BUDDHISM AND THE WEST

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IF asked to draw the sharpest possible distinction between Christianity and Buddhism in the briefest possible terms, one might choose some obvious antithesis, such as that Christians worship God while Buddhists do not, an antithesis that stands for attitudes so apparently irreconcilable that Westerners have often maintained that Buddhism is not a religion at all, but only a philosophy and a system of ethics. Yet this antithesis and all that goes with it, such as the Judeo-Christian world view, which is said to be teleological and anthropocentric, as compared with the Buddhist, which is trans-historical and universal, arises only from differences of cultural response to the same essential problem: the problem of establishing a relationship with the source of our being and the infinite life that surrounds us.

In relation to this problem, faiths and their practices are no more than different means to the one end. And if, in the event, the ends achieved by different faiths turn out to be contradictory, then evidently some of the means are in some way deficient and in need of revision; either they were inadequate in the first place (though perhaps good enough for the times) or have been perverted since. For all religions are derived from, and refer back to, the fact of life; all religious systems and philosophies whatsoever converge on this singleness of fact; they are interpretations of it, come into being in response to needs and circumstances that arise from it, prosper for a while, decline, become transformed into something else, or vanish altogether. Only and always the singleness of fact remains and (for as long as the human race exists) man's variable capacity for experiencing and understanding it. In this respect, Buddhism is a description of what is said to be, according to the Indian tradition, an ancient Road leading from death to immortality. The knowledge of this Road is not confined to any one country or to any one religion.

Where precisely a particular religion begins is hard to say; seldom is its origin as clear-cut as seems to be the case when viewed in the perspective of the established structure. In the beginning, the Way of the Buddha was one of a number of variations of the ancient Indian religious tradition. Enough is known, however, for us to be sure that the variation now known in the West as "Buddhism" had its origins in the life story of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, who was born in India in approximately 563 B.C.

From time to time, great souls, or geniuses, appear who put their finger on a fault, or have clearer vision than any of their contemporaries, and set things to right again. Among these, Siddhartha Gautama is one of the greatest the world has ever known; to him was given the title "Buddha,"

meaning "The Enlightened One." Two thousand five hundred years ago he saw a fault in the contemporary religious scene and found a remedy for it which is still potent today. A brief account of this event and its outcome will serve as an introduction to our main discussion.

The facts and legends of the Buddha's life show that his spiritual Odyssey was motivated by an acute existential disquiet caused basically by the conflict between selfish desire and the brute facts of the world. He perceived that suffering was a universal characteristic of human life, and sought a solution to the problem raised by this perception, first of all for the sake of his own peace of mind and then also for the benefit of all beings.

According to the legend, the crisis was brought on by the sight of sickness, old age, and death. It was these facts of life that gave rise to doubt and conflict in the mind of the Buddha and caused him to forsake the life of ease in the palace of his father, the ruler of a small country on the borders of what we now call Nepal, in order to go in search of a solution to his problem. The abandonment of his wife and son, the surrender of his inheritance, and his going forth from his home to adopt the life of a wandering ascetic would probably be condemned today as selfish and irresponsible, but in those days it was not only an acceptable response to religious yearnings but was also considered a noble one, and it is traditionally and respectfully called by Buddhists "The Great Renunciation."

After six years of fruitless study along traditional lines under the best available teachers, the Buddha's discovery of the solution to his problem came about through intense meditative absorption, a means suggested to him by the recollection of a youthful mystical experience of unity and tranquillity. This absorption led to the event known as his "*enlightenment*." According to a form of the legend most in accord with modern experience, at dawn one day, after a period of intense absorption, the Buddha happened to glance up and saw the brightly shining morning star. This vision, it seems, coming when his mind was in a state of perfect clarity, inwardly illuminated the source and nature of his own being and of the whole bubble of the universe. This was the "great awakening" of Siddhartha Gautama, his second birth, the moment when he was reborn as The Buddha, the Fully Enlightened One.

Primitive Buddhism, teaching self-abnegation and the widening of the human capacity for love, was the result of the Buddha's search and achievement. The origin of his teaching is the enlightenment event, and its prime purpose, whatever its intermediate ends may be, is ultimately to bring all beings to the same experience, to the same transformation of consciousness. This transformation is the essence of the Buddhist goal which is sometimes called *Nirvana*.

The Buddha's philosophy and Way are outlined in the first two discourses delivered at Benares shortly after his enlightenment. First of all he announced the principle of *The Middle Way* which avoids the extremes of

self-indulgence and self-mortification. Speaking from first-hand experience of both, he said the first was "low, coarse, vulgar, ignoble, and useless," and the second, "painful, ignoble, and useless." Next he outlined his philosophy in the form known as the "four noble truths" concerning the fact of suffering, its cause, its cessation and the way leading to its cessation. The fourth truth sets out the way known as "the noble eightfold path," which has three components: "wisdom," "morality," and "mental discipline"; these components interact on each other and are to be cultivated simultaneously, not successively. Lastly, in the second of the two discourses, he gave out the most important of all Buddhist doctrines. This is concerned with the nature of the person which he declared to be *Anatta* — without self, egoless. This represents a denial of what was then one of the principal contemporary philosophies according to which (in simplified terms) there is an inner reality, *Atman*, and an outer reality, *Brahman*, and the object of religious practice was to unite the inner *Atman* with the outer *Brahman*; this was in effect a soul-theory as compared with the Buddha's no-soul-theory. From the earliest times there has apparently been some dispute as to what precisely the Buddha meant by his doctrine of *Anatta* — no-self; did he mean that there was no self or only that no self is to be found within phenomena? This is a question that can only be settled by direct personal experience of the nature of one's own "self"; theoretical debate about it has proved on the whole unprofitable. In any case, the doctrine is of value principally for its effect in practice. Briefly stated, its purpose is to bring us to the realisation that within phenomena we cannot discover anything of which it can be said, "This is I, this is mine, this is my self". The significance and outcome of this practice will be discussed later. Meanwhile, it is sufficient to remember that Buddhism in theory and practice revolves around this doctrine; it is the Buddha's teaching about egolessness that gives to Buddhism its unique character among the religions of the world.

The whole structure of Buddhism rests upon these two discourses from the Theravada canon which have their equivalents in the Mahayana. All later developments with any legitimate claim to be called Buddhist can be traced back to the principles contained in these discourses, and in so far as any form of Buddhism deviates from these principles in spirit, to that extent it ceases to be typically Buddhist.

The teaching as briefly outlined above came to the fore in India a few generations after the death of the Buddha, partly for religious and partly for political reasons. In time it became established in virtually the whole of Asia. However, by the twelfth century of our era it had declined in India and was finally driven from there by the sword of Islam. Quite recently it has been driven out of Tibet by Communist armies, and for all practical purposes also from China, where it is now only a museum piece. It still survives in most of the other countries of Asia and has recently been

reintroduced into India as the religion of the "Outcastes." Wherever it survives in the East today it is being subjected to various modernising pressures connected with resurgent nationalism and democratic aspirations. During all these Eastern journeyings the teaching itself has been evolving, sometimes into forms which the Buddha would hardly recognise as having very much to do with what he originally taught. It took two thousand years and the advent of European colonialism to carry Buddhism to the countries of the West. What will now happen to it in the alien milieu of our own bustling, neurotic, greedy, and violent world cannot be foreseen.

It is probably far too early for anyone to attempt to forecast what lasting effects Buddhism may have on Western culture in general, for its influence so far is only germinal, and further growth and development are not yet assured. However, if we trace the course of Buddhism in the West, noting the changes of Western opinion that have accompanied its progress, we may achieve as a more limited objective an understanding as to why it has been gaining favour among us. What seems to have been taking place, as I shall try to show, is a gradual convergence of two tendencies: on the one hand, the West's increasing understanding and appreciation of the nature of Eastern faiths, such as Buddhism, and on the other, the West's growing disenchantment with its own religious heritage. We now seem to be at the point where these two tendencies show signs of merging into a single movement of religious regeneration, not necessarily Buddhist or even Eastern, though Buddhism and other Eastern faiths may have a part to play in it, but with motivations and aspirations similar to those of Buddhism, and sometimes reaching out for the kind of methodology which Buddhism can supply.

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Some of the earliest Western contacts with Buddhism were made by Jesuit missionaries in the sixteenth century. The records of their activities in China and Japan show that in spite of their position as pioneers in the field of Buddhist studies they had a fine appreciation of Buddhism, at any rate as encountered in those countries. Naturally, there were many aspects of the teaching and practice of the Buddhists which were uncongenial to them. Nevertheless, they had a high regard for the "bonzes" (priests), for their spirituality, and for the level of Buddhist culture generally. St. Francis Xavier wrote: "I have spoken with several learned bonzes, especially with one who is held in high esteem here by everyone, as much for his knowledge, conduct and dignity as for his great age of eighty years. His name is Ninshitsu, which in Japanese signifies 'Heart of Truth.' He is among them as a Bishop, and if his name is appropriate, he is indeed a blessed man. . . . It is a marvel how good a friend this man is to me."[1] He also reported of the Japanese in general that "in their culture, their social usage, and their mores, they surpass the Spaniards so greatly that one must be ashamed to say so."[2]

However, the Jesuit interest in Buddhism was primarily in support of their missionary effort, in which, incidentally, they had some success. Two and a half centuries later, when Schopenhauer speaks out in favour of Buddhism, he does so without condescension and in order to express his agreement with its principles. The consonance of Schopenhauer's views and Buddhist principles is all the more interesting when we remember that in the first instance he arrived at his own viewpoint quite independently of promptings from Buddhist or other Indian sources. He thought he had found in Buddhism support for his own theories and world view. His works contain many passages which either refer directly to Buddhism or can be correlated with it.[3] It seemed to him that the Buddhist process of self-realisation and liberation from self-will carried on from the point where his own understanding left off. "I have taught", he said, "what sainthood is, but I myself am no saint." Even though some people, from the vantage point of their own greater knowledge, now criticise his understanding of Buddhism, it is remarkable that he acquired as good an understanding of it as he did with such slender resources, for in his day Pali and Sanskrit scholarship was in its infancy, and very few Buddhist scriptures were available in translation. Perhaps from his own theories he read into Buddhism an emphasis on the will that is not there. The will certainly has an important place in Buddhism, but one that is subordinate to discernment. For Buddhism places more reliance on the natural morality and responses of the enlightened and liberated consciousness than on unenlightened self-coercion. Nevertheless, Charles Muses[4] has recently given support to Schopenhauer's views on the will and Buddhism, and shows that the *Lankavatara Sutra* of the Mahayana canon (a *sutra* unknown to Schopenhauer) completes Schopenhauer's thought with regard to logic, metaphysics, and ethics. As an example, for purposes of comparison, he quotes from paragraph 71 of *The World as Will and Representation:*

> "In those who have overcome the world, in whom the will, having attained to perfect self-knowledge, found itself again in all, and then freely denied itself . . . we shall see that peace which is above all reason, that perfect calm of spirit, that deep rest, that inviolable confidence and serenity, the mere reflection of which in the countenance . . . is an entire and certain gospel."

Muses then states that the *Lankavatara Sutra* lends its confirmation with clarifying detail. Among several examples, the following indicates the kind of confirmation and clarification he had in mind:

> "But with the Bodhisattva's attainment [Bodhisattva means 'enlightenment being'] . . . there comes the 'turning about' within his deepest seat of consciousness from self-centred egoism to universal compassion for all beings. After experiencing the 'turning about' . . . he will be able to enter the realm of consciousness that lies beyond that of the mind-system."[5]

The case of Schopenhauer has been chosen as an early and noteworthy example of the acceptance of Buddhist views as distinct from mere academic interest in them. But there were many other nineteenth century writers, such as Emerson and Tolstoy (in addition, of course, to Buddhist scholars), who contributed to the general awareness of the nature and value of Buddhism and other Eastern faiths. In some ways Tolstoy's views are typical of the period and represent the state of convergence at this time. On the one hand, he repudiated Church-Christianity, vehemently condemning its perversion of the truth and love of power; on the other hand, while welcoming Eastern faiths because they avoided the worst of the Church's vices and crimes and demonstrated that organised Christianity had no exclusive rights where the highest truth is concerned, he could not quite accept their teachings as the equal of Christ's original and unperverted message, as he himself understood it.[6]

By the end of the nineteenth century a far wider circle of scholars and the general public had begun to appreciate the merits of Buddhism as a non-theistic and non-authoritarian religion. By now Buddhism had in fact become widely recognised as a philosophical and ethical system that did not conflict with modern scientific knowledge and common sense. In this it contrasted sharply with the tendency of Western religion to resist the advance of modern knowledge as, for instance, in the attempt to refute the premises of Darwin's theory of Evolution. (A pleasing example of this attempt was the suggestion that God had put fossils into rocks in order to deceive human beings.) The words of T. H. Huxley give expression to a view of Buddhism which seems to have been widely held at this time:

". . . a system which knows no God in the Western sense, which denies a soul to man, which counts the belief in immortality a blunder and the hope of it a sin, which refuses any efficacy to prayer and sacrifice, which bids men to look to nothing but their own efforts for salvation, which in its original purity knew nothing of vows of obedience and never sought the aid of the secular arm, yet spread over a considerable moiety of the old world with marvellous rapidity and is still, with whatever base admixture of foreign superstitions, the dominant creed of a large fraction of mankind" (Romanes Lecture, 1893).

Commenting on this view, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan says: "Given the psychological conditions of the time (i.e., in India), the reception of the Buddha's message would be unthinkable, if it were negative. For anyone who is familiar with the religious environment of India it is impossible to look upon a philosophy of negation as the mandate of a religious revival."[7]

Certainly, the late nineteenth century assessment of Buddhism as represented by Huxley's words can now be seen as an expression of the rising tide of positivism and materialism and to that extent misses the principal characteristic of the Buddha's way which in this, as in other

respects, is a middle way between extremes, both in theory and in practice, hence neither materialistic nor idealistic, and neither theistic nor atheistic. In some of its aspects Huxley's view can now be cited as a case of Buddhism being admired largely for what it is not. Few scholars today would describe Buddhism in such terms as he used. Nevertheless, in some respects his view can be upheld, and it represents an important stage in the process of convergence between the acceptance of the new religious viewpoint and the rejection of the old.

Naturally, there were many views that differed from those given as examples so far. Some of these testified to the extreme difficulty of shaking off the Christian ethos of one's natural background, even with strenuous conscious efforts. For example, some professed Western Buddhists obstinately insisted, and some still do insist, against all the weight of evidence, in bringing into the teaching a ghost of the Western soul in the form of a "higher self," a kind of immortal entity existing in its own right. A detailed argument on this point would be out of place here. At present it is sufficient to note that whether or not there is in fact anything to which the term "self" can be applied, the way of the Buddha, as already noted, not only avoids this supposition, or hypothesis, but actually teaches quite otherwise. The whole system derives from, and depends for its efficacy on, the negation of anything in experience to which the term "self" could legitimately be applied; if any notion of self arises in consciousness, instantly the question must be asked, "To what or to whom does this notion occur?"

From the earliest European encounters with Buddhism until now, the teaching of the Buddha has been presented to the West in many conflicting forms ranging from extreme nineteenth century scientific Buddhism to mid-twentieth century "beat" Zen, and controversy about the merits of different views continues. So many interpretations have been spread around that almost every self-styled Buddhist draws his own picture of the Buddha either as some sort of ideal man or as a symbol for some kind of principle, and has his own private kind of Buddhism. Yet in spite of these somewhat shaky beginnings, Buddhism has already made quite surprising inroads into our culture.

As well as scientists and philosophers, many well known figures in the arts and literature, such as T. S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, and Hermann Hesse, have become associated with Buddhism, if not always as professed Buddhists, at least as examples of those who have been influenced by its teachings. Scratch a painter or a writer and as likely as not you will find a Buddhist.

In recent decades there has also been a steady increase in the number of Buddhist scholars, of Buddhist societies and study groups, and of books published on Buddhism. Of special importance was the publication in popular editions of Dr. D. T. Suzuki's works.[8] These introduced a wider

public to Zen and gave fresh impetus to the study of Buddhism in relation to various Western disciplines. For example, some psychoanalysts began to correlate their theories and practices with the methods and insights of Zen,[9] and philosophers began to draw comparisons between Zen and Western existentialism.

But at the same time and perhaps of more importance, there began to arise a greater interest in Buddhism in non-Buddhist circles for purely religious reasons. Here the term "religious" is being used in the sense given to it by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. There he laid down as criteria for valid religion: philosophical reasonableness, moral helpfulness, and immediate luminousness — terms which can easily be correlated with the three components of the "eightfold path," namely, "wisdom," "morality," and "mental discipline." Referring to these criteria, Dom Aelred Graham has suggested that they are what in effect are now being sought. He quotes the Chairman of an American university religious department as saying that all over America there is an increasing interest in religion combined with a decreasing interest in the Church, and commenting on this statement he says: "There can be little doubt that the scientific temper of the age with its emphasis on control by evidence and the test of experience, in contrast to religious insistence on mystery and blind faith, is a formidable challenge to any merely authoritative presentation of Christian belief. Science has been well described as a 'process of discovery rather than a compendium of data.' For many, this description could just as easily apply to the personal religious quest."[10] These remarks about authoritative religion and the personal quest draw attention to two important characteristics of the Buddhist way: the first, that it is emphatically not an authoritative system, and the second, that it is most decidedly a personal inward journey of self-discovery.

These two characteristics go a long way towards explaining the welcome Buddhism has received, especially from the young, in a culture which many people believe to be spiritually bankrupt. The young of today seem to be more conscious of this spiritual poverty and more affected by it than their elders; they sit, as Dr. H. Saddhatissa has put it, "in the midst of the nuclear arms race" and "surrounded by their bingo-crazy relations."[11] Whether the young, when no longer young, will retain this interest and awareness is another matter. Where, for instance, are the "beats," the "hippies," and the "flower people" of yesteryear? Gone — in the idiom of the "pop" song — to the suburbs, every one! Nevertheless, the young in their present attitude represent the natural outcome of the convergence we noted earlier — the rejection of the old, and the acceptance of the new. They are evidently seeking for a valid and vital religious basis on which to construct their lives. Some of them accept one or other of the Eastern religions, Buddhism for example, but many seek only guidance without wishing to commit themselves to any particular sect.

The nature of this spiritual regeneration in the West — in so far as it exists — suggests the birth of something new rather than the revival of something old. Evidence in support of this possibility is the preference shown for the non-theistic approach. Professor Ninian Smart, for example, has noted that . . . "one of the reasons why Buddhism and some other religious movements have attracted recent interest and concern in the West, and especially among the young, is precisely their non-theistic nature . . ." and that ". . . the mood is introvertive, disillusioned with the personalistic approach, among those who have experimented with the teachings and methods of the Eastern world."[12]

Buddhist non-theism contrasts with Christian theism not only as a fact in itself but also in the resulting absence of speculation and belief. Buddhism rests firmly on the facts of experience and on the logic of cause and effect. In Buddhist philosophy, cause and effect takes the form of the interdependence of events, a short formula for which runs as follows:

> "When this is, that is;
> This arising, that arises;
> When this is not, that is not;
> This ceasing, that ceases."

Using this principle, the cause of suffering is traced to "craving," and the cause of "craving" to "ignorance." If Buddhism ultimately refers back to the singleness of the fact of life itself, then it does so without speculating about the nature of the fact. The Buddha refused to discuss matters beyond the comprehension of his listeners, or which were not useful to the holy life. Such discussion, he said, "is not conducive to aversion, detachment, cessation, tranquillity, deep penetration, full realisation of Nirvana." Anyone who insisted on having metaphysical assurances before he would venture on the way, he compared to a man wounded by a poisoned arrow who refused to receive treatment until his friends had found out all about the arrow and the man who had shot it. As the Buddha pertinently remarked, the man would die before his friends could get the comprehensive report he demanded.

Turning to God-belief as a specific form of speculation, we find naturally enough that Buddhism is far less concerned with this question than Christianity. In fact, in Buddhism God-belief has no essential part to play at all, though it is raised in discussion from time to time incidentally, and consequently we find that several aspects of it are dealt with by the Buddha.[13] Some say that the Buddha neither affirms nor denies the existence of God. However, it is truer to say that he is less concerned with the question of God's existence than with the fact that Enlightenment transcends God-belief, which is in any case incompatible with the way of Enlightenment; for the way, as we have already noted, is one of discovery, not of belief. Buddhism, in fact, does not place the Buddhist in the position where the question of God arises as a necessary factor. Hence, although

faith is an important factor in Buddhism, it does not take the form of belief in God or of intellectual assent to creeds; it is primarily a form of trust in the efficacy of the way, a trust that is justified as one proceeds, step by step. First, we hear about the "truth of suffering," then we look around and within and find that it is true. Next, we proceed to the "truth of the arising of suffering" and find that it also is true. And so on. Other forms of faith may arise naturally from experience; for example, we have faith in the fact that there is a self-validating quality about truth itself which requires no justification. We may also experience faith in life itself in the sense of its essential rightness and sanctity, the kind of faith that so powerfully affected Tolstoy. But at no time does Buddhism make demands on our credulity; instead, it has always given priority to personal experience and self-reliance, for which reason it is sometimes said to be a "come-and-see" teaching.

This principle of seeing for yourself is well illustrated by the advice the Buddha gave to some people called the Kalamas who were perplexed by the many conflicting doctrines taught by men who all claimed to be right. The Buddha said, "When you yourselves know that certain things are unwholesome, and wrong, and bad, then give them up. . . . And when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome, and good, then accept them and follow them." The sayings of the Buddha include many similar injunctions; for example, on his deathbed he advised his followers to be "lamps unto themselves" and to accept no one else as an authority. At every stage of the way the principle applies that the final certitude, the ground of verification, must be one's own experience.

So far, in reporting on Buddhism's reception in the West we have tried to indicate its general compatibility with the temper of the present age and have noted some of the characteristics that appeal to the modern Western consciousness; we have made no mention, as now we must, of some of its shortcomings. In fact, we have been dealing with unperverted Buddhism, as it were, and must now confess that the teaching does not always, or indeed often, appear in a pure and unperverted form. In addition to the usual institutional drawbacks common to most faiths, some forms of Buddhism also exhibit lapses from integrity and good sense of a kind found in many other religions. Some of these are traditionally justified as "expedient means" for the use of less gifted followers of the way. But the history of Buddhism brings to light such astonishing deviations from what is generally believed to be the original teaching of the Buddha, that good sense suggests other reasons. It is, for instance, inconceivable that the Buddha would have given utterance to some of the more fanciful Mahayana *sutras*, magnificent though some of them may be, or demonstrated some of the Tantric sexual postures, whatever the benefit that is alleged to be derived from them. Such things are surely the fruit of the mind's natural exuberance rather than the result of someone's good intentions towards

the dim-witted. Objection is raised not so much against the means as such as against the supposition that they are necessary when it is perfectly obvious that they are not. In relation to the principal aims of Buddhism many of these developments are little more than ego-gratifying diversions; one might just as well climb mountains or go sailing.

Many of these developments can be accounted for by the fact that Buddhism, like other faiths, has been subjected to various corrupting influences. For example, it has its own form of scholasticism, has absorbed local superstitions and practices, has had to harmonise with racial and national idiosyncrasies, and has been manipulated to meet the needs of governments in search of legitimation and for other political purposes. We can trace its progress from the primitive message to the theistic, and sometimes theocratic, forms it later adopted — as, for example, in Tibet — and then back again by way of some of the early Zen sects to a semblance of the primitive ideal of personal experience and self-reliance. An immense variety of forms exists today, ranging from the comparatively authentic and ancient Theravada in Ceylon, to the comparatively inauthentic and modern pseudo-religious structures with strong political affiliations, such as the Soka Gakkai, in Japan.

Obviously, if we are to extract from this great mass of traditional material Buddhism's own unique contribution to the Western religious process, we must ignore not only what is superfluous but also what can be found just as easily elsewhere. For example, most traditions can supply emotional outlets and vicarious salvation and can offer the paths of devotion and works to those who want them. But Buddhism is essentially a path of self-knowledge and self-reliance, and its essence is therefore more likely to be found at the centre and near its origin than at the periphery and in its scholastic subtleties.

There is general agreement among Buddhist scholars[14] that the Theravada doctrine of *Anatta* — egolessness, and its highly developed Mahayana equivalent, the doctrine of *Sunyata* — emptiness, form the core of Buddhist teaching and that Buddhism stands unique among the religions of the world by reason of these doctrines. Consequently, that which is unique, relevant, and valid in the contribution which Buddhism is now making to the Western religious scene, derives from these two doctrines. And it also follows that the Buddhist process of convergence on the singleness of fact — the truth inherent in life itself, which was the proposition we started out with, is based on these doctrines. Accordingly, these must now primarily engage our attention. For convenience, we shall refer to these two doctrines in the singular as the doctrine of Emptiness.

3

In confining our attention to the central tradition of Buddhism and in particular to its basic truth of Emptiness, we are not dismissing as totally irrelevant to the needs of the West all the various doctrines that have

generally been regarded as essentials of the teaching. The intention is only to emphasise that Buddhism in any authentic form derives its power and validity from this basic truth of Emptiness and in this respect is unique among the religions of the world, and that by reason of this unique characteristic it has something of importance to say to the West which probably cannot be better said by any other tradition.

Admittedly, all the higher religions have acknowledged the truth of Emptiness to the extent of teaching that self-interest and self-assertion are the cause of every kind of vice, and that only by losing one's self will one find one's true life. But none has tackled the problem of selfishness in so radical a fashion as Buddhism. In its essential teaching Buddhism makes no concessions; even Nirvana, the goal, is impersonal. In terms of the Buddhist logic of the four-cornered negation, it cannot be said of one who has realised Nirvana "that he is or is not, that he both is and is not, or that he neither is nor is not." Such a one leaves no trace. In Buddhism there is no salvation for one's self; so long as any feeling of selfhood remains there will be a self that suffers. It is said not merely that the self is subject to suffering, but that all the constituents of body and mind (the "khandhas") are themselves the very substance of suffering. Anyone, therefore, who retains even a vague feeling of identification or association with all, or with any, of these constituents will be a sufferer. As stated in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, "He suffers who thinks and feels that he is." Only when one no longer feels that one is, when "there is suffering but none that suffers," is the problem of suffering solved.

It should be explained here that it is just as wrong to hold the opinion that one has no self as to hold the contrary opinion that one has a self; the first opinion leads to the error of annihilationism, and the second to the error of eternalism; the "middle way" once again lies between, or rather transcends, the extremes. Both opinions arise from the false idea "I AM." It is this vague feeling "I AM" that creates the idea of self which corresponds to nothing in reality. The importance and difficulty of eliminating this "I AM" feeling is illustrated by a story in the *Samyutta-nikaya* about a "bhikkhu" (monk) called Khemaka. Khemaka admitted, to the evident distress of his interrogators, that although he could clearly see that within all the constituents of mind and body there was no self or anything pertaining to a self, nevertheless he still had a vague feeling "I AM" (as indeed most people do) and that he must not therefore be regarded as an *Arahant* (saint or sage). He said this feeling was hard to pin down; it was like the smell of a flower, not easily attributable to any particular part of the flower, but was there in the flower as a whole. However, the discussion proved successful and the story had a happy ending; Khemaka got rid of his feeling "I AM" and became an *Arahant*, and so incidentally did all his interrogators.

This emphasis on the subject of self has led some Westerners to remark on the paradox that a Buddhist is unusually obsessed with the very thing he says does not exist. But the logic of this emphasis is well summarised by Dogen, the founder of the Japanese Soto Zen school:—

> "To study Buddhism is to learn the self; to learn the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to be at one with all existence; to be at one with all existence is to be thoroughly enlightened."

According to Buddhist theory, ignorance of Emptiness is at the root of the "I AM" feeling and thus the prime cause of selfishness; it leads to what the West calls "sin," for it sunders us from the source of our being and from others and from the infinite life that surrounds us. Ignorance in this sense is existential rather than intellectual; mere understanding will not overcome it; our thinking, our feeling, and our willing must all be freed from its influence. In practice, therefore, the whole of Buddhism may be regarded as a methodology aimed at the removal of ignorance. The Buddhist way is sometimes summarised in these three short axioms:—

Cease to do evil;
Learn to do good;
Purify the mind.

In the removal of ignorance, the last of these three axioms is the chief operative factor in relation to which the others stand first of all as necessary auxiliaries and then as natural effects.

The purification of the mind is effected by means of "*bhavana*" — mental culture, or discipline — which is an aspect of the "eightfold path" that is receiving particular attention in the West from both clergy and laymen. The detailed programme of mental culture has been evolved from the Buddhist analysis of the human predicament and takes into account psychological differences in the individual, such as whether his character is dominated by greed, hatred, or delusion, and so on. Here we can only give the briefest indication of the nature of this programme.

Mental culture is not educational in the accepted sense; its ultimate aim is to bring the mind to the full realisation of Emptiness. The chief means employed are "*sati*" — mindfulness, or attention, and meditation which is a term used in the West to describe formal periods of sitting in a prescribed posture and in a state of constant and intense awareness. The most typically Buddhist forms of meditation are based on mindfulness and serve two main purposes: first to calm down the psycho-somatic system, and then to develop insight. On the way to the realisation of Emptiness, insight leads to knowledge of our own nature at all levels. This helps to harmonise the different sides of our nature — the mind and the heart, and the inward and the outward. The need for such harmony has long been known in the West but not until recently has much attention been paid to it. It was, for example, for help in achieving this kind of integration that Socrates prayed:—

"Beloved Pan, and all you other Gods who haunt this place, give me beauty in the inward soul; and may the inner and the outer man be at one."

Mindfulness is also to be practised in everyday life. A Buddhist should at all times be fully aware of what he is thinking, feeling, intending, and doing in the present; regrets about the past, daydreams about the future, and doing one thing while thinking about something else, are all to be avoided. Absent-mindedness and forgetfulness are no excuse for ill-manners and accidents; if you step back thoughtlessly and knock someone under a 'bus, this is not an unfortunate accident but a case of culpable unmindfulness.

Mindfulness, in fact, is the heart of the whole Buddhist system and its importance in combination with other factors, such as energy and investigation, cannot be exaggerated. In the *Dhammapada* it is said: "Vigilance is the abode of eternal life, thoughtlessness is the abode of death. Those who are vigilant do not die. The thoughtless are as if dead already."

The realisation of Emptiness, which is the chief aim of mental culture, solves not only the problem of suffering, the problem that first motivated the Buddha's search, but also satisfies man's religious needs and provides in its most valid form that positive element without which, as Dr. Radhakrishnan pointed out, the teaching would have had no mandate for a religious revival in ancient India, and we may presume that it would similarly have none today in the West. If Buddhism only solved the problem of suffering it would be a boon but hardly a religion, for among man's legitimate and indeed proper aspirations is the desire to satisfy metaphysical curiosity. As Bernard Shaw put it:—

"There is no surer symptom of a sordid and fundamentally stupid mind, however powerful it may be in many practical activities, than a contempt for metaphysics. A person may be supremely able as a mathematician, engineer, parliamentary tactician, or racing bookmaker; but if a person has contemplated the universe all through life without ever asking 'What the devil does it all mean?' he (or she) is one of those people for whom Calvin accounted by placing them in his category of the predestinately damned."

In the present context we are relating religion and metaphysics through their mutual concern for our true relationship with the source of our being and with the infinite life that surrounds us. The religious significance of Emptiness can therefore be indicated in philosophical terms.

Buddhist philosophy is mainly concerned with the interpretation of meditational experience, and the interpretations given to the experience of Emptiness are very wide indeed. For example, scholars have found no less than thirty-three different kinds of "emptiness." But before considering what Emptiness is, let us note what it is not. It is not mere absence in the sense that a hare has no horns (using the Buddhist simile); nor is it the extinction of anything in the sense of cessation, as when a fire has gone

out; and finally, it is not just empty space in the sense that a room is said to be empty when all the furniture has been removed. Buddhist Emptiness transcends all such relationships.

The history of the philosophy of Emptiness begins with "egolessness." Early Buddhist philosophy interpreted the experience of egolessness in terms of elements of existence (*dhammas*) which were apparently given materialistic status. This interpretation is something of an aberration, for it conflicts with the actual experience of Emptiness, which shows, on the contrary, that the universe is not composite; there is only the One (empty, of course, like everything else!) and its infinite variety of self-expression at all points of experience; and each point, as can be realised within oneself, is the centre of the whole of Being at every level of Being, not separated from It and not other than It. But in thus realising that *here* is the void centre of the One, there is no support for egocentricity, for *here* is indeed *void*; *here* is clearly *seen* to be empty; yet it is not a mere absence or vacant space, for it is also a plenitude. Nor is this experience pantheistic or monistic, terms much bandied around with regard to Buddhism, especially Zen, but which do not meet the case, as scholars like Dr. Suzuki have frequently pointed out. (Attempts to define Zen or compare it with something else are particularly futile.) Our essential nature is natureless and therefore infinitely versatile. It is also eternal because timeless, and immeasurable because without location. On the whole it is perhaps easier to experience Emptiness than to comprehend it intellectually, if indeed it is possible to comprehend it at all, for in order to do that we must first define it, that is, limit it, and Emptiness has no limitations.

The real importance of the doctrine of Emptiness lies in its practical aim which is the achievement of spiritual freedom through direct personal experience. The doctrine works by demonstrating that everything which is not absolute spirit is unreal. That is to say, it reveals the spirit by removing what obscures it and thus liberating us from change, impermanence and hankering. It is all too seldom remembered, or even understood in the first place, that Emptiness is introduced into Buddhism not as a form of reality but only as a means of realising the nature of reality, for reality is not a thing. It is for this reason that one of the forms of Emptiness is said to be "the emptiness of Emptiness."

In far too many presentations of Buddhism, both traditional and modern, it is too readily assumed that ordinary intelligent adults cannot easily have existential experience of Emptiness. But there is a modern approach which is having results that contradict this assumption. Many Westerners today, through the writings and teachings of Douglas Harding[15] and others with similar views, are discovering that the experience of the emptiness that lies at the centre of our world is not difficult to achieve, and that it brings with it the experience of Emptiness in the larger sense. However, it should perhaps be noted that this modern approach differs from the traditional

path in one important respect; it by-passes the various levels of consciousness. It is therefore, as Douglas Harding puts it, only a down payment that ensures instant delivery of the goods which must nevertheless be paid for in full by instalments later. As a matter of fact, for most people, the fully effective realisation of Emptiness in thinking, feeling, willing, and acting, may take as long to accomplish by the modern as by the traditional way. All the same, by the modern way we do at least get delivery of Emptiness now, instead of only a promise of it, and many immediate benefits follow from the ability to experience Emptiness at will.

Among these benefits is the fact that the experience of Emptiness (the essential aspect of enlightenment) is always psychologically liberating whenever it occurs and by whatever means achieved. It puts an end for the time being to the kind of dualistic opposition that normally exists between the inner and the outer man, between subject and object, and between self and other. Someone who is in a state of liberation brought on by the direct perception of Emptiness rejects nothing, judges nothing, and accepts all creatures and things just as they are.

According to Buddhism, this kind of openness and acceptance leads to the highest kind of love: selfless, impartial and all-embracing Compassion. This is the most important practical outcome of the teaching. Unfortunately, the emphasis often given to Enlightenment in its noetic aspect tends to obscure its activity as Compassion, and may give the outsider the impression that a Buddhist sage is a rather cold sort of fish. But Buddhist Compassion and Enlightenment are the reverse and obverse of one and the same realisation; they cannot be separated. There is no perfect Compassion without Enlightenment or perfect Enlightenment without Compassion. The figure of the Buddha represents this perfect realisation; he stands before us symbolically as perfect Enlightenment and Compassion, and historically as the perfect example of a cool head combined with a warm heart. So far as the East is concerned, the doctrine of Love came into the world two thousand five hundred years ago with the Buddha and his teaching. At the level of practical activity Compassion is the Buddhist ideal.

Before the actual attainment of Enlightenment, this ideal is approached (that is to say, Compassion is cultivated) by means of meditation on the four "sublime states." These four states are: loving kindness, sympathetic sorrow, sympathetic joy, and impartiality. The practice of these states alone does not lead to enlightenment and is therefore primarily intended to train the as yet unenlightened Buddhist in the art of loving. The relationship between love and the fourth state — impartiality — is rather complex; how impartiality can operate as love is by no means obvious. Even if we take impartiality in its sense as serenity and equanimity it still sounds altogether too much like indifference. However, its role can be partly explained as a means for taking selfishness out of unenlightened love and altruism. It has also been suggested that through the practice of impartiality

one becomes conscious of the underlying reality that is common to all creatures, and that this consciousness can then take the place of the normal dualistic and unenlightened "I-THOU" relationship. Some people may see in this suggestion a shadow of the idea that the "love of God" can serve as a basis for the love of persons. To this, however, it might be objected that in practice in everyday life it is better, and incidentally more difficult, to love people for themselves than for the sake of something else.

Whatever may be the valid logic of this problem of non-dualistic love, in Mahayana Buddhism impartiality is clearly defined as including loving kindness and sympathetic sorrow. Impartiality is said to ensure that one is equally compassionate to all as if they were — in the Buddhist simile — one's only son, and it is also said that impartial compassion is "the desire that comes of its own accord to do good to all beings without the least craving for their love." Does this sound improbable? Maybe. Certainly it cannot be proved logically that love becomes spontaneous when all the impediments have been removed. We cannot say whether the liberated consciousness is always charitable without choice, and therefore, incidentally, also without moral worth. Nor can we say that all individuals have the same capacity for warmth. Here, as in everything else, personal experience is not only the ground of verification but also the limitation, for we cannot know more about other peoples' feelings than we know about our own.

In the West we seldom make clear distinctions between all these different kinds of love. We use the term to designate a wide variety of feelings and attitudes. Also, through long association with a mawkish and sanctimonious kind of religiosity, the term used in a religious sense can make Westerners squirm with embarrassment. However, we do actually practise love in all four of its Buddhist categories. For example, we know loving kindness, which Buddhism defines as "the love a mother has for her child"; we also experience sympathetic sorrow in the misfortunes and sufferings of others, even though it may be seasoned with a little self-satisfaction, and perhaps occasionally with a pinch of malicious pleasure, as when the neighbour dents his much vaunted new car; and we can feel sympathetic joy at the success and happiness of others, though possibly combined with a certain amount of envy or resentment, except perhaps in the case of those dear to us or who, as in the case of children, are not in competition with us; and lastly, some of us may experience impartial compassion through taking part in some activity concerned with the "loving care of others," though this is often debased by some political or other kind of self-interest. But it is unlikely that any of these forms of love will be entirely free of all traces of the "I-THOU" relationship, not only because it is difficult to practise selfless, non-dualistic love, but also because in the West our theories about love actually encourage a dualistic relationship.

Although non-dualistic, impartial, Buddhist compassion as a form of love is obviously not unknown in the West, it is not widely understood or

generally held before us as an ideal. Nevertheless, it is towards the realisation of this perfect form of love that Christianity and Buddhism both converge from their separate starting points and by means of their different systems. Concerning the relationship between Buddhist Compassion and Christian Love, Dom Aelred Graham says: "The Buddhist 'compassion,' it seems to me, has richer implications than all but the supreme form of Christian love. Christianity at the level of practice only rarely overcomes its theoretical dualism between man and God, and between man and man." And he suggests: "Perhaps the Buddhist and Christian ways of loving can meet if the emphasis is thrown on enlightened understanding rather than on benevolence."[16]

According to Buddhism, as we have already noted, enlightened understanding rests upon the realisation of Emptiness. This realisation puts an end to the kind of duality that Dom Aelred Graham suggests can be an impediment in the practice of Christian Love. Perhaps, therefore, the Buddhist theory and experience of Emptiness will indeed prove to be, as suggested earlier in this discussion, the best part of the contribution that Buddhism can make to our Western religious culture.

However, we do not yet know whether the West will accept Emptiness as valid in theory and useful in practice. If it does accept it in principle, then it should note that the importance of direct personal experience cannot be exaggerated. Without this experience, the contribution of Buddhism to Western culture may in the end prove ineffective, a mere intellectual gloss. To be really effective, the truth of Emptiness must not only be understood but must also be absorbed as an accepted concept of our Western consciousness through the personal experience and influence of a significant minority.

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