

POSITIVENESS IN THE LOTUS SŪTRA

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His Holiness Pope John Paul II, in his recent book *Varcare la soglia della Speranza*,¹ considers (I) that Buddhism is only a *negative soteriology*; (II) that the Buddha's Enlightenment is nothing else than the *conviction of the world being evil and a source of suffering*; (III) that, for Buddhism, the way to free oneself from suffering, i.e. from the evil that has its origin in the world, are *detachment* from the world and, as an effect of detachment, *indifference* in regard to the world; (IV) that of course Buddhism cannot admit that liberation comes from God, who represents the good, since Buddhism does not accept the existence of God; (V) that salvation, *Nirvāṇa*, is nothing else than *indifference to the world*, and (VI) that this is the culmination of the spiritual process.

On reading this text I had the idea to study whether the *Lotus Sūtra* teaches a *negative soteriology* or not. This study led me to examine the other assertions contained in the text. This have I done with due respect for the author of the book, without any polemical intention, and only with the desire to clarify the issues raised by the text I am commenting. I think these assertions are worthy to be elucidated by persons who study Buddhism, and specially by those who consider it not only as a collection of texts with a mere linguistic interest, but also as a treasure of thought and feeling, that has guided the life of many millions of human beings during many centuries, that has produced marvelous works of intelligence and beauty, that has propounded a way of life that inspires admiration and respect, and that presents as its founder a man of extraordinary personality.

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I. *Is Buddhism a negative soteriology?*

1. This question should be approached from two points of view: from the point of view of Early and “Hīnayāna” Buddhism, the first stage in the history of Buddhism, and from the point of view of Mahāyāna Buddhism, its last stage.

2. Early and “Hīnayāna” Buddhism on one side preached a kind of moral conduct in this life which emphasized non-violence, compassion, peace and personal development, and on the other side offered *Nirvāṇa* / *Nibbāna*, extinction of existence always conceived under the form of reincarnations, as the supreme goal, to whose attainment all human efforts should be directed. This message had a broad range of acceptance and a powerful attraction; it was accepted by millions of persons who converted to it and have lived with this faith for many centuries until our days, in India where it originated, and in Sri Laṅka and in South East Asia where it was propagated. Considering its great acceptance, it is difficult to admit that the Buddhist message of Early and Hīnayāna Buddhism was felt as something negative. *Prima facie* we must think that it was not taken for a negative message.

To appreciate in a correct way the attraction that *Nirvāṇa* conceived as extinction could offer to Indians, it is necessary to see it from the perspective of Indian culture, which believed that man is enchained to an eternal and painful transmigration. To get free from it was something to be desired as it was the only way to put an end to recurrent pain and suffering. Any teaching which offered a path for deliverance from transmigration, as the Buddhist did, could be looked upon as something positive, to be well received and adhered to. The exalting terms applied to *Nirvāṇa* like *sānti* / *sānti* (tranquillity), *śiva* / *siva* (auspiciousness), *sukha* (happiness),² and the *Theragāthās* and *Therīgāthās*, where monks and nuns express their joy because they are certain that they are ready for entering *Nirvāṇa*, give us an idea of the positive feeling that the notion of *Nirvāṇa* awoke in them.

3. Mahāyāna Buddhism preached also a noble ethic message, in which compassion occupied the central place. Supreme Perfect Enlightenment was the great goal it offered. With Mahāyāna, Buddhism was transformed from a religion aiming at *Nirvāṇa* into a religion aiming at Enlightenment.

Buddhism in its Mahāyānist form from India reached China, Tibet, Mongolia, Korea, Japan and in these regions, as it had happened in Sri Lanka and South East Asia, Buddhism was also accepted by millions of persons who converted to it and have maintained their Buddhist faith for many centuries until now. The great acceptance Buddhism enjoyed in these regions is also proved by the great number of translations of Buddhist texts done in China and Tibet during several centuries and the huge amount of manuscripts and printed copies of these texts and of their translations that have been found there. Thus we must think *prima facie* here also that the spread of Mahāyāna Buddhism in North Asia can only be explained if we accept that it was not considered as a negative message.

4. We shall examine a Mahāyānist text which was and is very much appreciated in Buddhist countries and which is the object of great veneration by Buddhist people, in order to find whether its salvific message is to be described either as negative or as positive and capable by its nature of attracting the adherence of people to which it is transmitted. This text is the *Lotus Sūtra (Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra)* as edited by Kern-Nanjio.

5. The *Lotus Sūtra* preaches a generous universalistic message. All people will reach Supreme Perfect Enlightenment (*anuttarasamyaksambodhi*), the highest form of Intelligence, Knowledge, Consciousness; all people will thus become Buddhas, will be omniscient, will obtain the supreme degree of spiritual development. This destiny is open to everybody. In the *Lotus Sūtra*, the Buddha predicts the Supreme Perfect Enlightenment to His old disciples who adhered to the overcome

forms of Buddhism, to millions of new disciples, to women and even to Devadatta, who attempted against His life.

To attain this goal is not an easy task.³ To obtain the Supreme Perfect Enlightenment one has to become a Bodhisattva, “a being who aspires to Enlightenment”, and as such has to submit himself to a strict discipline. This discipline is called *Bodhisattvacaryā*: “Bodhisattvas’ course of conduct”. If one decides to follow this course of conduct, one must first of all take the vow (*praṇidhāna*) to attain Enlightenment, making it the sole aim of all his efforts, of all his wishes, of all his actions. Consequently one must realize in himself the *Pāramitās* or Perfections of several moral virtues, carrying them to their supreme degree; one must respectfully serve the Buddhas he encounters and hear their Teachings; one must plant roots of merit (*kuśalamūla*); one must study and master the Doctrine (*Dharma*). A human existence is not enough to attain the lofty goal of the Supreme Perfect Enlightenment; innumerable reincarnations, innumerable lives are necessary to progress in the Bodhisattvas’ course of action and to get nearer to the desired aim, accumulating moral merits and knowledge. If man perseveres and exerts himself with unflinching constancy, after an infinitely long chain of reincarnations he will get the experience of the Supreme Perfect Enlightenment.

Once he attains the Supreme Perfect Enlightenment, the Bodhisattva becomes a Buddha, a Tathāgata. He will exist in a Buddha-world. All the Buddha-worlds are magnificent paradises, with level ground, full of flowers, jewels, gold; all in them is beauty, happiness, glory. Nothing in these worlds is ugly or disagreeable or painful. The new Tathāgata in his Buddha-world will be accompanied by millions of Bodhisattvas and Disciples, who will venerate him, follow him, hear his teachings. And during infinite millions of years, being in full possession of the most excellent virtues and qualities, he will preach the Doctrine to innumerable communities of beings, leading them towards Enlightenment.⁴

After an infinite existence of bliss, during which he deploys an intense compassionate activity, on the moment he chooses, with full consciousness and freedom, the Tathāgata will enter into Nirvāṇa, will extinguish himself.⁵

It is not just to affirm that this message is a negative one. On the contrary it could be thought that few religious Masters discovered and offered to their followers a more magnificent destiny, more in harmony with deep human aspirations.

6. In accordance with the positiveness of its message, the world of the *Lotus Sūtra* is not gloomy at all. On the contrary, in general, it is full of light, color and beauty. Let us mention:

- the miracles of the rays of light emitted from Shākyamuni's and Candrasūryapradīpa's foreheads which illuminate the whole universe and reveal all that exists in them (Chapter I, p. 6, line 6 and *passim* for Śākyamuni, and p. 20, lines 8 – 9 and *passim* for Candrasūryapradīpa. See also Chapter VII, p. 263, line 5 – p. 264, line 2);

- the marvelous and colorful Buddha-worlds (as for instance Chapter III, p. 65, lines 8 – 11, the Buddha-world Viraja; Chapter VIII, p. 202, line 1 – p. 203 line 2, the Buddha-world Suvisuddha);

- the divine flowers that rain from the space (as for instance Chapter I, p. 5, line 11 – p. 6, line 1; p. 20, lines 1 – 3);

- the millions of lotuses that are offered to the Buddha by Bodhisattva Gadgadasvara with golden stalks and silver leaves and splendid colors (Chapter XXIII, p. 426, lines 11 – 12);

- the rich thrones of the Buddhas (as for instance Chapter XI, p. 245, lines 3 – 5);

- the lavishly decorated *stūpas* and *vihāras* (as for instance Chapter I, verse 38 and verses 44 - 47; Chapter XI, p. 239, line 1 – p. 240, line 4, the *stūpa* of Prabhūtaratna);

- the valuable jewels offered as a mark of respect and veneration (as for instance Chapter XI, p. 264, lines 14 – 16; Chapter XXIII, p. 428, line 12 – p. 429, line 1);

- the embellishing canopies and garlands, bells, banners, etc. (as for instance Chapter I, verse 17; Chapter XI, p. 239, line 1 – p. 240 line 2; p. 243, lines 3-7; Chapter XX, p. 390, lines 1 – 10);

- the profusion of precious stones mentioned *passim* (as for instance Chapter XI, pp. 239-240);

- the delicious perfumes and incenses (as for instance Chapter XI, p. 260, line 3);

- the splendid carriages of the Gods (Chapter VII *passim*).

They all contribute to the splendour of the scenery in which the preaching of Lord Buddha takes place.

7. In the *Sūtra* predominate the positive feelings of optimism and happiness, the desire to collaborate and help, the positive attitudes:

- the Bodhisattvas and Disciples contemplate the Buddha in meditation or predicting the Supreme Perfect Enlightenment to his followers, with veneration, with eyes fixed in their Master, blooming with admiration and joy (Chapter I, p. 6, lines 2 – 5);

- the Bodhisattvas, whom the ray of light emitted by Shākyamuni shows in the infinite number of universes, eagerly practice the virtues prescribed by the Buddhist Discipline (Chapter I, verses 13 – 40);

- Śāriputra (Chapter III, p. 60), Subhūti, Mahākātyāyana, Mahākāśyapa, Mahāmaudgalyāyana (Chapter IV, p. 100), Pūrṇa (Chapter VIII, p. 199) manifest their joy and admiration after hearing the Buddha's message;

- all the Bodhisattvas and Disciples that gather in the Assembly, after hearing the Buddha's words, are sure that they will attain the supreme goal of Enlightenment, they are sure that this is their preeminent and auspicious

destiny. They cannot doubt, since the Buddha has declared that all human beings will become Buddhas (Chapter I, verse 82; Chapter II, verse 145) and has predicted to many of his Disciples, in an individual way, their future Enlightenment (as for instance Chapter III, p. 65: Śāriputra; Chapter VI: Kāśyapa and other Great Disciples; Chapter VIII, p. 201: Pūrṇa; Chapter X, p. 224: all who revere the *Lotus Sūtra* ;

- monks, Disciples, Bodhisattvas express their decision to preach the *Lotus Sūtra* overcoming all the difficulties they may face (Chapter XII, pp. 267 – 268; Chapter XIV, p. 297);

- the Bodhisattvas, the Great Kings Vaiśravaṇa and Virūḍhaka and even the Rākṣasīs grant *dhāraṇīs* to the Preachers of the Dharma for their protection and guard (Chapter XXI);

- the Bodhisattvas express that they are ready to patiently tolerate insults, affronts, abuses, attacks from the ignorant and from the false Bhikṣus, while preaching the *Lotus Sūtra* (as for instance Chapter XII, verses 2 – 21);

- Gods, Bodhisattvas, Disciples, deliver hymns of praise in honour of the Buddhas, eulogies referring to their virtues, powers, accomplishments, teachings (as for instance Chapter VII *passim*).

8. The great majority of the names of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, of the Buddha-worlds, of their *kalpas* are brilliant epithet-like names similar to those that are so frequent in the Indian epics, in the Homeric poems, in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Many of these names express that their possessor is preeminent in some particular Buddhist virtue or praiseworthy quality, like Nityodyukta, Pradānaśura Mahāsthāmaprāpta, Mahāpratibhāna. Some of them are laudatory names, whose function is merely to extol and glorify the personality of the bearer of the name in a metaphorical way, like Candrasūryapradīpa, Nakṣatrarāja, Ratnacandra, Ratnaprabha, Padmaśrī. These names constitute also a positive element of the *Sūtra*.⁶

9. In the *Sūtra* are found a good number of stories, that could be considered as parables. A common trait of them all is that they have a “happy end”. The old father saves his sons from the burning house (Chapter III); the physician restores to health his sons that are ill (Chapter XV); the rich father recovers the son that had abandoned the paternal house (Chapter IV); the leader of the caravan, overcoming the dangers of the forest, saves the merchants and guides them to success (Chapter VII); the blind man gets his vision restored and can enjoy looking at the diversity of the world (Chapter V).

10. Another element, which enhances the impression of positiveness created by the already mentioned elements, is the imposing grandeur of the reality where occurs all that is referred to or is described in the *Lotus Sūtra*: a reality composed of an infinite number of worlds, located in an infinite space, inhabited by numberless millions of beings,⁷ and which has had no beginning in time (*anādi*). (Cf. for instance Chapter XV, p. 317, lines 5 – 9).

11. The assemblies that surround Shākyamuni partake of this imposing grandeur. They are composed of innumerable beings, Gods, human beings, Bodhisattvas, Disciples, extraordinary non human beings as *yakṣas*, *gandharvas*, *asuras* etc., united and identified in their veneration and admiration for the Buddha, which they express by their attitudes and gestures (for instance Chapter I, pp. 1-6; Chapter XI *passim*).

The nature of the message of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the reality where it was delivered and the form how it was delivered make it difficult to declare that it is a *negative* salvific message.

II. *Is Enlightenment only the conviction that the world is evil and a source of suffering?*

Enlightenment (*bodhi*) according to Buddhism is an extraordinary experience, beyond speech and reason, where verbalization and

conceptualization have no entrance, and where it is believed that one attains a *sui generis* knowledge, that cannot be attained in another different situation. After the experience has ceased, the person, who had that experience, is able, resorting to a verbalizing and conceptualizing process, to inform about the knowledge he has obtained.

It can be said that the knowledge, reached at in the course of the Buddhist Enlightenment experience, is a knowledge that, even before the experience, one *already* possessed, and that one had obtained thanks to personal reflexion or reasoning, thanks to tradition or thanks to the teachings of some Master. Anyhow, the Enlightenment experience confirms, in the enlightened person, the knowledge he already possessed. This remark is also valid for the Enlightenment in any other religion.

1. First of all let us say that to attain Enlightenment (*bodhi*) according to Buddhism is not an easy task. To attain it requires the firm decision to dedicate all one's efforts and energy to that purpose. And this exertion must be maintained during an infinite number of reincarnations. In each one of them one has to acquire, practice and lead to perfection many virtues, venerate innumerable Buddhas, hear their preaching and follow their example; one has also to submit to a strict intellectual discipline in order to acquire the Buddhist teachings, centered around the knowledge of the true nature of reality, and one must master the meditation technic systematized by Yoga. Thus one prepares oneself to the Enlightenment experience.

The Buddha prepared Himself for such an experience and, in a memorable night, according to the whole of the Buddhist traditions, expressed in numerous texts, He obtained the *bodhi*.

2. Which knowledge did the Buddha obtain in His *bodhi* experience? He perceived the Four Noble Truths (cf. *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V [for the pāli texts I quote the PTS edition], p.420 (*Dhammacakkappavattanasutta*): 1. the Noble Truth about Suffering (*dukkha*), 2. the Noble Truth about its

Origin (*dukkha-samudaya*), 3. the Noble Truth about its Cessation (*dukkha-nirodha*) and 4. the Noble Truth about the Eightfold Path that leads to cessation (*aṭṭhaṅgikā dukkha-nirodhagāminī paṭipadā*). Each of these Four Noble Truths covers a very complex set of truths, principles, laws, norms, rules, etc.⁸ The totality of the truths, etc., that constitute each of these sets, is nothing else than the Buddha's Doctrine.

Buddha perceived the Doctrine of the Four Noble Truths *tota et simul* in its complete fullness and astonishing richness. The Masters that came after Him in the following centuries gradually unfolded, unveiled, disclosed all the contents of Buddha supreme intuition.

3. The First Noble Truth asserts that man is subject to suffering which adopts manifold forms: birth, old age, sickness, death, to be with what one dislikes (*appiya*), to be separated from what one likes (*piya*), not to get what one wants – all this are human experiences imposed on us by our human nature and all this is cause of suffering. The words *piya* and *appiya* cover persons, things, ways of life, experiences, etc., that one cherishes or that one abhors, that produce positive feelings or that produce negative feelings, the bright or the dark aspects of life. All these forms of suffering are *dhammas* / *dharmas* (factors, elements, constituents of existence) or *saṅkhāras* / *saṃskāras* (aggregates of *dharmas*). And *dhammas* / *dharmas* and *saṅkhāras* / *saṃskāras* – all things – are impermanent (*anicca* / *anitya*), painful (*dukkha* / *duḥkha*) and without an own self (*anatta* / *anātman*). See *Majjhima-Nikāya* I, p.435 (*Mahāmālunkyasutta*); *Dhammapāda* 277-279; *Aṅuttara Nikāya* I, p.286 (*Uppādāsutta*); *Samyutta Nikāya* III, p.21 (*Aniccāsutta*, *Dukkhasutta* and *Anattasutta*), pp.66-68 (*Anattalakkhaṇasutta*), etc. Suffering is inherent in every thing that compose our reality; it is a part of its nature.

4. The Second Noble Truth points out the cause of suffering: desire (*taṇhā*). The principle that underlies this assertion is that everything that

exists has a cause (*imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti imass' uppādā idam uppajjati*) (*Udāna*, p. 1). A strict determinism reigns in our reality; nothing is left to chance or hazard; nothing can be produced if the adequate causes are not present. Upon this principle are built the great philosophical Buddhist systems: the *sūnyatā* philosophy and the *vijñānavāda* philosophy; this principle is the foundation of the negation of substance and the proclamation of phenomenalism that characterize Buddhism. Suffering as anything else has a cause. Its production is the effect of a chain of causes, the *paṭiccasamuppāda* / *pratītyasamutpāda*. See *Dīgha Nikāya* II, p.55 ff. (*Mahānidānasuttanta*); *Samyutta Nikāya* II, p.1 ff. (*Paṭiccasamuppādasutta*) and p.2 ff. (*Vibhaṅgasutta*); *Udāna*, pp.1-3; *Lalita Vistara*, Chapter XXII; *Śālistambasūtra*.

5. The Third Noble Truth deals with the end of *desire*, the elimination of *suffering*, the cessation of *reincarnations*, the suppression of *existence*, since existence is possible only under the form of reincarnations. The state in which all these facts are given is called *nibbāna* / *nīrvāṇa*, *nibbuti* / *nirvṛtti*, whose basic meaning is extinction. Cf. *Majjhima Nikāya* I, p.436 (*Mahāmālunīkya-sutta*) [*sabbasaṅkhārasamatho sabbūpadhipaṭinissaggo taṇhākkhayo virāgo nirodho nibbānan ti* = *Mahānidāna*, p.20, line 11; *Mahāvagga*, p.5, lines 2-4 (*Brahmayācanakathā*)]; *Samyutta Nikāya* I, p.88, verse 210 (*Saññojanasutta*) [*taṇhāya vipphānena nibbānam iti vuccati ti*]; II, p. 117, §§ 26-27 (*Kosambisutta*) [*bhavanirodho nibbānaṃ ti*], p.278 [*nibbānaṃ...sabbadukkhappamocanam*]; III, p.190, § 15 (*Sattasutta*) [*taṇhākkhayo hi Rādha nibbānam ti*]; *Aṅguttara Nikāya* V, p.9, § 3 (*Sāriputtasutta*) [*bhavanirodho nibbānaṃ bhavanirodho nibbānam*]; *Udāna* III, 10 [*bhavataṇhā pahīyati vibhavataṇhā 'bhinandati / sabbato taṇhānaṃ khayā asesavirāganīrodho nibbānaṃ / tassa nibbutassa bhikkhuno anupādā punabbhavo na hoti /*]; VIII, 1 [*atthi bhikkhave tad āyatanaṃ etc.*] and 3

[*atthi bhikkhave ajātam etc.*]; and also P. Oltramare, *op. cit.*, pp.441-460. In the preceding section on Buddhist soteriology paragraphs 2 and 5 we have referred to *Nirvāṇa* and its positiveness.

Nibbāna / *nirvāṇa* is an Absolute. It does not belong to our empirical reality, it is something completely different from all that exists in this reality, it is transcendent and heterogeneous, beyond words and reason. Cf. the celebrated *Udāna* VIII, 1-4.

6. The Fourth Noble Truth is the Eightfold Path that leads to suppression of suffering. It is a moral Path. It establishes the rules that must guide the actions of the persons that wish to get rid of suffering. The Eightfold Path is constituted by right views (*sammādiṭṭhi*), right intentions (*sammāsaṅkappa*), right speech (*sammāvācā*), right action (*sammākammanta*), right living (*sammājīva*), right effort (*sammāvāyāma*), right mindfulness (*sammāsati*) and right mental concentration (*sammāsamādhi*). Many texts of Hīnayānist and Mahāyānist inspiration contain numerous norms on moral conduct, that make more explicit the items of the Noble Eightfold Path. As examples of these texts we mention *Dīgha Nikāya* I, 1 (*Brahmajālasutta*), §§ 7-27; XXXI (*Siṅgālovādasuttanta*), *Dhammapāda*, *Udāna*, *Jātakas* of Hīnayānist inspiration, and *Ratnāvalī*, *Suḥṛllekha*, *Sūtrasamuccaya*, *Bodhisattvacaryā* of Śāntideva, *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and *Śrāvakabhūmi* of Asaṅga, etc. of Mahāyānist inspiration. On the basis of these texts it is possible to construct a Buddhist moral system characterized as a lofty, complete, subtle set of moral rules.⁹

7. The *Lotus Sūtra* in its Second Chapter refers to what the Buddhas have attained in their Enlightenment experience: the Supreme Omniscient Knowledge.

The Chapter starts expressing that the knowledge (*jñāna*) of the Buddhas is profound, difficult to be understood, difficult to be comprehended, difficult to be conceived by anybody except the Tathāgatas

(p.29, lines 2-3); it is immeasurable (verse 11). Even if all the most intelligent Disciples, if all the Śrāvakas, Pratyekabuddhas and Bodhisattvas came together and reflected on the Buddha's Knowledge, they could not comprehend that knowledge (verse 9).

The Buddhas have been able to get that knowledge because they have revered many millions of Buddhas, because they have followed the true Buddhist course of life under the discipline of many millions of Buddhas during many millions of Cosmic Periods, because they have advanced from afar towards the Supreme Perfect Enlightenment, displaying energy, possessed of admirable, wonderful qualities, possessed of qualities difficult to be conceived (p.29, lines 4-6). Thanks to their effort, energy, constancy during many millions of reincarnations they have succeeded, and they have attained the knowledge that is proper of the Buddhas and only of them and of nobody else.

This Buddha knowledge is the knowledge of Laws (*dharma*) difficult to be understood (*durvijñeya*, p.29, line 6), Laws that have their causes in themselves (*svapratyaya*, p.29, line 8). These laws are profound and subtle, they are beyond reasoning (*atarkika*, verse 18). And these Laws constitute the Doctrine of the Buddhas (p.30, lines 2-3, verse 15). Among these Laws the Sūtra mentions the Four Noble Truths (p.17, line 13, p.18, line 11, p.80, line 6); the Dependent Origination (p.17, line 14, p.18, line 11, p.179, line 4, p.376, line 6); the moral retribution of actions (*karman*) (p.9, verse 6, p.354, line 9); Voidness (p.101, line 1, p.117, verse 45 a-b, p. 136, line 13-p.137, line 2, p.138, verse 51, p. 139, verse 53 a-b, p.142, verses 75-77, pp.142-143, verses 79-83, p.234, line 10, p.236, verse 24 c-d, p.262, line 2), etc.

According to what has been expressed in the previous lines Enlightenment is something *hard to attain*, it grants *knowledge* and that

knowledge is knowledge of something much more precious and rich than the mere conviction that our world is bad and a source of suffering.

Is the world really evil, and a source of suffering?

1. The Buddha declares that the world is evil and a source of suffering and he points out the reasons for this affirmation.

In the *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta* (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* V, p. 420 ff., and *Vinaya I, Mahāvagga*, p. 10), his first sermon, he affirms that man is submitted to suffering. See in the preceding section on Enlightenment the paragraph 3.

2. It is also necessary to have in mind that, according to Buddhism, man is dominated by three *kilesas / kleśas* (moral impurities): *rāga*, *dosa / dveṣa* and *moha*. *Rāga* means desire: greed, covetousness, avarice, lubricity, gluttony; *dosa / dveṣa*, ill-will: aggressivity, dislike, hatred, malevolence, enmity, etc.; *moha*, error: not to see things *yathābhūtam* (as they are in reality), but as our emotions induce us to see them or as we are interested to see them or as it has been inculcated in us how to see them. These *kilesas / kleśas* generally bring about actions, attitudes, behaviours that always provoke suffering in others and often in the persons who fall victims of them.

3. Owing to the mentioned reasons, we live in a world of painful existence, the *Sahā* world. In Chapter III of the *Lotus Sūtra* there is the celebrated parable of the burning house, the sinister, ruinous and decaying dwelling of ferocious, cruel, aggressive, or suffering, hungry and destitute beings. The *Sahā* world is compared to that house (Chapter III, p. 77, line 4 – p. 78, line 5): it burns by a mass of suffering; beings living in it are subject to birth, old age, disease, death, grief, wailing, pain, dejectedness, mental disturbance, to the covering of the veil of blindness produced by the darkness and obscurity of ignorance; the Buddha appears in that world to

deliver beings from the impurities of *rāga*, *dosa* / *dveṣa* and *moha*; He sees beings burning tormented, vexed, distressed by birth, old age, disease, grief, wailing, pain, dejectedness, mental disturbance, for the sake of enjoyments and sensual pleasure they experience multifarious pains; owing to their desire to gain and keep in this life they experience diverse pains in their next life; they suffer poverty provoked by Gods and men, union with what they detest and separation from what they cherish.

It is because of His great compassion that the Buddha has chosen to appear in this Sahā world instead of some more fortunate Buddha-worlds. This is the central theme of the *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīkasūtra*.

4. Which person born in this XXth century could not agree with the Buddha's idea about our world and human condition? Our century has seen terrific events: world wars, local conflicts, cruel dictatorships, terrorism, genocides, racial, religious, political persecutions, huge communities submerged in poverty, fear, injustice, ignorance, which increase the suffering proper of human nature. There has been great technological and scientific progress not accompanied by moral progress: solidarity, compassion, benevolence are at a very low level. Many persons live in abundance and among pleasures in face of many more that suffer and are deprived of all hope and opportunities – who have neither present nor future.

It is difficult to declare that this world is good, unless one adopts the point of view of the happy few.

III. *The Buddhist salvific path*

The doctrine of the Four Noble Truths is the basic doctrine of Buddhism. The Fourth Noble Truth, the Eightfold Path that leads to the suppression of suffering, is the Buddhist system of Ethics. See the preceding section on Enlightenment, paragraph 6. What Buddhism intends to do with its remarkable system of Ethics, is to make man a moral being

who submits himself to a severe discipline of Ethics, in order to reach the Buddhist goal.

Detachment and indifference

1. The elimination of desire, considered as the cause of suffering, must necessarily produce a sentiment of detachment. Detachment means the weakening, limitation or elimination of greediness, covetousness, avarice, ambition, gluttony, inordinate desire of sexual pleasure, etc. that enchain man to worldly objects and submits him to them. Detachment on its turn gives rise to sentiments of serenity and of emotional and mental peace. The Buddhist detachment is basically similar to the stoic detachment (cf. W. Windelband, *Storia della Filosofia*, Milano: R. Sandron Editore, Vol. I, pp.213 ff.) or to the detachment arrived at by members of several Catholic religious orders. Of course, in Buddhism, detachment practiced by the monk is more complete and profound than the one practiced by lay people.

2. The case of indifference is not the same. Indifference means not having any emotional connection with other people's destiny, not worrying about what happens to them, not feeling any desire to reduce their misery or to increase their happiness, being without the consciousness of the ties that link human beings among themselves and give rise to duties of solidarity. We think that it cannot be said that Buddhism preached *indifference* to the world. Let us examine this question looking at some virtues taught by Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, that regulate one's own relation with other beings.

3. The three first Brahmavihāra are *mettā* (sanskrit cf. *mitra*): "love, amity, sympathy, friendliness, active interest in others" (*The Pali Text Society Pali English Dictionary*), *karuṇā*: "pity, compassion" (*ibidem*), and *muditā*: "soft-heartedness, kindness, sympathy" (*ibidem*). Buddhaghosa in his commentary on *Sutta Nipāta* I, p.128, taking as a criterion the well

known utterance of the Buddha: *sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā*: “may all beings be happy” (*Sutta Nipāta* 145) defines *mettā* as “the desire of bringing (to one’s fellow-men) what is good and agreeable” (*hitasukhūpanayanakāmatā*), *karuṇā* as “the desire of removing (from one’s fellow-men) what is bad and disagreeable” (*ahitadukkhāpanayanakāmatā*) and *muditā* as “the desire that there be no separation (of one’s fellow-men) from the good and agreeable (they have) (*hitasukhāvippayogakāmatā*). The Buddha in *Dīgha Nikāya* I, pp.250-251, §§ 76-78 (*Tevijjasutta*) expresses that a *bhikkhu* is possessed of moral discipline (*sīla*) when his mind pervades the whole world with a heart of love (*mettā*), of compassion (*karuṇā*), of sympathy (*muditā*), “great, very great, beyond measure, friendly, peaceful”.

4. Mahāyāna Buddhism praises *karuṇā* (compassion) in the highest terms. Har Dayal¹⁰ indicates the great importance that *karuṇā* has in Mahāyāna and the various forms it manifests itself (I quote him, giving in note the texts he adduces in each case in his notes): “No one word can convey an adequate idea of what *karuṇā* means. It is mentioned in an enormous number of passages in all the principal treatises.¹¹ It is perhaps the word that occurs most frequently in Mahāyānist literature. According to the Śata-sāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, a bodhisattva shows his *karuṇā* chiefly by resolving to suffer the torments and agonies of the dreadful purgatories during innumerable aeons, if need be, so that he may lead all beings to perfect Enlightenment.¹² He desires Enlightenment first for all beings and not for himself.¹³ He is consumed with grief on account of the sufferings of others, and does not care for his own happiness.¹⁴ He desires the good and welfare of the world.¹⁵ All his faults and sins are destroyed, when his heart is full of *karuṇā*.¹⁶ He loves all beings, as a mother loves her only child.¹⁷ This famous simile sums up a bodhisattva’s ideal of *karuṇā*. He loves all creatures more than he loves himself or his wife and children.¹⁸ He does not

*love his own children more than other children, as his love is the same for all.*¹⁹ *He is like a mother, a father, a relative, a friend, a slave and a teacher for all beings*²⁰.

In the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, p.4, lines 11-13 and 15-18 (ed. N. Dutt, Patna: K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1966) there is an important passage on this matter. The text indicates the duties of a true Bodhisattva: he collaborates in the accomplishment of meritorious actions done by others, giving them preference over actions that he is doing; he suffers with the suffering of others, when others are killed, imprisoned, wounded, menaced or insulted, either when he sees or he hears about that suffering; he helps other beings in the various tasks they have to perform, doing his best in order that persons for whom the task is done be satisfied and pleased.

The *karuṇā* is practiced and developed chiefly by *dāna* (giving, generosity, liberality), the first of the *pāramitās* (perfections) that the *bodhisattva* has to cultivate in itself to its foremost degree.

5. That the preoccupation for others' welfare, happiness, safety, salvation is a duty of the Buddhist is clearly shown in several chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra* which describe as a model for beings the behaviour of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. For instance in Chapter I the Buddha emits a ray of light from His forehead; this ray illuminates the universe and shows the Buddhas fully dedicated to their task of helping people to reach a better destiny, revealing and preaching the salvific Dharma (verse 7) and announcing the calm extinction (*praśāntanirvṛti*) to people oppressed by suffering and distressed in their minds by birth and old age (verse 9). The Bodhisattvas on their turn practice the *dāna-pāramitā*, giving all their goods to needy persons and even generously sacrificing their own bodies and lives for other beings' sake (verses 14-19).

Chapter XXIV of the same Sūtra is consecrated to Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the most important and beloved Bodhisattva of the Mahāyāna. He is the incarnation of compassion (*karuṇā*), which he manifests in multifarious ways in his actions towards other beings and which many texts enjoy describing.²¹

Buddhists must be detached from worldly goods and free from worldly feelings in the degree allowed to them by their progress in the spiritual path and by their karmic history, but at the same time it is their duty to feel solidarity with their fellow men / women, to be always ready to help them and to procure them welfare and safety, avoiding to be indifferent to them.

IV. *God*

It is obvious that Buddhism cannot expect that salvation comes from God as Christianity thinks, since Buddhism is atheistic. It is not our task to discuss whether Christianity or Buddhism is right regarding the belief in God's existence; our task is only to establish if the opinion we are commenting agree or do not agree with the Buddhist texts and teachings.

V. *Is salvation, nibbāna / nirvāṇa, nothing else than indifference to the world?*

In the previous section on Enlightenment it has been said that salvation, *nibbāna / nirvāṇa*, is the elimination of suffering, the cessation of reincarnations, the suppression of existence, and that it is conceived as transcendent and heterogeneous, as an Absolute. It is not solely an attitude of indifference to the world; it is a richer and more complex notion. Moreover it is necessary to take into account that indifference to the world is not a Buddhist teaching.

VI. *Is the culmination of the Buddhist
spiritual process nothing else than
indifference to the world?*

The culmination of the Buddhist spiritual process is, from a Hīnayānist perspective, the Ar(a)hantship (*arahatta / arhattva*) or condition of an *ar(a)hant* and, from a Mahāyānist perspective, the Buddhahood (*buddhatā / buddhatva*) or condition of a Buddha.

1. An *ar(a)hant* is a man who has arrived to the highest degree of spiritual perfection. He has reached the end of the Noble Eightfold Path realizing in himself the ideals of right views, right intentions, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness and right mental concentration i.e. realizing in himself the most complete ideal of the morally perfect man. He is described as possessing lofty moral qualities. The *ar(a)hant* obtains the *bodhi*, becomes a Buddha, and is ready to enter in *nirvāṇa*, but in the most ancient Buddhist texts the arhantship is more emphasized as the final attainment of the *ar(a)hant* than the condition of a Buddha that he also obtains. The arhantship is the last stage of the Hīnayānist spiritual course of action, attained by means of a strenuous and long effort. Cf. on the *arahant* for instance *Dīgha Nikāya* I, p.177 (Kassapa Sihanāda Sutta), III, p.97, § 31 (Aggañña Suttanta), *Dhammapada*, Chapter VII; *Lotus Sūtra*, p. 1, *Avadānaśataka* N° 17, p.96, lines 4-9, ed. J.S. Speyer (formula repeated many times, as for instance pp.207, lines 9-14, 262, lines 8-13, 284, line 12 - 285, line 4), and also P. Oltramare quoted in section on Enlightenment § 5, pp.336-337 and pp.376-379; T.W. Rhys Davids, "Arhat", in J. Hastings (Editor), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (quoted in note 9), Vol. I, pp.774-775, and the article "Arahant" by W.G.W. and others, in *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, quoted in note 3, Vol. II, Fascicle 1, pp.41-54.

2. We have already referred in the previous section on Enlightenment to the richness of contents of the *bodhi* experience which

transforms a being into a Buddha. The texts quoted in that section reveal the broad knowledge the Buddha got on having that experience.

3. One passage, that is repeated several times in the *Avadanaśataka* as for instance pp.16, line 9 - 17 line 4, 30, line 7 - 31 line 4, 72, lines 3-14, 78, line 13-79, line 10, etc.), enumerates some of the virtues and accomplishments of the Buddhas:

- their omniscience (*nāsti kiñcid buddhānāṃ bhagavatām ajñātam adṛṣṭam aviditam avijñātam*);

- they are full of compassion (*mahākāruṇikānām*) and kindness for the world (*lokānugrahapravṛttakānām*);

- they have a single protector (mindfulness) (*ekārakṣānām*);

- they possess tranquillity and insight (*śamathaviśāyanāvihāriṇām*);

- they are skilled in the three-fold self-control [of thoughts, words and acts] (*tridamathavastukuśalānām*);

- they have traversed the four floods [of desire (*kāma*), existence (*bhava*), ignorance (*avidyā*), wrong views (*dṛṣṭi*)] (*caturoghottīrṇānām*);

- they are well established on the ground of the four bases of supernatural powers necessary for gaining proficiency in meditation [desire (*chanda*), energy (*vīrya*), (composed) mind (*citta*), inquiry (*mīmāṃsā*) based on correct knowledge, all directed towards the mastery of meditation] (*caturddhipādacaraṇatalasupraṭiṣṭhānām*);

- they have practiced during long time the four items of attraction or means by which a Buddha attracts creatures leading them to a moral form of life [and which are liberality (*dāna*), affability (*priyavacana*), action for the benefit of others (*arthakriyā*) and having the same joys and sorrows with others i.e. sympathy] (*samānasukhaduḥkhatā*)] (*caturṣu saṃgrahavastuṣu dīrgharātrakṛtaparicayānām*);

- they have given up the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) [i.e. desire for lusts (*kāmacchanda*), malice (*vyāpāda*), torpor and drowsiness (*styāna-*

middha), flurry and worry (*auddhatya-kaukr̥tya*), doubt (*vicikitsā*) [*pañcāṅgaviprahīṇānām*];

- they have gone beyond the five *gatis* or forms of existence [as god, as man, as animal, as ghost, as infernal beings] [*pañcagatisamatikrāntānām*];

- they possess a sixfold attitude of indifference to the objects of each of the six senses (*ṣaḍaṅgasamanvāgatānām*);

- they have fully realized the six Perfections (*Pāramitā*) [giving, generosity, liberality (*dāna*), morality (*sīla*), forbearance or patience (*kṣānti*), energy (*vīrya*), mental concentration (*dhyāna*) and wisdom (*prajñā*)] [*ṣaḍpāramitāparipūrṇānām*];

- they are richly endowed with the seven “flowers” of Enlightenment [which are mindfulness (*smṛti*), investigation of the Dharma (*dharmapracicaya*), energy (*vīrya*), happiness (*prīti*), calmness (*praśabdhi*), concentration of mind (*samādhi*), equanimity (*upekṣā*)] [*saptabodhyaṅgakusumādhyānām*];

- they teach the Eightfold Path (*aṣṭāṅgamārgadeśikānām*);

- they are skilled in the nine successive states or stages of mental concentration [which are the four concentrations of mind described in *Dīgha Nikāya* I, pp.73-76, §§ 75-82 (*Samaññaphalasutta*), the four concentrations of mind and the total *nirodha* described in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* IV, pp.412-414 (*Anupubbavīhārasutta* and *Anupubbavīhārasamāpattisutta*)] [*navānupūrvavīhārasamāpattikuśalānām*];

- they possess the ten powers [of distinguishing right from wrong (*sthānāsthānajñānabala*), of knowing the consequences of actions (*karmavipākā*^o), the different dispositions (of men) (*nānādhimuktī*^o), the different elements (*nānādhātu*^o), the degree of the mental powers (of men) (*indriyavarāvara*^o), the course of conduct that leads everywhere (*sarvatragaminīpratipadā*^o), all the meditations, liberations, concentrations of mind, *samāpattis* and the rising up and the elimination of impurities

(*sarvadyānavimokṣasamādhisamāpattisaṃkleśavyavadānavyutthāna^o*), of remembering former abodes (in the reincarnations' series) (*pūrvanivāsānusmṛt^o*) and of knowing the fall (from one existence) and the rebirth (in another) (of all men) (*cyutyutpatti^o*)];

- they enjoy a complete glory in the ten directions of space (*daśadīksamāpūrṇayaśasām*);

- they are the (most) eminent among ten hundred all-powerful persons (*daśaśatavaśavartiprativiśiṣṭānām*);

- they have obtained the knowledge very soon after their birth, looking at the world with their Buddha's eye (*trīrātres trīrdīvasasya buddhacakṣusā lokaṃ vyavalokya jñānadarśanaṃ pravartate*).

The passage ends pointing out the preoccupation of the Buddha for the woes of the suffering beings and His desire to help them: "Who is deficient (*hīyate*)? Who succeeds (*vardhate*)? Who is affected by pain (*kr̥cchraprāpta*)? Who is affected by difficulties (*saṃkaṭaprāpta*)? Who is affected by distress (*saṃbādhaprāpta*)? Who is affected by pain, difficulties, distress? Who is sinking into an evil state of existence (*apāyanimna*)? Who is propense to an evil state of existence (*apāyapraṇa*)? Who is inclined towards an evil state of existence (*apāyaprāgbhāra*)? Whom shall I rescue from an evil state of existence and establish in heaven (*svarga*) and in Liberation (*mokṣa*)? To whom fallen into the mire of desire shall I give my hand to deliver him? Whom deprived of the Treasure (*dhāna*) of the Nobles (*ārya*: the Buddhists) shall I establish in the Treasure, the Sovereignty and the Overlordship of the Nobles? Of which being, whose eye is covered by the mass of darkness of ignorance, shall I purify the vision? Whose roots of merit, not yet planted, shall I plant? whose roots of merit, already planted, shall I bring to maturity? Whose roots of merit, fully developed, shall I bring to Deliverance?"

Such are the Buddhas and such are their attainments, accomplishments, and attributes. And all that is truly *the culmination of the*

Buddhist spiritual progress which they incarnate, and not merely the conviction that world is evil.

NOTES

1 Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1994 (Spanish edition: *Cruzando el umbral de la Esperanza*, Barcelona: Plaza y Janés Editores, 1994, p.100).

2 Cf. P. Oltramare, *L'Histoire des idées théosophiques dans l'Inde, La Théosophie bouddhique*, Paris: P. Geuthner, 1923, pp.450-453.

3 Basic texts on the *Bodhisattvacaryā* are Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and Asaṅga's *Bodhisattvabhūmi*. Cf. Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975; L. de la Vallée Poussin, "Bodhisattva", in J. Hastings (Editor), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1964, Vol. II, pp.739-753; A.G.S.K. "Bodhisattva", in G.P. Malalasekera (Editor), *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, Vol. III, Fascicle 2, Ceylon: Government Press, 1972, pp.224-233.

4 On the Buddha-worlds see next paragraph 6; on the existence of a Tathāgata in a Buddha world see the story of Candrasūryapradīpa in Chapter I of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

5 The entrance in the *nirvāṇadhātu* of the Tathāgata is always very briefly described. Candrasūryapradīpa's *parinirvāṇa* is referred to in two lines: *atha khalvajita sa bhagavāṃś Candrasūryapradīpas tathāgato 'rhan samyaksambuddhas tasyām eva rātryāṃ madhyame yāme 'nupadhiśeṣe nirvāṇadhātau parinirvṛtaḥ* (I, p.21, lines 15-16).

6 Cf. F. Tola and C. Dragonetti, “On the names of Bhikṣus and Bodhisattvas in the *Lotus Sūtra*”, in *Hokke Bunka Kenkyu* N° 24, March 1998, pp.95-123.

7 The conception of reality of the *Lotus Sūtra* is the standard Buddhist conception. See F. Tola and C. Dragonetti, “Buddhist Conception of Reality”, in *Journal of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, Vol. XIV, N° 1, 1996, pp.35-64.

8 See É. Lamotte, *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien, Des origines à l'Ère Śāka*, Louvain: Institut Orientaliste, 1958, pp.29-52, where he briefly explains “*le sens et la portée de ces quatre vérités*”.

9 On Buddhist Ethics see: A.G.S.K., “Bodhisattva”, cf. note 3; M. Anesaki, “Ethics and Morality (Buddhist)”, in J. Hastings (Editor), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. V, pp.447-455; L. de la Vallée Poussin, “Bodhisattva”, cf. note 3; R. Spence Hardy, *Manual of Buddhism in its Modern Development*, Varanasi: Chowkhamba, 1967, Chapter 10, reprint of the edition of London, 1853. This work was praisefully commented by A. Weber, *Indische Streifen*, Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1983, reprint of the edition of 1869, volume II, pp.188-190; É. Lamotte, *op.cit.*, pp.73-82; H. Oldenberg, *Buddha, Sein Leben, Seine Lehre, Seine Gemeinde, Herausgegeben von Helmuth von Glasenapp*, München: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, 1961, pp.267-306; Bhikkhu Pāsādika, “Early Mahāyāna Lay Ethics in Nāgārjuna”, in *The Tibet Journal*, Vol. XXI, N° 1, 1996, pp.3-18; H. Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics, Essence of Buddhism*, London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1970; L. de la Vallée Poussin, *La morale bouddhique*, Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1927; and F. Tola and C.

Dragonetti, “El Budismo frente a la justificación de la violencia en la India Antigua”, in *Pensamiento* (Madrid), Vol. 55, Nº 211, 1999, pp.105-126.

10 Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975, pp.178-181.

11 *Lalita Vistara*, ed. S. Lefmann (1902-8), 352.11, 162.6, 180.6. *Mahāvastu*, ed. É. Senart (1882-97), I, 78.16; II, 340.22. *Jātaka-Mālā*, ed. H. Kern (1991), 41.1, 238.22, 2.18, etc. *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, ed. C. Bendall (1897-1902), 8.2, 232.10, 184.12, etc. *Daśa-bhūmikasūtra*, ed. J. Rahder (1926), 11.13, 13.13, 18.17, 19.8, 43.8, 42.12, 46.3, 47.23, 52.10, 52.14, 60.7, 63.24, 70.24, 71.2, 73.16, 78.19, 82.6, 88.12, 90.1, etc. *Śata-sāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, ed. P. Ghosa (1902-1913), 1455.8, 282.11, 1461.8, etc. *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṅkāra*, ed. S. Lévi (1907, 1911), 11.5, 14.3, 31.14, 33.22, 167.42, 84.24, 124.30, 167.39, 172.67, 174.74, etc. Kṣemendra, *Bodhisattvāvanakalpalatā*, ed. S.C. Das and H.M. Vidyābhūṣaṇa (1888), II, 57.42, 831.6, 909.1, etc.

12 *Śata-sāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, 1461.8 ff.

13 *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, 146.10.

14 *Jātaka-Mālā*, 41.1.

15 *Lalita Vistara*, 180.18.

16 Kṣemendra, *Bodhisattvāvanakalpalatā*, 1.1.

17 *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, ed. B. Nanjio (1923), 244.8. *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṅkāra*, 123.28. *Avadānaśataka*, ed. J.S. Speyer (1906, 1909), I, 184.12, I, 209.12. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, ed. H. Kern and B. Nanjio (1912), 136.4. *Lalita Vistara*, 280.7. *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, 287.9. Cf. *Sutta-nipāta*, 149-50 (p.26): *mātā yathā niyaṃ puttam*, etc.

18 *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṅkāra*, 161.6.

19 *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, 19.

20 *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṅkāra*, 162-4.

21 Cf. H.W. Haussig and others (edd.), *Götter und Mythen des indischen Subkontinents*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984, pp.322-326 with bibliography.