

ASIA-PACIFIC NAZARENE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE CONCEPT OF SELF-LIBERATION
IN THERAVADA BURMESE BUDDHISM

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THE CONCEPT OF SELF-LIBERATION IN THERAVADA BURMESE BUDDHISTS

AS PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
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(SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY)

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the self-liberation concept of Theravada Buddhism, with the hope that it can provide a foundation towards a dialogical exchange between Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar. To provide a better understanding of the context, the thesis offers a brief historical background of Buddhist-Christian relations in Myanmar. By mainly relying on the translation of the *Pali Tipitaka*, along with a number of secondary sources from prominent Buddhist scholars, the self-liberation concept of Theravada Buddhism is discussed, beginning with the personal experience of Gotama, the Buddha.

The thesis is descriptive in nature. The research employs a basic qualitative method, integrated with the analytical and interpretive methods. Correlation and synthesis were done and are presented in the final chapter with an emphasis on implications for interfaith dialogue.

The study produced some significant findings. Firstly, it discovered the true nature of self-liberation in Theravada Burmese Buddhism. It is neither focused on merit-making nor ritual performances. Rather, it is the attempt to fulfill the requirements for self-liberation in seeing all things as they are, which destroys all the defilements from one's mind to become an *Arahant*, a perfect one. Secondly, despite the differences in the means towards liberation between Christianity and Buddhism, and the seeming impossibility for a common ground to begin theological dialogue, there are common doctrinal grounds as well as practical implications that will not only allow us to appreciate each other's religions, but also share our divergences respectfully. Thirdly, it

discovers the possibility of Buddhist-Christian dialogue concerning liberation through shared experiences as a means to make our dialogue clearer. Overall, it uncovers relevant and feasible ways to bring peace and make dialogue possible in the context of Buddhist-Christian dialogue through soteriological engagement.

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No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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November 11, 2020
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DEDICATION

To my dearest late mother, Daw Cing Do Niang, who partnered with God in raising me to become who I am today.

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CHAPTER 1

METHOD AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Myanmar is a country where Buddhists and Christians are mainly found. As a result, it is, therefore, a land whereas Clasper says, “the impact of both the wheel of Buddhism and the cross of Christ has been felt.”¹ Theravada Buddhists in Myanmar agree with the teaching of Christianity concerning the nature of salvation as an experience rather than a rational understanding of a set of beliefs. However, concerning the means or way of salvation, the two religions stand in opposition. The Buddhists believe in self-liberation whereas Christianity believes in salvation as the work of God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This means that the encounter between a Burmese Buddhist and a Christian is not an easy one because it is the meeting of two different concepts of salvation.

Following many years of isolation from each other, Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar have been much more open towards each other in the past few years. Much research and contextual theology are being developed both from the East and the West.² Since the 1960s and partly in response to the changes in understanding related to

¹ Paul D. Clasper, "The Buddhist-Christian Encounter in Burma," *Review and Expositor* 58, no. 1 (1961): 35,36, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost.; David Thang Moe, "Being Church in the Midst of Pagodas: A Theology of 'embrace' for Myanmar," *Mission Studies* 31, no. 1 (2014): 35, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost.

² Samuel Ngun Ling, "The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma: Its Past, Present and Future Perspective" (PhD diss., Tokyo International Christian University, 1998). ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

religions started by Vatican II's conclusions, Dr. San Lian wrote a dissertation on the importance of inter-faith dialogue in challenging Myanmar Christians to engage with their neighbors based on socially focused spirituality. There are four recommendations he made as Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar enter interfaith dialogue namely:

1) no attempt must be made to equate different religious concepts; 2) faith differences must be respected and recognized; 3) honest matching as a result of analytical understanding of different religious texts can be conducted, with the intention of creating a common platform for dialogue; and 4) the required effort must be exerted to thoroughly understand both one's own and the other's religion.³

With this important suggestion in mind, we need to prepare for the effective engagement in dialogue which can only be done by not only knowing our own doctrines but also possessing an accurate enough knowledge of the fundamental teachings of the other party. Thus, this thesis aims to explore the concept of self-salvation, which occupies a central position in Burmese Theravada Buddhism. This will serve as a solid foundation for building up and engaging in inter-faith dialogue with our neighbors.

Background of the Study

Despite the mixture of Theravada Buddhism and traditional *nats* (spirits) worship in the religious practice of Burmese Buddhists in Myanmar, the country is appreciated to be preserving the pure form of Theravada Buddhism in comparison to other Southeast Asia Buddhist countries.⁴ At the same time, Burmese Buddhists are proud of their strong faith in Theravada Buddhism which they embraced gladly without raising many

³ San Lian, "Christian-Buddhist Dialogue in Myanmar: A Spirituality of Involvement in Social and Ethical Transformation" (PhD diss., University of Divinity, 2017), 260, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

⁴ Keneth K.S. Ch'en, *Buddhism: The Light of Asia* (Woodbury, NY: Barron's Educational Series, 1968), 127. Southeast Asia Theravada Countries are: Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.

questions. Alongside the golden-colored Gotama the Buddha's image, the spirit-altar is placed in every Burmese Buddhist home. An old saying remains true: "The Burmese loves the Buddha but fears the *nats*."⁵ Moreover, although most people in Myanmar are born Buddhists, they hardly devote themselves to learning their doctrine except for the monks. They would rather rely entirely on their monks for knowledge of Buddhism.⁶ Therefore, it is even harder for Christians in Myanmar to say that our knowledge about their beliefs is accurate unless we first make an effort to dig deeper into their fundamental teachings by studying the primary sources of the Buddhist doctrines.

The challenge by Maung Hla Bu is for Christians to examine whether they have sufficiently recognized the authentic core teachings of Buddhism before having an interfaith dialogue.⁷ Also, a promoter of Buddhist-Christian interfaith dialogue in Myanmar, Dr. Ciin Sian Khai says, "Without the support of theologies or religious teachings genuine interfaith dialogue cannot be implemented properly."⁸ With all of these in mind, there are two driving forces behind this thesis. Firstly, Christians in Myanmar need to prepare themselves theologically to engage in dialogue with their neighbors. To do this, they need to have authentic knowledge about the core teachings of Theravada Buddhism. Interfaith dialogue is all about exchanging our ideas and doctrines, but we need to be educated to do this. Another motivating factor for this study comes from my year-long

⁵ Simon Pau Khan En, *Nat Worship: A Paradigm for Doing Contextual Theology in Myanmar* (Yangon: Judson Research Centre, 2012), 30.

⁶ U Aye Maung, *Buddha and Buddhism* (Yangon: Yan Aung Books, 2016), 1,3.

⁷ U Hla Bu, "The Christian Encounter with Buddhism in Burma," *International Review of Mission* 47, no. 186 (1958): 176, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost.

⁸ Ciin Sian Khai, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue - a Way toward Peaceful Co-Existence in Myanmar* (Hamburg: Missionshilfe-Verl, 2015), 23.

experiences in growing up and ministering among Burmese Buddhists particularly in Aungmyithar, Kalay City, Myanmar. I had opportunities to communicate personally with some of the religious Buddhists and observed that Buddhists are deeply rooted in their concept of self-salvation. The Burmese Buddhist has no place for the concept of a Savior. Their efforts in religious practices, merit-earnings, and good conduct have a single purpose, to attain *nibbana* or at least have a higher birth in the next life. This led me to have a strong desire to explore the concept of self-liberation mainly relying on the primary sources.

Statement of the Problem

This research will concentrate on the main thesis question: What is the concept of self-liberation among Myanmar Theravada Buddhists? This core question generates some related questions:

- 1) What is Theravada Buddhism? What are its peculiar forms in Myanmar?
- 2) What is self-salvation in Theravada Buddhism? What is its relation to the attainment of *nibbana*?
- 3) What are the determining factors of attaining salvation? How can one be prevented from attaining it, thereby being trapped in the cycle of rebirth?
- 4) What is the Burmese Buddhist expectation about what constitutes *nibbana*, and when it is achieved?
- 5) What recommendations can be made to Christians who wish to engage Theravada Buddhists in dialogue?

At the end of this study, all the research questions will be answered, and the reader will have accurate and detailed knowledge regarding the concept of self-salvation in Burmese Theravada Buddhism.

Significance of the Study

From the very outset, Christians in Myanmar are being challenged theologically and philosophically because Christianity, as a theistic religion, exists in the nontheistic world of Theravada Buddhism. The uniqueness of this thesis lies in its endeavor to meet this challenge by trying to understand the very heart of the Buddhists' reality and claim.

Since this research is an attempt in exploring the self-salvation concept on the teachings of Buddha enshrined in the *Pali Tipitaka* of Theravada Buddhism, this study will be a great help to Christians from different positions interested in this subject. This may even be a useful instrument for the Burmese Buddhists themselves to know their authentic doctrines and see whether their practices are in line with the teaching of the Buddha or not. It will be a significant contribution because it will provide a clear understanding of the ambiguous knowledge regarding the concept of salvation in Burmese Buddhism. Most importantly, this study will help people who are engaged in Christian mission among the Buddhists in Myanmar to have a more complete awareness of the embedded concept of liberation through one's effort, which in turn will help them be better prepared for dialogue with them.

In the past, studies on Buddhism in Myanmar were conducted from a Christian perspective in terms of contextualizing Christian theology to be more in line with Asian and Burmese situations and aspirations. The researcher sees the need to attempt digging deeper into their teachings. This is part of our faith and calling as Myanmar Christians to

be the salt and light of the world in our context dominated by Theravada Buddhism. The findings from primary sources will be a great contribution to both the fields of theology and missiology.

Definition of Terms

Self-liberation refers to the idea that liberation-which is the goal of religions-is attained by human means and without any help from any higher spiritual being or God. The stress is on self-help through individual discipline and practice. In Theravada Buddhism, self-liberation means the responsibility of an individual for his or her liberation from this suffering world.⁹ The very word of the Buddha best defines the meaning of self-liberation when he said one must strive for his or her own liberation by being their own refuges (Dhammapada 276, 380).¹⁰

Melford Spiro said that the concept of salvation as “one’s unaided effort,” one’s reliance on oneself and the denial of the existence of a loving and merciful savior is “deeply rooted in the cognitive structure of the Burmese.”¹¹ In this study, the terms “self-salvation” and “self-liberation” will be used interchangeably.

Buddhism “comes from the word *budhi* which means ‘to wake up’ and thus Buddhism can be said to be the philosophy of awakening. Buddhism is now 2,500 years

⁹ Rudi Maier, “Salvation in Buddhism,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 10, no. 1 (2014): 10, 13, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jams/vol10/iss1/3/>.

¹⁰ Acharya Buddharakkhita, trans., *The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom* (Kandy, SL: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985), 65, 81.

¹¹ Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 132,33.

old and has about 380 million followers worldwide.”¹² According to Popular Dictionary of Buddhism, “Buddhism is also defined as “a way of life, a discipline; a way to live Reality.”¹³ It is a way to salvation or liberation according to the teaching of the Buddha, the Enlightened One. In Myanmar, the religion is preferably called as *Boukta Tha-thana* which means the doctrine of the Buddha.¹⁴

Theravada Buddhism is the oldest school among the three main schools of Buddhism.¹⁵ It is the school that follows the “Doctrines of the Elders,” which refers to the senior monks who preserved the tradition. A follower of this tradition is called a Theravadin. As the name implies, it is considered the most conservative school of Buddhism.¹⁶

Kamma (Burmese - *kan*) is a Pali word (Sanskrit- *karma*) which means “action” or “deed.” This is of three kinds: mental, verbal, and physical activity. Action committed with bodily conduct is a physical action, actions, or deeds done through uttering of words is called verbal *kamma*, and evil thoughts in one’s mind are called mental *kamma*.¹⁷ It is also understood in a simple way “action and the appropriate result of the action; the law of cause and effect as applied to the moral sphere; it is the Law of ethical Causation,

¹² S. Dhammika, *Good Question Good Answer* (Singapore: Buddha Dhamma Mandala Society, 2006), 7.

¹³ Christmas Humphreys, *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1997), 35.

¹⁴ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 32.

¹⁵ Asanga Tilakaratne, *Theravada Buddhism: The View of the Elder* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2012), XXII–XXIII.

¹⁶ Richard Francis Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, Reprinted. (London: Routledge, 1995), 3.

¹⁷ Shin Janakabhivamsa, *Abhidhamma in Daily Life*, trans. U Ko Lay, 2nd ed. (Mandalay: U Maung Maung, 1999), 198.

through the operation of which a man ‘reaps what he sows,’ builds his character, makes his destiny, and works out his salvation.”¹⁸

Nibbana (Burmese - *nibban*) “the Pali word *Nibbana* (Sanskrit- *Nirvana*) is composed of ‘*ni*’ and ‘*vana*.’ *Ni* is a negative particle. *Vana* means weaving or craving. This craving serves as a cord to connect one life with another. It is called *Nibbana* in that it is a departure (*ni*) from that craving which is called (*vana*).”¹⁹ It is “the supreme Goal of Buddhist endeavor.”²⁰ It is a state in which one is freed from the transmigration of souls or the endless cycle of life and death or the wheel of rebirth. It is the end of suffering.²¹

Scope and Delimitations of the Study

This thesis focuses on the exploration of the concept of self-salvation in the Theravada Burmese Buddhists from primary and secondary sources. Under Buddhism, there are different traditions or sects which are also different from one another in their doctrines. For instance, Theravada has a different concept of salvation from that of Mahayana. This study does not cover the concept of salvation in other schools of Buddhism but confines solely to the school of Theravada Buddhism. The purpose is also not to do a comparative study of Christianity and Theravada Buddhism and their views of salvation. Rather, it is to discover the authentic teaching of Theravada Buddhism on

¹⁸ Humphreys, *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism*, 110.

¹⁹ Venerable Narada Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings* (Taipei, Taiwan: The Buddha Educational Foundation, 1998), 386.

²⁰ Humphreys, *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism*, 153.

²¹ John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (New York: Anchor Books, 1986), 178.

liberation. Primary sources will be used for this study for the best outcomes. The study is also geographically limited within the country of Myanmar.

Discussion of Methodology

This descriptive study uses a basic qualitative research method where the researcher gathered information both from primary and secondary sources that are written, translated, and recorded. These were described, compared, interpreted, reviewed, and analyzed to present a thorough discussion of the concept of self-salvation among Theravada Buddhists in Myanmar. It is library-based research that explored what is written rather than what is practiced by Buddhists in Myanmar. Since the original writings of Theravada School are in Pali, the translations into English will be considered as primary sources. This study will utilize primary sources as well as secondary sources for the best answer to the thesis questions. This study is not about giving the opinion of the researcher on the topic, rather it is all about defining the topic.

The researcher's primary aim is neither to judge the concept of Buddhist's self-salvation from a Christian point of view nor bring a comparison between the two. The objective of this research is to explore the self-salvation concept of Theravada Buddhists in Myanmar from the fundamental teachings of the Buddha found in the sacred writings of Theravada Buddhism. As this study is an exploration of the other faith, the researcher attempts to deal with the study objectively. In the last chapter, the researcher brings implications and recommendations for Buddhist-Christian interfaith dialogue in Myanmar based on the findings from a Christian point of view.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This chapter aims to provide background and context related to this study by examining two aspects. The first part of this chapter gives a brief history of Theravada Buddhism with its development throughout history, including how it differs from Mahayana Buddhism, the other main school of Buddhism. The second part of this chapter discusses the historical context and background of Myanmar that will reveal factors that contributed to this study. This is followed by the history of the advent of Theravada Buddhism in the soil of Myanmar and its development throughout history, including information on how this religion became the dominant religion in Myanmar.

Buddhism in the Early Century

The Buddhist era began at the Buddha's enlightenment which modern Theravadins date from 544 or 543 B.C.E.²² Nevertheless, the history is silent for about a century or two following the death of the Buddha except for the Communal Recitations, an assemblage of five hundred senior monks that included the Ten Major Disciples still living at the time in Rajagaha to rehearse the teachings of the Buddha. In this way, the Canon was originated and the teachings of Gotama were passed down to one generation after the other.²³

²² Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 32.

²³ Daisaku Ikeda, *Buddhism, the First Millennium*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 13.

Shortly thereafter, the Buddhist order split into two main branches: Theravada or Hinayana Buddhism (Doctrines or Teachings of the Elders) and Mahayana Buddhism (the Great Community or the Larger Vehicle). Theravada Buddhism, also known as the Southern School, which is mainly practiced today in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Mahayana Buddhism, or the Northern School, is found in China, Korea, and Japan.²⁴ According to the records of Theravadins, the great split happened in the latter part of the first century B.C.E. when the teachings of the Buddha were put into writing and the Canon was originated.²⁵ Another source recorded the great split to have happened in about 383 B.C.E., during the Second Council that took place in Vesali. Two different explanations of the schism are mentioned but without much detail. One source says it was due to a disagreement over ten disciplining rules, whereas another source says the schism was caused by the concept of the *arahant* (Buddhist saint). According to the latter source, the split had to happen because some did not accept the orthodox monk's idea about the "the world-transcending saint." This group argued that the arahants are still feeble and can fall into temptation. Therefore, they rather hold the idea of "the world-sympathizing *Bodhisattva* (enlightened being)," who out of love and compassion helps others to reach their goal.²⁶ During the next two centuries, several sub-schools arose from both of the two main schools.²⁷

²⁴ Paul D. Clasper, *Eastern Paths and the Christian Way* (New York: Orbis Books, 1980), 33.

²⁵ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 158.

²⁶ Hans Wolfgang Schumann, *Buddhism: An Outline of Its Teachings and Schools*, 1st ed. (Wheaton, Ill: Theosophical Pub. House, 1974), 84.

²⁷ Schumann, *Buddhism*, 84. Aside from the two main branches of Buddhism; Theravada and Mahayana, another main type of Buddhism is Vajrayana (Tibetan Buddhism) which is viewed as a kind of Mahayana Buddhism. This is strong in Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim and Mongolia. Other popular Sects of Buddhism are Zen and the Ch'an Sect of Buddhism and School of Pure Land.

Theravada Buddhism

Historically, Theravada Buddhism is the oldest organized school of Buddhism with a complete canon.²⁸ An adherent of Theravada is called a Theravadin. The term “Theravada” or “Doctrines of the Elders” refers to the senior monks who preserve the tradition. Thus, the title itself suggests conservatism. The Theravada school claims to have preserved the original teachings and practices of the Buddha with pristine purity.²⁹

The Theravada School follows the tradition of the senior monks of the First Buddhist *Sangha* (*sangha* is the community of the monks). It reflects the features of early Buddhism in its most conservative form. Doctrinally, no great changes or developments seem to have taken place in Theravada school from the time of its origin. Rather, Theravadins prefer to be confined within the Pali *Tipitaka* without going further to avoid the tendency of misinterpretations of the *Dhamma*.³⁰ This is also how they avoid the misinterpretation of the Buddha’s teachings in times of diverse opinions. They emphasize Buddhahood, which is the highest spiritual level a human being can achieve, like Gotama himself who got rid of all his desires and became enlightened.³¹ Theravadins preserved the Buddha’s teaching as authentically as they could in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.³² Among these Southeast Asian

²⁸ Christmas Humphreys, ed., *The Wisdom of Buddhism* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1960), 41.

²⁹ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 3.

³⁰ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 21.

³¹ Lunugamwehere Rewatha, “Theravāda in Sri Lanka: A Brief Historical Perspective” (n.d.): 3, https://www.academia.edu/41514642/Therav%C4%81da_in_Sri_Lanka_A_Brief_Historical_Perspective.

³² Joanna Sokhoeun Duong, “The Influence of Theravada Buddhism on Spiritual and Social Reforms in Cambodia” (PhD diss., California Institute of Integral Studies, 2009), 12, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

countries, Burmese Theravada Buddhism is being credited as the closest to its original form.³³

Differences Between Theravada and Mahayana

As mentioned earlier, there are several sub-schools under the umbrella of Buddhism. However, in this section, the researcher does not discuss the differences among all those sects but instead focuses on the two main schools, Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism.

- 1) For Theravadins, liberation is through self-effort whereas Mahayanists consider “other-power,” or “outside assistance.”³⁴ Adhering to the teachings of the Buddha, the Theravadins are self-sufficient in their beliefs and not dependent on external resources. They comprise, as Gombrich put it, “an island to oneself.”³⁵ In contrast, Mahayana Buddhism embraces outside assistance particularly, the loving-kindness act of the *bodhisattvas* (enlightened ones).³⁶
- 2) In the Theravada tradition, Buddha is perceived as a human being, not a god, who by his self-effort reached a liberated stage and deserved to be called a worthy one (*Arahant*). He was a natural human being, who was able to destroy the roots of evils, who represents spiritual perfection, and shows the way to *Nibbana*.³⁷ For Theravadins, Buddha is not a savior but a way-shower who found the path and

³³ Ch'en, *The Light of Asia*, 127.

³⁴ Schumann, *Buddhism*, 34.

³⁵ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 89.

³⁶ Maier, “Salvation in Buddhism,” 9.

³⁷ B. C. Law, *Designation of Human Types* (London: Luzac, 1969), 99.

showed others how to follow that path.³⁸ On the other hand, Buddha is interpreted as the Absolute in the Mahayana School where he is the all-knowing like a creator God.³⁹

- 3) The goal of a Theravadin is to see the truth of suffering and escape from this suffering.⁴⁰ It denies the existence of a Supreme omnipotent or omniscient God who is in control of all things or everything.⁴¹ Therefore, the goal of a Theravadin is to attain *Nibbana*, the end of suffering. In contrast, for a Mahayanist, the goal is to reach a *Bodhisattavahood* (the state of enlightenment) to lead others to liberation. For a Mahayanist, his or her extinction and liberation are secondary. The primary concern is to help others reach their goal.⁴²

With these fundamental disagreements, the Theravadins perceive Mahayanists to be compromising the Buddha's teachings and credit themselves to be following the authentic teachings of Buddha.⁴³ Nevertheless, despite divergences between Theravadins and Mahayanists, they have common beliefs that bind them together as Buddhists, such as 1) the doctrine of suffering and the need for liberation, 2) the belief in *Kamma* and rebirth, 3) the concept of Soullessness, and 4) the goal of liberation.⁴⁴

³⁸ Samuel Ngun Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives* (Yangon: Judson Research Center, 2010), 156.

³⁹ Schumann, *Buddhism*, 92.

⁴⁰ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 89.

⁴¹ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 24.

⁴² Schumann, *Buddhism*, 92.

⁴³ Clasper, *Eastern Paths and the Christian Way*, 33.

⁴⁴ Schumann, *Buddhism*, 94.

King Asoka and the Spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asian Countries

In the history of Buddhism, King Asoka of India is considered a highly significant person. Buddhism's expansion could not have been as far-reaching were it not for his patronage. Emperor Asoka ruled from 274 to 236 B.C.E. Though Buddhism started shortly following the Buddha's death, it did not cross beyond the Ganges Valley for the first two centuries. It only became popular and moved beyond its confinement when King Asoka made it the official religion in his empire.⁴⁵

Asoka was the third successor of Chandragupta who founded the Mauryan dynasty and empire that began in about 324 B.C.E.⁴⁶ Before he became a Buddhist, Asoka ruled his empire like any other Indian king, indulging in the pleasures of hunting and permitting merrymaking by feasting and drinking. In the ninth year of his reign, Asoka sent an expedition to conquer a tiny enclave in Kalinga on the eastern coast of India. There, his army killed about 100,000 people. This incident filled Asoka with remorse. As a result, he resolved to never indulge in warfare and was converted to Buddhism. He decided to rule his empire for the welfare and happiness of people. He dug wells alongside the traveling roads to provide water for the travelers and animals and made provisions for the medical care of all living beings. He also restricted the slaughtering of animals even for food.⁴⁷

Emperor Asoka also built numbers of Buddhist stupas (shrines) and 84,000 monasteries. His little brother and two of his children, Mahinda and Sanhamitta, joined

⁴⁵ Maier, "Salvation in Buddhism," 11.; Ch'en, *The Light of Asia*, 111.

⁴⁶ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 128.

⁴⁷ Ch'en, *The Light of Asia*, 112.

the *sangha* (community of monks).⁴⁸ The example of King Asoka became a role model for the Buddhist kings after him and it became the duty of subsequent kings to defend and promote the Buddhist religion. Thus, Myanmar kings who followed Asoka promoted the Buddhist religion until modern times when the first Prime Minister U Nu declared Buddhism as the state religion.⁴⁹

King Asoka also sent missionaries to other Southeast Asia territories. His son, Arahant Mahinda was one of the missionaries. As a result, it is said that “during the Muslim invasion of northern India around AD 1000, Buddhism began to die out in India but started to flourish in other Southeast Asian countries.”⁵⁰ The fruit of Asoka’s missionary zeal is evident in parts of Southeast Asia countries today. Buddhism reached Sri Lanka in about 250 B.C.E, where the religion was confined within the country until it spread to Myanmar in the eleventh century. It then migrated to Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Adherents generally enjoyed the support of the kings and leaders of those countries, except during their colonial periods. Today, not only is Theravada Buddhism the established religion of Myanmar, but Theravada Buddhists are also found in countries such as Nepal, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. Moreover, Theravadin monasteries are found in several countries in Western Europe, North America, and Australia.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 132.

⁴⁹ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 133.; Khai, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue - a Way toward Peaceful Co-Existence in Myanmar*, 49.

⁵⁰ Maier, “Salvation in Buddhism,” 11.

⁵¹ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 3.

The Sacred Writings of Theravada Buddhism

Gombrich notes that two of the hallmarks of Theravada Buddhism are: “the use of Pali as its main sacred language and dependence on the Pali version of the Buddhist Canon as its sacred scripture.”⁵² The word Pali originally meant “canonical text,” which is meant to refer to the Theravadin canonical texts. Being the oldest school of Buddhism, the sacred writings of Theravada Buddhism provides the common doctrinal teachings found in different schools of Buddhism.⁵³

The Pali Canon of Theravada Buddhism was first preserved and handed down orally until it was put into written form at the end of the first century B.C.E. in Sri Lanka. It serves as the main source of knowledge of early Buddhism. Through the faithful *Theras* the teachings of the Buddha were preserved by the oral transmission for at least 400 years.⁵⁴ It is also said that the Pali Canon of Theravada Buddhism is more reliable than the sacred writings of other Buddhist schools, as it is the most ancient record of the Buddha’s teachings.⁵⁵ It was compiled and edited by three monastic councils.⁵⁶ These collected teachings of Gotama Buddha are called Tipitaka or “The Three Baskets” because they were written down on long and narrow palm leaves and sewn together. *Ti*

⁵² Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 3.

⁵³ Humphreys, *The Wisdom of Buddhism*, 41.

⁵⁴ Christmas Humphreys, *Studies in the Middle Way: Being Thoughts on Buddhism Applied*, 4th ed. (London: Curzon Press, 1976), 141.

⁵⁵ Maung, *Buddhism*, 11, 12.

⁵⁶ Schumann, *Buddhism*, 34, 35.

means “three” and *Pitaka* means “basket.” The three baskets are the *Vinaya Pitaka*, the *Sutta Pitaka*, and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*.⁵⁷

The *Vinaya Pitaka* deals with monastic disciplines for monks and nuns. It contains the framework upon which the monastic order or the *sangha* is built. It is the basket that contains the monastic code of conduct governing individuals and the community. It is classified into four important sections, namely the *Suttavibhanga*, *Mahavagga*, *Cullavagga*, and *Parivara*.⁵⁸

The *Sutta Pitaka* consists of 10,000 sutras or discourses of Buddha that cover various subjects. They were passed down by the chanting disciple Ananda. These are the social, moral, philosophical, and spiritual teachings of Buddha during his forty-five years of teaching.⁵⁹ It comprises five collections (nikayas): *Dinga Nikaya* (long discourses), *Majjihima Nikaya* (middle length discourse), *Samyutta Nikaya* (collection according to the subject-matter), *Anguttara Nikaya* (collection of expanding groups), and *Khuddaka Nikaya* (lesser collection).⁶⁰

The third basket, known as the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, or “the “further doctrine,” is a highly schematized philosophical compendium in seven books, most of which have now been translated into English by the Pali Text Society (PTS).⁶¹ This basket was added to the Pali Canon collection during the Third Council held in Sri Lanka. It consists

⁵⁷ Schumann, *Buddhism*, 34, 35.

⁵⁸ Alfredo P. Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha: Under the Bo-Tree-- on the Lotus Flower* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas, 2003), 31, 32.

⁵⁹ Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha*, 34.

⁶⁰ Maurice O’C Walshe, ed., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 52.

⁶¹ Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 52.

of seven sections: “*Dhammasangani* (Enumeration of Phenomena), *Vibhaga* (The Book of Treatises), *Dhatukatha* (Discussion Concerning the Elements), *Puggalapannatti* (Description of Individuals), *Kathavatthu* (Points of Controversy), *Yamaka* (The Book of Pairs), and *Patthana* (The Book of Relations).”⁶² Christmas Humphreys gives the highest credit to the Pali Canon, observing,

The Pali Canon of the Theravada is the best source for the Buddha’s basic teaching, but it is not the whole of Buddhism.... The Theravada teaching is clearly the Buddha’s way to *Nibbana*, the expression of his enlightenment, and clearly the product of tremendous thinking illumined by an intuitive awareness unique in the annals of mankind.⁶³

Myanmar and Its People

Myanmar, officially known as The Republic of the Union of Myanmar (*Pyidaungzu Thanmada Myanmar Nainngandaw*) is formerly known as Burma. It is the largest country on the Southeast Asian mainland with an area of 261,226 square miles.⁶⁴ Yangon, formerly Rangoon, was the capital city of Myanmar from 1948 till 2006. The name Yangon has a root meaning in history in the seventeenth century when King Alongpaya (1752-1760) subdued all his enemies, the Mons, and named the place Yangon. The Burmese word *yan* means “enemy,” and *gon*, meaning, “no more” or “finished.” Therefore, Yangon means “no more enemies.” Myanmar shares long borders with China on the north and northeast, with India on the northwest, Bangladesh on the

⁶² Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha*, 33, 34.

⁶³ Humphreys, *Studies in the Middle Way: Being Thoughts on Buddhism Applied*, 142.

⁶⁴ Chin Khua Khai, *The Cross Among Pagodas: A History of the Assemblies of God in Myanmar* (Baguio City: Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, 2003), 1.

west, Laos on the east, and Thailand on the southeast. The three major geographical features of Myanmar are mountains and hill areas, plateaus, and plains.⁶⁵

Myanmar is a beautiful country with different tribal groups with diverse religious backgrounds. The total population of nearly 60 million is made up of 135 indigenous groups. The origin of these diverse groups can be traced back to three major categories: 1) Tibeto-Burman stock which is comprised of Burmese, Rakhine (Arakanese), Chin, Kachin; 2) Sino-Tibetan stock which is comprised of Kayin, Kayah, Shan, and 3) Austro-Asiatic stock, comprised of Mon and others.⁶⁶ The eight major ethnic groups are Kachin, Kayar, Karen, Chin, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, and the majority Burmese or also called Barmars. Burmese make up 68% of the country's population. Myanmar has an overwhelming Theravada Buddhist majority (85%) and small portions of Christianity that made up (6.2%) of the total population. Other minority religions, such as Islam, Hinduism, and traditional religion of spirit-worship are also present.⁶⁷

Before the coming of Buddhism and Christianity in the soil of Myanmar, the worship of *nat* (a Burmese word for “spirit” or “deity”) was the prevailing practice of the people of Myanmar. However, later, people embraced different religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam as they were brought into the land. It is no denying that many turned to these faiths without totally abandoning their previous form of religious practices. Normally, in Myanmar, a person's religion can be identified

⁶⁵ Khai, *The Cross Among Pagodas: A History of the Assemblies of God in Myanmar*, 1–3.

⁶⁶ Peter Thein Nyunt, *Mission Amidst Pagodas: Contextual Communication of the Gospel in the Burmese Buddhist Context* (UK: Langham Monographs, 2014), 35.

⁶⁷ David Thang Moe, “Exclusion and Embrace: A Theology of Breaking Boundaries and Building Bridges Between Christianity and Buddhism in Myanmar,” *Exchange* 46, no. 2 (2017): 104, <https://doi.org/10.11G:i/la72a4:iX-12341434>.

through his or her ethnic identity. For instance, a Bamar or a Burmese is most likely to be a Buddhist whereas the ethnic group's Chin, Kachin, Nagas, Karen, Kayah are identified as Christians. Nevertheless, some Bamars are strong devoted Christians. Likewise, there are people from different tribal groups who belong to Buddhism especially among the Shan and the Mon. Ethnic minority, the *Arakans* are Muslims who occupy the Rakhine state.⁶⁸

The Rise of Nationalism and Buddhism as a National Religion

According to tradition, an established Burmese empire began in AD 1057-1287 with King Anawrahtar. He was crowned as the first king of the pagan dynasty in AD 1044. He brought stability and unity to his kingdom by using a strengthened army. He was able to bring the various tribes into a single nation which was his greatest achievement. He ruled with love and care for his people that under his reign, the Burmese nationalistic attitude rapidly grew.⁶⁹ Moreover, Myanmar developed into a ruling nation by conquering her neighboring countries and tribes. King after king who ruled Myanmar also attacked and conquered neighboring countries as far as Manipur and Thailand.⁷⁰

Beginning from the time of King Anawrahtar when the country became a Theravada Buddhist nation, numbers of golden-colored pagodas were set up. Across the country, the plains and the hilly area filled with golden-colored pagodas. Due to this,

⁶⁸ Ciin Sian Khai, *Rediscovering Religious Human Rights in Myanmar: A Myanmar Christian Perspective* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012), 42.; En, *Nat Worship: A Paradigm for Doing Contextual Theology in Myanmar*, 371–72.

⁶⁹ Nyunt, *Mission Amidst Pagodas: Contextual Communication of the Gospel in the Burmese Buddhist Context*, 38.

⁷⁰ Nyunt, *Mission Amidst Pagodas: Contextual Communication of the Gospel in the Burmese Buddhist Context*, 39.

Myanmar is best described as “Shwe Myanmar.” The Burmese word *shwe* refers to gold. This term is used to describe Myanmar that is filled with golden-colored pagodas. This is also how their strong faith in Theravada Buddhism is displayed. In this way, Theravada Buddhism became the officially established national religion. Since then, Theravada Buddhism shaped the culture of the people greatly. The way of life taught by Gotama the Buddha became the expected cultural norm in society. With this great influence of Theravada Buddhism in every aspect of one’s life in Myanmar, people started to perceive the religion as inseparable from citizenship. Thus, when a Burmese Buddhist converts to another religion, he or she is considered disloyal to the country. It has been considered and practiced that rulers of the country along with the monks are to promote the religion which is also one of the most important aspects where the success of their leadership is measured. Even when Burma fell under British rule, and Buddhism had no official defenders, promoters, or protector, the people united to fight against the British rule with the primary intention to preserve Theravada Buddhism as a national religion. Buddhism itself was the pushing and pulling factor to prevent the country from the influence of Christianity.⁷¹

Therefore, after the British left the country, the primary interest was to restore the Theravada Buddhism as it was under the faithful Burmese kings. Under the leadership of U Nu (the first prime minister of the independent Myanmar 1948-58, 1960-62), a state agency called “Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Ahpwe (BSNA),” was started to restore Buddhism in Myanmar. The aim was to bring unity in the country through religion by

⁷¹ Nyunt, *Mission Amidst Pagodas: Contextual Communication of the Gospel in the Burmese Buddhist Context*, 107–8.

spreading the teachings of Buddhism. Missionaries were sent to different parts of the country to convert citizens into Theravada Buddhism.⁷² With an intention to revive Buddhism in Myanmar, in 1962, U Nu propagated a nationalistic slogan, *Amyo, Bartha, Tharthana*.

Amyo (only the Burman race or Burmanization), *bartha* (only the language of Burmese or Burmesization), and *tharthana* (only the religion of Buddhism or Buddhistization). *Amyo* implies the nationalistic idea of the majority Burman domination over the ethnic Christian minority. *Bartha* implies the linguistic idea of maintaining Burmese as an absolute language and of abandoning the ethnic languages. All the ethnic minorities were denied the right of learning their languages at public schools. *Tharthana* signifies the religious idea of holding Buddhism as a nationalistic religion.⁷³

This popular slogan creates inequality, separations, and exclusions among people. A true citizen is expected to be a Buddhist. Opportunities and privileges are withheld from other religious groups of people apart from Buddhists. The national slogan further creates exclusivism between the Burmese Buddhists and the ethnic Christians.⁷⁴

Filled with religious spirit and passion, in this manner, U Nu revived Buddhism in Myanmar. In the history of Buddhism in Myanmar, his leadership in bringing religious revival in the country cannot be neglected. Importantly, under his leadership the country remarkably held “the Great Sixth Buddhist Synod in a mammoth artificial cave-building near the newly built World Peace Pagoda.”⁷⁵ As a result, transformations in religious

⁷² Khai, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue - a Way toward Peaceful Co-Existence in Myanmar*, 167.

⁷³ Moe, “Exclusion and Embrace,” 107. *Amyo* (only the Burman race or Burmanization), *bartha* (only the language of Burmese or Burmesization), and *tharthana* (only the religion of Buddhism or Buddhistization).

⁷⁴ Moe, “Exclusion and Embrace,” 107–8.

⁷⁵ Bu, “The Christian Encounter with Buddhism in Burma,” 171.

structures and new developments were carried out with the financial aid of the government. Other significant results as listed by Bu,

It has brought about the translation of the *Tripitaka* into modern Burmese. It has given an impulse to missionary enterprise among the hill tribes of Burma and Assam and to preaching missions to the West. It has also brought about the establishment of the International Institute for Advanced Buddhistic Studies where scholars from all over the world will be able to study Buddhism.⁷⁶

Following the footsteps of the Burmese kings, in this way, modern rulers of Myanmar have promoted Buddhism under their respective leadership. When Ne Win came to power in 1962, he set up the Revolutionary Government. Christian mission belongings such as education centers, hospitals, dispensaries were turned into state-owned properties. In 1966, all foreign missionaries were asked to leave the country.⁷⁷

Between 1988 and 2010, as Christianity increased in both the rural and urban areas in Myanmar, new restrictions were introduced. Religious discriminations were imposed under the rule of the military. Additionally, hundreds of Buddhist missionaries were sent to the Chin State by the military junta to convert Chin Christians to Buddhism. The Chin Christians who became Buddhists were offered rice supplies and other privileges. Many Christian children from the remote areas were taken to Buddhist monasteries and turned into novices. Numbers of women from minority ethnic groups were victims of rape by the army.⁷⁸ Indeed, until today, Christians in Myanmar are living

⁷⁶ Bu, "The Christian Encounter with Buddhism in Burma,"

⁷⁷ Nyunt, *Mission Amidst Pagodas: Contextual Communication of the Gospel in the Burmese Buddhist Context*, 40–41.

⁷⁸ Khai, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue - a Way toward Peaceful Co-Existence in Myanmar*, 34.

among the majority Burmese Buddhists for whom the word “Burmese” is synonymous with “Buddhist.”⁷⁹

It is also undeniable that Burmese people are proud of their past glorious history, culture, and religion that makes them consider themselves superior to other peoples. Tint Lwin, a theologian in Myanmar, sees this Burmese pride and feeling of superiority as a challenge to the Gospel. In his doctoral dissertation, he claims that the Burmese people themselves, with their religion, Theravada Buddhism, are a great challenge that has hindered the success of evangelistic efforts since 1813.⁸⁰ They neither look upon other religions better than their Buddhism nor other culture better than their culture. This is also the reason they are not interested in being introduced to other faiths. Most of the time, the sharing of faith is initiated by Christians.

The Peculiar Form of Burmese Buddhism

Despite the peculiarity of Burmese Buddhism in involving the worship of the thirty-seven *nats*, the country is still being appreciated for maintaining Theravada Tradition closest to the original teachings of the Buddha among Southeast Theravada nations. Their religious practices show that thirty-seven *nats* are great parts of their religious lives.⁸¹ Alongside the image of Gotama the Buddha, a place is offered for an altar for *nat*. It is considered that the preservation of numerous *nat* statues at the bottom

⁷⁹ Bu, “The Christian Encounter with Buddhism in Burma,” 172.

⁸⁰ Tint Lwin, “Contextualization of the Gospel: An Effective Strategy for the Evangelization of the Theravada Buddhist in Myanmar” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997), 1, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

⁸¹ Samuel Ngun Ling, *Theological Themes for Our Times: Reflections on Selected Themes of the Myanmar Institute of Theology* (Yangon: Judson Research Centre, 2007), 57.

of the Shwedagon Pagoda is a form of their tolerance about the worship of nats amid their devotion towards the teachings of the Buddha.⁸²

Today's religious state of affairs means that King Anawrahtar's religious reforms in the eleventh century failed. To make Theravada Buddhism as a national religion, King Anawrahtar suppressed the worship of *nat*. As a sign of the restriction of their powers, *nat* images were removed and put in a cave underneath the Shwezigone pagoda.⁸³ However, his attempt did not result in the total suppression of *nat* worship. Rather it resulted in the shifting of the place of *nat* worship from Mt. Popa into the people's houses. People started offering a place in their homes for the *nats*. *Nat* shrines were put up in every house beside the statue of Buddha. They did not replace their old religion with Theravada Buddhism. They rather embraced the new religion without totally forsaking their *nat* worship. Seasonally, sacrifices were made to the *nats* because they are believed to be either malevolent or benevolent.⁸⁴

At present, according to Maung Htin Aung, "many Burmese in rural areas still consult their astrologers and make their offerings to the *nats*, without ceasing to be good Buddhists."⁸⁵ Thus, Theravada Buddhism found in Myanmar is a mixture of the teachings of the Buddha with the traditional beliefs of *nat* worship. Ritual performances, magic, fortune-telling, and other practices relating to *nat* worship still prevail in daily

⁸² Lian, "Christian-Buddhist Dialogue in Myanmar: A Spirituality of Involvement in Social and Ethical Transformation," 13.

⁸³ Khai, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue - a Way toward Peaceful Co-Existence in Myanmar*, 46.

⁸⁴ En, *Nat Worship: A Paradigm for Doing Contextual Theology in Myanmar*, 388.; S. Pau Khan En, "Theological Reflection on Nat Worship," *Engagement* 7 (2006): 60.

⁸⁵ Maung Htin Aung, *Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism* (Rangoon: Buddha Sasana Council Press, 1959), 4.

life.⁸⁶ This is the peculiarity found in the religious lives of Theravada Burmese Buddhists in Myanmar.

The Relationship between Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar with their Perspective on Religions

Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar still find it difficult to embrace one another. From the Burmese Buddhist point of view, Christianity is considered as a foreign religion, simply because Christianity was introduced into the country along with colonialism by Western missionaries. They consider Christianity not to be different from colonialism.⁸⁷ As David Thang Moe points out, due to the influence of missionaries such as Adoniram Judson, Christians in Myanmar came to believe that they possessed religious superiority over Theravada Buddhists. Although being considered as the most successful missionary in Myanmar, Judson had a negative perception of the religion of the people of Myanmar, Theravada Buddhism. Moreover, he attempted to replace their religion with Christianity. This perception was inherited by Christians in Myanmar that as Moe states,

The ethnic Christians uncritically received a colonial knowledge of Judson's negative perspective on and his exclusive view of Buddhism as a source for treating Buddhism merely as an idolatrous religion. The result has been to treat Buddhism merely as a mere object for conversion and to replace it with Christianity. The ethnic Christians' view of Buddhism and their attempt to replace it with Christianity creates the ideology of exclusivism and superiority.⁸⁸

He further points out the problem of mutual exclusivism, observing that:

Ethnic Christians and Burman Buddhists build the boundary of mutual exclusivism- the former build the boundary of religious superiority, while the latter build the boundary of political nationalism. Christians claim themselves to

⁸⁶ Khai, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue - a Way toward Peaceful Co-Existence in Myanmar*, 47.

⁸⁷ Moe, "Exclusion and Embrace," 107, 109.

⁸⁸ Moe, "Exclusion and Embrace," 110.

be religiously superior despite their status minority. Despite their minority status in Myanmar, ethnic Christians count themselves as superior to Buddhists, claiming Buddhism simply as an idolatrous religion from which no insights could be received. But for Buddhists, such practices are part of their religious lives. They view Christianity in turn as a foreign religion. The result is a mutual misperception. The former misperceives Christianity simply as a foreign religion, and its minority status has to be discriminated against. The latter see the former simply as an idolatrous religion and its idolatrous practices have to be replaced.⁸⁹

Thus, it is explicit that mutual perceptions are greatly shaped by the past. It is the connection between colonialism and Christian missions that led Burmese Buddhists to perceive Christianity as merely a form of Western culture and colonialism. In turn, Myanmar Christians have a strong religious superiority complex over Theravada Buddhism inherited from the missionaries. Samuel Ngun Ling listed three important reasons that made the Burmese Buddhists perceive Christianity as a colonial religion:

It was from the year 1886 when the whole of Burma was subject to the British that Christianity was fully perceived as the British colonial religion for the following reasons: 1) the disestablishment of Buddhism as the State Religion (from 1886); 2) the replacement of Buddhist monastery education with the British secular and the American missionary educational systems, and 3) a special protection or patronage given to Christianity while not given to Buddhism. During the Anglo-Burmese wars, the British protected the missionaries and their new converts, for example, by allowing them to move their mission station from Rangoon to Moulmein in their territory and there the Christian mission continued to operate under British protection. As a result, the Burman Buddhists came to interpret all this [sic] things as an act of conspiracy between the British and the missionaries and therefore looked at the later missionary activities as destructive elements of the British colonial forces.⁹⁰

Today, due to all these reasons, Burmese Buddhists look at Christian mission works in Myanmar with suspicion and mistrust. The existence of western-styled churches reminds them of the bitterness of colonialism. Until the present day, Christian mission

⁸⁹ Moe, "Exclusion and Embrace," 109–10.

⁹⁰ Ling, "The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma: Its Past, Present and Future Perspective," 145.

works are not appreciated. Rather, they are considered as a type of neo-colonial power that is harmful to the country.⁹¹ Restrictions are made to prevent the growth and success of the Christian mission works in Myanmar.

Although there has been the dawn of openness toward each other in recent years, one can understand the persistent challenges for Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar to engage in interfaith dialogue. The challenge is not only doctrinal but also historical. However, to foster a better community, the researcher will next explore the concept of self-liberation in Theravada Burmese Buddhism to seek possible foundations for interfaith dialogue.

⁹¹ Zam Khat Kham, “Burmese Nationalism and Christianity in Myanmar: Christian Identity and Witness in Myanmar Today” (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, 2015), 60, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

CHAPTER 3

THE CONCEPT OF SELF-LIBERATION IN THERAVADA BUDDHISM

This chapter and the next explore the English translations of the Pali Canon along with related articles and secondary sources by prominent Buddhist scholars in answering our main thesis questions. The chapter begins with a short paragraph on the root of the concept of self-liberation, along with a definition of liberation or salvation in Buddhist understanding. This is followed by the concept of self-salvation from the experience of Gotama the Buddha and his teaching on this concept.

Hindu Root

The concept of liberation or salvation in Buddhism is rooted in Hinduism. Since life is seen as a cycle of birth and rebirth, their soteriological goal is not heaven or hell like that of Christianity. Their goal is to end this cycle of birth and rebirth. For a Hindu, the religious goal is to attain *moksha* which is the end of rebirth. Buddhism calls this *Nibbana* (or in Sanskrit *Nirvana*).⁹² According to Christmas Humphreys, “the teaching of the Pali canon comes very close to the Hindu teaching which the Buddha inherited.”⁹³ H. J. Harwood also states, “Buddhist ideals of deliverance and release derive from early Hindu thought and life.” Just as Christian doctrines of salvation are rooted in the

⁹² Maier, “Salvation in Buddhism,” 12.

⁹³ Cited in Cyril G. William, “Selflessness in the Pattern of Salvation,” *Religious Studies* 7, no. 2 (1971): 160, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500001955>.

understanding of human life and salvation in the Hebrew-Jewish history, the Buddhist pattern of salvation can be traced back to that of Hindu religious philosophy.⁹⁴

Historically, Buddhism may be considered as a reform movement within Hinduism. Maier writes: “Buddhism is a protest or radical movement directed against the hallowed ritualism and sacrificial religion cultivated by the Brahmins in Hinduism. As a substitute, it offers a system of moral training and mental discipline leading to ultimate *nibbana*.”⁹⁵ Thus, understanding the background of Gotama, who was born into the religious world of Hinduism, is vital to understanding his thought.

Gotama’s reformation-protest against Hinduism may be comparable to that of the reformation of Martin Luther in the history of Christianity: “Buddha by his interpretation was a reformer with a similar relationship to Hinduism as that which Luther had to Roman Catholicism. Just as Luther struggled with the problem of how sins can be forgiven, Gotama struggled with the question of how to be freed from the misery of endless rebirths.”⁹⁶ Thus, with this information, Buddhism can be somehow perceived as a religion that resulted from the reform movement of Gotama the Buddha based on his religious experience after a long period of struggle.

What is Salvation or Liberation in Buddhism?

The basic idea of the soteriological worldview of a Buddhist is based on “the structural framework of the two opposite poles of *samsara* and *Nibbana*. *Samsara*, the

⁹⁴ H J Harwood, “The Way of Salvation and the Burman Buddhist,” *International Review of Mission* 38, no. 152 (1949): 423–24, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost.

⁹⁵ Maier, “Salvation in Buddhism,” 12.

⁹⁶ R. Pierce Beaver and Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the World’s Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), 226.

wheel of rebirths, is that which the Buddhist monk is seeking liberation from, called *Nibbana*.”⁹⁷ Thus, salvation or preferably termed as liberation is deliverance from the cycle of birth and rebirth.⁹⁸ Salvation is not about deliverance from sin nor receiving forgiveness. Rather, it is the eradication of ignorance about the true nature of things that leads one to desire or crave things.⁹⁹ Unlike Christianity, the primary concern from which a human needs salvation is not sin but inevitable suffering. A liberated or saved person in Buddhism is described in Dhammapada 95: “He is calm like the earth that endures; he is steady like a firm column; he is pure like a lake that is clear; he is free from samsara, the ever-returning life-in-death.”¹⁰⁰ Here, in this verse, the Buddha’s word explicitly defines salvation in Buddhism as freedom from impurity that leads to freedom from *samsara*. The ability to escape from the round of birth and rebirth.

Gotama’s Experience of Self-Liberation

The concept of self-liberation cannot be discussed and understood without understanding the religious experience of Gotama the Buddha on which the concept is built. The life and teaching of the Buddha are the centers of the religious life and teaching of the orthodox Theravada Buddhism. They strongly hold that liberation is to be achieved through one’s effort just as Gotama the Buddha without receiving help from an outsider may it be a god or God.

⁹⁷ Frank Gerhard Fog, “Soteriology and Meditation of the Pāli Canon in the Socio-Religious Context of Early Buddhism,” *Temenos* 30 (1994): 37, <https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.6049>.

⁹⁸ Maier, “Salvation in Buddhism,” 12.

⁹⁹ Tissa Weerasingha, “Salvation in Buddhist Context,” in *Salvation: Some Asian Perspectives*, ed. Ken Gnanakan (Bangalore: Asia Theological Association, 1992), 155–56.

¹⁰⁰ Juan Mascaro, trans., *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 48.

Early Life and Search for Liberation

Gotama the Buddha lived in the sixth century B.C in north India. His full name is Siddhattha Gotama who was born to Suddhodana, the ruler of the kingdom of the Sakyas (modern Nepal) and Queen Maya. At a very young age of sixteen, he was married to a young princess named Yasodhara. Until the day he saw the truth about suffering in human life he lived a luxurious life of a prince inside the palace.¹⁰¹

He saw the misery of human life when he came out from his confinement in the luxurious palace. His turning point is a story well-known. He encountered four significant incidents that convinced him to understand the reality of the presence of suffering in human existence. He saw an aged person, a sick man, a dead human body, and an honorable monk who seemed to be happy. The first three signs convinced him about the reality of human life and the inescapable nature of suffering. Nevertheless, the fourth sign convinced him of the possibility of living a peaceful life amid human misery. It gave him hope and a hint to look for the answer to the previous three signs.¹⁰² Despite his luxurious living, he had a deep concern for the suffering world.¹⁰³ His reflection was deep:

Why do I, being subject to birth, decay, disease, death, sorrow, and impurities, thus search after things like nature? How, if I, who am subject to things of such nature, realize their disadvantages and seek after the unattended, unsurpassed, perfect security which is *Nibbana*?¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Walpola Rahula and Paul Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 2nd ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1981), xv.

¹⁰² Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 6.

¹⁰³ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 5.

¹⁰⁴ Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* (Kandy, SL: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995), 256.

After seeing the realities of life, he was not able to neglect these truths. He was troubled by the reality of human life. Therefore, he determined to set out in search of the solution to these miseries. Amid his firm decision in mind to search for truth, his wife bore a male child to him. When he heard the good reports, unlike what the people thought he was not joyful. Rather, he was said to utter, “An impediment (*Rahu*) has been born; a fetter has arisen.”¹⁰⁵ Hence, the child was given the name Rahula by Gotama’s father.

Shortly after this, he turned his back on his beautiful palace and set forth to become a wandering man to find the answer to human suffering. He was twenty-nine years old when he left the palace.¹⁰⁶ Nothing, including his beautiful family, was able to stop him from his compassion for the suffering humanity. He was willing to leave behind everything because for him nothing is more important than finding the solution to human suffering. He thus left his kingdom in the middle of the night and set out to the forest accompanied only by “his loyal charioteer.”¹⁰⁷ After a long journey, he changed his dress to those like wandering people. In this way, he began his life in seeking the answer to the human problem. Without a single penny in his hands, he wandered from place to place relying on what is given to him for survival. Without proper shelter, he spent his life in the forest. He walked without slippers under the hot sun. He spent the cold winter nights without warm clothes but only with the simple dress of a wanderer. Covering his body

¹⁰⁵ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 6–7.

¹⁰⁶ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, xv.

¹⁰⁷ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 6–7.

with the simple cloth with a bowl in his hands to beg for food, he spent his life in search of the answer to human suffering.¹⁰⁸

The Struggles and Self-Liberation

Prior to his discovery of the way to liberation, Gotama is said to be fully devoted in the two severe spiritual trainings called, “the indulgence in sensual pleasures, and self-mortification” under some teachers. These two kinds of trainings were greatly practiced by the wanderers during that time. However, he found out that these two ways of spiritual training did not bring him closer to the answer he was looking for. He saw that indulging in fleshly pleasure is too cozy and comfortable to bring life solutions. On the other hand, he also found out that training by mortifying oneself is too dangerous. It weakens not only one’s physical body but also the intellectual aspect.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, unlike what the people believed at that time, he saw the uselessness of these types of training to bring solutions to life questions.¹¹⁰

At this juncture, seeing the condition of Gotama without any result for his efforts, the five disciples who attended to him left him. Being alone, he was able to recollect his childhood experience on how he attained the stage of concentration by examining his breathing under a shady tree. From that moment, he was convinced that this must be the road to awakening. Since he also realized the impossibility of attaining enlightenment

¹⁰⁸ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 8.

¹⁰⁹ Mahasi Sayadaw, *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta: The Great Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma*, trans. U Ko Lay (Malaysia: SukhiHotu Dhamma Publications, 1998), 83.

¹¹⁰ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 14, 28.

with physical weariness, he started feeding himself to gain strength for spiritual development.¹¹¹

With full strength, he sat under a tree (since then called the Bodhi-or Bo-Tree, which means “the tree of wisdom”) and started his spiritual discipline by meditation. There, without much attempt, he was able to develop the stages of concentration called *Jhanas*,¹¹² until he is free from the impurity of mind and able to see the reality of human existence. He was then able to perceive the true nature of all things.¹¹³ Now, being free from ignorance and coming to the knowledge of all things, he was able to comprehend the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the way to end this suffering. He experienced deliverance as he was said to exclaim “Delivered am I. Rebirth is ended. Ignorance was dispelled, and wisdom arose; darkness vanished, and light arose.”¹¹⁴ This is how Gotama experienced his deliverance and built his philosophy upon it.

After his enlightenment, Gotama the Buddha reflected upon his struggle for enlightenment in Dhammapada 163: “Easy to do are things that are bad and harmful to oneself. But exceedingly difficult to do are things that are good and beneficial.”¹¹⁵ Gotama became “a Buddha, an Enlightened or Awakened One” by his efforts and

¹¹¹ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 21.

¹¹² Meditative ecstasy or a state of peaceful contemplation attained by meditation.

¹¹³ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 22.

¹¹⁴ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 23, 24.

¹¹⁵ Buddharakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, 47.

wisdom in destroying all the corruptions from the mind. “He was not born a Buddha but became one by his efforts.”¹¹⁶

The Buddha, after finding the answer to suffering, felt uneasy to teach the *Dhamma* because he thought that it is profound and difficult to understand. He also doubted that there would be no one to appreciate his new-found *Dhamma*. The Buddha described this experience as:

If I were to teach the Dhamma, others would not understand me, that would be wearying and troublesome for me because the Dhamma is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning. But this generation delights in worldliness, it is hard for such a generation to see this truth. Considering this, my mind is inclined to inaction rather than teaching the Dhamma. Then, bhikkhus, the Brahma Sahampati knew with his mind the thought in my mind and he considered; “The world will be lost, perish if the Tathagata, the fully enlightened One inclines to inaction rather than to teaching the Dhamma.” After saying this, the Brahma Sahampati vanished in the Brahma-world. Then I listened to the Brahma’s pleading, out of compassion for beings.¹¹⁷

Dhamma refers to “that which upholds or sustains.” This means that if a person embraces the *Dhamma* he or she is prevented from falling into miserable states or is delivered. The *Dhamma* is what truly is, i.e., “the doctrine of reality, the means of deliverance from suffering.” The Buddha discovered this *Dhamma* and revealed it out of compassion and love for the suffering of humanity. Referring to himself, Gotama the Buddha says,

Monks, there is one person, whose arising in the world is for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, who comes out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and humans. Who is that

¹¹⁶ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 25.

¹¹⁷ Nanamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*, 260–61.

one person? It is the Tathagata¹¹⁸, the Arahant, the Fully Enlightened One. This is that one person.¹¹⁹

The Buddha, then, began to preach the *Dhamma*. His teaching is best known as the Four Noble Truths such as; “the truth of suffering (*dukkha*), the cause of suffering (*Samudaya*), the end of suffering (*Nirodha*), and the way to end suffering (*magga*)” which is also called the noble eightfold path or the three-fold training. It is said, “The Buddha set out the Four Noble Truths in the way a doctor would aid a patient; he identified the disease, the source of the disease, the cure for the disease, and the details of treatment.”¹²⁰ This means that the Buddha discovered the illness of humanity and provided the remedy for this sickness just as the doctors do.

Understanding Reality

The name “Buddhism” itself conveys the idea of deliverance or liberation. As the name itself implies, Buddhism comes from *Budhi*, or “to wake up,” which emphasizes waking up from ignorance or lack of understanding. Because this is the fundamental cause of suffering from which a human needs liberation.¹²¹ Unless one is awakened from ignorance about the true nature of all things, one will live with a wrong view and liberation cannot be realized. The self-liberation concept is built upon seeing and understanding reality, and *vice versa*. Thus, one must see and understand the Three

¹¹⁸ Tathagata is the designation by which the Buddha usually speaks of himself. In general, it refers to the one who is enlightened.

¹¹⁹ Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *Discourses of the Buddha, An Anthology: Anguttara Nikaya* (Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1970), 8.

¹²⁰ Matthew Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipiṭaka: A Complete Reference to the Pali Buddhist Canon* (Regina: A Sangha of Books, 2013), 384.

¹²¹ Weerasingha, “Salvation in Buddhist Contexts,” 159; S. Dhammika, *Good Question Good Answer* (Singapore: Buddha Dhamma Mandala Society, 2006), 7.

Marks of Existence, the Five Aggregates which form an individual, the doctrine of *Kamma* and Rebirth, and the Four Noble Truths.

The Three Marks of Existence (*Ti-lankkhana*)

The three marks of the existence of human beings such as *Anicca* (impermanence), *Dukkha* (suffering), and *Anatta* (no-self or soullessness) are the fundamental teaching of Buddhism that must be understood to understand the self-liberation concept. First, according to the doctrine of *anicca* all things are impermanence. This change itself is seen as suffering. Birth comes and death follows. Death comes and birth follows. Nothing is permanent. All things are subjected to change. This change causes suffering. For instance, even in practical human existence, when change occurs, even a happy feeling and a pleasant condition can be replaced by pain, suffering, and sadness. Happiness did not last forever neither sadness.¹²² As Dhammapada 277 says: “All conditioned things are impermanent—when one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering. This is the path to purification.”¹²³ According to the teaching of the Buddha, when a person sees the truth about the impermanence of all things and stops for craving for those impermanence things, liberation happens.

The second mark of existence is suffering (*dukkha*) which is also the First Noble Truth of the Buddha. According to the Buddha, all existence is suffering because they are constantly changing. To be born, aged, physical complications, death, sadness, sorrow, grief, and despair are all connected to the existence, and they result in suffering.¹²⁴ All the

¹²² Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 20.

¹²³ Buddhārakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, 65.

¹²⁴ Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipiṭaka*, 382.

other *dhamma* are entwined with this basic doctrine of suffering (*dukkha*).¹²⁵

Dhammapada 278 says: “All conditioned things are unsatisfactory.”¹²⁶ There is no satisfaction in human existence.

Anatta (soullessness) is the third mark of existence. Unlike the doctrine of Hinduism, the Buddha taught that there is no self or an eternal soul in an individual. He further taught that to believe in the existence of a self leads one to crave for things. A person who considers the existence of such a soul or self is said to have a wrong view of human nature. A person is formed without a permanent soul in him or her. Understanding this truth is the basic requirement for liberation. Thus, unless one grasps this truth and overcomes this wrong view, liberation cannot occur.¹²⁷ As Dhammapada 279 says: “All things are not-self – when one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering. This is the path to purification.”¹²⁸

Samyutta Nikaya described the teaching of the Buddha concerning the three marks of existences to the bhikkhus:

The body (*rupa*), O Bhikkhus, is soulless (*anatta*). If O Bhikkhus, there were in this a soul then this body would not be subject to suffering. But since this body is soulless, it is subject to suffering. What thinks ye, O Bhikkhus, is this body permanent or impermanent? “Impermanent (*anicca*) Lord.” Is that which is impermanent happy or painful? “It is painful (*dukkha*) Lord.”¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Maung, *Buddhism*, 49.

¹²⁶ Buddhārakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, 65.

¹²⁷ Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipiṭaka*, 382.

¹²⁸ Buddhārakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, 65.

¹²⁹ Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1994), 1133–35.

These three characteristics such as impermanence, suffering, and soullessness are found in all phenomena. Therefore, one needs to understand these truths to realize *Nibbana*.¹³⁰

In another discourse, Angutara Nikaya 3:134, the Buddha expressed about his comprehension regarding these three marks of existence that:

All formations are subject to suffering.... that all things are non-self. A Tathagata fully awakens to this and penetrates it. Having fully awakened to it and penetrated it, he announces it, teaches it, makes it known, presents it, discloses it, analyses it and explains it: that all formations are impermanent, that all formations are subject to suffering, that all things are non-self.¹³¹

The Five Aggregates (*khandas*)

To understand the self-liberation concept of Theravada Buddhism, it is necessary to know the teaching of the Buddha about an individual. In his teaching, the Buddha said that an individual is “a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies of five aggregates.” The five aggregates that cause an existence are: “1) matter or form (*rupa*); 2) sensation, emotion, or feeling (*vedana*); 3) recognition or perception (*sanna*); 4) volition or mental formation (*sankhara*); and 5) consciousness (*vinnana*).”¹³²

A bodily form (*rupa*) refers to the physical body of an individual. Sensation (*vedana*) refers to the feeling of a person concerning the contact of things. “These sensations may be pleasant, unpleasant, both, or neither. Perceptions (*sanna*) account for the recognition and classification of sensations.” Mental formation (*sankhara*) refers to the motivating factors that push a person to behave. Consciousness (*vinnana*) “is an ever-changing

¹³⁰ Narada Thera, trans., *The Dhammapada: Pali Text and Translation with Stories in Brief and Notes* (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Education Foundation, 2000), 224.

¹³¹ Thera and Bodhi, *Discourses of the Buddha, An Anthology: Anguttara Nikaya*, 43.

¹³² Mathieu Boisvert, *The Five Aggregates: Understanding Theravada Psychology and Soteriology* (Canada: Wildrid Laurier University Press, 1995), 4.

reaction to the input received from the other four aggregates.”¹³³ It is the teaching of the Buddha that, “suffering arises when one considers these five aggregates to be the self.”¹³⁴ In the words of the Buddha, which are usually in the form of conversation with the monks, he said: “Monks, there are these five aggregates subject to clinging. What five? The form aggregate subject to clinging, the feeling aggregate subject to clinging, the perception aggregate subject to clinging, the volitional formations aggregate subject to clinging, the consciousness aggregate subject to clinging.”¹³⁵ There is no eternal soul in an individual that can be referred to as “self” or “soul.” Rather, when the five aggregates that formed a person work together, people tend to believe there is a soul in this combination which is usually expressed in “I.”¹³⁶ Thus, there is no permanent soul in the concept of Buddhist’s religious life to human nature and existence.

Kamma and Rebirth

To understand the self-liberation concept of Theravada Buddhism, we must understand the law of *kamma* which cannot be separately understood without the doctrine of rebirth. *Kamma* or actions are done in three ways: 1) bodily action (*kayakamma*), 2) verbal action (*vacikamma*), and 3) mental action (*manokamma*). Burmese Buddhists call the three actions or the three *kammas* as; *kayakan*, *vacikan*, and *manokan*.¹³⁷

¹³³ Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipitaka*, 386.

¹³⁴ Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipitaka*, 386.

¹³⁵ Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*, 857.

¹³⁶ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 23, 26.

¹³⁷ Mehm Tin Mon, *Kamma, The Real Creator* (Yangon: Mehm Tayzar Mon, 2007), 11.

Kamma and rebirth is a popular law that held everything. The former is the cause and the latter is the effect. The Buddha taught that this law of *kamma* conditions everything. There is no such Almighty Creator God who is in control of all phenomena. Rather it is this law that runs everything in the universe accordingly.¹³⁸ According to Minh Tin,

Kamma is a property of the mind that is most powerful in the world. Moral minds give rise to good *kammās* and immoral minds give rise to immoral *kammās*. These *kammās* are transmitted from one mind to another and so they are in the mental stream. At the time of near death, the many billion *kammās* that are in the mental stream compete with one another to have the chance to condition the arising of the next new existence. At the time of death and rebirth, soon after the dissolution of the death consciousness in the old existence, the rebirth consciousness arises in the new existence without any break in the mental stream.¹³⁹

To be liberated from the wheel of *samsara*, one needs to understand the natural law of *kamma* that keeps one is revolving around the circle of birth and rebirth. A person who is ignorant about this kammic law is called a person with a wrong view (*Micchaditthi*).¹⁴⁰ Understanding the law of *Kamma* is indispensable for every Buddhist to be liberated from suffering in the wheel of *samsara*. What a person is now and his or her becoming is determined by this law. Indeed, the belief in the law of *kamma* and rebirth already existed in Hinduism before the Buddha was even born. However, there is a divergence about this doctrine in Buddhism from that of Hinduism. Unlike the teachings of Hinduism, the Buddha's teaching concerning this topic is not simple. In Hinduism, there is an eternal soul in every human that shifts from one body to the other when a person dies. On the other hand, Buddhism teaches that the law of *kamma* and

¹³⁸ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 252.; Mon, *Kamma, The Real Creator*, 20–21.

¹³⁹ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 252.

¹⁴⁰ Mon, *Kamma, The Real Creator*, 22.

rebirth operates without the presence of an immoral soul in human beings. Despite the seeming complications about repeated births without the presence of a living soul in humans, they provide an explanation that it is merely “the knowledge, the perception, the feeling, the kamma properties that are being transmitted from mind to mind and they remain in the mental stream.”¹⁴¹ For them, this is also the reason a person can recall his or her many existences in the past.

Human life is seen as a cycle of birth and rebirth, determined by one’s *kamma*. There is no place for mystical explanations nor the involvement of a creator God in the concept of human existence in Buddhism. For them, the doctrine of *kamma* provided what is necessary to understand human life. For them, this doctrine is sufficient to explain the reason for human differences in many aspects.¹⁴² Differences of people in qualities, wealth, life spans, social status, and everything else including beauty and ugliness is believed as a consequence of one’s past *kamma*.¹⁴³ When the Buddha was asked for the reason of human nature where some live short, some live long, some beautiful, some ugly, some poor, some rich, the Buddha’s reply was “All living beings have actions (*kamma*) as their own, their inheritance, their congenital cause, their kinsman, their refuge. It is *Kamma* that causes beings into low and high states.”¹⁴⁴ The Buddha taught on the impossibility of escape from the consequence of one’s *kamma* in Dhammapada 1, 127:

¹⁴¹ Mon, *Kamma, The Real Creator*, 242.

¹⁴² Ch’en, *The Light of Asia*, 31.

¹⁴³ Mon, *Kamma, The Real Creator*, 160.

¹⁴⁴ Nanamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*, 1053.

What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind. If a man speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows him as the wheel of the cart follows the beast that draws the cart... Neither in the sky, nor deep in the ocean, nor a mountain-cave, nor anywhere, can a man be free from the evil he has done.¹⁴⁵

In this wheel of *samsara* conditioned by one's *kamma*, rebirth takes place in different states. Depending on their past kammic performances, one can be reborn in hell, as an animal, hungry ghost, gods, or as a human. As the Buddha says in Dhammapada 126: "Some people are born on this earth; those who do evil are reborn in hell; the righteous go to heaven, but those who are pure reach *Nibbana*."¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, in whichever realm a person is reborn, there is no escape from the three characteristics of existence such as impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and soullessness (*anatta*). Those born as gods are still bound by these marks of existence.¹⁴⁷ There is no escape from suffering eternally in any of the realms bound by *samsara*. Until one is liberated, one cannot eternally escape from the wheel of *samsara*. Being born as a human being is the most favorable for liberation because only human beings can grasp and practice the Buddha's teaching for liberation. According to Schumann, "The beings in hell, animals, spirits, and demons are too dull, the gods in their blissfulness too haughty to see the necessity for liberation. Only when reborn as human beings are they capable of grasping the teaching of the Buddha and of following the way to emancipation."¹⁴⁸ Therefore, for

¹⁴⁵ Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, 35, 53.

¹⁴⁶ Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, 53.

¹⁴⁷ Fog, "Soteriology and Meditation of the Pāli Canon in the Socio-Religious Context of Early Buddhism," 37.

¹⁴⁸ Schumann, *Buddhism*, 51.; D. N. De L. Young, "The Sangha in Buddhist History," *Religious Studies* 6, no. 3 (1970): 25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441250000456X>.

the Buddhists, the being as human now itself is due to the past good *kammas*.

Nevertheless, there are still divergences in riches, a social status which they believed are also caused by their past *kammas*. Usually, if a person became successful out of nothing, the reason is ascribed to their past good *kammas*. Likewise, any bad things especially a tragic death is considered due to the person's past *kamma*. This means that all that happens to a person's life whether in this very life or the next is conditioned by this law.

Rebirth as a human is the most desirable type of rebirth. It is only as a human being that one can attain liberation. Nevertheless, the Buddha taught about the extreme difficulty of being reborn as a human.¹⁴⁹ According to the word of the Buddha in Dhammapada 182: "Hard is it to be born as a man."¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, hard to be reborn as humans do not mean it is impossible.

Self-Liberation

The self-liberation concept is built upon and taught by the Buddha from his own experience.¹⁵¹ The unique concept in the relation of salvation is the very concept that does not require any outside power for liberation. The realization of *Nibbana* requires neither an outside power nor even any teacher. In the middle-length discourses, the Buddha described the self-liberation experience as: "*Na me acariyo atthi*" which means "a teacher have I not." He further says, "I am the one who has transcended all, a knower of all, having known this all for myself, to whom should I point as teacher?"¹⁵² He

¹⁴⁹ Ch'en, *The Light of Asia*, 32.

¹⁵⁰ Buddhakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, 51.

¹⁵¹ Richard A. Gard, ed., *Buddhism* (New York, NY: George Braziller, 1961), 107.

¹⁵² Nanamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*, 263.

exhorted his followers to rely on themselves for liberation. As the Buddha never considered the need for a savior, he also never called himself a savior who saves others. The concept is seen in the very words of the Buddha in various unambiguous passages of the Dhammapada:

Dhammapada 276: “You yourselves must strive; the Buddhas only point the way. Those meditative ones who tread the path are released from the bonds of Mara (the evil One, usually refers to passions).”¹⁵³

Dhammapada 165: “By oneself is evil done; by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil left undone; by oneself is one made pure. Purity and impurity depended on oneself; no one can purify another.”¹⁵⁴

Dhammapada 160: “Only a man himself can be the master of himself: who else from outside could be his master?”¹⁵⁵

Dhammapada 238: “Make an island unto yourself! Strive hard and become wise! Rid of impurities and cleansed of stain, you shall not come again to birth and decay.”¹⁵⁶

Daily Reading of Dhammapada 45: “By effort, you will cross the raging flood, by the energy you will pass by sorrow.”¹⁵⁷

Holding firmly in the teaching of the Buddha, Rahula says,

The Buddha was only a human being; he claimed no inspiration from any god or external power either. He attributed all his realization, attainments, and achievements to human endeavor and human intelligence. A man and only a man can become a Buddha. Every man has within himself the potentiality of becoming a Buddha if he so wills it and endeavors.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ Buddhakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, 65.

¹⁵⁴ Buddhakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, 48.

¹⁵⁵ Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, 58.

¹⁵⁶ Buddhakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, 60.

¹⁵⁷ S. Dhammika, trans., *Daily Readings from the Buddha's Words of Wisdom* (Singapore: The Buddha Dhamma Mandala Society, 1989), 41.

¹⁵⁸ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 1.

The Pali term Buddha comes from the word “*budh*” which means “to understand” or “to be awakened.” Therefore, a person who is awakened is known as *buddha*.¹⁵⁹ According to the self-salvation concept of Theravada Scriptures, one can become a buddha and save himself or herself. One is his or her own savior. Human beings are sufficient in themselves to liberate themselves from suffering. Thus, Buddhists do not look for a savior for freedom from *samsara*. Rahula comments that “almost all religions are built on faith -- rather ‘blind’ faith it would seem. But in Buddhism emphasis is laid on ‘seeing, knowing, understanding’ and not on faith, or ‘belief’.”¹⁶⁰

The Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw also states:

Many systems of religious beliefs exist in the world, each expounding its view of what it considers to be the essence of Truth. The teachings in other systems of religions are not based on personal realization of Truth, but merely on speculative thinking. Their followers accept such teachings not through personal experience either but only on faith. All such teachings which fall outside of Buddhism are comprised of sixty-two kinds of wrong beliefs enumerated in the *Brahmajala Sutta* by the Blessed One. Speculation does not have a place in the Buddha’s teachings. The Truth he taught was discovered by himself through his own insight.¹⁶¹

Till his last breath, Gotama the Buddha wanted his followers to strive and work for their own liberation. His last words to his beloved follower and cousin Ananda is one of the famous quotations made by the adherents of Theravada Buddhism especially in Myanmar: “Ananda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your refuge, with

¹⁵⁹ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 25.

¹⁶⁰ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 8.

¹⁶¹ Sayadaw, *Dhammacakkavattana Sutta: The Great Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma*, 157–58.

no one else as your refuge.”¹⁶² This very word of Gotama’s command is considered as a command to everyone who wants to follow the teachings of the Buddha for liberation.

Faith and Liberation

Having faith in the Three Jewels or the Buddhist term taking refuge in the Three Jewels is indispensable in the road toward self-liberation. The three Jewels are the Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Sangha*. To take refuge in the Three Jewels is also “the primary action taken by a layperson or novice monk or novice nun to be confirmed or ordained in the Buddhist faith. The purpose of taking refuge in the Three Jewels is to be delivered from suffering.” Here, faith in the Buddha means believing or having no doubt about the enlightenment experience of Gotama and giving full respect to him. Indeed, Buddhists have great respect for Gotama that his images are found everywhere across Buddhist countries. And devoted Buddhists at least bowed down before the image of the Buddha twice in a day, in the morning and the evening. Taking shelter in the *Dhamma* refers to believing and practicing the teachings of the Buddha with confidence to lead one to liberation from suffering. Faith in *Sangha* implies believing in the ideal community of the monks founded by the Buddha with a purpose to provide a better environment for self-liberation.¹⁶³ The Dhammapada tells about the necessity of taking refuge in the Three Jewels:

Dhammapada 75: “If you take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, no fear or trembling will ever arise.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 245.

¹⁶³ Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipitaka*, 381–82.

¹⁶⁴ Dhammika, *Daily Readings from the Buddha’s Words of Wisdom*, 60.

Dhammapada 194: “Happy is the birth of Buddhas. Happy is the teaching of the sublime Dhamma. Happy is the unity of the Sangha. Happy is the discipline of the united ones.”¹⁶⁵

Abandoning Defilements

The self-liberation concept of Theravada Buddhists can also be understood as abandoning the things that pollute one’s mind and leads to action. It is also the way towards seeing the true nature of things as the mind becomes purer and purer. The Pali Canon groups “ten fetters” or ten immoral mental factors are also known as the ten defilements (in Burmese *kilesas*) to be abandoned to attain *Nibbana*. These ten fetters are divided into five low fetters and five high fetters. The goal of a Buddhist is to end the wheel of rebirth by terminating “the fires of desire or lust that generates *kamma* and keep the individual hankering for continued existence.”¹⁶⁶

The Five Low Fetters are: 1) Identity View (*sakkayaditthi*): the belief in the presence of a “soul” or “self” in an individual which contradicts the teaching of the Buddha about the nature of the human as a composition of the five aggregates. 2) Doubt (*vicikiccha*): being doubtful about taking refuge in the Three Jewels for self-liberation; the Buddha, *Dhamma*, and the *Sangha*. 3) Rituals (*silabbatam*): the wrong idea to think one can achieve liberation or be perfect from the pollutions of mind utilizing ceremonial observations. 4) Lust or Craving (*kamacchanda*): the desire for things which is the root cause of suffering in the teaching of the Buddha. 5) Ill-will (*vyapado*:) wickedness that results in wanting to harm other living beings.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Buddhārakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom*, 171.

¹⁶⁶ Ch’en, *The Light of Asia*, 31.

¹⁶⁷ Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipiṭaka*, 387.

The Five High Fetters are 1) Worldly Craving (*rupam*): the desire to be reborn in a good realm. 2) Heavenly craving (*arupam*): the desire to have a happier life in becoming a deity. 3) Pride (*mana*): the feeling of seeing oneself better than others depend on wealth, status, or backgrounds. 4) Restlessness (*uddaccam*): the state of being anxious or worried. 5) Ignorance (*avijja*): ignorance about the Four Noble Truths (the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the way to end suffering).¹⁶⁸

Among the ten defilements, there are three main roots of evil. First is greed (*lobha*) – which is the desire for things. The word *lobha* also gives us the idea of wanting more and more in life. It implies the unending desire of human beings. Second, anger (*dosa*) which also refers to the feeling of bad about others, wanting to destroy others and things out of anger or rudeness. The third root is ignorance (*moha*). This refers to ignorance about the teachings of the Buddha that includes the four noble truths, the law of *kamma* and rebirth, and the true nature of things. Unless one is free from ignorance he or she is considered as living in the darkness without the hope of liberation.¹⁶⁹ These three immoral roots pollute a person in his mind from which flow kammic actions. They result in wrong actions, speech, and thoughts. Unless they are destroyed and uprooted, no one can enjoy the ultimate happiness of *Nibbana*. Therefore, one must put their full effort in to develop the opposite of these tree roots of evil greedlessness (*alobha*), hatelessness

¹⁶⁸ Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipitaka*, 387.

¹⁶⁹ Mon, *Kamma, The Real Creator*, 15.

(*adosa*), and wisdom (*amoha*). And these are developed as one undertakes the eightfold path or the three-fold disciplines.¹⁷⁰

These ten immoral mental factors birth immoral minds that result in evil actions. This is the reason the Buddha asked his followers to practice the way (*magga*) to purify one's mind. These evil actions formed bad *kammas* that results in the next rebirth of a person according to his or her *kamma*. These defilements keep a person revolving repeatedly in the wheel of *samsara*. Therefore, the mind needs to be trained to overcome mental corruptions that are already in a person and which are yet to come in existence in one's mind.¹⁷¹ According to Mon, "it is the greatest battle to fight against defilements because they overwhelm our minds most of the time and we have to obey their commands. But the Buddha showed the way how to fight and conquer them peacefully by the Noble Eightfold Path."¹⁷² Thus, one must destroy these mental pollutions little by little progressively. This progressive destruction can be compared to destroying a big tree by first cutting off all the branches, then removing the big trunk, next digging up the roots that are hidden under the ground, and finally burning everything to ashes so that it can never grow again. Likewise, the Buddha offered a stage after stage mental development that purifies one's mind from pollution. Since morality can restrain defilements of the mind only for a moment, one needs to undertake the training of concentration through the practice of *Samatha*¹⁷³ meditation to suppress the occurrence of defilements in one's

¹⁷⁰ Mon, *Kamma, The Real Creator*, 16.

¹⁷¹ Mehm Tin Mon, *Meditation the Buddha's Way* (Yangon: Mehm Tayzar Mon, 2013), 15.

¹⁷² Mon, *Meditation The Buddha's Way*, 19.

¹⁷³ Tranquility of mind.

mind. Unless one develops the right concentration, the mind cannot be purified from defilements which hinders one's enlightenment. Then, after the right concentration is attained, the meditator is now ready to practice the higher spiritual training, the training of wisdom through vipassana meditation by contemplating the three characteristics of human existence which we discussed above. Then, the meditator will be able to destroy all the defilements that include the underlying defilements because the meditator is now able to perceive the reality of things. When a meditator gains wisdom about things, he or she starts to see himself or herself without an immortal self in him or her. Therefore, the meditator is free from selfishness and greediness. Indeed, the three root causes of evil are being destroyed. Thus, one must have the right view by overcoming the wrong view about the existence of an immoral soul or a permanent soul. Unless this truth is seen, the meditator cannot purify his or her mind from defilements.¹⁷⁴ The mind is purified progressively stage after stage until it becomes completely purified from defilements. We will discuss more concerning this in the following chapter.

Progressive Self-liberation

The self-liberation concept of Theravada Buddhism is a progressive liberation where one develops stages in abandoning the ten fetters to attain *Nibbana* and become an *Arahant*, or a fully liberated person. In the Buddhist term, it is called the path to sainthood or the path to purification. Therefore, I use the term sainthood since I feel this term best expresses the idea. According to the teaching of the Buddha, normally the perfect stage or the purified stage is achieved in four stages of mental development

¹⁷⁴ Mon, *Meditation the Buddha's Way*, 20, 26, 37, 38, 68.

following the path shown by the Buddha.¹⁷⁵ According to the exposition of the Dhammapada, the first three fetters such as identity view, doubt, and ritual are destroyed in the first stage of Sainthood.¹⁷⁶ The Buddha addresses the first Stage of Sainthood:

Bhikkhus, one who places faith in the teachings of impermanence and resolves on them thus is called a faith-follower, one who has entered the fixed course of rightness, entered the plane of superior persons, transcended the place of the worldling. He is incapable of doing any deed because of which he might be reborn in hell, in the animal realm, or the domain of ghosts; he is incapable of passing away without having realized the fruit of stream-entry, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as his destination.¹⁷⁷

In the second stage of Sainthood, the next two fetters such as lust and ill-will are weakened.¹⁷⁸ According to the Tipitaka, one who attains this second stage is described as one whose “mind becomes internally steadied, composed, unified and concentrated; then the path arises in him. He now pursues, develops, and cultivates that path, and while he is doing so, the fetters are abandoned and the underlying tendencies eliminated.”¹⁷⁹ When a meditator reaches the third stage, the two fetters, lust, and ill-will which are weakened in the previous stage are destroyed in this stage.¹⁸⁰ In the Fourth Stage of Sainthood or the *Arahant* Stage, the last five fetters also called the Five High Fetters are eradicated.¹⁸¹ Dhammapada 90, 95, and 96 describe sainthood in this way:

¹⁷⁵ Thera, *The Dhammapada: Pali Text and Translation with Stories in Brief and Notes*, 22.

¹⁷⁶ Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed., *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon* (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2005), 374.

¹⁷⁷ Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*, 1004–5.

¹⁷⁸ Thera, *The Dhammapada: Pali Text and Translation with Stories in Brief and Notes*, 33.

¹⁷⁹ Thera and Bodhi, *Discourses of the Buddha, An Anthology: Anguttara Nikaya*, 62.

¹⁸⁰ Thera, *The Dhammapada: Pali Text and Translation with Stories in Brief and Notes*, 33.

¹⁸¹ Thera, *The Dhammapada: Pali Text and Translation with Stories in Brief and Notes*, 33.

The traveler has reached the end of the journey! In the freedom of the Infinite, he is free from all sorrows, the fetters that bound him are thrown away, and the burning fever of life is no more. He is calm like the earth that endures; he is steady like a firm column; he is pure like a clear lake; he is free from Samsara, the ever-returning life-in-death. In the light of his vision, he has found his freedom; his thoughts are peace, his words are peace and his work in peace.¹⁸²

Gotama the Buddha himself acknowledged the difficulty in attaining sainthood and becoming an enlightened one. After his enlightenment, he recalled how he wandered in the cycle of birth and rebirth until he became the enlightened one. Referring to this, he said in Dhammapada 153: “Through many a birth in samsara have I wandered in vain, seeking the builder of this house. Repeated birth is indeed suffering.”¹⁸³ In another verse of the Dhammapada 182, he further said, “Rare is birth as a human being. Hard is the life of mortals. Hard is the bearing of the Sublime Truth. Rare is the appearance of the Buddhas.”¹⁸⁴ Thus, deliverance from all kinds of mental corruption happens by normally going through these four stages for a Buddhist. Then, he or she becomes a perfect person, an *arahant*, who is now able to enjoy the happiness of *Nibbana*, the religious goal of Buddhists.

Conclusion

The above discussion from the sacred writings of Theravada Buddhism gives us a clear understanding of the soteriological concept of the Theravada Burmese Buddhists, which is by self-effort built upon the personal experience of Gotama the Buddha. The lives of Burmese Buddhists reflect their strong confidence in the Buddha’s teaching if

¹⁸² Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, 48.

¹⁸³ Buddharakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom*, 45.

¹⁸⁴ Buddharakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom*, 164.

one will follow and practice the path to liberation. As the popular Myanmar proverb goes: “you can be a god if you try.” The concept of self-liberation can be summed up simply as this: an individual is responsible for his or her liberation by making efforts to escape from the round of birth and rebirth, by understanding the reality of human life which is described in the three marks of human existence, by having the right understanding of the law of cause and effect, without doubting the Three Jewels, by progressively abandoning the defilements through following the path shown by the Buddha, the way-shower.

In the next chapter, we will further discuss the goal (*Nibbana*) and the way (*magga*) to self-liberation. This will give us a clearer picture of what we have discussed here about self-liberation.

CHAPTER 4

THE GOAL AND WAY OF SELF-LIBERATION

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part deals with *Nibbana*, the goal of self-liberation, along with the five hindrances which one must overcome to attain self-liberation. The second part deals with the means or way of self-liberation shown by the founder, Gotama the Buddha. The chapter also discusses briefly one of the most controversial topics whether it is possible for all the Buddhists to attain Nibbana or not irrespective of their gender and social status. The chapter ends with the discussion about the two religious goals found in the lives of Burmese Theravadins and how the religious community plays their role in the religious lives of the people as all strive toward their final goal.

Nibbana

The teaching of Gotama on *Nibbana* draws the attention and curiosity of outsiders. Nevertheless, for the adherents of Buddhism, it is not something to be understood and comprehended with human knowledge. Rather, it is to be experienced personally by those who faithfully follow the teaching of the Buddha and meet all the requirements to experience it. Indeed, the purpose of the religion is to lead people into this very experience because it is freedom from all kinds of suffering.¹⁸⁵ Unlike today,

¹⁸⁵ Ch'en, *The Light of Asia*, 56.

during the time of the Buddha questions concerning the nature of *nibbana* were rarely raised. People instead accepted his teachings without raising many questions.¹⁸⁶

Likewise, the Buddha himself avoided discussing *nibbana* because he felt that the limited human mind cannot comprehend the deepness of *nibbana*. Moreover, for him, human words are not sufficient to describe what *nibbana* is. It is beyond human words.

Whenever he was asked, though not often, he only suggested following his teachings to experience this happy state rather than trying to understand with their limited knowledge.¹⁸⁷

What is *Nibbana*?

According to Gotama the Buddha, *nibbana* is “peace supreme and infinite joy.”¹⁸⁸

The Pali word *nibbana* comes from the combination of two words, *Ni* which is translated as “negation of” or “departure from” and *vana* or *tahna* means “craving.” As discussed in the previous chapter, here the word craving signifies a kind of thread that joins one’s present life to the life after. Therefore, the word *nibbana* means to exit or escape from the desire by breaking the thread or cord that connects this life to the next.

Buddharakkhita gave a good explanation of *nibbana* in his dissertation that

“Metaphysically, it is the extinction of suffering, psychologically it is the elimination of egoism, and ethically it is the eradication of lust, hatred, and ignorance.”¹⁸⁹ The word

nibbana is said to appear several times in the sacred writings of Theravada Buddhism and

¹⁸⁶ Maung, *Buddhism*, 161.

¹⁸⁷ Ch’en, *The Light of Asia*, 60.

¹⁸⁸ Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, 38.

¹⁸⁹ Buddharakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom*, 25–26.

also in other Buddhist writings. In the canon of Theravada Buddhism, *nibbana* is described as the final liberation or liberation from all suffering, which in Pali is known as *vimutti-dhamma*.¹⁹⁰ A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism describes the concept of *Nibbana*:

The Supreme Goal of Buddhist endeavor [is] release from the limitations of existence. The word is derived from a root meaning extinguished through lack of fuel, and since rebirth is the result of desire (*tanha*), freedom from rebirth is attained by the extinguishing of all such desire. *Nibbana*, is, therefore, a state attainable in this life by right aspiration, purity of life, and the elimination of egoism. ... The Buddha speaks of it as “unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, unformed, contrasting it with the born, originated, created and formed phenomenal world.”¹⁹¹

It is the absence of the three roots of evil, namely *lobha* or *tahna* (greed, desire, covetousness) *dosa* (hatred, wickedness, violence, ill-will); and *moha* (misapprehension of the nature of human life particularly in the wrong belief of the presence of a “self” in an individual).¹⁹² According to the word of the Buddha in Dhammapada 202-203, “the hunger of passions is the greatest disease, disharmony is the greatest sorrow. When you know this well, then you know that *Nibbana* is the greatest joy.”¹⁹³ Buddhist scholar Rahula states, “Human language is too poor to express the real nature of the Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality.”¹⁹⁴ In his book, he refers to *Nibbana* as “the Absolute Truth whereas everything in the world is relative, conditioned and impermanent. It is the cessation of suffering. Therefore, to see things as they are, and the realization of this

¹⁹⁰ Ashin Dhammapia, “*Nibbana in Theravada Perspective with Special Reference to Buddhism in Burma*” (PhD diss., California Institute of Integral Studies, 2003), 12, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

¹⁹¹ Humphreys, *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism*, 153.

¹⁹² Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 387.

¹⁹³ Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, 64.

¹⁹⁴ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 35.

Truth is the extinction of craving or thirst and the cessation of dukkha.”¹⁹⁵ Therefore, to define *nibbana* most plainly, it is the end of suffering from which every Buddhist is seeking liberation. And it is the presence of the opposite of suffering, joy, and happiness.

Is *Nibbana* Nothingness?

Since the Buddha taught about the absence of an immortal soul and *nibbana* is the end of birth and rebirth, an important question arises; is *nibbana* nothingness then? Most westerners and outsiders usually understand *nibbana* in a pessimistic way such as the end of being, destruction of a person's existence, the passing away of a person forever. Nevertheless, for Buddhists, such kinds of interpretations are not consistent with the teaching of the Buddha. The Buddha himself suggested his followers stay away from such kind of wrong thoughts.¹⁹⁶ Mahathera argues: “To say that *Nibbana* is nothingness simply because one cannot perceive it with the five senses, is as illogical as to conclude that light does not exist simply because the blind do not see it.”¹⁹⁷ Rahula also refutes this negative perception.

It is incorrect to say that *Nibbana* is negative or positive. The ideas of “negative” and “positive” are relative and are within the realm of duality. These terms cannot be applied to *Nibbana*, Absolute Truth, which is beyond duality and relativity. A negative word need not necessarily indicate a negative stage. The negation of negative values is not negative. One of the well-known synonyms for *Nibbana* is “freedom.” Nobody would say that freedom is negative. But freedom has a negative side: freedom is always liberation from something which is obstructive, which is evil, which is negative. But freedom is not negative. So, *Nibbana*, the Absolute Freedom, is freedom from all evil, freedom from craving, hatred, and ignorance, freedom from all terms of duality, relativity, time and space.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 39–40.

¹⁹⁶ Maier, “Salvation in Buddhism,” 58.

¹⁹⁷ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 387.

¹⁹⁸ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 37–38.

According to Shwe Kyin Sayadaw, “*Nibbana* has nothing to do with absolute extinction, but it has to do with absolute peace and happiness.”¹⁹⁹ It is the destruction of human desire for things, the end of rebirth, the end of suffering, greatest happiness where there is no more death, or coming into another form of life again.²⁰⁰ *Nibbana* is, therefore, neither a state of nothingness nor mere termination of the existence of a person. For the Buddhists, it is the only permanence that must be the end goal of every human that cannot be expressed fully with human limited words.²⁰¹ I would like to conclude with the vivid description of *nibbana* by the Sacred Texts;

There is monks, an unborn – unbecome – unmade - unfabricated. The born, become, produced, made fabricated impermanent, composed of aging and death, a nest of illnesses, perishing, come from nourishment and the guide (that is craving) is unfit for delight. The escape from that is calm, permanent, beyond inference, unborn, unproduced, the sorrowless, stainless state, the cessation of stressful qualities, the stilling of fabrications, bliss.²⁰²

Does *Nibbana* Exist in Reality or Only in the Mind?

The teachings of the Buddha assuring the existence of *nibbana* usually raised another question, namely, whether the existence of *nibbana* is in reality or only in the mind. Indeed, it is also one of the most debatable topics in the teachings of the Buddha. The reason is that if there is no self or soul to exist in *nibbana*, its existence must not be a reality rather in the mental stream of those who attain it. Another reason is due to the

¹⁹⁹ Dhammapia, “*Nibbana* in Theravada Perspective with Special Reference to Buddhism in Burma,” 156.

²⁰⁰ Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha*, 59–60.

²⁰¹ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 390.

²⁰² Bhikkhu Thanissaro, trans., *Itivuttaka* (Barre, Massachusetts: Dhamma Dana Publications, n.d.), 27.

inability to prove its existence realistically with evidence. Nevertheless, for an adherent of Buddhism, the existence of *nibbana* is certain although it is unprovable. It is to be realized by experiencing it after being awakened from the lack of understanding of the true nature of things. The truth about the existence of *nibbana* and the impossibility of knowing it through explanation is usually compared to a turtle trying to explain how it feels to be on the land to a fish who only lives in water. A turtle explained with every possible word to let the fish understand its experience on the land. However, the fish was not able to understand and grasp it because it had never been living on the land. Likewise, the Buddha would rather ask his followers to stop inquiring about *nibbana*, he would rather tell them to strive toward and experience it just like the turtle.²⁰³

Prominent Buddhist scholars, particularly those from Myanmar such as Shwe Kyin Sayadaw, Ven. Taungpulu-Kaba-Aye Sayadaw, and Ledi Sayadaw argue the certainty of the existence of *nibbana*. According to them, *nibbana* is a real and “unconditioned”, i.e., without any desire, hatred, or wrong belief about self. There is no suffering because there is neither birth nor rebirth. Therefore, it is experienced by those who see the reality of life and overcome the defilements. Furthermore, the emphasis is given to the noble eightfold path as the only means to attain this goal. For them, this path is capable to lead a person to perfection. Also, Ledi Sayadaw particularly argues that the truth of the existence of *nibbana* is revealed in the *Dhamma* of the Buddha. He, along with other scholars and the Buddha himself, admits the difficulty of grasping this truth, as well as achieving a realization of the state itself. One must first see the three

²⁰³ Dhammapia, “Nibbana in Theravada Perspective with Special Reference to Buddhism in Burma,” 113.

characteristics of all existence (*anatta, dukkha, anicca*) to be able to destroy craving and attain this peaceful and unconditioned state. To put it simply, Nibbana cannot be experienced without being awakened. Therefore, one is required to apply the teaching of the Buddha to attain this real, joyful state.²⁰⁴ Further, Dhammapia in his dissertation argued the existence of *Nibbana* by providing an example of a person without eyesight. Just because a person cannot perceive the sun and the moon with his very own eyes due to the lack of his eyesight, it is wrong for him to deny the existence of the sun and the moon. In this case, although the sun and the moon are very much real, his lack of sight hinders him from seeing them. Likewise, Buddhists believe that it is wrong to deny the existence of *Nibbana* just because we are not qualified to see it.²⁰⁵

Where is *Nibbana*?

If Nibbana is real and not nothingness, the next question is, where does it exist? For instance, in a Christian world, the existence of heaven is normally pointed upward above the sky. There seem to be no issues in arguing whether it is somewhere in the four corners of the world or underneath the earth.

Nevertheless, when it comes to the place of the existence of *nibbana* in the Buddhist world, there seems to be uncertainty to instantly point out the place of its existence. There is no specific place to point out with our fingers here or there. However, the idea of *nibbana* as an “unconditioned” suggests that it exists somewhere which is certainly outside of the limitation. It is no more bound by limits. It must be a place where

²⁰⁴ Dhammapia, “*Nibbana in Theravada Perspective with Special Reference to Buddhism in Burma*,” 124.

²⁰⁵ Dhammapia, “*Nibbana in Theravada Perspective with Special Reference to Buddhism in Burma*,” 124.

a person is no more bound by the five aggregates.²⁰⁶ Since the Buddhists believe in the presence of thirty-one planes (i.e., the four woeful states, one human plane, six planes of *deva* and twenty planes of Brahma) where beings are bound by samsara, *nibbana* must be elsewhere from these planes. Thus, the only answer one can give concerning this question is that it is impossible to point out *nibbana* as being here or there, but it is surely real and existed somewhere outside of the thirty-one planes without any kind of limitations.²⁰⁷

What Constitutes *Nibbana*?

The question about what constitutes the goal of adherents of Buddhism seems to be interesting. Indeed, all those religious practices and disciplines are means toward this goal. Interestingly, like that of heaven for Christians, *nibbana* is said to constitute joy, happiness, and no more sorrow nor tears. Importantly, for the Buddhists, there is no more rebirth nor death.

As described in Dhammapada 90, to have attained *Nibbana* means that “the traveler has reached the end of the journey! In the freedom of the infinite, he is free from all sorrows, the fetters that bound him are thrown away, the burning fever of life is no more.”²⁰⁸ Moreover in Dhammapada 202, “There is no fire like lust, there is no evil like hate. There is no pain like disharmony. There is no joy like *Nibbana*.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ Dhammapia, “*Nibbana in Theravada Perspective with Special Reference to Buddhism in Burma*,” 125.

²⁰⁷ Dhammapia, “*Nibbana in Theravada Perspective with Special Reference to Buddhism in Burma*,” 118–19, 126.

²⁰⁸ Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, 48.

²⁰⁹ Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, 64.

A conversation regarding this is mentioned by Rahula. A wandering ascetic named Udayi asked about *Nibbana* to the chief disciple *Sariputta*, who replied: “O friend, *Nibbana* is happiness! *Nibbana* is happiness!” Then Udayi asked: “But friend Sariputta, what happiness can it be if there is no sensation?” Sariputta answered in a very thoughtful way that: “That there is no sensation itself is happiness.”²¹⁰ Similarly, the Buddha described *Nibbana* to Ananda: “This is peace, this is sublime, namely the stand-still of all *kamma* formations, the forsaking of all substrata of existence, the fading away of craving, detachment, cessation.”²¹¹

In his dissertation, Ashin Dhammapia describes the characteristics of *Nibbana* as the highest peace. “It is the ultimate tranquility which is free from all the fetters of life. There is no longer rebirth nor death. It is absolute peace and ultimate truth brought about by the ceasing of all craving. It has nothing to do with arising, presence, or dissolution.” He further says that “*Nibbana* consists of no size and no shape that it has also nothing to do with the concept of eternalism which has to do with the theory of the eternal soul.”²¹²

In contrast to *samsara*, the wheel of birth and rebirth, or the ever-changing of things, *Nibbana* is everlasting, enjoyable, and happy. There are no more corruptions, no more hatred nor sorrow. It is further believed that the joy and happiness experienced in *nibbana* are different from the momentary joy and happiness found in the world.²¹³

²¹⁰ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 43.

²¹¹ Thera and Bodhi, *Discourses of the Buddha, An Anthology: Anguttara Nikaya*, 18.

²¹² Dhammapia, “*Nibbana in Theravada Perspective with Special Reference to Buddhism in Burma*,” 122, 124.

²¹³ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 393, 395.

Who or What Realizes *Nibbana*?

The question of who realizes Nibbana seems not appropriate to ask Buddhists, as they deny self or a soul in humans. Their doctrine of *anatta* is so clear about the non-existence of a personal self or soul in an individual. For them, there is no such permanent soul in human beings and life is as Mahathera put it, “adynamic life-flux (*santati*) which flows *ad infinitum* as long as it is fed with ignorance and craving.”²¹⁴ Therefore, the answer is not who attains *nibbana*. When a person is liberated by awakening into the true nature of things, he is free from ignorance and desire that cause lives to flow repetitively. The flow of life ends when the perfect person dies. The Pali term *parinibbana* is used to refer to the death of a person who overcomes the causes of suffering. In Burmese, the term is *pari nibban san*. This is how *nibbana* is attained in the teaching of Buddhism.²¹⁵

In this aspect, we can see the significant difference between the goal of Buddhism and that of Hinduism. In Buddhism, an adherent strives toward attaining the goal without a soul whereas the latter strives towards reaching *Mukti* with the concept of the existence of an immortal soul in humans along with the concept of a higher being. Thus, the goal of Buddhism does not imply eternal living. Indeed, the teaching of the Buddha concerning this concept of *nibbana* is one of the most complicated doctrines both for the Buddhists and non-Buddhists. Therefore, the Buddha himself suggested that people not try to understand it with human ability, but rather strive toward experiencing it by oneself.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 402.

²¹⁵ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 401–2.

²¹⁶ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 403.

Two *Nibbana* Elements

There are two elements of *Nibbana* because *Nibbana* is possible to realize both after death and before death in this very life. However, this does not suggest the existence of two types of *Nibbana*. There is no teaching in the Buddhist texts that states the possibility of experiencing *Nibbana* only after the death of the *arahants*. When a meditator becomes an enlightened one, he experiences the pre-death *Nibbana* which in the Buddhist term is known as *Sopadisesa Nibbana Dhatu*. This is the experience of Gotama the Buddha when he was awakened from ignorance under the Bo-tree at the age of thirty-five. The second element refers to the time of the death of an *arahant*, where there is no more bodily existence of the *arahant*. This was the experience of the Buddha at his death when he was eighty years old. In Pali term, this is called as *Parinibbana*. In *Parinibbana* “there are no more Kammic activities that will cause rebirth and the Buddha, or the perfect saint disappears from the world of impermanence.”²¹⁷ Below are the Buddha’s words about the two types of experience of the enlightened beings and they are worth quoting in length:

There are monks, these two *Nibbana* elements. The *Nibbana* element with residue remaining and the *Nibbana* element without residue remaining.

And what, monks, is the *Nibbana* with residue remaining? Here a monk is an *arahant*, one whose taints are destroyed, who has lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached his own goal, utterly destroyed the fetters of existence, one completely liberated through final knowledge. However, his five sense faculties remain unimpaired, by which he still experiences what is agreeable and disagreeable, still feels pleasure and pain. In this way, *Nibbana* is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, worthy of application, to be personally experienced by the wise.²¹⁸

²¹⁷ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 391.; Ch’en, *The Light of Asia*, 57.

²¹⁸ Thera and Bodhi, *Discourses of the Buddha, An Anthology: Anguttara Nikaya*, 24.

And what, monks, is the *Nibbana* element without residue remaining? Here a monk is an arahant, ... one completely liberated through final knowledge. O monks, the monk is an arahant ... and is liberated through right wisdom. And all those feelings, no more desired here, will (at death) come to cessation. This is called the *Nibbana*-aspect with no more groups remaining.²¹⁹

Dhammapada 89 also describes *Nibbana* in this very life as: “For he whose mind is well trained in the ways that lead to lights, who surrenders the bondage of attachments and finds joy in his freedom from bondage, who is free from the darkness of passions shines pure in a radiance of light, even in this mortal life he enjoys the immortal *nibbana*.”²²⁰

Rahula describes the characteristics of one who enjoys the state of enlightenment before death:

He is the happiest being in the world, free from all “complexes” and obsessions, the worries and troubles that torment others. His mental health is perfect. He appreciates and enjoys things in the purest sense without self-projections. He is joyful, exultant, enjoying the pure life, his faculties pleased, free from anxiety, serene and peaceful. As he is free from selfish desire, hatred, ignorance, conceit, pride, and all such defilements, he is pure and gentle, full of universal love, compassion, kindness, sympathy, understanding, and tolerance. He is free from the illusion of Self, and the thirst for becoming.²²¹

According to the Dhammapada 89, “Those whose minds have reached full excellence in the factors of enlightenment, who, having renounced acquisitiveness, rejoice in not clinging to things – rid of cankers, glowing with wisdom, they have attained *Nibbana* in this very life.”²²² Thus, it is clear that despite the seeming complications, the freedom and joy of *nibbana* can be experienced in this life. This is also the characteristic of the *arahants*. They are free from defilements and ignorance in this very life and enjoy

²¹⁹ Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon*, 367.

²²⁰ Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, 47.

²²¹ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 43.

²²² Buddhārakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, 36.

nibbana. With their physical death comes the end of their existence in impermanence and suffering world.

Nivarana* or Hindrances to *Nibbana

Nivarana means hindrances. It refers to “the five factors which blind one’s vision from the truth.” They are termed as hindrances because they are obstacles that hinder the meditator from achieving the goal, *Nibbana*. They bind one in the wheel of *samsara* and keep one from overcoming the defilements that lead to enlightenment.²²³ The word *Nivarana* is a combination of *Ni* and *var* which means “to hinder” or “to obstruct.” The word also indicates the meaning which “muffles, enwraps, or trammels thought.”²²⁴ The Theravada Texts says:

There are five impediments and hindrances, overgrowths of the mind that stultify insight. What five: Sensual desire is an impediment and hindrance, an overgrowth of the mind that stultifies insight. Ill-will ... Sloth and torpor ... Restlessness and remorse ... Skeptical doubts are impediments and hindrances, overgrowths of the mind that stultify insight. Without having overcome these five, a monk can't realize that superhuman state of distinctive achievement. But if a monk has overcome these five impediments and hindrances, he is capable of realizing that superhuman state of distinctive achievement.²²⁵

Sensual desire (*kamacchanda*) refers to a desire to enjoy. Ill-will (*byapada*) means wanting to do bad to others. Sloth and torpor (*thina-middha*) mean not being able to focus by putting full energy with full attentiveness. Restlessness and remorse (*uddhacca-kukkucca*) is a kind of anxiety or the lack of patience to continuously go through spiritual progress. Finally, skeptical doubt (*vicikiccha*) means being doubtful

²²³ Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipitaka*, 387.

²²⁴ Mahatthera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 427.

²²⁵ Nyanaponika Thera, trans., *The Five Mental Hindrances and Their Conquest: Selected Texts from the Pali Canon and the Commentaries* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993), 3–4.

about the Three Jewels: Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Sangha*. This means doubting about the liberation experience of Gotama the Buddha, being doubtful concerning the effectiveness or capability of the Buddha's Dhamma for one's liberation, and doubtful about the ideal community of the Buddha as a means to provide a better spiritual enhancement. As long as one is doubtful, he or she cannot attain a peaceful state of mind and without this peaceful mind, no one can see the true nature of things.²²⁶ The problem, however, according to Mehn Tin Mon, is that

Even when we maintain pure morality, moderate defilements, also called hindrances (*nivaranas*) keep arising and agitating the mind. They make the mind restless and wandering. They also block or prevent moral minds, mental absorption (*jhana*), and Path-consciousness (*magga*) from arising. Furthermore, they blind the mind not to see things (ultimate realities and Noble Truths) as they really are.²²⁷

Unless the mind is pure and free from these hindrances there will be unwholesome karmas that will cause further rebirth.

Normally, the Noble Eightfold path is stressed as the only way to liberation. However, there are occasions of instant awakening as a result of hearing and understanding the Buddha Dhamma. In these cases, the hearers were awakened right after the teaching of the Buddha and were able to see the true nature of things. According to traditions, numbers of instances are recorded where people instantly realized the goal by hearing the teaching of the Buddha. Among the many examples, particularly the Buddha's five previous friends during his early ascetic life along with a person named Yasa were said to have achieved enlightenment after hearing the message of the Buddha.

²²⁶ Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipitaka*, 387.

²²⁷ Mon, *Meditation The Buddha's Way*, 26.

However, in these kinds of cases, they are said to be those who had done many good *kammas* in their past lives. Their past good kammas enabled them to grasp the *Dhamma* without putting great effort into the process of meditation to understand the true nature of all phenomena. They were awakened and saw the truth about existence because the Eightfold path itself is a means to bring one to this awakening.²²⁸

Nevertheless, for most people, liberation takes not only great effort but it takes many lives. This is clearly understood when the Buddha uttered the following words after his enlightenment:

Through many a birth in samsara have I wandered in vain, seeking the builder of this house. Repeated birth is indeed suffering! O housebuilder, you are seen! You will not build this house again. For your rafters are broken and your ridgepole shattered. My mind has reached the Unconditioned; I have attained the destruction of craving.²²⁹

A Burmese Buddhist scholar and meditation teacher Minh Tin Mon explains that “in this verse, ‘house’ refers to ‘body and mind’; house-builder refers to ‘craving (*tahna*)’; ‘rafters’ means ‘defilements’; and ‘ridge-pole’ means ‘ignorance (*avijja*)’.”²³⁰ Thus, one must overcome these hindrances to attain *nibbana* and be liberated from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

The Way to Self-Liberation

Eventually, the Buddha’s way of self-liberation is to destroy all the defilements from one’s mind progressively by developing mental disciplines through morality as a

²²⁸ Schumann, *Buddhism*, 7.; Maung, *Buddhism*, 262.

²²⁹ Buddhārakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom*, 45–46.

²³⁰ Mon, *Kamma, The Real Creator*, 61.

foundation and meditation as means to gain wisdom about reality.²³¹ Because as discussed, it is the mind that causes a person to form kammic results for further rebirth in three ways; in actions, in words, or thoughts. In other words, it is the mind that rules the person and causes the kammic actions to be performed resulting in further rebirth. According to Mehm Tin Mon, “If we can control just, that is our mind, we shall enjoy human happiness, the celestial happiness and the supreme happiness of *Nibbana*.”²³²

When the mind is pure, defilements are overcome and there are no more bad *kamma* developments that will cause further rebirth. *Visuddhimagga* explains:

For all *kamma*-formations that are rooted in defilements due to apprehending (formations) as permanent, and the *kamma*-resultant aggregates rooted in both which might arise in the future, are abandoned by causing their non-occurrence. ... When defilements are given up by the path, then *kamma*-formations are called “given up” through producing (*apadana*) in them the nature of not causing result, and aggregated rooted in them are called ‘given up’ through their being rendered fit for non-arising.²³³

Therefore, it is clear from the passage that liberation can only be attained when one’s mind is free from all defilements because they form *kammās* that result in further rebirth. The corruptions of the mind must be uprooted from one’s mind through the Noble Eightfold Path training. The Buddha teaches: “O monks, you should train yourselves thus: unremittingly shall I struggle and resolve: I have attained whatever can be won by manly strength, manly energy, manly effort! Thus, should you train yourselves.”²³⁴ The Buddha offered mental development through moral training and mental discipline by

²³¹ Mon, *Meditation The Buddha’s Way*, 15.

²³² Mon, *Kamma, The Real Creator*, 11, 15, 117.

²³³ Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga*, trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli, 5th ed. (Kandy, SL: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991), 788.

²³⁴ Thera and Bodhi, *Discourses of the Buddha, An Anthology: Anguttara Nikaya*, 11.

which liberation is possible if one strives forward to escape from *samsara*.²³⁵ The Eightfold Path is also called the Middle Way that leads to stillness, understanding, and realization of *nibbana*. If one puts it in practice it enables him or her to put an end to suffering by destroying its cause and to attain the religious goal, *nibbana*.²³⁶

Christmas Humphreys defines the Noble Eightfold Path as “the best scheme of moral and spiritual self-development leading to Enlightenment.”²³⁷ The eight steps are:

- 1) Right View (*Samma Ditthi*)
- 2) Right Thought (*Samma Sankappa*)
- 3) Right Speech (*Samma Vaca*)
- 4) Right Action (*Samma Sammanta*)
- 5) Right Livelihood (*Samma Ajiva*)
- 6) Right Effort (*Samma Vayama*)
- 7) Right Mindfulness (*Samma Sati*)
- 8) Right Concentration (*Samma Samadhi*)²³⁸

The Pali Tipitaka is filled with teaching about the effectiveness of the Eightfold Path in leading to self-liberation. From the very teachings of the Buddha:

Dhammapada 273-75: The best of the paths is the path of eight. The best of truths are the four sayings. The best of states, freedom from passions. The best of men, the one who sees. This is the path. There is no other that leads to vision. Whoever goes on this path travels to the end of his sorrow. I showed this path to the world when I found the roots of sorrow.²³⁹

Dhammapada 285: Pluck out your self-love as you would pull off a faded lotus in autumn. Strive on the path of peace, the path of *Nibbana* shown by the Buddha.²⁴⁰

²³⁵ Maier, “Salvation in Buddhism,” 12.

²³⁶ Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipitaka*, 384.

²³⁷ Humphreys, *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism.*, 154.

²³⁸ Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipitaka*, 384.

²³⁹ Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, 75.

²⁴⁰ Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, 76.

In teaching this noble eightfold path the Buddha devoted 45 years of his life. Depending on different hearers' ability to understand, he explained the path to liberation using several methods to make the *Dhamma* understandable.²⁴¹ The path is comprised of Eight Mental factors. They are usually categorized into three groups of mental development in the progress toward liberation, namely morality (*sila*), concentration (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*panna*).²⁴² The Buddha teaches: "Monk, train in these three trainings: the high virtue, the higher mind, and the higher wisdom. When you train thus you will abandon lust, hatred, and delusion. So, he who trained, he abandoned lust, hatred, and delusion."²⁴³

Morality (*Sila*)

The word "*sila*" refers to "moral precepts, code of morality, or Buddhist ethics."²⁴⁴ This virtue must be developed. The Buddha taught: "And what is the training in the higher virtue? Here, a monk is virtuous, restrained, perfect in conduct and resort, seeing danger in the slightest faults. Having undertaken the training rules, he trains himself in them. This is called the training in the higher virtue."²⁴⁵

Of the Eightfold Path, three belong under morality: Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. Right speech is abstaining from telling lies, gossiping, and using abusive words. Right action is to stay away from killing, stealing, dishonesty, and having

²⁴¹ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 45.

²⁴² Mon, *Kamma, The Real Creator*, 7.

²⁴³ Thera and Bodhi, *Discourses of the Buddha, An Anthology: Anguttara Nikaya*, 38.

²⁴⁴ Humphreys, *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism.*, 213.

²⁴⁵ Thera and Bodhi, *Discourses of the Buddha, An Anthology: Anguttara Nikaya*, 37.

sex outside of marriage. Right livelihood is not earning a living by unjust means.²⁴⁶ This is the first step towards self-liberation. It has a double purpose to bring peace in a person as well as in society. Without this moral foundation, one cannot develop higher spiritual training.²⁴⁷ This is a stepping-stone towards further spiritual progress. According to the Dhammapada 289, “Let the wise man restrained by morality, hasten to clear the path leading to Nibbana.”²⁴⁸

In another passage, the Buddha says: “O monks, without having mastered the domain of morality (*sila*), it is not impossible to master the domain of concentration (*samadhi*). Without having mastered the domain of concentration, it is not possible to master the domain of wisdom (*panna*).”²⁴⁹ Also, in Dhammapada 281: “A man should control his words and mind and should not do any harm with his body. When morality is built up one can progress on the path of the wise.”²⁵⁰ This moral training must be based on love and compassion. As Rahula asserts, “the teaching of the Buddha is based on love and compassion.” In his basic teachings, the Buddha required two qualities to become perfect. They are compassion, preferably called in Buddhism as loving-kindness (*karuna*), and wisdom (*panna*). The first quality must result in outward expressions such as kindness, forbearance, giving of alms, and other virtuous characteristics. This is also called the emotional aspect of a person or the matter of one’s heart. The latter quality

²⁴⁶ Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipiṭaka*, 391.

²⁴⁷ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 47.

²⁴⁸ Buddhārakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom*, 67.

²⁴⁹ Nāṇatiloka Thera, *The Buddha’s Path to Deliverance: A Systematic Exposition in the Words of the Sutta Piṭaka* (Seattle, WA: BPS Pariyatti Editions, 2002), 49.

²⁵⁰ Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, 75.

refers to the intellectual aspect of a person. The two qualities must go hand in hand. Thus, developing both one's emotional as well as intellectual qualities is required to be perfect and to achieve self-liberation.²⁵¹

In discussing Buddhist ethics or morality, we cannot exclude the Five Precepts (*Pancasila*) and the Five Ennobling Virtues (*Pancadharmas*) that serve as moral guidelines to Buddhists.²⁵² The Five Precepts (*Pancasila*) consist of (1) “abstaining from killing, (2) abstaining from stealing, (3) abstaining from immoral sexual behavior, (4) abstaining from falsehood, and (5) abstaining from intoxicating things.”²⁵³ A person who keeps these five precepts is called a virtuous one. On the other hand, the Five Ennobling Virtues (*Pancadharmas*) consist of “(1) loving-kindness or compassion, (2) patience in the right means of livelihood, (3) abstention from immoral sexual behavior, (4) truthfulness, and (5) watchfulness.”²⁵⁴

It is remarkable to know that the Five Precepts and the Five Ennobling Virtues cannot be separated because the latter are the fruits of following the former five precepts. From a person who follows the precept of not harming others arises loving-kindness or compassion for all beings. Patience has to do with earning a living without harmful ways. When a person lives a good moral life, he or she stays away from unlawful sexual behaviors. Truthfulness is developed when a person chooses to stay away from lying, gossiping, and avoiding abusive words. The virtue of watchfulness is cultivated in a

²⁵¹ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 46.

²⁵² Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha*, 64.

²⁵³ Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha*, 65.

²⁵⁴ Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha*, 65.

person who keeps his mind pure from bad thoughts. Normally, lay Buddhists are expected to follow the five precepts to become good Buddhists.²⁵⁵

Especially for lay Buddhists, the only purpose of the discipline of morality is the achievement of *kammic* merit which lays the foundation for better rebirth.²⁵⁶ However, one must be aware that though the emphasis is given to moral living (*sila*), love for others or the preferable term loving-kindness (*metta*) is considered as a higher value because it creates greater merit. Nevertheless, this virtue is not out of emotion. It must be a genuine virtue that needs to be developed by a person from within.²⁵⁷ The genuineness of this loving-kindness is also shown by good works especially in giving (*dana*).²⁵⁸ Thus, morality is accomplished with the working of *dana*, helping the poor, and the less privileged. By this means, Buddhists establish a strong foundation towards their goal— if not now in this life, at least in the next life.²⁵⁹ Therefore, building up a pure moral life must not be neglected because it is the basis for higher spiritual attainments. Rather, one's moral life must be strong enough to sustain and contribute the subsequent trainings of concentration (*samadhi*) and wisdom (*panna*).²⁶⁰ In Theravada tradition, morality is

²⁵⁵ Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha*, 66.

²⁵⁶ Schumann, *Buddhism*, 69.

²⁵⁷ Schumann, *Buddhism*, 72, 76.

²⁵⁸ Ch'en, *The Light of Asia*, 34.

²⁵⁹ Humphreys, *Studies in the Middle Way: Being Thoughts on Buddhism Applied*, 93.

²⁶⁰ Mon, *Meditation The Buddha's Way*, 26.

considered as “a door that leads to *Nibbana*.”²⁶¹ It is an integral part of the path to self-liberation.

Concentration (*Samadhi*)

Samadhi is “contemplation on Reality.”²⁶² The term means “being firmly put together” or “one-pointedness of mind.”²⁶³ In different books on Buddhist studies, concentration is interchangeably used with meditation. The Pali word *bhavana* is used to refer to meditation which carries a meaning “to make grow” or “to develop.”²⁶⁴ According to Dhammapada 23, “And those who in high thought and indeed contemplation with ever-living power advance on the path, they, in the end, reach *Nibbana*, the peace supreme and infinite joy.”²⁶⁵

This category of mental discipline contains Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.²⁶⁶ Right Effort is the attempt, with a strong desire, to destroy the corruptions of the mind which are already there in the mind, and also to prevent the rise of corruption in one’s mind. At the same time, it is an effort with full energy to have a good and peaceful state of mind. Right mindfulness refers to the need for a meditator to be constantly watchful in four areas, i.e., “1) the activities of the body (*kaya*), 2) sensations or feelings (*vedana*), 3) the activities of the mind (*citta*) and 4) ideas, thoughts,

²⁶¹ Robert E Jr Buswell and Robert M (Robert Michael) Gimello, ““Buddhist Soteriology: The Mārga and Other Approaches to Liberation,”” *The Journal of International Association of Buddhist Studies* 13, no. 1 (1990): 84, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost.

²⁶² Humphreys, *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism*, 188.

²⁶³ Nāṇatiloka Thera, *The Buddha’s Path to Deliverance*, 73.

²⁶⁴ Dhammika, *Good Question Good Answer*, 39.

²⁶⁵ Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, 38.

²⁶⁶ Schumann, *Buddhism*, 71.

conceptions and things (*dhamma*).”²⁶⁷ In the discipline of “the activities of the body,” the most popular method is “concentration on breathing (*anapanasati*) that connects with the body, for mental development.” Secondly, with “sensations or feelings,” the meditator puts forth an effort in being mindful about each feeling, whether it is good or bad. Thirdly, regarding “the activities of the mind,” the meditator maintains constant alertness towards his or her mind whether there is lust, ill-will, greed, or any other kinds of defilements present or not. Moreover, the meditator needs to be watchful about the changes taking place in his or her mind to be aware of how the defilements arise and vanish. Fourthly, in relation to “ideas, thoughts, conceptions, and things,” the meditator puts an effort into contemplating the coming and going of all phenomena, to realize the true nature of all phenomena. In this way, when a meditator comes to the factor of Right concentration under this category, it leads the meditator in gradually destroying the defilements from the mind in four steps of *jhana* until the mind becomes pure and the meditator becomes perfect.²⁶⁸ The four *jhana* are the stages of the mind developed when a meditator practices the mindfulness concentration of mental training. They are also called as “meditative ecstasy.”²⁶⁹ They are the stages Gotama developed under the Bo-tree and achieved his enlightenment. Anguttara Nikaya describes how this mental training leads one to enlightenment in a form of conversation.

[A conversation between the Buddha and the monks] And what is the training in the higher mind? Here, secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a monk enters and dwells in the first *Jhana*. With the subsiding of thought and examination, he enters and dwells in the second *jhana*, which has internal confidence and unification of the mind, is without thought and

²⁶⁷ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 48.

²⁶⁸ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 48–49.

²⁶⁹ Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipitaka*, 384.

examination, and has rapture and happiness born of concentration. With the fading away as well as of rapture, he dwells equanimous and, mindful and comprehending, he experiences happiness with the body; he enters and dwells in the third jhana of which the noble ones declare; He is equanimous, mindful, one who dwells happily, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous passing away of joy and sadness, he enters and dwells in the fourth jhana, which is neither painful nor pleasant and includes the purification of mindfulness by equanimity. This is the training of the higher mind.²⁷⁰

Thus, the hindrances to Nibbana are destroyed through mental training. This is the Buddha's way of self-liberation. By this mental discipline, all corruptions that bind a person in *samsara* are destroyed, and the meditator can see the reality of things and *nibbana* is attained.²⁷¹ Thus, this mindfulness and concentration of mental discipline is the cure of suffering discovered by the Buddha that makes an end of suffering possible.

Wisdom (*Panna*)

The third category among the steps of the Eightfold Path is made up of Right View and Right Thought. Indeed, these two factors are listed before the other six factors of the eightfold path. However, when they are categorized, the category of wisdom is usually listed at the end. Right View refers to believing in the teachings of the Buddha, which is summed up in the Four Noble Truths. The latter factor is the resolution and aims to follow to contemplate the reality of things that will lead to liberation. This right thought will produce the right view.²⁷² As Dhammapada 22 says: "Those who with a clear mind have seen this truth, those who are wise and ever-watchful, they feel the joy of

²⁷⁰ Thera and Bodhi, trans., *Anguttara Nikaya*, 37-38.

²⁷¹ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 68.

²⁷² Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipitaka*, 391.

watchfulness, the joy of the path of the Great.”²⁷³ This wisdom also involves “discarding of the Four Perverse Views (*vipallasa*): looking for something permanent in the impermanent, looking for happiness in suffering, looking for a Self in the non-self, and looking for beauty in what is ugly.”²⁷⁴

The three factors under concentration and the two factors under the category of wisdom are called “the five workers (*karaka magganga*),” that enable the mind to be free from corruption. In the process of training into higher mental disciplines of concentration and wisdom, the moral foundation not only stays still without pollution but also became purer and purer as the meditator makes progress in his or her training. Thus, with the foundation of morality, “the five workers” formed the Noble Eightfold Path by which self-liberation is made possible from suffering.²⁷⁵

Rahula explains the Buddhist’s path to liberation simply as:

A way of life that is to be followed, practiced, and developed by each individual. It is self-discipline in body, word, and mind, self-development, and self-purification. It has nothing to do with belief, prayer, worship, or ceremony. In that sense, it has nothing which may popularly be called “religious.” It is a path leading to the realization of Ultimate Reality, to complete freedom, happiness, and peace through moral, spiritual, and intellectual perfection.²⁷⁶

Since there is no God or higher spiritual being on whom one must depend for liberation, offering prayers and ritual performances for liberation are considered as futile. Rather, this kind of belief is considered as one of the fetters that must be cut off to attain

²⁷³ Mascaro, *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, 38.

²⁷⁴ Schumann, *Buddhism*, 69.

²⁷⁵ Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw, *To Nibbana Via the Noble Eightfold Path*, ed. Bhikkhu Pesala, trans. U Htin Fatt, new ed. (Yangon: Buddha Sasananuggaha Organization, 2013), 16.

²⁷⁶ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 49–50.

liberation.²⁷⁷ The beautiful ceremonies occasionally performed by the Buddhists do not contribute towards attaining the religious goal; rather, they are celebrations of important events. The only means to reach their religious goal is to strive forward in destroying the defilements (*kilesas*) from one's mind via the Eightfold path or the noble threefold training that emphasizes meditation, focus, and persistence. Then, the mind progressively becomes completely pure from defilements so that the meditator can see the reality of all phenomena, which in turn leads to putting off of craving.²⁷⁸

Thus, the means of self-liberation is not prayer nor ritual performances, but it is a renunciation of the material world and desire through spiritual training. It is the purification of the mind from all defilements. Doctrinally speaking, the path contains morality, meditation, and wisdom, which requires self-cultivation as the word of the Buddha says, Dmp.183. "To avoid all evil, to cultivate good, and to cleanse one's mind – this is the teaching of the Buddha."²⁷⁹

Can Everyone Attain *Nibbana*?

Considering the requirements, one must fulfill by oneself to be free from the wheel of *samsara*, it becomes a big question whether the goal is reachable by every person or not? There are also diverse opinions concerning this matter. According to Maier, Theravada Buddhism, being the most conservative school, teaches that liberation is accessible by the monks alone. In this case, it is believed that rebirths will take place until one's kammic performances are strong enough to become a monk in one life and

²⁷⁷ Meghaprasara, *New Guide to the Tipiṭaka*, 387.

²⁷⁸ Mon, *Kamma, The Real Creator*, 8.

²⁷⁹ Buddhakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, 51.

attain *Nibbana*.²⁸⁰ According to Ch'en, the highest goal of a lay Buddhist is to be reborn as a god in the heavenly realm. They are not to aim for sainthood or liberation from suffering in this life. However, he is not ignorant of those instances where laypeople attained *nibbana* as recorded in the Pali canon. Therefore, he argued that in such cases, the enlightened people are required to leave behind the world and join the religious community on the very day. Otherwise, it will lead them to death.²⁸¹

Rahula, a Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar strongly argues for the accessibility of *Nibbana* by everyone. According to him, *Nibbana* is not limited only to monks nor to those who join the *Sangha*. Nevertheless, in saying this he is not degrading the atmosphere that the community can provide for one's spiritual progress. Rather, he is strongly arguing for the possibility of attaining the religious goal by everyone. He strongly states, "The Buddha's teaching is meant not only for monks in monasteries but also for ordinary men and women living at home with their families. The Noble Eightfold Path, which is the Buddhist way to liberation, is meant for all, without distinction of any kind."²⁸² He further says:

There are numerous references in Buddhist literature to men and women living ordinary, normal family lives who successfully practiced what the Buddha taught, and realized *Nibbana*.... once asked the Buddha straightforwardly whether there were laymen and women leading the family life, who followed his teaching successfully and attained to high spiritual states. The Buddha categorically stated that there were not one or two, not a hundred or two hundred or five hundred, but many more laymen and women leading the family life who followed his teaching successfully and attained to high spiritual states.²⁸³

²⁸⁰ Maier, "Salvation in Buddhism," 29.

²⁸¹ Ch'en, *The Light of Asia*, 100.

²⁸² Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 76.

²⁸³ Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 77.

According to Burmese writer U Aye Maung, it is the post-canonical Buddhist writings that limit liberation only to the monks. He further says that there are twenty-one lay followers of the Buddha who are declared by the Buddha to have attained the religious goal.²⁸⁴ S. Dhammika also argues that one does not necessarily have to become a monk to attain enlightenment.

Some of the Buddha's most accomplished disciples were laymen and women. Some were spiritually developed enough to instruct the monks. In Buddhism, the level of one's understanding is the most important thing and that has nothing to do with whether one wears a yellow robe or blue jeans, or whether one lives in a monastery or a home. Some might find the monastery, with all its advantages and disadvantages to be the best environment in which to grow spiritually. Others may find the home with all its joys and sorrows, to be best. Everyone is different.²⁸⁵

Having considered the above arguments, the arguments about the possibility of liberation to all seems more in line with the teachings of the Buddha. There are no such restrictions as long as one fulfills the requirements to achieve the goal. Moreover, there is no specific teaching found in the Pali Canon about the limitations of liberation only to the monks. Rather, the precondition for liberation is to destroy the root cause of suffering by seeing things in their reality. Despite the different views and perceptions, *Nibbana* is attained by anyone who fulfills the necessary precondition to its achievement. As the words of the Buddha go:

Dhammapada 23: The wise ones, ever meditative and steadfastly persevering, alone experience Nibbana, the incomparable freedom from bondage.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁴ Maung, *Buddhism*, 172–73.

²⁸⁵ Dhammika, *Good Question Good Answer*, 58.

²⁸⁶ Buddharakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, 26.

Dhammapada 368: The monk who abides in universal love and is deeply devoted to the teaching of the Buddha attains the peace of Nibbana, the bliss of the cessation of all conditioned things.²⁸⁷

Two Different Soteriological Goals of Theravada Buddhists in Myanmar

Looking closer at the religion of Burmese Theravadins, concerning their soteriological ideology, an anthropologist, Melford Spiro pointed out the existence of two systems in relation to their religious soteriological goals which he termed as nibbanic Buddhism and kammatic Buddhism.²⁸⁸

Nevertheless, these different forms or systems do not imply different kinds of Buddhism. They are the systems that differ in degree whereas the highest degree or sometimes called as extraordinary norm, nibbanic Buddhism is practiced by very few adherents of Buddhism. It is also said that these kinds of forms are not only found among the Burmese Buddhists, but also in other Buddhist countries such as Thailand as well as in Sri-Lanka. Soteriologically, these two systems differ “in both aim and technique.”²⁸⁹

In the normative Buddhism of nibbanic Buddhism the religious goal of an adherent is to end samsaric existence. Just as the teaching of the Buddha, life is seen as suffering. All types of samsaric existences including being born as a higher being is seen as suffering, thus, the goal is to escape from samsaric existence. This is the “extraordinary norm” taught by the Buddha.²⁹⁰ Nevertheless, the Burmese including other Buddhists countries of southeast Asia had developed a kind “ordinary norm” of

²⁸⁷ Buddhakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, 79.

²⁸⁸ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 12.

²⁸⁹ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 11.

²⁹⁰ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 2.

soteriology where the goal is the enhancement of one's life in samsaric existence. Here the concern is to have a better rebirth either in human society or a higher rebirth as a heavenly being. It is found out that the Burmese are not ignorant about the soteriological teaching of the normative Buddhism. When a Buddhist choose to follow kammic path to enhance his or her samsaric existence, it does not mean that he or she is not ignorant about the nibbanic path. It is rather a choice made by individual. Normally, kammatic Buddhists justify themselves of their choice by saying that "they are not yet spiritually qualified to practice nibbanic Buddhism."²⁹¹ It is observed that "kammatic Buddhism is the mainstream of Burmese religious life whereas the other is the creed of relatively few people in Myanmar."²⁹²

Meditation to see the true nature of things by following the eightfold path is the means to liberation for the Burmese Buddhists. On the other hand, in kammatic Buddhism, in order to be reborn as a better being in the next life, the performance of good merits is given the most important religious discipline. Because it is by acquiring good karmas that will allow one to have a better rebirth.²⁹³ In nibbanic Buddhism, a true Buddhist is the one who renounces the world because liberation can only happen when samsaric existence is put to an end which is the "normative ideology of Theravada Buddhism."²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 11,13.

²⁹² Maung, *Buddhism*, 253.

²⁹³ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 43.

²⁹⁴ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 64.

Thus, we can say that soteriologically, the Burmese Theravadins differ in their religious goals where those who follow nibbanic Buddhism aim to transcend their samsaric existence, the kammatic Buddhists seek satisfaction within this samsaric existence. In other words, the former seeks to end desire that cause suffering and trap a person in this wheel of rebirth whereas the latter seeks the fulfillment of those desires which is also called “samsaric pleasures.”²⁹⁵ Normally, laypeople take the kammic path by following the five moral precepts which not only make them good Buddhists but allow them to be reborn in a better life. Besides, controlling anger, living a life of compassion, giving alms to the sangha, respecting elders, and avoiding the wrong livelihood must be practiced faithfully. Also, a lay Buddhist should not have pride from wealth or social status but seek the company of wise people.²⁹⁶ By these means, the lay people not only earn merits for the next life but also get closer and closer to their final liberation.²⁹⁷ Also, a professor and teacher of Buddhist meditation, Mehm Tin Mon, says it is impossible to attain the state of perfection just in one life. It takes uncountable cycles of births to become a perfect one, a buddha.²⁹⁸

For the kammic Buddhists, their goal is to live a good moral life. For Nirvanic Buddhists who aim for enlightenment in this present life, morality only serves as a strong foundation for their spiritual progress towards liberation. They practice insight meditation

²⁹⁵ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 67.

²⁹⁶ Ch'en, *The Light of Asia*, 100.

²⁹⁷ Sylwia Gil, “The Role of Monkhood in Contemporary Myanmar Society” (n.d.): 6, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/05699.pdf>.

²⁹⁸ Mon, *Kamma, The Real Creator*, 243.

that leads them to see the three marks of existence; “suffering, impermanence, and selflessness” which in turn leads them away from craving and experience *nibbana*.²⁹⁹

Melford further said even in kammatic Buddhism that keep nibbana as a long-term goal by moving toward it as they improve their samsaric existence in the process, there are also some Buddhists who did not look so far to nibbana rather only focus on the enhancement of their samsaric existence in this world.³⁰⁰ Because, psychologically, they argued that it is not the desire that caused suffering, but it is the unmet desires that cause suffering. So, in this regard, for one liberation from suffering is not renouncing but it is pursuing those desires to have a happy life. They believe that “happiness can be achieved by its fulfillment.”³⁰¹ This, Melford calls, a shift from “radical (otherworldly) to a proximate (worldly) salvation.”³⁰²

Despite the differences in their soteriological ideologies, both ideologies strongly hold the unaided liberation, meditation for wisdom in Nibbanic Buddhism and the accumulation of merits in kammatic Buddhism.³⁰³ Importantly, the two soteriological ideologies focus on the unassisted effort of the adherent without any outside power.³⁰⁴

²⁹⁹ Maung, *Buddhism*, 261.

³⁰⁰ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 69.

³⁰¹ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 72.

³⁰² Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 73.

³⁰³ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 132.

³⁰⁴ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 140.

Other Non-soteriological Forms of Buddhism in Myanmar

Melford Spiro also found out that there are other non-soteriological forms of Buddhism in Myanmar. Firstly, besides the two soteriological forms of Buddhism, the other form is apotropaic Buddhism which is a religion of magical protection.³⁰⁵ This system is mainly concerned with the daily well-being of the people which includes healing from sickness, the protection from bad luck, scarcity, famine and natural calamities which can be caused by evil spirits, demons, and ghosts that can cause any harm anytime. Therefore, the means to protect is the consultation of magicians, attempting to please the spirits, and assistance from spiritual beings whom they believe can protect them from the danger of everyday life.³⁰⁶ Beside this non-soteriological form of Buddhism, there are also others such as esoteric Buddhism which is “a religion of chiliastic expectation.”³⁰⁷ Under this form of Buddhism, there are more than a hundred esoteric sects which are called *gaing* that made up thousands of members. These sects are said to be soteriological in their system, yet they are said to be have very little connection to the tradition of normative Buddhism. Rather, they symbolize a kind of syncretistic of mystical beliefs that is only covered by the teaching of the Buddha. One interesting point is that these sects are said to be not rejecting the normative soteriological tradition rather adding a new system into the existing systems. The common practice among these sects is the mythical magician or *weikza* which is related to the eschatological Buddhism that includes the coming of the future king who will inaugurate the millennium Buddhism.

³⁰⁵ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 140.

³⁰⁶ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 12, 140.

³⁰⁷ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 162.

For some sects, it is related to supernormal power of prolonging life, preserving youthful life, and even overcoming death. Indeed, these kinds of practices and aspirations are in contrast with the teaching of Buddhism. Therefore, the sect becomes Buddhist only when the weikza belief is integrated with the Buddhist beliefs in a Future Buddha.³⁰⁸ According to the findings, these sects are not confined only to the farmers and uneducated but also the educated Burmese.³⁰⁹

Melford further says that esoteric Buddhism is a combination of different elements which includes the indigenous worship of nat, yogic from Hinduism, the larger vehicle of Buddhism which involves the combination of even contradicting elements. This is a mixture of all forms of other Buddhism present in Myanmar within these sects.³¹⁰

The above various forms of Buddhism in Myanmar are the “native category system.” They are the forms of Buddhism that indicate and describe the types of Buddhism in Myanmar under the big umbrella Theravada Buddhism. They are the analytical interpretation of Burmese religion from the researchers. It shows how the teachings of the Buddha are being reinterpreted among the Burmese. Melford also said that the Burmese Theravadins are aware of the existence of these major features in their religious lives.³¹¹

³⁰⁸ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 162, 63, 64.

³⁰⁹ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 180.

³¹⁰ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 186, 87.

³¹¹ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 11.

The Role of Sangha in Self-liberation

The liberation taught by the Buddha is purely a self-effort without any outside help. He was merely a way-shower. However, the Sangha or the monastic community was established to provide a favorable situation for those who practice the threefold training prescribed by the Buddha.³¹² When the Buddha founded the community, his intention was for the betterment of his followers in their mental discipline.³¹³ Regarding this, the Buddha's words are recorded in the Dhammapada 206-207:

Good is it to see the Noble Ones; to live with them is ever blissful. One will always be happy by not encountering fools. Indeed, he who moves in the company of fools grieves for longing. Association with fools is ever painful, like a partnership with an enemy. But the association with the wise is happy, like meeting one's kinsmen.³¹⁴

Indeed, the path taught by Buddha requires focus and concentration which is somehow difficult for people who have family responsibilities. Usually, one who would like to be devoted to religious life with the goal of Arahantship prefers to join the *sangha* for a better environment. In the Sangha, the monks and nuns can devote their entire attention to meditation and monastic activities without being worried about their food or family because they depend on the material support of the laypeople.³¹⁵ Therefore, people who aim to attain *nibbana* in this life normally withdraw themselves from society and join the religious community. In the community, they are being accompanied by people with the same goal, and also the rules and regulations that bind them are helpful towards

³¹² Ch'en, *The Light of Asia*, 86.

³¹³ Maung, *Buddhism*, 201–2.

³¹⁴ Buddhārakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, 55.

³¹⁵ Ch'en, *The Light of Asia*, 98–99.

reaching their goal.³¹⁶ Moreover, since the Buddhist way to liberation requires proper discipline in meditation, S. Dhammika says:

A teacher is not absolutely necessary but personal guidance from someone who is familiar with meditation is certainly helpful. Unfortunately, some monks and lay people set themselves up as meditation teachers when they simply don't know what they are doing. Try to pick a teacher who has a good reputation, a balanced personality, and who adheres closely to the Buddha's teachings.³¹⁷

In Myanmar, there are many meditation teachers. Some are widely known not only within the country but also globally. Some of them are; U Narada Mahathera, known as Mingun Jetawan Sayadaw, Ledi Sayadaw who was recognized as a source of knowledge for meditation, Mogok Sayadaw who was an expert in *vipassana* meditation, Professor Mehm Tin Mon, and many more. Meditation in Myanmar is not limited to the Nibbanic Buddhists, but it is greatly practiced as a remedy from daily life problems for everyone.³¹⁸ Therefore, as Burmese Buddhists strive toward final liberation following the eightfold path, they normally prefer to have someone who can guide them in the process of their spiritual development. As a result, there are many meditation teachers, guides, and also meditation centers in Myanmar.

There is a mutually beneficial relationship between the Sangha and the laypeople. Regarding material assistance, the Sangha relies on the laypeople. On the other hand, the laity looks upon the monks for their spirituality. Both groups have their duty to follow. In this way, they fulfill their religious life.³¹⁹ According to Gil, "At present, about 90

³¹⁶ Dhammika, *Good Question Good Answer*, 57.

³¹⁷ Dhammika, *Good Question Good Answer*, 44.

³¹⁸ Lian, "Christian-Buddhist Dialogue in Myanmar: A Spirituality of Involvement in Social and Ethical Transformation," 50.

³¹⁹ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 48.

percent of Myanmar's population is Buddhist and an estimated 500,000 inhabitants are practicing monkhood." In Myanmar, it is more like a traditional practice to join the religious community as a momentary monk or nun. It is also simple to join the community of monks by performing the religious ceremonies required to be a monk and live in the monasteries for a limited period. Joining the religious community is considered a kind of spiritual renewal, as well as a way of seeking peace from any troublesome situation. For instance, some go to the monasteries as temporary monks and nuns to escape from daily pressures and gain peace of mind. They practice meditation not necessarily to attain *nibbana*, but to have peace of mind. In particular, leaders of the ruling party of the country usually spend a few days in the monasteries, which they believe is a good way to begin their task.³²⁰

Conclusion

As discussed above, *nibbana* is the goal for an adherent of Buddhism, to be realized either in this life or in lives to come. With the scarcity of information concerning the nature of *nibbana*, it is indeed hard to comprehend with limited human knowledge. Concerning the countless questions and controversial subject in relation to the concept of *nibbana* not only in regards to its actual existence but also the "where" is *nibbana* and the question on the "who" will enjoy *nibbana*, Dhammapia states, "since the concept of *nibbana* is philosophically critical and theoretically argumentative, no one can write a reasonable answer to that simple question. Possibly, the more one explains, the more

³²⁰ Gil, "The Role of Monkhood in Contemporary Myanmar Society," 4–5.

people will be confused.”³²¹ The prominent Scholar Rahula shares the same view concerning this issue. He says: “the only reasonable reply to give to the question is that it can never be answered completely and satisfactorily in words because human language is too poor to express the real nature of the Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality which is *Nibbana*.”³²² The Buddha himself said that a liberated person will experience the true nature of *nibbana*. It cannot be proven by outside research with human ability.

Taking shelter in the Buddha, his teachings, and the community of monks is essential for one who would like to make spiritual progress toward the goal. Unless there is faith in the truthful teaching of the Master, there cannot be submission or willingness to follow the path, and attainment of liberation from suffering will not occur. A strong foundation of a moral life is required to proceed with the higher mental training to gain knowledge and insight. Meditation or concentration by oneself is the means to reach *nibbana*. There is no place for prayer and petition or ritual performances to a higher being as a means for liberation. Since the way to liberation requires wisdom from rigorous meditation and concentration, different views have arisen as to whether it is attainable only to monks or also to laity. However, from our explorations we can conclude that there is no specific teachings of the Buddha about the limitations of *nibbana* only to the monks. Liberation from suffering is possible to anyone who can destroy the cause of suffering.

³²¹ Dhammapia, “*Nibbana in Theravada Perspective with Special Reference to Buddhism in Burma*,” 121.

³²² Rahula and Demiéville, *What the Buddha Taught*, 35.

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DIALOGUE

During the reign of King Anawrahtar, the Theravada form of Buddhism was established as the national religion in Myanmar, replacing the traditional *nat* worship of the Burmese people. However, even today Burmese Buddhists have not abandoned their traditional *nat* worship. Instead, they brought *nat* worship into their homes. Despite the presence of elements from their traditional worship, Theravadins in Myanmar are being appreciated for their faithful preservation of the original form of Theravada tradition as compared to other Southeast Theravada countries. Religion and culture are combined in the lives of Burmese Buddhists.

It has been considered the responsibility of state leaders to protect and promote the religion ever since it was made the national religion by King Anawrahtar. Because of the efforts of succeeding political leaders, from the time of King Anawrahtar until today, Theravada Buddhism is still the leading religion in Myanmar. Burmese identity is tied to religious affiliation, and with it comes a sense of hostility to citizens following other faiths. Also, due to past experiences under colonialism, Burmese Buddhists view Christianity as a form of colonialism or mere Western religion. Likewise, Christians in Myanmar have a negative perception of Theravada Buddhism. Most Myanmar Christians including pastors and church leaders view Burmese Buddhism as the worship of the image of Buddha as a god. In my dialect, Burmese Buddhists are usually called “*milim biate*” which means “idol worshippers,” in the sense of worshipping the Buddha’s image.

This contradicts my findings in this thesis. The findings show that Theravadins neither acknowledge the presence of any creator God or Supreme Being nor consider Gotama to be a god. For them, those gods and goddesses are beings who are still bound in the wheel of *samsara* yet due to their past good *kammas* got the chance to be reborn in a happier state. Therefore, in this sense, Theravada Buddhism is a religion without believing in the existence of God. It can be best described as an atheistic religion. The findings also reveal that there are superficial knowledge and judgments made by Christians about Buddhism.

By relying mainly on the English translations of the Pali *Tipitaka*, the Theravada Canon, and secondary sources, the thesis defined the meaning of salvation in Theravada Buddhism. Unlike our Christian understanding of salvation, Buddhist soteriology is not concerned about the sinful nature of humanity from which human beings need to be saved. Instead, salvation or in the preferable term in Buddhism, liberation, is the ending of samsaric existence. Gotama's experience of enlightenment serves as the foundation for the concept of self-liberation in Theravada Buddhism. Some major doctrines of Theravada Buddhism with the self-liberation concept are discussed in the latter part of Chapter Three. The three characteristics of all phenomena: impermanence, suffering, and soullessness provide the foundation of the self-liberation concept. Besides, the Buddha's teaching concerning the formation of humans, the law of cause and effect (*Kamma* and Rebirth), and the well-known Four Noble Truths that sum up the Buddhist' *Dhamma* are presented. These doctrines revolve around self-liberation and vice versa.

Despite the responsibility of one for his or her own liberation, faith, or trusting confidence is essential for the self-liberation process. However, this faith is not "saving

faith” as Christians understand it. Rather faith for Buddhists implies the need to trust in Gotama’s experience of enlightenment, his *Dhamma*, and the community he founded for the spiritual progress of his followers. This faith is a sort of energy that will enable one to hope for the possibility of having the same experience as the Buddha. These are required to progress toward liberation. Unless one has faith in these three jewels, there will be no practice of the *Dhamma*. Ignorance or lack of understanding and seeing the true nature of things is said to cause a person to crave for things and form corruptions in mind. Thus, self-liberation is achieved by progressively abandoning the corruptions of the mind through meditation. Of course, if there are means to self-liberation, there are also hindrances to self-liberation. These were discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis. The paradox, however, is that despite many longing answers concerning *nibbana*, the Buddha suggested that *nibbana* is beyond human comprehension. It is understandable only by experiencing it. Moreover, there seems to be no consensus on *nibbana* because it has also become the center of many doctrinal arguments. This is mostly due to the scarce teachings of the Buddha and avoidance to speak more concerning this.

The Eightfold Path of self-liberation is classified into three groups of spiritual training, namely morality, concentration, and wisdom. Despite the soteriological gap, the social implications from the Eightfold path will serve as a strong foundation for Buddhists-Christian interfaith dialogue in Myanmar. Unlike our Christian understanding of salvation, liberation for a Theravadins is to be able to escape from the cycle of rebirth, doctrinally termed as *samsara*. This can be achieved by training in morality, concentration, and wisdom by one’s effort. As mentioned in the last part of chapter four, tradition recorded about people who achieved liberation just by hearing the teachings of

the Buddha. Nevertheless, they are said to be people who built up good *kammas* in their many past lives. The Buddha insisted his followers entirely depend on themselves by following the Eightfold Path for liberation. There is no outside power that can contribute towards one's road to liberation. It takes concentration and perseverance because one has to overcome the hindrances to be enlightened. Neither a god nor someone else is responsible for one's suffering. Likewise, neither a God nor someone else is capable or responsible to free one from this suffering. An individual is responsible for his or her own liberation. Unlike what many Christians in Myanmar think, good works in Buddhism are not a means to liberation, although they play an important part in the road to *nibbana*. Unless one is perfect by overcoming all the defilements through meditation, they will still be trapped in samsaric existence.

Connections for Inter-religious Dialogue

The primary concern in this part of the thesis is to see how Christians in Myanmar can engage in inter-religious dialogue with their neighbors by drawing the possible ways from the preceding surveys. A prominent Myanmar Christian theologian, Samuel Ngun Ling defines interreligious dialogue as “a reciprocal yet convincing communication between persons of different faiths.”³²³ Amid hindrances for Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Myanmar due to feelings of religious superiority and nationalism, Buddhists and Christians have come to a new era where they see the need for relating to each other. The primary concern for this awakening is not necessarily spiritual or religious matters. Rather, it is the result of globalization and the need to work together for the development

³²³ Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 203.

of social life in the country. Nevertheless, according to Dr. Ciin Sian Khai, “Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Myanmar is still at an introductory level.”³²⁴ Both parties are still reluctant to engage in interfaith dialogue. Most Myanmar Christians still prefer evangelization over dialogue in a mutual exchange of ideas. At the same time, the Burmese Buddhists do not feel the necessity to engage with Christians in dialogue because they see their religion as good enough to bring peace in the society as well as in their personal life.

Both parties must get over past bitter experiences to engage in dialogue. I remember one time hearing the speech of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said, the primary thing the people need in Myanmar is healing from the past. She might not necessarily refer this to religious matters, but I believe this is also the primary thing Christians and Buddhists in Myanmar need to consider concerning religion. Indeed, Christians must end their perception of the Burmese Buddhists as people who embrace a religion that cannot save them from hell. They must stop seeing themselves and their religion as better than the Buddhists and their religion. Ciin Sian Khai called this a “holier-than-thou attitude.”³²⁵ On the other hand, Burmese Buddhists need to stop their view of Christianity as a mere Western religion, as well as without ethical teaching. Recently, I listened to a Buddhist monk Dr. Paing Soe, who was converted to Christianity for a few years and then turned back to Buddhism. Out of many things he said in the video, one of the things he said is, “how can Christianity be good when there are wars and unrest in Christian countries.” Indeed, most Buddhists in Myanmar regard Christianity as a religion without ethical

³²⁴ Khai, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue - a Way toward Peaceful Co-Existence in Myanmar*, 15.

³²⁵ Khai, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue - a Way toward Peaceful Co-Existence in Myanmar*, 172.

teaching. This, for them, is not good enough to lead one to ultimate liberation, because ethical conduct or moral life is the foundation for liberation in Buddhism. They must also stop taking pride in their identity as a Buddhist just because they are the biggest religious group in Myanmar. Thus, dialogue cannot take place until both parties are open enough and respect the other person's religion. Likewise, without dialogue, there cannot be peaceful living in a country such as Myanmar where people of different faiths are living together. Our wrong perceptions towards each other and our religions cannot be corrected without engaging in dialogue and sharing our beliefs and faith. Judging one another from outside and trying to convert one another with superiority in our hearts will not do any good in Buddhist-Christian relations in Myanmar. It is not about who is right or wrong, the most important thing is to begin to calmly engage in conversation with respect and forgiveness.

Indeed, Burmese Buddhists have a popular proverb that goes, *pohngu khin mah tayah myin*, which means the truth is seen and understood only after friendship is built. It can also be meant to say receptiveness only happens when we first build up a friendship. Religious truth will be seen when both parties start building friendships. At the same time, to build friendship, both parties must be willing to open by overcoming the hindrances. Therefore, as Ciin Sian Khai suggested, to go beyond dialogue, our primary purpose should be building friendship and trust between Christians and Buddhists in Myanmar.³²⁶

Also, Samuel Ngun Ling saw the dialogical approach as the best way to relate to the Burmese Buddhists who belong to the biggest religious group in Myanmar. He states:

³²⁶ Khai, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue - a Way toward Peaceful Co-Existence in Myanmar*, 225.

“The objective of the dialogue is neither to convince our fellow Buddhists of their errors nor show how superior Christianity is to Buddhism, but to take appropriate steps to eliminate all those factors that tend to create distrust, suspicion, and ill-will between Buddhists and Christians.”³²⁷ Social engagement is considered the best way to begin our dialogue particularly in a country such as Myanmar where people have bitter past experiences that have to do with religious matters. This does not mean completely harmonizing the two religions or their religious teachings. Rather, the goal is to build a foundation of peace by engaging in interfaith dialogue that will bring forgiveness and reconciliation among the people for further engagement in dialogue over doctrinal matters.

The question is: what would be the most appropriate method to begin our dialogue when our soteriology seems to stand in opposition to theirs who know no savior? To be one’s own refuge is their basic principle. Theological debates or digging out all the divergences will not be the best approach; rather we must begin with the similarities we share in our religious traditions. This approach will not only give the feeling of respect for the person and the religions, but it will also allow us to express our differences respectfully.

Practical Connections

After conducting his empirical studies, Dr. Ciin Sian Khai found out that “dialogue based on social concern is badly needed in Myanmar.”³²⁸ Indeed, with our past experiences still ringing in our ears, socially engaged dialogue or practically engaged

³²⁷ Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 207.

³²⁸ Khai, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue - a Way toward Peaceful Co-Existence in Myanmar*, 23.

dialogue must precede our deeper dialogical engagement over doctrinal matters. With this conviction, the question here is: Is there any aspect of teaching in the soteriological concept of both religions that can be employed as a socially engaged interfaith dialogue? Officially, Kaikkainen says, “with all their differences, living faith traditions all seek to explain and overcome the effects and roots of evil and “sin” in human life.”³²⁹

Despite the divergence in their soteriological concept, both religions stress the necessity of love or loving-kindness accompanied by ethical living as the very core of their religious value. It is also the religious standard or the measuring rod of a genuine Buddhist or Christian. When the venerable S. Dhammika was asked what he would say regarding some sayings of the religions which are the same, he answered by pointing out 1 Corinthians 13:1-7.

This is exactly what Buddhism teaches – that the quality of our heart is more important than any super-normal powers we might have, our ability to foretell the future, the strength of our faith, or any extravagant gestures we might make. So when it comes to theological concepts and theories, Buddhism and Christianity certainly differ. But when it comes to heart qualities, ethics, and behavior, they are very similar.³³⁰

In Theravadins’ soteriology, loving-kindness and morality are the very foundation without which no further progress can be made to reach the goal. It is the foundation for one to proceed on with the road to ultimate liberation. Morality is considered to be the foundation for mental development that leads to *nibbana*, and love is considered to be the highest virtue. This is the common ground on which we can begin our interfaith dialogue. This will not only lead us into social transformation and peaceful co-existence in

³²⁹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), 386.

³³⁰ Dhammika, *Good Question Good Answer*, 13.

Myanmar but will also pave the way to enter into a deeper theological engagement of interfaith dialogue.

Loving-kindness is considered as the highest virtue in Theravada Buddhism. An awakened person is said to become “a living embodiment of the four divine states of mind (*brahmaviharas*): loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*); sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*).”³³¹ Likewise, Christians consider love as the highest virtue (1 Cor 13:13) that must be seen in a saved or a spiritually liberated person who comes to the knowledge of the truth (Jesus). It is the fruit that a liberated or in a Christian’s term “a saved person” bears which must be expressed in “joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). Moreover, the emphasis of each religion is that this love is not out of feeling or emotion, but a virtue one needs to develop. First Corinthians 13:4-7 resonates well with Dhammapada 5: “Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is a law eternal.”³³² Likewise, Paul commands us in Romans 12:10-18 that we are to devote to one another in love, not to repay evil for evil but evil with good. Instead of taking revenge, we are to live at peace with everyone. The emphasis of love in the teachings of the two religions can bring peace and harmony in the country.

Indeed, this is a practical dialogue. As we begin an interfaith dialogue with the emphasis on love, barriers of suspicions, bitterness, and unforgiveness will be broken. This will also hopefully bring reconciliation with each other, it may not be easy though.

³³¹ Ashin Janakabhivamsa, *Abhidhamma in Daily Life*, trans. U Ko Lay, 2nd ed. (Mandalay: U Maung Maung, 1999), 104.

³³² Buddharakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom*, 23.

Without the practice and cultivation of love, there will not be respect for one another and other religions. This is a basic and practical dialogue for Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar that will pave the way for deeper dialogical engagement. Practically, this love is accompanied by charity works that Burmese Buddhists call *dana*. Likewise, the Bible provides plenty of examples and teachings about love expressed in action (Deut 15:7-11; Matt 19:21; Luke 12:33, 14:13; John 3:16; Heb 13:16; James 2:14-17; I Tim 6:18; 1 John 3:18; 2 John 3:17). Therefore, Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar can have a social engagement together in expressing their love with works of charity. The teachings of loving-kindness in the two religions should prompt them to work together for a peaceful society, which starts by being open to each other.

Another common ground for Buddhist-Christian engagement is the emphasis on morality. Every religion is not ignorant about moral living or ethical conduct as an important role in one's religious life. It can be said that religion and morality are linked together. Morality is grounded in religious teachings. The Sacred Text of Theravadins shows that salvation or liberation partially centers upon the conquest of living a moral life. The five precepts are a discipline for moral living. Moral training and living the ethical life are important in both Christianity and Theravada Buddhism. As explored, the Buddhist's liberation is to overcome the defilements from the mind. A saved person in Christianity must put to an end defilements of the mind that leads to sinful actions through body, speech, and thought such as sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed (Col 3:5). This commonality that aims for a good moral living allows them to not only work together for a better society and built a safe and peaceful community.

Theological Connections

Although the dialogical engagement of Christians and Buddhists in Myanmar is still in its initial stage, we need to consider and prepare for a deeper doctrinal engagement where we may be able to express our respective doctrinal teachings and traditions. This may also help us to see the true nature of the faith of the other. In this light, we may be able to evaluate whether our presumption and views about the other's belief system are true or not. Especially, this may allow both parties to correct their wrong perceptions about the other faith. As a result, both parties may be able to appreciate the good teachings found in the religion of the other. As we come to a point of dealing with the theological exchange of dialogue, I begin with the four rules proposed by Dr. San Lian that need to be observed in promoting Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Myanmar. My aim in bringing this proposition is to build a healthy dialogue that will also guard our theological exchange of dialogue against going extreme. They are:

1) no attempt must be made to equate different religious concepts; 2) faith differences must be respected and recognized; 3) honest matching as a result of analytical understanding of different religious texts can be conducted, with the intention of creating a common platform for dialogue; and 4) the required effort must be exerted to thoroughly understand both one's own and the other's religion.³³³

Soteriologically speaking, like Christianity, the teachings of Theravada Buddhism centers on salvation. As the Buddha says, "One thing only does the Buddha teach, namely, suffering and the cessation of suffering."³³⁴ Thus, salvation or liberation is the major teaching and the goal of Christians and Buddhists in Myanmar. Nevertheless, they

³³³ Lian, "Christian-Buddhist Dialogue in Myanmar: A Spirituality of Involvement in Social and Ethical Transformation," 260.

³³⁴ Nanamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*, 235.

move in opposite directions toward their soteriological goals. Christian's soteriology begins with the very helplessness of a human to be liberated by their own effort. Therefore, it centers around the credibility of a merciful Savior. In contrast, Theravadins' soteriology emphasized the responsibility of humans to liberate themselves.

Challenged by the self-liberation concept of the Theravadins, the question then is, how can we have a dialogue of theological exchange in the field of soteriology with an appreciation of the soteriological concept of the other? Is there any shared concept through which we can begin our theological exchange? The answer will be yes. If yes, then how? According to Lynn A. De Silva, it will "based on a theological structure oriented to the conceptual framework of Buddhism."³³⁵

In the Theravadin's understanding of liberation, the doctrine of *anatta* (selflessness) is the core concept from which human existence is interpreted and closely connected to the other two concepts *anicca* (impermanence) and *dukkha* (suffering) which thus form the three marks of existence (*Ti-lakkhanas*). Simply, *anatta* is egolessness or the losing of oneself that denies the selfish idea "I, Me, Mine." In the self-liberation concept of Theravada Buddhism, liberation from suffering is possible only when the meditator overcomes the selfishness of "I, Me, Mine" which results in craving, greed, and other mental corruption in the mind. It is from this place of selfishness that kammic actions are formed which results in repeated rebirths. One must overcome or awaken to the truth of no-self or selflessness.³³⁶ The question then is, is there a way or a

³³⁵ Lynn A De Silva, "Good News of Salvation to the Buddhists," *International Review of Mission* 57, no. 228 (1968): 449, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost.

³³⁶ Leopold Ratnasekera OMI, "Seeking Self-Understandign as Christains in a Buddhist Context," ed. Clare Amos, *Current Dialogue* 51 (2011): 42, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/current-dialogue-magazine/dialogue-51>.

concept in the Christian tradition that would be relatable to this concept of selflessness for our conceptual approach to dialogue?

In our doctrinal exchange of ideas, the suggestion of De Silva would be very important, he says that “our approach should probably begin with an appreciation and evaluation of the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* and a restatement of the Biblical view of man in relation to this.”³³⁷ Indeed, this doctrine is present in both religions. The Theravadin's self-liberation stems from their interpretation of this doctrine of *anatta*. Likewise, Christianity built their soteriological concept of a merciful savior based on this concept of *anatta*. Therefore, when we appreciate their doctrine of *anatta*, we can offer the doctrine of *anatta* from our Biblical point of view about an individual concerning salvation. Christianity, indeed, begins with the doctrine of *anatta* or selflessness, in relation to human existence. It is also this very doctrine that required human existence to be interpreted within a context of relationship. The very idea of *anatta* conveys the rejection of the existence of a self independently. From a Biblical point of view, the doctrine of *anatta* conveys the truth about the impossibility of human beings to be independent beings. The true existence of human beings is seen in their relationship with the Creator God which De Silva put it as “an I-Thou relationship.” A human being is indeed *anatta* outside of this connection.³³⁸ Jesus took the form of a human testify to the nothingness of a human without a relationship in John 5:19. The Apostle Paul also writes, “For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself,” (Gal 6:3). It looks so close to the teachings of the Buddha when he condemned the wrong

³³⁷ De Silva, “Good News of Salvation to the Buddhists,” 450.

³³⁸ De Silva, “Good News of Salvation to the Buddhists,” 450.

belief about a personal self. Another important passage from the Bible concerning the nothingness of humans without this relationship is found in Acts 17:28a, which says, “For in Him we live and move and have our being.”

From the very beginning, the Bible provides the true nature of human beings as nothing apart from their relationship with the “*ruach*,” the breath or spirit of Yahweh (Gen 2:7). Likewise, when we come to the New Testament, the Bible consistently tells us the nothingness of humans apart from God. In the writing of Paul about the formation of humanity, he used two words which are in harmony with the teachings of Gotama about the formation of humans. The first word, *psyche* (e.g., Rom 11:3; 16:4), corresponds to *nama* in the Buddhist world. Both of these words conveyed the psychical aspect of an individual. The second word *sarx*, or *rupa* in the Buddhist world, symbolizes the physical aspect of an individual.³³⁹ Therefore, in our theological exchange, we begin with our convergence and express our Christian view of *anatta* which compels us to believe in the helplessness of humanity and the answer to our emptiness through relationship (John 3:16; Gal 5:16; Rom 5:6 ESV; John 15:4-6; Rom 10:13; Titus 2:11). Therefore, as we begin with our shared doctrine, it will allow us to respectfully express our differences, interpretations, and conclusions of the doctrine of *anatta* that result in self-liberation (Buddhism) and the need for a Savior (Christianity). As Dr. San Lian suggested, in this way both parties can respect and evaluate the faith differences in their conclusions of the doctrine of *anatta* and its relation to one’s liberation.

³³⁹ De Silva, “Good News of Salvation to the Buddhists,” 450.; OMI, “Seeking Self-Understanding as Christians in a Buddhist Context,” 43.

By observing the religious life of Burmese Buddhists in continuing their *nat* worship along with their official religion, we can say that they are in fact longing for someone higher than a human being who can answer to their needs as well as protect them from trouble. In a Burmese term, they usually use the word *mati seih* to refer to a kind of inner longing that is not expressible from outside. They may not admit it but unknowingly their inner soul is longing for such a kind of higher being from their *mati seih*. De Silva also found out this truth among the Buddhists that he says “while with the top of their heads Buddhists deny the need of a savior, in their hearts, they yearn for someone like Jesus Christ, a loving, humble, suffering and forgiving Savior.”³⁴⁰ Then, an important question to consider is, how can we present Jesus in a way that will meet their existential need? How can the saving figure of Jesus be appealing to the Buddhist while the suffering of Jesus might be a negative presentation to them? Again, the self-emptiness of Jesus would be a very meaningful presentation of Jesus in relation to the Buddhist concept of *anatta*.³⁴¹

I would say that God is not only working in the cultures of human groups to receive His message but also working in the religions and traditions of people in preparing a way for the message of salvation to be relevant and understandable. Here, Jesus’ self-emptiness serves as the perfect manifestation of selflessness. Philippians 2 presents Jesus who bore the three marks of existence. Although being equal to God, v.6, He made himself nothing, v.7 (*anatta*), born in the likeness of human, v.8a (*anicca*), and suffered on the cross, v.8b (*dukkha*). Thus, in this way, He reverses every bad thing and

³⁴⁰ De Silva, “Good News of Salvation to the Buddhists,” 451.

³⁴¹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation, A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2013), 396.

made available all the opposite of the three marks of existence to those who join Him by having a relationship with God.³⁴² Peter presents how Christ bore the three marks of existence and brings their opposites such as “imperishable (*apathartos*), undefilable (*amiantos*), and unfading (*amarantos*)” (1 Pet 1:3-5). This gift of salvation is for anyone who loves Him and puts their trust in Him and comes into a communion with Him.³⁴³

Furthermore, the true nature of humans found in Psalm 90 is in harmony with the three marks of existence taught by the Buddha. Indeed, the Psalm begins with the nothingness of humans without the relationship (v. 1). Then it goes on with expressing human life as a momentary by comparing it with the grasses that last only for a day (vv. 5, 6, and 10a) which is harmony with the doctrine of *anicca* in Buddhism. It then speaks about this short human life being filled with difficulties, sadness, and pain (vv. 9, 10b, and 11) which the Buddha said about the *dukkha* of human life. And the Psalm also talks about the nothingness of humans compared with dust (v. 3) like that of the doctrine of *anatta* found in Buddhism. After seeing these truths of human life, a petition is made to see something good amidst this hopeless human existence. The Bible further shows how the petition was answered when Jesus Christ willingly took the hopelessness of human existence upon Himself.³⁴⁴ He not only put an end of this hopelessness but also reversed this hopelessness into a living hope for all human beings (Isa 53:3-5; John 3:16, 10:10; Rom 8:1; I Pet 2:23-24). Thus, the Bible not only tells us the hopelessness and nothingness of human beings but also tells us that the answer is found in a relationship. In

³⁴² De Silva, “Good News of Salvation to the Buddhists,” 453.

³⁴³ De Silva, “Good News of Salvation to the Buddhists,” 455.

³⁴⁴ De Silva, “Good News of Salvation to the Buddhists,” 449–50.

this way, we can begin with our convergence and express our divergence with respect. This is also how our dialogue will take us further to introducing Jesus Christ, the merciful savior, and the necessity to have that relationship with God. Both parties may respectfully express how one finds the answer in oneself and the other finds the answer of human hopelessness in a relationship. Therefore, beginning our dialogue with the concept of God or Savior may not be pleasing to them but if we can begin with our similarities, the dialogue will take us further to introduce the uniqueness we have in our respective religion.

Also, the above discussion in the field of soteriology is in line with the suggestion of Paul Tillich. He suggested that representatives consider “a common ground which makes both dialogue and conflicts possible and the openness of both sides to criticisms directed against their religious basis.”³⁴⁵ Christians and Buddhists in Myanmar may still find it difficult to openly come out with positive criticisms at this moment. However, as discussed, we can begin a productive dialogue with a common ground that allows us to see our shared concept, particularly the doctrine of human existence upon which is built our interpretation of the means to liberation.

Missiological Connections

Generally, Burmese Buddhists are more silent in comparison to those of Myanmar Christians in sharing their faiths. Nevertheless, they are not ignorant about their missiological task. Since the beginning, as we discussed in Chapter Three, right after the enlightenment of the Buddha, he was asked to share the *Dhamma* he discovered for the

³⁴⁵ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 62.

benefits of human beings. Later, he also charged his followers to do the same in teaching the *Dhamma*. The commission is recorded as, “Rise, Hero, victorious in Battle, Debtless One, travel through the world. Let the Fortunate One teach the Dhamma, for the benefit of many people, for the happiness of many people, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, benefit, and happiness of gods and men. There will be those who understand.”³⁴⁶ As a result, Buddhist faith spread throughout Asia. Likewise, the great commission of Jesus Christ to share the Gospel and make disciples is found in (Matt. 28:19-20). Having received the great commission respectively, in the past, certain forceful means of conversions were used in the context of Myanmar not only by the Buddhists but also by the Christian mission workers. Today, as we enter into a more pleasing situation where both the parties are open towards each other in comparison to the past, these kinds of harmful attitudes must end by both parties.

While keeping in mind our respective missiological agenda, we need to change our perception towards each other as suggested by Khai, both parties must perceive “one another as co-pilgrims who seek together ultimate reality in one way or the other.”³⁴⁷ The representatives in dialogue must perceive one another as being obedient to their respective commission. With this pure motive, Burmese Buddhists may share the *Dhamma* to Christians and Christians may share the Good News to the Buddhists with respect. Our primary focus should be on how we can have a wholesome dialogue where both parties can have an exchange of ideas, beliefs, doctrines, and religious traditions by

³⁴⁶ Nanamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*, 261.

³⁴⁷ Khai, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue - a Way toward Peaceful Co-Existence in Myanmar*, 237.

setting aside our past missiological strategy while we are still faithful to our respective commissions.

Dialogue through Contextualization

Despite the soteriological divergences, we have discussed how we can connect our doctrinal teachings in the light of Theravada traditions with emphasis on a dialogical approach. Now, under this topic, I would like to bring a dialogical approach by contextualizing in the field of missiology.

Theravada Buddhism stresses extremely on liberation as a self-deliverance. One is responsible for his or her liberation. There is no concept about a kind of substitute who will fulfill the requirements on behalf of someone else's liberation. Rather, as Kärkkäinen supposed, the suffering of a Savior on behalf of humanity would appear to the Buddhists as one bearing one's *kamma* to suffer in that way. Likewise, to believe in someone's suffering as a means of paying one's *kamma* or sin might appear as trying to escape from the responsibility of bearing one's own *kamma*.³⁴⁸ If so, the question is how then can we relate the saving work of Jesus Christ and His suffering for all humanity in our missiological exchange of dialogue with them. Throughout the years, from the time of the Bible, God communicates His heart in the context of humans to let humans understand the message. Likewise, in the field of Christian mission, human context and experiences are God's preparation through which the Gospel message may be communicated and made understandable to the receivers.

³⁴⁸ Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation*, 394.

Karkkainen says,

the task of the proclamation of Christ on Asian soil is not one of conversion but of growing with Asians in their knowledge and experience of God's saving work in the world. The contribution of Christian missions is to inform the Asian spirituality shaped by Asian cultures and religions of the love of God in Jesus Christ. This helps to move Asian society toward freedom, justice, and love.³⁴⁹

Also, Song, in his article confidently says, "Asian Christians are an integral part of the Asian humanity longing for liberation from physical and spiritual sufferings. Surely there must be a direct relationship between their sufferings and God's suffering in Jesus Christ."³⁵⁰ He further says that "Asian theologians must reflect on the mission of God in Asia today, what He is to Asian masses, and what He is doing with the poverty and suffering which constantly keeps Asia in its grip."³⁵¹ In this light, I would like to bring again what Karkkainen says:

In addition to the idea of emptiness, what draws Asians to Christ and his cross is the theme of suffering. According to the analysis of Buddha, the elimination of dukkha, suffering is the focus of religion and ethics. What is distinctive about Christ's suffering for Asians is not the idea of vicarious suffering, explicated in classical theology, but the suffering of Christ with human as a fellow sufferer. In Christ, God loves his people so much that God suffers with them and dies with them.³⁵²

With the supports of these sayings by theologians in mind, I believe that the Saffron Revolution in 2007 will be a significant historical event where we can contextualize the Gospel message in our dialogue with Burmese Buddhists. Indeed, there

³⁴⁹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 272.

³⁵⁰ Choan-Seng Song, "From Israel to Asia: A Theological Leap," *Ecumenical Review* 28, no. 3 (1976): 258, <https://doi/abs/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1976.tb03210.x>.

³⁵¹ Song, "From Israel to Asia," 264.

³⁵² Kärkkäinen, *Christology*, 273.

can be several historical events where we can contextualize our message. For instance, the work of Boyoke Aung San in bringing independence to the whole country and people of Myanmar which impact is still enjoyed by the people. Nevertheless, I would only focus on the one incident, the popular Saffron Revolution which happened only a decade ago when I was in high school during that time. Not only Burmese Buddhists but also Christians in Myanmar cannot stop admiring the sacrifice of thousands of Buddhist monks on behalf of the people. In September 2007, to liberate the people from the merciless military government, thousands of monks followed by the mass chanted about the universal loving-kindness (*Mett-Sutta*) as they marched throughout the highways of Yangon. The monks showed the highest virtues of loving-kindness and self-sacrificial love as they stood up and raised their voices for the wellbeing of the oppressed and marginalized.³⁵³ They were beaten and some even to death. This act of the Burmese monks can play a symbolic act of solidarity alongside the work of Christ on behalf of humanity. Indeed, suffering (*dukkha*) is perceived negatively in the teaching of Buddhism. Therefore, mere presentations of the suffering of Christ on the cross may appear to Burmese Buddhists as a kind of bearing his own *kamma* or it may even appear as foolishness to them as Paul says. Nevertheless, in our dialogue, if we can contextualize the message of the Gospel in relation to this historical event, it can be a tool to make our message meaningful to them. As Khawsiamia commented on this event, “God is revealed in the midst of the Ludu’s *dukkha* as we see in the history of Myanmar.”³⁵⁴ The Gospel

³⁵³ Ingrid Jordt, “Turning over the Bowl in Burma,” *Religion in the News* 10, no. 3 (2008): 18–19, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost.

³⁵⁴ K M Y Khawsiamia, “Towards a Theology of *Dukkha*: A Christian-Buddhist View on the Suffering of Ludu in Myanmar,” *The Asia Journal of Theology* 26, no. 2 (2012): 122–23. A Burmese term *Ludu* is a political term that refers to the common people in Myanmar, the oppressed, alienated and

message is never out of context. Indeed, I believe I will not be wrong to say that God has been working in the history of Myanmar in every situation, preparing things to bring good and fulfill his purpose through them.

marginalized. The term does not include the elite, the ruling military group and their supporter. It carries a meaning “the people, or the masses,” used to refer to the suffering people in Myanmar under the military rule.

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 BURMESE - speak fluently and read/write with high proficiency

ENGLISH– read and write with competence