

Buddhism

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[Fr. Peter J. Wilkinson, a Columban Father, has done extensive studies of Eastern Religions, particularly in the light of Vatican II. This pamphlet explains another Eastern Religion. It is a companion to "Hinduism" written by the same author. Cover: (Not shown) The golden Buddha in Bangkok. He is in the position which Buddha is supposed to have taken during his meditation under the Bodhi Tree.]

A. THE THREE REFUGES

In devout Buddhist families, the young boys are given over to the monastery at a very early age to live the life of a monk. In a most impressive ceremony the boy has his head shaved clean, his ordinary clothes replaced with the simple saffron-coloured robes of the monk; he is invested with a begging-bowl, and (usually) in the presence of one of the monks he recites the sacred "Three Refuges":

To the Buddha for refuge I go. To the Dharma for refuge I go. To the Sangha for refuge I go.'

Actually, the Buddha, the Dharma (the Buddha's doctrine) and the Sangha (the monastic Order or institution) contain in themselves the essence of classical Buddhism, and are known as the Triratna, the "Three Jewels".

B. THE LIFE OF BUDDHA

Buddha - it means "the Enlightened One" - is an historical person who lived in northern India probably between 560 and 480 B.C. He is the originator of the great eastern religion which bears his name.

Buddha's family name was Siddhartha Gautama. He was a prince of the Shakya tribe and is often referred to as the Shakyamuni Buddha, to distinguish him from the other Buddhas who preceded him and from those who will follow him.

According to the Buddhist scriptures there are many "Buddhas" who appear in time - a cosmic time, measured in aeons - at various intervals. These Buddhas are not so much persons as types, necessary to communicate the truths of spiritual reality to the historical age in which they appear. The Shakyamuni Buddha is the Enlightened Teacher for the historical age 500 B.C. - (?). His successor, the Maitreya Buddha, will appear when this present age is terminated.

Previous lives

For Buddhahood a long preparation is necessary. It is said that Shakyamuni began his preparation in many previous lives, during the period of the Dipankara Buddha, his predecessor by many aeons. It was then that Shakyamuni decided to become a Buddha; from that moment he became a Bodhisattva.

The Buddhist scriptures give many details of the previous lives of the Shakyamuni, showing how he was endowed with the virtues required of a future Buddha. They are richest, however, when they speak of his historical life in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C.; though not all that we read can be taken as historical fact. There is obviously much myth and fantasy mingled with the factual data. However, in order to preserve the beauty, the story - as contained in the scriptures - is only abbreviated and not interpreted in this pamphlet.

Origin of Gautama

According to the "Buddhacarita" ("Acts of the Buddha"), a biography by Ashvaghosha, the infant Gautama was conceived without defilement in the womb of his beautiful mother, the Great Maya, Queen of the Shakyas and wife of King Shuddhodana. Before she had conceived, the Queen had dreamt that a white king elephant seemed to enter her body without causing any pain. When the time of delivery came, the child came out of his mother's side without causing pain or injury; born as befits a Buddha, with full awareness and dazzling beauty. Instantly he walked seven steps and spoke:

'For enlightenment I was born, for the good of all that lives. This is the last time that I have been born into this world of becoming.' ("Buddhist Scriptures" selected and translated by Edward Conze. Penguin Books. 1966, p. 36)

Royal birth

This birth took place near Kapilavastu in northern India, about 560 B.C. Five days later he was given the name Siddhartha Gautama.

When the great seer Asita came to the King's palace to see the royal babe, he exclaimed:

'The time has come when I must pass away, just when he is born who shall discover the extinction of birth which is so hard to win. Uninterested in worldly affairs he will give up his kingdom. By strenuous efforts he will win that which is truly real.... To those who are tormented with pains and hemmed in by their worldly concerns, who are lost in the desert tracks of SAMSARA (i.e. the cycle of rebirths) he shall proclaim the path that leads to salvation... After he has won full enlightenment, this boy, then a king of Dharma (i.e. the doctrine of salvation) will free the world from its bonds.' (Conze, Ibid. pp. 36-37)

The young prince grew up in the royal palace in the care of his aunt - the Queen could not bear the joy felt at the sight of her son - growing more perfect every day, until he reached maturity.

Marriage

Now his father, remembering the prophecy of Asita, determined to tie his son down to sensual pleasure so that he might not abandon his royal role. He selected, as a wife for his son, the beautiful Yashodhara and housed them in the upper part of a magnificent palace with rooms to suit every season. He provided him with a retinue of beautiful maidens who would entertain him with music and every form of sensuous enjoyment. So captivated was the young prince with these sensual delights that it did not occur to him to ever leave the palace.

Birth of Rahula

In time, his wife bore him a son whom he called Rahula. But also in time he came to hear of the beautiful groves outside the palace and near to the city. Feeling now like a trapped elephant he

determined to leave the palace. His father, hearing, of his intention and hoping to keep him ensnared, arranged a pleasure excursion along a magnificent route which was to be cleared of all common folk with any affliction lest the prince's mind be disturbed.

The gods intervene

However, the gods had other intentions. On his first excursion they conjured up before the prince the illusion of an "Old Man" so as to induce him to leave his home of sensual pleasure. The prince, when he saw the old man, was shocked to hear of "old age" and returned disgusted to the palace which now seemed empty to him.

On a second excursion he saw the illusion of a "man with a diseased body". At the same time he also saw how other men could behold the same thing and go on apparently regardless.

On a third excursion the gods showed him a "corpse". When the prince's charioteer explained the meaning of this sight to him he was dismayed:

'This is the end which has been fixed for all, and yet the world forgets its fears and takes no heed... How could an intelligent person pay no heed at a time of disaster, when he knows of his impending destruction.'

(Conze, Ibid. p. 40)

From that time on, the prince withdrew from the sexual pleasures of palace life. When he considered the impermanence of everything in the world he could find no delight in it; for to delight in perishable things would be a sign of delusion.

'I become frightened and greatly alarmed when I reflect on the dangers of old age, death and disease. I find neither peace nor contentment, and enjoyment is quite out of the question.' (Conze, Ibid. p. 41)

On a fourth excursion, into the forest where he hoped to find some peace, the prince observed the destruction of animal and vegetable life wrought by a ploughman who was himself the victim of suffering and time. The prince then passed into a state of trance where he gained a correct understanding of the world's destiny and, saw so clearly the futility of sensuous excitements that they could no longer influence him. It was then that the gods showed him another vision. He saw a "religious mendicant" who, when asked his identity, replied:

'I am a recluse who, terrified by birth and death, have adopted a homeless life to win salvation. Since all that lives is doomed to extinction, salvation from this world is what I wish, and so I search for that blessed state in which extinction is unknown.' (Conze, Ibid. p. 43)

and then flew up into the sky.

Becomes a religious mendicant

Then and there the dazed and elated prince intuitively perceived the Dharma and determined to leave home and lead the life of a wandering religious mendicant. Aided by his faithful charioteer he did this immediately, renouncing his wife, son, family, palace and royal power. He studied the practice of Yoga and asceticism and joined five other mendicants on the bank of the river Nairanjana. These men enrolled as his disciples and watched with joy as he emaciated himself to skeletal form with severe mortifications and physical austerities in his quest for quietude and an end to the cycle of rebirths. For six years he led this life, his mental and psychic powers growing

immensely. However, he gradually realized that the inward calm needed for success in meditation was only being impeded by his weakened physical condition. He must abandon this other extreme of living (the first extreme was his sensual palace life) and find some other way. He now left off his severe fasting and began eating in moderation. His disciples, believing he had abandoned the holy life, abandoned him.

Enlightenment

The moment of "enlightenment" was drawing near. Sitting himself, cross-legged, at the root of a sacred Bodhi-tree - the "Tree of Enlightenment" - the Sage (this is how the scriptures refer to him) made a vow to win enlightenment:

'I shall not change this my position so long as I have not done what I set out to do.' (Conze, Ibid. p. 48)

As he sat, Mara, the Evil One, the inveterate foe of the true Dharma and the Lord of the realm of sensual desire, attacked him with all kinds of temptation. But the Sage overcame him. As night fell, he went into a trance. He recalled with perfect understanding all his former births and deaths; he acquired the "heavenly eye" with which to look on the entire world; he achieved a correct knowledge of all there is to be known with a true understanding of the process of causation; and when dawn came he had reached the state of all-knowledge.

The Sage was victorious; he had become "enlightened." The Bodhisattva had become the Buddha, the "Enlightened One." The earth swayed like a drunken woman and thunder filled the air, so full was the world's joy that the great Sage had found the Authentic Way and achieved perfection.

Freedom found

"There I have found freedom" thought the Buddha, realizing he had grasped the principle of causation, and convinced that there was no "self" in anything that exists.

For seven weeks he sat under the Bodhi-Tree deciding whether to keep his great discovery to himself or to communicate the "Way to Enlightenment" to others. It was then that the gods, Indra and Brahma, concerned for the welfare of the world, pleaded with him:

'Now that you, O Sage, have yourself crossed the ocean of the world of becoming, please rescue also the other living beings who have sunk so deep into suffering.' (Conze, Ibid. p. 52)

The Buddha pondered their plea; and at last decided to set the world free.

Disciples enlightened

At this time, two merchants gave him alms. But it was not to them that he first preached his Dharma (i.e. Doctrine) ; it was to his former disciples, the five mendicants, in the Deer Park at Benares. These men greeted him with respect and treated him as their master, but they would not accept the fact of his enlightenment. However, when he expounded his Dharma to them - how he had given up the extremes and found the "Middle Way" which leads to the appeasing of all ill - and had instructed them in the "Holy Eightfold Path" and the "Four Holy Truths," they believed and were converted.

Return to his father

The Buddha then returned to Kapilavastu, preached his doctrine and showed his wonder-working powers to his father, who far from being angry at his son's abdication, extolled him for his great

spiritual achievement. Later, at Shavristi, he accepted the gift of the Jetavana Grove and performed miracles. Leaving there, he rose to the heaven of the Thirty-three where he preached the Dharma to his mother, Queen Maya, and the gods. Back on earth again, he continued his travels, converting those who were ready to receive his teaching.

A split in the ranks

However, it wasn't long before a split occurred in the ranks of his followers. Devadatta, the Buddha's cousin and monk-disciple, grew jealous through pride and tried to split the monastic Order, the Sangha. He even contrived to kill the Buddha with a huge rock aimed at him from a high peak and with a wild elephant let loose on his path. Both efforts failed.

Nirvana

At about the age of eighty, and after some forty-five years of preaching, the Buddha decided that the time had come for the Parinirvana, the final nirvana or "Total Extinction." As a Tathagata (the Buddha as a Spiritual Principle) he had the power to live on for an aeon (25,000 years), but he now decided to renounce his claim and to leave the world. At the announcement of this impending event the whole world quaked, and his faithful disciple Ananda wept copiously.

Three months later, when the time for Nirvana had come, the Buddha left Vaisali and went to Kusinagara where he bathed in the river there and bade Ananda to arrange a couch for him under two sal trees. He then announced that he would enter Nirvana that night and proceeded to compose himself on the couch, resting on his right side with his head on his hand. At that moment, all grew silent; the birds uttered not a sound and the wind dropped. The Buddha asked Ananda to call the Mallas (the local people) and he preached to them the wonder of Nirvana. When they showed grief at the prospect of his departure, he explained:

'Salvation cannot come from the mere sight of Me. It demands strenuous efforts in the practice of Yoga. But if someone has thoroughly understood this my Dharma, then he is released from the net of suffering, even though he never cast his eyes on me.' (Conze, Ibid. p. 62)

Then to Ananda he said:

'Do not grieve, Ananda, do not despair. Remember my words: from all that delights us, from all that we love, we must one day be separated... Perhaps, Ananda, you will think, "We no longer have a Master." But you must not think that. The law remains, the law that I taught you; let it be your guide, Ananda, when I shall no longer be with you.' ("The Life of Buddha" - A. Ferdinand Herold. Tuttle & Co. 1954, pp. 285-286)

Thereupon, he entered the transic state, passing through all nine stages and back again. Then he ascended to the fourth stage of trance: when he emerged from that he entered the final Nirvana.

Buddha cremated

The earth quivered, and thunder and lightning broke loose. The sal trees flowered out of season and showered their blooms on the Buddha's body. The monks were grief-stricken, and wept. The Mallas, in deep sorrow, placed the body on a precious bier and honoured it. They carried it to the Makuta shrine and cremated it on a kingly pyre. The bones of the Blessed One, which were unconsumed, were placed in eight jars and distributed to various regions.

Some time later, many of the disciples, wishing to preserve the Dharma (doctrine) as the Buddha taught it, collected all the sayings of the great Sage; and with the help of Ananda, who had heard more of the Buddha's preaching than any other disciple, they composed the basis of the Buddhist scriptures.

What is fact and what fable in this legend of the Buddha we can only surmise. To the early believers, at least, he was the "Universal Monarch" (a kind of ideal ruler), the "Victorious One", the "King of the Dharma". For them he was not only superhuman, but also superior, to the gods. He was the teacher of both gods (these are not too well defined, though mortal and subject to Karma) and men. In no way, however, is he regarded as a "Saviour" who delivers men from sin. Only the sinner himself can do this by following the Dharma which will show him the true Path to follow. Buddha himself is not "The Way"; he had merely found the Way and pointed it out to others. As he said himself whilst reclining under the sal trees:

'A man must take medicine to be cured; the mere sight of the physician is not enough.' (Edward Conze - op. cit. p. 62)

C. BUDDHIST DOCTRINE - Dharma

Though the Buddhist Dharma or Doctrine is in essence original and revolutionary, it is at the same time based on the Hindu religio-philosophic outlook.

Siddhartha Gautama was born into a particular caste (Kshatriya) and culture which was Hindu through and through. From childhood he learnt of the supremacy and eternal infinity of the Absolute - Brahman - the one and only reality. More important, he learnt the Hindu doctrine of Samsara and Karma: that life is impermanent and constantly changing, is subject to continual rebirth (Samsara) and conditioned by its action (Karma) in a previous existence. According to Hindu belief, empirical life is evil, for it implies death and suffering. Bliss can only be found in union with the One, absolute and unchanging.

These teachings, which Gautama received in his youth, he did not completely discard. But he threw enough of them overboard to have himself classed as a Hindu heretic.

Four noble truths

For Buddha the predominant reality was suffering. In his quest for the Way, what he was seeking was essentially a means of extinguishing this suffering. Hence Buddha's doctrine of the "Four Noble Truths":

I. Noble Truth of the Universality of Suffering:

'Birth is ill, decay is ill, sickness is ill, death is ill. To be conjoined with what one likes means suffering. To be disjoined with what one likes means suffering. Not to get what one wants, that also means suffering.'

II. Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering.

'It is craving that leads to rebirth, accompanied by delight and greed, seeking its delight now here, now there, i.e., craving for sensuous experience, craving to perpetuate oneself, craving for extinction.'

III. Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering.

'It is the complete stopping of that craving, the withdrawing from it, the renouncing of it, throwing it back, liberation from it, non-attachment from it.'

IV. Noble Truth of the Path leading to the cessation of Suffering.

'It is this Holy Eightfold Path which consists of right views, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.' (See these quotes of the 'four noble truths', in Conze, Ibid. pp. 186-187)

The Noble Eightfold Path is also known as the "Middle way", for it seeks to avoid the extreme modes of striving for happiness; sensuality and harsh asceticism. It is the Buddha's practical doctrine of salvation.

Living the Dharma

Recalling the dying words of Buddha, it must be remembered that salvation consists in living the Dharma. It is not enough that one should merely look upon the Buddha himself and expect Nirvana. 'If one is sick, one must take the medicine.' And the medicine is stiff and hard to take. From the very beginning it was considered a Path too difficult to be lived in the family household where circumstances would not permit the necessary exercises. Only the environment of a monastic community would provide the opportunities to live the Middle Way in its entirety.

The Middle Way

Basically, the Middle Way is a moral or ethical programme for salvation. It bypasses sacrifice and ritual, extreme asceticism and Yoga (though there are similarities in Buddhism to this technique), and concentrates on the systematic elimination of passion and self-seeking.

'As a kind of cultivated escapism for the individual who masters the drill, Buddhism has been dismissed by some westerners as Freudianism in reverse; a systematic elimination of the Ego so that anxiety has no place to roost.' (Time Magazine. December 11, 1964. p. 22)

Indeed, one of the most important notions to grasp in Buddhism is that concerning the "Self". In Hinduism, salvation consists in the realization that the Self and the Absolute are one and the same: 'Tat tvam asi' - 'That you (singular) are'. In Buddhism, the very existence of the Self is denied. The individual man is made up of five Skandhas or "heaps": the Body, the Feelings, the Perceptions, the Impulses and Emotions, and the Acts of Consciousness. Each person is not someone endowed with these five "heaps"; he is these "heaps," the bundle of these Skandhas but without any permanent substratum or soul. In fact, there is no individuality at all. Individuality is only an invented belief, a product of gratuitous imagination, a grand delusion. The aim of the Dharma and the goal of the Middle Way is the extinguishing of belief in an individuality. When the individual ceases to exist, the result is "extinction", Nirvana.

Nirvana, the ambition of all Buddhists, is an essentially negative concept. It means the extinction of the Self ; the end of the Karma-process and the Samsaric cycle of rebirth; the utter annihilation of craving - the cause of suffering - and delusion. Nirvana is not synonymous with death; for like the Buddha himself, the emancipated one - the Arhat or Saint - may continue to live on awaiting the final extinction (Parinirvana) in the consciousness that he will never again be reborn.

Schemes for spiritual training

There are various schemes for the spiritual training of the Buddhist, whether layman or monk. The oldest of these divides the disciple's career into three parts: 1) morality, 2) meditation and 3) wisdom. For both the layman and monk the minimum moral requirements for spiritual achievement are contained in the "Five Precepts":

i) to abstain from taking life ii) to abstain from taking what is not given iii) to abstain from sexual and sensuous misconduct iv) to abstain from false speech v) to abstain from intoxicants which tend to cloud the mind.

In addition to these Five Precepts, the monk is also subject to about 250 monastic rules (of the Sangha). (These are set out in the Vinaya-Pitaka section of the scriptures; see Section D of this pamphlet.)

Mental discipline

Besides moral behaviour, the Buddhist must also exercise mental discipline, thus attacking not only his sinful actions but also the causes of these actions. As the Dhammapada, the most famous of all Buddhist scriptures, says:

'All that we are is the result of what we have thought; it is compounded of our thoughts, made up of our thoughts.'

Meditation

By constant and prolonged meditation - the only key to higher spiritual states - implying an extreme introversion, the disciple will gradually rid himself of the "Five Obstacles": 1) ill-will 2) worldly attachment, 3) indolence and apathy, 4) distraction and mental disturbance, and 5) doubt. He then proceeds to master the technique of "Trance" (Dhyana) with its four stages, until he achieves the "knowledge that releases" and the "Five Mundane Super-knowledges": 1) the various magical powers, 2) knowledge by the heavenly ear, 3) knowledge of others' thoughts, 4) the recollection of previous lives, and 5) knowledge of the decease and rebirth of other beings. When he has acquired these powers he has the characteristics of an Arhat or Saint; he has done what has to be done. He has achieved Nirvana, and henceforth is released from the cycle of rebirth.

Wisdom

Wisdom is the third area of the disciples spiritual training. Two questions that the Buddha refused to answer satisfactorily were: the nature of Nirvana, and the condition after death of the one who attained it. Buddha was not concerned with the nature of Nirvana; only with how to receive it. He concentrated on the cause of existence and the mechanism of Karma. He dismissed the idea of a permanent Self or Ego as a grand illusion. 'A person's reality,' he said, 'is like a cart made of nothing but parts; or like a flame constantly renewing itself - a never-ending process, a "chain of causation".'

However, even to many early Buddhists, the concept of a non-existent permanent Self was not satisfying and they postulated a permanent transmigrating principle - the "person". They were regarded as heretics.

Buddhist orthodoxy

But what is Buddhist orthodoxy? This question has plagued the Buddhist community since the time of Buddha's death. The Sage left to his disciples the Dharma. But he left no authority to preserve and safeguard the integrity of that Dharma and to make authoritative interpretations. There is no

"Pope", no central authority; nor has there ever been one unified Buddhist Church. However, almost immediately after the death of Buddha, the First of four Great Councils was held by the Sangha. They convened at Rajagaha to try to settle the Canon of Scriptures - the "Three Baskets" (Pitakas): the Rules of Discipline of the Sangha (Vinaya-Pitaka), the Sermons of Buddha (Sutta-Pitaka), and the systematic Doctrinal Teaching (Abhidhamma-Pitaka). The Second Council, at Vesali, a century later, discussed the relaxation of the monastic Rules. A split resulted. The conservatives, forerunners of the present-day "Theravadins" (especially strong in Ceylon or Sri Lanka) who regard themselves as the "School of the Elders" and claim their Pali Canon is the original one, won the day. The defeated progressives held a Council of their own. Thenceforth, Buddhism was split into sects and schools, each with its own version of Scripture and its own interpretation. Two other great Councils were held, but as these were not representative of all the various schools their importance is not significant.

A new revolutionary movement

About the first century B.C., a new and revolutionary movement, Mahayana Buddhism, arose. It was foreshadowed in some way by the progressives of the Second Council. It asserted itself as the "Great Vehicle" leading to emancipation. And "emancipation" was not extinction of craving, it held, but universal compassion, Buddhahood. Instead of proposing the ideal of Arhatship, Mahayana propounded the idea that everyone may become a Bodhisattva - a future Buddha - superhuman beings of infinite compassion and wisdom who choose to remain in the world of suffering and change in order to guide and help others. Mahayana is opposed to Hinayana Buddhism or the "Small Vehicle."

Concern for own salvation - Hinayana

Hinayana (the southern Buddhists dislike this deprecatory term and prefer to be called "Theravadins") proposes a solitary perfection and deliverance of the Arhat type. One should concern himself with his own salvation - by extinguishing desire or craving in himself - and be indifferent to the rest of the world. The Arhat is one saved; not the saviour of others. He is concerned only with himself. To care for others is to him an imperfection.

Salvation of the world - Mahayana

Mahayana will not rest content with solitary sanctity which does not serve others. It preaches the perfection of the Bodhisattva; one who vows to follow the Buddha in devoting himself to the salvation of the world. It is the universalist ideal. The salvation of all men is the first duty of the "perfect". For since perfection consists in destroying suffering by destroying desire, the perfect Buddhist must destroy suffering in others as well as in himself.

Growth of popular cults

One of the most notable results of the Mahayana doctrine of the Bodhisattva was the growth of devotionism and popular cults. For many, laymen especially, the path mapped out by Buddha - especially where it demanded self-denial, self-discipline and the monastic life - was too severe and demanding. When the concept of the Bodhisattva-Saviour appeared, they grasped it with eagerness, and they poured upon the person of the Bodhisattva their devotion and worship.

The most famous of these Bodhisattvas is Avalokitesvara (Lord of Survey), an Indian male deity who was transformed in China to the female deity Kuan-Yin (Goddess of Mercy) and as such passed to Japan where she was invoked under the name of Kwannon.

Associated with this cult is the more famous one of Amitabha Buddha whose statue graces many of the most important shrines in China and Japan (e.g. the Kamakura Buddha). Amitabha is not an historical person. He is the Buddha who dwells in the "Great Western Paradise", who is pre-eminently compassionate and leads the souls of the believers to the "Land of Bliss" (Sukhavati), where they remain in perfect happiness until the moment of Nirvana.

Prayer and trust

In this devotional Buddhism, which is a complete break with the ancient orthodox Dharma, the devotee simply casts himself in prayer and trust upon the compassionate Buddha, invoking his name and surrendering to his grace.

The Mahayana movement, with its philosophical and religious systems, spread to China, Korea and Japan and to Vietnam. It also took hold in Tibet and Mongolia, but about 500 A.D. was overthrown by Tantric Buddhism (a composite of magic, secret ritual and symbolism) which developed in those areas.

Hinayana Buddhism took control in Ceylon (or Sri Lanka), Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. As already mentioned, the Hinayanans of Ceylon preferred to call themselves "Theravadins".

However, as Dr. D. T. Suzuki, the most famous Japanese exponent of Zen Buddhism, has said:

'There are not two Buddhisms; the Mahayana and Hinayana are one, and the spirit of the founder of Buddhism prevails in both. Each has developed its own way, according to the difference in environment in which each has thriven and grown, understanding by environment all those various factors of life that make up the peculiarities of an individual or nation.' (Dr. D. T. Suzuki - "The Development of Mahayana Buddhism" in the Buddhist Review. Vol. 1, 1909)

D. THE BUDDHIST COMMUNITY (of Monks) - Sangha

The third of the "Three Jewels" is the Sangha or Buddhist Community of Monks. Buddha taught that salvation was to be achieved only through the practice of the Dharma. But very early it was seen that the perfect observance of the Dharma was only possible in the seclusion of a monastery, where one could walk the Middle Path without distraction or disturbance. Right from the beginning then "Buddhism has been essentially a doctrine and a way of life intended for monks." ("Buddhism" - E. Zurcher. St. Martin's Press. N.Y. 1962, p. 36) Five precepts and rules

For both monks and laymen the minimum moral obligations are contained in the "Five Precepts". But over and above these the monks are subject to some 250 Rules, contained in the Vinaya-Pitaka.

Eligibility

As long as no disrepute or strife be caused, anyone - male or female in separate institutes - may join the Sangha and be ordained a monk: a Bhikshu (male) or a Bhikshumi (female). Ordination entails two stages: first, the candidate becomes a novice by putting on the monastic robe and reciting in the presence of an elder monk the "Three Refuges" (see section A.); the second stage or full Ordination comes after two years as a novice and when the candidate is at least twenty years of age. At this second stage he/she is fully admitted into the Sangha as a Bhikshu/Bhikshumi in a ceremonial action performed by the community. The novice is questioned and the principal monastic Rules are read; the monk must live in complete poverty, begging for his food; he must observe perfect chastity; he must not steal; he must not consciously kill any living being; and he must not pretend to

possess supernatural qualities, nor induce anyone to transgress these basic rules. To do so would mean expulsion from the Order.

Dress

As a monk, the disciple wears a saffron robe, shaves his head, and usually changes his name. His only worldly possessions are his robe, sandals, umbrella, belt, razor, water-filter, staff, reading glass and begging-bowl.

Monastic life

Normally, the monks live in community in a monastery or convent which they control themselves with material support from laymen. Sometimes, with permission, they may live in solitude. In the monastery, the novices are in the care of a Spiritual Director and an academic guide. The fully ordained monks have precedence according to seniority by ordination; though equality rather than central authority has been the guiding principle in these institutes. Moreover, all caste distinction is left at the monastery door.

Support

Since the monks are forbidden to retain money or to work, the construction and upkeep of the monasteries has always depended on the generosity of laymen. In many cases Royalty has been the best benefactor. A typical monastery would incorporate in its design a Chapter Room (meeting room for monks), a library, a dining room, kitchen, dispensary, bathing pool and a sanctuary with a statue of the Buddha.

Daily routine

In the daily routine, the monks rise with the sun. After meditating for some time they leave the monastery and beg their food. On returning, they wash their feet and eat (there are only two meals each day). The rest of the day is spent mainly in prayer, contemplation, spiritual conversation and studies. Some time is also spent in contact with laymen, and they may even eat with them. But the monks must return to the monastery to sleep (four hours at most).

It is a hard and disciplined life, but not excessively difficult or irksome.

Monastic ceremonials

Of monastic ceremonials perhaps the most outstanding is that of "Confession". Each fortnight, all the monks gather in the Chapter Room of the monastery. The presiding Elder then reads the Pratimoksha (the monastic Rules) and each monk confesses his transgressions of the various rules. A similar ceremony takes place at the end of Retreats during the rainy season. The monks who have been living together invite each other to point out their failings and transgressions. It is a simple act of discipline and humility aimed at spiritual growth. The most solemn Festival of the year is that celebrating the memory of the Buddha's Enlightenment and Parinirvana.

Some variations

While the principles of monastic organization have remained much the same throughout the Buddhist world, there have been some variations. In Mahayana Buddhism, for example, where the Bodhisattva ideal allowed even laymen to achieve salvation, the monk lost some of his importance and a form of self-ordination crept in. Also in Mahayana, the attitude towards the monastic Rules became somewhat freer and some exceptional groups in Japan and Tibet even permitted marriage.

On a wider front, particularly in Japan and China, the Mahayana monks developed a "this-worldly" attitude which, while it harmonized with their belief in salvation for all men and allowed them to enter the arena of social welfare in various ways, it nevertheless left them open to abusive practices which inevitably arose. Various un-clerical activities such as financial speculation, acquisition of property, commercial enterprise, and even political activity, were found being indulged in by individual monks and even monasteries.

E. THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka)

When the Buddha had gathered his first disciples about him, he said to them:

"O disciples, I am free of all bonds, human and divine. And you, too, are now free. So start on your way, O disciples, go, out of pity for the world, for the world's happiness, go. It is to you that Gods and men will owe their welfare and their joy. Set out on the road, singly and alone. And teach, O disciples, teach the glorious law,... to all who hear, proclaim the perfect, the pure, the saintly life. There are some who are not blinded by the dust of the earth, but they will not find salvation if they do not hear the law proclaimed. So go, O disciples, go and teach them the law." (A. Ferdinand Herold - op. cit. p. 128)

So the disciples went out, and they taught the Glorious Dharma by preaching and discussion.

The people of India were the first to receive their teaching; though, at this stage, there was no dogma, no written texts. Nor were there sacrifices, sacraments or prayers.

The first preaching of the Dharma outside India was in Ceylon. King Asoka of India - the ideal king in Buddhist tradition - who had become a very devout follower of the Path about 250 B.C., sent missionaries to Ceylon with extraordinary success and it has remained a stronghold of Theravada Buddhism ever since. Ceylon's most notable contribution to the Buddhist treasury is its 1st Century 'Pali' texts - its written records of the earliest Message.

South-East Asia

King Asoka also sent missionaries to Burma where a blend of Hinayana and Mahayana and the native 'Nat' worship was evolved. However, when King Anawratha (1044-1077 A.D.) established his fabulous capital at Pagan he officially attached Burmese Buddhism to the Theravada School of Ceylon, and it remains so to this day.

Siam (Thailand) is also a member of the Theravada group. Probably, the Siamese first welcomed Buddhism before they had migrated from their native China; but in the 14th century A.D. they embraced Theravada from Ceylon at the instigation of their then Asoka-like king.

Theravada also puts a claim on Cambodia and Laos. In recent times there has been an attempt to introduce Theravada in Vietnam, but apart from founding a monastery in Saigon it is the Chinese-type Mahayana which prevails.

Buddhism gained entrance to Malaya and Indonesia in the first centuries of our era. Actually, there existed side by side Buddhism, Brahmanism and Tantrism. But it was Islam, in the 15th century, particularly in Indonesia, which gained the upper hand. The Buddhism which now remains is mainly the Mahayana type found in the Chinese section of the community.

China

The time of Buddhism's arrival in China is usually given as the 1st century B.C. - during the Han Dynasty - or the 1st century A.D. It seems that the emperor of China requested a knowledge of the religion and two monks of the Mahayana School in India brought images and the scriptures to him. The Chinese, permeated with Confucianism and Taoism, accepted Buddhism, but only after they had substantially modified it. They rejected the monasticism (unknown in China) with its celibacy and mendicant mode of living, and only after 300 years did Buddhism find itself at home in this culture alien to its birth. Much credit for its final acceptance among the Chinese must go to the scholar Kumarajiva who did an enormous amount of writing and translating. Another scholar, the Indian Bodhi-dharma, was perhaps even more influential in the evolution of a specifically Chinese Buddhism. He initiated the "Ch'an" School (from which the Japanese derived their "Zen") whose purpose and techniques have been summarized as:

"A special transmission outside the scriptures; No dependence upon words and letters; Direct pointing to the soul of man; Seeing into one's own nature." ("Buddhism" - Christmas Humphreys. Penguin Books. 1958, p. 67)

Buddhism was at its zenith in China during the Tang Dynasty (620-907 A.D.), when its artistic achievements attained a cultural high-point and its monks devised the art of printing. However, in later times, its fortunes waxed fair or foul according to the religious affiliations of the current emperor. If he was Buddhist, all was well; if Confucian, even persecution might be its lot. Buddhism's ultimate failure in China, however, was due above all to its own inner sickness.

Korea

Korean Buddhism is very much akin to the Chinese form. It came to Korea from China together with Chinese writing, about 372 A.D., and while it could be said to have struck roots it never really flourished. It is on its role as the connecting link between Chinese Ch'an and Japanese Zen that Korea is most important.

Japan

Buddhism arrived in Japan by way of Korea in 522 A.D. Its implantation received an early boost from the Regent Prince Shotoku Taishi (593-622), one of the greatest Japanese of all time and an outstanding patron and exponent of Japanese cultural and religious development. Prince Shotoku did much himself to give Japanese Buddhism its own individual identity, even though the newly imported religion had arrived from China and Korea already split into rival schools.

Buddhism in Japan was to a great extent influenced by the native "Shinto" religion. Even today, though a statistical report might indicate that 55% of Japanese are Buddhist and only 5-8% are Shintoist, it would not mean that their affiliations were mutually exclusive, or that either religion was devoid of considerable influence on the other.

Buddhism in Japan has, moreover, always been politically connected; it was established and prospered under royal patronage and was closely allied to the ruling Shogunate during the Tokugawa period. When the Shoguns were displaced during the Meiji Restoration in 1868, it was versatile enough to stand on its own and reorganize itself as a 'disestablished' Church.

Although Buddhism in Japan is divided into many sects - some of local origin, such as Shin and Nichiren; others imported from China - it is true to say that it is still the foremost extant example of the Mahayana School, with some 36 million believers.

Probably the best known type of Japanese Buddhism among Westerners is that of Zen. Originally imported from China as Ch'an in the 12th century, it today claims about nine million followers divided into several sects, the most influential being Rinzai and Soto. With its orientation towards practical living and its emphasis on restrained conduct, unpretentiousness, natural simplicity and spontaneity, it has profoundly influenced Japanese culture. Zen teaches that enlightenment comes not from scriptural study or philosophical reasoning, but from a 'sudden flash of intuition' which will occur during disciplined meditation. For various reasons, Zen has become very popular in the West.

Tibet

Tibet is also Buddhist; but with a difference. 'Lamaism', as Tibetan Buddhism is often called, has been described as "a mixture of the best and worst of Buddhism and much that lies between." (Humphreys, Ibid. p. 189)

Buddhism began to arrive in Tibet, in various forms, about 650 A.D. In the south, there arose a mixture of Mahayana and Tantrism (a blend of Indian aboriginal nature-worship and Hindu mysticism) ; in the east, a version strongly affected by the Chinese Ch'an School. Also influential in the shaping of Tibetan Buddhism was the native Bon, a shamanistic religion with its own esoteric ritual, magic and sorcery.

It is claimed that Buddhism in Tibet belongs to the Mahayana branch; but it would be more truthful to say that it is a type all of its own.

Overview

Over 2500 years have passed since Gautama was born in northern India, and the religion which he established has spread and flourished throughout the greater part of Asia. Today, an educated estimate (it can be no more) would put the number of its followers at about 300 millions. They worship at some two million shrines attended by 800,000 monks and nuns. The greatest numbers are found in China (100 millions), Japan (57 millions), Thailand (28 millions), Burma (20 millions), and Vietnam (23 millions {?}). It is a religion which is still very much alive and continuing to influence the lives of many besides the believers. However, in this present age it is finding itself beset with many new pressures, in particular atheistic Communism, religious indifferentism and the advance of western science and technology. A new era of 'dialogue' has also begun, particularly between the Christian Churches and Buddhism. We shall now have a look at Buddhism in these modern circumstances.

F. BUDDHISM TODAY

1. BUDDHISM AND COMMUNISM

Apart from Christianity, no other major world religion has had to confront Communism in Asia on such a massive scale. How Buddhism has fared in this confrontation is sometimes a matter of conjecture (for we are investigating a spiritual, unmeasurable phenomenon); always a case of individual and national response.

China

In China, for example, where a Communist government has been in power for near twenty years, [in 1968] the Buddhist Sangha, though existing in name, has gradually passed into obscurity. The

great Buddhist monuments and treasures, though assiduously preserved and even restored by the authorities, are now little more than tourist attractions and art pieces.

When the Communists first took over in 1949 they pushed the hard-line, driving the monks from their monasteries and forcing them to work in factories and on the farms, even enlisting the young monks as 'volunteers' to fight in the Korean War, and compelling the nuns to get married. This policy, however, was found to be "antagonizing the masses" and a softer approach was adopted. [Has much improved since then?]

Tibet

It was the soft-line strategy which the Communists used in 1950 in their take-over of Buddhist Tibet. There they used persuasion, outward friendliness, bribery and brain-washing; and to good effect. However, when a revolt broke out in 1959, they reverted to ruthlessness, shooting the monks, forcing them to sole their shoes with the sacred texts and importing prostitutes to seduce the celibates.

North Korea

In North Korea there was no nonsense; the monks were simply sent out to work on the farms and in the factories. [or worse fates!]

Vietnam

In North Vietnam, where Buddhism was the official State Religion, the Communists adopted the technique of installing 'puppet monks' (there has been no shortage of these) who would mouth the thoughts of the government.

But it is in South Vietnam where the most interesting and decisive drama of confrontation is today (1968) being played out. With about 8.5 million believers (this figure is no more than an educated estimate; some would put it as low as four million, others as high as 12.8 million) Buddhism is one of the most potent forces in the nation, the more so since it has been highly organized for political as well as religious purposes. Its power has been most evident in its success in toppling the 1963 and 1964-5 national governments, whilst claiming to be the victim of a religious persecution.

Allegiance to whom?

One of the great imponderables of the present situations is 'Where does the allegiance of the leading bonzes lay?' Monks like Thich Ti Quang make repeated anti-Communist avowals, but one can never be too sure whether these are only to soothe the sensitive anti-communists who are embroiled in the current bloody war. It is a verifiable fact that the Communists, throughout Asia, have not been unsuccessful in winning large numbers of the Sangha over to their side, with such shrewd devices as the "discovery" of great similarities between Marxism and Buddhism: the classless society and the attitudes of both to modern science. And not a few bonzes have been anxious to see their spiritual religion as the complement to materialistic atheism.

Incompatibility

When the chips are down, though, the majority of Buddhist leaders are well aware of the insidious snare which is being laid for them, and realize the intrinsic incompatibility of the two beliefs. But because it is the gentlest of religions - "Shame on him that strikes, greater shame on him who, stricken, strikes back" - the Buddhists find it difficult to raise their arms against the Communist foe.

The Communists know this, and with dogged persistence have sought to penetrate and infiltrate the Buddhist camp. By way of resistance, those Buddhists who see no possibility of conciliation have adopted a double course: 1) achieve political power to protect themselves and to prevent a Communist political take-over, and 2) attempt a unified Buddhist religious revival, with a Buddhist ideological front throughout Asia.

Dangers

There is no question in the minds of these leaders of the dangers which threaten from Communism. Even the 'pink' Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia, who treads the treacherous tight-rope, has admitted that Communism would be the end of Buddhism in his nation. [Since these words were written, his poor country has witnessed one of the most brutal of Communism's dictatorships oversee one of the centuries greatest genocides, during which thousands of Buddhist monks were murdered along with many more thousands of their fellow citizens. Moreover, subsequent years were to see this same Prince Sihanouk return to his country on the coat-tails of an invading Vietnamese Communist Army!]

Burma, in 1968 a Socialist but predominantly Buddhist nation, published in 1959 a report specifically drawn up by the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Defence, entitled "Dhammantaraya" (Buddhism in Danger). It left no doubt as to the aims of Communism in Burma and it can be taken as representative of the Communist approach wherever it confronts Buddhism.

"The Burma Communists... first objective is to scorch Buddhism root and branch out of the land... They realize that Buddhism is their arch-enemy and they have marked it down as such. Colloquially speaking, they have their knife in Buddhism and the Buddhists. The Buddhists on their part do not seem to be even aware of this terrible hatred. They cannot figure out why Burma Communists should harbour such hatred. For, as good Buddhists, they practise goodwill and forbearance so that feelings of hatred and enmity are none of their preoccupation."

"If ever the Communists come into power! With their intransigent attitude towards religion, 'the enemy of the people', and ruthless war against Buddhism, the fate of Buddhism, Buddhist institutions and people in this country is imponderable."

"Already the Communists are calumniating the Buddha, the Sangha, the Buddhist traditions... hell-bent on the destruction of that gentle influence which is the foundation of our civilization."

(Dhammantaraya (Buddhism in Danger) Translation of a Booklet published jointly by the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Defence, Union of Burma. Rangoon, 1959, p. iii and p. 3)

2. BUDDHISM AND THE SCIENTIFIC AGE

Despite its otherworldliness and its essential concern with the life of the spirit, Buddhism is not at all troubled by its contact with modern science. Mr. Christmas Humphreys, an eminent exponent of Buddhism, has this to say:

"Alone of the world's religions Buddhism has nothing to fear from the two activities of the modern Western mind, namely, the 'higher criticism' of previous ideas and alleged authorities, and science, using the term in its largest scope.

Truly, Buddhism has nothing to fear from Western science, and in the world of mind, including that Cinderella of mental science, psychology, the West has more to learn from Buddhism than as yet it knows." (C. Humphreys - op, cit. pp. 222-223)

Nevertheless, Western industrial society, based on materialism and individualism, does not harmonize well with the social concepts of the Middle Way. The capitalistic - as well as the communistic - emphasis on acquiring material goods is a 'craving' which according to the Buddha's teaching should cease. At the same time, Japan, which is basically Buddhist, is one of the leading industrial and technologically advanced nations of the world. Moreover, in Buddhist studies, carried on in six major Buddhist universities and other institutions, Japan stands unrivalled in the whole world.

So while in theory at least Buddhism lacks the empirical spirit, in practice it has been able to plunge headlong into the modern scientific and industrial world.

3. BUDDHIST - CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

In its 'Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions', Vatican II has said:

"In her task of fostering unity and love (charity) among men, and even among nations, the Church gives primary consideration to what human beings have in common and to what promotes fellowship among them." (Paragraph 1, *Nostra Aetate*, in Abbott edition. G. Chapman, Dublin, 1966)

Going on to speak of Buddhism and its Dharma, it says:

"Buddhism in its multiple (various) forms acknowledges (testifies to) the radical insufficiency (essential inadequacy) of this shifting (changing) world. It teaches (proposes) a path (way of life) by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, (with confidence and trust) can either reach (attain) a state of absolute freedom (perfect liberation) or attain (reach) supreme enlightenment (illumination) by (through) their own efforts or by higher assistance (the aid of divine help)." (Paragraph 2, *ibid.*)

Then speaking of the relationship between the Church and the non-Christian religions, including Buddhism, it says:

"The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon (has high regard for) those ways (the manner) of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings (precepts and doctrines) which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men... The Church has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly (with prudence and charity), through dialogue (discussion) and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of the Christian faith and life (way of life), acknowledge, preserve and promote (encourage) the spiritual and moral goods (truths) found among these men, as well as the values in their society (social life) and culture." (Paragraph 2, *ibid.*)

Pope John

Vatican II and the character of John XXIII both gave new dimensions to the encounter of Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions. The humanity of the pastoral Pope and his prodigious sense of the brotherhood of man did more to open men to one another than a plethora of proclamations.

In November, 1962, Pope John received in audience at the Vatican thirty Japanese Buddhists. The audience had been sought by the Buddhists in order to confer with the Pope on a joint effort to secure world peace. Abbot Iwamoto of the Zen Sect, and leader of the party, said that the impression

made on them by the Pope was as surprising as it was favourable. In their conversation the Pope was most respectful towards Buddhism and more or less said that 'belief in God and belief in the Buddha had the same foundation, and that all religious people should work together in peace for the good of mankind.' ("The Encounter with Buddhism" - George Siegmund, Concilium Nov. 1967. p. 63.)

They were somewhat surprised when he did not extol Christianity as the highest religion and explain that all men must adopt it. He did not adopt a superior attitude, and as he shook hands with them he urged them to disregard their sectarian differences and work towards the common good.

Pope Paul

In 1966, Paul VI, continuing the contact already established, received in audience fifteen Japanese Bonzes. He expressed his appreciation of the relationship of goodwill and respect which had come about between Buddhism and the Catholic Church, and voiced his hope that their visit would promote the spirit of tolerance and mutual respect and strengthen the role of religion in the cause of human welfare and education.

Dialogue of trust, love and respect

These meetings are the beginnings of a dialogue of trust, love and respect. But they are only beginnings. Christianity and Buddhism have been in contact with one another in Asia for over 400 years (and for much longer in the case of the Catholic 'Thomas Christians' of India and the Nestorian and medieval evangelization efforts of the Franciscans and others towards China). Some tolerance, but very little dialogue has been the fruit of those years. Now the stage is set for a two-way conversation in search of truth and understanding.

Some representatives of both religions will, no doubt, be tempted to go too far in seeing similarities and common ground where none exist, or even where there are profound differences. Besides, many Buddhists may feel inclined to think that the Christian desire for dialogue is a tacit admission of spiritual bankruptcy and an unspoken desire to find something 'new' - to find a 'lost soul' in the true spiritual and religious ethos of the East. Both of these attitudes can only be harmful.

George Siegmund feels that many experienced missionaries "who have striven for centuries to establish a true dialogue with the East, do not have great hopes for the prospects of this dialogue." (Siegmund, Ibid. p. 64)

Secretariat

However, the Catholic Church is taking its part most seriously, and to this end has established a Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions. It was set up on 17th May, 1964, with Cardinal Paul Marella as its permanent head, to develop relations with the Non-Christian Religions, to create a climate of friendship and understanding, "to dissipate prejudices and ignorance especially among Catholics and to establish fruitful contact with members of other religions concerning questions of common interest." (Documents of Vatican II - Abbott edition. Footnote 1, p. 660)

Cardinal Marella, speaking of the Secretariat's role, explained:

"The present calls for a new contact between the Church and the non-Christians (distinct from that through her missionaries): the contact of sympathy and mutual understanding based no doubt on study, but also on frankness and the rejection of every prejudice. This will lead to mutual esteem, to a sincere rapprochement and to cordial collaboration in all possible fields..."

("The Catholic Encounter with World Religions" - H. Van Straelen, S.V.D. Burns & Oates, London, 1966. Footnote 1, p. 24)

Fr. H. Van Straelen, S.V.D., in his essay on "The Pre-suppositions for a Fruitful Dialogue", marks out four qualities which must be present if there is to be such a dialogue:

"1) both partners must acknowledge the value of the other's religious convictions so that they consider the dialogue worthwhile; 2) each of the religionists must be able to represent his own religious basis, with meekness, great charity and conviction; 3) there must be some kind of common ground which makes the dialogue possible; and 4) both sides should remain open to charitable criticism and should never feel offended" (Van Straelen, Ibid. pp. 28-36)

One dialogue which would have fulfilled all these conditions was held in Oiso, Japan, from 27 March to 1 April, 1967, between a group of Zen Buddhists and a group of Christians, both Catholic and Protestant. All the participants were selected for their scholarship and experience and they discussed the "interior way" and "man's responsibility for bringing order in to the world".

Reviewing the meeting, Fr. Heinrich Dumoulin, S.J., said that it was friendly and fruitful and both groups were able to learn something from the other. ("A meeting with Zen Buddhists" - Heinrich Dumoulin, S.J. Concilium, Nov. 1967. pp. 70-76)

But again we must remind ourselves that we are only at the beginning and that a long road lay ahead. It will be a tortuous and a difficult journey, but the prize which awaits us at the end will be worth all the prayer, sacrifice and effort that we put into it.
