



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Title: Loving Compassion in Islam and Buddhism: Rahma and Karuna

Author: Reza Shah-Kazemi

Publication: *Religions: A Scholarly Journal* No.1, 2010, pp.43-56.

Abstract: In this article the author intends to show ways in which the Islamic conception of *Rahma* can be seen to serve a function similar to compassion in Mahayana Buddhism, which comes to play a determinative role, elevated as the very principle, cosmological and not simply ethical, which motivates the *Buddhas* and *Bodhisattvas*.

The author analyses how Islam and Buddhism are not so far apart from each other as regards the role of this quality of compassionate love. Despite their very different conceptual starting-points, both traditions stress this human quality as a key ethical trait; and for both traditions, this human quality is inseparable from the Absolute—from *Allah* in Islam, and the *Dharma*, or the Void (*Shunya*) or *Nirvana* in Buddhism.

Copyright permission has been sought from the aforementioned publisher.

The use of materials published on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website indicates an acceptance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies' Conditions of Use. Each copy of the article must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed by each transmission. For all published work, it is best to assume you should ask both the original authors and the publishers for permission to (re)use information and always credit the authors and source of the information.

Loving Compassion in Islam and Buddhism: *Rahma* and *Karuna*

Reza Shah-Kazemi

This is an edited version of an article that originally appeared in *Religions: A Scholarly Journal*. Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue, no.1, 2010, pp.43-56.

- Introduction
- *Rahma*; A Quality of Being
- Oneness and Compassion
- *Rahma* as Creator
- Conclusion

Key words: comparative study, *rahma*, Buddhism, Islam, compassion, *metta*, *maitri-karuna*, loving compassion, Qur'an, *tawhid*, al-Ghazali, Divine Mercy, Hadith

Introduction

Compassion, even on the human plane, is not just a sentiment, it is an existential quality. This existential quality presupposes a concrete sense of participation in the suffering of others, as is expressed by the etymology of the word: com-passion means to 'suffer with' another. The metaphysics of *tawhid* finds its most appropriate ethical expression in this quality, for when the illusion of separation is overcome, the suffering of the 'other' cannot be separated from oneself; the virtues of compassion and mercy, generosity and love thus become the hallmarks of the character of one who has truly realised Unity.

Likewise, but from a different angle, when self-centeredness is overcome, together with the worldliness, subtle or overt, which feeds it, then the same qualities centered on compassionate love will flow forth naturally and spontaneously: these qualities, inherent in the spiritual substance or *fitra* (primordial nature; innate disposition) of each soul, will no longer be constrained or suffocated by coagulations of egotism and worldliness. Rather, compassionate love will emanate to the whole of creation, the compassionate soul will reflect and radiate the all-encompassing grace of God. Speaking of two types, those who reject God and those who believe in Him, the Qur'an declares:

Unto each, the former and the latter, do We extend the gracious gift of thy Lord. And the gracious gift of thy Lord can never be confined (17:20).

This is because God's *Rahma*, being infinite, can be excluded from nowhere, and from nobody: *My loving Compassion encompasses all things (7:156).*

Islam and Buddhism are not so far apart from each other as regards the role of this quality of compassionate love. Despite their very different conceptual starting-points, both traditions stress this human quality as a key ethical trait; and for both traditions, this human quality is inseparable from the Absolute—from *Allah* in Islam, and the *Dharma*, or the Void (*Shunya*) or *Nirvana* in Buddhism.ⁱ

In this article we intend to show ways in which the Islamic conception of *Rahma* helps to render explicit what is largely implicit in the earliest texts of the Pali canon; in this respect, it can be seen to serve a function similar to that of Mahayana Buddhism, wherein compassion comes to play a determinative role, elevated as the very principle, cosmological and not simply ethical, which motivates the *Buddhas* and *Bodhisattvas*.

We would therefore argue that for both Muslims and Buddhists, the quality of loving compassion must determine the core of one's personality, and it must dominate the nature of one's conduct in relation to others. This ideal, at once ethical and spiritual, derives its ultimate justification and transformative power from the fact that it expresses on the human plane a principle which is rooted in the heart of the Absolute.

***Rahma*: A Quality of Being**

In both traditions compassion is inseparable from love, *mahabba* in Islam and *metta* in Buddhism.ⁱⁱ In Buddhism one even finds the compound *maitri-karuna* 'love-compassion' which expresses the intertwining of these two principles; in Islam, likewise, *Rahma* cannot be adequately translated by the single English word 'compassion' or 'mercy', but requires the addition of the element of love.

A compelling reason for translating *Rahma* as 'loving compassion' and not just 'compassion'—and certainly not just 'mercy'—is provided by the Prophet's use of this word in the following incident. At the conquest of Mecca, certain captives were brought to the Prophet. There was a woman among them, running frantically and calling for her baby; she found him, held him to her breast and fed him. The Prophet said to his companions: 'Do you think this woman would cast her child into the fire?' We said, 'No, she could not do such a thing.' He said, 'God is more lovingly compassionate (*arham*) to His servants than is this woman to her child.'ⁱⁱⁱ The *Rahma* of God is here defined by reference to a quality which all can recognise as love: the mother's acts of compassion and mercy stream forth from an overwhelming organic love for her child. One cannot love another without feeling compassionate to that person, while one *can* feel compassion for someone without necessarily loving that person.

The Jewish scholar Ben-Shemesh goes so far as to translate the *basmala* as 'In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Beloved' to bring home this key aspect of love proper to the root of *Rahma*.^{iv} He argues that in both Arabic and Hebrew the meaning of love is strongly present in the root *r-h-m*, and gives the following evidence: Psalm number 18 contains the phrase: *Erhamha Adonay*—'I love thee my Lord'.^v In Aramaic/Syriac, the root *r-h-m* specifically denotes love, rather than 'compassion'. One can thus feel the resonance of this Syriac connotation within the Arabic *Rahma*. Moreover, there is epigraphic evidence that early

Christian sects in southern Arabia used the name *Rahmanan* as a name of God, and this would probably have been understood as ‘The Loving’.^{vi}

God’s *Rahma* is described by the Prophet as being greater than that of the woman for her child, implying that the transcendent prototype of this most loving and compassionate of all human qualities is found in the divine Reality. It is interesting to note that the Buddha refers to an almost identical image in order to bring home the meaning of *metta*, the love that is inseparable from *karuna*. This is from a passage in the *Metta-sutta* (‘Teaching on love’) in the Pali canon:

Even as a mother watches over and protects her child, her only child, so with a boundless mind should one cherish all living beings, radiating friendliness over the entire world, above, below, and all around without limit. So let him cultivate a boundless goodwill towards the entire world, uncramped, free from ill will or enmity. Standing or walking, sitting or lying down, during all his waking hours, let him establish this mindfulness of goodwill, which men call the highest state!^{vii}

It is out of compassion, indeed, that the Buddha preached his *Dharma*: his desire was to liberate people from suffering by enlightening them as to its cause, and showing them the means—the ‘noble eightfold path’—to eliminate that cause. It is clear, then, that even in early Buddhism compassion was not just a cardinal virtue, it went to the very heart of the Buddhist *upaya*, the ‘expedient means’ or ‘saving strategy.’ However, it is not hard to see that in the later texts, those from which the Mahayana branch of Buddhism derive, the stress on compassion goes well beyond anything found in the earliest texts, those of the Pali canon, upon which the Theravada branch of Buddhism is based.

In the latter, compassion is indeed fundamental and indispensable, but it remains a human virtue. In Mahayana texts, by contrast, it takes on altogether mythological dimensions, and enters into the definition of what most closely approximates the Personal God in Buddhism, namely, the Buddha of Infinite Light, *Amitabha*. By tracing the compassionate function of Gautama the sage back to its principal root, Mahayana Buddhism helps to solve a logical problem within the very structure of Theravada Buddhism, or at least makes explicit what is implicit in the earlier tradition. The logical problem is this: If, as the Buddha preached, there is no ultimate reality pertaining to the individual soul (this being the doctrine of *anatta*, ‘no soul’), from where does the compassion derive its substance, and its enlightening efficacy? If the soul is but a conglomeration of empirical and psychic envelopes (*skandhas*), with no essential reality, can the compassion manifested by such a soul have a more substantial reality than these ‘envelopes’ themselves? In other words, what is the ultimate source of the compassion of the Buddha?

A simple answer would be that this source is none other than the enlightened state itself: compassion flows forth from the very nature of Nirvana or *Shunya*. But the question remains: how does compassion spring forth from an *impersonal* or supra-personal state, when the very nature of compassion is so clearly *personal*, that is, it so intimately implies a personal will, actively and compassionately involved in the lives of suffering humanity, a personal will which, moreover, must at the same time be transcendent or absolute. It must be transcendent, otherwise it could not save relative beings through its compassion; but it must also assume a dimension of relativity, otherwise it would have no relation to living human beings. It is precisely this

combination of absolute transcendence and personal compassion which is expressed in the Islamic conception of divine *Rahma*, and in the various heavenly Buddhas depicted in later Mahayana texts.^{viii}

According to these texts, the principle of compassion, so perfectly embodied in Gautama the sage, is depicted as a principle transcending his own empirical individuality. He insisted that one can only 'see' the Buddha in the light of the reality of the Dharma, the supreme principle,^{ix} of which he is an embodiment: 'Those who by my form did see me, and those who followed me by my voice, wrong are the efforts they engaged in; me those people will not see. From the Dharma one should see the Buddha, for the dharma-bodies are the guides.'^x The compassion proper to the *Dharma* is universal; Gautama the sage manifested this quality in one particular modality. This relationship between the particular and the universal is expressed in Buddhism by means of the mythology of cosmic Buddhas existing in unimaginably distant aeons prior to the earthly appearance of the Gautama. Mahayana texts therefore present a picture of a 'Personal God' with diverse traits—the *Adi-Buddha*, *Vairochana*, *Amitabha*, etc.—without whose grace and mercy, one cannot attain salvation into the celestial domains known as the 'Pure Land', let alone that state of *Nirvana* wherein the various Buddhas themselves are all transcended.

It is clear, then, that Mahayana Buddhism comes close to the Islamic conception of divinity as regards the root of the quality of compassion. Both traditions make explicit a metaphysically irrefutable principle, one about which the Buddha himself was silent, but which he did not contradict: compassion cannot be exhausted by its purely human manifestation; on the contrary, it derives all its power and efficacy from its supra-human, absolute or 'divine' source. This source is transcendent, but insofar as it radiates towards all creatures, it assumes a 'personal' dimension, for it consists of an active, conscious and loving will to save all creatures: and to speak of such a will is to speak of some kind of 'person' directing that will.

In one respect, then, this can be seen as a personalisation of the Absolute, bestowing upon the pure, ineffable and inconceivable Essence a personal or anthropomorphic dimension, a dimension without which it cannot enter into engagement with human persons; for the pure Absolute has no relation whatsoever with any conceivable relativity.

But this personal dimension does not in any way diminish the intrinsic absoluteness of the Absolute; the manifestation of such qualities as compassion, love, and mercy does not exhaust the nature of the Principle thus manifested. In Islamic terms, the pure Absolute is the Essence (*al-Dhat*), transcending the Names and Qualities which are assumed by the Absolute in its relationship with the world; transcending these Names and Qualities implies transcending those 'personal' dimensions of God which presuppose and manifest these Names and Qualities.

The Islamic synthesis between two conceptions of God—the supra-Personal and the Personal—can be seen as analogous to the synthesis effected by Mahayana Buddhism between the two dimensions of the Absolute, for the personal and supra-personal dimensions of *Allah*, comprising all the qualities designated by all of the divine Names, are in perfect harmony and perfect synchronicity. There is no contradiction between asserting, on the one hand, that the Essence of God infinitely transcends all conceivable 'personal' qualities, and on the other, that God assumes these personal qualities for the sake of entering into compassionate, enlightening and saving

relationship with His creatures. This Islamic synthesis can help to show that what has been called Mahayana ‘theism’ does not violate early Buddhism’s insistence on the impersonal nature of the Absolute—the transcendence of the *Dharma/Nirvana/Shunya*—vis-à-vis all conceivable qualities, personal or otherwise.

Oneness and Compassion

Islam also helps to answer the question which might be posed to a Buddhist: what is the connection between the metaphysics of unity—in terms of which there appears to be no ‘other’, no ‘dualism’, *Samsara* and *Nirvana* being ultimately identical—and the quality of compassion—which logically presupposes both an agent and a recipient of compassion, thus, a duality? Or it might be asked: is there a contradiction between the absolute transcendence of Reality, and the compassionate manifestation of this Reality?

We would answer in terms of Islamic metaphysics that the oneness of Reality strictly *implies* compassion. For the oneness of God is not simply exclusive, it is also inclusive—it is both *Ahad* and *Wahid*, it is both transcendent and immanent. As *al-Wahid*, all-inclusive oneness, God encompasses all things, whence such divine Names as *al-Wasi*, ‘the Infinitely Capacious’ and *al-Muhit*, ‘the All-Encompassing’. Now it is from this all-embracing dimension of divine reality that compassion springs: for it is not just as being or knowledge, presence or immanence, that God encompasses all, it is also as *Rahma*: *My Rahma encompasses all things*, as we saw above. The angels, indeed, give priority to God’s *Rahma* over His knowledge (*‘Ilm*) when addressing Him as the one who encompasses all things: *You encompass all things in Rahma and ‘Ilm* (40:7).^{xi}

It might still be objected: God is certainly ‘merciful’ but He should not be called ‘compassionate’ as He does not ‘suffer’ with any creature. Mercy, it has been argued, is the more appropriate word by which to translate *Rahma*. One may reply as follows: insofar as compassion is a human virtue, it cannot but be rooted in a divine quality; it is this divine quality of *Rahma* which serves as the transcendent archetype of the human virtue of compassion. The relationship between this divine quality and its human reflection is characterised by two apparently contradictory principles: similarity (*tashbih*) and incomparability (*tanzih*).

Thus, in respect of *tashbih*, God as ‘The Compassionate’ can metaphorically be said to manifest sympathy for us in our suffering; and it is out of this ‘com-compassion or ‘sym-pathy’ that He graciously lifts us out of our suffering. However, this conception needs its complement: the point of view deriving from the principle of *tanzih*: inasmuch as the quality designated by ‘The Compassionate’ has no self-subsistent essence, but subsists solely through the Essence as such, it cannot possibly be subject to any relativity. The inner dimension of this divine quality must perforce transcend the sphere within which suffering and other such relativities are situated, failing which it would not be a *transcendent* quality, that is: one that is rooted in the utter transcendence of the divine Essence.

Conversely, on the human plane, compassion as *Rahma* is evidently a virtue which one must acquire and cultivate; it must therefore be present in God, failing which our human quality of compassion would lack any divine principle; compassion would then be a human effect without a divine cause. This is made clear in the prophetic saying on the *Rahma* of the mother for her child: human compassion is akin to the compassion of God for all creatures, except that divine compassion is Absolute and Infinite, while human compassion is relative and finite. The essence of the quality is one and the same, only its ontological intensity, or mode of manifestation, is subject to gradation.

The aspect of transcendence proper to God implies that this attribute, when ascribed to God, has an absolute and infinite quality, in contrast to the relative, finite participation in that quality by human beings. In the human context, then, compassion manifests two things: a virtue whose essence is divine, on the one hand, and a human capacity to suffer, on the other.

In the divine context, the transcendent source of human compassion is affirmed, but the susceptibility to suffering, which accompanies the human condition, is totally absent. As between the human virtue and the divine quality—or simply: between the human and the divine—there is both, essential continuity and existential discontinuity, analogical participation and ontological distinction, *tashbih* and *tanzih*.

Another way of resolving the apparent contradiction between divine compassion and divine unity is provided by al-Ghazali. If compassion be understood as a mode of love, then one can reformulate the question and ask whether it is possible to ascribe love to God: can God be susceptible to desire for His creatures, when He possesses perfectly and infinitely all that He could possibly desire? Can the Absolute desire the relative? Al-Ghazali addresses this question, first in theological mode, and then in terms of the metaphysics of oneness, from the point of view of *ma'rifa* (spiritual knowledge). One can legitimately apply the same word, love (*mahabba*), both to man and to God; but the meaning of the word changes depending on the agent of love.

Human love is defined as an inclination (*mayl*) of the soul towards that which is in harmony with it, beauty both outward and inward, seeking from another soul the consummation of love. Through this love it attains completeness, a mode of perfection which cannot be attained within itself. Such love, al-Ghazali asserts, cannot be ascribed to God, in whom all perfections are infinitely and absolutely realised. However, from a higher, metaphysical point of view, one can indeed say that God loves His creatures. God's love is absolutely real, but His love is not for any 'other' being or entity. Rather, it is for Himself: for His own Essence, qualities and acts. There is nothing in being but His Essence, His qualities and His acts. Hence, when the Qur'an asserts that '*He loves them*' (5:54), this means that '*God does indeed love them* [all human souls], but in reality He loves nothing other than Himself, in the sense that He is the totality [of being], and there is nothing in being apart from Him.'

^{xii}

Al-Ghazali demonstrates that God is the entirety of being by reference to the holy utterance (*hadith qudsi*), in which God speaks in the first person, on the tongue of the Prophet: 'My slave draws near to Me through nothing I love more than that which I have made obligatory for him. My slave never ceases to draw near to Me through supererogatory acts until I love

him. And when I love him, I am his hearing by which he hears, his sight by which he sees, his hand by which he grasps, and his foot by which he walks.’^{xiii}

It is the saint, the *wali Allah* (literally: friend of God), who comes to understand the reality that God alone is—that there is no reality but the divine reality—and this understanding comes through effacement, *fana*’, in that reality, and this, in turn is the function of God’s love: ‘My slave never ceases to draw near ... until I *love* him.’ It is from this divine love that the saint comes to see that God loves all creatures, and that the reality of this love is constituted by God’s infinite love of Himself. This love is expressed not just by the term *mahabba* but also by *Rahma*, which *encompasses all things*.

Rahma as Creator

Turning now to another aspect of compassion, that of its creative power, we see again that what is left implicit in early Buddhism is rendered altogether explicit both in Islam and in such Mahayana traditions as *Jodo Shin*. In both traditions, the Creator is nothing other than the ‘All-Compassionate’, or the ‘All-Loving’; but whereas this conception is enshrined in the very heart of the Qur’an, it emerges in Buddhism only in certain Mahayana traditions.

The Muslim consecrates every important action with the utterance of the *basmala*, the phrase: *Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim*. This formula also initiates each of the 114 chapters of the Qur’an (except one). It is altogether appropriate that all ritual and significant action be initiated with a recollection of the compassionate source of creation. In terms of the two divine Names deriving from the root of *Rahma*, the first, *al-Rahman* is normally used to refer to the creative power of *Rahma*, and the second, *al-Rahim*, to its salvific power. Combining these two properties of loving compassion, the creative and redemptive, one sees that ultimately nothing can escape or be separated from God’s all-embracing *Rahma*.

This is why calling upon *al-Rahman* is tantamount to calling upon God: *Call upon Allah or call upon al-Rahman* (17:110). If *al-Rahman* is so completely identified with the very substance of God, then it follows that the *Rahma* which so quintessentially defines the divine nature is not simply ‘mercy’ or ‘compassion’ but is rather the infinite love and perfect beatitude of ultimate reality, which overflows into creation in the myriad forms assumed by mercy and compassion, peace and love.

Rahma is thus to be understood primarily in terms of a love which gives of itself: what it gives is what it is, transcendent beatitude, which creates out of love, and, upon contact with Its creation, assumes the nature of loving compassion and mercy, these being the dominant motifs of the relationship between God and the world. As was seen above, God’s transcendent *Rahma* is alluded to by the Prophet in terms of the most striking expression of *Rahma* on earth—that expressed by a mother who, after searching frantically for her baby, clutches it to her breast and feeds it.

‘*Call upon Allah or call upon al-Rahman; whichever you call upon, unto Him belong the most beautiful names*’ (17:110). It should be noted in this verse that all the names are described as ‘most beautiful’, including therefore all the names of rigour as well as those of gentleness. But

the most important point to note here is that the name *al-Rahman* is practically co-terminous with the name *Allah*, indicating that the quality of loving mercy takes us to the very heart of the divine nature.

In two verses we are told that *Rahma* is ‘written’ upon the very Self of God: *He has written mercy upon Himself* (6:12); *Your Lord has written mercy upon Himself* (6:54). The word *kataba*, ‘he wrote’, implies a kind of inner prescription, so that *Rahma* can be understood as a kind of inner law governing the very *nafs*, the Self or Essence of God. The use of the image of ‘writing’ here can be seen as a metaphor for expressing the metaphysical truth that *Rahma* is as it were ‘inscribed’ within the deepest reality of the divine nature. God’s ‘inscription’ upon Himself is thus God’s description of Himself, of His own deepest nature.

The creative aspect of the divine *Rahma* is vividly brought home in the chapter entitled ‘*al-Rahman*’ (Sura number 55), it is *al-Rahman* who ‘*taught the Qur’an, created man, taught him discernment*’ (verses 1-3). The whole of this chapter evokes and invokes the reality of this quintessential quality of God. The blessings of Paradise are described here in the most majestic and attractive terms; but so too are the glories, beauties and harmonies of God’s entire cosmos, including all the wonders of virgin nature, these verses being musically punctuated by the refrain: *so which of the favours of your Lord can you deny?*

In this chapter named after *al-Rahman*, then, we are invited to contemplate the various levels at which *Rahma* fashions the substance of reality: the *Rahma* that describes the deepest nature of the divine; the *Rahma* that is musically inscribed into the very recitation of the chapter; the *Rahma* that creates all things; the *Rahma* that reveals itself through the Qur’an and through all the signs (*ayat*) of nature. One comes to see that God has created not only *by Rahma*, and *from Rahma* but also *for Rahma*: ... *except those upon whom God has mercy: for this did He create them* (11:119); and *within Rahma*: *My Rahma encompasses all things* (7:156).

Combining these two properties of loving compassion, the creative and redemptive, or the ontological and salvific, we see why it is that ultimately nothing can escape or be separated from God’s all-embracing *Rahma*, which is the divine matrix containing the cosmos. The word ‘matrix’ should be taken quite literally, in relation to its root: ‘mother’. The word for womb, *rahim*, derives from the same root as *Rahma*.

The entire cosmos is not just brought into being by *Rahma*, it is perpetually encompassed by *Rahma* which nourishes it at every instant, as the mother’s womb nourishes and encompasses the embryo growing within it. One should note here that in Buddhism, one of the terms denoting the Buddha is *Tathagatagarbha*, which literally means the ‘womb’ (*garbha*) of the Tathagata, the ‘one thus gone’. This womb or matrix not only contains all things, it is also contained within the soul, being one with the immanent Buddha-nature (*Buddhadhatu*) which each individual must strive to realise.

In the Islamic worldview, God’s *Rahma* is not just mercy; rather it is the infinite love and overflowing beatitude of ultimate reality, one of whose manifestations is mercy. In this light, one can better appreciate such perspectives as the following, within Jodo Shin Buddhism: ‘The inner truth is: From the Eternal Love do all beings have their birth’.^{xiv} Such a statement

articulates a dimension of causality left completely out of account by the earlier Buddhist scriptures, where the entire emphasis was on escape from the round of births and deaths.

The only important point about the ‘birth’ of beings was the existence of the ‘unborn’ to which one must flee for refuge: the process by which beings were born was thus seen as a process of enslavement to the ineluctability of suffering and death. In Mahayana Buddhism, however, one can find expressions of love and compassion which are identified with the creative power of the Absolute. This passage from *Naturalness* shows that the Absolute reveals its ‘Eternal Life’ through the dimension of its ‘Great Compassion’:

Amida is the Supreme Spirit from whom all spiritual revelations grow, and to whom all personalities are related. Amida is at once the Infinite Light (*Amitabha*) and the Eternal Life (*Amitayus*). He is at once the Great Wisdom (*Mahaprajna: daichi*)—the Infinite Light—and the Great Compassion (*Mahakaruna: daihi*)—the Eternal Life. The Great Compassion is creator while the Great Wisdom contemplates.^{xv}

Some lines later, we read about the unitive power of love; this can be compared with the compassionate love which is spiritually required and logically implied by the metaphysics of *tawhid*: ‘In love ... the sense of difference is obliterated and the human heart fulfils its inherent purpose in perfection, transcending the limits of itself and reaching across the threshold of the spirit-world.’^{xvi}

In love, *the sense of difference is obliterated*: the unity of being, which may be conceptually understood through knowledge, is spiritually realised through love, whose infinite creativity overflows into a compassion whose most merciful act is to reveal this very oneness. To return to al-Ghazali: the perfect and eternal love of God creates the human being in a disposition which ever seeks proximity to Him, and furnishes him with access to the pathways leading to the removal of the veils separating him from God, such that he comes to ‘see’ God by means of God Himself. ‘And all this is the act of God, and a grace bestowed upon him [God’s creature]: and such is what is meant by God’s love of him.’^{xvii}

This enlightening grace of God towards His creatures is constitutive of His love for them, a love which in reality is nothing other than His love for Himself. Human love and compassion, by means of which *the sense of difference is obliterated* between self and other, can thus be seen as a unitive reflection here of the oneness of the love of God for Himself within Himself. Absolute compassion and transcendent oneness, far from being mutually exclusive are thus harmoniously integrated in an uncompromisingly unitive *tawhid*.

The compassion which we have been examining is clearly an overflow of the beatitude which defines an essential aspect of ultimate Reality, the oneness of which embraces all things by virtue of this compassion, precisely. Inward beatitude, proper to the One, and outward compassion, integrating the many, is a subtle and important expression of the spiritual mystery of *tawhid*. We observe in this affirmation of *tawhid* another conceptual resonance between the two traditions, a resonance made clear by the following verses of Milarepa, the great poet-saint of Tibet:

Without realising the truth of Many-Being-One

Even though you meditate on the Great Light,
You practice but the View-of-Clinging.
Without realising the unity of Bliss and Void,
Even though on the Void you meditate,
You practice only nihilism.^{xviii}

The truth of ‘Many-Being-One’ can be read as a spiritual expression of *tawhid*, and mirrors many such expressions in Islamic mysticism, indeed, the literal meaning of *tawhid* being precisely a dynamic integration, not just a static oneness. It is derived from the form of the verb, *wahhada*, meaning ‘to make one’. Phenomenal diversity is thus integrated into principal unity by means of the vision unfolding from this understanding of *tawhid*. In these verses, Milarepa tells one of his disciples that however much he may meditate on the supernal Light, if he regards that Light as being separate from all things by way of transcendence, then he cannot realise the immanence of that Light in all that exists, that immanence by virtue of which the ‘many’ become ‘one’, the ‘face’ of reality being visible in everything that exists. In the absence of this vision, then meditation on the Light results only in ‘clinging’—clinging, that is, to a false distinction between the One and the many, a duality which will imprison the meditator within the realm of multiplicity.

It is when Milarepa addresses the intrinsic nature of the Void, however, that the similarity with the Islamic conception of the beatific *rahma* of God emerges in a striking manner. ‘Without realising the unity of Bliss and Void’, any meditation on the Void is but nihilistic. The Void is intrinsically blissful, or it is not the Void. *Nirvana* and the Void (*Shunya*) are identical in essence, the term *Nirvana* stressing the blissful nature of the state wherein one is conscious of the Absolute, and the term ‘Void’ stressing the objective nature of the Absolute, transcending all things are ‘full’—full, that is, of *false* being.

Milarepa’s verse makes clear this identity of essence, and shows moreover that it is precisely because the Void is overflowing with beatitude that the experience of the Void cannot but be blissful: it is far from a nihilistic negation of existence and consciousness. Knowing and experiencing the beatitude of the Void thus cannot but engender in the soul a state of being reflecting this beatitude, and a wish to share that beatitude with all beings: such a wish being the very essence of compassion, which is not simply a capacity to feel the suffering of others as one’s own—which articulates one level of ethical *tawhid*—but also, at a higher level of *tawhid*, a capacity to bring that suffering to an end through making accessible the mercy and felicity ever-flowing from ultimate Reality. This is the message—which is immediately intelligible to any Muslim—of the following verses of Milarepa:

If in meditation you still tend to strive,
Try to arouse for all a great compassion,
Be identified with the All-Merciful.^{xix}

Here, we see the All-Merciful being identified with Absolute Reality, referred to earlier as the Void, but here, the character of the Void is clearly affirmed as infinite mercy. To identify with this mercy is to identify with the Absolute; arousing for all ‘a great compassion’ means infusing into one’s soul a quality which reflects the infinite compassion of the Absolute. One from whom

compassion flows to all is one in whom ‘the overflowing Void-Compassion’, as Milarepa calls it in another verse, has been realised: it ceaselessly overflows from the Absolute to the relative, and to the extent that one has made oneself ‘void’ for its sake, one becomes a vehicle for the transmission of the Compassion of the Void:

Rechungpa, listen to me for a moment.
From the centre of my heart stream
Glowing beams of light.

...
This shows the unity of mercy and the Void.^{xx}

Conclusion

To conclude this section, it may be objected that however remarkable be the similarities between the Islamic and the Jodo Shin conceptions of the loving compassion that articulates the creativity of the Absolute, Jodo Shin cannot be taken as representative of the broad Buddhist tradition, and is rather an exception proving the rule. To this, we would reply that the Jodo Shin presentation of this crucial theme—God as Creator through compassion—does not prove that the two traditions of Islam and Buddhism can be crudely equated as regards this theme; rather, it simply demonstrates that the differences between the Islamic conception of God as Creator through compassion and the Buddhist silence on the question of such a Creator need not be seen as the basis for a reciprocal rejection.

Rather, the very fact that at least one Buddhist school of thought affirms the idea of a compassionate Creator shows that there is no absolute incompatibility between the two traditions as regards this principle. There is no need to claim that the principle plays an analogous role in both traditions, far from it: definitive, central and inalienable in Islam; and conceivable, possible, and, at least, not absolutely undeniable in Buddhism.

ⁱ It is all too often stated that Buddhism is ‘atheistic’, insofar as it does not speak about the Personal God. But, as Frithjof Schuon explains, the Buddhist notion of the Void, or of extinction, is God conceived in subjective mode, as a ‘state’; what is called ‘God’ in the theistic traditions is conversely, the Void considered objectively, as principle. F. Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1993), p.19. See also our *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2010), on which this article is based.

ⁱⁱ *Anukampa* and *daya*, translated as ‘sympathy’, are closely related to the idea of compassion. See Harvey Aronson, *Love and Sympathy in Theravada Buddhism* (Delhi, 1980), p.11. As Reverend Tetsuo Unno notes in his introduction to Kanamatsu’s *Naturalness* (p.xiii), the author uses the English word ‘love’ to translate *karuna*, normally translated as ‘compassion’.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bukhari, *Sahih, Kitab al-Adab, bab 18 hadith no. 5999* (Bukhari summarised: p.954, no.2014); Muslim, *Sahih, Kitab al-Tawba, hadith no. 6978*.

^{iv} See A. Ben Shemesh, ‘Some Suggestions to Qur’an Translators’, in *Arabica*, vol.16, no.1, 1969, p.82.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} See Albert Jamme, ‘Inscriptions on the Sabaean Bronze Horse of the Dumbarton Oaks Collection’, in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 8 (1954), pp. 323-324 et passim.

^{vii} E. Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures* (Baltimore, 1968), p.186.

^{viii} This celestial level of the manifestation of the Buddha-principle is referred to as *Sambhoga-kaya*, in contradistinction to the *Dharma-kaya*—which pertains to the supra-manifest Essence—and the *Nirmana-kaya*, the human form of the earthly Buddha.

^{ix} Marco Pallis, in his important essay, ‘Dharma and Dharmas as Principle of Inter-religious Communication’, shows convincingly that the concept of ‘Dharma’ is a bridge linking Buddhism to the other religious traditions: ‘If Dharma corresponds, on the one hand, to the absoluteness and infinitude of the Essence, the dharmas for their part correspond to the relativity and contingency of the accidents.’ M. Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), p.103. It should be noted that just as Dharma can mean both Reality and the Law or Norm or Rectitude which leads to that Reality, so the Arabic concept of *Haqq* refers both to the ultimate Reality and the human obligations and duties fashioned by conformity to that Reality.

^x *Vajracchedika*, 26a, b. Cited in *Buddhist texts through the Ages* eds. E. Conze, I.B. Horner, D. Snelgrove, A. Waley (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1954), p.144.

^{xi} It is interesting to note that in Tibetan Buddhism, there is likewise a certain priority of compassion over knowledge, as far as the manifestation of these qualities is concerned on earth, for the Dalai Lama, representing the Bodhisattva of compassion (Chenrezig, the Tibetan name of Avalokiteshvara) has priority over the Panchen Lama, who represents the Buddha of Light (Opagmed, the Tibetan name for Amitabha). See M. Pallis, *The Way and the Mountain* (London: Peter Owen, 1991), pp.161-162.

^{xii} Al-Ghazali here cites the saying of Shaykh Sa‘id al-Mayhini. This is from ‘The Book of love and longing and intimacy and contentment’ of his *Ihya’ ‘ulūm al-din* (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1992), book 6, part 4, vol. 5, p.221.

^{xiii} *An-Nawawi’s Forty Hadith*, p.118, no.38. It is cited there from Bukhari, *Kitab al-riqaq*, p.992, no.2117.

^{xiv} Kenryo Kanamatsu, *Naturalness—A Classic of Shin Buddhism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2002), p.113.

^{xv} Ibid., p.63.

^{xvi} Ibid., p.64.

^{xvii} Al-Ghazali, *Ihya'*, op. cit., pp.221-222.

^{xviii} *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, (tr. Garma C.C. Chang) (Boston & Shaftsbury: Shambhala, 1989),vol. 2, p.526.

^{xix} Ibid., vol.2, p.561.

^{xx} Ibid., vol.2, p.445.