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## Mother Teresa and the Bodhisattva Ideal: A Buddhist View

Karma Lekshe Tsomo PhD

University of San Diego, [tsomo@sandiego.edu](mailto:tsomo@sandiego.edu)

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# Mother Teresa and the Bodhisattva Ideal

## A Buddhist View

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, University of San Diego

*The notion of the bodhisattva, the selfless individual who is dedicated to alleviating the sufferings of others, is traditionally articulated within a Mahāyāna Buddhist framework. The question posed here is whether and to what extent this religious ideal can be conceived or, or instantiated by, individuals whose religiosity is framed by a different set of beliefs and values, taking the Roman Catholic Sister of Charity, Mother Teresa, as an example. The broader question of commensurability arises when the criteria for qualifying as a bodhisattva, set within a specifically Mahāyāna context, are superimposed upon a figure who is solidly grounded within another religious tradition. At first glance, the requisite virtues of the bodhisattva—renunciation, compassion and wisdom—seem to intersect aptly with the life and teachings of the “saint of Calcutta.” In the details, however, the Buddhist philosophical context of these requisites calls into question the legitimacy of attempting to*

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*blithely translate ideas and principles from one worldview to another. Ultimately, the contrivance may work, trumped by the attainments of the archetypal bodhisattva. With figures like Mother Teresa, who are regarded as moral exemplars not only within their own traditions but in other traditions and beyond religion as well, perhaps we can expand our understandings of compassion and of the cultural and religious categories that delineate religious ideals.*

Whenever I teach about the selfless ideal of the *bodhisattva* in classes on Buddhism, students inevitably ask: “Is it possible that Mother Teresa was a *bodhisattva*?” The question prompted me to reflect on the Buddhist notion of the *bodhisattva*, the qualities associated with this ideal and whether or not someone outside the Buddhist tradition could potentially fulfill the criteria traditionally required to become one. My intention was not to artificially equate Catholic and Buddhist religious ideals, but to place the highly developed expressions of religious life held by these traditions side by side and explore where the categories cross over and where they do not. For example, if renunciation were used as a primary criterion, how might the analysis help highlight different aspects of this religious ideal as conceptualized and embodied in the Catholic and Buddhist traditions?

The life of the well-known Roman Catholic Sister of Charity, Mother Teresa, has been an inspiration and model for millions of women and men from a wide range of religious backgrounds around the world. Her charity work among the poor is heralded as a classic example of love, expressing the highest ideals of Catholic social teachings. While she used Christian language and grounded her work solidly within her own faith tradition, Mother Teresa’s life of selfless devotion to the poor epitomized compassionate

service to humanity in a way that reached beyond the confines of religious categories. Given the fact that she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, beatified in 2003 and widely mythologized, it is somewhat surprising to find that her life and her charitable work have received little scholarly attention to date.

In this essay, I offer a Buddhist analysis of the life and social work of this remarkable woman. The central focus of the essay is a comparative analysis of the principles that guide the *bodhisattva*, the eminently selfless individual in the Buddhist tradition, and the Christian principles that guided Mother Teresa's selfless service. First, I introduce the life and teachings of the "saint of Calcutta [Kolkata]." Second, I describe the *bodhisattva* ideal and explain the prerequisites for entering the *bodhisattva* path. Third, using these criteria as starting points, I assess Mother Teresa's aspirations and achievements in relation to the aspirations and achievements of the *bodhisattva*. In this cross-cultural comparison, I investigate the fundamental values and human qualities that emerge in the narrative of Mother Teresa from a Buddhist perspective. A subtext of the essay is the question of commensurability, the extent to which similar concepts in dissimilar contexts can legitimately be compared, and the question of whether such an exploration yields new insights, either theoretically or practically, into either religious tradition.

### To Save and Sanctify the Poorest of the Poor

Mother Teresa was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhui in 1910 to a prosperous Albanian Catholic family in Skopje, now Macedonia. As a child, she was very religious and conscientious in caring for the poor in her environs. At the age of 18, inspired by the letters of Yugoslavian priests working in Bengal, she left home and

traveled to Zagreb and then to Dublin where she joined the well-known missionary order, the Sisters of Our Lady of Loreto. Soon thereafter, in 1928, she traveled to India where she completed two years of novitiate training in Darjeeling before receiving her first vows. She then taught history and geography and later became the headmistress at St. Mary's High School, a prestigious girls' school run by the Loreto Sisters in Kolkata. In 1937, she took her final vows and the name Teresa. In 1946, she received a calling from God that directed her to serve the poor.<sup>1</sup>

In 1950, Teresa received approval from the Diocese of Calcutta and Pope Pius XII to establish an order of nuns, called the "Missionaries of Charity," with the express purpose of serving the unfortunate while living among them: "Our particular mission is to labor at the salvation and sanctification of the poorest of the poor."<sup>2</sup> She began her charitable work immediately and, two years later, opened a home for the dying destitute in an empty pilgrims' rest house at Kalighat, a popular Hindu pilgrimage site. For the next 45 years, eventually joined by 4,000 dedicated nuns who followed her example and 10,000 lay volunteers who assisted, she faithfully tended the sick, downtrodden, and abandoned. Despite contracting tuberculosis, she continued to give succor to lepers and AIDS patients until her death in 1997 at the age of 87, maintaining a lifestyle akin to that of the impoverished she served, while regarding them as "the Lord himself."

1 Kathryn Spink, *Mother Teresa: A Complete Authorized Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 3–22.

2 From the Constitution of the Missionaries of Charity written by Mother Teresa. See Edward Le Joly, S.J., *Mother Teresa of Calcutta: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 28.

Despite her widely acclaimed mission of peace and charity, Mother Teresa received considerable criticism. While she was admired as an embodiment of Christian faith and goodness, an “angel of mercy” and a “saint of the gutters” by many, her detractors denounced her as a fanatic and a fraud, and excoriated her for opposing divorce, contraception and abortion amidst the miseries of an overpopulated world. Eschewing all modern conveniences, Mother Teresa lived a life of poverty for almost 50 years, yet has been faulted for not allowing her nuns to use fans, washing machines or elevators that would have lightened their work. Despite these controversies, at the behest of Pope John Paul II, she was beatified in 2003 and declared “a blessed of the Catholic Church.” To commemorate this penultimate step to sainthood, 150,000 people from around the world gathered in Rome to pay her tribute.

Few doubt that Mother Teresa was a very special person and many regard her as a saintly and uniquely selfless example of Christian charity and piety. She received tribute worldwide for her humanitarian contributions, including the Pope John XXIII Peace Prize in 1971 and the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. Her life of kindness and compassion among the abjectly poor in India set a new model for what it means to be devoted to Jesus and become an instrument of God’s love:

To me, Jesus is the Life I want to live, the Light I want to reflect, the Way to the Father, the Love I want to express, the Joy I want to share, the Peace I want to sow around me. Jesus is everything to me.<sup>34</sup>

3 José Luis González-Balado, *Mother Teresa: In My Own Words* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1996), p. 34.

Despite the long “dark night of the soul” she silently experienced, Mother Teresa continued to “see Jesus in the face of every beggar.”<sup>45</sup> Her legacy of compassion for the poor continues in hundreds of centers around the world through the efforts of several thousand nuns and countless lay devotees.

There is no question that Mother Teresa’s selfless devotion to the poorest of the poor inspired hope and charity among millions of people with an influence that extended far beyond the Catholic community. The question that concerns us here, however, is whether or not she can be called a *bodhisattva*, a supremely selfless individual in the Buddhist sense of the word. To answer this question, we need to be clear about the qualities of the *bodhisattva* and the criteria for becoming one.

### Entering the *Bodhisattva* Path

An abiding concern for the welfare of sentient beings (literally, beings who possess consciousness) is one of the salient features of the Buddha’s teachings as evident in even the earliest Buddhist texts. The Buddha declared his intention to work for the welfare of all and exhorted others to do likewise. In the *Majjhima Nikāya*, a text found in the Pali canon of the Theravāda tradition, we read:

Laying aside cudgel and sword,  
I live a life of innocence and mercy,  
Full of kindness and compassion for everything that lives.<sup>5</sup>

4 Despite her devotion to God, Mother Teresa’s letters reveal that she felt a spiritual emptiness or sense of abandonment throughout much of her ministry.

5 *Majjhima Nikāya*, III.29ff.

In the Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions, this dedication to living a life of mercy, kindness and compassion for all that lives is even more highly lauded and becomes linked with the new goal of achieving perfect Buddhahood. Rather than the earlier ideal of liberation from cyclic existence, the *bodhisattva* ideal of the Mahāyāna stresses the intention of liberating all sentient beings from suffering. The *bodhisattva* doctrine of universal salvation is regarded as a natural corollary of compassion for all beings. This doctrine is founded on the premise that sentient beings are limitless in number and that, in the incessant cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*), all living beings have at one time or another been related. Consequently, all these sentient beings are recognized as having been one's own loving mother (and father, sister, brother, teacher, student and so on), not just once, but innumerable times.<sup>6</sup> This recognition, conjoined with the virtue of great compassion, results in what the Fourteenth Dalai Lama calls a sense of "universal responsibility" to relieve the sufferings of all.<sup>7</sup>

However, the path of the *bodhisattva* is not simply a matter of living a compassionate life. To become a *bodhisattva*, one must meet three specific criteria: (1) renunciation, (2) *bodhicitta* and (3) direct insight into emptiness. These criteria were clearly enunciated by the Indian scholar and monk Atīśa in his seminal work, *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment (Bodhipathapradīpa)*,<sup>8</sup> and other

6 In the Buddhist view, the sense of community is limited neither to human beings nor to those born from a womb of a flesh and blood mother, but encompasses all sentient life, including those who take birth "from an egg, from moisture, and through miracle."

7 Tenzin Gyatso, *The Global Community and the Need for Universal Responsibility* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991).

8 Geshe Sonam Rinchen, *Aiśha's Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 1997).

Mahayana texts. Although the term "*bodhisattva*" may be used rather loosely in common parlance to denote a kind and compassionate person,<sup>9</sup> properly speaking, a *bodhisattva* must have these three qualifications.

### Renunciation: The Soteriology of Selflessness

The primary principle of the *bodhisattva* way of life is renunciation. The first evidence of Mother Teresa's renunciation was her clear decision to leave her natal family and become a nun. Not only did she sacrifice the physical and emotional intimacy of marriage and children, but she also left her own country and culture to serve in the unfamiliar setting of India. That Mother Teresa sacrificed selflessly in tending to the poorest and most miserable—the abandoned, the dying and the lepers—in the streets of Kolkata is a well-documented fact. After almost 20 years of teaching at St. Mary's, she felt compelled to renounce the relative comfort of her life as a school principal in order to establish a mission that would serve the neediest segments of the Indian population. She not only lived a life of poverty like the poor she served, but also inspired an order of nuns with a similar dedication and left a very visible legacy of service to the most indigent sectors of societies around the world. The austerity of her living environment and diet, approximating the living conditions of those she served, are legendary. She has even been faulted for going to extremes by eschewing the use of fans in the sizzling heat of Kolkata. There is little question that she embodied the ideal of renunciation that is the trademark of all religious traditions.

9 For example, in Buddhist circles in Korea, laypeople are routinely addressed as *bodhisattvas*.

In examining the notion of renunciation, we find close parallels between the Catholic and Buddhist monastic orders. Christians take their cue from Jesus of Nazareth's exhortation, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and then you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Matthew 19: 21). Monks and nuns of the Catholic monastic orders renounce a life of marriage and family to serve God through a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. A similar notion of renunciation applies to the lifestyle of the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*, the monks and nuns who renounce the household (married) life and join the Saṅgha, or monastic community. In the Buddhist context, however, the term "renunciation" has another specific denotation since it refers not only to the renouncing the pleasures of this world but also to renouncing cyclic existence—the wheel of birth, death and rebirth known as *saṃsāra*. This understanding of renunciation is premised on the theory of repeated rebirth in the various realms of *saṃsāra*, comprised of myriad heavens, hells, and the realms of humans, animals and ghosts, and their attendant sufferings and frustrations. The Buddhists worldview within which renunciation is practiced thus contrasts with the Roman Catholic worldview comprised of an afterlife in heaven, hell, or purgatory.

While the Buddhist and Christian worldviews share a common belief in heaven and hell, the Buddhist heavens and hells are plural and, in the wheel of rebirth, may be experienced multiple times. Although rebirth in a heaven is very pleasant, it is temporary; even if a rebirth in heaven lasts for 80,000 years, it is not a permanent state. As soon as one's good *karma* from past lives is exhausted, the pleasant consequences also come to an end, followed by rebirth in a realm less pleasant than heaven. Moreover, for the determined Buddhist seeker of liberation, a rebirth in heaven is not particularly

desirable because it amounts to a lengthy diversion from the task of liberating oneself from *saṃsāra*. Christians, on the other hand, aspire to reach heaven at the end of their life through the grace of God in Jesus. From a Christian perspective, this heaven transcends the world of birth and death. Christians look forward to the creation of a new heaven and a new earth where they will live, body and soul, forever. In Buddhism, there is no such idea of a renewal of heaven and earth as a final and eternal reward.

Humility and renunciation of the things of this world are regarded as great virtues in both the Buddhist and Christian traditions. In both, it may be argued, the ultimate goal is a type of spiritual perfection, though the nature of spiritual perfection is recognized as beyond the comprehension of imperfect beings. Whereas Christians achieve salvation through God's love and the redemptive power of Jesus Christ, Buddhists must achieve liberation through their own efforts. The Buddha, on his deathbed, instructed his followers: "Work out your own liberation with diligence." Jesus, by contrast, instructed his followers to have faith in him and follow the will of God. For Mother Teresa and her followers, the will of God for them was expressed in service to the poor and needy. She and her sisters believed that they belonged to Jesus and, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, were simply doing God's work. The credit for any achievement therefore went to God and was not viewed as creating any personal merit. Buddhists, on the other hand, view the individual accumulation of merit as necessary for spiritual attainment. The "credit" for wholesome actions, even charitable actions such as serving the poor, ultimately accrues to the individual practitioner and not to anyone else. Although Christians and Buddhists may practice similar methods to reach their spiritual goals, such as acts of compassion toward those in

need, there is a clear distinction between their concepts of the spiritual dynamics of liberation and salvation.

### ***Bodhicitta*: Compassion in Theory and Practice**

*Bodhicitta*, the second principle that is requisite for the *bodhisattva*, is the altruistic aspiration to achieve perfect awakening in order to free all sentient beings from suffering. The task here, then, is to investigate the extent to which the Christian ideal of compassion and selfless service is commensurate with the ideals of compassion and selfless service in the Buddhist context, specifically as embodied in the *bodhisattva*. Compassion is a central pillar and common denominator of the Christian and Buddhist traditions. Just as Buddhists seek to embody the love and compassion of the Buddha, Mother Teresa emulated the love and compassion of Christ, an incarnation of God's love for humanity. The Christian instruction to serve the hungry, naked and imprisoned is found in Matthew 25:35: "Whenever you do this for the least of these, you do for me." Her work among indigent children follows the injunction "Suffer the little children to come unto me" (Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16).

In India and elsewhere, questions arise about whether Mother Teresa's motivation was purely to benefit the poorest of the poor or whether she may have hoped to convert the beneficiaries of her charity to Christianity or to get into heaven herself. In reading the accounts of her life, I personally conclude that she was motivated by the hope of leading the beneficiaries of her charity to God, but that it was not a conversion effort of the flagrant "body count" variety like recent conversion efforts in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Mongolia and other developing countries in recent years. These aggressive conversion attempts by Evangelical Christian organizations

are widely resented by people who feel that their own religious values and identities are under attack. On the other hand, in reaching out to the abandoned indigent, Mother Teresa was working with people whose suffering was beyond religious identifications. In striving to bring people to God, I believe that she was motivated not by an exclusivistic conceptualization of God, but by a notion of pure goodness and love that is beyond selfish interests or religious agendas.

The Buddha taught the virtues of love and compassion—a spontaneous, effortless compassion toward all living beings that is unbounded in scope and guided by insight. Similarly, love is the commandment of Jesus and is guided by the Holy Spirit that imparts insight. Although it is very doubtful that the Buddha had a social welfare ministry in mind, he did teach his followers to care for those who are suffering from sickness and other physical and emotional afflictions as he did himself. This is parallel to Jesus' commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:12) In the Mahāyāna tradition, the teachings emphasize an altruistic ideal that expands beyond individual expressions of love and compassion to a universal compassion for all living beings—human, animal, visible, and invisible. Finally, this great compassion expands to *bodhicitta*, the altruistic intention to liberate all living beings from the sufferings of *saṃsāra*. This "enlightened attitude" is of two types: (1) aspiring *bodhicitta*, that is the strong determination to become fully awakened (i.e., a Buddha) in order to liberate all sentient beings from suffering, and (2) engaged *bodhicitta*, that is the implementation of this noble ideal in action. *Bodhicitta* begins either as a brief impulse or as a calculated response to the sufferings of living beings. Sporadic altruism gradually matures into spontaneous, effortless compassion toward all creatures and

culminates in an unwavering determination to achieve perfect Buddhahood, a resolve that extends to all future lifetimes until perfect enlightenment is reached.

The *bodhisattva* is utterly devoid of self-interest, fully capable and ready to relieve the sufferings of sentient beings at any time by providing them with whatever they need. The commitment to relieve the sufferings of human beings is especially great since a “precious human rebirth” is necessary for progress on the spiritual path. A verse by Āryaśūra shows the extent of the *bodhisattva*’s commitment:

Even if someone should demand my flesh,  
May I offer it with pleasure in my eyes;  
May I always donate my limbs and so on,  
For the welfare of all embodied beings.

May I, like a wish-fulfilling gem,  
Provide all that beings desire;  
And may I, like the wish-granting tree,  
Completely fulfill their hope.<sup>10</sup>

Both Mother Teresa and Mahāyāna Buddhists express a deep commitment to the welfare of humanity and to the implementation of love and compassion in action, especially toward the most wretched. As a Roman Catholic, Mother Teresa demonstrated her commitment to “the dignity of the human person”<sup>11</sup> as she

10 Gendun Gyatso, *Āryaśūra’s Aspiration and a Meditation on Compassion* (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1979), p. 25.

11 “The dignity of the human person” is a stock phrase and core value of Catholic social teachings inscribed in *Gaudium et Spes*, a document of the Second Vatican Council.

dressed the wounds of lepers and sacrificed her health to minister to society’s throwaways. She did not go so far as to donate limbs for the welfare of others, as Āryaśūra’s *bodhisattva* is purportedly willing to do, but she did sacrifice her life to care for the poor. The *bodhisattva*’s willingness to sacrifice life and limb may be allegorical, since, as critics of the *bodhisattva* resolve have pointed out, to destroy the body or damage one’s health impairs one’s ability to serve living beings. In any case, the sacrifices detailed in *bodhisattva* narratives are not instructions for others to follow, but are meant to inspire compassion and endurance in the course of liberating beings from suffering. Although Mother Teresa never expressed her intention to become a Buddha or to liberate all beings from *samsāra*, the tremendous hardships that she endured during her years of work among the unfortunate are abundant evidence of her commitment to the *bodhisattva* ethic of compassion.

### Direct Insight into Emptiness: Wisdom and Insight

The third principle of the *bodhisattva* way of life is *prajñā* (wisdom, understanding or insight), that in the Buddhist context is specifically understood as direct insight into emptiness, the true nature of all phenomena. Wisdom guides the altruism of the *bodhisattva* such that it does not degenerate into mere sentimentalism, but entails skillful means to effectively accomplish the welfare of all beings. Wisdom and compassion operate in tandem. Like the two wings of a bird, both qualities are essential to the achievement of enlightenment. After acquiring an intellectual understanding of the no-self (*anātman*) doctrine, the *bodhisattva* gains direct insight into the lack of independent or inherent existence of phenomena, that is known as emptiness (*śūnyatā*). He or she has penetrating insight into the dependent arising, the interrelatedness of existing

things. This insight reveals the relatedness of all living beings, that, in turn, supports the development of compassion. The *bodhisattva* practices meditation on emptiness throughout the ten stages of the *bodhisattva* path, accumulating wisdom and merit through the practice of the ten perfections (*pāramitā*)<sup>12</sup> for three countless aeons. The process culminates in the perfect wisdom of a Buddha: simultaneously knowing all things “as they are,” that is equivalent to omniscience.

Wisdom in the biblical context is most commonly God’s wisdom (“the divine wisdom:” *he theia sophia*) or revelations of God’s wisdom rather than human insights (*vipāśyanā*) into the nature of life, such as those discovered and taught by the Buddha. In the *Book of Wisdom*, the concept has two denotations: in relation to human beings where it is a profound and perfect knowledge expressed by the righteous in everyday conduct, and in relation to God where wisdom is the personification of divine knowledge. Wisdom is in eternal partnership with God and is accessible through prayer and contemplation. Among the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit enumerated in Isaiah 11:2–3, wisdom is said to be the foremost, representing the perfection of faith that leads to perfect knowledge. In my view, Mother Teresa was both contemplative and apostolic. Her life reveals both the wisdom of God’s revelation as she experienced it, and wisdom as manifest in everyday actions. Although she may not have possessed the wisdom that understands emptiness, in the

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12 In the Mahāyāna literature, the ten perfections are: generosity (*dāna*), ethical conduct (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), joyful effort (*virya*), meditation (*dhyāna*), wisdom (*prajñā*), skillful means (*upāya*), aspiration (*praṇḍhāna*), power (*bala*) and exalted wisdom (*jñāna*). In the Pali literature of the Theravāda tradition, the ten perfections are slightly different: generosity (*dāna*), ethical conduct (*śīla*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), wisdom (*paññā*), energy (*viriya*), patience (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*), loving kindness (*mettā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*).

Buddhist sense, her daily devotions and compassionate life led her to inspired insights and commonsense judgments that cut through accepted truths: “War is the killing of human beings. Who can even think that it could ever be ‘just’?”<sup>13</sup> In addition, she had the practical wisdom that enabled her to negotiate the Indian bureaucracy. She deserves sainthood for that alone. She successfully administered dozens of social welfare programs while dealing with significant social and cultural differences, and clearly had the wisdom to see beyond these differences to the essential dignity of all human beings.

### Comparing Compassion

From studying the life and maxims of Mother Teresa, I conclude that although she was probably a saint from any religious point of view, she may or may not have been a *bodhisattva* from a Buddhist point of view. She clearly qualifies as a *bodhisattva* in the broad outlines, in that she embodies the qualities of renunciation, compassion and insight. However, she does not fulfill the specific criteria of the *bodhisattva* that are set forth in the Mahāyāna tradition and explicated by *Atiśa*. Although she renounced worldly pleasures and personal benefit, there is no indication that she consciously renounced cyclic existence or even was familiar with the concept. Although she manifested great compassion in caring for the sick, destitute and dying, and although she may well have aspired to relieve all human sufferings, there is no indication that she aspired to become an enlightened being in order to liberate all sentient beings from the sufferings of *samsāra*, or that this *bodhisattva* aspiration was even in her vocabulary. Although she was wise in

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13 Le Joly, p. 67.

ways that appear to have been directly inspired by God or her belief in God, there is no indication that she attained direct insight into emptiness or even that she had ever encountered the concept. Without these three specific qualifications, then, she cannot be considered a *bodhisattva* in the strict sense of the word.

When questioned about a Buddhist equivalent to Mother Teresa, Buddhists are hard-pressed to provide an example. His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other great Buddhist masters work day and night to benefit living beings through their prayers and by teaching about the path to enlightenment. But they are not in the trenches, cleaning the wounds of lepers or tending to indigent patients dying of AIDS. When it comes to active engagement in the world of suffering and affliction, perhaps Mother Teresa is closer to the *bodhisattva* ideal than any Buddhist. Does the *bodhisattva's* ambition to provide whatever living beings need require that person to be a professed Buddhist who follows the teachings and uses the language of Buddhism? Or can *bodhisattvas* emerge in any place, in any culture?

This raises several important questions for Buddhists: Is the *bodhisattva* ideal limited by culture? Is a *bodhisattva* necessarily Buddhist? If the *bodhisattva's* activity is dependent upon culture, the definition and scope of his or her work might be limited to a particular sphere. Is the *bodhisattva* active only in Buddhist countries? Is the *bodhisattva's* compassion limited only to Mahāyāna countries? If this is the case, can we infer that the recipients of the *bodhisattva's* compassion are limited to, or more likely to be, Māhāyāna Buddhists? This leads to a logical impasse: If a *bodhisattva's* compassion is circumscribed in any way, it cannot be said to be universal or impartial, that contradicts the *bodhisattva's* stated ideal of working to liberate all living beings from suffering. If the

*bodhisattva's* activity is not limited, but extends to beings of all descriptions, then we run into a different problem. A person may be selflessly devoted to relieving the sufferings of living beings, but not use the language of the *bodhisattva* and not have the aim of becoming a Buddha. Such a person might, like Mother Teresa, define the ultimate in very different terms.

Looking at the question from a specifically Buddhist angle leads us to one further consideration. In the Mahāyāna tradition it is believed that a *bodhisattva* has the capacity to appear in myriad forms to benefit sentient beings. The *bodhisattva's* capacity to benefit all increases exponentially as she or he progresses along the paths and stages to awakening. At the first stage, a *bodhisattva* purportedly has the ability to manifest in one hundred forms in one hundred world systems. At the final stage of the process, a Buddha has the power to manifest innumerable forms in innumerable world systems. From this perspective, a *bodhisattva* could appear in whatever form was most beneficial to living beings. Since in the world today more people profess Christianity than any other religious tradition, it stands to reason that a *bodhisattva* who uses Christian terminology and beliefs has the potential to reach the greatest number of people by using a language they can understand. Using this logic, it is not impossible that Mother Teresa was a *bodhisattva* who manifested in a Christian form to propagate the ethic of compassion.

The question of commensurability that was raised at the beginning of this paper has yielded an unanticipated conclusion. The search for similarities has turned up a trove of differences with many layers of meaning, and has brought to the surface new questions regarding cultural and philosophical congruence. The point of greatest similarity that emerges is the value of a life lived with

compassion and devoted to the service of all. In the present dialogical exercise, I have attempted to examine a Roman Catholic figure through the use of Buddhist terminology and criteria in an effort to understand the extent to which the *bodhisattva* ideal is culturally constructed and whether it has value outside the Buddhist context. Perhaps this is an exercise in futility, like trying to match round pegs and square holes, since the *bodhisattva* ideal is predicated on a set of assumptions that, as far as we know, the Catholic Mother Teresa never considered. At the same time, through such an exercise we can expand our understanding of compassion and of the cultural and religious categories that define its significance. After all, genuine compassion cannot be circumscribed, but must extend to the whole of humanity, transcending boundaries of culture, class and gender.

Compassion, in Buddhist terms, extends not only to human beings, but to all forms of life: animals, hell beings, hungry ghosts, and all. All sentient beings in cyclic existence experience the sufferings specific to their particular form of existence and also the sufferings of change and the sufferings of being trapped in cyclic existence. An awareness of these sufferings leads Buddhists to a focus intensively on compassion and contemplation toward the goal of awakening and liberating all beings from suffering. These activities entail an ethics of “non-harm” toward all living creatures with profound implications for peacebuilding, environmental protection and global justice.

Wisdom, in Christian terms, is not an aptitude of human beings alone, but is necessarily inspired by God. At the same time, God’s love as incarnated in Christ has inspired both profoundly compassionate service, such as that of Mother Teresa, and social justice movements such as liberation theology. The source of this

compassion as understood in Christianity is God: “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Since God’s love is infinite, it embraces all existence including all human beings. Jesus’ life was a self-revelation of that love as he cared for the poor and suffering around him. The divine source of compassion, the model of Jesus’ love, and the loving guidance of the wisdom of the Holy Spirit provided Mother Teresa with her way of serving the poorest of the poor.

In short, Buddhists and Christians have much to learn from one another. Many Roman Catholics are now using Buddhist teachings and meditation practices to renew their spiritual life. Many Buddhists are now recognizing the contributions of Roman Catholics to creating a more just society. Important figures like Mother Teresa are regarded as moral exemplars not only within their own traditions, but in other traditions and beyond religion as well. Further interaction and dialogue will surely expand the effectiveness of both Buddhists and Christians in relieving human misery.

*Karma Lekshe Tsomo received her doctorate in comparative philosophy from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. She is associate professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego where she teaches courses on Buddhism, World Religions and Comparative Religious Ethics. She also studied Buddhism in Dharamsala, India, for 15 years and is one of the founders of the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women. Her publications include Sisters in Solitude: Two Traditions of Monastic Ethics for Women (1996), Into the Jaws of Yama, Lord of Death: Buddhism, Bioethics, and Death (2006), and a number of edited volumes and articles on women in Buddhism.*