The Pope states that "the Buddhist tradition and the methods deriving from it have an almost exclusively negative soteriology (doctrine of salvation)." Such a view of the Buddhist teachings was widespread among Christian missionaries in Asia during the 19th century, serving to justify their evangelical incursions into the heartlands of Buddhism. Serious scholars of comparative religion have long recognized this view to be a misrepresentation, rooted, in the case of the early missionaries, partly in misunderstanding, partly in deliberate distortion. It is therefore puzzling that the present head of the Catholic Church, otherwise so well informed, should repeat these worn-out lines, particularly at a time when greater mutual understanding is expected from the leaders of different religions.

The Pope does not explain exactly why he regards Buddhist soteriology as negative. Most likely, he takes this view because the Buddhist path
of deliverance does not recognize a personal God as the agent and end of salvation. Like beauty, however, what is negative and what is positive lies in the eye of the beholder, and what is negative for one may turn out to be another's supreme ideal. If one seeks an everlasting union between one's eternal soul and a creator God, then a doctrine that denies the existence of an eternal soul and a Divine Creator will inevitably appear negative. If one regards everything conditioned as impermanent and devoid of self, and seeks deliverance in Nibbana, the Deathless Element, then a doctrine of everlasting union between God and the soul will seem -- not negative perhaps -- but founded upon wishful thinking and unacceptable articles of faith. For the ordinary reader, however, the word "negative," when applied to Buddhism, will suggest something far different from a philosophically acute way of approaching the Ultimate, conjuring up pictures of a bleak doctrine of escapism aimed at personal annihilation. Behind the Pope's words we can detect echoes of the ancient texts: "There are, monks, some recluses and brahmins who charge me with being an annihilationist, saying that the recluse Gotama teaches the annihilation of an existent being. That is false misrepresentation. What I teach, in the past as also now, is suffering and the cessation of suffering" (MN 22).

Even more worrisome than the Pope's characterization of the Buddhist doctrine of salvation as negative is his contention that "the Buddhist doctrine of salvation constitutes the central point, or rather the only point, of this system." The conclusion implied by this pronouncement, left hanging silently behind the lines, is that Buddhism is incapable of offering meaningful guidance to people immersed in the problems of everyday life; it is an otherworldly religion of escape suited only for those of an ascetic bent.

While Western scholars in the past have focused upon the Buddhist doctrine of salvation as their main point of interest, the living traditions of Buddhism as practiced by its adherents reveal that this attitude, being one-sided to begin with, must yield one-sided results. The Buddhist texts themselves show that Buddhism addresses as wide a range of concerns as any other of humanity's great religions. Nibbana remains the ultimate goal of Buddhism, and is certainly "the central point" of the Dhamma, but it is by no means "the only point" for which the Buddha proclaimed his Teaching.

According to the Buddhist texts, the Dhamma is intended to promote three types of good, each by way of different but overlapping sets of principles. These three goals, though integrated into the framework of a single internally consistent teaching, enable the Dhamma to address individuals at different stages of spiritual development, with varying capacities for comprehension. The three goods are:

(i) the good pertaining to the present life (ditthadhammattha//), i.e., the achievement of happiness and well-being here and now, through ethical living and harmonious relationships based on kindness and compassion;

(ii) the good pertaining to the future life (samparayikattha//), i.e., a favorable rebirth within the round of existence, by practicing generosity, observing the precepts, and cultivating the mind in meditation; and

(iii) the ultimate good (paramattha//), i.e., the attainment of Nibbana, by following the complete training defined by the Noble Eightfold Path.

For most Buddhists in their day-to-day lives, the pursuit of Nibbana
is a distant rather than an immediate goal, to be approached gradually during the long course of rebirths. Until they are ready for a direct assault on the final good, they expect to walk the path for many lives within samsara, pursuing their mundane welfare while aspiring for the Ultimate. To assist them in this endeavor, the Buddha has taught numerous guidelines that pertain to ethically upright living within the confines of the world. In the Sigalovada Sutta, for example, he enumerates the reciprocal duties of parents and children, husband and wife, friends and friends, employers and employees, teachers and students, religious and laity. He made right livelihood an integral part of the Noble Eightfold Path, and explained what it implies in the life of a busy lay person. During his long ministry he gave advice to merchants on the prudent conduct of business, to young wives on how to behave towards their husbands, to rulers on how to administer their state. All such guidance, issuing from the Buddha's great compassion, is designed to promote the welfare and happiness of the world while at the same time steering his followers towards a pleasant rebirth and gradual progress towards final liberation.

Yet, while the Buddha offers a graduated teaching adjusted to the varying life situations of his disciples, he does not allow any illusion to linger about the ultimate aim of his Doctrine. That aim is Nibbana, which is not a consoling reconciliation with the world but irreversible deliverance from the world. Such deliverance cannot be gained merely by piety and good works performed in a spirit of social sympathy. It can be won only by renunciation, by "the relinquishment of all acquisitions" (sa\'b'upadhipatinissagga/), including among such "acquisitions" the bodily and mental processes that we identify as our self. The achievement of this end is necessarily individual. It must be arrived at through personal purification and personal insight, as the fruit of sustained effort in fulfilling the entire course of training. Hence the Buddha did not set out to found a church capable of embracing all humanity within the fold of a single creed. He lays down a path -- a path perfect in its ideal formulation -- to be trodden by imperfect human beings under the imperfect conditions that life within the world affords. While the quest for the highest goal culminates in deliverance from the world, this same ideal "bends back" towards the world and spells out standards of conduct and a scale of values to guide the unenlightened manyfolk in their daily struggles against the streams of greed, hatred, and delusion. Nibbana remains the "chief point" and the omega point of the Dhamma. But as this goal is to be experienced as the extinction of greed, hatred, and delusion, it defines the condition for its realization as a life devoted to overcoming greed through generosity, to overcoming hatred through patience and loving kindness. and to overcoming delusion through wisdom and understanding.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

//Part II of this essay will appear in the next BPS newsletter.//

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