

**JOHN WESLEY'S VIEW OF SALVATION AS LIBERATION:
A Perspective of *Dukkha*-ridden People in Myanmar Context**

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Introduction

John Wesley, a travelling evangelist, emphasized *salvation* in his ministry. In the 18th century, remarkably, he founded *Methodism* during a time when Christians were spiritually weak in England. God used him to awaken and revive their lives. Wesley also challenged the ministry of the Anglican Church (or Church of England). He is considered an evangelical as well as a liberal. For him, salvation is not only for saving *souls*, but also for liberating people's lives from bondage. Wesley did not neglect such social issues. In a Myanmar context of being a Buddhist-dominated country, it is essential for Christians to employ *interreligious dialogue*—a way of theological reflection which engages different religious beliefs and their concepts.¹ The purpose is to study Wesley's theological view of salvation as liberation and Buddhism's *dharmalogical*² view of liberation from *dukkha*, a term which basically means "suffering". This paper also challenges the Wesleyan community (i.e. the Methodists) in Myanmar, to examine their ministry. It is hoped that they might join with Buddhists in liberating and transforming the country. We will consider this: What is the present situation of the Methodist churches in Myanmar? Can she reach beyond Christianity?

1. The Story of a *Dukkha*-ridden People in Myanmar

This section briefly looks at the concept of *dukkha* and illustrates the real-life story of the common people under the Myanmar military regime during 1962-2011.

1.1. *Dukkha*: All Kinds of Suffering

The Buddhist term *dukkha* is derived from a Pali word. Its origin is a Sanskrit word. Ram Kumar Ratnam and Bhaskara Rao, who studied *dukkha* in early Buddhism, describe:

'Dukkha' in Pali or 'dukkha' in Sanskrit is a compound of two words 'du' and 'kha.' The prefix 'du' is used in the sense of 'vile' (kucchita). It signifies something 'bad', 'disagreeable', 'uncomfortable' or 'unfavourable.' The suffix 'kha' is used in the sense 'empty' (tuccha). It signifies 'emptiness' or 'unreality'. Therefore, *dukkha* stands for something that is 'vile' and 'imaginary'.

¹ In doing theological interreligious dialogue scholars attempt to find similarities between different religions. These findings can help in our mutual understanding in a religiously pluralistic world and in building a peaceful world together, in addition to fostering social change.

² The term *dharmalogical* is an adjective form of *dharmalogy*, which means "a study of the truth taught by the Buddha, or of the teaching of the Buddha, or of the Sermon of the Buddha."

Buddhaghosa³ is the opinion that things that are impermanent, harmful and devoid of substantiality are characterised otherwise by ignorant people and this leads to pain and misery. Hence, these are called *dukkha*.⁴

In his very first sermon, Gautama Buddha preached and taught the doctrine of *Dukkha* – The Four Noble Truths (*Dukkha-ariyasacca*), the central themes and foundation of Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths are:

- (i) *Dukkha*,
- (ii) *Samudaya*, the arising or origin of *dukkha*,
- (iii) *Nirodha*, the cessation of *dukkha*, and
- (iv) *Magga*, the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*.⁵

The term *dukkha* refers to a bad state and generally corresponds to a number of words in English—suffering, pain, unsatisfactoriness, sorrow, affliction, anxiety, dissatisfaction, discomfort, anguish, stress, misery, and frustration. There are three aspects of the concept of *dukkha* in Buddhism:

- (i) *Dukkha* as ordinary suffering (*dukkha-dukkha*),
- (ii) *Dukkha* as produced by change (*viparinama-dukkha*) and
- (iii) *Dukkha* as conditioned states (*samkhara-dukkha*).⁶

Ven. Nai Teja's definition of *dukkha* is worthy of quoting here:

- (i) Dukkha-Dukkha is the most common suffering. It means the ordinary feeling of suffering due to sickness, old-age, death, loss of friends, parents, children, and so on. This sort of suffering is very often experienced in our daily lives. It also includes physical and mental suffering such as pain, sorrow, etc.
- (ii) Viparinama-Dukkha means changes of existing favourable conditions in life. A happy feeling or condition is just a moment; it is not permanent, everlasting. It is always changing. For instance, when a happy feeling changes to an unhappy feeling, there arises, or it produces, unhappiness, disappointment, misery, etc. This sort of suffering is produced by a changing condition.
- (iii) Sankhara-Dukkha is unlike the above two Dukkhas; it is the most important aspect. It is very deep and difficult to understand. It is described as unsatisfactoriness and is experienced due to conditioned state. It is necessary to make an analysis of an individual or being in order to understand this Sankhara-Dukkha property.⁷

The Buddhist concept of *dukkha* "includes not merely physical and mental suffering, it also includes deeper ideas such as imperfection, impermanence, emptiness, conflict, insubstantiality,

³ The word "Buddhaghosa" is taken from Sanskrit and Pali. It is the name of a monk who was born at the beginning of the 5th century and considered to be the greatest of commentators on the Pali Canon. See *Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism*, s.v. "Buddhaghosa," <<http://www.answers.com/topic/buddhaghosa>> (accessed December 12, 2010).

⁴ M. V. Ram Kumar Ratnam and D. Bhaskara Rao, *Dukkha: Suffering in Early Buddhism* (New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House, 2003), 45.

⁵ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (London and Belford: The Gordon Fraser Gallery Ltd., 1967), 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷ Ven. Nai Teja, "Life is Full of Suffering," *Dana Sri Lanka Society*, 2nd Anniversary, no. 4, 1999, <<http://www.thisismyanmar.com/nibbana/teja1.htm>> (accessed January 28, 2009).

unsatisfactoriness and ignorance (*avijja*) concerning the true man and his existence."⁸ Ram Kumar Ratnam and Bhaskara Rao mention the philosophical sense of *dukkha* as follows:

In the philosophical sense, *dukkha* points to our ignorance concerning the meaning of life. The suffering arising out of this type of ignorance is more intensive, acute and paralyzing than the physical and mental suffering of man. In fact, one can find remedies (immediate or remote) for the pain arising out of the physical and mental factors. Fever can be cured, enemies can be vanquished and desires can be fulfilled. The pain caused by the absence of wisdom concerning the true significance of life is more frustrating and acute because it is very difficult to find easy ways of overcoming it.⁹

Dukkha indicates all kinds of suffering. No one lives without *dukkha* in this world. What we see in the lives of the common people, *Ludu* (လူငယ်) in Burmese, in Myanmar is a socio-politico-economic *dukkha*.

1.2. The People and Their Socio-politico-economic *Dukkha*

The Union of Myanmar, formerly known as *Burma*, is the largest country in Southeast Asia. The neighbouring countries are China to the north and northeast; Laos and Thailand to the east and southeast; the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal to the south; and Bangladesh and India to the west. The total population of Myanmar is roughly estimated at 54.3 million.¹⁰ According to Myanmar history, the *Pyu* tribe founded the first City-state, called *Sri Ksetra*, in about 78 A.D. Then, the era of the Burma Kingdom followed; maintaining power for more than one thousand and seven hundred years (ca. 100 B.C.–A.D.1885). Other tribes, known as the *ethnic nationalities*, had their own land and ruled themselves in those days.¹¹

Myanmar is a truly diverse country with 135 national ethnic groups, such as Bamar, Chin, Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, Rakhine and Mon. Ethnic conflict is hugely complicated in Myanmar. The dominant ethnic group is the *Burman* (or *Bamar*). In terms of religion, Myanmar is predominantly a Buddhist country. Religions comprise of Buddhism 89.2%, Christianity 5.0%, Islam 3.8%, Hinduism 0.5%, Spirituality 1.2% and others 0.2%.¹² Buddhism and Christianity are the main religions of the original people in Myanmar.

Having served as a Methodist minister for fifteen years in a rural area, I have seen and experienced the *dukkha* which has been created by various holders of power in Myanmar. We have indeed suffered under the different forms of military regime that have existed over the past 50

⁸ M. V. Ram Kumar Ratnam and D. Bhaskara Rao, *Dukkha: Suffering in Early Buddhism*, Preface.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 46–47.

¹⁰ Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of the Union of Myanmar, *Implementation of the Seven-Step Map and Sector wise Development of the State* (27th March 2005), 1. See also "Myanmar," <<http://www.mofa.gov.mm/aboutmyanmar/location.html>> (accessed: November 19, 2008).

¹¹ Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967), 3.

¹² "Ethnic Groups in Myanmar," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nay Pyi Taw, the Union of Myanmar*, <<http://www.mofa.gov.mm/aboutmyanmar/location.html>> (accessed: November 19, 2008).

years. The first military regime began to control the country in 1962. General Ne Win formed a kind of civilian-turned-military government called the *Burma Socialist Programme Party*, also known as the *Burmese Way to Socialism* (1962-1988). He practised a closed-door system. All foreigners, including missionaries, were driven out of the country. Mission schools and hospitals were nationalized. During his time in power, Burma became one of the poorest countries in the world. The *Ludu* cried silently due to socio-politico-economic *dukkha*. As a result, in August 1988, a massive democratic movement was initiated in Yangon and spread throughout the country. The movement was led by students, but all classes of people joined it. Together they demonstrated across the entire country on 8th August 1988, which has become known as the *8888* uprising. Soon after, the single-party rule came to an end.

The second military regime took power in 1989. Its leaders formed the *State Law and Order Restoration Council* (1989-1999), which was later changed to the *State Peace and Development Council* (2000-2011). They also renamed the country to *Myanmar*. During this military era, the *Ludu* were oppressed harshly and pushed into poverty. All media was strictly censored by the government. The *Ludu* gradually lost their freedoms and had few human rights. They lived in fear of the ruling elite, and were driven by their socio-politico-economic *dukkha*. In September 2007, Buddhist monks demonstrated in Yangon and other towns in Myanmar to protest about the economic crisis. The event became known as the ‘Saffron Revolution’ or ‘Golden Revolution’ (*Shwewa-yaung Taw-hlan-ye* in Burmese) because of the colour of *Thin-gan* (the robe) worn by the Buddhist Monks in Myanmar. The number of demonstrators increased considerably as the protest went on, with estimated numbers ranging from 10,000 to 100,000.¹³ However, the *Ludu* were disappointed when the revolution ended without success.

The suffering of the *Ludu* of Myanmar can be defined as *Viparinama-Dukkha*. Khawsiamama remarks that:

Buddhism believes that life is full of suffering. The term *dukkha* applies to all kinds of suffering in everyone’s life. However, it is difficult to categorize the *dukkha* of the *Ludu* in Myanmar. Perhaps, their *dukkha* is *Viparinama-Dukkha*, which is produced by change. It is created by the power holders. They changed the life situation of *Ludu* in various ways by shifting policy and law, rules and regulations, political ideology, etc.¹⁴

The *Ludu* are still wandering in the darkness of socio-politico-economic *dukkha*. We do not know how long it will take to reach “the land of Canaan,” a place where the Israelites would be liberated and where would flow milk and honey.

¹³ “Saffron Revolution,” *Burma Digest*, <<http://burmadigest.info/2007/12/26/burmas-saffron-revolution-leader-revered-monk-sayadaw-abbot-u-gambira/>> (accessed January 25, 2010).

¹⁴ K.M.Y. Khawsiamama, *Towards a Ludu Theology: A Critical Evaluation of Minjung Theology and Its Implication for a Theological Response to the Dukkha (Suffering) of People in Myanmar (Burma)* (Bern: Peter Lang Publication, 2013), 160.

2. A Brief Observation of John Wesley's Life and His Theological View

Here we will briefly look at the life of John Wesley, his evangelism and his strong commitment to the liberation of souls. He was born on 17 June 1703 in Epworth and died on 2 March 1791 in London, England. He was one of the 19 children of Rev. Samuel Wesley, a Rector of Epworth, and his wife Susanna Wesley, who sowed the seed of Methodism into the hearts of her children by disciplining them methodically. Wesley became a great preacher rather than a theologian. He travelled over 250,000 miles and preached over 44,000 times.¹⁵ He became known as “God’s Horseman”¹⁶ and “an eighteenth-century Billy Graham.”¹⁷ He once said, “I look on all the world is my parish [...]”

Wesley was a successful organizer of a Christian group known as the *Holy Club* during his studies in Oxford in 1729. Later, it became the *Methodist Society*; growing first in England and then abroad. Wesley founded *Methodism*, but not a new denomination. He preached and nurtured Christians to grow up and bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit in their life. He and his younger brother Charles Wesley, a famous hymn composer, went to Savannah, Georgia, USA, as missionaries in 1736. In the voyage by the ship *Simmonds*, Wesley would be greatly influenced by a great spiritual lesson learned from a group of Moravian pietists. W. P. Stephens writes:

They made a profound impression on him by their life and by their faith. In the ordinary circumstances of life on a ship they stood out as extraordinary. On Sunday, 25 January 1736, his journal includes an impressive testimony to them in the midst of a dramatic account of a storm at sea. It was the third storm during the voyage, one which he described as 'more violent than any we had had before'.¹⁸

Amazingly, Wesley was touched by the Holy Spirit during a small Moravian group meeting at Aldersgate Street in London, where he felt “his heart strangely warmed” on 24 May 1738. He had received assurance of salvation through his faith in Christ. That experience made a big change in his life’s spiritual journey and theological view. Melvin E. Dieter affirms that:

Aldersgate radically reformed and reordered all his prior theological understanding, especially that of justification and sanctification [...] His theology became a working theology, not averse to the usefulness of the historically accepted objective, logical or systematic discussion of truth, but never satisfied to stop there. From that time on, all purported knowledge of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Christian life, the church or its mission would have to take into account what such knowledge meant to the everyday life of the Christian and the church in the world [...].¹⁹

¹⁵ Steve Harper, *John Wesley's Message for Today* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis & Taylor, 2002), 17.

¹⁶ Joan Clifford, *The Young John Wesley* (London: Max Parish and New York: Roy Publishers Inc., 1966), 126.

¹⁷ John Munsey Turner, *John Wesley: The Evangelical Revival and the Rise of Methodism in England* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2002), Preface.

¹⁸ W. P. Stephens, "Wesley and the Moravians," ed. John Stacey, *John Wesley: Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Epworth Press, 1988), 24.

¹⁹ Melvin E. Dieter, "Wesleyan Theology," ed. John Stacey, *John Wesley: Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Epworth Press, 1988), 166-167.

Wesley had learned a lesson about God's grace. Indeed, he is recognized as a theologian of grace. He appreciated and agreed with John Calvin's theology to a large extent. However, he argued against Calvin's doctrine of election and predestination. On that topic, Allen R. Bevere comments:

Like Calvin, Wesley believed that God is the one who takes the initiative to offer salvation. Without grace salvation is impossible. But, unlike Calvin, the offer is made to all, and all persons, through God's prevenient grace, have the opportunity to respond. Divine grace is necessary for saving faith, but such grace can be resisted by the individual.²⁰

Wesley can be observed as a practical theologian because he "was primarily concerned about developing a faith that worked in everyday living."²¹ John Bailie notes:

Although John Wesley was not a systematic theologian, his theology can be described with reasonable clarity from the study of his published sermons, tracts, treatises and correspondence. In essence, Wesley's theology, so akin to the reformation, affirms God's sovereign will to reserve our 'sinful, devilish nature,' justifying, and sanctifying grace (grace being nearly synonymous with the work of the Holy Spirit).²²

Wesley was both "abolitionist and liberating evangelist."²³ The reason is that he was concerned about social issues – slavery, poverty, gambling, and so on. He wanted to transform society. It is clear that Wesley's salvation theology begins with prevenient grace, continues through acceptance via faith and culminates in liberation from sin and oppression. My own judgement is that his theology of salvation leads to *liberation*.

3. John Wesley's View of Salvation as Liberation from *Dukkha*

Let's look at Wesley's theological view of salvation from a liberation perspective with the Buddhist concept of liberation from *dukkha*. Christianity and Buddhism are different religions. Theoretically, there is no God in Buddhism. Christians believe in God as Creator, Almighty, Omnipresent, Omnipotent, etc. The concept of God makes for difficulty in Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Furthermore, Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Messiah. Faith is the most important piece in Wesley's Methodism. Buddhism, however, is an ethical-based discipline of self-effort that culminates in enlightenment. It requires meditation and merit to achieve liberation – overcoming *dukkha* and achieving *nirvana*, which is the extinction of all suffering. Ideologically, Wesley's view of salvation and the Buddhist understanding of liberation from *dukkha* have some interesting correlations.

²⁰ Allan R. Bevere, "John Wesley on Predestination" <<http://www.allanbevere.com/2010/11/john-wesley-on-predestination.html>> (accessed 11 May 2013).

²¹ Steve Harper, *John Wesley's Message for Today*, 18.

²² John Bailie, *John Wesley – A Theology of Liberation* (M.Th. Thesis, University of South Africa, 2005), 49.

²³ See Theodore Walker, Jr. "Wesley as Abolitionist and Liberating Evangelist," *Circuit Rider* (May/ June 2003): 26-27 <<http://www.circuitrider.com/pdfs/circuitrider/6627WALE.pdf>> (accessed 7 May 2013). See also John B. Cobb Jr., "Wesley the Liberationist," <<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1100>> (accessed 8 May 2013).

3.1. Salvation from Personal Sin as Liberation from Personal *Dukkha*

Sinfulness is rooted in personal acts—inherited sin and actual sin. In his evangelistic mission, Wesley focused primarily on salvation from personal sin. Human beings are born sinful because of “Original Sin”, which was first developed in 2nd century A.D. by Saint Irenaeus (ca. 175-185 CE).²⁴ My observation is that sin is the root cause of personal *dukkha*, which, in other words, is a consequence of bad actions or disobedience toward the Word of God (Gen. 2:16, 17).

The biblical story of the Garden of Eden tells us that Adam and Eve lived without suffering or *dukkha*. God made them and created all things. They were not worried about anything in their life. Everything was sufficient for them. However, their situation was changed when they fell into sin. They had to suffer or face *dukkha* in various ways because of that sin.²⁵

Wesley took “Original Sin” seriously in a sermon of his based on Genesis 6:5, “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” In his commentary on this particular verse, Wesley shows how humankind is affected by original sin:

Abundance of sin was committed in all places, by all sorts of people: and those sins in their own nature most gross and heinous, and provoking; and committed daringly, with a defiance of heaven [...] A sad sight, and very offensive to God's holy eye. This was the bitter root, the corrupt spring; all the violence and oppression, all the luxury and wantonness that was in the world, proceeded from the corruption of nature; lust conceives them, James 1:15, see Mt 15:19. The heart was evil, deceitful and desperately wicked; the principles were corrupt, and the habits and dispositions evil [...]²⁶

Because of sin humankind became mortal while all other things became impermanent. At this point, let me quote Helmuth Von Glasenapp:

Christianity and Buddhism agree in their strong emphasis on the impermanency of all things. In Christianity, the suffering inherent in the world is the outcome of sin, and sin is disobedience towards God's commandments. Because Adam had sinned, all his progeny is afflicted with Original Sin.²⁷

Buddhists believe that everyone suffers *dukkha* as the consequence of *kamma/karma* (or *kan* in Burmese), meaning ‘one's deed or action’. Barbara O'Brien argues that “The word *karma*, like the word *evil*, is often used without understanding. Karma is not fate, nor is it some cosmic justice

²⁴ Wayne B. Bowman, *Hidden in Plain Sight: Catechism Versus the Bible* (Mustang, Oklahoma: Tate Publishing, LLC, 2009), 82.

²⁵ K.M.Y. Khawsiamia, *Towards a Ludu Theology: A Critical Evaluation of Minjung Theology and Its Implication for a Theological Response to the Dukkha (Suffering) of People in Myanmar (Burma)*, 165.

²⁶ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Bible Commentary* <<http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/wesleys-explanatory-notes/genesis/genesis-6.html>> (accessed 11 May 2013).

²⁷ Helmuth Von Glasenapp, “Buddhism and Christianity” *The Wheel Publication*, no. 16. <<https://mywebpage.wisc.edu/jrblack/web/BU/BPS/WH/wh016.pdf>> (accessed 18 May 2013).

system. In Buddhism, there is no God to direct karma to reward some people and punish others. It is simply cause and effect."²⁸ Walpola Rahula, a Theravada scholar, writes:

Now, the Pali word *kamma* or the Sanskrit word *karma* (from the root *kr̥* to do) literally means 'action', 'doing'. But in the Buddhist theory of karma it has a specific meaning: it means only 'volitional action', not all action. Nor does it mean the result of karma as many people wrongly and loosely use it. In Buddhist terminology karma never means its effect; its effect is known as the 'fruit' or the 'result' of karma (*kamma-phala* or *kamma-vipaka*).

Volition may relatively be good or bad, just as a desire may relatively be good or bad. So karma may be good or bad relatively [...]²⁹

Bad *actions* cause humankind to suffer many kinds of *dukkha*. For Buddhists, suffering is not the result of original sin. While *kamma* is seen as an innate reality in Buddhism, sin as an inborn reality in Christianity. Both serve as the intrinsic mark of humankind. Buddhists believe that humankind is to suffer endlessly because he/she is under the bondage of *kamma*. For Christians, humankind is to suffer eternally because he/she is under the power/bondage of sin. Both lead to endless suffering. There is no origin of *kamma* in Buddhism. However, there is original sin in Christianity. *Kamma* concerns only "doings", but sin concerns both "doings" and "undoings".³⁰ If so, there is no original sin, but actual sin in Buddhism. Looking at the concept of *kamma* in Buddhism from Wesley's view of original sin, I can see that *kamma* is the outcome of original sin. At the same time, original sin is one's bad *kamma*. Due to this original sin everyone is sinful and has to suffer. The fall of Adam and Eve is the beginning of original sin, and affects everyone. As a result,

Man is too weak to free himself from sin by his own strength. Therefore God in his compassion became man in Christ, and died as a vicarious redemptory sacrifice for all humanity. Through Christ's sacrificial death all men have become free from the power of sin, but that vicarious salvation from evil becomes reality only if man opens himself to divine grace through his faith in Christ.³¹

It is fundamental to Christianity that human beings need a Saviour who is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to obtain *salvation*.

"What is salvation?" Wesley raises this question and defines it in his sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation":

The salvation which is here spoken of is not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness. It is not the soul's going to paradise, termed by our Lord, "Abraham's bosom." It is not a blessing which lies on the other side of death; or, as we usually speak, in the other world. The very words of the text itself put this beyond all question: "Ye are saved." It is not

²⁸ Barbara O'Brien, "Evil, Karma and Buddhism," <http://buddhism.about.com/od/basicbuddhistteachings/a/evil_2.htm> (accessed 17 May 2013).

²⁹ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 32.

³⁰ Tomas Zatel, "The Significance of the Hebraizing Principle of Kosuke Koyama for the Formulation of a Christian Theology of Karma from a Myanmar Christian Perspective," *Rays – MIT Journal of Theology* 12 (January 2011): 77-78.

³¹ Helmuth Von Glasenapp, "Buddhism and Christianity" *The Wheel Publication*, no. 16. <<https://mywebSPACE.wisc.edu/jrblack/web/BU/BPS/WH/wh016.pdf>> (accessed 18 May 2013).

something at a distance: it is a present thing; a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of. Nay, the words may be rendered, and that with equal propriety, "Ye have been saved": so that the salvation which is here spoken of might be extended to the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul, till it is consummated in glory.³²

The order of salvation in Wesley's theology is that "salvation from original sin begins with justification, continues in sanctification and ends with glorification."³³ For his own salvation, Wesley began by accepting God's free offer of grace. From the start in one's life, there exists God's *prevenient grace*, which lays waiting for a person to accept it as permanent; when it then changes into *justifying grace*. Ultimately, he/she receives a *sanctifying grace* that draws him/her into perfect Christianity.³⁴

Buddhism is a no-god, no-saviour and no-soul (*anatta*) religion.³⁵ Buddhists believe, instead, in a 'cycle of rebirths'; i.e. *samsara* in Pali (*thandhaja* in Burmese), which "embraces the whole circle of existence: past, present, and future". David A. Brown says, "Life will continue as long as there is desire, and it is the law of *kamma* that keeps the process going." Since all things are subject to *dukkha*—to pain, decay, and death, everything is impermanent because they are always changing. Buddhism has the doctrine of rebirth or reincarnation. Anyone may be born as an animal, a ghost, or a good.³⁶

Buddhists accept the need of liberation in their life in order to overcome their personal *dukkha*; both in one's present life as well as one's life after death. The term 'liberation' carries more meaning to Buddhists than 'salvation', which needs a saviour. Buddhism is a self-effort religion. Buddha is neither a saviour nor a liberator. He was a great teacher who taught his followers how to overcome *dukkha* and how to find *nirvana*. Buddhists can liberate themselves from *samsara* by

³² John Wesley, *Sermons 43*, "The Scripture way of Salvation" (1765), §1.1, Works 2:156. See also <<http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-43-the-scripture-way-of-salvation/>> (accessed 2 May 2013).

³³ "The Order of Salvation in John Wesley's Theology," <<http://www.shol.com/featheredprop/theo4.html>> (accessed 31 December 2012).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Although there is doctrine of no-soul in Buddhism, Buddhists believe there is "life". However, in this paper, I will not argue this issue.

³⁶ David A. Brown, *A Guide to Religions* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), 130.

following "The Noble Eightfold Path", also known as "The Middle Way".³⁷ They are also required to keep the *Seven Purifications*, the classical outline of the Theravada Path to Liberation:³⁸

Thus, the way of liberation from *dukkha* in Buddhism is to maintain purity of life through the self-effort of following The Noble Eightfold Path. Similarly, there are the "Beatitudes" (*Mingalar shitpar* in Burmese) in Christianity that Jesus taught about in his Sermon on the Mount.³⁹ Wesley understood how important the Beatitudes are for Christians and he emphasized them in his sermons.⁴⁰ Christians should be poor in spirit; mournful; meek; hungering and thirsting for righteousness; merciful; pure in heart; peacemaking; and persecuted because of their righteousness. The road that leads from personal salvation to liberation is belief in Christ along with the Beatitudes.

3.2. Salvation from Social Sin as Liberation from Social *Dukkha*

We have discussed Wesley thus far as a liberationist. Of course, he was also very concerned about slavery. In early 1774, his tract *Thoughts upon Slavery* was published as a 53-page pamphlet in London by Robert Hawes; it sold for a shilling. The tract was a significant contribution of Wesley

³⁷ The Noble Eightfold Path

- (1) Right Understanding (*Samma ditthi*)
- (2) Right Thought (*Samma sankappa*)
- (3) Right Speech (*Samma vaca*)
- (4) Right Action (*Samma kammanta*)
- (5) Right Livelihood (*Samma ajiva*)
- (6) Right Effort (*Samma vayama*)
- (7) Right Mindfulness (*Samma sati*)
- (8) Right Concentration (*Samma Samadhi*)

See Wapola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 45.

³⁸ The Seven Purifications

- (1) Purification of Conduct (*silā-visuddhi*)
- (2) Purification of Mind (*citta-visuddhi*)
- (3) Purification of View (*ditthi-visuddhi*)
- (4) Purification by Overcoming Doubt (*kaṅkha-vitarana-visuddhi*)
- (5) Purification by Knowledge and Vision of What Is Path and Not Path (*maggamagga-ñānadassana-visuddhi*)
- (6) Purification by Knowledge and Vision of the Course of Practice (*patipada-ñānadassana-visuddhi*)
- (7) Purification by Knowledge and Vision (*ñānadassana-visuddhi*).

See Ven. Matara Sri Nanarama, *The Insight Knowledges: A Guide to the Progressive Stages of Buddhist Meditation*, Translated from the Sinhala, 2nd ed. (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993), 12. <http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/bm7insight.pdf> (accessed 23 May 2013).

³⁹ Sermon on the Mount: The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-11 NIV).

- (1) Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- (2) Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- (3) Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- (4) Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
- (5) Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
- (6) Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- (7) Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- (8) Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴⁰ See John Wesley, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse 1-11".

toward the liberation of slaves in England and America.⁴¹ Let me quote Wesley's prayer for slaves from the pamphlet:

O thou God of love, thou who art loving to every man, and whose mercy is over all thy works; [...] have compassion upon these outcasts of men, who are trodden down as dung upon the earth! Arise, and help these that have no helper, whose blood is spilt upon the ground like water! Are not these also the work of thine own hands, the purchase of thy Son's blood? Stir them up to cry unto thee in the land of their captivity; and let their complaint come up before thee; let it enter into thy ears! [...] O burst thou all their chains in sunder; more especially the chains of their sins! Thou Saviour of all, make them free, that they may be free indeed!⁴²

Wesley's theological view reflects God's love, mercy and compassion for slaves who are outcast, downtrodden and helpless. He sees God as a Saviour who can free them. Like liberation theologians today, Wesley viewed God as a liberator.

Wesley sent a letter dated 24 February 1791 to William Wilberforce, a member of Parliament who had been converted under his ministry. Wesley expressed his opposition to slavery and encouraged Wilberforce to take action. Eventually, in 1807, Parliament outlawed the participation of England in the slave trade.⁴³ According to Theodore Walker, Jr.:

We should value Wesley's abolitionism. In addition to historical value, seeing Wesley as an abolitionist has theological value. Attention to Wesley's abolitionism helps us to see an essential liberationist component in his understanding of the gospel.⁴⁴

What's more, Wesley was always on the side of the people who are economically poor. Randy L. Maddox, therefore, remarks that:

Wesley is then portrayed as spending his ministry almost entirely among the poor, voluntarily embracing poverty himself to stand in their midst. Early Methodism, resulting from this focus of his ministry, is assumed to be comprised primarily of manual labourers and the destitute.⁴⁵

Wesley developed a relevant theology that focuses on salvation from social sin. "Social sin is collective, an aspect of our society which doesn't resemble the Kingdom of God."⁴⁶ Tatha Wiley defines:

⁴¹ H. Newton Malony, *The Amazing John Wesley: An Unusual Look at an Uncommon Life* (Colorado Springs: Biblica Publishing, 2010), 138.

⁴² John Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Slavery" <<http://www.umcmision.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/The-Wesleys-and-Their-Times/Thoughts-Upon-Slavery>> (accessed 24 May 2013).

⁴³ "Letter to William Wilberforce" <<http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/wesley/wilber.stm>> (accessed 2 January 2013).

⁴⁴ Theodore Walker, Jr. "Wesley as Abolitionist and Liberating Evangelist," *Circuit Rider* (May/June 2003): 27.

⁴⁵ Randy L. Maddox, "Visit the Poor: John Wesley, the Poor, and the Sanctification of Believers," In *The Wesley and the Poor: The Legacy and Development of Methodist Attitudes to Poverty, 1729–1999*, edited by Richard Heitzenrater (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2002), 60. See <http://divinity.duke.edu/sites/default/files/documents/faculty-maddox/16_Visit_the_Poor.pdf> (accessed 20 April 2013).

⁴⁶ "Social Gospel Today" <<http://socialgospel.blogspot.com/2004/08/what-is-social-sin.html>> (accessed 19 May 2013).

Social sin is a consequence of individual sinful acts, yet it goes beyond the individual. Social sin becomes embodied in customs, personal relations, and social structures. What has been socially constructed distorts personal consciousness, leading both oppressor and oppressed into believing that the social order reflects what is natural.⁴⁷

Social holiness is an important subject in Wesley's vision of salvation. For him, there is "no holiness without social holiness." He said, "I continue to dream and pray about a revival of holiness in our day that moves forth in mission and creates authentic community in which each person can be unleashed through the empowerment of the Spirit to fulfil God's creational intentions."⁴⁸ Wesley believes personal holiness is the foundation of social holiness. Salvation leads a person to live a holy life by the grace of God through Christ. John Lunn rightly perceives that:

Wesley's views and practices could be adopted today and be more fruitful than the status quo. In particular, Wesley's insistence on the importance of each person because the person is made in God's image and is someone for whom Christ died is an ideal starting point for social concern. His focus on social change through redeemed people rather than by changing social structures should be considered seriously by Christians. Finally, Wesley's use of reason and empirical evidence to analyze the sources of social problems and the potential effects of proposed solutions is needed today. The desire to do good for people does not imply that good actually gets done. What is needed is an analysis of the problems followed by proposed solutions.⁴⁹

The purpose of Wesley's ministry is to achieve "Christian perfection in love" while we are in this world, with the goal being to enter the Kingdom of God. Here, *love* takes the most important place because "The essence of Christian perfection is perfect love."⁵⁰ John B. Cobb, who views Wesley as liberationist, claims:

Love turns one immediately away from preoccupation with oneself to concern for the neighbour who is in need. Its expression is, therefore, immediately social. Individual salvation is a matter of growing social concern and acting on that concern.⁵¹

If we examine Wesley's theological view of *salvation from social sin* from a Myanmar perspective, we can see that it becomes liberation from social *dukkha*. Social *dukkha* is a collective suffering of people or a common experience of *dukkha*, created by a ruling elite.⁵² An acute sense of social sin develops wherever there is poverty, racial or caste discrimination, oppression of the poor,

⁴⁷ Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2002), 150.

⁴⁸ John Wesley, "How To Pray: The Best of John Wesley on Prayer" <<http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/151350.John+Wesley>> (accessed 11 April 2013).

⁴⁹ John Lunn, "John Wesley's Social Ethic," *Religion and Liberty* 3, no. 6 (November and December 1993) <<http://www.acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-3-number-6>> (accessed 25 May 2013).

⁵⁰ John L. Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 53.

⁵¹ John B. Cobb Jr., "Wesley the Liberationist," <<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1100>> (accessed 8 May 2013).

⁵² K.M.Y. Khawsiam, "Towards a Theology of *Dukkha*: A Christian-Buddhist View on the Suffering of *Ludu* in Myanmar," *Asia Journal of Theology* 26, no. 2 (October 2012): 121.

marginalization of minorities, injustice, economic exploitation, terrorism, violence, destruction of eco-systems, or undemocratic political regimes. We can realize that, considering his eagerness to change and transform human society, Wesley was formulating a theology of salvation from social *dukkha*.

4. The Present Situation of the Country and Wesleyan Community in Myanmar

Today, Myanmar is in a transitional period. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which gained power in the general election that was held on 7 November 2010, formed “a new semi-civilian government”⁵³ in March 2011. Khawsiamia speaks:

In spite of some doubts, however, the people have a great hope that this marks the beginning of a transitional period and of the move towards *Democracy*. They raise their heads out of the darkness of socio-politico-economic *dukkha* to breathe the fresh air of *freedom* and see the blue sky of a *better future*. At the same time, they are wondering whether this new political system will stabilize to provide relief to their sufferings as common people.⁵⁴

However, the people are still crying out to solve their socio-politico-economic *dukkha*. They need a leader who can liberate them. Presently, there are two big social issues in Myanmar:

(1) *The civil war in Kachin State:*

Kachin, known as the “Land of Blue and Gold,” is one of the states where the majority people are Christian. But she has been facing civil war. Jason Motlagh, a reporter from the *Pulitzer Centre*, writes:

Deep in the resource-rich hills of northern Burma’s *Kachin State*, a civil war grinds on between government forces and *Kachin* rebels, calling into question the more conciliatory signals emanating from the country. Over the past year an estimated 75,000 civilians have been driven from their homes.⁵⁵

It is an internal conflict in Myanmar and the longest-running civil war in the world. The government is trying to make peace with the *Kachin Independence Army (KIA)*, a political group under the *Kachin Independence Organization*. Nowadays, *Kachin* Christian leaders and national leaders are having peace-talks.

(2) *The Ethnic Conflict between Rakhine and Rohingya in Rakhine State:*

The ethnic conflict between *Rakhine* Buddhists and *Rohingya* Muslims is a big problem in Myanmar. The *Rohingya* are a stateless people. A survey of *Human Rights Watch*, entitled: “All You Can Do is

⁵³ “Myanmar: The Politics of Economic Reform,” *Asia Report* no. 231 (International Crisis Group – Working to Prevent Conflict Worldwide, 27 July 2012), 1, <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/231-myanmar-the-politics-of-economic-reform>> (accessed 30 April 2013).

⁵⁴ K.M.Y. Khawsiamia, “Towards a Theology of *Dukkha*: A Christian-Buddhist View on the Suffering of *Ludu* in Myanmar,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 26, no. 2 (October 2012): 110.

⁵⁵ Jason Motlagh, “In Burma, Civil War Grinds on Far From Capital,” *Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting*, 29 June 2012 <<http://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/burma-civil-war-kachin-rebels-ethnic-conflict-human-rights-abuse-resources-China>> (accessed 29 May 2013).

Pray – Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma’s Arakan State," says:

The sectarian violence in June was sparked by the rape and murder on May 28, 2012 of a 28-year-old Arakanese woman by three Muslim men in Ramri Township. On June 3, a large group of Arakanese villagers in Toungop town, southeast of Ramri, stopped a bus and beat and killed ten Muslims who were on board. Violence between Arakanese Buddhists and Rohingya intensified, with mobs on both sides committing killings and arson. Both communities’ populations suffered and thousands fled their homes. While the state security forces initially did nothing to halt the violence, they soon joined in with Arakanese mobs to attack and burn Muslim neighbourhoods and villages.⁵⁶

Another incident was the Buddhist-Muslim riot which broke out on 21 March 2013 in Meiktila town, Mandalay Division. This time, violence claimed the lives of at least 20 people and perhaps many more.⁵⁷

Do the Myanmar Methodists pay attention to socio-politico-economic *dukkha* in people's lives? The present situation of the Myanmar Methodists might compare to a Wesleyan community under the leadership of Jabez Bunting (1779-1858) in old England. The Methodist history tells us that Wesleyan in England was divided into different churches, e.g. Primitive Methodist, arose and spread quickly between 1810 and 1850, The Protestant Methodists, formed in 1827, and so on.⁵⁸ There are five Methodist churches in Myanmar, viz.:

- (i) *The Lower Myanmar Methodist Church*: The American Methodist missionaries established this church in 1885.
- (ii) *The Upper Myanmar Methodist Church*: This church was founded by the British Methodist missionaries in 1887.
- (iii) *Free Methodist Church*: This church was formed by a person who separated from the Upper Myanmar Methodist Church in Haka, Chin State, in 1995.
- (iv) *Wesleyan Church*: The people who broke away from the Upper Myanmar Methodist Church due to doctrinal problems and ethnic issues established this church in 1996.
- (v) *Evangelical Methodist Church*: These people who separated from the Upper Myanmar Church, Falam District, Chin State, founded this church in 2003.

The number of Methodists in Myanmar is about 35,000. The Lower and Upper Myanmar Methodist churches are trying to unite. Notably, Methodist churches in Yangon have had fellowship as a

⁵⁶ "All You Can Do is Pray – Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma’s Arakan State," *Human Rights Watch* <<http://www.hrw.org/node/114872/section/3>> (accessed 10 April 2013).

⁵⁷ "Buddhists and Muslims clash in central Burma town," *Burma National News*, <http://burmanationalnews.org/burma/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3590> (accessed 30 May 2013).

⁵⁸ "How did Methodism develop under Jabez Bunting?" <<http://richardjohnbr.blogspot.com/2011/10/how-did-methodism-develop-under-jabez.html>> (accessed 30 May 2013).

Wesleyan community on *Aldersgate Day* (May 24) since a couple years ago. They worship together and sometime have seminars. They helped the victims of Cyclone Nargis in 2008.⁵⁹

I have found that some leaders of the Methodist Church in Myanmar participate in social concerns as ex officio members of the Myanmar Council of Churches or other Christian Organizations/Associations or NGOs. However, the Myanmar Wesleyan community has not yet taken any significant official actions in regard to social issues in the country.⁶⁰ In connecting to this point, it is needed to consider profoundly what Wesley's view on the church and its ministry for salvation is. Bud Bence observes:

The most striking and ever-relevant feature of Wesley's ecclesiology is its soteriological focus, an emphasis that shaped almost every aspect of his thought and actions. By examining the central place that salvation plays in Wesley's understanding of the nature, mission, structure, and final destiny of the Church, we can better apply his ecclesiology to the exigencies of the twenty-first century.⁶¹

Wesley is seen as a man of High Church notions and strict methods of living. He wanted the church to be holy. But this does not mean that the church should disregard social issues. In his view, the nature of the Church is holy. He wrote:

The Church is called holy because it is holy; because every member thereof is holy, through in different degrees, as He that called them is holy. How clear is this! If the Church, as to the very essence of it, is a body of believers, no man that is not a Christian believer can be a member of it. If the whole body be animated by one Spirit, and endued with one faith, and hope of their calling; then he who has not that Spirit, and faith, and hope, is no member of that body.⁶²

Furthermore, Wesley views that the Church is the substantial reality of the body of Christ catholic or universal church. Moreover, he stressed the spiritual character of the church rather than its organizational structure. I have concluded that the Church is holy in order to become an instrument of God for salvation, and to be the extension of His Kingdom through its mission of an evangelism which leads to liberation. For Wesley, the Kingdom of God "is not barely a future happy state in heaven, but a state to be enjoyed on earth; [...]"⁶³

In his study of Wesley's ecclesiology, Bence says, "The destiny of the Church was one with the goal of history—a social order that glorified God in all its aspects".⁶⁴ Wesley's vision for the Church is "first to save each his own soul; and then to assist each other in working out their

⁵⁹ Rev. Dr. Zaw Win Aung, the Conference President of the Methodist Church (Upper Myanmar), interview by author, in Mandalay, 22 June 2013.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Bud Bence, "The Ecclesiology of John Wesley," <<http://www.google.com/urlsa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=0CDwQFjAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.wesleyan.org%2Fbgs%2Fassets%2Fdownloads%2Fdoctrinal%2520symposium%2Fdown.php%3Ffile%3DThe%2520Ecclesiol>> (accessed 31 May 2013).

⁶² *Works*, 400.

⁶³ John Wesley, *Notes* (Matthew 3:2, 4:1), 14.

⁶⁴ Bud Bence, "The Ecclesiology of John Wesley."

salvation; [...]”⁶⁵ Saving souls involves liberation from *dukkhas* and then moving on toward social holiness. Bence speaks:

[...] Social holiness is the penetration and permeation of the gospel in all aspects of the social order with the intent of changing that order into the kingdom of God. Wesleyan ecclesiology as an expression of his soteriology must be transformational in its deepest sense. The goal of the Church is to be the first fruits of the coming kingdom, to be the first instalment of God’s reign on earth.

Thus Wesley combined the functional concept of the Church as act, with a substantial view of the Church as the new social order, breaking through from the eschatological future into the present age [...]⁶⁶

Wesley views the Church as the instrument of God for salvation from personal and social sins. In other words, God is using the Church for salvation from both personal and social *dukkhas*.

Conclusion

I have found that Wesley's view of salvation as liberation is still relevant and valuable for Myanmar. However, it is indispensable to critically examine and reflect from our own perspective. In my view, Wesley focuses personal salvation from sin as liberation from personal *dukkha* by God's grace and through faith in Christ. Secondly, he intensifies to build up human society toward social holiness. That leads to salvation from social sin, i.e. liberation from social *dukkha*. Today Wesley strongly challenges Methodist Churches in Myanmar to reach beyond Christianity. The urgent need of the Wesleyan community is to discover effective ways for social transformation to enable change toward a better situation. To conclude this paper, I would like to make some suggestions for such future ministry as follows:

- (i) To achieve unity of Methodist churches in Myanmar as a Wesleyan family;
- (ii) To work actively hand in hand for transforming and developing the country;
- (iii) To study together Wesley's theology from a Myanmar perspective;
- (iv) To serve jointly for saving souls and liberating people's lives; and
- (v) To engage with other faiths in the movements of liberation and peace.

⁶⁵ *Works*, VI, 149ff.

⁶⁶ Bud Bence, "The Ecclesiology of John Wesley."