

THE GREAT CONTROVERSY IN THE BUDDHIST WORLD: A SUGGESTION FOR AN ADVENTIST APPROACH TOWARDS BUDDHISM¹

MARCUS B. WITZIG, M.DIV. CAND.

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, PHILIPPINES

The Buddhist temples of Bangkok, as well as many other public places and buildings, offer a diversity of religious symbols that open the door to the heart of Thai Buddhists. Buddha's victory over Mara (the evil force in Buddhism), Naga (a snake deity), Yaksha (a guard of the mountain of the gods), and the elephant give comfort to the common Buddhist that finds himself in the perpetual struggle between good and evil—as nicely displayed in the centerpiece of Thailand's new airport. However, he is left alone in the daily effort to fulfill good deeds. This study suggests that the unique Adventist focus upon the Great Controversy and its final resolution in Christ's sacrifice could, better than other doctrines, bridge the gap between the delivering gospel of Jesus, and the works-focused Buddhist believer.

Key Words: Theravada Buddhism, Adventist mission, Great Controversy, Buddhist temples, Buddhist symbols, contextualization

1. Introduction

It was in the newly constructed Suvarnabhumi Airport where I got my first impression of Thai (or Theravada) Buddhism.² I looked at the Yakshas, Na-

¹ The study was first presented at the *Eleventh International Theological Forum*, organized by the Theological Seminary at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Oct. 30–Nov 1, 2009, in Silang, Cavite, Philippines. The general focus of this *Forum* was dedicated to issues of contextualization. I would like to express my appreciation for the helpful comments received at that time as well as the observations of the two anonymous readers of the *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* international review board.

² Buddhism developed in a sixth century B.C. Indian setting under the leadership of Gautama Buddha. During that time, Hinduism was the predominant religion. Gautama Buddha, who also grew up in this context, tried to reform Hinduism and is therefore sometimes seen as a reformer, although it has to be differentiated from the protestant reformation. The goal was not to go “ad Fontes,” i.e., back to the roots, but to find a way to inner peace, to which the current practices were, at least in his sight, unable. Elements of Hinduism can therefore be easily found in Buddhist's figures, symbols, and ideas.

gas, Vishnus, and Buddhas with totally foreign eyes. It was a new worldview which seemed to flow against the mainstream evangelical Christianity. This made me realize that just as Buddhism is foreign to the Christian tourist or missionary, Christianity is unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable to the Buddhist believer who perceives this religion as a Western element that would by no means suit the Thai. Given the circumstances of a totally different religion and the preconceptions that come with the "package," it is no wonder that Christian, and more specifically Adventist, growth within such areas is very limited. This fact unveils the need for a contextualized missiological approach, capable of breaking existing barriers.

The display of Buddhist religion at Bangkok's main airport welcomes and introduces the tourist to the worldview of Buddhist believers. In a special way, the theme of the struggle is made remarkable through the airport's centerpiece—the Churning (or sea of milk). This 21m long artistic work displays demons, a Naga, and a Vishnu in a dramatic scene that symbolizes "the perpetual struggle between good and evil."³ Vishnu, the Indian goddess with many arms, is the one providing or restoring "balance when order in the universe is likely to be upset in the eternal struggle between good and evil."⁴ This particular theme is repeatedly found in Bangkok. Many shrines "seem to be chosen with deliberate care to preserve that delicate spiritual balance,"⁵ as well as to "appease bad Karma."⁶

This research paper, although in many ways limited, aims to point towards a new approach to Theravada Buddhism. The researcher believes that by knowing and considering some common elements of the Buddhist's life and way of thinking, the unique Adventist doctrine of the Great Controversy and its solution for humans, i.e., salvation, may enhance mission in the Buddhist world. The Buddhist view of the controversy between good and evil will be examined and the similarities found will be used to build the framework for a new missiological approach.

There are three main elements that can summarize the controversy's concept as it is found in the Bible and the writings of Ellen White. First, there is a struggle between good and evil, i.e., God and Satan. The battlefield is not only our planet as a whole, but also every single heart. The biblical account

³ "Tour Bangkok Legacies," n.p. [cited 30 April 2008]. Online: <http://www.tour-bangkok-legacies.com/vishnu-shrine.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The word Karma means "to do" and, basically, means that every action has a reaction. As the Mango seed in the earth brings forth a Mango tree, so a bad deed brings forth unhappiness or something worse. Compare also "Thai Blogs," n.p. [cited 12 May 2008]. Online: http://www.thai-blogs.com/index.php/2005/07/05/title_207blog=23.

tells that Lucifer was a created being who rebelled against the law of God. At first unnoticed, the seed of rebellion was planted in heaven and as a result one third of perfectly created beings had to leave heaven together with Satan.⁷ This seed of rebellion was given forth to Adam and Eve as they decided not to trust God (Gen 3:6) and reached thus the heart of every human being (Rom 5:12–21). Ever since there has never been a greater battle than when one's sinful nature was confronted by the desire for godliness. Ellen White clearly points that out: "The warfare against self is the greatest battle that was ever fought. The yielding of self, surrendering all to the will of God, requires a struggle; but the soul must submit to God before it can be renewed in holiness."⁸ The fierceness of this battle is also recognized by Paul, who states that "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12).⁹

Second, there is a resolution offered to this conflict.¹⁰ Before the creation of the world God already had a plan that would draw back to him all those willing to accept his sacrifice.

Third, the way back to a harmonious state of existence is clearly shown. Ellen White testifies: "If men are willing to be molded, there will be brought about a sanctification of the whole being. The Spirit will take the things of God and stamp them on the soul. By His power the way of life will be made so plain that none need err therein."¹¹ Referring to the running race that is mentioned by Paul, Ellen G. White adds that "so the heavenly goal is presented to the view of the Christian, that it may have its just influence, and inspire him with zeal and ardor. We may safely and earnestly look to this recompense of reward, that we may assure ourselves of its excellence, and have an ardent desire to secure its possession."¹²

Within Buddhism, as well as any other religion, there are many symbols, myths, and rituals that shape the religious life. These elements connect the believer to God and give help in grasping the reality that surpasses human understanding.

⁷ In her book *Patriarchs and Prophets*, Ellen White gives a comprehensive account of how Lucifer was once a wonderful Cherub (cf. Ezek 28 and Isa 14) but then rebelled against God and his law. The result was that one third of the angels went with the person that had become Satan. Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1958), 34–37.

⁸ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1956), 43.

⁹ All Bible texts are taken from the NKJV, unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption* (Hagerstown: Review & Herald, 1980), 43.

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1911), 52.

¹² Ellen G. White, "The Christian Race," *Review and Herald* (Oct. 18, 1881), paragraph 4.

William Young suggests good definitions for the first two terms which are of importance to the present research: symbols and myths. Symbols are generally “communication elements” that take the place of a “complex of person, object, group, or idea.”¹³ However, Young suggests that in a religious context, well taken symbols give the believer the opportunity “to participate in that to which the symbol points,”¹⁴ symbolism becoming, thus, “the very life’s breath of religion.”¹⁵

In the same way, a myth—which is in fact a story based on tradition and not on an actual event—when put into a religious frame, is perceived as ultimately true. Moreover, mythical stories “reveal the way life is to be understood and lived.”¹⁶

It is obvious, therefore, that these elements play a major role in the shaping of a specific religion. In Buddhism, too, the believer’s worldview is influenced and sustained by symbols and myths.

2. The Elements of the Buddhist Great Controversy

In ancient times, temples were the place where important spoils from a successful battle were stored (see, e.g., 1 Sam 5:2 or Dan 1:2). Another way of keeping record of victory was to engrave it in the walls of a temple (e.g., the temple of Karnak in Egypt). This was a way of expressing the belief of the people that the god of this specific temple had determined the conquest. Likewise, the Buddhist temples “talk” to us in this regard. The presence of the Mara, Naga, Yaksha, and the elephant is an indicator of the honor offered to Buddha, who proved his supremacy over all of them.

2.1. The Mara

The Mara is the most important unit when it comes to the struggle between good and evil. It is generally referred to as an evil masculine force that can be seen mostly on drawings or carvings. Similar to the Adventist belief, Buddhists have also an understanding of an evil force that was once good, but then fell in degradation and became the source of evil desires.¹⁷ The

¹³ “Symbol,” in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (ed. Jacob E. Safra; 15th ed.; 29 vols.; Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2002), 11:458.

¹⁴ William A. Young, *The World’s Religions: Worldviews and Contemporary Issues* (2nd ed.; Upper Saddle River: Pears Prentice Hall, 2005), 15.

¹⁵ James W. Heisig, “Symbolism,” *ER* 14:198.

¹⁶ Young, *The World’s Religions*, 16.

¹⁷ Peter Harvey, “Buddhist Visions of the Human Predicament and Its Resolution,” in *Buddhism* (ed. Peter Harvey; London: Continuum, 2001), 85. Ling points out the connection between Mara and the first noble truth of suffering. Mara represents, thus as

never-dying force Mara is, as portrayed in Buddhist legend and cosmology, the “Lord of the Kamadhatu (‘realm of sense-desire’) and principal antagonist of Buddha and his followers.”¹⁸ Evil intents, attitudes, and wishes come from him. When the believer is trapped in Mara’s snares, bad karma results. Only the good deeds obtained in many lives can bring an end to karma’s hunt.

One story tells that Mara tempted Gautama (the Buddha of this age) with “honeyed words,”¹⁹ as he sat under the Bodhi tree, waiting for enlightenment. Trying to prevent the enlightenment from happening Mara appeared, first, in the form of a messenger who told about the usurpation of the “Sakya throne from Gautama’s family.”²⁰ Thereafter, a report of a great storm, falling of meteors, etc., follows.²¹ The third attack involves Mara’s three daughters, i.e., thirst, desire, and delight. However, “the strength of his (Gautama) perfections from previous births²² was so great that nothing, no evil power, could prevail.”²³ Buddha’s touching of the earth summons it “to witness his claims to preeminence.”²⁴

After his achievement of supreme enlightenment there was one last doubt. Gautama questioned whether there would be anybody who would understand the truth. Mara worked hard on him to abandon any attempts to preach. However, through the positive influence of the gods, Gautama’s

Satan, a force “which proves resistant to man’s search for holiness.” Trevor Ling, *Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1962), 92, as quoted in Harvey, “Buddhist Visions of the Human Predicament and Its Resolution,” 283.

¹⁸ Nancy E. Auer Falk, “Mara,” *ER* 7:187.

¹⁹ Peter Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 21.

²⁰ “Mara,” in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (ed. Jacob E. Safra; 15th ed.; 29 vols.; Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2002), 7:811.

²¹ Iqbal Singh, *Gautama Buddha* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 162. Some, however, assume that the storm, rain, and the other natural disasters were only figurative representations of what was going on in Gautama’s mind.

²² A person will not stop experiencing the phenomenon of rebirth, as long as the karmik force exists. Under Rebirth, one understands, therefore, the arising of a consciousness that has formerly died, in new skandhas that make up a person. The life-stream “flows ad infinitum, as long as it is fed by the muddy waters of ignorance and craving. When these two are completely cut off, then only, if one so wishes, does the stream cease to flow, rebirth ends as in the case of the Buddhas and arahats.” Narada Thera, “Rebirth,” in *Buddhism in a Nutshell*, n.p. [cited October 2008]. Online: <http://www.buddhanet.net/nutshell07.htm>.

²³ J. Kahyap, “Origin and Expansion of Buddhism,” in *The Path of the Buddha: Buddhism Interpreted by Buddhists* (ed. Kenneth W. Morgan; New York: Motilal Banarsidass, 1956; reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), 8.

²⁴ Falk, “Mara,” *ER* 7:187.

doubts were put aside.²⁵ Buddha, thus, defeated Mara, who retreated subsequently. This victory represents a crucial element of Buddha's life for the Buddhist believer.

2.2. Naga

Naga is a semidivine being—half human and half serpentine—with many mythical attributes.²⁶ Nagas and their respective symbols and allusions, are found at several places in Buddhist temples: (1) on the roofs in the form of “horns”; (2) at the frontside of the roof in a decorative style; (3) to the right and left of stairs going up to the temple or temple areas; (4) under the Buddha, with or without the protecting snakes in the background; and (5) on the clothing of many figurines.

The legend of Buddha shows a clear and interesting connection to Naga. The snake deities, who usually reside underground, gave veneration to the Buddha.²⁷ According to the story, Mucalinda, the king of serpents, came from under the earth to protect “the one who is the source of all protection” from a great storm. When the great storm had cleared, the serpent king assumed his human form, bowed before the Buddha, and returned in joy to his palace.²⁸ Mucalinda's “submission came to symbolize Buddhism's claim of ‘spiritual conquest’ over all deities in every locality where the faith missionized.”²⁹ The snake and all its allusions embody, henceforth, the strong desire of security, as well as the strong belief in the essential need of security.

2.3. Rakshasa/Yaksha

Yakshas trace their origin in the Indian mythology as “generally benevolent nature spirits.”³⁰ The representation of these good evils³¹ can be found in several places, as for instance, at the airport, at the entrance gates of tem-

²⁵ “Mara,” *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* 7:811.

²⁶ John Garrett Jones, *Tales and Teachings of Buddha* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), 186.

²⁷ John L. Esposito, *Religion and Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 375.

²⁸ Wikipedia, “Mucalinda,” n.p. [cited October 2008]. Online: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mucalinda>.

²⁹ Esposito, *Religion and Globalization*, 375.

³⁰ “Yaksha,” in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (ed. Jacob E. Safra; 15th ed.; 29 vols.; Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2002), 12:806.

³¹ They are also known as being bloodthirsty and especially interested in devouring human flesh. Cf. Jones, *Tales and Teachings of Buddha*, 181.

ples, as well as at other gates within the temple. They are not good looking, but rather ugly, with angry eyes, big ears, heaven-pointed head coverings, etc.

These spirits, too, had a determining encounter with Buddha. The story recounts the following: "On one occasion the Blessed One was living in the abode of Alavaka, the Yakkha (demon), at Alavi. Then Alavaka approached the Blessed One and said: 'Get out, recluse (samana).' — 'Very well, friend,' so saying the Blessed One went out. 'Come in, recluse.' — 'Very well, friend,' so saying the Blessed One entered."³² Buddha was thus entering and leaving the room, until he finally refused to do it again. Then, Yaksha wanted to ask a question, threatening Buddha that if he did not answer it properly, he would "confound [his] mind (thoughts), or cleave [his] heart, or take [him] by [his] feet and fling [him] over to the further shore of the ocean (para gangaya)."³³ Not being intimidated by this threat, Buddha encouraged Yaksha to ask. Not only one, but many questions were asked; as Yaksha heard Buddha's answers, he responded:

Most excellent, O Gotama, is thy teaching, most excellent. Just as a man would set upright what is overturned, reveal what is concealed, point out the way to one gone astray, ... I take refuge in the Venerable Gotama (the Buddha), in the Dhamma and in the Sangha (the Order). May the Venerable Gotama accept me as a disciple who has taken refuge, from this day forth while life lasts.³⁴

2.4. The Elephant

Representations of elephants can be found everywhere in Thailand for they are closely connected to Buddha's birth. It is said that "Buddha was purportedly both a white elephant and a regular elephant in previous lives."³⁵ The story recounts that Queen Maya, Gautama's mother, fell asleep on her bed after a great meal at the full moon festival. Four kings took her and brought her to the Himalayas. Thereafter, their wives, the queens, carried her to a lake where she was washed so that every human stain would be removed.³⁶ After she had been laid on a divine bed, the Bodhisattva (the enlightened one) assumed the shape of a white elephant and descended from the mountains with a lotus flower in his trunk to enter her womb.

³² Piyadassi Thera, *The Book of Protection* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1999), 91.

³³ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁵ Carol Stratton and Miriam McNair Scott, *Buddhist Sculptures of Northern Thailand* (Chicago: Buppha, 2004), 359.

³⁶ Singh, *Gautama Buddha*, 48.

There is another story told about the cousin of Buddha, Devadatta, who wanted to kill Buddha. At first, Devadatta hired sixteen men to have his cousin murdered, but the warm welcoming of Buddha determined them all to become his disciples.³⁷ Having failed in his first plan, Devadatta came up with another one. He gave an elephant sixteen measures of beer and issued a royal proclamation to harm nobody, but Gautama alone. The mad elephant was released as Buddha was out in search of alms.³⁸ The elephant showed its evil temper by destroying the houses that were in his way. Although the news that he was to be killed reached him in time, Buddha "would not change his custom."³⁹

Presently a little child ran out of the house, and the elephant was about to kill her; but Buddha called out: 'You were not intended to attack anyone but me; do not waste your strength on anyone else.' But when the elephant beheld Buddha all its fury abated, and it approached him in gentlest way and kneeled to him. Gautama charged the elephant to never do such thing again and harm anyone 'but to be kind to all; and the elephant repeated the five commandments aloud in the presence of all the people.'⁴⁰

2.5. Buddha: The Center of the Temple

Shakyamuni's life story became for Buddhists a paradigmatic example of an individual's quest for enlightenment, and his exemplary role for subsequent generations was elaborated in hundreds of didactic stories that describe incidents from his previous births as human, animal, or spirit.⁴¹

Just as a highway sign points to a close city, so the symbols point to the center of the temple, i.e., the Buddha statue. He is the one representing the good (in contrast to Mara, which represents the evil), conquering Mara, Naga, Yaksha, and the elephant. By meditating in front of his statue, the believer is supposedly participating in Buddha's conquest, reaching in this way enlightenment.

Although Buddha is, theoretically, not a god, he is perceived as such by the common Buddhist believer. There are several reasons for this. The most common one nowadays would be given by the appearance and the handling of the Buddha .

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁸ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Elizabeth N. Nivedita, *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* (Mineola: Courier Dover, 1967), 281.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Esposito, *Religion and Globalization*, 376.

The myths of Buddha's victories are illustrated through the statue's outer appearance. According to the *Dialogues of the Buddha*, there are 32 marks of Buddha's superhumanness listed. Mentioned are, for example, his feet with superhuman level tread, his long fingers, his intensively blue eyes, his bronze-like complexion, his exaggerated size of ears—suggesting a supernatural ability to hear, etc.⁴²

Moreover, a look at the rules that an artist follows in "creating" a Buddha confirms also the fact that Buddha is perceived as a divine person. In *Dialogues of the Buddha*, one can read:

The artist who produces an image of the Buddha does not have the goal of creating an original work of art. On the contrary he is working within clearly prescribed rules as to what the image should look like. He has studied a model, meditated upon it, and holding it firmly in his mind, deliberately attempted to copy it, in the belief that only in this way can he achieve a true likeness of the Buddha.⁴³

At the beginning of Buddhism, the object on display recalled "the qualities that are found in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha."⁴⁴ However, in time, supernatural attributes were incorporated into the image,⁴⁵ and anyone who denies these superhuman qualities "will be thrown into hell,"⁴⁶ as an old verse reads. The believer is, therefore, more than encouraged to live his life according to the "ideal human life"⁴⁷ of Buddha.

3. The Believer within the Controversy

The supposed divinity of Buddha and the believer's personal life with its challenges do not seem to interconnect much. The Buddhist is still alone⁴⁸ in

⁴² *Dialogues of the Buddha. Volume III* (trans. T. W. Davids and C. A. T. Rhys Davids; London: Pali Text Society, 1977), 137–39; as quoted in Dorothy H. Flickle, *Images of the Buddha in Thailand* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989), 12–13. See also Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, eds., *Handbook of Today's Religions* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 307–8.

⁴³ Flickle, *Images of the Buddha in Thailand*, 7.

⁴⁴ Buddha Dharma Education Association, "Frequently Asked Questions," n.p. [cited 12 May 2008]. Online: <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/snapshot03.htm>.

⁴⁵ Flickle, *Images of the Buddha in Thailand*, 14.

⁴⁶ Edward G. Parrinder, *What World Religions Teach* (2d ed.; London: Harrap & Co, 1968), 53.

⁴⁷ Vernon Ruland, *Imagining the Sacred: Soundings in World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), 89.

⁴⁸ It is interesting that the Buddhist believer is left alone in his life, but once he dies there are possibilities to add good deeds to his life. One can, therefore, repeatedly find inscriptions on parts of Buddhist temples or monasteries, telling the read that something had been donated in order to increase the good deeds of a passed-away loved one.

doing his good deeds and fighting the evil, hoping that in the end his efforts will be enough to ensure him enlightenment and, eventually, the achievement of the main goal: Nirvana⁴⁹ or a better re-birth. In the Dhammapada we can read:

160. One truly is the protector of oneself, who else could the protector be? With oneself fully controlled one gains a mastery which is hard to gain.

165. By oneself is evil done, by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil left undone, by oneself is one purified. Purity and impurity depend on oneself—no one can purify another.⁵⁰

The high demands and the bad results that seem to have no end make it natural for one to seek refuge somewhere else. Considering the limitations and weaknesses of the human nature, it is an impossible task to reach the set goal all by oneself.

4. A Suggested Approach towards Buddhists

The complexity of Buddhism with its myths, symbols, and rituals is not a big enough barrier to be surpassed by the Good News of the Gospel. Although accepting a different religious view is not an easy step to take, when a common background is found, mission can be facilitated.⁵¹ The book of Hebrews has some very interesting cultural similarities and teaches us how to make use of them in our missionary approach.

Jewish Christians who were used to the Old Testament sacrificial system experienced some difficulties when the type met the antitype. Thus, although still practiced until A.D. 73, the sacrificial system was left without purpose.⁵² The old system that was practiced and believed in had to be

⁴⁹ Nirvana is the end and main goal of the Buddhist's journey. It is a state of nothingness, i.e., a clearing of one's desires and, therefore, an end to Karma. For "if a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as a wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage." Robert C. Lester, *Buddhism: The Path to Nirvana* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 56. However, the work of good deeds is oftentimes so exhausting that a release from suffering, i.e., the "better re-birth" ("ideal goal"), is sought today more than Nirvana. Roger Schmidt et al., eds., *Patterns of Religion* (2nd ed.; Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2005), 205.

⁵⁰ Wikipedia, "Refuge Ceremony," n.p. [cited: October 2008]. Online: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refuge_ceremony.

⁵¹ Paul, e.g., used the "Unknown God" of the people of Athens to bridge the gap and reach the people (Acts 17:22–34). This approach used the things that were familiar to their religious understanding for the good of "some men" (Acts 17:34).

⁵² William G. Johnsson, "Hebrews: An Overview," in *Issues in the Book of Hebrew* (ed Frank B. Holbrook; Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 4; Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, 1989), 16–17.

given up and a new system had to be adopted. Although the situation faced by the Jewish Christians was not really as new as it is for a Buddhist believer, the strategy of the author of Hebrews is applicable to both cases. He started with the familiar old sacrificial system and pointed to the *better* priest, the *better* priesthood, the *better* covenant, etc.⁵³

4.1. Why This Approach?

Although there are crucial differences between Christianity and Buddhism, the parallels that can be found could be a starting point in reaching out to the Buddhist believer.

As well as the Bible, Buddhist teaching, if one could speak about it as such, incorporates elements of a Savior (good) as well as of Satan (evil). Both see Mara/Satan as a person that had been good at one time, but fell and then deceived the followers of Buddha/Christ. This causes an inner struggle in believers—the struggle between good and evil, or the struggle of ridding oneself of the evil desires. However, the evil force has been defeated by Buddha/Christ whose perfect life became a blueprint and an object of meditation for their followers. The refuge in Buddha (as part of the three refuges) creates also a power for good in oneself that overcomes desires. This might be similar to the power we receive of Christ. Part of the believer's journey (Nirvana/heaven) is the experience of sanctification, although there are also great differences in this regard between Christianity and Buddhism.

4.2. What Is Our Message?

Following the strategy of Hebrews, the Adventist message can use a common ground to point to better news for the Buddhist believer. Yet, it is not sought to tell the Buddhist believer that Christians are better or superior to the Buddhists. The term *better* focuses on our Lord and his wonderful work, rather than on us sinners. "Where is boasting then? It is excluded" (Rom 3:27).

A Better and Merciful Savior: The Bible tells of a compassionate Savior (Heb 4:15), who carries our burdens (Matt 11:28), and knows our name (John 10:14; Isa 43:1). He is merciful in that he gave his life willingly in our stead. The consequence of sin, or the karma, has been paid completely (Rom 6:23). We can, therefore, live (John 3:16; Rom 6:23) and be happy even in this life (Jer 58:13; John 10:10). No one needs to fight alone on this earth, but Christ, our Creator, is now working in our stead and applying the

⁵³ Ibid., 28–29.

deeds he has worked out for us. Sulak Sivaraksa was right by saying that the “world dukkha [‘suffering’] is too immense for any country, people, or religion to solve.”⁵⁴ Only the one who created everything can do what no one can do. A belief that the problem can be solved if everybody helps to solve it, i.e., a belief in the goodness of the human race, has already proven itself false. Buddha might have been a great victor, but Jesus incorporates all that one would expect from his God, and much more.

Better News about Evil: While Buddhists believe in a never-dying Mara, the Bible assures us that there will soon be a complete end to Satan, and, subsequently, of sin, pain, suffering, etc. The Psalmist says: “You have destroyed the wicked, you have blotted out their names forever and ever. O enemy, destructions are finished forever” (Ps 9:5–6; cf. Rev 12:12; 20:14–15; 21:4). “Christ made an end of sin, bearing its heavy curse in His own body on the tree, and He hath taken away the curse from all those who believe in Him as a personal Saviour.”⁵⁵ Thus, Mara will be no more, for we are going to live eternally with our God.

A Better Sanctification: As Christians, we do not need to work on our sanctification alone. It is God who works it out for us (Ezek 20:12; Heb 13:12). The Epistle to the Hebrews was written to illustrate the Christian walk with God.⁵⁶ It is emphasized that the “weakest saint, as well as the strongest, may wear the crown of immortal glory. All may win who, through the power of divine grace, bring their lives into conformity to the will of Christ.”⁵⁷ Moreover, the Bible tells us that we are justified even before we are sanctified. Buddhist believers have the understanding that only when sanctification is achieved, can one enter the Nirvana. Yet, the good news of the Bible is that when we come to Christ, we are justified (Rom 5:8–11), i.e., we are “brought into a right state as related to God.”⁵⁸ We have, therefore, not to worry about whether we are saved or not seeing we are not perfect, because salvation is a complete gift (Eph 2:8) that cannot be worked for (Rom 3:20; Titus 3:5). Good deeds are a response to his love, rather than a payment that has to be done to obtain enlightenment. This would be great news to the Buddhist believer who has experienced the pain and failure of trying to buy righteousness with good deeds.

⁵⁴ Sulak Sivaraksa, as quoted in Espisito, *Religion and Globalization*, 372.

⁵⁵ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (3 vols.; Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1958), 1:395.

⁵⁶ White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 312.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁵⁸ Marvin Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 3:39, as quoted in Arnold V. Wallenkampf, *Justified* (Hagerstown: Review & Herald, 1988), 35.

A Better Heaven: The destinations of Buddhism and Christianity are very different. Nirvana is a state of nothingness, a “place” where only nothing is offered. In contrast, heaven is a place of harmony, happiness, fellowship, and adoration. It is the greatest promise and reward offered to anyone who is or wants to become a child of God. There we will meet Jesus, the one who carried us through. We will enjoy the pleasures and happiness of friendship with old and new friends. Beautiful houses will be called our home. What we have and see is going to be so overwhelming that we find our greatest pleasure in thanking and glorifying him who is the reason for it. However, this does not have to be waited for. Its glimpses of beauty can be seen, even in our sinful world.

4.3. How to Tell This Great News

4.3.1. *Tell It in Stories*

Stories are an important part of human development. While writing to the Hebrews, the author of Hebrews included a whole chapter of lived-by-faith stories in order to conclude his theological excursus. No wonder that the content of Heb 11, and not his theological arguments, is best remembered. It shows once again that stories, and not necessarily theoretical concepts, stick in our minds. Jesus also used this method extensively. “By connecting His teaching with the scenes of life, experience, or nature, He secured their attention and impressed their hearts.”⁵⁹

This is exactly the reason for the creation of Buddhist myths. They make deeper concepts not only understandable, but also easily remembered. The Adventist church should take note of this particular ability of stories and use it more profoundly. God’s leading of Israel, as well as the way in which Jesus approached suffering people, illustrates a better and a merciful Savior/God. The stories of Jesus walking on the water, casting out demons, or raising the dead to life, show the power of God over nature, death, and evil. The picture of the wolf and lamb feeding together (Isa 65:25) will help in picturing the harmony of heaven. There is a huge treasure of stories and illustrations in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, that can easily be used.

4.3.2. *Live the Christian Joy and Teaching*

A much more powerful story is one’s own life. A smile and a helping hand are worth more than a thousand words. “Not only did [Jesus] teach the

⁵⁹ Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1941), 21.

truth, but He was the truth. It was this that gave His teaching, power.”⁶⁰ This is particularly true in the Buddhist context. It is easy to say that the gospel of the Bible is a better gospel, but most probably the Buddhist believer will at first not accept that only by faith. The Buddhist religion is very practical in nature—which is, of course, at least partially, due to its works-focused teaching—and needs, therefore, to be approached in a practical way. Paul encourages us to demonstrate faith (1 Cor 2:4; 4:16) and to be confident in the power of the Gospel (Rom 1:16). He encourages prayer, gratitude, and happiness (1 Thess 5:16–18), which become testifiers of Christian faith. However, the most important hint towards the essential nature of the practical approach of mission can be found in the life of Jesus who taught the simple truth that words and deeds are at least equally important.

5. Conclusion

Buddhist temples picture the victories of a superhuman, i.e., Buddha. Impressive pictures and statues reflect the success of Buddha’s teaching. Although the symbols of the evil forces might be perceived as threatening and blood-thirsty, the one believing in Buddha is not to fear for his meditation upon Buddha’s success in facing evil forces should empower his quest for enlightenment. However, the way towards Nirvana or a better rebirth is still a lonely one, for the Buddhist needs to work out the required good deeds all by himself.

In such circumstances, the unique Adventist focus upon the Great Controversy can help in bridging the gap between Adventism and Buddhism. Jesus, as our Redeemer and friend, the free gift of salvation, the complete end of evil, and a heaven prepared for us are elements that surpass any offer ever made. Our merciful Savior did not leave us alone in our limitations and weaknesses, but provided the supreme sacrifice, justifying us by faith. This wonderful news will be best received when put into stories that facilitate remembrance and understanding. Particularly the story of one’s personal life, as Jesus taught us, will bring forth many fruits.

When reached by the better news of the Gospel, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Buddhist believer will echo the response of the people from Athens:

“We want to hear you again on this subject” (Acts 17:32).

⁶⁰ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1952), 78.