EVOLA ON BUDDHISM: THE DOCTRINE OF AWAKENING

“Man projects his soul on the world and makes it personal, he endows the world with feelings, desires, and aims: he projects onto it a pathos, he gives it values and distinctions, all of which, in one way or another, inevitably lead back to the force that supports his life, to appetite, aversion, and ignorance.”

Julius Evola (1898-1974) was an Italian aristocrat, painter, fascist philosopher, and esotericist who deeply believed that fascism should be firmly rooted in some primordial Aryan (i.e. Indo-European) spiritual tradition. For the most part he preferred ancient Roman paganism, especially the “initiatory” and thereby elitist and aristocratic mystery cults; although in 1943 he produced a book on early Buddhism entitled La dottrina del risveglio, or, in English, The Doctrine of Awakening, endorsing Buddhism as a viable option for a basis of fascist spirituality. Probably even most western Buddhists have never heard of it, or of Evola; and even if they have they wouldn’t read the thing, since most western Buddhists lean to the left politically and consider fascism (real fascism, not just what hysterical Social Justice activists denote as such) to be just plain evil. Nevertheless, the book has had a significant impact on western Theravada Buddhism if only because it (allegedly) inspired the world-renunciation and ordination of one of the most famous and influential bhikkhus in the western Sangha, venerable Nyanavira.

 I happened recently to come across a copy of the English translation (The Doctrine of Awakening: The Attainment of Self-Mastery According to the Earliest Buddhist Texts, translated from the Italian by H. E. Musson, Inner Traditions, Rochester, VT (1996)), and I read it with interest. I will say that I consider it worth reading, if only because it discusses Dhamma from a radically atypical orientation. How often does one find a book on Buddhist fascism? Just that in itself makes it interesting. But beyond this, Evola, regardless of his politics and despite some of the friends he cultivated, was a deep thinker and had an insightful appreciation of ancient Indian spirituality. In other words, the man actually had some wisdom.

The book has two main characteristics that are worth noting. First, it is for the most part a standard, relatively insightful interpretation of early Buddhism, not so different in this way from many other book-length interpretations of same. By now it is somewhat dated, as Evola was dependent upon the writings of early 20th-century Buddhistic scholars like T. W. Rhys Davids, F. L. Woodward, and T. Stcherbatsky, plus the orthodox bedrock of Nyanatiloka. He apparently was ignorant of the Pali language also (although most western teachers of Buddhism are), and thus he relied heavily on old translations, especially an Italian translation of the Majjhima Nikāya. Evola’s attempts to explain such basic yet elusive aspects of Buddhist doctrine as paṭicca-samuppāda (“conditioned genesis” or “dependent co-arising”), jhāna (advanced contemplative states), and āsava (which he renders as “mania”) are pretty much the standard intellectual groping in the dark found in most books on Buddhist philosophy and practice, even most of those written by Buddhists, and can be a little tedious. Nevertheless, some parts are interesting, even intriguing, like his theory to account for repetitions in the texts, and also his discussion of the nature of primordial avijjā or ignorance—for example: “Craving might possibly be conceived as something absolutely fundamental; but certainty not ignorance that already, as such, presupposes knowledge. Nor would it be sensible to talk of an awakening, for obviously one cannot awake if one has not been sleeping, and if there is nothing that shines beyond the cloud of oblivion.” From this we can see that Evola was an absolutist: Enlightenment entailed no mere oblivion of extinction for him, but a tearing of the veil to reveal what is beyond conception.

 Second, what deviation there is from the standard scholarly interpretation of early Indian Buddhism is naturally in a more or less fascistic and “Aryan supremacist” direction. This is more of a matter of emphasis than of flat-out misrepresentation, although there is a little of the latter also, presumably unintentional. Being a monk myself, I rather enjoyed Evola’s skillful attempts to portray the enlightened Buddhist sage as the ultimate Übermensch, the spiritual lord and superman. And although he is clearly biased in favor of a fascistic interpretation of Dhamma, in all seriousness he hardly distorts it any more than most western scholars or Dhamma teachers do, just in a different direction—a point to which I will ultimately return.

 Well, for that matter, I’ll return to it right now: One theme Evola emphasizes throughout the book, which is often downplayed by Buddhist teachers of the East and the West, is that Buddhism was originally intended to be a system of ascesis, that is, ascetic self-discipline. Early Buddhist practice was such that most Buddhist practitioners today, if required to follow it, would be freaking out and melting down within 48 hours—wandering homeless and penniless, sitting and sleeping alone under trees in tropical jungles, contemplating rotting corpses, etc. etc. He often uses “ascesis” as a synonym of Dhamma or Dharma, as well as of the term brahmacariya, usually rendered into English as the “Holy Life.” For example, he translates a well-known Pali formula praising renunciation like this: “Home is a prison, a dusty place. The life of a hermit is in the open. One cannot, by remaining at home, fulfill point by point the completely purified, completely illumined ascesis.” He asserts that ascesis, ascetic practice, is the very substance of the Buddhist doctrine.

 He similarly emphasizes the austere manliness of the ancient Buddhist way of life with his rendering of the Pali word viriya, “energy, vigor,” as virility. (The Indo-European etymology of the two terms, and of virtue also, is the same, derived from a word originally meaning “man.”) Thus he refers to the viriya-magga, the path of energetic effort, as “the path open to the virile mind.” The Aryan disciple is a “combatant,” a “fighting ascetic.”

 Evola even interprets the word sammā, “right,” in a masculine sense: The “eightfold path of the Ariya” involves

…eight virtues, to each of which is applied the term sammā, "right," a term to be understood mainly in the sense we have already indicated, that is to say, as the attribute of one who "stands," who holds himself erect, as opposed to the oblique or horizontal direction of those who "are driven."

Right=upright=masterful=masculine; associated with the vertical symbol for fire which shoots upwards, contrasted with “wrong”=horizontal=slavish=feminine; associated with the symbol for water, which lies flat. Strange, and reminiscent of René Guénon’s odd ideas, but weirdly interesting.

 One shortcoming of Evola’s interpretation, methinks, is his vested interest in deriving Buddhism entirely from the Indo-Aryan Vedic tradition. He apparently was oblivious of the existence of the prehistoric Indus Valley Civilization which was non-Aryan and which in all probability was the origin of many classical Indian philosophical beliefs and practices. But the ideological and practical origins of systems like Buddhism, Yoga, and Upanishadic mystical absolutism are controversial to this day. Like many westerners, Evola had little use for the notion of rebirth or “reincarnation,” and declared it to be a non-Aryan intrusion. He did, however, accept the Buddhist idea of karmic momentum passing from one life to another.

 Evola being a fascist with a strong sense of individual nobility, at least for the masters, it is not surprising that he deviated from strict orthodoxy in his interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine of anattā, No Self. He accepted the Buddhist assertions that none of the five aggregates which make up an individual person (form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and “individuated consciousness”) were one’s true self; yet he strayed toward a Vedantic, transcendent Self, not even quite reaching it, but remaining somehow individual and distinct, not even merging into a kind of World Soul. Self is unconditioned and indeterminate, yet still somehow “the supermundane, Olympian nucleus in ourselves.” This is quite in keeping with Evola’s belief that a true man should be godlike. But, to be fair, quite a few western commentators, even lately, have had difficulties in understanding and/or accepting anattā, and its interpretations are controversial even among monks—for example the great Nyanavira’s notion of existent individuals who nevertheless lack a “self.”

 One rather surprising aspect of the book is Evola’s emphasis on and respect for morality; not only because he was a fascist (and fascists are popularly considered to be ruthlessly amoral at best), but also because morality receives relatively little press even among a great many western spiritual teachers. He praises elaborately the brahma-vihāras as well, meditations in which the Aryan ascetic radiates love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity to all beings in the universe. On the other hand, he does point out that morality and universal love are more side-effects than vehicles to wisdom or enlightenment; he describes them in terms of knowledge, nobility of spirit, and honor. Also, he points out that the brahma-vihāras are intended for ascetic hermits, not for people living worldly, “vulgar” lives—unconditionally forgiving your enemies doesn’t work so well in town, especially when universal forgiveness and equanimity are the incidental result of psychological invulnerability, itself the result of strenuous spiritual practice, ascesis.

 The book includes the mandatory chapter on mindfulness, which is interesting partly because he (and/or his translator) was apparently innocent of the standardized jargon of the Vipassanā movement. He uses a rather different vocabulary. I’ll let him speak for himself:

As in a mirror, he "looks at himself again and again before performing an action; he looks at himself again and again before saying a word; he looks at himself again and again before harboring a thought." It can easily be seen that by following such a path a man naturally transforms himself into a kind of living statue made up of awareness, into a figure pervaded by composedness, decorum, and dignity, a figure that inevitably calls to mind not only the whole style of the ancient Aryan aristocracy but also that made famous by the ancient Roman tradition in the original type of the senator….

Evola’s understanding of unmindful semiconsciousness, and of the necessity of it for samsaric existence, is acute:

…most of the "private" mental life of every average and more-than-average man develops today in that passive manner of thought that, as the Buddhist text we have just quoted strikingly puts it, "walks by itself," while, half-unconscious, we look on. Anyone can convince himself of this by trying to observe what goes on in his mind, for example, when leaving his house: he thinks of why he is going out but, at the door, his thoughts turn to the postman and thence to a certain friend from whom news is awaited, to the news itself, to the foreign country where his friend lives and which, in turn, makes him remember that he must do something about his own passport; but his eye notices a passing woman and starts a fresh train of thought, which again changes when he sees an advertisement, and these thoughts are replaced by the various feelings and associations that chase each other during a ride through the town. His thought has moved exactly like a monkey that jumps from branch to branch, without even keeping a fixed direction.

 And of course, being an occultist as well as a student of Buddhism, Evola included an elaborate chapter on psychic powers… “phenomena which, although extremely rare in the modern world on account of the ever more intense ‘physicalization’ and ‘samsārization’ of the human being, are, nonetheless, quite real.” Evola was clearly influenced by René Guénon, who also despised the modern world and its materialist “physicalization,” and who harbored an even greater passion for quotation marks.

 One last bone I would pick with Evola’s interpretation of Buddhism is his assumption that enlightenment is the result of practice, the end of a path. Nirvana is unconditioned, and thus without cause or effect; and the oldest texts do not bother to differentiate between the state of Nirvana and its attainment. Thus enlightenment is itself paradoxical and inexplicable; it cannot be forced, or even elicited; it is completely Off the Scale. It seems that Evola, despite his studies and sharp mind, did not fully appreciate this—but then again, even many Asian meditation masters endorse the idea of “storming the gates of Nirvana.” It is one of the rare superiorities of Western Buddhism that many of its teachers can appreciate the great paradox. Or so it seems to me.

 Evola concludes his book with a discussion of the value of an ancient Indian spiritual tradition in a materialistic modern world. In fact this is an underlying theme throughout the book, and presumably the main reason why he wrote it. With regard to the new ranks of noble renunciants, he says this:

One who is still an "Aryan" spirit in a large European or American city, with its skyscrapers and asphalt, with its politics and sport, with its crowds who dance and shout, with its exponents of secular culture and of soulless science and so on—among all this he may feel himself more alone and detached and nomad than he would have done in the time of the Buddha, in conditions of physical isolation and of actual wandering.

And towards the end of the book he makes a very nice observation, reminiscent of Saint John of the Cross, concerning the spiritual value of ascetic renunciation in a soulless world:

We think it possible that should the course of history, in spite of appearances, not deteriorate further, this may perhaps be due, less to the efforts and direct action of groups of men and leaders of men, than to the influences proceeding, through the paths of the spirit, from the secret realizations of a few nameless and remote ascetics, in Tibet or on Mount Athos, among the Zen, or in some Trappist or Carthusian cloister of Europe. To an awakened eye, to an eye capable of seeing with the sight of one on the Further Shore, these same realizations would appear as the only steady lights in the darkness, as the only peaks emerging, calm and sovereign, above the seas of mist down in the valleys. Every true ascetic realization becomes inevitably transformed into a support—an invisible one, but for all that nonetheless real and efficacious—for those who, on the visible plane, resist and struggle against the forces of an obscure age.

I think he may be right: Who knows, the world may be saved on account of the “good karma” of a few contemplative saints who deserve better than we do, or their ability to dream up a better world than we can.

 Although I have mentioned that the reading of this book inspired the great Nyanavira to renounce the world and become a bhikkhu, Nyanavira seems to have owed little to the philosophy contained in the book…aside from a similar naive belief in the authenticity and infallibility of ancient Pali texts, and a similar disdain for women, Nyanavira developed his own extremely intellectualized system of Dhamma as a refinement of modern Existentialism—in some ways inferior to Evola’s vision, for example in his (Nyanavira’s) contempt for mysticism and anything resembling a transcendent, unconditioned Absolute—but that’s just my own opinion. Followers of Nyanavira’s philosophy (and few are intellectual enough even to understand it) no doubt consider him to be right, and Evola and me to be wrong, which is fine.

It is truly ironic that an interpretation of Dhamma by a self-proclaimed superfascist—the foremost fascist thinker in Europe in his day—comes closer, in some respects at least, to the genuine, original teachings of Theravada than the castrated, feminized, politically correct fluff passing for Buddhism among the leftist elites of the West, typified by some elderly lady or androgynous nebbish sitting before an altar to PC at a luxurious meditation resort, speaking in soft, gentle, non-threatening tones calculated to ruffle zero feathers and bruise no one’s fragile self esteem, and charging exorbitant fees for it. With regard to such new westernized forms of spirituality, Evola observed that “…the true reason for the success of such new expositions is to be found where they are the most accommodating, least rigid, least severe, most vague, and ready to come to easy terms with the prejudices and weaknesses of the modern world.” Which pretty much nails it. Set aside the fact that Julius Evola was an outsider looking in, attempting an intellectual understanding of Dhamma, and compare him with a legion of later academics in essentially the same position, or even with self-proclaimed Buddhists, and it appears that he has distorted Dhamma no more, and in many cases much less, than they have…although of course in a masculine and rather counterintuitive, not to mention politically incorrect, direction.

Postmodern leftist types may disbelieve that a “superfascist” could be sincerely spiritually oriented; but most lefty types are themselves spiritually destitute, incapable of differentiating true spirit from feminine emotionality—feelings of worldly love, compassion, shame, a felt need for conformity, “healing,” etc.; the far left in particular is traditionally and notoriously anti-spiritual, especially in the guise of Marxist dialectical materialism. At least the radical hippies of two generations ago had LSD and other psychedelics to give them a foot in the door, some fleeting glimmer of “God.”

“‘Awakening’ is the keystone and the symbol of the whole Buddhist ascesis: to think that ‘awakening’ and ‘nothingness’ can be equivalent is an extravagance that should be obvious to everyone. Nor should the notion of ‘vanishing,’ applied in a well-known simile of nibbāna to the fire that disappears when the flame is extinguished, be a source of misconception. It has been said with justice that, in similes of this sort, one must always have in mind the general Indo-Aryan concept that indicates that the extinguishing of the fire is not its annihilation, but its return to the invisible, pure, supersensible state in which it was before it manifested itself through a combustible in a given place and in given circumstances.”

“We have already said that Buddhism, in its true essence, is of an eminently aristocratic nature. At the beginning, Buddhism was the truth understood by those few, who alone had really achieved illumination and who appeared as bhikkhu or wandering ascetics. Then, around these, the upāsaka, lay followers, collected and increased and who, according to the canonical formula, had taken refuge in the Buddha, the doctrine, and the order. The order, however, did not resemble a church and the doctrine still less a religion. Women were originally excluded. The unity of the order was essentially due to a strict style of life. It was only later, and with a decadence fully recognized as such by the ancient texts, that precepts and rules multiplied.”