

## CONCEPTS OF REALITY IN BUDDHIST THOUGHT

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"ALL IS VOID," ANSWERED THE BUDDHA, WHEN QUERIED repeatedly by his followers about the nature of existence. In Buddhist scriptures, it is difficult to find expressions of reality, although there seems to be an abundant indication of unreality. "The Middle Way" suggested by the Buddha as the reasonable and intelligent path between sensualism and asceticism, indirectly explains through ethics, his concept of reality. It evolves logically from his teaching that earthly experience can—at best—be described as "unsatisfactoriness" (*dukkha*), arising from desire, which must ultimately be eliminated.

For some reason, it does not appear to be common knowledge among non-Buddhists, that their Buddhist brethren basically reject a metaphysical entity, such as Christians and Muslims ascribe to an omnipotent God. In classifying religions as theistic or atheistic, it would not be possible to include Buddhism in the former group, and it has little in common—ontologically speaking—with Islam, Christianity, Brahmanism or Sikhism. Many Buddhists do believe in certain non-earthly powers and accept a wide variety of "Celestial beings." Yet, all Buddhist thought shies away from consideration of a God-power, or of any conception of infinity based on an omnipotence. In attempting to establish basic tenets of Buddhism common to all schools, a Western Buddhist scholar, Col. H. S. Olcott, drafted in 1891 what he called the *Fourteen Fundamental Buddhist Beliefs*. These were considered acceptable by leaders in the various Buddhist areas of Japan, Burma, Ceylon, India, and ultimately, by the chief Lama of the Mongolian Buddhist Monasteries. The second of the basic beliefs makes clear the non-acceptance of God in the orthodox sense:

The universe was evolved, nor created; and it functions according to law, not according to the caprice of any God.<sup>1</sup>

If, then, reality is not a state of being ordered by God, an all-powerful and omnipresent being, what is it? The Buddha's remark, "All is void," does not seem to satisfy completely our natural curiosity about who we are, why we are here, or where we are going. Could it have been meant as little more than a thought-provoking jibe at man's natural tendency to favor speculation about the future to the immediate task of self-improvement? Buddhist teachers today might answer in different words, but with a similar intent. After all, reality may not truly be of a nature which lends itself to analysis—except perhaps on the mundane level—and achieving super-mundane (ultimate) truth should come only after experience has been thoroughly analyzed.

In contrast to almost all other thinkers on the subject, who can usually

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1962), 71.

be categorized as Monists (idealists, theists, traditionalists, etc.) or Pluralists (materialists, dualists, relativists, etc.), Buddha inspired the conviction that the fundamental reality is neither singular nor plural. At first we assume: if being is neither one, nor many; the answer must be *none* ("All is void"). Yet, carried to the logical conclusion, it is neither one, nor many, *nor* none. If ultimate reality (ultimate truth) is indeed both end and explanation, we are, in fact, describing Nirvana (Nibbana)—the state of complete understanding, the cessation of all desire (and consequent rebirth), the end of becoming, the clear air of comprehending reality.

The Middle Path in effect, calls for denial of every basic spiritual principal right along with the atheists, materialists and relativists. Like them, Buddha also denied a permanent state of after-life (except in the cycle of re-incarnation which must eventually be broken), and promise of future retribution of sins. Yet, we must not assume further commonality with the materialist camp, for he was quick to point out that any sensually-valued existence is basically vulgar. In fact, a "pleasure-is-good" approach, such as that held by the Epicureans, might even be evil, because such searching after comfort leads only to further searching after comfort; and in its wake, will come further desire, struggle, *dukkha*.

While the Buddha discards the materialist as selfish and debased, he is a little more sympathetic to the idealists, for he felt the various idealisms to be wrong in concept—harsh, and leading nowhere because of their over-emphasis on self-mortification. Of course, we are obligated to recognize the idealism of the Buddha's day as quite different from any average idealism of the Western world of the 19th or 20th century. The Buddha referred, we can safely assume, to the advanced asceticism which led to his own near-demise from hunger, his revised attitude being that there is no gain in forever striving to overcome the body by prayers, fasting, and other austerities, when that very effort and attention could just as well be invested in finding the path to Enlightenment.

With both idealism and materialism eliminated, along with concepts of one or some, it follows that the Middle Path between the two extremes indicates Buddhism to be more involved with mental orderliness than with any speculative postulations about reality. This insistence on mind improvement, rather than theory construction, has always been a main tenet of the religion, and has progressed to the view in Buddhist circles that the mind itself is not an entity but, in fact, only a *function*. But function, implying action and action-change, emphasizes the rather all pervasiveness of the Asian's concept of change. "He does not even consider," says Abegg, "that which is casually conditioned, and even continuous change is for him something organic, inasmuch as he sees it, for example, as a succession of generations."<sup>2</sup> Finally, the idea of continuous change is really cyclic, though we have to think of this circle as being sufficiently big to include the whole history of mankind and of the Cosmos.

<sup>2</sup> Abegg, L. *The Mind of East Asia* (London: Thames & Hudson Company), 1952.

"I leave you, I depart, relying on myself alone," said the Lord Buddha, about to pass away at the end of his long ministry. He evidently used this dramatic moment to remind his followers that he had no faith in any power external to his own thinking. This late-hour statement underlines, not only the Buddha's rejection of salvation through grace, but also his strong denial of his contemporaries' theories of determinism. In fact, he is quoted as describing any belief in a predestined existence as the "most pernicious of doctrines."<sup>3</sup>

Does not this casting out of predestination and determinism clash with the admonition to do away with becoming; to put out of thinking all desire? Not if we remember firmly that sovereignty of consciousness resides not in the will, but in being without a will; for *will* represents desire and desire is the source of all conflict, conquest and unhappiness. This brings to the surface, once more, that strange undercurrent of Buddhist philosophy—namely, its search—not for happiness, but instead, for a path away from *unhappiness*.

Perhaps, such an approach is truly as negative as its critics insist. On the other hand, it is more likely to be merely another way of achieving a familiar goal, possibly contentment. The highest good, the *summa bonum*, of Buddhism being Nirvana or Enlightenment, can we assume contentment here on earth must precede the ultimate of all contentments? "Life is a bridge, build no house upon it" goes the saying; such we must strictly avoid if we are to overcome self: Now we are running parallel to the highly important Christian ideal of self-immolation, for in both Christian and the Buddhist views, man seems obligated to "work out his own salvation" *from himself*.

Here, the parallel paths begin to separate as the contrast in views of "self" is considered. The Christian looks upon self as either mortal or immortal, or perhaps both, but never divorced from concepts of soul and the "image and likeness of God." The Buddhist thinks of self as his worst enemy in the practical sense, and as changing, if not unreal in the theoretical sense. It is merely an illusion stemming from desire and, because of mutation, can be neither permanent nor worthy of reconstitution. In fact, according to the doctrine of *Anatta*, or non-soul—as explained in the *Anattalakkhama Sutta*—not only is the self without permanent being, there is nothing which really merits the term "I". Put even stronger, the worst sin is the faith in self to survive as an identity in this life, or in, or after, any lives yet to come.

*Anatta* does not preclude our facing the value of judgment on the worth of Nirvana as a goal of a civilization. All civilizations have their concepts of a heaven, our state of being, perhaps we should say "quality of existence," different from the mundane. Whereas even the most primitive of cultures propagate such by folklore and the like, Buddhism, which dwells in a quite unprimitive culture, likes to think of itself as without a "Heaven" in the orthodox sense. Yet, for most Buddhist peoples, Nirvana constitutes a dream of peace, just as desirable as the Muslim or Judaic-Christian concept of another world, or paradise.

<sup>3</sup> Chas Moore, (ed.) *Philosophy and Culture, East & West* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1959), 195.

Desirability is about the extent of common characteristics in Buddhist and Theistic goals. If you asked a Muslim or a Christian his conception of a heavenly existence, he could quickly describe some state of being commensurate with the views of his sect. But ask a thinking Buddhist about his concept of Nirvana, and you are more apt to get a statement of what is it not than what it is. In the Scripture's words:

If any teach Nirvana is to cease,  
Say unto such they lie.  
If any teach Nirvana is to live,  
Say unto such they err...<sup>4</sup>

The poet hits upon a tender point in comparing Buddhist with non-Buddhist thoughts, for extinction, ceasing to be at all, is not truly the Buddhist way of thought about Nirvana. Rather it is a cessation of re-birth, desire for rebirth of becoming. In the end result, a person achieving Enlightenment will have discarded selfishness in all forms. Nirvana will be a "void" of self. This being indescribable, it is no wonder the Scriptural passage of the Buddha's own definition of Nirvana is as unclear as it is unlimited:

There is, Brethren, a condition where there is neither earth nor water, nor fire, nor air, nor the sphere of infinite space, nor the sphere of infinite consciousness, nor the sphere of the void, nor the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception... that condition, Brethren, do I call neither a coming nor a going nor a standing still, nor a falling away nor a rising up; but it is without fixity, without mobility, without basis. It is the end of... an un-born, a not become, a not-made, a not-compounded.<sup>5</sup>

In this brief paragraph above, we note two "neithers" and thirteen "nors", as a clue to the basically negative approach to the Buddhist counterpart of Heaven. But, though the approach is not positive, it is nevertheless worthy of great contemplation, and is the subject of many Buddhist writings of a strangely contracting positive-action viewpoint. Although we cannot yet understand the nature of Enlightenment, we must recognize the basic premise of "void of self" as the goal, and the cultivation of this void, the path of life. When we are one day free from all bondage, Nirvana will be less inexpressible.

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<sup>4</sup> *Udana*, Part VIII.

<sup>5</sup> *Pali Chanting Scripture* (Bangkok, Chalerm Panpadi, 1952), 145.