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Sitting at the Buddha with the Tanna'im: Walking Through the *Dhammapada* and *Pirke Avot*

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Abstract

This paper examines the parallels between two ancient ethical texts, the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, and the Jewish, *Pirke Avot*. Both of these texts offer the reader insights into what is necessary for maintaining "balance" in the world of ethical requirements for treating each other with respect and dignity. Buddhists and non-Buddhists can read the *Dhammapada* for an understanding of how to maintain balance on the Eightfold Path. Jews and non-Jews can read *Pirke Avot* for a similar understanding of how to complete *mitzvoth*, often translated as "good deeds." Each text offers insights into the other religion, reminding readers that these ethical texts offer similar wisdom, despite extraordinary differences in religious beliefs.

Can a little book help those looking for the path to righteousness? Hindus read, even memorize, the *Bhagavad-Gita* for guidance and instruction. Epictetus offers mild rebukes to modern-day Stoics in his *Art of Living*. My interest here in this paper is to examine how Buddhists and Jews can come together, enriching each others' ethical traditions by examining two ancient texts, still beloved and read by many in each religion. For the Buddhist, the *Dhammapada* provides instruction for how to find balance on the Eightfold path. For the Jew, *Pirke Avot*, or "Sayings of our Fathers," provides a similar view from the ancient Middle East. Both texts are relevant for countless of today's ethical dilemmas.

The *Dhammapada*, written approximately in the same era as *Pirke Avot*, offers the very essence of Buddhist thought and practice. From the 26 chapters divided into 423 verses, we can learn, and even begin to practice, some of the very principles that have meant so much to Buddhists who continue to live a life based on the ethical teachings of the dharma path, or the Middle Way. *Pirke Avot* may be the only text Jews know more than Torah, yet few may think of it as a path of daily instruction. The 108 verses, divided into six chapters, are the defining text of Judaism for many, as well as a collective rabbinic past inherited from the Tanna'im. The text is grounded in references to rabbinic teachers, and its pithy sayingss are intended for practical, ethical situations.

Yet as a Jew mindful of mitzvoth, I am drawn instinctively to the Buddha's instructions, finding more each day how the dharma path serves as an ancillary to all the teachers in Talmudic and rabbinic Judaism. One of many verses of the *Dhammapada* takes me to the litany of the Kol Nidre (a prayer read and chanted on every Yom Kippur), and in those hours of intense reflection, the definite lines between the two religions begin to fade and meld into one: "Think not of the faults of others, of what they have done or not done. Think rather of our own sins, of the things you have done or not done," (Mascaro, 1973, 42-3).

As an American, and as a Westerner, I realize how deeply imbedded are certain beliefs, one of which seems to define the great separation between Asian and Western traditions: the notion of something being "over there," and something being "over here," or the notion of a *this*, or a *that. The more I read Buddhist texts, the more I sense that all of what is here is "one."* The world as we know it is perhaps still in its place, but the notion of separation is more and more questionable. For Jews and other Westerners, history is the record of human events, and history, in particular, defines Jewish tradition. There *is* a past, clearly defined, clearly delineated from anything of the moment, or what might be next in Jewish history. This notion of *was*, *is*, and *will be* continues to define our "path" of Judaism, with history encompassing all of the present and future. Yet the more we can recognize that there is no *this* or *that*, the more we can comprehend that the only opportunity we have as sentient beings is to "be" in the present, the more we may be awakened to living and breathing, in the presence of *Ha Shem* or *Adonai* or *Yud Hey Vuv Hey*, or whatever name we ascribe to a divine presence in this world.

Perhaps the most illuminating concept of Buddhist thought is that there is no separation of anything from anything else, known sometimes through the principle of "all is one." This includes all of nature and all that humans have created. Once we can begin to see that we are all inter-connected to all that is in the universe, we may be more receptive to the notion of tolerance and respect for *all* that is living, as well as all that is non-organic. This may be best understood in my evolving perception of mountains. To me, they are slowly becoming less as they appear to the naked eye. I have even tried to think that maybe those mountains I see are simply optical impressions, and are very likely only illusions in my mind's eye. If that is an optical possibility, then the mountains, and everything else in view, are all one phenomenon. It's getting easier to see how "all is one."

When I was stationed for a year of duty as a Private First Class in the foothills of what was once South Vietnam, I understood that the mountain range I looked to every day in the western horizon was just that: the mountain range bordering Vietnam and Laos. At the time, I certainly didn't think those mountain ranges were any part of me. Nor did I think that the foothills, where I stood as an American on a firebase of 105mm howitzers, were an actual part of me. I had not comprehended, in the midst of artillery barrages into the Song Chang River valley, that the forests, the foothills – the very spaces I defined as nature – were a part of me. As a soldier, I had been commanded to see the space as the enemy, so firing into it became for me – and for many of my companions –an act of self-defense. At the time, I had not comprehended that "our life is the creation of the mind" (Mascaro 1973, 35).

The Nixon Administration decided to bomb those mountains and trails in an effort to force a peace negotiation. I certainly did not feel part of that decision, even though I directed barrages of cannon fire at the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong. At the same time I was ordering, "Fire" onto the enemy, somewhere else in Vietnam a Buddhist monk was diligently trying to establish peace in his country. When the North finally conquered South Vietnam, the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who now means so much to me in my reorienting of time and space, escaped from his country and established a home and retreat (Plum Village) in France. Had I known Thich Nhat Hanh then, I might have questioned why those mountains were not as I once thought, over *there*, but *here*, inside of me.

Years later, I stood on the Golan Heights and listened to our tour guide tell of the great Israeli spy, Eli Cohen, who dropped eucalyptus seeds which quickly grew into groves of trees identifying Syrian artillery batteries aimed at villages and kibbutzim in the Jordan river valley. Even then, I did not comprehend that those groves, and the Golan Heights which were part of the groves, were part of me. As I now read *The Dhammapada* as much as *Pirke Avot*, I am slowly beginning to realize how the world is less and less separated. Through the writings of this Buddhist teacher, I am beginning to see how the world is one, and how all of us, those breathing, as well as mountains and stars, are all one. We can be reminded of this by the writers of Exodus who tried to examine the meaning of God's name, and perhaps the most creative conclusion was "Ehyeh–Asher-Ehyeh" (Exodus 3:14) or "I am who I will be." The longer we read only one text, the longer we will continue to believe and see this as our only guiding text. A journey through *The Dhammapada* can be as enlightening and as confirming as one's own Judaism.

Pirke Avot is not an easily interchangeable text with *The Dhammapada*. Yet it is quite remarkable how similar these voices are, coming from such disparate religions. We know for example how important it is to be "guided" into the tradition of Torah, as Joshua says: "Get yourself a teacher, find someone to study with, and judge everyone favorably" (Kravitz 1993, 5). In a section entitled "Endurance," which includes metaphors of battled-trained elephants, we find the Buddha writing of a similar friendship: "If on the journey of life a man can find a wise and intelligent friend who is good and self controlled, let him go with that traveler; and in joy and recollection, let them overcome the dangers of the journey" (Mascaro 1973, 82). Once we find this connection of guide and companionship in both traditions, the more easily we will see how both the path of Torah and the Eightfold Path of Buddhism have more in common than we might first expect.

What is even more remarkable is that *Pirke Av*ot and *The Dhammapada* each evolved at about the same time, no earlier than the third century B.C.E. And while the *Mishna* (early second century C.E. rabbinic interpretations of Torah), which *Pirke Avot* is part of, developed into its form as we know it from different conversations over the next five centuries, it is difficult to gauge how long the process took for Buddhist monks to gather, compile, edit and shape the *Dhammapada* into literary form. We do know the process was generally completed by the third century B.C.E. Both texts also come out of a rich tradition of wisdom literature, each exemplifying their own ethical paths in different faith traditions. Both have strikingly comparative modes of argument rich in maxims and aphorisms. Rabbi Tarfon is remembered as saying, "The day is short; there is much work [to be done]; [yet,] the laborers are lazy, [even though] the wages are great and the Householder is insistent" (Kravitz, 1993,29). Likewise, the Buddha is also remembered as saying, " The man who arises in faith, who ever remembers his high purpose, whose work is pure, and who carefully considers his work, who in self-possession lives the life of perfection, and who ever, for ever, is watchful, that man shall arise in glory" (Mascaro 1973, 38). These sayings both seem grounded in the notion that work is a noble activity, though one warns about the potential for laziness, and the other affirms that if work is mindful then one is safely traveling on The Path. As one takes a journey through both of these small books of ethical instruction, one can't help but begin to imagine possible conversations of Jews and Buddhists taking place on trade routes from the Middle East toward Asia. Roger Kamenetz, author of *The Jew in the Lotus,* also wondered about this as he reported in his travel memoir that Emperor Ashoka, one of the first conqueror/soldier converts to Buddhism, may have sent missionary monks to the Middle East.

The two texts are also similar in structure, though the oral tradition from which both evolved may have been quite different from what we read today. The *Dhammapada* now

comprises 423 verse/aphorisms, divided into twenty-six thematic chapters such as "Arise," "Watchfulness," and "Endurance." *Pirke Avot* is a collection between 108 or 127 verses (depending upon translations) of sayings of the Tanna'im, rabbinic sages whose commentaries appeared in the *Mishna*. One can almost hear the arguments rising and falling amidst much ongoing debate of sixty or so rabbis over a 500-year period. The *Pirke Avot* tractate of the *Mishna* is now divided into six chapters of equivalent length, with the number of verses ranging from eleven in Chapter VI to twenty-two or twenty-nine verses in Chapter IV. Neither ethical text discussed here is designed to be read sequentially, as there is no clearly defined beginning, no dramatic narrative, and no climax that one might find in ancient world histories such as the Book of Exodus or the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Yet, most readers today read both texts from beginning to end even though one verse does not necessarily lead to the other. The last verses of each text do not provide the kind of closure readers are accustomed to with narratives or sermonic material, yet readers are also aware that wisdom literature seldom provides a dramatic conclusion, but simply an ending of these "sayings."

While the "Sayings of our Fathers" may be based upon gleanings from Torah, and from that, the implication of the 613 mitzvoth, *The Dhammapada* is based upon the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, leading to the Middle Path, or the Eightfold Path. As Jews we are certainly mindful of what Buddhists refer to as suffering. How can we not be? It is the *tsuris* of our history. Torah informs us about that suffering through the Biblical narratives, nearly all of the prophetic writings, and even in the Psalms. But for the Buddha, simple knowledge of that suffering didn't bring the penitent into a peaceful existence. The individual wasn't more tranquil, blissful or near a state of nirvana simply by knowing about suffering. One had to know the source of that suffering, be released from it or at least attempt to cease doing what caused it, and finally, one had to take ethical steps in order to reach any state of well-being. Those steps, the traditional Eight Fold Path, are a way to live mindfully in this world, in balance with the world, and all that is in this world. For Jews the S'hma ("Hear O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One") affirms the existence of God. Yet Buddhists have no interest in a creator god, a sustainer god, or a god of redemption. Often characterized as atheistic, even nihilistic, the Buddhist sense of the past or even the future doesn't have the resonance for history that Jews have. For Jews, history is never old, as it is constantly re-interpreted in the present, retold over the centuries and made meaningful by all the teachers of Torah, including the Tanna'im and all who followed.

Chapter IV of the Tanna'im offers an excellent example of a Jewish "path" toward a clearer realization and aspiration of holiness. Verse 1 offers a glimpse into the psychology of different types of human behavior, and according to the rabbis, each type (wise, mighty, slow to anger, rich, and honorable) has its own mitzvah (commandment) of holiness. The foundation of action, in a Jew's life, is mitzvoth, and this is reflected in verse two by a similar Buddhist notion that good deeds create more good deeds, and likewise, evil deeds lead to more evil deeds. Jews are reminded in verse three not to despise anyone, and not to complain about anything for everything has value. While complaining may bring some immediate solace to the negative spirit, it does little for anyone pursuing a path of holiness. Even the Buddha cautioned against this type of behavior, teaching instead a path of virtue as the only way to reach *nirvana*. We are constantly reminded of the image of the decaying body in Buddhist literature. In fact, that image is often suggested as *the* image to meditate upon, not unlike the fourth verse in Chapter IV which reminds readers of the body's eventual decay: "...Be exceedingly humble of spirit, for the human hope is only the worm" (Kravitz 1993, 58).

How can one pursue a life of holiness, or have any honor, if the name of God is blemished in any way? This is the essence of the latter half of the fourth verse. Though the *Dhammapada* does not refer directly to this principle, the name of Buddha is highly revered, and blemishing the name would seem antithetical to someone who wishes to maintain a moral equilibrium by following the Eightfold Path. Judaism is not abstract, theoretical, and designed simply for reflection and philosophical speculation. Instead, it is a religion of practice, and in verse five of Chapter IV, this principle is reinforced over simply learning Torah in order to teach Torah. This teaching is analogous to not only knowing the Four Noble Truths, not only knowing Buddhist scripture, but also leading a life of balance and centeredness on the Eightfold Path. Just as the Buddha reinforced community with the institution of *sangha*, so too did the rabbis reinforce the notion of connectedness to a community, and not isolated study. Also, as part of verse five, the rabbis reinforced the principle that study of Torah should not lead to profit (at least not until the modern era), for the goal of the rabbi was simply to provide guidance and instruction. Likewise, Buddhist monks are reminded that while the laity supports them with whatever meager provisions, the monks, in turn, shall provide instruction of *dharma*, creating harmony for both.

Verse six of Chapter IV of *Pirke Avot* notes that honoring and dishonoring Torah honors and dishonors the world. Buddha also acknowledges such thoughtlessness when he warns his followers of carelessness in regard to acts of devotion (Mascaro 1973, 79) or "when vows are broken, or when the holy life is not pure" (Ibid., 79). In the chapter entitled "In Darkness,"

Buddha advises, "better to do nothing than do what is wrong" (Ibid.). The path for the Buddhist, even if as a monk in a *sangha*, is always an individual path. Little is said in the *Dhammapada* concerning judicial decisions surrounding legal petitions, or litigants, or judgeships, yet by extension, all of the chapter entitled "Watchfulness" (Ibid., 38-39) applies as well to the Tanna'im's concerns for a proper attitude in a public role. The negative characteristics that lead Buddhists off the Middle Path include unwatchfulness, foolishness, ignorance, and carelessness. These behaviors can only lead a Buddhist away from *nirvana*, the "release" of almost an infinity of suffering. Likewise, the rabbis in Chapter IV, verses seven and eight of *Pirke Avot* advise Jews to be "watchful," particularly as it applies to determining fault in court cases. A person could easily slip into foolishness and arrogance in this role, and if one serves as a judge, more than likely one would see the worst forms of human behavior. Both the Buddha and the rabbis direct individuals to be constantly alert. Far too many dangers exist when carelessness becomes the norm. Perhaps the rabbis would have found Buddha's remark in Chapter nineteen, "Righteousness," to be as equally salient in their own tradition: "A wise man calmly considers what is right and what is wrong, and faces different opinions with truth, non-violence and peace" (Mascaro 1973, 73).

The rabbis warn, in Chapter XIX, verses nine and ten, against devoting too much attention to gaining wealth, and by extension, gaining too much prestige and honor in the community at the expense of study and reflection of Torah. Nothing can be gained, writes Rabbi Meir in verse ten, by neglecting Torah, but abundance of "reward" comes to the Jew who makes Torah a daily path. In similar fashion, the "wealth" of a Buddhist is not determined by his or her financial portfolio, but by how attentive and awake the individual is of the Eightfold Path. The goal is a blissful *nirvana*, and paying only occasional heed to the Path will not only impede the journey, but will affect future lives as well, as actions of this day always affect a karmic future in another life. Better to be mindful of the Path, and to be mindful of Torah.

By now readers can certainly infer that both the rabbis and the Buddhist monks had far more in common concerning the path individuals must follow regardless of whether the instruction leads to the Eightfold Path or Torah. Had the ancient Eastern and Middle Eastern trade routes been even more open to a multiplicity of ideas, we probably would have seen the kind of harmony of ideas that exists today when the Fourteenth Dalai Lama offers to speak with Jews either in Dharmasala, India, or to many gatherings of spiritually minded people around the world. The *Dhammapada* is not all that different from the spirit or intent of *Pirke Avot*, and those sayings of the Jewish rabbis certainly provide resonance to readers of what purportedly the Buddha is remembered as saying in his 40 years of walking and teaching in northern India.

Of the remaining twelve verses in Chapter IV, the rabbis offer a wide range of wisdom for how to live in this world, and sometimes, how to prepare for Olam Ha-ba, or the next world, a concept Buddhists might find as an interesting variation of *samsara* (the cycle of reincarnation) and ultimate *nirvana*. The Torah path these rabbis take is a conservative one, much like the Middle Path. It reminds the Jews of the Roman Empire to be cautious, to be mindful of the task of living on this earth, and to be attentive to the instruction of Torah. Good deeds, of course, are better than transgressions (Mascaro 1973, 62), honor of a student or another teacher is essential to this life on earth, and caution in teaching is always a mindful act (Ibid., 63). Other rabbinic insights focus on the importance of a good name over possessions or position (Ibid.,63-64), living close to Jewish communities (Ibid., 64), letting go of the need to explain why sinners may be wealthy, or accepting the pain that visits the pious (Ibid., 65).

But one of the most intriguing verses in the latter half of Chapter IV reads remarkably like an insight of Buddhist philosophy. Rabbi Yaakov seems to be of the same mind when he argues, "An hour spent in penitence and good deeds in this world is better than all of life in the world to come. An hour of contentment in the world to come is better than all of life in this world" (66). Keep in mind "this [Jewish] world" was a life of suffering and remorse, akin to the political situation of Rome's dominance in Judea. It is helpful to remember that the final release of suffering, in a Buddhist's mind, may come only after many lifetimes, so no comparison can be made between Nirvana and the Pharisaic institution of resurrection of the dead and the world to come. Still, the similarity between the Buddhist doctrine of absence of suffering leading to *nirvana*, and the hint of blissfulness in reflection upon the next world for devoted Jews is certainly, noteworthy.

Chapter 8 of *The Dhammapada* includes fifteen verses which come remarkably close to the sense of *Pirke Avot* IV:17 (Mascaro 1973, 66). By far the closest connection is verse 110, Buddha's comparison of *yetzer ha-ra* (evil inclination) to *yetzer ha-tov* (good inclination): "Better than a hundred years lived in vice, without contemplation, is one single day of life lived in virtue and in deep contemplation" (Mascaro 1973, 51). The Buddha is remembered as saying likewise in the next verse, "one...day...lived in wisdom and in deep contemplation" is far "better than a hundred years lived in ignorance, without contemplation" (Ibid.). The question we might raise is just what is the object of contemplation (perhaps a decaying body, or one of the Four Noble Truths), and what is the absence of that suffering, or what is the contemplated bliss of *nirvana*. While it may be a gross overstatement to suggest the two Traditions merge here in the

"better than" verses, we can see a likeness as to the necessary steps, mitzvoth, or commandments needed to reach both nirvana and *Olam Ha-ba* (the Jewish after life, or world to come).

At this point in *Pirke Avot*, it's almost as if Buddha's monks are God's rabbis, and are speaking harmoniously: one faith speaking of sins of this world, the other, as Buddhists, speaking of release from those sins. Listen to Rabbi Elezar Ha-kappar in verse 21 of Chapter IV: "Envy, lust, and [the pursuit of] glory take a person out of this world" (Kravitz 1993, 68). The Buddha's insights of human behavior (The Four Noble Truths) are universal insights, and in response to this Buddhist-like rabbinic insight about the suffering caused by human desire, the Buddha said in the chapter entitled "Cravings," "...whoever in this world overcomes his selfish cravings, his sorrows fall away from him, like drops of water from a lotus flower" (Mascaro 1973, 83).

By taking just one chapter from one of the most popular Jewish texts, and a few verses from a Buddhist wisdom text, we can begin to see how both monks and rabbis have shared concerns about how to live on this earth without realizing a conversation had actually been taking place. What we can do now is be mindful of our shared traditions concerning human suffering, and acknowledge that both paths, the path of Torah and the Middle Path of Buddha, offer striking resemblances. When one begins to study the two, it may require the same vigor as climbing mountains. It may not be so important to completely scale the mountain. What might be more gratifying is to begin the climb.

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