

BUDDHISM IN THE NORTH

Mr. D. Lancashire

Two terms which are commonly applied to Buddhism are Hinayana and Mahayana. From the point of view of the Chinese and Japanese Buddhist, the kind of Buddhism we heard about yesterday is Hinayana, a lesser or small 'vehicle,' whereas they refer to their own Buddhism as Mahayana, the great 'vehicle.' Now because these two terms are so common I shall make use of them today, but as you can imagine, the term Hinayana is not appreciated among Southern Buddhists. I am quite sure, for example, that yesterday's speaker would not consider his 'vehicle' as the lesser of the two.

To give myself a hook on which to hang what I want to say, I shall begin with a quotation from the writings of Dr Paul Dahlke. He says: "Nirvana means extinguishing, and is extinguishing ... Extinguishing is a process such as one may observe in every expiring flame. Extinguishing, then, means 'dying out' as a flame flickers out for lack of fuel." He goes on, "Life springs wholly and entirely out of ignorance . . . ignorance ceases means Life ceases." "To the actual thinker it is really a strange evangel when someone comes and says: 'I declare to you eternal life.' Of eternal life beings assuredly will not fail. What I call a joyful message, is when one comes and says: 'Behold I show you the path upon which you can win free from eternal life!' This path of escape, the Buddha points out, is only for him to whom life has become wholly and entirely suffering. 'As of old, so also now I proclaim but one thing: Suffering and the cessation of suffering.'"

Now the three most important points which emerge from this short passage are as follows: (a) the concept of 'eternal life', so precious to the Christian, is challenged - at least verbally. (b) Life, which the Christian holds to be good, and which we all hold on to for as long as we can, is here declared to be "wholly and entirely suffering." (c) This life, which is wholly and entirely suffering, and which is the product of ignorance and not the willed creation of a benevolent deity, can be extinguished through the dispelling of ignorance.

(a) But to return to our first point concerning 'eternal life.' What Dahlke has in mind, of course, is the doctrine of 'rebirth' and the doctrine of Karma. Both these doctrines are axiomatic to Buddhism and both, with modifications, were taken over from the religious notions already current in India when Sakyamuni Buddha became the Buddha or the 'Enlightened One' in or about the sixth Century B.C.

The chief difference between the older Indian views of rebirth and the Buddhist view is that whereas the former regarded man as possessing a sort of independent self or soul, which is reincarnated in another body at death - rather as "a caterpillar passes from one blade of grass to another" - with its new body depending on the kind of life the self has led in a former existence, Buddhism held that man does not possess such a thing as a soul-entity, but rather that he is made up of a number of mental and physical elements held together by a law which guarantees that one set of actions and attitudes will result in another set of actions and attitudes. This law, which is commonly known as the law of Karma, does not cease to operate when a person dies physically, but calls into being new arrangements of these mental and physical elements so that we have a new form of phenomenal existence.

(b) Now it should not be too difficult for us to understand how such an interpretation of eternal life - an eternity of unrelieved living - can come to be regarded as something utterly unpleasant, and so be described as "wholly and entirely suffering." Nor should it be difficult

for us to see why the central question posed by existence came to be this: "How can I escape from this unending round of rebirth?" "How can this frustrating law of Karma be suspended so that I can find release, rest and stillness?" The answers to these questions had, of course, to be found in terms of the law of Karma itself. Release must, and can only, come through a proper use of those mental and bodily elements of which each person is composed. Thus, the prerequisites for liberation must include faith in the teachings of the Buddha who has discovered the "way out" and one must realise these teachings in one's own self as a personal experience. There must be knowledge of man's true predicament. There must be meditation, which helps us to see what activities and attitudes bind us to eternal life, and which helps us to develop right attitudes. A person's actions and ways of living must be conducive to the eventual removal of all fuel which keeps the flame of phenomenal life burning.

In the scriptures of Buddhism, the Buddha is represented as a kind of medical practitioner who examines man's condition and makes his diagnosis. His findings are presented in what are called the Four Noble Truths. He says: 1. "Now this, monks, is the noble truth of suffering: Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, dejection and despair are suffering. Contact with unpleasant things is suffering, not getting what one wishes is suffering . . ." in fact all existence is suffering.

2. "The noble truth of the cause of suffering: the craving which tends to rebirth, combined with pleasure and lust . . . the craving for existence, and the craving for non-existence." The point of this "noble truth" is that our craving, as often as not, is for what we imagine to be something permanent, whereas, according to the Buddha, there is no permanent unchanging entity in anything, just as there can be no such thing as a motorcar apart from its component parts.
3. "The noble truth of the cessation of suffering: the cessation of suffering, abandonment, forsaking, release, non-attachment." i.e., not holding on to the non-existent.
4. "The noble truth of the way that leads to the cessation of suffering: this is the noble eight-fold way viz: right views, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

In the light of what has been said thus far you may be tempted to think of those words of St. Paul in which he says: "Wretched man that I am! who will deliver me from this body of death?" And yet, if you were to use this quotation in a Buddhist context, you would be misrepresenting both St. Paul and the Lord Buddha. For what St. Paul finds himself plagued with is the problem of moral failure, whereas the central difficulty for the Buddha was the existence of suffering. This is not to say that St. Paul and Christianity have no interest whatsoever in the problem of suffering or that Buddhism has nothing to contribute on the subject of morality, but it is important to be quite clear that for Buddhism the central issue is suffering viewed in terms of impermanence. Both Christianity and Buddhism are soteriological in character, that is to say, they are both religions in which the need for salvation is felt, but in Buddhism salvation comes through man's own efforts to achieve a total understanding of his own nature, his knowledge being corroborated by an experience which grips his whole being and assures him that the law of causality to which he has been a prisoner through endless rebirths has come to an end.

Now the name given to this experience is, as we have seen, Nirvana, and as we should expect the more disciples the Buddha drew into his monastic order, and the more attention other thinkers and religious people paid to him, the greater was the demand for the Buddha to describe and define his experience. After all, if one can say, as Buddhists sometimes do, that the Nirvana experience is worth aiming at, that it is an experience of bliss, and that at death

there is still Nirvana, then there are not a few questions which arise and which seem to demand an answer. But the Buddha steadfastly refused to be drawn into making metaphysical statements because, from his own experience, he knew it was possible to get so involved in the minutiae of metaphysical argumentation that one could miss the wood for the trees. What the Buddha was concerned about was the practical situation. For him, existence in impermanence was suffering, and the urgent need was for men to accept his diagnosis of man's predicament, and so to find release from the law of cause and effect and rebirth. Thus, when questioned about the human mind, for example, the Buddha answered: "Mind is referred to being mindful." "And to what is mindfulness referred?" "Mindfulness is referred to release." "And to what is release referred?" "Release is referred to Nirvana." "And to what is Nirvana referred?" "Your questioning goes too far, brahmin, one could not get to the end of your questioning. The religious life is lived as plunged in Nirvana, with Nirvana as its aim, and Nirvana as its end."

But man, being what he is, will ask questions, so that after the Buddha's death there grew up a body of material representing some of the greatest religious insights and some of the most remarkable metaphysical thinking ever achieved by man.

First of all, there is the Buddha himself. If he had, as he claimed, attained to Nirvana, remaining in Nirvana after death, then surely to be a Buddha, or to be enlightened, must mean being Nirvana. And if this is so, and if other people can attain to this experience as well, must not attaining to Nirvana signify attaining to a general state of enlightenment? And if all can aspire to this state, must not this state be some kind of absolute?

As a result of questionings of this kind and a growing intoxication with the concept of the absolute, Nirvana or Buddhahood came to be viewed in three distinct ways:

1. First as "Suchness," an unchanging permanent absolute. The sacred text which outlines this position for many Chinese and Japanese Buddhists is known as the *Awakening of Faith*. This work which is traditionally ascribed to the great teacher Asvagosha in the first century A.D., maintains that suchness is the "essence" or "soul" of the world and therefore of all beings. But it is not only the essence, it is the source of the cosmos in all its manifestations. It exists "in all things; remains unchanged in the pure, as well as in the defiled; is always one and the same; neither increases nor decreases, and is void of distinction." Now, to say all these things about it is, of course, to say that it is beyond qualification or determination, and that it is the final universal reality. This Suchness may be viewed from two aspects: (a) first, it may be viewed as it is in itself, and (b) second, as it is constituted in phenomenal existence, i.e. in the world of birth and death. However, since the phenomenal realm, the realm of birth and death, has no independent sub-stratum of its own, or, if you like, since man has no soul independent of the absolute, it is clear that reality is one whole - that it is monistic. As one Japanese exponent has put it. "Suchness is called by as many different names as there are phases of its manifestation. It is Nirvana when it brings absolute peace to a heart egoistic and afflicted with conflicting passions; it is perfect wisdom when we regard it as the source of intelligence; it is the essence of Being when its ontological aspect is taken into account; it is the Mahayana or great vehicle when it embraces the soul of all living beings."

From this, then, it follows that Suchness is the supreme universal; the final reality we can know, and the multiplicity of particulars - i.e. all forms of individuation - are only appearance, are only illusion.

2. This leads us to the second way in which Nirvana has been viewed. This second way applies to Nirvana the term "Voidness," by which is meant not nothing, but that which is void

of description. As developed by Nagarjuna towards the end of the second century A.D., this system of thought came to be known as the Madhyamika, a word signifying "mean" or "middle" i.e. taking a middle course between the concepts of existence and non-existence. As a matter of fact, Nagarjuna was not aiming to build a system of thought, but rather was he anxious lest the language applied to Nirvana or Buddhahood should in some way deprive what is absolute of its true character and so hinder man in his search for, and his achievement of, Nirvana. And, of course, to describe an absolute in any way would appear, at least superficially, to bring it down from the infinite to the finite level. Nagarjuna, therefore, used negatives only in speaking of the "finally real", and his position can be summed up in his dictum that "Nirvana is neither existence nor non-existence, nor both, nor neither." If any word could be used at all it was the word "Voidness."

Since Nagarjuna, like Asvagosha before him, was a monist, his mode of argument led him to say that all phenomena, all things, are not "Suchness," but "Voidness." As one might expect, however, there were those who very quickly asked, if all is voidness, how can there be any Four Noble Truths, because surely the Four Noble Truths, on the basis of this kind of argumentation, must also be voidness? How can there be a way of life stemming from the recognition of the Four Noble Truths? Indeed, how could there be a Buddha? Nagarjuna's answer runs as follows: "The doctrine of the Buddha is based on two truths - conventional truth, and truth in the supreme sense . . . Only as based on the truth of ordinary life can the supreme truth be inculcated, and only with the help of ultimate truth can Nirvana be obtained."

Nevertheless, despite Nagarjuna's insistence that voidness did not simply signify nothing, there were many Buddhist thinkers who found his description of Nirvana unsatisfying. Some also found difficulty in seeing how Nirvana could be experienced unless consciousness in some form or another was taken into account. And so, whilst not rejecting Nagarjuna's logical method, they preferred to transpose their view of Nirvana on to the psychological plane, and to view Nirvana in terms of an absolute consciousness which they called the Alaya-vijnana, or "Storehouse Consciousness!" Whilst not giving up the basic Buddhist tenet that all things are without a substratum of self, and whilst continuing to hold to a monastic interpretation of reality, they maintained that the ground and source of all phenomena is a consciousness which is the storehouse of all potentiality, so that to be enlightened, to attain to Nirvana, is to experience one's own deepest consciousness as being identical with the one consciousness underlying the whole cosmos. The scripture which best expresses this system of thought for many Northern Buddhists is known as the Lankavatara Sutra. We do not know when this Sutra was composed, but it was translated into Chinese in the fifth century A.D.

Now alongside these developments in metaphysical thought concerning the nature of Nirvana, there were also parallel developments in the views held concerning the historical Buddha himself. The first of these developments was in the direction of speculation concerning his previous existences, for quite obviously, no-one could attain to Buddhahood without previously undergoing a series of births in which merit was so accumulated that it could result in enlightenment. Thus a whole body of literature grew up in which the previous existences of the Buddha were described in detail.

The second development resulted from a growing feeling that self-sacrifice was a higher ideal than the search for one's own salvation. There thus developed the important doctrine of the Bodhisattva, a being who through the accumulation of merit over a period involving innumerable rebirths is entitled to enter into the final bliss of Nirvana, but who, out of compassion for suffering and ignorant mankind, makes a vow not to enter into final Buddhahood until he has ferried all living beings across the sea of life to the shores of Nirvana.

One of the most important of these Bodhisattvas is Avalokitesvara (Kuan-yin in Chinese) who occupies an important place in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, and who has come to be represented in these countries in female form.

Thirdly, since Nirvana or Buddhahood came to be viewed as an absolute, it was naturally taken to be infinite, with an infinity of phenomenal manifestations. This being so, there could be no beginning and no end to the emergence and passing away of worlds. Nor, for that matter, could there be any end to the number of Bodhisattvas or Buddhas, all of them being expressions of the one ultimate reality. Our historical Buddha, then, is but one of a numberless host who appear out of compassion for suffering beings in world after world after world. It is also because of this way of viewing things - of seeing that all things are essentially one - that it has been possible for Buddhism to find a home in countries where every level of religious experience is to be found, and to assimilate to itself what might be thought at first sight to be religious systems totally alien to its point of view. Buddhism, you see, did not set out to deny the realms of the gods, rather, it set out to show that final truth transcends all gods and that they, as much as men and women and all living beings, are subject to the law of cause and effect.

Although what I have been trying to explain to you so far is what we might call the "theological" heart of Buddhism, as in all religions, the inner experience has frequently to express itself in language and worshipful forms if it is to be meaningful for everyone, and so far as China and Japan are concerned Buddhism has done this most eloquently in terms of the Pure Land Sect. Now according to this school of Buddhism, there is a certain Buddha, one of the innumerable hosts of Buddhas, who presided over a world known as the Western Paradise which, as its name implies, lies to the west of our world of Sakyamuni Buddha. The name of this Buddha is Amitabha, the "Buddha of Immeasurable Light", or Amitayus, the "Buddha of Immeasurable Life". The main scripture which expounds the view of this school is called *The Great Sutra of the Endless Life*, and it concerns itself primarily with a description of the western land of purity and bliss. It is not at all interested in the philosophical side of Buddhism, and is not concerned with the various stages in the career of the Bodhisattva. All that is necessary in order to break away from this world at death and to enter the western paradise is devotion and faith. Now although the problem of the relationship of this western paradise to the absolute is a real one, a follower of this type of Buddhism is not concerned about the problem at all. The important thing for him is that he can escape from this world of birth and death, simply by worship, devotion and faith directed towards Amitabha, and this, for many Buddhists in China and Japan is a sufficient goal in itself.

That one can attain to salvation of this kind after death is entirely due to the grace of Amitabha Buddha who has so practised the virtues of the Bodhisattva, and has so sacrificed himself for others through innumerable lives, that he has acquired a "treasury of merit" sufficient to supply the needs of all living creatures, and to compensate for all their lack of merit. Thus, in Amitabha Buddha we have a universal saviour, and one whose name even the most sophisticated Mahayanist is not ashamed to call upon.

To sum up, the essential difference between Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism is that the Hinayanists tend to lay stress on the gaining of Nirvana for oneself, and generally hold to the view that only those who have entered the monastic order have reached a point at which salvation is possible. The Mahayanists, on the other hand, have given to Buddhism a more universal character and have introduced supernatural aid for the ordinary believer.

A difficulty arises, however, over the fact that the Mahayana sutras claim as much to be the direct teaching of the Buddha as the strictly Hinayana sutras. The answer to this problem given by the Mahayanists is summed up in that remarkable work known as the *Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law*. In it the Buddha is made to say: "The Buddha teaches but one way, one vehicle, for a Hinayana (or small vehicle) is not big enough....Only the great vehicle (Mahayana) is capacious enough to hold all creatures. I...know that all living beings have many and varied desires deep-rooted in their minds, and I have, according to their capacity, expounded the various laws with various reasonings, parabolic expressions and expedients." The key word here is "expedients". The Mahayana view is that all Buddhist teachings in their early Hinayana form are given for purposes of expediency; they possess only a partial validity, the Buddha accommodating himself to the capacities of his hearers.

Further reading: *Buddhism* (Edward Conze, pub. by Cassiver); *The compassionate Buddha* (Burt Mendor); The Various Publications Of Dr. D. T. Suzuki; *Buddhist Scriptures* (Penguin Classics).

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