Listening to the Buddha's Noble Truths: A Method to Alleviate Social Suffering

Veena R. Howard
University of Oregon

THE MAIN CONCERN OF THE Buddha's teachings is to ease human suffering (*dukkha*) manifesting itself in physical and mental *dis-ease*. The Pāli word "*dukkha*" generally is translated as "suffering," but it literally means an "uneasy" or "unwanted feeling" (Skt. *pratikūlavedanā,* unpleasant agony or sensation).[1] The Buddha presents an *upāya* (approach) with a systematic range of physical, psychological, and moral practices that are required for the development of *kusala* (apposite moral conduct). These means provide an individual with the ability to wield and eventually transcend the human predicament. Scholar Padmasiri de Silva succinctly describes this. "The doctrine of the Buddha clearly accommodates the interlacing of the psychological and the ethical aspects of behavior.... The development of virtue is not merely blind adherence to rules, but the development of certain type of skill (*kusala*)."[2] The Buddha's urgent call to listen deeply to the reality and cause of *dukkha* and his pragmatic means to transcend it resonated with the religious people of India and continues to guide the lives of millions across a multitude of cultures.

Even though the Buddha's diagnosis of the present human condition is apparently bleak, and his ethical and contemplative disciplines seem to focus on the ultimate end to *dukkha*, his techniques have also has been utilized for the purpose of constructing methods to address worldly human afflictions. Thus, in modern times, the value and purpose of the Buddha's strategy have been evaluated in a broader context, including various fields—from psychology and psychotherapy to mediation and communication. Specifically, in the field of psychotherapy, in spite of its presuppositions (which are different from those of

the Buddha's), several Buddhist techniques have been utilized for the purpose of alleviating human misery apparent in symptoms of anxiety, identity crisis, depression, etc. In this paper I seek to explore the relevance of Buddha's call to listen deeply to the *truth* of suffering and his method to remove suffering, specifically the prescribed principles of renunciation and ethical regimen, in the context of addressing social suffering. I ask whether the Buddha's methods of ameliorating suffering could also be applied to the purpose of curing the ills of society. More precisely, could his principles of morality, which essentially are meant to transform an individual and overcome the metaphysical reality of *dukkha,* be directed to remove the existential forms of suffering—personal and social? For the purpose of examining these queries, I take Mahatma Gandhi, a twentieth-century political leader, as a model who was inspired by the Buddha and also by the teachings of Hinduism. In his writings, Gandhi portrayed the Buddha, the embodiment of renunciation, as a socially concerned activist, and chose to apply ethical and renunciatory principles as tools to treat his own physical and mental infirmity, as well as to address social ills present in the forms of gender and race inequality, social injustice, and oppression.

First, it must be noted that, as understood within the Indian context, Buddhism and Hinduism, in spite of some varied doctrines, do not represent distinct systems of belief, which is the interpretation that Gandhi asserts.[3] The ideologies of both religions not only share historical roots but have also shared philosophical and ritual spaces. The relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism has been reciprocal and reflects the ability of *deep listening* that leads to reformation of the individual self as well as the society. The Buddha's fundamental teaching of the reality of *dukkha* and his methods to alleviate suffering not only presented an alternative to the existing methods to approach the predicament of life, but also reshaped the ailing cultural and religious norms within Hinduism of the time. In turn, later Buddhism was remolded—in its philosophy and techniques—by Hindu culture. Gandhi's philosophy of ascetic-activism—constituted upon the ideologies of these traditions for his purpose of personal and social reform—is an example of these syncretistic tendencies. Not surprisingly, Gandhi in his actions of social service and his methods of nonviolence has been compared to the Buddha. Gandhi's religio-political methods (which were different from the customary methods of confrontation) to address the social problems of slavery, discrimination, and injustice re-

flect his propensity for the practice of ethical disciplines and a capacity for *deep listening*.

DEEP LISTENING: A PREREQUISITE

In the ancient texts of Hinduism one of the preliminary steps for the purpose of realizing the truth of reality or attainment of spiritual freedom is *śravaṇa*, meaning "listening"—listening to the scriptures and the words of the guru.[4] The Sanskrit word "*śravaṇa*" is derived from a root verb, √*śru*, which literally means "to hear, to listen, to be attentive, and to attend upon."[5] Listening is not merely hearing but attentive listening with a focused and attentive mind. This type of listening requires a kind of *antaḥ-karṇa-śuddhi*—purity of the mind and heart achieved through fundamental precepts—where selfish concerns drop away. Deep listening leads to understanding of the teachings and ultimately to the realization of the truth of the reality of one's own self and those around us. Buddha often asked for the attention of the monks. His discourses were often preceded by this refrain: "Listen carefully, O *bhikkhus*!" In fact, the entire Pāli canon is a record of the deep listening by the monks who recited the entire canon after the *parinirvāṇa* (the ultimate liberation) of the Buddha. (The canon was passed down orally for hundreds of years before it was written down.) The phrase "Thus I have heard" often introduces the sermons of the Buddha.[6]

Deep listening in personal spiritual development requires faith, receptivity, and cognitive discernment, and in an interpersonal context—such as communication—it calls for empathy. Joseph Bailey differentiates between hearing and listening:

> Hearing is a physiological phenomenon while listening is a psychological state. To listen deeply is to perceive beyond mere words and gestures. Without analyzing, we sense the underlying feelings and meanings; we understand the subtler level of communication. When we are listening deeply, we are affected and touched by the other person. And for the moment we are changed.[7]

Many therapists, counselors, and mediators incorporate deep listening and other Buddhist principles of mindfulness and compassion in their respective fields.[8] I suggest that the significance of deep listening to the Buddha's teaching of suffering also has the same significance for social healing. Even though his ideology of the ubiquitous nature of *dukkha* and the Buddha's own life of renunciation may appear to be

"world-denying," an attentive listening to this reality opens an avenue to address social suffering.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING TO A BROAD REALIZATION OF ITS REALITY

The Buddha elaborates on the first noble truth of suffering in his sermon, *Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth (Dhamma)*. *Dukkham ariyasaccam—dukkha* is the truth (reality)—the Buddha's great proclamation:

> The Noble Truth of suffering (*dukkha*) is this: Birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant [persons or objects] is suffering; dissociation from the pleasant [persons or objects] is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering—in brief, the five aggregates [five groups of clinging that form the object of attachment, the notions of I, mine, and self] are suffering.[9]

The Buddha presents a systematic list of various possibilities of suffering that can be categorized into three types: physical (pain, privation, and discomfort), mental (the discrepancy between our illusion and reality, the disappointments), and realization that clinging to one's personality or individuality is suffering.[10] For the Buddha the existence of *dukkha* is the existential and verifiable truth and makes up the core of his life and thought. The Buddha's claim leads us to construe the Buddha's view of life that suffering is ubiquitous: "all created things are sorrowful and transitory."[11] One may ask: if our entire existence is, by its very nature, enveloped by the dark shadow of *dukkha,* is there even a possibility of addressing the issue of removing mental and social suffering? What was the Buddha's purpose to assert the grim reality of suffering unlike some of his counterparts who focused on the positive ways to explain the reality of the universe? Does this stated fact behoove us to choose a life of renunciation similar to that of the Buddha? For these queries it is essential to listen to the Buddha's life story.

The account of the life of Siddhārtha Gautama (who later came to be known as the Buddha) tells us that as a youth he was very sensitive and restless with his life and surroundings, leaving no choice for the his father, the king, but to keep watch over him lest he decide to escape. Fortuitously, during some of his excursions from the palace, his personal experience of suffering in the form of three separate sights of physical suffering—death, disease, and decrepitude—led Siddhārtha

to embark on a journey to understand reality. Generally, in this world most experience pain, death, old age, and suffering, but continue with their daily lives in the hope of betterment of their situation. However, Siddhārtha was unusually agitated by these sights of "physical suffering." In the Freudian idiom, he was suffering from "reality anxiety."[12] Siddhārtha's reaction was unusual. He was not in pain physically (he was a prince with good health and opulent wealth), but the thought of what the future held for him and his loved ones—the trauma of old age and certain death—haunted him. Anxious to find the cause and cure of suffering, Siddhārtha left home in the middle of the night. Under the spell of his own neurosis about suffering, he didn't hesitate to turn his back on the grief of his devoted wife, the cries of his innocent child, and the laments of his loving father. In his choice of renunciation, Siddhārtha turned a cold shoulder to his family obligations and his princely duties. Disregarding familial concerns, Siddhārtha chose the life of a wandering ascetic intent upon discovering the cause of suffering and a method to stop its vicious cycle.

Siddhārtha's "great renunciation" from family, social, and political life and his arduous search for the end of suffering through the practice of various outer and inner disciplines comes to fruition in his *bodhi* (awakening). His awakening was unique, however. He was not awakened to a transcendent reality (such as *brahman*) or to a glorious realm of heavenly gods, but he was awakened to a disturbing revelation of the reality of suffering (*dukkha*) and impermanence (*anicca*). However, his revelation was not entirely of a hopeless nature; it included the cause of suffering rooted in selfish desires as well as the way to attain release from the cycle of suffering (classified as the four noble truths).[13] Various sources of the Buddha's life story tell us that with his awakening to reality, he also became filled with *karuṇā* (compassion). In his deep silence he contemplated the sounds of suffering that surround samsara. Breaking his prolonged serene silence, the Buddha set out to share his realization with his fellow beings in the hope that listeners would also be able to rid themselves of the arrow of suffering. The only way to alleviate this "uneasy" feeling manifesting itself in physical and mental suffering is to eliminate *taṇhā* (selfish cravings), the root cause of *dukkha,* by following the eightfold path.

RECONCILING THE REALITY OF SUFFERING AND EFFORTS IN HEALING

Apparently, the Buddha, through his truth of *dukkha,* conveys to us the tenet that living means suffering. For example, in the *Dhammapada,* the Buddha recommends the path of a recluse. His renunciation of the worldly life accordingly presents an approach for his fellow beings to lead a life of seclusion and tranquility away from the worldly quagmire. The experience of ultimate freedom presupposes the life of a mendicant who is intent on realizing the end of personal *dukkha.* According to him, those who choose this path "do not delight in an abode; like swans who have left their lake, they leave their house and home."[14] Although the Buddha taught both the lay and renunciate, his approach to ending the cycle of *dukkha* required a life of worldly detachment. The path of a householder (representing worldly engagement) is considered a path defiled by passions leading to suffering, and the path of renunciation a path of freedom from suffering.

The following four aspects of the Buddha's life and teaching seems to inspire his followers to give up a life of worldly engagement: his own renunciation of the family life, his invitation to a life of seclusion, his advocacy for urgency in getting out of the cycle of samsara—the world of change and flux[15]—and his disciplinary and contemplative practices (*śīla* and *dhyāna*) for going beyond the entrapment of individual self or ego. Taken together these affirm that living and getting involved in this world reinvigorates ego and selfish cravings (*taṇhā*). Relief from *dukkha* is achieved by renouncing this-worldly life of family and social relations. The "homeless" (*bhikkhu*) ideal and the Buddha's establishment of the organized community of mendicants (sangha) are representative of his renunciatory ideology.

Due to his overt declaration of the ever-present nature of suffering in samsara, Buddha has been accused of a pessimistic attitude and indifference to the existential suffering of day-to-day life. However, it would be naive to construe, on the basis of his truth of suffering and his personal renunciation, that the Buddha was unconcerned with the existential form of suffering, leaving no optimism for bringing comfort for worldly physical, mental, and social ailments. A deep listening to the Buddha's life and his insight into the nature of suffering offers significant counsel in various situations of life. Therefore, several components of the Buddha's path leading to ultimate freedom from *dukkha* have been applied to address suffering of various forms—mental, physical, psychological, and social. The Buddhist psychophysical tech-

niques, including mindfulness and meditation, have been successfully applied to resolve mental ailments, conflicts, and even physical health issues.

In the following section I focus particularly on the therapeutic application of the Buddha's program in the pragmatic context—social suffering—with a modern day example, Mahātma Gandhi, a political and social activist. The Buddha's life and his renunciatory teachings (which were similar to other Indian religious traditions) inspired Gandhi to confront his personal neurosis and to bring relief to the people of India suffering from an "identity crisis," slothfulness, and slavery.[16] Even though the Buddha and Gandhi appear to be very different figures, the narrative of the Buddha's journey to find a cure for *dukkha* carries similarities to the incidents that led Gandhi to commit himself to confront the social suffering of humanity. Gandhi's ideology of activism that combined the elements of asceticism for social activism draws attention to the following points: (1) the elements of renunciation offer a strategy to confront social suffering; (2) the Buddha's strategy of transcending *taṇhā* offers a therapeutic solution to various forms of suffering; and (3) the embodiment of asceticism itself becomes instrumental in the efforts to confront suffering caused by social systems.

THE NARRATIVE OF THE BUDDHA AND GANDHI'S JOURNEY TO ALLEVIATE SUFFERING: A COMPARISON

As we mentioned earlier, due to his personal life of renunciation and choice of non-violent methods, Mahātma Gandhi has been often compared to the Buddha.[17] On the surface, however, these two personalities resemble each other neither in their personages nor in their actions. One critic says:

> Outwardly it would be hard to conceive of two individuals more different. On the one hand is the tranquil Buddha who walks serenely and calmly across the pages of history, or traditionally sits peacefully on a lotus with a gentle smile of infinite compassion.... On the other hand is the Mahātma, speed and energy in every moment, laughing and sorrowing in his ceaseless endeavor to help mankind with the problems of human life....[18]

The above statement portrays the Buddha as a compassionate being but inactive, witnessing the reality of suffering in deep detachment; on the other hand, Gandhi is an activist relentlessly engaged in his venture to alleviate the suffering manifesting in the form of social in-

justice. However, this seems to be a superficial comparison: these are caricatures that exaggerate only one dimension of these figures. Was the Buddha merely a passive figure who calmly sat on a lotus immersed in his individual delight, bringing his message of the crude inevitability of suffering? Did Gandhi, who sought to help humankind with human problems, possess no composure? Then, how could Gandhi have derived inspiration from the Buddha's life of renunciation for the purpose of his endeavor to help humankind with its socio-political problems?

To understand these questions we must look at the beginnings of Gandhi's career as an activist as well as listen to his understanding of the message of the Buddha. According to Gandhi's own autobiographical records, he was raised in a middle-class family. In his early twenties, he had not thought about the ills of discrimination and slavery until he came face-to-face with "color prejudice." Gandhi suffered the most unexpected trauma while travelling on a train in South Africa, when a white man objected to his presence in the first-class compartment because he was "colored." He was an ordinary man: he was neither endowed with a charismatic personality nor was he an extraordinary barrister. In spite of the conductor's threats to "push" him out from the compartment, Gandhi refused to get off the train. Unaware of the deep color prejudice in that country, he asserted that it was his right to travel in first class because he carried a first-class ticket. Gandhi's resistance was to no avail, and the constable pushed him off the train with his luggage. Gandhi, determined to assert his right, refused to sit in the third-class compartment and the train steamed away. Humiliated and surprised, the barrister Gandhi spent the entire night in the "cold, bleak, and windswept waiting room" of the train station reflecting on that evening's incident.

The direct encounter with prejudice awakened Gandhi to a dark side of humanity: inequality and injustice of the social system manifested in forms of colonial suppression and racism, just as the Buddha was awakened to the reality of suffering through direct experience in the form of three passing sights. In the grave silence and bitter cold of the dark night Gandhi reflects on his predicament:

> I began to think of my duty. Should I fight for my rights or go back to India.... It would be cowardice to run back to India without fulfilling my obligation. The hardship to which I was subjected was superficial—only a symptom of the deep disease of colour prejudice. I should

> try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process.[19]

The firsthand experience of the injustice of the social system also made Gandhi realize the suffering of oppressed fellow beings. This incident became the antecedent to Gandhi's commitment to a life of non-violent activism for which he eventually adopted a lifestyle similar to that of a renunciate. Later he recalls this incident as a "formative experience in this career."[20] Gandhi's embodiment of an ascetic for the purpose of his non-violent activism incited millions of Indians to participate in his movement for securing India's freedom from the misery of slavery and other social afflictions including untouchability. Gandhi's non-violent strategies have been experimented with in various situations throughout the world and serve as a model for an alternative method of confronting any form of social suffering.

Gandhi's sudden commitment to this colossal task was atypical. Just as the Buddha turned his back on the luxurious life of the palace, Gandhi gave up his lucrative profession and took the vows of celibacy and poverty. Gandhi's life has been a subject of vast scholarly commentary. Many scholars have speculated on possible reasons for Gandhi's behavior and subsequent decision to choose a lifestyle reminiscent of an ascetic. For example, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, in his monumental work *Gandhi's Truth*, tries to discover the roots of Gandhi's behavior in his past.[21] Gandhi as a child was bashful and as a young man had a very sensitive conscience. Gandhi described himself as being nervous and afraid of the dark. He suffered from neurosis and had even attempted suicide. Besieged by the experience of social evil on the train, Gandhi decided to embark on rooting out the suffering. Roy Walker recounts the incident, which is reminiscent of the Buddha's final determination to find a cure for suffering.

> Throughout the long hours of darkness he fought one of the decisive spiritual battles of his life. The natural impulse was to give up the unequal battle and return to India.... But there was another impulse too that told him to stay, to stay and fight. It would not be a fight for himself alone.... It was the battle for humanity itself, for all who were sick and weary and oppressed. When morning dawned his decision was made, the way ahead was clear.[22]

But at the time when he made this resolve, Gandhi had not contemplated the possible methods to address the oppressive injustices of the systems of society. How could this ordinary man confront the mighty

empire on behalf of the oppressed? He was neither an eloquent orator nor an astute statesman. Nonetheless, Gandhi had spiritual foundations. In his autobiography, he recalls that he was deeply influenced by the *Light of Asia* (a book about the life and philosophy of the Buddha), the Sermon on the Mount, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*.[23] In particular, due to his predisposition and his upbringing he was attracted to the teaching of renunciation found in these texts. "The renunciation was the highest form of religion [and] appealed to me greatly."[24] These teachings inspired him to choose moral-force instead of violent methods to confront social ills. For his non-violent strategy, Gandhi combined the elements of renunciation with activism.

RENUNCIATORY DISCIPLINES FOR THE *TELOS* OF ACTIVISM

"The Buddha's main concern," as M. G. Bhagat puts it, "was to reduce human suffering by explaining its causes; he wanted to expose evil tendencies in man and show how they could be cured."[25] However, according to Gandhi, the Buddha also exposed and confronted the ills of society. The Buddha was no less concerned about the social sufferings caused by individuals possessing selfish tendencies. Gandhi remarks: "The Buddha fearlessly carried the war into the adversary's camp and brought down on its knees an arrogant priesthood."[26] Interestingly, Gandhi did not invoke the bodhisattva ideal of the Mahāyāna Buddhism, which represents the embodiment of compassion; but, rather, he presented the Buddha himself as an example of a concerned and socially involved being. The Buddha was not simply a detached figure; he was a compassionate being who dedicated his life to teaching his message to humanity. Gandhi asserts that the Buddha also worked toward the alleviation of suffering caused by oppressive systems. "When the Buddha," Gandhi explained, "with the lamb on his shoulders, went up to the cruel Brahmins who were engaged in an animal-sacrifice, it was in no soft language that he spoke to them; he was however, all love at heart."[27] Gandhi's emphasis that the Buddha was an activist is consistent with his own unique interpretations of religious figures and texts.

According to Gandhi, the Buddha through his renunciation purified his own passions and thereby found the cure for *dukkha* for all humanity including his family. "The Buddha, by leaving his parents, brought deliverance to them as well," asserts Gandhi.[28] Although Gandhi did not renounce family and the social aspects of humanity, by choosing a life of an ascetic Gandhi seems to follow the steps of the Buddha. The

Buddha's methods of personal and social reform and Gandhi's own socio-political activist strategy appear to be different in nature, yet they hold a fundamental resemblance.

The Buddha's method of getting rid of suffering includes the *pañca-śīla* (five precepts)—the principles for purification of the mind from negative tendencies. In his prescriptive approach, the Buddha emphasizes that the demons of greed, hatred, and attachment haunt the mind that needs to be purified by the practice of ethical conduct (*pañca-śīla*). "*Śīla* is a discipline of both body and mind, whereby the defilements that cloud wisdom are removed."[29] The *śīla is* comprised of five essential disciplines: non-violence, truth, not taking what is not given, sexual restraint (*brahmacarya*), and abstaining from intoxicating substances. These virtues have also been prescribed for the purpose of spiritual freedom by other Indian traditions of Hinduism and Jainism for the purpose of spiritual freedom.

However, Gandhi experimented with these moral virtues as instruments for his socio-political goals and inverted the purifying power of the *pañca-śīla* for the purpose of purifying social ills. Gandhi sought to utilize these virtues, generally prescribed for achieving the ultimate liberation from samsara, as tools for the purpose of securing freedom from the vicious cycle of social suffering. For him, the observance of non-violence, truth, and celibacy, which have roots in the ancient religious traditions, also had functional value.

Gandhi claimed himself to be a "practical" visionary, who saw the sum value of any religious observance also in terms of its relevance for the purification of the society. He sought to apply the "technology" of ascetic disciplines—which categorically fall into the domain of religious renunciation—to address social and political issues. Even though an engagement in the socio-political issues is generally considered to be the domain of worldly engagement by orthodox ascetic traditions, for Gandhi, it provided a framework for the service of humanity. (Gandhi also likened the service of humanity to the service of God.) Gandhi asserted: "if we want to put this body in the service of truth and humanity, we must first raise our soul by developing virtues like celibacy, non-violence and truth. Then alone may we say that we are fit to render real service to the country."[30]

The value of these restraints has also been assessed by some scholars in the context of establishing a harmonious society. "While certain anti-social impulses that lead to the moral degradation of society

should be eliminated, the Buddha recommends the development of the socially valuable psychological qualities of self-control (*dama*), mental calm (*sama*), and restraint (*niyama*)."[31]

The practice of *śīla* principles channels the mental energies to purity and calmness. Gandhi adopted the disciplines (the essential vows that he saw present in all religions)[32] for his personal purification and inner empowerment and at the same time experimented with their efficacy on a mass level for purging social ills. Gandhi transformed religious virtues into activistic tools such as non-cooperation, self-suffering, and passive resistance. He employed non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) to fight against the mighty British Empire.[33] Gandhi made a novel connection between the practice of *ahiṃsā*, compassion, and participatory resistance to violence: "No man could be actively nonviolent," he pronounced, "and not rise against social injustice no matter where it occurred."[34] He equated non-violence with compassion. "He [Gandhi] thought," Bhikhu Parekh suggests, "even as compassion led to avoidance of harm, it could and indeed ought to lead to a positive desire to help others."[35]

Gandhi was aware of the Buddha's message that violence breeds violence and keeps the cycle of hatred and fear in motion. Gandhi, who chose the means of love instead of retaliation, echoes the Buddha's proclamation: "All men tremble at punishment, all men fear death. Likening others to oneself, one should neither slay nor cause to slay."[36] Gandhi understood the weapon of non-violence to be superior to any other weapon. He declared that "the Indians...must forge a weapon which would be different from and infinitely superior to the force which the white settler commanded in such ample measure."[37] Later, Gandhi coined the word for his passive resistance, *satyāgraha*, literally meaning "soul-force" or "truth-power": an ancient ascetic way of utilizing soul-force to overcome evil and transform the heart of the evil-doer. A famous legend tells us that the Buddha himself utilized this practice to confront and transform the mind of the cruel bandit, Aṅgulimāla. The Buddha declares: "He who leads others by a procedure that is nonviolent and equitable, he is said to be a guardian of the law [*dhamma*, justice], wise and righteous."[38] Only the righteous one—who seeks to conquer his or her inner negative tendencies—could be the guardian of law, none other. The path of non-violence requires overcoming the three negative forces of *rāga* (attachment), *dosa* (hatred), and *moha* (delusion). The Buddha teaches people to loosen the knot of suffering by giving up selfish desires, worldly passions, and attach-

ment to one's individuality, not by denying the world. For Gandhi, a life of renunciation simultaneously became instrumental in shattering the shackles of physical, mental, and social suffering.

THE EMBODIED RENUNCIATION AND SOCIAL HEALING

The stereotyped image of downcast eyes, pervasive in the pages of art and history, may represent the composed and complacent Buddha, but this image can also be seen as an illustration of defiance to the overly ritualistic and at times aggressive behavior of the priesthood. Walter Kaelber explains the ascetic power of protest: "The particular ascetic practice is comprehensible only in terms of the cultural practice it self-consciously seeks to challenge. Ascetic practice may, therefore, frequently be seen as an intentional language of protest."[39] The Buddha raised his voice against the practice of animal sacrifice and untouchability and taught the equality of all beings. Gandhi states: "One of the many things for which I revere the life of Gautama Buddha is his utter abolition of untouchability, that is, distinction between high and low."[40] By virtue of his renunciation of the caste and ties of blood, the Buddha was able to address broader social issues. The Buddha's pragmatic teachings and applications brought new life to those oppressed under draconian conventions. In her ethnographic study of *sādhus* (holy person, renunciate), Kirin Narayan observes the renunciation of "ties of blood or caste" moves the *sādhus* to the periphery of society where they are free to get involved in the service of society at large. "Ironically," states Narayan, "the act of renunciation may in fact push an ascetic into more extensive social involvement than if he or she remained a layperson."[41] A renunciate who steps outside of society proper may even become a catalyst for social reform and a "dynamic center of religious development and change."[42]

A prominent scholar Raghavan Iyer assesses the result of the Buddha's teachings: "The impact of Buddhism on the corrupt social order of India was comparable in its intensity and significance to the impact of the Renaissance and the Reformation on Europe."[43] During the nineteenth century, some of Gandhi's predecessors who were leaders of religious reform movements were renunciate and also social activists.[44] They incorporated religious concepts and technical vocabulary to reinvigorate their countrymen who "had fallen prey to waves of foreign rule because they had become passive, effete, and devoid of energy as a result of their sensuous and self-indulgent lifestyle."[45] Gandhi saw a

direct connection between religious renunciation and the attitude of social service. Joseph Alter comments, "Gandhi is very clear in pointing out that renunciation is worthless unless it manifests itself in selfless service and social reform."[46]

For Gandhi, the composed image of the Buddha was not a symbol of indifference because of the pervasive reality of *dukkha*, but it was a symbol of the embodiment of universal compassion and concern for all beings. Inner purity must be cultivated, and the force of inner power must be redirected to defy the will of the evil-doer while cultivating "a positive state of love, doing good to even an evil doer." The Buddha teaches his listeners to replace the negative tendencies of hatred, delusion, etc. with *mettā* (love), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity). To fight against social evils, Gandhi first must purify himself from selfish cravings. Even though he never donned the robes of a renunciate, Gandhi subjected his mind and body to austere restraints for purifying the body, speech, and mind: he took the most formidable vow of *brahmacarya* (comprehensive self-restraint in thought, word, and deed) to control his sensory desires and exercise non-attachment; renounced his material belongings to a bare minimum; followed a strict vegetarian diet to harm no living entity; and restricted his intake of food and food types to control his passions and needs.[47] He tested his willpower by committing himself to various disciplinary vows.

By these practices, Gandhi sought to transcend individual gratification and selfishness and prepared a way for Indians to become independent in daily life by having very few desires. Moral disciplines (which were prescribed by the Buddha to break the fetter of *taṇhā*) for Gandhi became an approach to removing dependence on the foreign regime. Spiritual freedom would lead to political liberation. Gandhi claims: "Truthfulness, *brahmacharya*, non-violence, non-stealing, and non-hoarding, these five rules of life are obligatory on all aspirants.... Everyone who observes these vows will be able to find a way out of all perplexities."[48] He utilized these teachings as a liberating apparatus to purify inner passions and social evils: slavery, racism, oppression, and gender inequality. The result was therapeutic. He mobilized a mass movement that awakened Indians to the reality of their suffering caused by racial oppression and prejudice and inspired them to sacrifice in order to confront oppression and slavery. Gandhi's mass mobilization to confront unjust laws and his "mission of relieving the

grief-stricken and downtrodden" has been compared to the "the Buddha's great march of renunciation."[49] Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, records the psychological transformation of the Indian people:

> The essence of his [Gandhi's] teaching was fearlessness and truth and action allied to these.... So, suddenly as it were, the black pall of fear was lifted from the people's shoulder, not wholly of course, but to an amazing degree.... It was a psychological change, almost as if an expert in psychoanalytic method had probed deep into the patient's past, found out the origins of his complexes, exposed them to his view, and thus rid them of burden.[50]

CONCLUSION

The direct experience of suffering made the Buddha and Gandhi analyze the cause and find the cure for the suffering that extended beyond their personal pain and private concerns. Iyer writes: "The revelation of the pain as the law of existence can be regarded as the condition sine qua non for redemption. Suffering can have a positive, constructive function and a value."[51] But suffering could be constructive only when one is able to realize its reality and alter the negative experience into a therapeutic program for one's own self and society. The Buddha's teachings may appear to be world-denying, but they also present a formula to address the various forms of *dukkha*—physical, psychological, and social.

The Buddhist way of overcoming suffering can also be applied to overcoming psychological, physical, and social problems as illustrated by the example of Gandhi. Erik Erikson reflects on Gandhi's confession of personal anxiety and his overcoming of suffering:

> For while our clinical era might see in his confessions [referring to Gandhi's confessions of guilt, shame, depression, and shyness in his autobiography] only an admission of having been possessed by irrational guilt, the Mahatma does not stop there. He *experimented,* so he means to emphasize..., with the devils of shame and doubt, guilt and inferiority: he challenged them and won.[52]

Gandhi challenged the "devils" as the Buddha confronted Māra by using the inner strength acquired by moral disciplines. They both chose the life of a renunciate and sought to purge the phobia and pain created by social oppression. Gandhi echoes the Buddha[53] when he un-

derscores deep-rooted passions and attachment as the source of fear and suffering:

> There is fear of disease in enjoyments, there is danger of destruction in having a family, there is danger from kings in having riches, there is danger of ignominy in trying to be respected, there is danger of creating enemies in showing one's physical power, there is danger of disfigurement in having beauty, there is danger of disputation in discussing scriptures, there is danger from the evil-minded in being endowed with high qualities, there is danger of death in having the body, thus is everything a cause of fear. Only complete renunciation is free from fear.[54]

Gandhi, by adopting a religious strategy, broadened the scope of alleviating suffering. He integrated his efforts for acquiring personal freedom from suffering with the freedom from suffering caused by social systems. His methods were religious in nature, but they were functional in the socio-political context. By identifying the service of humanity as a spiritual endeavor, Gandhi aimed at relieving his followers from the fetters of suffering from both the present and future lives.

In today's society, with its shrinking geographical distances and broadening gap between traditional established norms and the fast and fluctuating modern life—media, instant news, job, relationships—the problems of "unease" and fear are extensive. At this time, listening to the Buddha's clear message of the reality of suffering; his call to root out suffering by overcoming emotions of greed, hatred, and delusion by the diligent practice of moral disciplines; and his recommendation to cultivate positive mental attitudes by self-analysis could bring relief to all people, from patients and physicians, to psychotherapists and political leaders.

Even though Gandhi's overt emphasis on action and the Buddha's on renunciation seem to make them ideologically different, a deep listening to their narratives and message brings convergence to these dichotomous strands: renunciation and ethical principles are instruments to end social and metaphysical suffering. Through his attentive listening to the Buddha's *truth of suffering* and following the moral teachings propagated by him in other religious texts, Gandhi found a therapeutic program: the neurosis of fear and pain is deeply rooted in egotistic and private attachments. The recognition of the source of suffering and gradually overcoming inherent negative emotions of greed and delusion through renunciatory practices leads the way to the inner

"ease" that seeks to ameliorate the factors causing social dis-ease (*dukkha*). The pure—passionless—mind is able to listen deeply to the concerns of others and act to alleviate their suffering. In the deep listening mind, a miraculous transformation dawns: understanding of the root of suffering leads to the concern for the well-being of others. A modern Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, emphasizes: "While listening you know that only with deep listening can you relieve the suffering of the other person. If you listen with just half an ear, you cannot do it."[55]

NOTES

1. In English, there is no direct equivalent to the word *dukkha*; it is generally translated as "suffering" or "illness." "It signifies dis-ease in the sense of discomfort, frustration, or disharmony with environment." In Christmas Humphreys, *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism* (Chicago: NTC Publishing Group, 1962), 70.

2. Padmasiri De Silva, *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology,* 3rd ed. (Lanham, Boulder, and New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 2.

3. "It may be said that, in India at any rate, Hinduism and Buddhism were but one, and that even today the fundamental principles of both are identical." Gandhi elaborates during one of his lectures that the Buddha did not start a new religion, but those who came after him gave his teachings "the identity of a new religion." In Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi,* CD-ROM, 98 vols. (Delhi: Publication Division Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1958–1994), 4:247.

4. A serious candidate is required to go through a series of "preparatory" states of "understanding." "The first of these states is known as *śravaṇa:* study, listening to the teacher and thoroughly learning the revealed texts by paying careful attention to what they say." Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 431.

5. V. S. Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary,* 4th ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965), 932.

6. For example, "The Fire Sermon." In Walpola Sri Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught,* rev. ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 95.

7. Joseph Bailey, "Deep Listening: The Prerequisite to Presence," http://www.thespeedtrap.com/Reflections/Heart_to_Heart/Listening.listening.html; quoted in Rev. Ann C. Fox, "Deep Listening," http://www.uufairhaven.org/2002/Ser2002Oct13.htm.

8. There are several volumes that explore the interactions between psychotherapy and Buddhism, such as Mark Unno, ed., *Buddhism and Psychotherapy across Cultures* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006); and Manly P. Hall, *Buddhism and Psychotherapy* (Los Angeles: The Philosophical Society, 1967).

9. "Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth" (*Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*), in Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught,* 93.

10. Lama Anagarika Govinda thus explicates three types of suffering. He quotes the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, *Dīgha-nikāya* 22: "jāt ipi dukkha, jarā pi dukkha, maraṇam pi dukkhaṃ (I) (soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassa-upāyāsa pi dukkhā), yam p'ichaṃ na labhati tam pi dukkhaṃ (II) saṃkhittena pañv'cupādanakkhandā pi dukkhā (III)." In Lama Govinda Anagarika, *Psycho-*

logical Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy and Its Systematic Representation according to Abidhamma Tradition (London: Rider & Company, 1961), 49.

11. The *Dhammapada* (*Maggavaggo*: 5–6), trans. and ed. S. Radhakrishnan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 146. Subsequent references to the *Dhammapada* from the same edition.

12. "Reality anxiety is a painful emotional experience resulting from a perception of danger in the external world." Calvin Hall, *A Primer of Freudian Psychology* (New York: The New American Library, 1979), 63.

13. Some scholars discuss the Buddha's classification of the fourfold regimen of noble truths in the context of therapeutic models of Āyurveda, medical science, and the *Yoga-bhāṣya*: "In an analysis of the four-fold division the Yoga-śastra, the Āyurvedic medical science and the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, A. Wezler discusses the term *ārogya*, 'health' (*a* 'not,' *rogya* 'broken, from √*ruj*, 'to break'). Wezler notes that *ārogya* connotes *restoration* to a condition free of disease, presupposing an original state of health." In Gregory P. Fields, *Religious Therapeutics: Body and Health in Yoga, Āyurveda, and Tantra* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001), 133.

14. *Dhammapada* (*Arhantavaggo,* 2), 89.

15. Literally, "going or wandering through," "undergoing transmigration." Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, new ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990), 1119.

16. At times Gandhi was mocked by his fellow Hindus as following Buddhism instead of Hinduism, by adhering to the principles of non-violence and compassion like the Buddha. Gandhi replies to this accusation: "And sometimes I feel even proud of being accused of being a follower of the Buddha, and I have no hesitation in declaring in the presence of this audience that I owe a great deal to the inspiration that I have derived from the life of the Enlightened One." Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi,* 40:368–369.

17. Gandhi, however, deplored the comparison on the basis of his "ordinariness" and the Buddha's divine qualities. Gandhi writes: "First and foremost, it is a mistake to consider me a reincarnation of Buddha or of the Prophet. I have never made any such claim. I am an ordinary man. Of course I do try to follow the principles of life as preached by our scriptures and our great men." Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 95:55.

18. In Nicholas. F. Gier, *The Virtue of Nonviolence from Gautama to Gandhi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 58.

19. M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography, or, The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. Mahadev Desai (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 112.

20. Catherine Clement, *Gandhi: The Power of Pacifism*, trans. Randhir Singh (New York: Abrams, 1996), 38.

21. By utilizing the lens of psychoanalysis Erikson studies the possible underlying hidden meanings of his compulsive anti-sexual behavior. Erikson notes: "I was a psychoanalyst...men of my kind do not merely ask for facts that can be put on the dotted line but really want to discover hidden meanings within the facts and between the lines." E. H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: Norton & Co., 1969), 65.

22. R. Walker, *Sword of Gold: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (London: Indian Independence Union, 1945), 15.

23. Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia: The Great Renunciation* (London: Trübner & Co., 1879). The book presents the life, character, and philosophy of the Buddha.

24. Gandhi, *An Autobiography,* 69.

25. M. G. Bhagat, *Ancient Indian Asceticism* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1976), 160.

26. Quoted in Gier, *The Virtue of Nonviolence*, 59.

27. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi,* 22:159.

28. Ibid., 14:176.

29. G. P. Malalasekera, "Some Aspects of Reality as Taught by Theravāda Buddhism," in *The Indian Mind: Essentials of Indian Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Charles Moore (Honolulu: East-West Center Press and University of Hawaii Press, 1967), 83.

30. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi,* 15:242.

31. De Silva, *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology*, 4–5.

32. Hinduism (principles of *dharma* ethics) and Jainism (five *aṇuvrata,* small vows) recommend a similar set of five ethical principles for spiritual evolution.

33. *Ahiṃsā* is a basic principle of all of the Indian religious traditions. In the Hindu tradition it is considered to be the "highest virtue (*dharma*)."

34. M. K. Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers: Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Krishna Kriplani (New York: Continuum, 1990), 81.

35. Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition, and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse,* rev. ed. (New Delhi: Sage, 1999), 127.

36. *Dhammapada* (*Daṇḍavaggo:* 1), 102.

37. Quoted in Jonathon Schell, *The Unconquerable World* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003), 125.

38. *Dhammapada* (*Dhammaṭṭhavaggo:* 1), 140.

39. Walter O. Kaelber, "Understanding Asceticism—Testing a Typology: Re-

sponse to the Three Preceding Papers," in *Asceticism,* ed. Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 325.

40. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi,* 6:193.

41. Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 79.

42. Louis Dumont discusses the dynamic role of the renouncer in social reform and creating values in *Religion/Politics and History in India: Collected Papers in Indian Sociology* (Paris and Hague: Mouton, 1970), 46.

43. R. N. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 235.

44. They include Swami Dayananda (1824–1883) of the Arya Samaj movement, Swami Vivekananada (1863–1902) of the Vedanta Society, and Swami Sivananda (1887–1963).

45. Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition, and Reform*, 204.

46. Joseph Alter, *Gandhi's Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 51.

47. Gandhi says: "I was anxious to observe *brahmacharya* in thought, word, and deed, and equally anxious to devote the maximum of my time to the *Satyāgraha* struggle and fit myself for by cultivating purity. I was, therefore, led to make further changes and greater restraints upon myself in the matter of food...the new experiments were made from a religious point of view." Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers,* 26.

48. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi,* 14:355.

49. Mahadev Desai reflecting on the sentiments of people during the Salt March led by Gandhi. In Dennis Dalton, *Gandhi's Power: Nonviolence in Action,* 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004), 109.

50. Quoted in Susanne Hoeber Rudoph and Lloyd Rudolph, *The Traditional Roots of Gandhi's Charisma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1967] 1983*),* 6.

51. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, 236.

52. E. H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth*, 107.

53. "From the liked arises grief; from the liked arises fear.... From affection arises grief; from affection arises fear." The *Dhammapada* (*Piyavaggo:* 4–9), 129.

54. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi,* 13:279.

55. Thich Nhat Hanh, *For a Future to Be Possible: Commentaries on the Five Mindfulness Trainings,* rev. ed. (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2007), 48.