

THE BUDDHA AS A LENS FOR READING *KOHELETH/ECCLESIASTES*

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PRECIS

One of the many benefits of interfaith dialogue is the light that a phenomenon in one tradition can (perhaps unexpectedly) shine on a phenomenon in another. The biblical book of *Koheleth/Ecclesiastes* has proved to be difficult to interpret. Perhaps it can be understood more clearly and seen as possessing a coherent message if studied in conjunction with the teachings of the Buddha. Not that I suggest any causal relationship; rather, an encounter with the Buddhist tradition helps us place the essential themes of *Koheleth* into sharper relief. The lives of the Buddha and “Solomon,” the putative author of *Koheleth*, reveal suggestive parallels. The themes articulated by the Buddha of the impermanence of all things, the pervasiveness of suffering, and the futility of craving find echoes in *Koheleth*. The Buddhist lesson of “disinterested action” seems to have its counterpart in the message of *Koheleth* as well.

Advocates of interreligious dialogue remind us that there are many reasons for members of different traditions to engage in conversation with one another. There is no need to review those for readers of this journal. However, among the most profound benefits of dialogue, I suggest, is the reality that elements of one tradition can shed light on aspects of another. Indeed, phenomena of one tradition that are unclear in themselves might become comprehensible when viewed through the lens of another. This essay represents an attempt to understand an aspect of the Jewish tradition by means of juxtaposing it with Buddhist teaching. As such, it constitutes an exercise in interreligious dialogue as much as an exposition of biblical text.

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Of all the books in the TaNaCH, or Hebrew Bible, it has been suggested that *Koheleth* (Eng., Ecclesiastes) has the hardest-to-penetrate meaning. For the casual reader much of the TaNaCH is hard to understand. Even the parts that we do easily comprehend contain complex and confusing elements. Still, in fairness we should acknowledge that some parts are harder to understand than others, but this book is deeply unclear to many of its readers. It is hard to make sense of even its name, *Koheleth*. No one is sure what the name really means. It seems to be based on the Hebrew trilateral root KHL, which has to do with gathering. Some scholars have suggested that it alludes to one who preaches to a congregation—a gathering (*kahal*). Others maintain that the title refers to the author as a gatherer of observations from life, a gleaner of insights or aphorisms. Whatever the title means, the book goes out of its way to purport that its author was King Solomon. At the very beginning of the book, *Koheleth* is called “Son of David, King of Jerusalem” (1.1),¹ and soon it reads, “I *Koheleth* was king in Jerusalem over Israel” (1:12). Later tradition in the main subscribes to this attribution. As we shall note later, other details in the life of the narrator reflect the assertion of royal authorship.

What is most perplexing about the book, of course, is what it teaches. *Koheleth* gives voice to a very different mood and reflects a different vision than the rest of the TaNaCH. It ignores elements that are important elsewhere in the TaNaCH: the Temple cult, holidays, Shabbat, and *mitzvot*, or commandments. Also, there is no mention of the historical experience of the Jewish people. *Koheleth* denies some things that are asserted in the rest of the TaNaCH. Elsewhere, God reveals God’s self and God’s will to human beings. Here, God is unknown by revelation or to reason. Unlike the rest of the TaNaCH, *Koheleth* questions justice in the world, a concept that is central to the other Hebrew scriptures. It counsels against being zealous in pursuit of righteousness—a notion inconceivable in the rest of the scripture. Throughout, the mood seems to be one of disillusionment. *Koheleth* counsels resignation, while elsewhere in the TaNaCH the predominant mood seems to be hope. Indeed, the ethic of *Koheleth* is disturbing. It is not rooted in revelation. The book advocates caution and seems to suggest that we should grasp the only satisfaction available to human beings: the enjoyment of being alive.

The fact is that most Jewish readers do not know what sense to make of *Koheleth*, despite the fact that it is the assigned reading from *Ketuvim*/Writings for the holiday of Succot (perhaps not incidentally the feast of the ingathering of first fruits). More than a text, *Koheleth* is, to most Jews, an impenetrable puzzle.

Various interpretations have been put forward in the effort to explain the meaning of *Koheleth*. Frequently, *Koheleth* is seen—and dismissed—as a book of simple hedonism, urging us to enjoy all the pleasures of life. To others, it is a book of pessimism written by one who has seen the world and its mendacities and who holds no hope for its improvement. So, in effect, the author dismisses it as worthless. Some read *Koheleth* as a book of boredom, understanding it as the musing of a man who has seen and done everything. He is jaded. There is noth-

¹Most of the translations of *Koheleth* in this essay are from the Jewish Publication Society’s 1954 edition of *The Holy Scriptures*. A few are my own.

ing new, nothing left, so he dismisses it all as so much vanity. Some have called it a book of bitterness. To them, it is the text of an old man whose youth and vitality have passed. He is angered that the life he has known is no longer accessible to him, so he denounces youth as being fleeting and the pleasures of youth for being evanescent. Some writers characterize *Koheleth* as a book of resignation: In the end everything is fated and cannot be changed; all we can do is accept our lot. To still others, it is the record of a quest, the “log” of one who has sought ultimate meaning in hedonism (wealth and pleasure), in wisdom, or in justice and has discovered that all of these are wanting. None of these interpretations, I fear, captures the full implications of the teaching of *Koheleth*. The book, if understood in any of these ways, does not reward the reading by leaving us with wisdom by which to conduct our lives.

I suggest that we can find coherence in the message of *Koheleth* and make sense of its teaching if we read it in light of another tradition. The message of *Koheleth* comes into clearer focus if we read it through the lens of the life and teaching of Gautama the Buddha, the enlightened one who is the source of the Buddhist tradition. I am not suggesting that there was any kind of interaction between the two traditions that resulted in the articulation of similar visions. The Buddha and *Koheleth* do not speak in a single voice, yet there is a certain resonance between them if we are attuned to listening for it. I am advocating the idea that a familiarity with the Buddhist tradition makes it possible for us to approach this element of the biblical tradition with a new clarity. For readers unfamiliar with the Buddhist tradition, I shall begin with a presentation of some fundamental introductory information germane to the issue under discussion.

The Case of the Buddha: His Life

We begin to penetrate the mystery of *Koheleth* when we note the striking parallels in the life of its purported author and that of a man who lived far away in distance, but whose life was remarkably similar in outline: Gautama the Buddha. We possess an abundance of historical facts about the man who came to be called the Buddha. “Buddha” is an honorific title that means “the enlightened one,” for reasons which will soon become clear. The Buddha was born in 563 B.C.E, during the time that Karl Jaspers has called the “axial age.” The Buddha’s contemporaries during that rich moment in human history were Confucius in China, Socrates in Greece, and Amos and Isaiah in Israel. His given name was Siddhārtha, which literally means “wish-fulfilling.” He was born in the Śākya clan of the Gautama family, so he is also called Śākyamuni—“sage of the Śākya clan.” His father was the ruler of the clan’s kingdom in the northwest part of the Indian subcontinent.

Stories are told about the events surrounding the Buddha’s birth, as they are about the births of other great religious figures—Moses comes to mind in the Bible itself, or Samson. It is said that soon after the child was conceived, the father summoned the royal sages, who predicted that the son who was to be born would be either an omniscient Buddha or a great ruler. The sages warned the father that if the son saw four specific things, he would abandon his throne and

opt for the teacher's role. The four things that he might see were all expressions of human suffering: old age, sickness, and death—as well as a recluse who had transcended all those aspects of human life. Naturally, the father wanted the son to follow the family tradition and be a ruler, so he saw to it that this son born to him led a very sheltered life. He made sure that the boy would not see any signs of human suffering. Siddhārtha was not allowed to leave the grounds of the palace. His father insured that all the worldly distractions that could be provided for a young man were lavished on him. He was indulged in all the material pleasures of life. At sixteen he was married to his cousin, Yasodhara, the most beautiful maiden in the country. Very soon afterward she bore him a son named, tellingly, Rahula, which means “bond” or “link.” This infant was supposed to chain Siddhārtha to the life of the palace, to hold him fast to the material world.

However, things did not work out as the king had intended. Siddhārtha did see those four signs, and he became the Buddha—the enlightened one. One night he bribed his carriage driver to take him outside the walls of the palace. In the Buddhist world, that event is called “the night of the great going forth.” When he was driven out of the grounds of his palace, he saw things he had never even heard of before. Siddhārtha saw a person worn down by old age. He saw someone racked with disease. His gaze fell on something he could not have imagined in his protected life: a human corpse. Then, by the side of the road, he saw a recluse—a man who had sought to overcome those three miseries of the human experience by immersing himself in the practice of asceticism. That night shocked the young prince. It was a night that led him to change the course of his life, and, as a result, the course of so much of the world was changed forever. Siddhārtha had the blazing insight that drove him to fulfill the prediction of the royal sages. Seeing those signs of human suffering impelled him to become a teacher, to pursue the path of enlightenment. He gave up everything that was his; he broke the bond. He left his son and his wife and gave up the life of the palace. He abandoned the kingship and worldly rule and set out to learn what it was he must teach.

Siddhārtha sought out various teachers of the conventional type, who were plentiful enough in the India of his day, and he tried to learn their wisdom. He discovered, however, that they had nothing to teach him. Then, he tried to gain enlightenment by pursuing a path of strict asceticism. He abandoned food and finally fell into a stupor. When he awoke, he decided not to pursue that path again. He abandoned strict practices of renunciation and self-mortification and committed himself to finding a middle course between the luxurious life he had led in the palace and the kind of strict asceticism that was common among Indian recluses. It was then that one of the great events in world religious history took place. Siddhārtha left the five disciples he had accumulated by then, and they then proceeded to denounce him for abandoning the holy life. He went off to sit by himself under a tree in an area called “Deer Park.” The tree came to be called the “bodhi tree”—the tree of awakening—for it was there that he attained enlightenment. Siddhārtha sat under that tree for forty-nine days, and then the great awakening came. He became the Buddha.

After awakening, the Buddha propounded his great lessons. He did not see himself as a theoretician, but as a doctor of the soul instead. He did not bother

with answering abstract theoretical questions. What he wanted to do was to help people overcome their suffering. The image he used was that of a man who had been struck by an arrow. You do not ask him: “Who shot you?” “From what direction did the arrow come?” “Of what was it made?” What you do is pull the arrow out and begin working to heal the man. You begin the process of medication. That is what the Buddha wanted to do. He did not want to figure out the issues of the world; he wanted to help people. Often, he taught using simple homilies, telling stories—much like the rabbis of the Talmud or the Hasidic *rebbeim* in later Jewish tradition. At other times, he could be more directive.

One well-known story told about the Buddha involves a woman whose child had died. Her grief was so intense that she almost went mad. She could not put down the child’s body. Wandering from place to place, she looked for someone who could revive the child. Every teacher she approached sent her away, telling her they could not be of assistance. Finally, she came to the Buddha. The Buddha told her that, yes, he could revive the child, restore it to life, if she could do one simple thing. All she had to do was get a handful of mustard seeds from a house in which no death had ever occurred. The poor woman went begging from door to door asking for mustard seeds. At every house she visited, however, she was told that the inhabitants would indeed be happy to give her the necessary mustard seeds but that, of course, a death had taken place in that house or within that household. Finally, she realized that death was a universal reality. Everyone suffers loss. With that knowledge, she returned to the Buddha and, according to Buddhist tradition, became the first woman to enter his order of nuns.

The Buddha’s Message

The story of the woman whose child had died gives us some insight into the Buddha’s great teaching. His fundamental lesson is called the “chain of dependant origination.” Each human being, the Buddha teaches, is caught up on the wheel of samsara—the endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth. We are held on the wheel by karma—the consequences of our actions in each life. To this point what the Buddha teaches is no different from other Indian teachings: the notion that what we do affects what becomes of us as we return, unendingly, to this world. What is unique in the Buddha’s teaching is that he proposed a remedy to this situation. He suggests how we can leave the wheel of samsara. The Buddha called the first of his teachings the “four noble truths.”

The first noble truth is *dukkha*. *Dukkha* is a hard concept to render in words. We understand it best when we encounter its opposite, *sukkhā*. *Sukkhā* is a feeling of contentment, well-being—the sense that “God’s in his heaven and all’s right with the world.” If you understand the meaning of well-being, you can begin to understand *dukkha* as ill-being, a sense of loss, the feeling that the world is somehow awry and that things are not all right with the world. The first noble truth is the reality of *dukkha*.

The second noble truth is that *dukkha* has an origin. That origin for us is *taṇhā*, “craving.” We want things; we crave things; we grasp for things. As a consequence, either one of two things happens. We are either gnawed at by the

things we want and do not get, or we are gnawed at by having gotten the things we want and finding them not fulfilling because they generate their own needs—their own *dukkha*—within us. Craving is the origination of our sense that things are awry. There is no stasis in the world. Things are always off balance in one direction or the other. Either we do not have what we want or we do have what we want and it does not do what we want it to do.

The third noble truth follows from this imbalance. The Buddha said that the cessation of *dukkha* is possible. All you have to do is cut off craving, and you will find stasis. The way to cause things to cease being awry is to stop your craving; this will put life in order.

At this point let us note that the first three of the noble truths read like a physician's diagnosis. The physician determines what is wrong—craving—and identifies the cause of our craving. The physician also determines the cure, which is simply to cease craving. It is in the fourth noble truth that the Buddha prescribes the remedy.

The fourth noble truth teaches us that the way to cease craving is to follow a specific path. The Buddha called it the “eight-fold path”—specific actions that will lead to the end of craving. The path, says the Buddha, is a middle way between giving in to the pleasures of the senses on the one hand and self-mortification on the other. You do not have to inflict pain on yourself. You do not have to do what many of the holy men of India in the Buddha's time did, such as walk on hot coals, lie on a bed of nails, or starve yourself. This, says the Buddha, is just another kind of *dukkha*. What you have to do is to cease wanting, to overcome the acquisitive instinct and the grasping part of yourself. All you have to do is have right thought: Know the four noble truths. You need to free yourself from lust, ill will, and cruelty. Do not lie; do not go about tale-bearing. Engage in right action; abstain from killing, stealing, or improper sexual relations. Pursue a right livelihood. Engage in right effort. Aspire to right mindfulness and right concentration. If you master that path, says the Buddha, you will cease your *taṇhā*, your craving. You will overcome your wanting, and you will free yourself from *dukkha*. That is the heart of the Buddha's teaching. All that was to become the tradition of the Buddha grew from this.

At the core of the Buddha's teaching is the lesson that, when you are able to let go, you will be freed from the wheel of samsara. That is when you will find nirvana, which means literally “going out”—as a candle goes out when you blow on it. Going out is also what happens to water when you turn off the faucet. Nirvana is the goal. That cessation is the end product of our ceasing to crave, of our ceasing to be driven by our wants for things in this world.

In promoting the middle way, the Buddha did not advocate the mortification of the flesh that characterizes the life of the ascetic, nor did he teach the disengagement from the world that characterizes the life of a hermit. He did not embrace a cult of death or physical self-extinction. Suicide was not his solution to the problem of craving.

The essence of the Buddha's solution is not moving out of life, but the psychology with which we approach the life we live. For the Buddha, mastery comes, finally, in conducting our lives free from attachment to the stuff of our lives. Our material selves go on. Our bodies have their own momentum, and we

cannot cause their functioning to stop. What we can do is master our psychological framing of those actions. The Buddha would have us live with our actions, in detachment from their results. We do what must be done, psychologically liberated from the actions or the fruits of those actions. This disinterested action allows human beings to proceed with their lives, freed from the bonds of craving.

This is what the Buddha meant when he instructed his followers who lived as monks to “wash your bowls.” We cannot abstract ourselves from the actions of this world. We still must eat and attend to our corporeal needs. Have your meal and then “wash your bowl”—but go through your routine without attachment, without the longing for more, without the pride of possession, and without inappropriate engagement.

The Buddha as a Lens for Reading Koheleth

The excursion into the life and teaching of the Buddha prepares us to understand *Koheleth* as an important book with a coherent message. The attribution of *Koheleth* to Solomon is more than a rhetorical strategy. We are not the first generation to have had difficulty figuring out what *Koheleth* is truly about. Indeed, the rabbis seemed perplexed by it as well. We know that *Koheleth* was almost excluded from the canon and that it was ultimately incorporated on the basis of the argument that it was written by King Solomon. Conventionally, we are taught that Solomon is credited with writing three books: the Song of Songs (“in his lusty youth”), the Book of Proverbs (“the distillation of the wisdom of his middle years”), and *Koheleth* (“the writings of his later years”). If we are to follow that chain of thought, I suspect we will be led in the wrong direction. If we look at *Koheleth* as the writings of an embittered old man, then we will not understand what *Koheleth* is about, and it will not offer much for us to learn.

If, however, we are sensitized to the teachings of the Buddha, we are prepared to find the sense and wisdom of *Koheleth*. It is not a book of pessimism, which teaches that everything is rot. Neither is it a book of sorrow and bitterness in which the author engages in an extended whine because his time has passed and nothing is left for him; he knows his cup is no longer as full as it once was. Nor is *Koheleth* a book of hedonism, instructing “eat, drink, and be merry.” Any book that can be misinterpreted from so many directions is obviously a fascinating work—and also quite complex.

The Life of Solomon

There is specific rhetorical purpose in attributing *Koheleth* to Solomon. Beyond fulfilling the purpose of serving as warrant for the inclusion of this text in the canon, the attribution of its writing to King Solomon is intended to make a point. The author of the text intends us to learn a lesson from the described life of the narrator—who is represented as the author of the text. We are expected to think of the supposed author, self-identified as *Koheleth*, as having lived Solo-

mon's life. If the author of the text was not, in fact, King Solomon, the true author clearly modeled the fictive persona of the purported author and narrator on the life and career of Solomon. It is thus appropriate to state that the putative author of the book and the person of Koheleth, the narrator, is either Solomon or "Solomon." The life thus ascribed to this character reads significantly—and suggestively—like the life of the Buddha.

From the Book of Kings, we learn several salient realities about Solomon. He was indeed a king, reigning over both Judah and Israel (1 Kgs. 4:20) and ruling the largest territory of any of the Jewish kings, "from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and the boundary of Egypt" (1 Kgs. 5:1). Of his character, we know two salient details. He led a richly sensuous life:

22 Solomon's daily provisions consisted of 30 kors of semolina, and 60 kors of [ordinary] flour, 23 10 fattened oxen, 20 pasture-fed oxen, and 100 sheep and goats, besides deer and gazelles, roebucks and fatted geese. (1 Kgs. 5:22–23)

3 He had seven hundred royal wives and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned his heart away. (1 Kgs. 11:3)

We know, as well, that he was renowned for his wisdom:

29 God endowed Solomon with wisdom and discernment in great measure, with understanding as vast as the sands on the seashore. 30 Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the Kedemites and than all the wisdom of the Egyptians. 31 He was the wisest of all men: [wiser] than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Chalkol, and Darda the sons of Mahol. His fame spread among all the surrounding nations. 32 He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered one thousand and five. 33 He discoursed about trees, from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall; and he discoursed about beasts, birds, creeping things, and fishes. 34 Men of all peoples came to hear Solomon's wisdom, [sent] by all kings of earth who had heard of his wisdom. (1 Kgs. 4:29–34)

Indeed, it was Solomon's wisdom that is attested to in the famous story of the two prostitutes who both claimed to be the mother of a baby and brought the case to Solomon for adjudication (1 Kgs. 3:16–28). It was this same wisdom that attracted the attention of the queen of Sheba. After submitting Solomon to what amounted to a test, she was led to proclaim:

6 The report I heard in my own land about you and your wisdom was true. 7 But I did not believe the reports until I came and saw with my own eyes that not even the half had been told me; your wisdom and wealth surpass the reports that I heard. 8 How fortunate are your men and how fortunate are these your courtiers, who are always in attendance on you and can hear your wisdom! (1 Kgs. 10:6–8)

Parallels between the Lives of Koheleth and the Buddha

Let us now examine anew the remarkable parallels between the Buddhist account of the life of the Buddha and the self-described path of the author of *Koheleth*—purported to be King Solomon. Each figure grew up as a prince, living a life of royal ease and luxury, including, presumably, an abundance of women. Both knew a voluptuary life:

3 I ventured to tempt my flesh with wine and to grasp folly, while letting my mind direct with wisdom, to the end that I might learn which of the two was better for men to practice in their few days of life under heaven. 4 I multiplied my possessions. I built myself houses and I planted vineyards. 5 I laid out gardens and groves, in which I planted every kind of fruit tree. 6 I constructed pools of water, enough to irrigate a forest shooting up with trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves, and I acquired stewards. I also acquired more cattle, both herds and flocks, than all who were before me in Jerusalem. 8 I further amassed silver and gold and treasures of kings and provinces; and I got myself male and female singers, as well as the luxuries of commoners—coffers and coffers of them. 9 Thus, I gained more wealth than anyone before me in Jerusalem. In addition, my wisdom remained with me: 10 I withheld from my eyes nothing they asked for, and denied myself no enjoyment; rather, I got enjoyment out of all my wealth. And that was all I got out of my wealth. (2:3–10)

This was *Koheleth's* story, until the narrator revolted from sensual pleasures:

I said to myself, "Come, I will treat you to merriment. Taste mirth!" This too, I found, was futile. Of revelry I said, "It is mad!" of merriment, "What good is that?" (2:1–2)

Each man sought "knowledge":

23 All this I tested with wisdom. I thought I could fathom it, but it eludes me. 24 (The secret of) what happens is elusive and deep, deep down; who can discover it? 25 I put my mind to studying, exploring, and seeking wisdom and the reason of things, and to studying wickedness, stupidity, madness, and folly. 26 Now, I find woman more bitter than death; she is all traps, her hands are fetters and her heart is snares. He who is pleasing to God escapes her, and he who is displeasing is caught by her. 27 See, this is what I found, said *Koheleth*, item by item in my search for the reason of things. 28 As for what I sought further but did not find, I found only one human being in a thousand, and the one I found among so many was never a woman. 29 But, see, this I did find: God made men plain, but they have engaged in too much reasoning. (7:23–29)

Neither found answers to his heart's demands. Each tried austerities, renouncing life:

2 Then I accounted those who died long since more fortunate than those who

are still living: 3 and happier than either are those who have not yet come into being and have never witnessed the miseries that go under the sun.” (4:2–3)

Each learned that truth could not be found in it. Finally, each found a middle path between the hedonism of his youth and world renunciation, and then they reentered life as teachers:

9 Because (he) was a sage, he continued to instruct the people. He listened to and tested the soundness of many maxims. (12:9)

The Message of Koheleth

A. Diagnosis: The Instability of Human Life

We will best make sense of *Koheleth* if we read it with Buddhist eyes. *Koheleth* is a book about *dukkha*. This does not make it any more normatively Jewish, but it is the only thread that holds the book of *Koheleth* together. Life cannot be wholly on an even keel, says *Koheleth*. Life cannot be rendered permanent. Life is somehow seriously awry. That is the final sense of the famous aphorism in 1:2:

Utter futility!—said *Koheleth*—
Utter futility! All is futile!

Havel havalim, while familiarly rendered “vanity of vanities,” is more properly understood as saying “futility of futilities,” all is futility. In enunciating this theme at the beginning of the book, the author identifies the message that binds together all of its seemingly disparate parts. Running through *Koheleth* is dissatisfaction with all things human and natural. In the course of the author’s explorations, everything turns out to be displeasing. Nothing is ultimately rewarding.

Undergirding this message is the leitmotif of *Koheleth* that the source of this ongoing dissatisfaction is the reality that we all die. Nothing is pleasurable because it ends—and we end. All the accumulation of material goods is not a pleasure because ultimately we let go of it. All the accumulation of wisdom does not amount to what it should, says *Koheleth*, because no matter how wise we become, we die. The image that *Koheleth* evokes is that of Sisyphus: all of this labor, all that hard pushing, becomes meaningless, repetitive. We are not going anywhere; we are not adding anything. It has all been done before, says *Koheleth*; it is all going to be done again. The hardest part for him is that it was done before—and he was not there. It will be done again—and he will not be there. Futility of futilities.

The other motif that runs beneath the words of *Koheleth* is that there are no permanent forms. Heraclitus said that you do not step into the same river twice. His disciple might elaborate as follows: You do not step into the same river once. The river is never constant. There is no permanence. Again, the image of *hevel* is a key. It need not mean vanity. It need not even mean futility as we conventionally understand the term. *Hevel*, literally, is that frozen breath you see

before you when you step outside on a frozen winter's day. That insubstantial frost looks as though it is something, and then it is quickly nothing. *Hevel ha-valim* says *Koheleth*: frost of frost, vapor of vapors—the vaporousness of our existence. There is nothing substantial in our lives. It is all—we are all—nothing but vapors, but insubstantiality. We are in transit.

Koheleth seems preoccupied with aging and death:

12 For what will the man be like who will succeed the one who is ruling over what was built up long ago? My thoughts also turned to appraising wisdom and madness and folly. I found that

13 Wisdom is superior to folly

As light is superior to darkness;

14 A wise man has his eyes in his head,

Whereas a fool walks in darkness.

But I also realized that the same fate awaits them both. 15 So I reflected: “The fate of the fool is also destined for me; to what advantage, then, have I been wise?” and I came to the conclusion that too was futile, 16 because the wise man, just like the fool, is not remembered forever; for, as the succeeding days roll by, both are forgotten. Alas, the wise man dies, just like the fool! 17 And so I loathed life. For I was distressed by all that goes on under the sun, because everything is futile and pursuit of wind. (2:12–17)

Koheleth is clear in enunciating the source of his discontent. The origin of his affliction is the lack of permanence in his world. You can amass material goods, but you cannot go on amassing forever. You may pursue wisdom, but you do not hold that wisdom forever, because for *Koheleth* the fundamental discontent is that *you* are not forever.

So it goes throughout the book. The message that *Koheleth* brings us is the identification of that kind of *hevel*, that kind of transitoriness, that futility. That, for him, is the boundary of all experience. Here, above all, is where we find the resonance with the teaching of the Buddha. For the Buddha's lessons were triggered by his discovery of *dukkha*, and *dukkha* itself had its origins in his encounter with sickness, aging, death, and the kind of sorrow and pain that flow from them. *Koheleth* teaches us that reality in itself eludes us. Our reality is not permanent. In effect, it is not fully existent. It is *hevel*. Does *hevel* have a reality? It does, temporarily, but it is primarily a kind of illusion.

B. Prescription: Living Life through Disinterested Action

If the idea that reality is not permanent is all that *Koheleth* taught, if that is all that the Buddha taught, the lesson would not be of much use to us. It seems that *Koheleth*, like the Buddha, teaches us what to do about our condition. He begins with the awareness that there are no essences. You are not going to make anything permanent, so your goal cannot be, says *Koheleth*, the achievement of permanence. If this is so, what are we to do with our life? What is the purpose of pursuing wisdom, or eating, or drinking, or whatever we do in the course of our daily existence? As *Koheleth* engages with this question, he comes to see that the answer is that the simple experiences of our lives have value in, of, and for

themselves. Doing is valuable in itself, not for any imagined permanence that can result from it.

The Buddha called that kind of behavior “disinterested action.” You do the actions of your life for the action’s own sake, not because you are attached to the fruit of that action or because you are waiting for the rewards of the behavior. You do what you must do because that is what people do, not because you are waiting to amass a permanent storehouse of wisdom or possessions, or even pleasure. The Buddha taught that there is no way to avoid action. Action is inevitable. (Remember that, in the Buddha’s vision of the middle path, self-mortification and renunciation themselves are rejected.) The struggle to oppose what is irresistible is folly: Do not waste your efforts on that. We do, says the Buddha, what we must do. Freedom from attachment to what we inevitably—irresistibly—do is the key to our release from suffering. The Buddha’s own teaching is paraphrased in the well-known text, *Questions of King Milinda*: “Without being attached to the body they [enlightened ones] take care of it for the purpose of making a holy life possible.”²

That same message lies at the heart of the lesson of *Koheleth* as well. The first thing that we look for is tranquility:

6 Better is a hand full of gratification than two fists full of labor, which is pursuit of wind. (4:6)

13 Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer has sense to heed warnings. (4:13)

The lesson is made crystal clear in the opening verses of chapter 6:

1 There is an evil I have observed under the sun, and a grave one it is for man: 2 that God sometimes grants a man riches, property, and wealth, so that he does not want for anything his appetite may crave, but God does not permit him to enjoy it; instead, a stranger will enjoy it. That is futility and a grievous ill. 3 Even if a man should beget a hundred children and live many years—no matter how many the days of his years may come to, if his gullet is not sated through his wealth, I say: The stillbirth, though it was not even accorded a burial, is more fortunate than he. 4 Though it comes into futility and departs into darkness, and its very name is covered with darkness, 5 though it has never seen or experienced the sun, it is better off than he—6 yes, even if the other lived a thousand years twice over but never had his fill of enjoyment! For are not both of them bound for the same place? 7 All of man’s earning is for the sake of his mouth, yet his gullet is not sated. 8 What advantage then has the wise man over the fool, what advantage then has the pauper who knows how to get on in life? 9 Is the feasting of the eyes more important than the pursuit of desire? That, too, is futility and pursuit of wind. (6:1–9)

What is the enemy that *Koheleth* is envisioning here? It is the overwhelming craving that characterizes so much of the human experience. A person might have all of these material goods, offspring, or insight, and yet he or she cannot

²Edward Conze, ed., *Buddhist Scriptures* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 160.

stop wanting. The person Koheleth describes in these verses is driven by *taḥhā*, by craving. Koheleth warns us that what will entrap us is that very craving. We can hear Koheleth's warning: If you keep craving, you are never going to be satisfied. The resulting dissatisfaction is the enemy; in it is the root of our *hevel*, our futility.

C. Not Pessimism or Nihilism: Freedom from Attachment

Against this background of the futility of craving, Koheleth lays out the central vision of his message:

12 Here is a grave evil I have observed under the sun: riches hoarded by their owner to his misfortune, 13 in that those riches are lost in some unlucky venture; and if he begets a son, he has nothing in hand. 14 Another grave evil is this: He must depart just as he came. He can take nothing of his wealth to carry with him. 15 So what is the good of his toiling for the wind? 16 Besides, all his days he eats in darkness, with much vexation and grief and anger. 17 Only this, I have found, is a real good: that one should eat and drink and get pleasure with all the gains he makes under the sun, during the numbered days of life that God has given him; for that is his portion. (5:12–17)

Considering the teachings of the Buddha, we are prepared to hear this lesson not as bitter but as descriptive. Koheleth is dealing with the reality of death, not bemoaning it. This is the human condition. Koheleth prepares us to understand that it is the breaking of the cycle of craving that makes the difference, for we can carry nothing of our wealth away with us. Similarly, against the background of the wisdom of the Buddha, we recognize that these words do not advocate an empty hedonism. Rather, Koheleth is preaching the lesson of freedom from attachment.

From this angle of vision, we do not see Koheleth as preaching a destructive ethic. His insight is not a nihilism, in which all actions are permitted, nor is it suicide. Those actions accept the reality of conventional vision, though they evaluate it negatively. The vision of Koheleth disaffirms our conventional vision. Koheleth is not embracing "evil" actions; to do so would be egocentric and selfish. The vision takes life seriously on its most superficial terms. It assumes a reality for me, mine, and my existence with a seriousness that is not congruent with the notion of *hevel*. Koheleth's lesson, thus understood, becomes that we should be in life, not of it. Our condition causes us to take part in life, but we need not take it seriously. Do what we do, Koheleth teaches us, but do it free from attachment.

Engaging with the teachings of the Buddha affords us a lens with which to make sense of *Koheleth*. Looking through this lens, we see this book not as a hodgepodge of disparate, unconnected ideas but as coherent and consistent. Understood in this way, the book makes sense and teaches us a lesson that helps us live our lives with less pain and maybe even with equanimity, balance, and a sense of well-being.