

Julius Evola

## 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 come to the fore, their less severe and essential features, those furthest removed from the metaphysical plane. While hardly any of the major historical religions have escaped this destiny, 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 in which the message that the Buddhist religion should have for the modern world has been spoken of, afford evidence of this.

While someone has lately 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 deteriorated 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, the Mahayana was) 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 Siddharta 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 the natures not noble, 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 and announce the possibility of the Great Liberation and the path to be followed to attain it.

It is known that in the beginning the Order of the *Ariya*, 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 equalitarian and universalistic 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 equalitarianism, whether social or spiritual) with that which lies above such differentiated structures, as in the case of the really 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[1] is pretty 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 revolutionist 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.[2] 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 when the crossing has once been made.[3] Contrary to the view, whether philosophical or religious, which ascribes to some 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 the several attitudes of right conduct that he pointed out, a purely instrumental value, the value of means justified only in view of a certain aim and therefore only *sub conditione*. But this end, just as the higher grades of Buddhistic asceticism 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.”[4]

Thus the fact that some of the rules of the *sila* may perhaps correspond to what the moralists may desire, should deceive 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 innocuousness. He who follows the path of the awakening cultivates these mental attitudes only as the means for freeing 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”, with the consequent absolutization of this sentiment, would be for the authentic Buddhist doctrine an absurdity. Love and compassion are mere details of the *opus remotiois*, 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, *upekka*, is impassibility, the disincarnate neutrality of a soul that has got free from all sentimentality, from both the bonds of the “I” and the “you” 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 notion of the void is not affirmed only 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 notion 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 the system of 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 would be non-existent, would be so many illusions, mere apparitions of the cosmic dream generated by ignorance. This contradiction and nonsense alone should suggest that to the precept spoken of and also to the doctrine of universal illusion must be given a meaning that differs widely from the exoteric, literal, and popular one attributed to them. Both the one and the other should be understood on a purely pragmatic plane.

Both in some aspects of the Mahayana, in which alone the esoteric doctrine of the “awakening” has been replaced by a “religion,” and 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, the 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 the Zen throws into clear relief the essential value of illumination, its transcendency in respect of all that which, in the several cases, may favor it, and at the same time its immanency, 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 either. That should be recalled to those who accept unilaterally the theory of innocuousness, 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[5] who are certainly not noted for their abhorrence of arms and bloodshed. The fact is that the pivot on which all this wisdom turns is one only: 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. On the human soil on

which the seed of the doctrine falls depends the fruit it will bear. The humanitarian, pacifist, vegetarian figurine of the Buddhist is a distortion, and in any case its acceptance is not compulsory. A Samurai and a Kamikaze may equally well be a Buddhist. From a book in which a Buddhist chaplain describes the days of the Japanese put to death by the Americans[6] we see how these men died without conversions 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 devilries of the modern world can disturb; which can be preserved above all tragedies and all destructions, even when man’s human and illusory part is involved. Now, it is in this direction rather than in any other that lies the message that Buddhism may have for our days. At the conclusion of one of our works[7] in which we tried to reconstruct the essence of the Buddhist doctrine, we pointed to the dual possibility 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 built up technique of the mind which allows the detachment and strengthening of a principle that transcends the purely human, irrational, emotional and in general the *samsaric* substance of our being. In no other tradition are these techniques taught in such a clear, thorough, we might say scientific form, free from specific religious or ethical implications, as they are in Buddhism. 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 in keeping 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 ever urge man on in a “flight towards” (Bernanos), destroying in him all centrality, all real consistency. In an age like ours, *samsaric* as no other has ever been, already that which as a system of free and virile *askesis* in Buddhism is mere 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; this—let us repeat it—is not to be understood as an escape, but as a means for assuring a serene and superior security and liberty. And it is in view of the times that are approaching that perhaps never so much as now has there been need of men educated along these lines.

But in the Canons we find opposite the use of such disciplines for life to the use of them for carrying us “beyond life.”[8] 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 the absolute unconditioning of being, the attainment of absolute transcendency. By now the puerile idea of those who identified nirvana with “nothingness”, or regression into the unconsciousness of a kind of trance determined 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 expression *dukkha* is “commotion,” is agitation rather than “suffering”: the condition that the *ariya*, 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 the being is thirst, insatiable longing, fever, and attachment, in its many forms and branches. Beyond all that lies awakening and enlightenment, the *samhhodi* 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 of creature, or as the result of an original sin, he belongs to the natural order; only by the intervention of a transcendent power, only on the assumption of his “conversion,” of his faith and of his renunciation of his own will, only by Divine action, can he be “saved” and attain to life in “paradise.”

The implications of the notion of “awakening” are entirely different; man is not a fallen or guilty being, nor is he a creature separated by an ontological hiatus 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 leading motive is the destruction of “ignorance,” of *avijja*. Decisive here is a fact of an essentially “noetic,” viz. 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 more known to the West, and which have often given rise as to a reaction among Westerners to anti-ascetic prejudice and a distorted exaltation of life.

This character of loftiness, which is due to 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 confirm the state in which he is, 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 things that must be taken into consideration are 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 looked for. This conception, on which already pivoted the traditional Hindu notion of *karma*, 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 by himself enlightenment and the Great Liberation, points out to those having a like vocation the path to follow. 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; myriads of Bodhisattvas and Buddhas busy themselves to assure the salvation and happiness of all living beings.

Again, if we turn to the *terminus ad quem*, i.e., to the ultimate ideal of Buddhism, the break with religious conceptions is a clear one and it is difficult for Westerners to grasp fully. In the West we are accustomed to consider as a religious ideal "Paradise," the survival of the believer in heaven, and only a few mystics speak of the unitive life, of union with the Being. But the Buddhist doctrine looks on all that as too little and it left it behind. Its horizon is that of the traditional Hindu metaphysics, which consider the divine worlds as themselves belonging to *samsara*, for which immortality does not consist in the perpetuation of individuality but in the realization of the Unconditioned; nor the Being here is the supreme point, that beyond which nothing other is conceivable. The Being is matched by the Non-Being and the Unconditioned is that which is superior and anterior to both. In a well-known sequence[9] 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 the 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 in it almost a diabolical temptation,[10] 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 Buddhistic experience, dimensions that appear clearly in the canonical texts, what can he think of those who consider that Buddhism is not even a religion but a system of sickly sentimental secular morality, consisting of humanitarianism and indiscriminate love, the pale evanescent wisdom of one who has recognized that the “world is suffering”? Undoubtedly, the metaphysical dimensions of Buddhism just referred to can only be grasped, let alone achieved, by very few. But the ultimate background of the whole system is indeed that. The canonical saying is known: “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.”[11] 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 unnameable, 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 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 perfectly “awakened One.” As “unconquered and intact beings,” similar to “lofty Supermen” appear those who have travelled along this path[12]; like lions in whom anguish and terror are dead[13] they see the past, they see the heavens and the infernal regions,[14] they know this world and the world beyond, the kingdom of death and the kingdom free from death, the temporal and the eternal.[15] 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.”[16] “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.[17] 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 to 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 no other does.”[18] 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 pain, detached from pleasure he is purified. As 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 men.[19]

Notwithstanding the hyperbolic element in some of these attributes, from them takes definite shape an ideal type against a background of grandeur and spiritual virility which it would be hard to find in any other tradition, beside which the religious values of “sanctity” itself pale and droop. 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 exclusivisms, the Buddhist path of awakening is, as we have said, a narrow one reserved to those who possess an exceptional vocation and qualifications, and in following it, it may be said that the saying of the *Katha-upanisad* is also applicable: it is like walking on a razor edge while no help, either human or divine, is given.

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, producing death or mortal pain. It 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 unparalleled contamination of the truth.

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## Notes

- [1] *Dhammapada*, 58–59.
- [2] Cf. *Suttanipata*, I, vii, 21; *Digha-nikaya*, XII, 1. 24–26, 28; *Dhammapada*, 141.
- [3] *Majjhimonikaya*, XXII.
- [4] *Vie de Milarepa*, trans. Kazi Dawa Samdup (Paris, 1955), p. 81.
- [5] Kaiten Nukariya, *The Religion of the Samurai* (London, 1913).
- [6] Shinsho Hanayama, *Heiwa no Hakken* (Tokyo, 1949). Translated into Italian by G. Morichini, in the Bocca edit., under the title *La Via della pace* (Rome, 1954).
- [7] J. Evola, *The Doctrine of Awakening* (London, Luzac and Co., 1951).
- [8] Cf. for example *Majjhimonikaya*, LII.
- [9] *Majjhimonikaya*, I.
- [10] *Majjhimonikaya*, XLIX.
- [11] *Anguttara-nikaya*, VIII, 19.
- [12] *Majjhimonikaya*, CXVI.
- [13] *Suttanipata*, III, vi, 47.
- [14] *Samyutta-nikaya*, III, 58–59; *Dhammapada*, 422–23.
- [15] *Majjhimonikaya*, XXXIV.
- [16] *Ibid.*, IV.
- [17] *Uravagga*, III, 21.
- [18] *Majjhimonikaya*, LVI.
- [19] *Dhammapada*. 420 sg. and passim; *Majjhimonikaya*, XCVIII.

