SPIRITUAL VIRILITY IN BUDDHISM

It is the fate of almost all religions to become, so to say, denatured: as they

spread and develop, they gradually recede from their original spirit, and their

more popular and spurious elements, their less severe and essential features,

those furthest removed from the metaphysical plane come to the fore. While

hardly any of the major historical religions have escaped this fate, it would seem

that it is particularly true of Buddhism. We need only consider the prevalent

notion of the teaching of the prince of the Sakyas that has been formed not only

in the West by those who profess admiration for Buddhism, but also for many

centuries past in many strata of the peoples of the East.

The terms in which the 2500th anniversary of the death of the Buddha has

been commemorated this year, and the way the message that the Buddhist

religion should have for the modern world has been spoken of, afford evidence

of this.

Someone has recently been able to say: “There is no other alternative: the

world today must choose between the H-bomb and the message of the

Buddha”—thus identifying that message with pacifism and humanitarianism.

The Western friends of Buddhism have been almost unanimous in appraising it

as a sentimental doctrine of love and universal compassion, a doctrine composed

of democracy and tolerance, to be admired also for its freedom from dogma,

rites, sacraments; almost a sort of secular religion.

It is true that these distortions appeared quite early in the history of Buddhism.

But though it may seem audacious on our part, we have no hesitation in saying

that this is a falsification of the message of the Buddha, a degenerated version

suited not to virile men, standing with head erect, but to men lying prostrate in

search of escape and spiritual alleviation, for whom the law and discipline of a

positive religion are too severe.

If we accept the interpretations referred to, Buddhism in its real essence would

be a system of ethics rather than a religion in the strict meaning of the term. This

character, which some historians of religion had stressed in an attempt to charge

Buddhism with supposed inferiority as compared to theistic and dogmatic

religions, is today claimed by others as a merit, their claim being based on a

misapprehension of a different, but not less serious kind. If Buddhism, taken in

its original forms, cannot be called a “religion,” this depends on the fact that it is

not below but above the plane of all that can be legitimately defined as

“religion,” especially theistic religion. The doctrine of awakening and

enlightenment, the essential core of Buddhism, has nothing “religious” about it,

because it is preeminently of an “initiatic” or esoteric character, and as such is

accessible only to a few elect. It therefore represents not a “broad way” open to

all (as in more than one of its aspects, almost in its very name, Mahayana) but a

“straight and narrow path” reserved for a minority. This is already made clear by

the accounts given in the Canon of the first moment of the enlightenment of the

Buddha. When Prince Siddhartha had the revelation of the truth and of the way,

the dhamma, he resolved not to spread it, believing it to be inaccessible to the

masses, to ignoble natures immersed in samsara. And so, from the way the story

is told, it would seem that only through the mythical intercession of certain

divinities the Buddha was induced to change his mind and to consent at last to

communicate the possibility of the Great Liberation and the path to attain it.

It is known that in the beginning the Order of the Arya, the noble “sons of the

son of the Sakyas,” was restricted, even if not by extrinsic limits. Thus for

instance, the Buddha objected to the admission of women. And those who like to

see in the attitude of the Buddha towards the conception of caste and the

exclusiveness of the Brahmanas, evidence of an egalitarian and universalist

spirit, are much mistaken. They confuse that which lies beneath the differences

and limits proper to every sound hierarchy (as is the case with democratic

egalitarianism, whether social or spiritual) with that which lies above such

differentiated structures, as in the case of the truly awakened Buddhist and of the

initiate in general. The comparison drawn between the Awakened One and a

flower that rises miraculously from a heap of dung

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is very eloquent on this

point, even if it be not edifying to those who indulge in a democratic and

humanitarian interpretation of Buddhism. Considered in the framework of the

Hindu situation of his day, the Buddha was a revolutionary only in so much as

he opposed to the fictitious and obsolete dignities—corresponding no longer to

real qualifications—true dignity, to be shown in each case by works and

effective superiority. Thus, for instance, he maintained the designation of

Brahmana, but opposed the type of the real Brahmana to that of the false one.

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If

in the case of Buddhism one can speak of universalism, this is the universalism

of the summits, not the promiscuous one at the base.

The reduction of Buddhism to mere moral teachings appears as the height of

absurdity to anyone who remembers the canonical parable of the raft. In no

spiritual tradition more than in Buddhism is the purely instrumental and

provisional character of morality, of sila, so strongly stressed. As is known, the

whole body of moral rules, with good and evil, dhamma and adhamma, was

compared by the Buddha to a raft that is built for crossing a river, but which it

would be ridiculous to drag along once the crossing has been made.

30 Contrary to

the view, whether philosophical or religious, which ascribes to moral rules an

intrinsic, autonomous value (a typical instance of this is the so-called “absolute

morality” of Kant’s categorical imperative) the Buddha ascribed to his attitudes

of right conduct a purely instrumental value, the value of means justified only in

view of a certain aim and therefore only sub conditione. But this end, as are the

higher grades of Buddhist ascesis and contemplation, is beyond morality, nor

can it be measured by the religious conception of “holiness.” As Milarepa was to

say: “In my youth I committed some black deeds, in my maturity some white

ones; but now I have rejected all distinctions of black and white.”

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Thus, the fact that some of the rules of the sila may perhaps correspond to

what the moralists desire, should mislead no one. The spirit inspiring the action

in the two cases differs fundamentally. This holds good also for that which the

“spiritualists” admire so much in Buddhism: the ethics of love, of compassion,

of harmlessness. He who follows the path of awakening cultivates these mental

attitudes only as the means to free himself from the bonds of ignorance, of the

samsaric ego; not out of sentimental altruism. A conception such as the Western

one, expressed by the words “God is love,” and the consequent absolutization of

this sentiment, would be an absurdity for the authentic Buddhist doctrine. Love

and compassion are mere details of the opus remotionis, whose aim is a

liberation, an enlargement or opening of the soul which can favor, in some cases,

the “rupture of the level” and the sudden flash of illumination. Thus, not only is

the famous series of the four brahmavihara-bhavana or appamanna, which

includes love and compassion, technically and practically equivalent to the

several states of a purely “dry” intellectual contemplation, leading to the same

goal (the four jhana and the arupa-jhana), but even in the series of

brahmavihara-bhavana, the last stage, upekkha, is impassibility, the disincarnate

neutrality of a soul that has become free from all sentimentality, from both the

bonds of the “I” and the “thou” and shines as a pure light in an ontological

super-individual essentiality expressed also in the symbol of the “void,” sunna or

sunnyata.

We are not the only ones who have noted that this concept of the void is not

only affirmed by the Mahayana, but is found already clearly stated in the Canon

of early Buddhism. The work proper to Mahayana has been rather that of making

this concept the object of a paradoxical philosophical elaboration (paradoxical

because this idea corresponds to an absolutely super-rational level detached from

philosophy), to which Mahayana added a popular soteriological religion which

carried the misdirected interpretation of the precept of compassion to a form

that, inter alia, leads to a flagrant contradiction in this form of later Buddhism.

In fact, on the one hand, the precept of compassion and love for all beings is

announced to such a degree that the Mahayanic Bodhisattva vows that he will

not enter nirvana until all living creatures have been redeemed; while on the

other hand, according to the Mahayana doctrine of the universal “void,” all these

beings are non-existent, so many illusions, mere apparitions of the cosmic dream

generated by ignorance. This nonsensical contradiction alone should suggest that

to the precept spoken of, and also to the doctrine of universal illusion, a meaning

must be given that differs widely from the exoteric, literal, and popular one

attributed to them. Both should be understood on a purely pragmatic plane.

In some aspects of the Mahayana, in which alone the esoteric doctrine of the

“awakening” has been replaced by a “religion,” and also in other currents, the

essential core of Buddhism has been enveloped by philosophical, mythological,

and ritualistic dross and superstructures. When considered in relation to them,

so-called “Zen Buddhism” stands for a return to the origins, a reaction in all

respects similar to that of early Buddhism itself to degraded Brahmanism. Now,

Zen throws into clear relief the essential value of illumination, its transcendence

of all that which, in several cases, may favor it—and at the same time its

immanence, that is to say the fact that the state of enlightenment and nirvana

does not mean a state of evanescent ecstasy, an escape, so to say, of which

compassion is only a pale reflex accompanied by horror of all that is action and

affirmation. It is instead a higher form of freedom, a higher dimension. For him

who holds fast to it there is no action that cannot be performed, and all bonds are

loosened. This is the right interpretation of the doctrine of the void, of the non ego, and also of the Mahayanic conception of the identity of nirvana and

samsara in a third principle higher than either, and anterior to both. This should

be recalled to those who accept unilaterally the theory of harmlessness, of the

timorous respect of all forms of life. As a matter of fact, Zen Buddhism could be

called the doctrine of the Samurai, i.e., of the Japanese nobility

32 who are

certainly not noted for their abhorrence of arms and bloodshed. The fact is that

all this wisdom turns on one pivot alone: the severance of the bond of the ego,

the destruction of ignorance, the awakening. When the bond of the ego is

severed, all restrictions cease. The fruit the doctrine will bear depends on the

human soil on which its seed falls. The humanitarian, pacifist, vegetarian image

of the Buddhist is a distortion, and in any case its acceptance is not compulsory.

Samurais and kamikazes may equally well be Buddhists. In a book in which a

Buddhist chaplain describes the days of the Japanese put to death by the

Americans,

33 we see how these men died without conversion or repentance, in a

perfect state of Buddhist grace; men who, if they were not “war criminals” as the

victors claimed, were as generals, officials, and politicians certainly not delicate,

shy flowers of the field.

Those who have experienced that fundamental inner transformation, that

“rupture of the level” which is the essential feature of Buddhist realization, are in

possession of an unshakeable calm, an “incomparable certainty” which not even

the age of the H-bomb and of all the other devilry of the modern world can

disturb. This calm can be preserved above all tragedies and all destructions, even

when man’s human and ephemeral aspect is involved. Now, it is in this direction

rather than in any other that we find the message Buddhism may have for our

time. At the conclusion of one of our works

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, in which we tried to reconstruct

the essence of the Buddhist doctrine, we pointed to the dual possibilities it

offers. The first is that of a clear and virile askesis which creates in man firmness

and serenity, samatha, by means of a carefully constructed mental practice

which allows the detachment and strengthening of a principle that transcends the

purely human, irrational, emotional, and, in general, samsaric substance of our

being. In no other tradition are these practices taught in such a clear, thorough,

we might say scientific form, free from specific religious or ethical implications.

What here is of particular importance is the style of the clear vision, yatha

bhutam, which is that of a superior realism, the vision exactly corresponding

with reality. A goodly number of gifted men can still make an “immanent” use

of Buddhist teachings thus understood. We may even find in them the corrective

of the prevalent trends of our day: the religion of life, of struggle, of

“becoming,” the union with irrational, instinctive, and sub-personal forces that

urge man ever onwards in a “flight towards” (Bernanos), destroying in him all

centrality, all real constancy. In an age like ours, samsaric as no other has ever

been, the Buddhist system of free and virile askesis as preparation for

ultramundane realization might serve to create limits, to provide inner means of

defense, to keep at bay the anguish or the rapture felt by those who cling

convulsively to the illusory mortal Ego. To repeat, this is not to be understood as

an escape, but as a means for assuring a serene and superior security and liberty.

And in view of the times that are approaching, perhaps we have never needed

men educated along these lines as much as we do now.

But in the Canons we find juxtaposed to the use of such disciplines for life,

the use of them for carrying us “beyond life.”

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It is here that Buddhism presents

itself as the doctrine of awakening, identical with a strict doctrine of initiation,

which as such is timeless (akalika), not tied down to historic contingencies,

superior to all faiths and all systems of mere devotion. It is not easy for the

Westerner to realize what the real purpose of Buddhism is on this level. The

ideal here is absolute unconditional being, the attainment of absolute

transcendence. By now the puerile idea of those who identify nirvana with

“nothingness,” or regression into the unconsciousness of a trance caused by the

distressing knowledge that “life is suffering,” has been to a large extent

discarded. Also, the teaching that “life is suffering” belongs only to the exoteric

aspect of Buddhism. The deeper meaning of the term dukkha is “commotion,”

agitation rather than “suffering”: the condition that the arya, the “noble son,”

rejects is that of universal impermanence, of the transitory—a state that should

therefore be essentially understood in ontological terms, and whose emotional

significance is quite secondary. Its counterpart is thirst, tanha; and the

extinction, the nirvana in question, is not destruction in general but precisely and

only the destruction of what in our being is thirst, insatiable longing, fever, and

attachment, in all its many forms and ramifications. Beyond all this lies

awakening and enlightenment, the samadhi which leads to the unconditioned,

the immortal.

Perhaps the antithesis between the initiatic notion of “awakening” and the

religious and more especially Christian notion of “salvation” or “redemption”

has not yet been adequately stressed. The religious conception is based on the

assumption that man is a being existentially detached from the sacred and the

supernatural. Because of his ontological status as creature, or as the result of

original sin, he belongs to the natural order. Only by the intervention of a

transcendent power, or on the assumption of man’s “conversion,” or by his faith

and his renunciation of his own will, only by Divine action, can he be “saved”

and attain to life in “paradise.”

The implications of the concept of “awakening” are entirely different; man is

not a fallen or guilty being, nor is he a creature separated by an ontological gulf

from a Creator. He is a being who has fallen into a state of sleep, of intoxication,

and of “ignorance.” His natural status is that of a Buddha. It is for him to acquire

consciousness of this by “awakening.” In opposition to the ideas of conversion,

redemption, and action of grace, the principal theme is the destruction of

“ignorance” (avijja). Decisive here is a fact of an essentially “noetic” or

intellectual, and not emotional, nature. This confers an indisputable aristocratic

character on the doctrine of Buddhism. It ignores the “sin” complex, self abasement, and self-mortification. Its askesis is clear and “dry”; it is alien to the

features of auto-sadism or masochism which are always present in the forms of

the asceticism better known to the West, and which have often given rise among

Westerners to anti-ascetic prejudice and a distorted exaltation of life.

This character of loftiness, which is founded in Buddhist ontology, is matched

by the Buddhist doctrine of autonomy: man is the free master of his own destiny.

He alone is responsible for what he is. Thus, in conformity with his vocation, he

can affirm the state he is in, or he can change it. There are no penalties and no

rewards; therefore, there is nothing to hope for and nothing to fear. The only

thing that must be taken into consideration is the objective, unsentimental, extra moral connection of cause and effect. If a Buddha sets himself free, it is by his

own efforts alone. On the path leading to awakening, no external aid is to be

sought. This conception, on which the traditional Hindu notion of karma was

already founded, is particularly stressed by Buddhism. The historical Buddha, as

is well known, did not present himself as a divine savior, but as a man who, after

attaining enlightenment and the Great Liberation by himself, indicates the path

to those having a like vocation. All this refers to early Buddhism. With

Mahayanic Buddhism in its prevailing and popular aspects, we descend once

more to the level of the soteriological religions; innumerable Bodhisattvas and

Buddhas busy themselves to insure the salvation and happiness of all living

beings.

Again, if we turn to the terminus ad quem, to the ultimate ideal of Buddhism,

the break with religious conceptions is a clear one, and it is difficult for

Westerners to fully grasp. In the West we are accustomed to consider paradise as

a religious ideal, the survival of the believer in heaven, and only a few mystics

speak of the unitive life, of union with Being. But the Buddhist doctrine looks on

all this as trivial and leaves it behind. Its horizon is that of the traditional Hindu

metaphysics, which considers the divine worlds as themselves belonging to

samsara, and immortality not as the perpetuation of individuality but as the

realization of the Unconditioned. Nor is Being the supreme point, that beyond

which nothing other is conceivable. Being is matched by Non-Being, and the

Unconditioned is that which is superior and anterior to both. In a well-known

passage

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the Buddha rejects and condemns one by one all the identifications:

identification with the body, with the elements, with the Ego, with the cosmos,

with the divine hierarchies, even with the God of Being, that is to say with

Brahma. In a speech which is Michaelangelesque in its grandeur, identification

with the God of Being, which is equivalent to the unio mystica, the ultimate limit

of religious rapture, is rejected in terms that see it almost as a diabolical

temptation,

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for it would represent a limit to the great Liberation, to the

attainment of the Unconditioned.

He who has a knowledge of these dimensions of the Buddhist experience,

dimensions that appear clearly in the canonical texts, what can he think of those

who consider Buddhism to be not even a religion but a system of sickly

sentimental secular morality, consisting of humanitarianism and indiscriminate

love, the pale evanescent wisdom of those who have recognized that the “world

is suffering”? Undoubtedly, the metaphysical dimensions of Buddhism just

discussed can only be understood, let alone reached, by very few. But this is

indeed the ultimate background of the whole system. The canonical saying goes:

“All the waters of the ocean have but one flavor, that of salt; so the sense of the

whole of the Law is only one, that of liberation.”

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For the ultimate, the great

nirvana, or more correctly, the “void,” the sunna, the Buddha uses the method of

the so-called “negative theology”; it is unnamable, indefinable,

incomprehensible to the human mind; one can only say what it is not, not what it

is, for one cannot even apply to it the category of Being. But how to ignore what

may be called the traces, the marks of Him who has no marks? Because “the lord

of men and gods” was called the perfect “awakened One.” As “unconquered and

intact beings,” similar to “lofty Overmen,” appear those who have travelled

along this path

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; like lions in whom both anguish and terror are dead.

40 They see

the past, they see the heavens and the infernal regions,

41 They know this world

and the world beyond, the kingdom of death and the kingdom free from death,

the temporal and the eternal.

42 They are “like tigers, like bulls in a mountain

cave” though they appear as “beings free from vanity, who have appeared in the

world for the good of many, for the health of many, for compassion of the world,

for the good, the profit, and the health of men and gods.”

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“I have passed beyond

the brambles of opinions, I have acquired power over myself, I have reached the

path, I possess the knowledge, I have none who guide me,” says the Awakened

One of Himself.

44 He is the “daring One who never hesitates, the sure guide, free

from passion, bright as the sunlight, free from pride, heroic”; he is the “One who

knows, who is dazzled by no fevers, overcome by no troubles, tempted by no

victories, stained by no stains”; He is “the great being who lives apart, freed

from all ties, no longer slave to any servitude”; He is the “worthy One who

keeps watch over Himself, of steady step, ready for the announcement,”

“inclined to none and disinclined towards none, sublime in soul, powerful,

impassible”; He is “the One whom no thirst burns, no smoke dims, and no mist

wets; a spirit who honors sacrifice and who rises up majestically as does no

other.”

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Passions, pride, falsehood have fallen away from Him like mustard

seeds from the point of a needle. Beyond good, beyond evil, he has cast off both

chains, and detached from both pain and pleasure he is purified. Since He

knows, He no longer inquires: “How so?” He has reached the bottom of the

element free from death. He has left the human bond and the divine bond and

has freed Himself from all bonds; no one in the world can conquer Him, who has

for his domain the infinite and whose path is known neither by the gods nor by

angels, nor by ordinary men.

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Notwithstanding the hyperbolical element in some of these attributes, an ideal

type takes definite shape from them against a background of grandeur and

spiritual virility which it would be hard to find in any other tradition, in

comparison to which the religious value of “sanctity” is pale and flaccid. Judged

by this standard, far from being a doctrine accessible to all, a doctrine that makes

things easy for the “spiritualists” because it has no dogma and no rites and is free

from exclusivities, the Buddhist path of awakening is a narrow one reserved for

those who possess an exceptional vocation and qualifications. In following it, it

may be said that the saying of the Katha Upanishad is also applicable: it is like

walking on a razor’s edge without help, either human or divine.

It is agreed that wisdom of this kind cannot be “popularized.” Indeed, it

should not even be indiscriminately communicated, for it is not without risk. The

Canon itself speaks of the consequences of the doctrine if wrongly interpreted: it

is like one who, having seized a serpent in the wrong way, sees it pounce on

him, causing death or mortal pain. The doctrine stands out and remains a

summit, bearing witness to what a superior humanity could conceive. As to the

forms in which Buddhism has become a religion sui generis, and, worse still, as

to those forms in which it is conceived and appreciated as a democratizing

humanitarian morality, they should be rightly considered as an unmitigated

contamination of the truth.

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