic contamination or Christian compromise with the prevail-

ing Greco-Roman worldview.⁷ The immortality of the soul is, said Oscar Cullman, “one of the greatest misunderstandings of Christianity.”⁸

Biblical scholars have attempted to clarify the Bible’s anthropology through making fine philological and etymological distinctions between the Hebrew and Greek words for soul, *nephesh* and *psyche*, and for spirit, *ruach* and *pneuma*. While this has not resolved the issue, what has been gained is the realization that strong dualism is alien to the scriptures.⁹ In the Hebrew Bible (the literary soil out of which Christianity grew) the human is not a composite of two entities temporarily joined in this life. Persons are material beings created and vivified by God.¹⁰ “The Hebrew idea of personality is an animated body, not an incarnated soul.”¹¹ This seems to be fairly clear with reference to the Hebrew scriptures, which do of course form the ground out of which the Christian Testament grew. The situation for Christianity is a bit less clear in that the Christian scriptures do not offer a single well-developed anthropology in this regard.

Christian eschatology clearly teaches continuity of self beyond death, but this is based in God’s power and promises, not in some inherent capacity of the soul itself. There is no survival outside of God’s creative and sustaining love.¹² Discussions of the body-soul relation are at times confusing, because some theologians mix dualism with the problem of whether or not there might be an intermediate state of existence after death but before the resurrection. There is, however, some consensus that the body and soul are joined in an enduring unity. “We assume that with the body the sinful soul also dies, and that in the resurrection God, with the soul, also creates a new body and that this new spiritual body is a warrant and condition for the eternal communion of personal spirits.”¹³

SOUL, SCIENCE, MATERIALISM, AND REDUCTIONISM

In a materialist framework, mind (or soul) and body are one thing. Epiphenomenalism is perhaps the most popular form of materialism among philosophers and scientists today. Here, mental states are believed to be by-products of brain events. Consistency in this model requires that the mind cannot exert causal influence on the body. The mind is no more than a consequence of neural firing, so there can be no such thing as a mind or soul apart from the body. In other words, mental states are reduced to the physical. While this view enjoys popularity among philosophers of mind and neuroscientists, it obviously is incompatible with Christianity.¹⁴ But the responsible theologian cannot ignore the fact that those who are “in the know” about brain function argue strongly against any conception of an immaterial mind distinct from the neurological system.

Major advances have been made in understanding how the brain and nervous system function. Science has determined that specific areas of the brain are directly involved in physical sensation and in certain types of emotional response. However, science has thus far failed to identify any physical brain location that, when stimulated, causes the subject to make decisions and choices. Humans appear to possess some mental capacity that operates extra-neurologically. Theology has long disig-

nated this scientifically unaccounted for capacity “the will.” Not just theology but personal experience insists that to be a person means more than just neurochemical responses.¹⁵ However, science does lead the responsible theologian to agree that a purely disembodied mind/soul concept and its causal reductionism are no longer tenable. At the same time we are left with the knowledge that we cannot reduce all aspects of human life to the physical: we are clearly embodied creatures, and at the same time something more. The problem for theology is one of accepting the truths of science and biblical criticism without compromising the theological truth that we are embodied *spiritual* creatures.

Philosophical theologian Nancey Murphy suggests that the way forward lies in a modified physicalist anthropology, which she calls nonreductive physicalism. This theory acknowledges that human behavior cannot be exhaustively explained either without reference to brain states or on the basis of science alone, and at the same time avoids the traditional dualism of soul as a separate metaphysical entity. It is possible to reject the nonmaterial soul and at the same time speak coherently of consciousness and spiritual capacities, if we see them as circumstantially supervenient emergent properties of the brain that exert causal influence on the body in a top-down direction.¹⁶

First, to claim that the soul is an emergent property is to say that an exhaustive description of the underlying physical state of the human is necessary but not sufficient for explaining the soul’s existence.¹⁷ An emergent property is an unanticipated outcome or by-product, a “something more”; whereas normally $a + b$ should = c , if the relation between a and b is one of emergence, $a + b = c^{+1}$.¹⁸

Supervenience has been given a variety of definitions in philosophy of mind, some of which border on contradiction. In general, though, it describes a relation of dependence between two sets of properties. Put simply in the context of the mind-body problem, strong supervenience means that a physical base property, P , for mental property, M , guarantees the occurrence of M ; if something brings about P , it necessarily brings about M as well—always and everywhere.¹⁹ Strong supervenience is the interpretation advocated by epiphenomenalists; mental events in this reading are just a special kind of physical event.²⁰

Circumstantial supervenience is a helpful refinement. This allows for the possibility that identical events occurring under different circumstances might not produce the same outcome. The moral quality of “goodness” is used to illustrate the point: goodness supervenes on a set of characteristics. To use Saint Francis as a case in point, his goodness supervenes on characteristics like celibacy, charity, desire to do no harm, and so on. Goodness here is a noncausal consequence of having these qualities. But these traits do not exhaust the possibilities for “goodness.” There are other traits Saint Francis did not display that in some circumstances warrant the label of goodness. Further, some traits (like celibacy) contribute to goodness only under certain conditions or in certain circumstances. (If Saint Francis had been married, his spouse may well have found the celibacy problematic!)²¹

This interpretation of supervenience avoids causal reductionism by recognizing that: (1) Supervenient properties are multiply realizable. In other words, there are multiple characteristics that make for goodness. (2) Mental properties are what they

are not just by reason of the neurochemistry that brings them about, but also by reason of their function. In this example, celibacy counts toward goodness only under the circumstance of having taken the priestly vow.²²

Supervenience helps explain causation in the direction of physical to mental, but our experience tells us that mind/body causation is not a one-way street. “Bottom-up” causation in firing neurons and neurochemical transfer across synapses is certainly necessary, as far as we now know, for any mental or physical event. But evidence indicates that causation flows from the top down as well. This has been most clearly demonstrated in perception studies. How we perceive sensory input is determined both by the stimulus itself *and* by individual expectations regarding the stimulus. We very often see what we expect to see rather than what is really there.

Pulling all of this together, we can now say that the physical determines initial emergence of the mental, but does not fully determine the outcome of the mental after its emergence. If we agree that the mental life is an emergent feature of the complex biological structure of the brain’s interaction with its environment, a person is “a physical organism whose complex functioning, both in society and in relation to God, gives rise to ‘higher’ human capacities such as morality and spirituality.”²³ The human being is dual in aspects—inner and outer, mental and physical, soul and body—but not in substance.²⁴ The soul is a property, a quality, or a phenomenon, not a substance. Soul in this context can be understood as a product of the relational character of human being. No longer interpreted in individualistic terms, it is rather that which joins us “to other individuals and to our community, and to God.”²⁵

What survives death is not some disembodied entity inherently capable of immortality. We know that our material selves are composed of the matter of the universe, that we are made of the dust of stars and planets that ceased to exist long ago. It is as if the matter of our bodies is on loan to us, temporarily configured as individual persons. When we die, the materials of which we are made return to nature, only to be recycled again and again in myriad forms of life.²⁶ “You are dust and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). The Christian scriptures do not explain how personal identity continues after death except to make clear that it happens only through God’s power.

THE IMPERSONAL NO-SELF OF THERAVADA BUDDHISM

Some scholars have interpreted *anatta* to mean that there is literally no self: this has become the customary interpretation in religious studies.²⁷ At the other end of the spectrum, others assert that the ancient writings speak of the existence of a metaphysical or permanent self.²⁸ Like Christian teachings on the soul, then, there is no consensus on interpretation of Buddha’s teachings regarding *anatta*. At least one scholar today claims that a careful reading of the earliest texts of the Theravada tradition shows that it “is plain wrong” to claim that there is no concept of self at all in the Buddha’s teachings.²⁹ Peter Harvey concludes that the Buddha’s discourses on no-self were explorations about the empirical changing personality and not attacks on the concept of selfhood, *per se*. Harvey claims the Buddha’s concerns were existential, not theoretical.

The human being in Buddhist thought is an ever-changing product of the inter-

action between five aspects or principles, called *khandhas*: the physical body, sensations, cognition, constructing activities like volition, and consciousness. Consciousness arises as a product of the interaction of the other four, and no aspect exists independently of the others. Further, the human being cannot be said to exist in any one aspect—a person as “I am” is only insofar as these five *khandhas* are. As for the illusion of “I am,” the Buddha said to his followers, “the uninstructed ordinary person, touched by feeling born of stimulation by spiritual ignorance thinks ‘I am.’”³⁰

Much of what the Buddha taught was intended as corrective for Hindu teachings that he believed led to selfish goals rather than compassion for others. His teachings against the caste system are one obvious example. Perhaps not so obviously anti-Upanishadic were his teachings on the self. The Buddha was quite practical, insisting that if an idea cannot be rationally explained, it most likely comes from an emotional bias. Ideas about the self are clearly burdened by heavy emotional overlay. Ideas about “I” and self are “thoughts haunted by craving concerning the inner self.”³¹ And so the Buddha hoped to turn his disciples’ thoughts away from self, toward realization of the radical self-less-ness of compassion for all living beings.

In the early *suttas* one monk, Vacchagotta, acts as a foil for the Buddha’s teaching on self. This monk (sounding a bit like Jesus’ disciples in the Christian gospel stories) pesters the Buddha again and again for easy answers to his questions. Bewildered by the abstract nature of the Buddha’s teachings on the self, Vacchagotta finally demands to be told whether or not the self exists. The Buddha gives no response.

Later, the Buddha explains to his closest disciple, Ananda, why he did not respond to Vacchagotta’s persistent questioning. Had he told Vacchagotta either that the self does or does not exist, confusion would have ensued. Indian logic allows that if the statement “Self neither exists nor does not exist” is true, saying “Self exists” is false and so is “Self does not exist.” The concept is itself self-contradictory.³² “Does the self exist or not?” is what the Buddha called an “Undetermined Question.” In conversation with another monk, Malunkya-putta, on the issue of metaphysics generally, the Buddha said, “[B]ear always in mind what it is I have not elucidated and what it is that I have elucidated . . . I have not elucidated that the world is not eternal; I have not elucidated that the world is finite; I have not elucidated that the world is infinite; I have not elucidated that the soul is one thing and the body another; I have not elucidated that the saint exists after death; I have not elucidated that the saint does not exist after death . . . And why, Malunkya-putta, have I not elucidated this? Because, Malunkya-putta, this profits not.”³³ Questions like this are inherently flawed, wrongly phrased, and in our case the problem is with the word “self.” Harvey says that the Undetermined Questions are like asking an innocent man if he has stopped beating his wife yet—to answer either yes or no is to indict one falsely. The only recourse is to remain silent.

During the Buddha’s time there were others who taught extreme positions regarding the self. Annihilationists taught that the self is an unchanging entity, identical to the body, which is destroyed at death. They denied rebirth of any kind: life was a one-shot deal for them. The Eternalists insisted that the self survives death and lives forever. Both of these positions were problematic for the Buddha because he believed

either results in preoccupation with the self.³⁴ He saw this as a destructive distraction from the primary goal of compassionate and self-giving engagement with life.

The Buddha taught that the world and the self are similar concepts. The world is without an unchanging character, and yet it is an experienced reality, so it is not correct to say that the world is nonexistent. And yet there is much in worldly existence that is illusory. In the same way, the self is without an unchanging eternal nature and yet is an experiential reality. The experiential reality is of a changing self that flows into rebirth. It is a shifting stream of physical and mental states that “neither unchangingly exists nor does not exist,” not a metaphysical self, but an empirical one, according to Harvey’s interpretation.³⁵ Phrased differently, the Buddhist metatheory encompasses separate discourses on the self. In what might be called the ultimate discourse, there is no self, no metaphysical entity. In conventional discourse, the self exists as a temporary pattern of physical and psychological factors held together both in this life and across rebirths by the individual nature of karma.³⁶ The empirical self is an experiential fluid reality made up of individual themes held together by karmic glue.

Significant evidence for this is found in the discourses on the *Arahat*. An *Arahat*, “one of developed self,” experiences *nibbana* while alive, but does not enter permanently until death. The path toward becoming this holiest of saints requires transformation of the empirical self into a *mahatta*, or “great self.” Through mindful meditation and practice of loving kindness the disciple can be transformed into one who possesses an immeasurable heart/mind (*citta*) that has “broken the ‘eggshell of spiritual ignorance.’”³⁷ In the shattering of ignorance all boundaries created by the *khandhas* are destroyed, and the holy one no longer identifies with any particular grouping of personality factors as his or her own. The importance of this is revealed in a story about the Buddha and three monks: he asks them how it is that they are able to live in harmony, “as milk and water blend, regarding one another with the eye of affection.” One of them, Anuruddha, replies: “I, Lord, having surrendered my own *citta* [heart/mind], am living only in accordance with the *citta* of these venerable ones. Lord, we have diverse bodies but assuredly only one *citta*.”³⁸ Free of the conceit of “I am” that arises from concern for a metaphysical self, the Buddhist saint has become in life a boundless self: having realized the truth of not-self, the *Arahat* becomes the greatest of selves.

Concomitant with talk of no-self, the Buddha taught the existence of an empirical “life-principle,” dependent upon the physical body but not identical with it, such that this life-principle survives bodily death. It is made up of “vitality, heat, and consciousness,” with consciousness being the most important aspect. Consciousness is responsible for rebirth: it is the continuing and changing aspect of the individual that “falls into” the womb at conception. Descriptions here sound much like the *empirical* self at times. For example, regarding rebirth, the Buddha said “karma is the field, consciousness is the seed, craving is the moisture: for beings hindered by ignorance, fettered by craving, consciousness is supported in a lower element.”³⁹ This could be compared to a spiritlike principle, in that it is dependent upon the body but not identical to it, leaves the body at death, and functions as the link across rebirths.

Interestingly, consciousness is used as a synonym for heart/mind in some of the early suttas, and both are said to be conditioned by the arising of mind and body.⁴⁰

Like the Christian soul, the no-self is important to soteriology. The path to *nibbana* requires release of all possessive forms of attachment. Identification with something as what “I am” is a deep form of attachment. The goal of seeing things as not-self is to realize that everything we grasp after leads to clinging, which binds us to this world. The no-self teaching is supposed to provide a means for letting go. Grasping after self is clinging to illusory ignorance, and until all forms of clinging are overcome the Buddhist cannot attain *nibbana*. When applied to life experience and meditation, we see that all mental objects (*dhammas*) are not-self.⁴¹ The no-self teaching, then, is a practical and existential rather than philosophical concept.

One very early Theravadan text, the *Patisambhamagga*, juxtaposes the personality factors to *nibbana*. On this basis, Harvey draws an interesting parallel between the no-self teachings and the Buddha’s speech about *nibbana*. He extrapolates from the sayings about what the self is *not* to imagine what an ideal self, if there were one, might be like. The ideal self, short of which all things fall, would be permanent, free of *dukkha*, not conditioned by anything, blissful, without fear, self-controlled, integrated, and aware.⁴²

The early Buddhist teachings, then, tell us that the person is an accumulation of physical and mental processes formed out of the interaction of these processes with environment unified by karma and focused on consciousness. Each of us is a “consciousness-endowed body.”⁴³ Spiritual development is a gradual process of strengthening the purity of consciousness, until even it is finally radically transformed. In this transformation, interaction between body and form falls away, leaving timeless consciousness that is “unsupported, unconstructed, infinite and radiant, beyond any worldly phenomenon.” This is the eternal and unchanging *nibbana*.⁴⁴

WHERE THE BUDDHIST AND CHRISTIAN MIGHT CONVERGE

We are now in a position to look for consonances between the Buddhist and Christian teachings as interpreted herein. First it must be said that neither Buddhism nor Christianity can accept a mechanistic reduction of self/soul/mind to the physical. In both systems of thought, the person is not a mere material thing, but a product of interaction between matter and spirit, name and form (*nama, rupa*)—a process, in other words. Further, it is important to keep in mind that neither ancient Buddhist nor early Christian discourse about the self and salvation was intended as philosophical speculation: these teachings were experiential expressions aimed at helping followers understand the means through which salvation comes. In a sense, then, delving too deeply into the linguistic and philological nuances can lead one astray.

In Christian thought, personal histories begin at birth into the present life and potentially extend beyond into the Kingdom of God. For the Buddhist, personal history is more cosmic, in that it has always been and potentially extends into eternal bliss. There are undeniable differences regarding preexistence. However, in reference to this life and the life to come, the differences are not so great as they first seem. The Buddhist ideal self, based on understandings of *nibbana*, is permanent, free of

craving and suffering, blissful, without fear, self-controlled, integrated, and aware. The Christian ideal human being, as exemplified in Jesus, is a fully self-aware, self-controlled, and psychologically integrated being whose existence beyond this life is in communion with God: the promise is of freedom from fear, suffering, lustful craving; in short, it too is blissful existence.

Christianity has tried at times to describe the incomprehensible and incommunicable. The Buddha refused to do so. But we can extrapolate from his teachings hints of what awaits the believer, and it sounds not so terribly different from that which awaits the Christian. The Buddha saw that when human beings are promised a better life beyond this one, we are prone to turning salvation into a selfish goal. This tendency results in failure to respond to the suffering of living beings right here, right now. Jesus, too, taught that we should set aside concerns for things that rightly belong to God, and attend to the present. Striving, worry about material possessions, and fear for the future are all distractions from the deeper reality, which is focused on stewardship of the world. In other words, the Christian is to engage the world as an agent of God, without anxiety about the future (cf. Matt. 6:25–31).

Both traditions have been criticized from within and without for inherently passive ethical tendencies. For Buddhism, this has been traced primarily to cultural and historical conditions, but it is the case that the teachings themselves do contain seeds of passivity. Ethically, one's life circumstances are the result of karma; therefore it can tend toward supporting stoic acceptance of the status quo. Passivity is also ontologically implicit: since this material realm is ever changing, there is no firm foothold in this world from which to work for social and political reform. However, it is true that the Buddha taught extensively on compassion as a corrective for this—a point that has often been overlooked in Western scholarship of the Theravadan tradition. Christianity's tendencies toward passivity are tied to its teachings on immortality of the soul and the promise of heavenly reward. Religious doctrines that promise continued existence in an improved state beyond the present must always combat tendencies toward ethical passivity, and Christianity's problem is compounded by its promise of the return of the Messiah. Exhortation to eschew the things of this world in preparation for the return of Christ, removed from historical context, is more rightly the culprit for Christian acceptance of the status quo than emphasis on life after death, *per se*. Like Buddhism, Christianity's implicit passivity also has an ontological component: since the end is near, there is no need in even trying to change the status quo. Jesus' own words have been used time and again in Christian history to support this attitude.⁴⁵

The Buddha spoke directly on the subject of personal survival beyond this life, in large part due to the importance of individual efforts for attainment of *nibbana*. In Theravadan doctrine, salvation is solely through personal effort—no assistance is available from beyond this earthly realm.⁴⁶ In Christianity just how much the individual contributes to his or her own salvation has never been resolved. All Christians agree that in the end salvation is a divine gift, but the works-righteousness question has been a major stimulant to denominational splitting in Christian history. Lynn de Silva claims that Christianity—at least in one sense—advocates a more radical denial of self than Buddhism. The Buddhist achieves salvation through her own efforts: the

accumulated karmic energy of life determines perpetuation of life after death or achievement of blissful *nibbana*. In Christianity the individual has no power to generate life beyond the grave. It is only by the power of God that we obtain eternal bliss.⁴⁷ While it may be the case that in this one sense the Christian self is less apparent than the Buddhist, this is possibly so because the Buddha refused to discuss the existence of anything beyond this life. Theravadan Buddhism is nontheistic as a result. The Buddha eschewed all metaphysical questions. “Does God exist?” qualifies as one of the Undetermined Questions, and so there can be no appeal to anything beyond the human in speech about salvation.

It is important to remember the purpose of speech about no-self. The point of learning to release attachment to the idea of selfhood is to be capable of practicing compassion for all living beings. Here we find an important point of convergence between Christian and Buddhist doctrine. Compassion is the prescribed mode of being-in-the-world for both faiths; explicitly and directly related to attainment of salvation in Buddhism, descriptive of Jesus’ mode of being-in-the-world and implicitly essential to Christian salvation as well. The Buddha taught of four Sublime Attitudes or Immeasurable Mindsets: love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These Attitudes are cultivated in meditation, since they form the basis for all social action and development of a great self.⁴⁸ Ever the practical man, the Buddha recommended a sequential meditation practice, moving from easiest to most difficult. He knew that for selfish humanity the easiest form of love is self-love, so this is where we begin. Progress in meditation moves from compassion for ourselves to loved ones to someone or something about which one is neutral, until the ultimate challenge is reached—practice toward someone about whom we feel hostility or hatred. Over time, this approach results in a greater capacity to enter into and be moved to relieve the sufferings of others.

As for Christianity, although there is no specific teaching like that of the Buddha’s, the most distinctive term associated with Jesus’ own mindset in the scriptures is *splanchnizesthai*. Literally it means “to be moved from the viscera—or the heart—to have compassion.”⁴⁹ Karl Barth insisted that the intent of the Greek *splanchnizesthai* is much stronger than the meaning implied by the English or German words for compassion, sympathy, or pity. Jesus was not just moved by the sufferings of those around him, “but it went right into his heart, into himself, so that it was now his misery. It was more his than that of those who suffered it.” It is in this visceral response to and participation in the sufferings of humanity that Jesus was “the kingdom of God come on earth.”⁵⁰ Although compassion is not specifically isolated from the Gospels as vital to salvation, Jesus serves as exemplar for fully developed human selfhood: what he was we all should strive to be. Jesus, too, spoke of the difficulty of compassionate love, and insisted that we must learn to love even our enemies (Luke 6:32). He taught that the greatest of the commandments, on which all else depends, is to love God and neighbor with all one’s heart, soul, and mind (Matt. 22:37–40). In order to be a true human self, a Christian *mabatta*, we are to experience this heartfelt sharing in the life-worlds of others. We ought to be moved viscerally by the sufferings of others and motivated to lighten the burdens of others in this life.⁵¹

The Buddha, like today’s nonreductive physicalist, spoke against the concept of a separable and immortal soul, while insisting that the human is more than just physiological processes. A nonreductive physicalist soul is an embodied soul. It is not an ethereal something that exists apart from the body, but the sum of creaturely, historical, and communal existence and experience. The human being is dual in aspects—inner and outer, mental and physical, soul and body—but not in substance. A person is a responsive physical being whose complex physiological interaction with creation causes ongoing change within the organism and gives rise to human capacities like morality and spirituality. The soul is a dimension of experience, not a separate metaphysical entity. It comes into being out of relation with creation, the capacity for which is an emergent property of the mind: soul is the embodied facilities and experiences of interrelatedness. The human being in Buddhist thought is also an ever-changing product of the interaction between the body and its environment. Consciousness arises out of interaction among the personality factors, and so can be said to be an emergent property that is supervenient on the *khandhas*. The empirical self is an experiential fluid reality made up of individual themes held together by karmic glue. Who we are and who we become are determined by our histories and our relationships to all others.

These two ways of thinking have more in common than not. Higher human capacities—mind or consciousness—are more than the actors who give rise to them. Consciousness and soul have a top-down causal relationship to the body in both systems of thought, as well. In Buddhism this is stronger than in Christian nonreductive physicalism, since consciousness in this life impacts the very nature of the rebirth body in the life to come. Two points from biology and psychology should be noted before closing. We now know that the physical self is in a perpetual state of change: the cells of our bodies die and regenerate such that we are made up of new material “stuff” about every seven weeks of our lives. Once thought to be a somewhat discrete entity with clear borders and structures that separate it from all others, the psychological self is now believed to be “a living and dynamic dialogical process, a set of loosely connected, nonverbal narrative themes and variations created from the history of communication with people and with things.”⁵² These words from science undeniably support aspects of Buddhist doctrine and of Christian nonreductive physicalism.

It is my hope that this thought experiment introduces fruitful themes for dialogue among Buddhists and Christians. Whether we believe ourselves to be not-selves at all, or whether we find comfort in the idea of individuality, we do well to listen the Buddha’s last spoken words: “Subject to decay are all compounded things. Do ye abide in heedfulness.”⁵³

NOTES

1. Winston L. King, “No-Self, No-Mind, and Emptiness Revisited,” in *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, eds. Paul O. Ingram and Frederick J. Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1986), pp. 155–176.

2. Thomas Aquinas taught that the soul is the form of the body, for example. Martin Luther argued that the soul either dies with the body or “sleeps” until the general resurrection.

3. John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 8.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

5. Nancey Murphy, “Human Nature: Historical, Scientific, and Religious Issues,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, eds. Warren Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 11–19.

6. Edmund Hill, *Being Human: A Biblical Perspective* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984), p. 97. Quoted in Ray Anderson, “On Being Human: The Spiritual Saga of a Creaturely Soul,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, p. 176, n3.

7. One classic example is Edwin Hatch’s *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages Upon the Christian Church* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1891).

8. Oscar Cullman, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (London: Epworth, 1958), p. 15.

9. Anderson, “On Being Human,” p. 178.

10. Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought*. (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997), p. 106. Gillman notes that Judaism too has struggled with the problem of dualist anthropologies over the last two millennia.

11. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Religious Ideas in the Old Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1947), p. 83.

12. Bartholomew Collopy, “Theology and the Darkness of Death,” in *Theological Studies* 39 (1978), p. 39. Nondualist theological anthropologies are offered by Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Rahner, Jurgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Elizabeth Johnson, Sallie McFague, and Peter Hodgson, among others.

13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 201.

14. Critics of epiphenomenalism point out a number of problems: (1) If there were a perfect correlation between brain states and mental events, the neurologist should, for example, be able to determine *what* someone is dreaming about rather than simply *that* someone is dreaming. (2) How can we account for the phenomenal qualities of things (*qualia*)? No amount of physical information about a rose can encapsulate its smell. (3) Most mental states are directed toward something. How can intentionality be explained if it is the result of nothing more than neurons firing? (4) If mental events cannot cause physical ones, how can we explain the now-innumerable studies demonstrating the impact of emotional stress on physical well-being? And how can we explain everyday experiences like the transition from reading and thinking about ideas to the physical act of writing a response? Simply put, we cannot account for the content of this paper, if pure epiphenomenalism is correct. (5) Conscious mental states, if they do not influence the body, have no survival value. Why then do they arise? (6) How can we explain reasoning and introspective knowing? Brain states are certainly a necessary but not sufficient condition for reasoning. (7) Finally, if epiphenomenalism is true, we cannot believe it to be so, because all beliefs have to be based solely on brain changes. This means that arguments offered in favor of epiphenomenalism can play no part in anyone’s beliefs! See Paul Edwards, ed. *Immortality* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1997), pp. 1–70.

15. Paul K. Jewett, *Who We Are: Our Dignity as Human*, ed. Marguerite Shuster (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 10, n15.

16. Nancey Murphy, “Nonreductive Physicalism: Philosophical Issues,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, p. 131.

17. Phillip Clayton, “Neuroscience, the Person, and God: An Emergentist Account,” in *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, eds. Robert John Russell, Nancy Murphy, Theo C. Meyering, and Michael A. Arbib (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1999), pp. 181–214.

18. Nancy Murphy and George Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 23.

19. Jaegwon Kim, *Mind in a Physical World: An Essay on the Mind-Body Problem and Mental Causation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), p. 10.

20. Nancy Murphy, “Downward Causation and Why the Mental Matters,” in *CTNS Bulletin*, vol. 19 (winter 1999) no. 1:13.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Nancy Murphy, “Supervenience and the Downward Efficacy of the Mental: A Non-reductive Physicalist Account of Human Action,” in *Neuroscience and the Person*, pp. 147–164.

23. Murphy, “Human Nature,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, p. 25.

24. Malcolm Jeeves, “Brain, Mind, and Behavior,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, p. 89.

25. Warren Brown, “Conclusion: Reconciling Scientific and Biblical Portraits of the Human,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, p. 222. Also Ray Anderson, “On Being Human: The Spiritual Saga of a Creaturely Soul,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, p. 192.

26. Murphy and Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe*, pp. 211–213. See Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 89.

27. See Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982). In later writings, Collins’s interpretation shifts toward the position advocated by Peter Harvey and addressed in this paper. In a 1994 essay Collins says the Buddhist denial of self is intended to describe only certain kinds of experience and agency. “What Are Buddhists *Doing* When They Deny the Self?” in *Religion and Practical Reason: New Essays in the Comparative Philosophy of Religions*, eds. Frank E. Reynolds and David Tracy (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), pp. 59–88.

28. According to Harvey, this is the interpretation advocated by the highly respected C. A. F. Rhys-Davids, I. B. Horner of the Pali Text Society, and Edward Conze, among others. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

29. Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness, and Nirvana in Early Buddhism* (Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 1995), p. 7.

30. *Samyutta Nikaya* III.46, translated by and quoted in Harvey, p. 40.

31. *Anguttara Nikaya* II.212; *Majjhima Nikaya* III.32. Both cited in/translated by Paul Griffiths, *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990), pp. 154–156.

32. *Samyutta Nikaya* IV.400–401; Harvey, pp. 28–29, 31.

33. *Majjhima Nikaya* Sutta 63, *Buddhism in Translations*, ed. Henry Clarke Warren (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1915).

34. Harvey, pp. 29, 38.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 38.

36. Collins, “What Are Buddhists *Doing*?” pp. 66–67. The later Mahayana tradition, especially the Indian *Yogacara* tradition, developed the theory of “store consciousness,” which sounds a lot like a continuous self. It was first developed to help explain personal continuity—the gist of it is that each action deposits seeds in the actor. The seeds remain in this locus until they mature and bear karmic fruits. That this category is an ad hoc philosophical attempt to deal with apparently insurmountable problems in Buddhist doctrine is argued by Paul Griffiths in *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Problem* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986).

37. *Anguttara Nikaya* IV.176. *Citta*, or heart/mind, was often used by the Buddha as a synonym for self.

38. *Majjhima Nikaya* I.206–207; Harvey, p. 61.
39. *Anguttara Nikaya* I.223.; Harvey, p. 97. Harvey translates *vinnana* “discernment.” At the suggestion of my anonymous reviewers, I will use the more common translation as “consciousness.”
40. Harvey, p. 113, directs us to *Samyutta Nikaya* II.95; V.184; III.60–61.
41. *Anguttara Nikaya* V.188; Harvey, pp. 44–45.
42. Commonly translated “suffering” but may more accurately mean something like “unsatisfactoriness.” See Collins, “What Are Buddhists *Doing?*” p. 62.
43. *Samyutta Nikaya* III.80; Harvey, p. 116.
44. Harvey, p. 249.
45. Much has been written on this subject. The classic is “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:13). Other texts, like Ephesians 6:5–7 and Titus 2:9 have been used to justify slavery. The point about ontological aspects of Buddhist thought is from Joseph Spae, *Buddhist-Christian Empathy* (Chicago: Chicago Institute of Theology and Culture, 1980), p. 121.
46. In the later Mahayana tradition, ideas that assistance is available to us from outside this life developed over time. Bodhisattvas are “great selves” who voluntarily delay their own entry into *nibbana* out of compassion for all living beings and are available to assist others. Celestial Buddhas can be prayed to for assistance as well.
47. Lynn de Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 85.
48. The Ultimate Light Sutra, from the most ancient of Buddhist writings, defines the attitudes: “*Love* is the state of desiring to offer happiness and welfare with the thought ‘May they be liberated from their sufferings’ . . . *Compassion* is the state of desiring to remove suffering and misfortune, with the thought ‘May they be liberated from these sufferings’ . . . *Sympathetic joy* is the state of desiring the continuity of [other’s] happiness and welfare with the thought ‘You beings are rejoicing; it is good’ . . . *Equanimity* is the state of observing [another’s] suffering or happiness and thinking ‘These appear because of that individual’s own past activities.’” From the Pali Canon. Harry B. Aronson, *Love and Sympathy in Theravada Buddhism* (Dehli, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), pp. 63–64.
49. Peter C. Hodgson, *Jesus—Word and Presence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 168–169; 196–199. Luke 1:78 refers to the “*heartfelt* mercy of our God.” Jesus uses the word in telling the parables of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:33, in Luke 15:20 of the father receiving his prodigal son, and in Matthew 18:27 regarding the king who forgives debts. Jesus was “*moved by compassion*” to heal in Mark 1:41, Luke 7:13, and Matthew 20:34. In Matthew and in Mark, the word appears as part of a formula related to Jesus’ experience of the crowds of followers: “When he saw the crowds, he *had compassion* for them” (Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 15:32; Mark 6:34, 8:2).
50. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, “The Doctrine of Reconciliation,” part 2. ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), pp. 185–187.
51. Rita Gross argues convincingly that it is more accurate to draw parallels between Jesus and the bodhisattva of Mahayana Buddhism than the Buddha himself, since the bodhisattva vows to sacrifice personal release into *nibbana* until all living beings attain the same. Rita M. Gross, “The Buddhist’s View of Jesus,” in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 19:1 (1991): 62–75.
52. Alan Fogel, Relational Narratives of the Prelinguistic Self,” in *The Self in Infancy: Theory and Research*, ed. Phillipe Rochat (New York: Elsevier Science, 1995), p. 118.
53. *Mahaparinnibbana Sutta* VI.10. trans. by T. W. Rhys-Davids, *Buddhist Suttas, Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 11 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1881).

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⁵¹ **This Buddhist's View of Jesus**

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