

**Buddhism** On the first of May, 1890, chance led me to visit the Musée Guimet in Paris. There, standing in the silence and simplicity of the gods of Asia, my eyes fell on the statue of the Buddha who beckoned to suffering humanity to develop understanding and compassion. If ever a God walked on this earth, I felt here was He. I felt like kneeling down to him and praying to him as God.

—Anatole France<sup>1</sup>  
Nobel Prize winner, 1924

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in S. Radhakrishnan, *Our Heritage*, p. 65.

## I. GAUTAMA BUDDHA

### His Life

In the eyes of many modern Indians, the greatest teacher of their nation was the founder of Buddhism. Literature and religion know him by several names. Since he belonged to the Gotama clan, he is sometimes referred to as Gautama. His father named him Siddhartha, meaning "one who accomplished his objectives in life." Subsequently, after his reputation as a teacher was spread about, he was praised as Sakyamuni, the "sage" of the Sakya tribe. By his followers, Gautama was hailed as the *Buddha* (Enlightened One), *Tathagata* (the self-realized) or *Bhagavan* (the blessed).

India has been sublimely indifferent to matters of history and chronology. Most scholars tentatively conclude that Buddha was born about 563 B.C. and lived until 483 B.C. His father served as the elected king of a small realm in Nepal at the foothills of the snow-clad Himalayas. The monarch was married to two sisters, one of whom—Maya—gave birth to Buddha, while the other brought him up. Maya lived only a week after the birth of her son.

Most of our modern accounts of Buddha's life depend upon historical research carried out by western scholars. For the Buddhists, everything about him is embroidered with colorful legends. According to the faithful, the eternal Buddha surveyed the world, found conditions suitable for his descent to earth, miraculously assumed the form of a white elephant and entered the womb of the sleeping virgin queen Maya. He remained inside her for ten months, and when he came forth from his mother's body, immediately the flowers burst into bloom.

The king later surrounded his growing son with extreme luxury. Living at various seasons of the year in three palaces, Gautama was dressed in the most expensive clothes, fed the choicest delicacies and served by lovely female minstrels. As a prince he received the best sort of education in classical Indian literature. Yet as a member of the warrior caste rather than the Brahmin priesthood, he also learned the physical arts of a gentleman: how to ride a horse, mount an elephant, drive a chariot and

lead an army.

In spite of the ease and delights of palace life, the youth became dissatisfied with worldly ambitions and sensual pleasures. Gautama was gifted with a sensitive soul. Unbridled indulgence, by some curious twist of fate, gradually transformed a monarch's heir and warrior prince into an apostle of limitless compassion. Brahmins had warned the king that this might happen. They told him that as soon as his son saw old age, sickness and death, as well as the existence of holy men, he would abandon the household. The father heeded the warning and took every precaution to keep the boy in seclusion amid the luxuries of the palace and the beauty of the pleasure gardens—to no avail.

According to a famous Buddhist tale, Gautama happened to encounter an aged man while driving along in a chariot. The man was bent over, leaning on a staff and tottering as he walked. The sight of old age shocked the prince. On another occasion while touring his pleasure park, Gautama saw a man who was desperately sick and became similarly distressed: he was taken aback by the misery of human existence. On a third occasion the prince met a funeral procession and realized that all men must die. When he finally encountered a shaven-headed yogin wearing the yellow robe of an ascetic order, he resolved to adopt the religious life, as the Brahmins had predicted. Gautama made the vow to be "thorough in the peaceful life, thorough in good action, thorough in meritorious conduct, thorough in harmlessness, thorough in kindness to all creatures."

After deciding to abandon the world, Gautama returned home, to his wife that he had married at age sixteen. Even though he discovered at that time that he had become a father, such joy did not deter him from the ascetic life. Now twenty-nine, the prince moved from the palace, leaving his wife and child behind. Determined to escape from life's endless misery the prince proceeded to renounce the world.

For six years he subjected himself to ascetic torture of his

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\* From the legend of the "Four Signs," quoted in S. Dun, *The Buddha and Five After-Centuries*, Luzae and Co., London, 1957, pp. 26-27.

body. He tore off his clothes, plucked out the hair of his head and face, slept on a bed of thorn branches and denied himself food. However, by disciplining his physical senses and uprooting his passions, the former prince achieved no feeling of liberation from the endless wheel of rebirth.

Gautama hence realized the folly of the ascetic life. He resumed eating and drinking like an ordinary person. While sitting under a tree on the banks of a river, he resolved to attempt emancipation by means of intense concentration. By meditating all night, the former monk successfully attained complete enlightenment. Henceforth Gautama was the Buddha.

Once he had achieved liberation, Buddha became a teacher. "I will beat the drum of the Immortal in the darkness of the world," he vowed. <sup>2</sup> Moving to Benares, he preached his first sermon, entitled "Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of the Law":

Monks, two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth as a wanderer—

Devotion to the pleasures of sense, a low practice of villagers,

Devotion to self-mortification which is painful, unworthy and unprofitable.

By avoiding these two extremes the Tathagata (Buddha) has gained knowledge of the middle path which gives vision, knowledge, calm, enlightenment, Nibbana.

What is the middle path?

Truly, it is the eightfold path: right view, right aim, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

Now this is the truth about suffering:

Birth is suffering, decay is suffering, death is suffering. . . . In a word, this life of ours based on grasping—that is suffering.

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Quoted in C. Humphreys, *Buddhism*, Pelican Book, Harmondsworth, 1969 edition, p. 34.

And this is the truth about the cause of suffering:  
It is craving that leads back to birth—craving for sensual pleasure, craving for continued existence, craving for life to end.

And this is the truth about stopping suffering:  
Truly it is utter passionless cessation of, the giving up, the release from and the absence of longing for this craving.

And this is the practice that leads to the end of suffering—the eightfold path. <sup>3</sup>

His ministry continued for the next forty-five years. Wandering in the eastern part of the Ganges Valley and preaching in the major cities, he taught his gospel of the "middle path" between self-indulgence and self-negation. Success crowned his ministry from the outset; within three months he had converted sixty monks to his cause. Men of every caste—Brahmins, merchants, warriors, even untouchables—joined Buddha's monastic community. For the final quarter century of his life he resided in a beautiful park donated by a rich layman.

At age eighty, Gautama's life came to a sudden end. While on a preaching tour, he became dangerously ill. Realizing that his career would soon be finished, Buddha summed up his doctrine in a few sentences for his personal attendant and favorite disciple, Ananda. Then at a banquet provided for him and his retinue, Buddha suffered an attack of food poisoning caused by eating either mushrooms or pork.'

Death came at Kusinara. After asking his monks if they had any final questions for him to answer, Buddha began to contemplate. Amidst the shaking of the earth and peals of thunder—say the Buddhist scriptures—he entered final Nibbana. His body was then wrapped in one thousand layers of the finest cloth and

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<sup>3</sup> An abridgement. Cf. E.A. Burn, *Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, Mentor Book, N.Y., 1955, pp. 29-32 for a fuller text.

The delicacy served to Buddha was "pig's soft food" (*sukaramaddava*) which could have been either food made of pork or soft food eaten by pigs, e.g., mushrooms or some type of fungus.

cremated. Relics were divided and distributed to eight cities, each of which erected a memorial shrine to contain them. Four spots were henceforth especially sacred—where Buddha was born, where he attained enlightenment, where he preached his first sermon, and where he entered Nibbana. <sup>5</sup>

For Buddhists the personality of Buddha is as important as his teachings. A professor at Nalanda University in India, for example, extols his unruffled calm, tolerance, practicality, ready wit, persuasive reasonableness and deeds of service. <sup>6</sup>

Even those who are only aware of the popular statues of Buddha are immediately struck by his profound peace of soul and tranquillity of spirit. Buddhist scriptures relate that one night their master overheard an angry debate about him between a wandering Indian holy man and a follower of the Enlightened One. The next morning Buddha told his monks that if anyone finds fault with him or his teaching, they should never become displeased or offended. Such feelings would only harm the disciples. Nor should they be pleased to hear praise of him—for this too would disturb their calm. If men slander me, merely see if what they say contains some truth, he advised. And if they praise us, find out if their compliments are based on fact.'

Buddha's tolerance is also related in stories about his attitude toward the rival sect of Jains. General Siha, a prominent patron of Jainism, once visited Gautama to find out how the Buddhists could "bewitch" so many people. Repeating all the accusations made against the Middle Path, Siha was amazed to see how Buddha analyzed each criticism and clarified his own position. When the general asked to join the Buddhists, Gautama advised him to make further study rather than come to a quick decision. This only increased Siha's enthusiasm, so Buddha accepted him as a lay disciple but only on the condition that the general continue to

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<sup>5</sup> The above account is largely based on K. K.S. Chen, *Buddhism The Light of Asia*, Barron's Educational Series, Woodbury, N.Y., 1968, pp. 13-29.

<sup>6</sup> J. Kashyap in K.W. Morgan, ed., *The Path of the Buddha*, Ronald Press, N.Y., 1956, pp. 10, 20.

support the Jain monks with whom he had been associated.<sup>8</sup> At another time, a millionaire Jain layman encountered Buddha with the intention of exposing his theological weaknesses. After finding himself caught in a series of verbal contradictions the Jain pleaded to become a Buddhist. Again, Buddha agreed only if the millionaire promised not to cut off his financial support of the Jain ascetics.<sup>9</sup> Since Jainism and Buddhism were rival reform movements in Indian religion, Buddha's broadmindedness and liberality appear even more admirable and unusual.

The impact which Buddha made on his own time and all subsequent centuries can be illustrated with two quotations, both modern, one from a distinguished Hindu, the other from an American philosopher. Professor D.S. Sarma of Madras wrote, ". . . during the lifetime of Buddha the charm of his own wonderful personality and the story of his great renunciation overcame everything. For he was the most lovable of the world-teachers. No harsh word ever escaped his lips. He ever radiated peace, gentleness and serenity, and he had boundless compassion for all beings. The success of his simple practical teaching conveyed in the language of the people was immediate."<sup>10</sup>

Professor E.A. Burt of Cornell University won his scholarly fame for a book on the metaphysical foundations of modern science. Attracted to Buddhism, he prepared an anthology of Gautama's teachings found in the Buddhist sacred writings. Of Buddha he said: "Gautama the Buddha seems to have combined in high degree two qualities that are rarely found together and each of which is rarely exemplified in high degree. On the one hand, he was a man of rich and responsive human sympathy, of unflinching patience, strength, gentleness, and good will. His friendliness, to all who came to him in sincere search, was genuine and unreserved. He therefore aroused in his followers a wondering, eager, affectionate devotion such as only the greatest leaders of men have awakened. On the other hand, he was a thinker, of unexcelled

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 12-14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> D.S. Sarma, *Hinduism Through the Ages*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1973, p. 15.

philosophic power. His was one of the giant intellects of human history, exhibiting a keenness of analytic understanding that has rarely been equalled. He probed through the deceptions of the thought of his day, adopting it where it seemed to him clearly sound and abandoning or radically revising it when he saw that it was missing the true and the good. It is in virtue of this characteristic of the Master that Buddhism is the only one of the great religions of the world that is consciously and frankly based on a systematic rational analysis of the problem of life, and of the way to its solution. Buddha was a pioneering lover of men, and a philosophic genius, rolled into a single rigorous and radiant personality. "''''

### **Buddha and Hinduism**

Like Jesus of Nazareth who opposed the orthodox Judaism of his day and was condemned as a blasphemer, false prophet and revolutionary, Gautama criticized conventional Hindu piety and was denounced by the Brahmins as a dangerous heretic. In light of this, one should understand the Buddha's teaching as it contrasts with the prevailing Hinduism of his generation.

As opposed to Brahminism, the Buddha discarded the authority of the *Vedas* as divine revelation. Whereas the Hindus thought of Vedic scripture as infallible, he preached against blind acceptance of the *Vedas* or of any book because he felt that such uncritical reliance upon scripture was harmful to man's spiritual progress: "Do not accept a thing merely because it has been handed down by tradition."

Buddhism also differs from Hinduism in regard to the belief in a creator-God. Those who follow Gautama cannot accept the idea of a First Cause because in their eyes both the realm of matter, in ceaseless flux, and the realm of spirit have no beginning. Buddhism denies all three Hindu concepts of divinity: the deist God who dwells in heaven; the pantheistic God who pervades everything; and the personal God like Krishna or Siva who answers prayers and becomes incarnate. Buddhism believes in gods, but

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" E. A. Burn, ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, 1955, pp. 22-23.



these are merely minor celestial beings, spiritual powers living on a different plane of existence than the human one. For the Buddhists, these gods are in fact lower than the saints who have attained enlightenment.

In matters of ritual too, Buddhism differs greatly from Hinduism. Buddha rejected the spiritual efficacy of external rites at a time when his Brahmin contemporaries based their faith on the saving power of Vedic sacrifices. Buddhists thus denied the merit of such practices as washing in the Ganges, fasting, or putting holy markings on one's body to ward off evil spirits. As a Buddhist nun told a Brahmin, "If you could go to heaven by bathing in the river, then surely the fish, tortoises, frogs, water snakes, and crocodiles too will attain heaven. Moreover, if the sins are washed off by bathing, the merits too will be washed off by the water."<sup>12</sup>

Buddhism believes that only self-culture, self-discipline and self-realization are means to self-purification. No external rites can effect inner purity. True tranquillity of spirit comes from diligent meditation and contemplation. As a result, modern Indian Buddhists look askance at the practices of self-mortification carried out by Jain and Hindu ascetics. They doubt that the yogins can cleanse their souls by smearing their naked bodies with ashes or piercing themselves with spikes. Buddha tried such means to secure salvation and learned that they were of no help in realizing the Truth. In Buddhist opinion, these methods merely make a man more disturbed and restless. Real austerity refers not to the inflicting of physical pain but rather to the burning up of one's mental defilements.

Besides denying the creator-God, the efficacy of external rites and ascetic self-negation, Buddhism disagrees with Hindu monism. Buddha challenged the Hindu belief in an eternal, ever-present Brahman or Atman. He taught that the ever-existing Self is an imaginary construct of which we can have no real comprehension. In his eyes, to believe in Brahman is like climbing a ladder to the sky in order to reach a place we know nothing about or like

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted from the "Tripitaka" by J. Kashyap, in K. Morgan, *Mid*, pp. 45-46.

falling in love with a beautiful queen whom no one has ever seen.<sup>13</sup>

Buddhism also will have nothing to do with the special privileges showered on the Hindu upper classes or the disgraceful contempt with which the so-called untouchables are treated. In the Buddhist monastic order all are considered brothers and sisters. Long before Gandhi and the other spokesmen for Hindu social reform, Buddha declared, "It is not by birth that one becomes a Brahmin or an untouchable, but it is through one's acts that one becomes a Brahmin or an untouchable."<sup>14</sup>

Buddha's hostility to the caste system is illustrated by a story of his relationship with Sunita, a poor street cleaner. As scripture tells it, in the first watch of the night the Exalted One surveyed the world with great pity. And he saw the possibility for sainthood in Sunita, shining like a lamp within a jar. When dawn came he walked to the city carrying his alms bowl and sought the street where the outcast was cleaning. Now Sunita was collecting rubbish. And when he saw the Master, he was filled with awe. Finding no place to hide—as untouchables are expected to do when men of the privileged classes appear—Sunita had to confront the Buddha. "Sunita, what to you is this wretched mode of living? Can you endure to leave the world?" asked the Enlightened One. Henceforth, the pitiful scavenger was a member of the Buddhist monastic order.<sup>15</sup>

The similarities between the Brahmins and the Buddha, nevertheless, are as real as their differences. In both belief and behavior, the two faiths held much in common. For example, Buddha taught the doctrine of reincarnation and based his philosophy on the law of karma. Upon numerous occasions he referred to the Hindu *Vedas* to illustrate his ideas and repeatedly praised Hindu sages. Hinduism and Buddhism agree about the need for following the path of renunciation; often Buddhist saints and Hindu holy men practiced the same types of yoga discipline. Both groups stressed the value of meditation as a means to achieve

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.. Kashyap, *Ibid*, p. 47.

.. Quoted by Kashyap, *Ibid*, p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in J. B. Pratt, *Pilgrimage of Buddhism*, Macmillan Co., N.Y. 1928, p. 12.

mystical illumination. In all these matters, Buddhism and Hinduism appear to be branches growing out of one tree and are nourished by the same soil of Indian mysticism. Consequently, while one recognizes Buddha's revolutionary and unique position in Indian religious thought, his ties to Hinduism are apparent.

For many centuries Hindus condemned Gautama as the notorious heresiarch. The philosopher-theologian Shankara, for instance, who did so much to provide the classic exposition of Vedanta Hinduism, had to refute charges that he was only a Buddhist in disguise—the worst accusation orthodox Brahmins could level against any thinker. Fortunately, to a considerable extent dialogue has now replaced debate. In fact, the danger at present among Indian nationalists is to transform the Buddha into a Hindu. As has long been its method, Hinduism effectively silences an opponent by embracing him, swallowing up his distinctiveness in its tolerance of everything from animism to absolute idealism.

According to one group of modern Hindu apologists, Gautama was an exceptional world-teacher whose differences from Hinduism have been exaggerated and whose ideas are in the main correct but have been badly misunderstood." If Buddhism had stopped with the simple and practical side of Buddha's sermons that life is filled with suffering because of man's sensuous desires and that a state of perfection can be achieved when passions are extinguished—this would have been a useful supplement to the mystical teachings of the *Upanishads*. If followers of the Buddha shifted men's attention away from ritualistic observances to the securing of peace and happiness through a strenuous moral life, as Gautama wanted, then Buddhism could have been regarded as a renaissance of true Hinduism as valuable as the more philosophic awakening of Vedanta. Since scholars now greatly differ over the views of Buddha on the nature of the world, the reality of the soul and the final state of liberation, it is quite probable that later Buddhists added to and perverted his actual teachings. In this case—these apologists would argue—Buddhists rather than Bud-

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<sup>16</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1923, vol. I, pp. 676-694.

dha are to blame for the erroneous notions that there is nothing permanent in the universe, no changeless Brahman, no immortal soul, no goal in life but annihilation. Because of distortions, Buddhism looks like a system of mere self-culture—a moonlit world, beautiful yet uncomfortably cold.

In the eyes of such Hindus, Buddha (or his disciples) exaggerated the negative aspects of Upanishadic mysticism and minimized its positive features. Worst of all, he tried to turn the whole world into a monastery. Because of his cold rationalism, he gave birth to a system without God, without worship and without the warm feeling of true devotion. His negations, true enough but one-sided, kept men from experiencing joyous union with the Supreme Reality.<sup>17</sup>

## II. THE MIDDLE PATH

For the Buddha the central theme is the cultivation of a moral life which leads to perfect tranquillity. In the opinion of most commentators he builds his ethic on a pessimistic view of the world, the universality of sorrow, the derivation of suffering from desire, and the consequent need to root out such craving in every form. Buddha termed his basic message "the Four Noble Truths." In his first sermon at the deer park near Benares, he declared, "This is the Noble Truth of suffering: birth is suffering, decay is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. The presence of objects we hate creates pain; separation from things we love produces pain. To sum up the situation, our whole clinging to existence because of our attachment to the world of the five senses causes misery."

Does this make Buddha a pessimist? Not in any unrestricted way. He stresses the need to recognize evils which under the surface are full of grief. This does not mean we live in a thoroughly evil world. Many values of life are real but transient values. In fact, we feel sad because even good things pass away. However strong

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<sup>17</sup> D.S. Sarma, *Hinduism Through the Ages*, pp. 11-15.

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our grip on them and however great our attraction to them, they do not last. Ours is a sad world—a vale of tears—because even the good and the beautiful are trapped in an ever-moving stream of time, decay and destruction. Buddhism clearly recognizes the sadness, uncertainty and pain of this world. Like the Spanish Catholic mystic Miguel de Unamuno, Buddha feels "the tragic sense of life." One must realize the deep sadness of this world, he would say, to be filled with zeal for transcending its misfortunes.

Having recognized the fact of universal suffering, man must seek to understand its underlying cause Buddha took for granted the existence of a uniform law of cause and effect. We live in an orderly and rational world, so if sorrow is present everywhere there must be an explanation What is always present with sorrow, what is absent when sorrow is absent? Misfortune does not originate from a lack of material possessions. Nor can it be uprooted by experiencing more or greater pleasures, for reliance upon sensory satisfaction merely heaps fresh fuel on the fire. Our cravings are limitless. We want, want, want. . .without end. As Buddha concludes, "This is the noble truth of the cause of suffering: thirst that leads to rebirth, accompanied by pleasure and lust, finding its delight here and there." Such thirst is three-fold, namely, a craving for pleasure, a desire for continued existence, a thirst for prosperity. No assured happiness is possible until we have freed ourselves from serfdom to desire. We are sad because we long for things and become therefore the slaves of things. To strike at desire is to strike at the very root of sorrow. We can become masters of ourselves only to the degree that we exercise control over our cravings.

Sometimes Buddha distinguishes between good and evil desires. Chiefly though not exclusively, he disapproves of sensuous pleasures. Proper happiness comes from correcting bad qualities and developing good ones, he once stated. Yet, no less common in his teaching and that of his disciples is a repudiation of all craving. Repeatedly Buddhism declares that sorrow arises from all worldly attachments. A disciple wonders, is there anything in all the world I can cling to without sin?" No, there is nothing that one can be attached to without sinning. Once a woman who had lost her

grandchild came to Buddha seeking comfort. "Would you like to have as many children and grandchildren as there are people in this city?" the Master enquired. When she admitted that nothing would make her happier, the Enlightened One replied, "Those who have a hundred dear ones have a hundred woes; those who have ninety dear ones have ninety woes; . . . those who have one dear one have one woe; those who hold nothing dear have no woe."<sup>19</sup>

Is everything which causes pain or pleasure evil? According to the Buddha, a disciple understands evil when he recognizes the root from which it grows: sensual craving, clinging to existence, and everything controlled by desire. To explain what he means the Enlightened One lists ten specific evils: killing, stealing, unlawful sexual intercourse, cruelty, lying, slander, the use of violent language, vain talk, covetousness and wrong views. On the basis of this generally recognized catalogue of bad thoughts, words and deeds, he concludes that "greed is the root of evil, anger is the root of evil, delusion is the root of evil."<sup>20</sup> What this implies is that the thirst for material possessions leads to sins like murder and stealing, the vice of anger leads to verbal evils, and the power of illusion leads to intellectual mistakes. Evil then results from men who have become excited by greed, furious with anger and blinded by delusion. Suffering can therefore cease only by rejecting sensuous craving. As the *Dhammapada*, Buddhism's popular moral handbook, states: "The man who can repeat but little of the Teaching, but lives it himself, who forsakes craving, hatred and delusion, possesses right knowledge and calmness, clings to nothing in this or any other world, he is a follower of the Blessed One."<sup>21</sup>

Like a physician, the Buddha examined the symptoms of man's basic malady, diagnosed the cause of the sickness and prescribed a cure. The crucial point is that he believed there was a remedy for insatiable craving. For most Occidentals, the power of

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted from J. B. Pratt, *Ibid*, p. 30. Pratt points out the basic similarity between Stoicism and Buddhism because both extol the virtue of detachment.

<sup>19</sup> C. Humphreys, ed., *The Wisdom of Buddhism*, Harper and Row, N.Y., 1960, p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> *Dhammapada* #20, quoted in C. Humphreys, *Ibid*, p. 46.

desire is thought to be uneradicable. What but the grave can destroy our thirst for life? However, in Indian metaphysics death provides no solution because every individual is chained to a wheel of birth, death and rebirth for countless ages. Even Gautama, according to Buddhist theory, had to suffer 550 different lives before he reached the height of spiritual development in which he could gain final release through enlightenment. Nevertheless, he did prove that emancipation was possible. In the third of his four noble truths, the Buddha taught that man could by strenuous efforts free himself from the wheel of rebirth. From his first sermon in the deer park until his last at age eighty, he preached "the noble truth of the extinction of suffering; the extinction of this thirst by complete annihilation of desire, letting it go, expelling it, separating oneself from it, giving it no room."<sup>21</sup>

For Buddha, impermanence is the fundamental law of all existence. Change is inexorable and pitiless. No holy man, no Brahmin priest, no god—neither the creator Brahma nor the satanic Mara—can keep man from growing old, free him from sickness, ward off death, or halt decay.

What Lord Buddha taught was designed to avoid two extremes: realism and nihilism. He denied belief in phenomenal being and the opposite notion that there is no phenomenal process at all. The Buddhist doctrine asserts that everything is becoming, a flux without beginning or end. What we ordinarily think of as a thing or a person is merely a succession of instants of consciousness. We deceive ourselves into believing that there is ever a pause in the flow of becoming. The substance of our bodies and the constitution of our souls change from moment to moment. A thing, something solid, does not exist. All we find in the universe of ceaseless flux is an unstable continuity of changes.

On the basis of his insight into the nature of eternal becoming, Buddha provided man with a general explanation of the world of phenomena as well as a specific analysis of the nature of evil. In his theory, even the soul (the ego, the human personality) disappears

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<sup>21</sup> A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, Harper Torchbook, N.Y., 1964, p. 91.

What then is the model of the liberated life? To follow the Eightfold Path means to be free of greed, anger and delusion. One's mind should be cleansed of lust, **and cruelty**. A monk must not lie or gossip, but rather speak soothingly and lovingly. Most importantly though, the Buddhist must achieve mastery over his body and composure for his spirit through regular disciplines of meditation. Then he will live independently, unattached to anything in the world.<sup>24</sup>

The goal of Buddhist morality and meditation is called *Nibbana* in the Pali texts and *Nirvana* in the Sanskrit scriptures. Exactly what this denotes has long been a matter of spirited scholarly debate. By reading Buddhist explanations quite literally, numerous western scholars and Christian missionaries have decided that Nibbana means annihilation, total extinction, complete cessation of existence. Others, no less learned, disagree. As they read the Buddhist texts, Nibbana is equivalent to the *moksha* (liberation) of the Hindu and the "eternal life" of the Christian: supreme bliss, ultimate perfection, the peace which the world can neither give nor take away.

The writers on Buddhism who take the latter view make Buddha into an exemplar of mystical religion. When one overcomes the conditions of finitude that make every creature subject to unhappiness, and when one extinguishes the blind "demandingness" in our nature which makes us ask of the universe more than it is ready or able to give, he enters Nibbana—not a state of extinction, but one of liberation, inner peace and the joy of oneness with all reality.<sup>25</sup> Nibbana thus becomes, religiously speaking, a state of salvation to be realized here and now. From the standpoint of ethics it refers to the death of lust, resentment and illusion. Psychologically, it implies release from the limitations of individuality. And philosophically, it means the recognition of ultimate truth.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> John A. Hardon, "Buddhism," Religions of the World. Image Book, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1968, vol. I, pp. 110-114.

<sup>25</sup> E. A. Bunt, *ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>26</sup> Coomaraswamy, *ibid.* p. 354.



Although eminent scholars may expound this mystical interpretation of Buddha's teaching, it is difficult to justify such an explanation on the basis of the oldest texts of Buddhist scripture. It is equally irreconcilable with the opinion of the Theravada monks—who claim to have preserved the original teachings of the Buddha.

First, the Hindu *moksha* and the Christian "eternal life" both imply belief in the finitude of this world, the existence of the soul, and the reality of the hereafter. But according to an early recorded dialogue of Buddha, such questions were not his concern. When a monk was perplexed by the fact that the Enlightened One left these three vitally important religious questions unexplained and was at the verge of abandoning religious training because of it, the Buddha merely remained silent. For him, these problems have nothing to do with the fundamentals of religion. Whether the soul and body exist separately, or whether the saint lives after death are unprofitable speculations because they have no bearing on eliminating one's passions, attaining wisdom or achieving Nibbana.<sup>27</sup> Though many religious leaders would hardly agree with Buddha that the problem of immortality is an unifying question, that was clearly the position he took.

Secondly, the language Buddha uses to describe the goal of the religious seeker seems to suggest that Nibbana refers to extinction rather than mystic beatitude. Buddha preached the extinction of desire instead of the taming of one's desires; he advocated the total suppression of the thirst for pleasures rather than discriminating between lawful and illicit pleasures; he counseled men to uproot the craving for existence instead of merely disciplining their life on behalf of higher ends. In his second sermon, significantly entitled "On the Non-Existence of Soul," Buddha declared that the true disciple "will conceive a disgust" for every physical form, every sensation, every perception, every predisposition and every state of consciousness. By divesting himself of desire and by exhausting his love for becoming, he becomes free and puts off mortality forever.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Burtt, *Ibid*, pp. 32-36.

<sup>28</sup> Coomaraswamy, *Ibid*, p. 41.

Thirdly, the teaching of the Theravada monks about the nature of Nibbana should be considered. When James Bissett Pratt visited the various Buddhist lands, he specifically asked Thai monks about the present state of the Buddha. From the learned abbots and the educated monks he learned that Buddha is in Nibbana which means that he no longer sees, hears or knows anything. Nibbana is a state of complete unconsciousness, total extinction. As a monk explained, Buddha is finished, like smoke that has been dissipated and has disappeared. Professor Pratt compares Nibbana to the Platonic realm of ideal forms. Buddha belongs to the world of the ideal rather than that of the actual. In Nibbana because he has no taint of the existential upon him, he inhabits the spaceless, timeless realm of the eternally real.<sup>29</sup>

Without attempting to resolve the difficulties inherent in the Nibbana concept, one can point out that whatever it meant metaphysically, the Buddha was primarily concerned with its practical value. What a follower got from renouncing the world and becoming a Buddhist monk is well illustrated in the life of Bhaddiya who abdicated a throne to join the monastic order. Retiring into the forest and sitting at the foot of a tree, he exclaimed over and over again, "O happiness! O happiness!" When Buddha heard about Bhaddiya's ecstatic utterances, he summoned the monk to him and demanded an explanation. The ex-king replied that formerly he had to post an armed guard inside and outside his private apartments, inside and outside the city in which his palace was located, as well as soldiers all around the borders of his nation. Now that he had given up his crown, he could sit at the foot of a tree, all alone in a forest, yet feel free of fear or anxiety. As a monk, homeless, moneyless, powerless, he could dwell at ease, feel secure and possess the natural peace of an antelope.<sup>30</sup> Surely, for large numbers of early Buddhists, it was this sort of carefreeness that symbolized the true significance of Nibbana.

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<sup>29</sup> LB. Pratt, *Ibid*, pp. 166-167, 170. Pratt's book provides a valuable study of this whole problem of Nibbana.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted by Pratt, (*ibid*, pp. 68-69).

### III. THE MONASTIC ORDER

#### The Sangha

Buddha left at his death a two-fold legacy: a *Dhamma* (Sanskrit: *Dharma*) or system of ethical doctrine and the *Sangha* or monastic brotherhood. Brushing aside ritualism, metaphysics and conventional Hindu theology, he shifted emphasis in religion to man's inner life. His philosophy provided the means to purify the spirit and cultivate its powers. At the same time he founded a distinct sect which would become the custodian of his heritage. The *Dhamma* and *Sangha* developed side by side.

United by the bond of allegiance to their Teacher, the primitive Buddhist sect gradually developed into a monastic order. Originally limited to an area about 150 square miles in extent, Buddhism within two centuries spread over the bulk of the Indian empire. At the outset, this community of wandering monks was held together by three factors: the existence of a recognized Teacher, a distinct system of faith (*Dhamma*) and the formal vows of discipleship.

Buddha himself, however, insisted that the brotherhood of faith and religious practice were more important than allegiance to an individual, even himself. Repeatedly he cautioned against the creation of a personality cult. Following him there would be no authoritative head, no supreme leader, no law-giver, no ruling abbot. In sharp contrast to the Hindu practice of relying on the traditional Brahmin priesthood or a succession of yogins, Buddha declared: "Be ye lamps unto yourselves. Rely on yourselves, and do not rely on external help. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp, Seek salvation alone in the truth, Look not for assistance to any one besides yourselves."

To keep from succumbing to disruptive individualism, Buddhist monks living in the precincts of a village met regularly to enquire what each was doing. Buddha himself had come from a

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Quoted E. A. Burtt, ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, p. 49. S. Dutt suggests that the injunction "Be ye lamps unto Ourselves" may originally have been "Be ye islands unto yourselves." (Dutt, 'bid, p. 64, footnote 19.)

part of India where government was in the hands of popular assemblies. By "full and frequent assemblies" Buddhist monks were enabled to make a common confession of faith and discipline those who transgressed monastic rules. Thus Buddhism at first relied on congregational polity as opposed to episcopal supervision.

In the beginning the Buddhists were solitary religious wanderers. From Buddha himself they learned that anxiety is born from friendship with the world and distraction springs up like clouds of dust in the life of a householder. The true monk aims only for a state free from the ties of home and friends, he taught. Like the Hindu yogin and the Jain ascetic, the Buddhist was "gone forth from home into homelessness." On principle he could no longer seek permanent shelter.

However, India is subject to wild monsoon rains. At least for this season, three months of each year, fixed residence became necessary. Except for this time, the holy man was expected by all Indian sects to live an unsocial, unsettled, solitary life. The Buddhist scriptures said, "Let him roam alone like the rhinoceros." Four definite rules were insisted upon: (1) living off alms, (2) wearing cast-off rags, (3) dwelling at the foot of a tree, and (4) using only cow urine as medicine.

As Buddhism prospered, exceptions to the above rules were tolerated and soon the rules themselves were openly disregarded. Monasteries were built, first to house monks during the monsoon rains; but gradually they became permanent dwelling places. Rich laymen provided monks with robes and regular food service. Resident monks were even endowed with generous gifts to keep up their monasteries. Few continued to live like the rhino alone in the forest.

Separate monastic communities became common. These were organized, self-governing units composed of monks who submitted to the rules and fully participated in their corporate life. Most important was the fortnightly congregational service commemorating the traditional full moon and new moon festivals. Since the Vedic age, Hinduism had celebrated such holy days-

when the gods were supposed to descend and dwell with men. Buddhists adopted the calendar but used the time to recite the *Dhamma*, chant hymns about Buddha's teachings or repeat a code of religious ethics, confessing their sins.

Probably two centuries passed before the transition from solitary wandering to communal living could be completed. Buddhism took on the form of monastic self-government with direct democracy practiced by each independent brotherhood. Every act was a collective one. No single person or representative body held legislative, judicial or executive authority. However, as the monasteries increased in size, a select group of monks had to make decisions for the entire society. Direct democracy was replaced by representative government.

In his personal life the Buddhist monk exercised a large measure of freedom. However, for the first ten years he was helped by an elder. Doctrines were taught, discussed and debated as Buddha himself had enjoined. Oral discussion of *theDhamma* was a regular part of monastic life. From the beginning Buddhism was extraordinarily tolerant of free thinking. Varied opinions were often voiced, sometimes leading to actual schism. If no reconciliation seemed possible, dissidents had the well-recognized right to secede from the majority party and set up their own self-governing monastery. Separate schools of Buddhist thought and a variety of distinct Buddhist sects gradually appeared on the scene. As a result, Buddhism has been as divided and divisive as Protestantism.

The *Sangha* provides the key to a clear understanding of Buddhism in its formative stage. The fact that the Middle Path involved a community of monks indicates that it was not intended to be a faith for husbands and wives, merchants and warriors, government officials and secular rulers. Its earliest scripture, the original doctrines, the primitive Buddha-cult were all outgrowths of monastic culture.<sup>2</sup> The initial Buddhist tradition came from monkish hands and appealed to monkish hearts. To ignore this fact is to misinterpret both Buddha and his original disciples.

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<sup>2</sup> S. Dutt, *The Buddha and Five After-Centuries*, p. 143.

## Buddhist Scriptures

As soon as Gautama died, a council of the monks was convened to decide what were to be the scriptures. The rules of monastic discipline, the sermons which Buddha preached, and a manual of Buddhist metaphysics and psychology became the "Three Baskets" of the canon. A century later, a second council, called to debate the proper interpretation of the rules of discipline, led to a split between the conservative majority of monks and a liberal minority. A third council convened by Emperor Asoka tried to restore the original purity of the faith, revise the teachings and confirm the canon. By this time Buddhism had virtually divided into Northern (*Mahayana*) and Southern (*Theravada*) schools.

The Pali canon written in the Pali language of north India represents the sacred literature of the Theravada monks. Most scholars believe that it is closest to the original Buddhist teachings. However, the Pali canon was transmitted orally for about five hundred years and not reduced to writing until the reign of the Ceylonese king Vattagamani (29-17 B.C.).

In the Three Baskets of the Law one finds 227 rules binding on all Buddhist monks, the "Sutta of the Great Decease" about the Buddha's last three months on earth, the sermon on the turning of the Wheel, a manual of Buddhist ethics, a collection of psalms of the brethren, and the Jataka tales which contain a variety of animal fables and stories of the previous lives of the Buddha. Most famous of all is a section called the *Dhammapada*, a 423 stanza guidebook of morality which represents the core of Theravada teaching about enlightenment through absolute self-reliance.

Theravada Buddhists do not limit their sacred writings to the Three Baskets of the Law. Of post-canonical writings perhaps best known is a book entitled "Questions of King Milinda," enquiries about Buddhism by the Bactrian Greek monarch Menander, which Thai monks treat as scripture. Also noteworthy is the "Path of Purity" (*Visuddhi-magga*) produced by Buddhaghosa, an Indian monk of the fifth century A.D. residing in Ceylon.

The most important Mahayana scriptures exist in Sanskrit and

other Oriental languages. Among the specially distinctive books are:

*Amida Sutra*—a Chinese version of the smaller *Sukhavativyuha Sutra*,

*Sukhavativyuha Sutra*—the fundamental Sutra of Pure Land Buddhism,

*Amitayurdhyana Sutra*—setting forth the mediation of Amitabha, *Mahavairocana (Sun-deity) Sutra*—the fundamental scripture of tantric Buddhism,

*Mulamadhyamika Sastra*—a treatise by Nagarjuna, the fundamental text of the Madhyamika school (Middle Path school),

*Prajnaparamitahridaya Sutra*—the essence of The Discourse on Perfect Wisdom,

*Saddharma Pundarika Sutra*—*The Lotus of the Wonderful Law*, setting forth the doctrine of the One Vehicle and the Eternal Buddha,

*Vijnaptimatratasiddhi*—a treatise on Vijnanavada (mind-consciousness) doctrine,

*Avatamsaka Sutra*—the main treatise of The Flower Garland school,

*Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra*—setting forth Buddhism for laymen.

In addition, the *Vajracchedika (diamond) Sutra* is important for Zen Buddhism.

The Buddhist community as a whole has no common Bible, at least nothing like the authorized King James Version of the English-speaking Protestants. In theory, most Buddhists—with the exception of Zen monks—esteem the scriptures as the supreme source of knowledge and the standard by which everything should be tested. Yet the Northern and Southern schools have always disagreed as to which writings belong in the canon. Writings revered by the Mahayana are rejected by the Theravada as later creations which do not reflect the teachings of Gautama. For the latter, only the Pali Baskets (*Tripitaka*) are authoritative. Hence one must conclude that, "even though almost all Buddhists base their faith on the scriptures, there is no one scripture which is

accepted as having the same authority for everyone who calls himself a Buddhist."<sup>3</sup>

In general, Buddhism is not a religion of the Book in the way fundamentalist Protestantism or Islam is. This is partly due to the fact that the Buddha himself rejected the authority of the *Vedas*, the Hindu scriptures of his day. He stressed the value of independent enquiry and focused on the importance of a practical path to enlightenment. In addition, Buddhism thrived in a part of the world where the vast majority of people were illiterate. For them, their religion was to follow the path trod by Gautama, obeying the moral regulations he established and belonging to the community he founded. While philosophic discussion and meditation upon sacred texts have been a notable feature of Buddhist life for many centuries, neither is truly central to the faith.

Some modern Buddhists, like the British writer Christmas Humphreys, take a certain pride in the fact that their religion has no Bible. Buddhism, they say, recognizes no authority—human or divine—for what is truth. For 1500 years Buddhist scriptures have grown steadily. All the materials have in common is that they stem from Buddha's enlightenment and are based on the Four Noble Truths he taught. The canon is not closed. If it begins with the sermons of the Buddha, it also includes commentaries made a millennium later and the teachings of Buddhist sages down to the present day. For such broad-minded followers of the Middle Path, not one word in the traditional sacred books is dogmatically presented. Buddhism is unique, they affirm, in that disciples would refuse to take even their Master's actual words as binding on them. In the absence of all claim to authority or the least suggestion of dogma, Buddhism is not bound to any event in history and its tolerance for different points of view is unlimited.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hajime Nakamura, professor of Indian philosophy at the University of Tokyo: "Unity and Diversity in Buddhism," K. Morgan, ed., *The Path of the Buddha*, p. 391.

C. Humphreys, ed., *The Wisdom of Buddhism*, pp. 7-8. This author goes so far as to maintain that Buddhism would be in no way affected if Gautama were only a mythical figure.



#### IV. A THOUSAND YEARS OF INDIAN BUDDHISM

For over a thousand years Buddhism expanded and prospered in India, creating numerous monastic centers, establishing great universities, building impressive temples, writing new sutras and developing systems of philosophy. From the time of Buddha's own ministry at least until the 7th century A.D., Indian Buddhism flourished. During this millennium, most of the characteristic features of contemporary Buddhism originated.

The lavish patronage bestowed upon the religion by several rulers greatly aided its growth. First and most notable of these was Emperor Asoka who ruled from circa 274-236 B.C. He built shrines at Buddha's birthplace, near the Bo tree at Gaya, in the deer park at Benares and at the site of his death. With the immense wealth of the empire at his disposal, Asoka erected 80,000 temples and personally supported 64,000 monks. At his direction, Buddhist missionaries were sent to distant monarchs like Antiochus II of Syria, Ptolemy II of Egypt and Antigonus of Macedonia. The grandson of Chandragupta who founded the Maurya empire, Asoka had been a noted warrior; but in dismay over the blood he had shed on the battlefield, Asoka became an apostle of gentleness, compassion and peace. Yet, he probably did not become a monk, nor did he make Buddhism the state religion, in spite of traditions to that effect. • Asoka convened the third Buddhist Council at his capital city of Patna, in an effort to heal schisms among the monks. As a result of his efforts on behalf of the Buddhist cause and his espousal of peace, Asoka has ever since been considered the exemplar of what a perfect Buddhist ruler would be.

There were two other early monarchs who were prominent Buddhists. Menander, a Greek ruler whose forbears had been with Alexander the Great when he invaded India, governed much of north India in the second century B.C. and was converted to

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• S. Dutt, "The Handsome King, Beloved of the Gods," *The Buddha and Five After-Centuries*, pp. 151-162. Contrast Humphreys, Buddhism which makes Asoka the head of church and state, a monk in later life, and the promulgator of the established religion of India.

Buddhism. His dialogue with a monk named Nagasena covered most of the main points of Buddhist philosophy and became a part of the canon. A third notable sovereign was the Scythian King Kanishka (circa 100 A.D.) who convened a Buddhist council at Kashmir to collect the available Buddhist manuscripts and prepare commentaries on them. Because of such royal patronage, Buddhism was able to extend far beyond the Ganges Valley where it originated and become an international faith.

Equally important was the stimulus to Indian thought made by Buddhist philosophers. For centuries, Buddhism was a major influence in Indian education. Buddhist monks were among the most eminent intellectuals and great Buddhist universities like that at Nalanda attracted ten thousand students a year. <sup>6</sup> Besides learned commentaries on the sacred texts, Indian Buddhism promoted subtle studies in metaphysics, logic, epistemology and psychology. Debates between Hindu and Buddhist scholars were of benefit to both sides, enriching the content of Hindu apologetics as well as Buddhist philosophy.

Indian Buddhists relied on occasional councils rather than on a centralized hierarchy to preserve doctrinal purity, correct practical abuses and maintain religious unity. Monasteries were self-governing which resulted in a large measure of diversity. Also, Buddha himself had encouraged monks to work out their own understanding of his teaching. While reliance on conciliar authority, which was exercised only rarely, encouraged a spirit of free enquiry, it had the drawback of not providing a check to ideological speculations. For centuries Buddhism experimented with new ideas, sometimes borrowing from the surrounding Hindu culture and often departing widely from Gautama's original teachings. Although they tried, conservative monks were unable to restrict Buddhist thinking to the established Pali canon.

Already by Asoka's time, there were eighteen separate sects, the most important being the Theravada and what would later be called the Mahayana. The much more speculative Mahayana

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. T.R.V. Muni, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1955.

school flowered in north India and won millions of converts throughout the years in Tibet, China, Korea and Japan. Controlling numerous monasteries, it produced great logicians, commentators and metaphysicians. Their scriptures and doctrinal texts were written in Sanskrit, the language of the learned class in India, but their commentators felt quite free to expand and enrich the tradition with metaphysical elaborations.' Theravada Buddhism, on the other hand, flourished in southern India and from there went on to establish a lasting Theravada tradition in Ceylon, Thailand, Burma and elsewhere.

After a thousand years of growth and development, Indian Buddhism began to decline. For over four centuries the religion decayed until the Muslim invasion (circa 1100 A.D.) almost completely eradicated it from the land of its birth. Why did Buddhism virtually disappear from India? Buddhists admit that the problem baffles them.<sup>8</sup> Yet some of the causes seem apparent. Hindu opposition was strong and relentless, especially when local rulers were not Buddhist. Furthermore, a revival of Hinduism took place which attracted the Indian masses. Also Vedanta was expounded by a series of brilliant Hindu philosophers who borrowed from Buddhism and learned from it how to defend the traditional faith of India. Then came the zealous Muslims. Incidents of savage bigotry were not uncommon as the conquerors cleared India to build the impressive Mughul Empire. As a Turkish historian of the time reported, when the Muslims destroyed the university of Nalanda, thousands of monks were burned alive, thousands more were beheaded.<sup>9</sup> Fortunately, by this time Buddha had millions of disciples in other lands.

## V. THERAVADA BUDDHISM

### Original Buddhism

Theravada, meaning "doctrine of the elders" is one of the

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The most celebrated Indian Mahayanists were Asvaghosha (early 2nd century A.D.), Asanga and Vasubandhu, two brothers (4th century)—thinkers largely unknown in the West but equal in Buddhist lands to Origen, Augustine and Athanasius among the Christian Fathers. Mahayana Buddhism is considered at length in volume III.

<sup>8</sup> J. Kashyap in K.W. Morgan, ed., *The Path of the Buddha*, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

two major schools in contemporary Buddhism. Monks who belong to this group claim that their teachings are the original ones taught by Gautama. To prove their case, they point to the fact that the scriptures they use are written in the Pali language, a vernacular dialect similar to the one used by Gautama himself. Theravada monks also maintain that these scriptures were decided upon at a meeting of Buddha's followers as soon as their Master died.

Since Theravadins believe they have received and transmitted without change the teachings of the elders, this implies that all other Buddhists are unorthodox. As Theravada Buddhism is limited to India, Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand, the Buddhists of Tibet, China, Korea and Japan are considered "heretical" by Theravada standards. That is, those who call themselves Mahayana Buddhists have made unfortunate additions to the scriptures, greatly altered the original doctrines and corrupted Gautama's message with philosophical speculations and superstitious practices, we are told.

If Theravada is close to original Buddhism, how can one explain the appearance of the very different Mahayana school? Its origins are not known but a variety of speculative explanations seem plausible. Aside from the Mahayana sutras written in Sanskrit which are undatable, the first known expounder of Mahayana doctrine was Asvaghosha who lived about the time of Jesus; the term "Mahayana" did not come into general circulation until the third or fourth centuries A.D. As the Theravadins claimed to be the "orthodox," the Mahayanists claimed to be the progressives, the broad-minded and big-hearted. Mahayana means "big vehicle" as opposed to the "little vehicle" (*Hinayana*) of the Theravadins. Non-Buddhist scholars assume that the Mahayana school was influenced by Hindu philosophy and piety, that it represents the speculative metaphysics of intellectuals far removed in time from Gautama's Buddhism, and that it reflects the gradual development of folk Buddhism which was more appealing than the monastic faith of the Theravada elders.

To explain the vexing division in Buddhism, four theses have been advanced, each of which has prominent advocates. They are:

a) Mahayana doctrines are a radical departure from Gautama's teachings and a perversion of his spirit; b) Theravada doctrines represent only half of Buddha's message, the most important part being found in the Sanskrit sutras and Mahayana teachings which also go back to Gautama; c) Mahayana doctrines are later additions but represent an improvement over Gautama's original teachings; d) Mahayana doctrines are somewhat different from Theravada but are legitimate developments of the teachings and spirit of Gautama.<sup>10</sup>

Without taking sides in this controversy, we shall limit ourselves in this section to a presentation of the Theravadin position based on the Pali texts.

### **Teaching of the Elders**

As the ancient texts record, on the night of the full moon at the traditional spring festival of Wesak in 528 B.C., precisely at 10 P.M., Buddha entered the state of enlightenment. He saw the whole long parade of separate lives he had previously experienced and with equal clarity he viewed the process of continuous rebirths suffered by his fellowmen. According to Theravada Buddhists, prior to this experience the idea of reincarnation was only a theory; Gautama's enlightenment was first-hand evidence of its validity.

Still in mystic ecstasy, at 2 A.M., he learned that all human wrongs and sufferings result from man's craving for life, his attachments to it and his self-centeredness. This truth—that our manifold ills are due to *tanha* (attachment to self)—revealed man's fundamental malady. Now Gautama knew why we are fettered to the wheel of life.

Then, finally, at 6 A.M., just as the moon was setting and the sun rising, Gautama became fully enlightened when he saw how man could escape from bondage by following the Eightfold Path leading to Nibbana. At that moment he himself was liberated from *tanha*. Henceforth, as the Buddha, he could show the way for others.

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<sup>10</sup> These are: a) the traditional Theravada position, b) the classic Mahayana position, c) the view of some Western scholars, d) the position of liberal Mahayana scholars like D.T. Suzuki.

Immediately, Buddha broke into song, a victory hymn: "For many lives in *samsara*" I have been running in search of the maker of this house, trying to see him. But in vain. Again and again there is suffering. Now housemaker I have seen you! Never again will you make a house for me. I have broken your bones! Even the house frame has been shattered. My mind has turned to a state of purification from defilement. I have attained eradication of all *tanha!*"

For the next seven weeks Buddha remained in the state of supreme bliss. On the basis of his own experience of Nibbana he could point the path for others; and on the solid foundation of his teaching, the tradition of the Elders (Theravada) was constructed. Following is a brief summary of the main points of Theravada doctrine.<sup>1 2</sup>

### 1. Characteristics of All Beings:

#### *Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta*

Examining the exact nature of phenomena by studying their effects and tracing their causes, Gautama discovered how man can become Buddha by the principle of enlightenment. All forms of life, he declared, are characterized by 1) impermanence, 2) suffering, and 3) the absence of a permanent, unchanging individual soul. These characteristics are "the three signs of being."

First, nothing escapes the law of change. There is no rest within the universe, only ceaseless becoming, a never ending cycle of movement. *Anicca* (impermanence) is a fundamental fact of all existence. Birth, growth, decay and death can be seen in the world outside and just as clearly in the life of man.

Secondly, everything suffers. Summing up his message, Gautama said that he taught one *thing*—*dukkha* and the ending of *dukkha*. For Buddhists this concept refers to suffering in every form: pain, illness, disease, disharmony, discomfort, discontent, friction and incompleteness. If a man looks at himself or the wider

<sup>1</sup> Becoming, literally "faring on", "coming-to-be", the antithesis of Nibbana.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. "Fundamental Principles of Theravada Buddhism," in Morgan, *The Path of the Buddha*, pp. 67-112.

world he will realize that all life suffers from lack of well-being, perfection, wholeness and bliss. *Dukkha* is an omnipresent reality.

Thirdly, nothing in existence has within it an imperishable essence which separates it from other forms of life. Buddha explicitly denies the basic Hindu doctrine of the *Atman*. Being is *an-atta*, without an *Atman*. There is no "immortal soul" which distinguishes one man from another. The individuality of a person is not eternal. A man is an aggregate of factors—a body, sensations, perceptions, thoughts—all of which exist in a constant state of flux. There is no immutable entity behind or apart from the complex combinations of sensations, ideas, emotions and volitions we call man's personality, the ego or the "I".<sup>13</sup>

## 2. The Wheel of Life

The Buddha uses the metaphor of the wheel to illustrate both the universal predicament and the way out of it. The two should not be confused: Buddhism is the Wheel of the Law (*Dhamma*) and our basic problem is the Wheel of Life (*Samsara*). Because the basis of existence is an intricate network of events and actions on a variety of levels Buddha compared it to an ever-turning Wheel of Life with twelve spokes, the component factors (*Nidanas*) keeping it in motion. These *Nidanas* are interrelated factors, forming an endless whole; only by examining their total effect can one understand their true significance. The twelve factors are ignorance (*Avidya*), corrupted or defiled thoughts (*Sankharas*), passive consciousness (*Virthana*), psycho-physicality (*Nama-rupa*), the six sense organs (*Salayatana*), contact among sense organ, sense object and sense consciousness (*Phassa*), perceptions and conceptions (*Vedana*), attachment to self (*Tanha*), grasping defiled thoughts (*Upadana*), conception (*Bhava*), birth (*Jati*) and the common lot of life (*Samsara*). Like the revolutions of a wheel, life moves through a succession of deaths and births caused by a cleaving to existing

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<sup>13</sup> Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana differ somewhat in their interpretation of *anatta*, the former insisting upon the doctrine of "no soul," the latter making concessions to the older Hindu *Atman* theory. Cf. C. Humphreys, *Buddhism*, pp. 85, 88 who complains that the Theravada school has "a cold and dreary doctrine" which goes "too far." Theravadins, however, would maintain that they preserve Gautama's original teaching.

objects and governed by the law of karma. To stop the Wheel of Life we must remove its cause.

### 3. Primal Evil: Desire

According to Buddha, if the omnipresence of *Dukkha* (suffering) is the fundamental disease which afflicts all beings, its cause is to be found in *Tanha* (desire). *Tanha* takes many forms—uncontrollable lust, sensual delight, craving for the gratification of one's physical appetites, selfishness, love for this present world, etc. But in the deepest sense *Tanha* is synonymous with man's "will to live." *Tanha* keeps us bound to the Wheel of Life and subjects us to continual suffering. *Tanha* is the desire to affirm the lower self, to cling to it and identify oneself with it. Only the elimination of that attachment will remove our man-made unhappiness.

### 4. Karma and Reincarnation

In general Buddhists and Hindus agree in their understanding of karma, the iron-clad law of cause and effect, though they differ in details because of Hinduism's doctrine of *Atman* and Buddhism's insistence on *Anatta*. For Theravada Buddhists, there cannot be a long journey of the soul from one body to the next because for them there is no soul. Karma-formations—effects of one's actions—persist rather than the soul (*Atman*) which travels from body to body.

By the method of inductive logic, Buddhists begin with effects and from these seek their causes. Whatsoever a man reaps he must have sown. Like a pebble tossed into a pool, every act has an effect. Instead of blaming what happens on Fate or relying on the over-ruling providence of a personal God, Theravada Buddhists explain that all occurrences are the working out of a natural moral law of cause and effect. This law of karma helps to make man self-reliant. As the *Dhammapada* indicates, it is by oneself that evil is done and by oneself an individual suffers; also by oneself evil is left undone and by oneself a person is purified."

However, each man is part of larger social groupings—a family, a trade union, a political party, a nation. Consequently, he

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<sup>14</sup> Dhammapada, CLX V.



feels the effect of several "karmas," all of which are his own because he is intimately related to such interpersonal social units. Karma governs the interdependence and solidarity of the universe in all of its parts. I<sup>5</sup> Yet on the whole, Theravada Buddhism tends to be individualistic, because the monk severs his ties to his family, society, nation and world.

Each man is bound to the wheel of dying and rebirth as long as he is subject to the defiling mental states of greed (*lobha*), hatred or aversion (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). These vices are the source of all wrong deeds whose effects have to be suffered under the law of karma. The graver the fault the longer its effects will take to wear away. Because of the heavy burden of karma which every individual must carry, he is destined to pass through an immensely long succession of lives in the world of men or as a ghost, as an animal or as a temporary inhabitant in hell. No one can finish his karma-conditioned time until the consequences of every volitional deed have been paid off.

Man is the only being who can free himself from the wheel of Samsara. Even the gods must be reborn as men in order to attain Nibbana. I<sup>6</sup> For most people, the journey through one life after another has been going on for innumerable aeons in the past and will probably continue for a very long time in the future. According to Buddha, the flood of tears shed by each man since he started on the journey to Nibbana is far greater than the amount of water in all the oceans.

Consciousness is a stream and that which exists at the moment of death flows on without interruption into the next state of rebirth. Yet it is not the "I" of one life which transmigrates to another. There is no "being" who passes from body to body. The doer is not substantially the same as he was in a preceding life yet not totally different. When Buddhists use terms like "I," "he" or "being" in reference to the subject of many rebirths, they do not think of them in any ultimate sense but merely as convenient designations for a changing stream of consciousness.

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<sup>5</sup>s C. Humphreys, *Buddhism*, p. 103.

<sup>6</sup> Except for a particular kind of Brahman.

Connected with the doctrine of karma is the equally important corollary concept of rebirth. The body dies at death, but the individual's karma lives on. Though the individual's personality, in the sense of a separate entity, does not survive death and take on a new body, what does survive is "a nameless complex residuum" of karmic effects. To use a favorite Buddhist metaphor, the flame from one candle lights a second candle. The second candle is not the first; its wax, wick and flame are utterly different. All that survives of the first, when it burns out, is the effect it had—the heat it transmitted—to cause the second to be lighted.

Nevertheless, according to Theravada scriptures, the Buddha was able to call to mind the various states of his former births, where he lived, what names he had, which castes he belonged to, all his previous experiences and how long he lived in each body. At the stage of enlightenment, Gautama could call to mind in all their specific details the number and nature of his earlier lives.<sup>18</sup> According to some Buddhist scholars, "Gautama taught not that there is "no-self or no-soul" but that there is "no *separate* self, no *separate* soul." In any case, there must be some specific connection which relates in a single continuum of karmic effects all the lives which the Buddha (or anyone else) experiences.

### 5. Dependent Origination (*Paticca-samuppada*)<sup>20</sup>

In the complicated concept of dependent origination (or conditioned genesis or con-production, as it has been called) one finds a unique contribution of Buddhism to philosophy. Difficult as it may be to grasp, dependent origination lies at the very heart of Buddhist metaphysics. "Who sees dependent origination sees Dharma; who sees Dharma sees dependent origination."<sup>21</sup> No

<sup>17</sup> C. Humphreys, *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>18</sup> F.L. Woodward, trans., *Some Sayings of the Buddha*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1925, p. 263.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. C. Humphreys, *The Wisdom of Buddhism*, p. 77.

<sup>20</sup> For a new interpretation based on careful linguistic analysis of the Pali texts, see Dickwela Piyandana, *The Concept of Mind in Early Buddhism*, Ph.D. dissertation, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 1974, pp. 124-175.

<sup>21</sup> *Majjhima-Nikaya* I: 190-191.

finite thing has an independent reality. Every form of existence depends upon something which preceded it and serves to condition its nature. Applied to matters of religion this implies that there is no transcendent creator-God who is above the rest of creation and no immutable souls which are unconditioned by what goes on in the body or in the world. The Buddhist doctrines of "No God—no soul" arise out of and are based on the truth of the theory of dependent origination.

How is a specific person conditioned? From the past his "karmic formations" are conditioned by ignorance and his consciousness is dependent upon his karmic formations. In the present, an individual is molded in a variety of ways: by his name and shape, his six sense fields, his feelings, his craving and grasping, all of which profoundly affect his continued becoming. As for the future, the fact that an individual is caught in the wheel of becoming means that he will be subject to the cycle of birth, death and rebirth with its concomitant evils of grief, aging, despair and death. Because everything depends upon everything else, man is chained to the wheel of Samsara.<sup>22</sup>

Connected with the concept of dependent origination is the Buddhist analysis of the five aggregates (*khandha*) which combine to form an existing being. The first is the body consisting of a supporting solid, the factor of cohesion, the element of temperature and the faculty of motion. Besides these physiological aspects of every form of life, there are non-material qualities such as feeling, perception and volition. The fifth *khandha* which is "passive consciousness" (*Viiiiana*) is what survives the death of one body and finds a subsequent foothold for itself in a new one. Consciousness and the psycho-physical elements are mutually dependent upon each other. Where there is one there is also the other. Consciousness cannot survive apart from the other *khandha*. Hence, when the chains of becoming are broken, consciousness no longer exists. In other words, as Theravadins insist, there is no permanent, immutable and eternal soul.

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<sup>22</sup> I. B. Homer, "Buddhism: The Theravada," R.C. Zaehner, Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths, pp. 285-286.

## 6. The Arhat Ideal

Once a Buddhist is convinced of the validity of the four noble truths and decides to follow the Eightfold Path, he becomes a *Bhikkhu* (monk). Although there are millions of lay Buddhists, only the *Bhikkhus* are really disciples of Gautama in the deepest sense. When one abandons the ordinary life of a householder, the Buddhist demonstrates his dedication to the quest for enlightenment. So long as he is not part of the *Sangha* (the religious brotherhood) and does not reside in a *Vihara* (monastery) he merely possesses an elementary understanding of the Buddha's message and observes the preliminary practices of the Buddhist ethic. The path to Nibbana however involves four successive stages of spiritual advancement.<sup>23</sup>

First, *Sotappana*. The Bhikku is one "who has entered the stream" which will in time carry him to the ocean of Nibbanic bliss. By accepting the discipline and duties of the monastic life, a Buddhist gradually frees himself from the first three of ten fetters which bind him to the wheel of rebirth: the delusion that the individual self is real and self-existent, doubt, and the belief that religious ceremonies can ensure a man's salvation. At best, rituals—even Buddhist ones—are only outward appearances; nothing like these can replace the real need for self-liberation.

Secondly, *Sakadagamin*. At this stage of spiritual growth, the Bhikku becomes one "who will return to earth only once more." The curse of numerous repeated births has been broken. Nevertheless, to reach this new plateau of spiritual advancement, the monk must successfully break two more fetters: sensuality and unkindliness.

Thirdly, *Anagamin*. At this stage, the Bhikku completely sublimates all his erotic and aggressive desires, transmuting them into higher forms of psychic energy. No longer does he become angry, long for material possessions, fall prey to fleshly lusts, crave unwholesome excitement or harbor ill will towards any living thing.

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<sup>23</sup> C. Humphreys, *Buddhism*, pp. 119422.

Fourthly, *Nibbana*. Five final fetters still bind the Bhikku to the wheel of Samsara: attachment to continued life in the worlds of form, a desire for some higher life in the formless worlds (like the longing for personal happiness in heaven), spiritual pride, self-righteousness and ignorance (*Avidya*). Buddhists are well aware of the subtle imperfections which mark the so-called religious life. For example, according to Theravadins, a man is not truly free of earthly attachments if he seeks an afterlife in which all his personal desires are satisfied. Nor is he religious in the deepest sense when his spiritual achievements become an excuse for displaying his feeling of superiority over other men. And at the end must come the truth which sets him free. As ignorance is the most basic part of the wheel of becoming, it is the last fetter to be removed. To know the Truth, by living it, by being it, is the ultimate goal of man's self-liberation. Nothing less can produce the state of Nibbana.

According to Theravada scripture, Nibbana refers to "an unborn, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded." "The rafters of the house of life have been broken, and the whole house completely pulled down."<sup>24</sup> Good and evil have ceased to have any meaning. All sin has been burnt away; all worldly conditions are overcome. Consciousness no longer has even a seed from which new life could spring. As the Theravadins teach, at this stage, the Bhikkhu becomes the *Arahat*, one who has reached Nibbana.

### 7. Buddha

According to the Pali canon, Gautama Buddha is the Way-shower. He taught the four noble truths and pointed out the path by which anyone can escape the wheel of Samsara. That and only that was his role. Because he showed what it means to become enlightened by his teachings and life, he enables others to awake from ignorance to knowledge. At his death he became extinct, utterly free from the world of becoming. Henceforth, as he put it, "Who sees Dharma (my teaching) sees me; who sees me sees Dharma:"<sup>25</sup> Although Theravada monks revere Buddha, they do

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<sup>24</sup> C. Humphreys, *The Wisdom of Buddhism*, pp. 91-92; from *Sacred Books of the East*, XXV, 1, 207.

not pray to him, do not worship him as a god and do not expect further help from him on their own quest for Nibbana. As they say, once Gautama Buddha died, he became "trackless" and "untraceable."<sup>26</sup> Having revealed the middle path and travelled it himself, his earthly and personal mission was complete.

### **Buddhism in Sri Lanka (Ceylon)**

Emperor Asoka of India had allowed his son Mahinda (age 20) and his daughter Sanghamitta (18) to join the monastic order, and they became the imperial apostles of Buddha to Ceylon. While others—travellers, traders or fishermen—may have first brought knowledge of the Middle Path to Sri Lanka, tradition gives full credit to the prince and princess for making Buddhism the Ceylonese faith.<sup>27</sup>

During Asoka's reign India and Sri Lanka were friends. The king of Ceylon upon his accession to the throne sent gifts to the Indian monarch, who responded by inviting him to accept the Buddhist faith. The stage was now set for Mahinda's mission. The king received the shaven-headed Indian monks and asked for an explanation of their beliefs. Mahinda preached a discourse on "the simile of the elephant footprint"—a sermon still preserved by the Ceylonese Buddhists. As a result the king and his entire retinue of forty thousand embraced the new faith. Surrounded by converts, many of whom were women, Mahinda requested Asoka to send his sister to organize a nunnery. Asoka broke off a branch of the sacred banyan tree under which Buddha achieved enlightenment, planted it in a golden bowl, and sent it to the king of Sri Lanka as a token of his affection. The Ceylonese monarch planted the branch in the royal park where the Bodhi tree still grows, one of the most sacred objects of Buddhist veneration.

In a long reign of forty years, the king spent much of his time promoting the Buddhist cause. He ordered the erection of temples, monasteries and nunneries across the entire island. Mahinda and his sister worked there until their death. State funerals were given

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<sup>26</sup> I. B. Horner, *Ibid*, p. 283.

<sup>27</sup> H.R. Perara, *Buddhism in Ceylon*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Ceylon, 1966.

to each; and to commemorate their work, the king built *stupas* to house their relics.

In spite of numerous obstacles throughout history, Buddhism has remained the national faith. The early Ceylonese made several contributions to Theravada Buddhism. They were the first to put the Pali canon into written form (89 B.C.). They also hosted the Indian monk Buddhaghosa, who completed valuable commentaries on Theravada (420 A.D.). Since the fourth century A.D. Sri Lanka has possessed the sacred eye-tooth of Buddha, one of the most famous relics.

As the centuries passed rival Buddhist sects appeared, monastic morality slipped, and Ceylon was periodically invaded. There were new Tamil invasions and by the 11th century, the king had to ask Burma to send him monks to revive the faith.

In later centuries, however, they faced a different kind of intruder—imperialists from the West. For Buddhists (as well as for Hindus and Muslims of Asia) the ravages of the Westerner cannot be easily forgotten. Sri Lanka was particularly affected: first came the Portuguese (1505), then the Dutch (1638), and finally, the British (1796).

Buddhists were persecuted harshly under each nation's rule, though from some accounts the Portuguese treatment appears to have been the most brutal.<sup>28</sup> British persecution followed the Dutch pattern, which was less severe than the Portuguese, but just as devious. For nearly half a century under British occupation, Ceylonese could be legally married only by a Christian clergyman; and he would require that the bride and groom both be baptized prior to the nuptial rites. No one who remained Buddhist was favored for government employment. And of course, the colonial officials encouraged Christian missionaries in every way. For a child to become successful, he or she would have to attend Christian schools, participate in daily Christian worship services, and listen to sermons critical of Buddhism. Probably the most insulting of all the actions of the British was the erection of the Anglican

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. H.R. Perara, *Ibid.*, p. 54.

cathedral on the grounds of Sri Lanka's holiest temple.

What Col. Henry Olcott and his student Dharmapala did for India, they also did for Ceylon. When Olcott arrived in Ceylon in 1880, he helped to create a Buddhist educational system equal to that of the Christian missionaries. By 1897 he and his friends had twenty-five boys' schools, eleven girls' schools, and ten co-educational schools. These were for Buddhists, run by Buddhists. In 1903 there were 174 such schools, and by 1940 the number had risen to 429, all under the auspices of the private Buddhist Theosophical Society.

Olcott's other activities on behalf of the downtrodden Ceylonese were no less noteworthy. He successfully agitated for the Buddhist right to hold public processions and forced the British to declare Wesak, the full moon festival, a public holiday. He designed a Buddhist flag, published a newspaper and had Buddhists appointed registrars of marriages.

Beginning with Olcott's young follower, Dharmapala, the revival of Buddhism was linked to Ceylonese independence. Freedom fighters staged demonstrations against the British when Japan won its 1905 war with Russia, which for all Asians was a symbolic defeat of the imperialist West. By 1948, Sri Lanka saw the British flag removed from its land. A 133-year occupation had ended.

With independence Buddhists felt that their faith should be recognized as the national religion—in name as well as in fact. After numerous difficulties brought about by Communists—who were hostile to all religion—and Christian missionaries who wanted to hold on to the privileges bestowed upon them by the defunct British Empire, the first constitution granting complete freedom of religion was amended to recognize the historic pre-eminence of Buddhism.

Since Buddhists represent sixty-five per cent of the population, the 2500th anniversary of Buddha's death was a memorable day in Sri Lanka history. The renovation of the Temple of the Tooth was completed. A great Encyclopedia of Buddhism (in English and Ceylonese) was begun; and the World Buddhist Conference was convened in Colombo the following year. Buddhism's historic



rights as the national faith in Sri Lanka are now guaranteed.

### **Burmese Buddhism**

Theravada Buddhism probably came to Burma when Emperor Asoka sent out missionaries. By the time Buddhaghosa finished his work as a scriptural commentator in Ceylon, and visited Burma (5th century A.D.) Buddhism was well established in that country.

In the eleventh century, after the king united **all** of Burma, Theravada was made the state faith." Leading monks then were sent to Ceylon to be educated. The thirteenth century saw Buddhism suffer a temporary setback when Kublai Khan's Mongols invaded Burma. However, two centuries later a Burmese king with the guidance of the Ceylonese restored Buddhist influence. <sup>30</sup> King Mindon, a late 19th century ruler, was the next to play an important role in Burmese Buddhism. Anxious to purify the faith of popular superstitions and even more interested in promoting study of the Pali texts, Mindon inspired a modern revival of Theravada, and supervised the inscription of the entire Pali canon on 729 marble slabs placed at the foot of Mandalay Hill.

From the beginning Buddhist monks opposed the British occupation. In fact, the first modern Burmese political party sprang from a Buddhist association. In 1929 a monk name U Wisera died in jail after a hunger strike lasting over three months, begun in protest against British rule. Now a memorial stands in front of a Rangoon pagoda, honoring the monk as a martyr for the cause of free Burma. **In** the 1931 uprising against Britain monks also took part.

In 1947 the Burmese voted to leave the British Commonwealth and set up an independent republic." U Nu, the father of modern Burmese nationalism, is an ardent Buddhist. He wel-

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<sup>29</sup> King Anawrahta of Pagan (1044-1077 A.D.).

<sup>30</sup> Balangoda Ananda Maitreya, "Buddhism in Theravada Countries," K.W. Morgan, ed., *The Path of the Buddha*, pp. 119-121.

<sup>31</sup> Ernst Benz, *Buddhism or Communism*, pp. 70-82. See Winston L. King, *A Thousand Lives Away*, Bruno Cassirer, Oxford, 1964, for a perceptive study of contemporary Burmese Buddhist philosophy and practices.

corned the sixth World Buddhist Council to Rangoon and openly urged that missionaries be dispatched to Europe and America. When the military took over the country, he was placed under detention and upon his release he became a Buddhist monk .<sup>32</sup> Another Buddhist, U Thant, served as secretary-general of the U.N. from 1962-1971.

Burmese Buddhism is significant because of the way it combines intense nationalism with a special form of socialism. U Nu fiercely denounced the Communists and condemned the Soviet repression of the Hungarian freedom fighters. Yet, he also opposed capitalism and drew up legislation to nationalize all private property in Burma. Each action was in accord with the central Buddhist belief that man must liberate himself from the material world.

### **Buddhism in Thailand**

Thailand, like Burma and Sri Lanka, received Theravada missionaries sent out by Asoka. Mahayana Buddhism was introduced to Thailand three hundred years after Theravada, in the last part of the first century A.D. At that time Mahayana had spread from north India to Malaysia, lower Burma, Indonesia and western Thailand. Later, in the eighth century, an Indonesian empire centered in Sumatra, whose rulers were Mahayana Buddhists, controlled the Malay peninsula and southern Thailand. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries all of Thailand belonged to a dynasty of Cambodian monarchs who favored Mahayana but tolerated the already well-established Theravada monks. When a strong Burmese kingdom took dominance in the area in the latter part of the twelfth century, Theravada ideas regained strength in the north.

For several centuries migrations of Thai people took place. Originally settled in Yunnan (a province in southwest China), the Thais moved southward under Chinese pressure. By 1257 they had established a kingdom in what is now northern Thailand based on a mixture of Hinduism, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. They were helped by missionaries from Ceylon, where Theravada had a strong royal patron. Beginning in 1277, that form of Buddhism

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<sup>32</sup> In 1970 U Nu fled to Thailand.

predominated in Thailand.<sup>33</sup>

In 1766, however, Burma invaded Thailand and ruthlessly destroyed the Thai kingdom. In spite of the fact that Burma and Thailand were both Theravada nations, the invaders massacred the defeated; Burmese burned the palace and demolished the temples. Even the large and beautiful statues of Buddha were hacked to pieces or melted down for the gold they contained. Not even a single copy of the sacred "Three Baskets" (*Tripitaka*) was left when the conquerors finished their work.

Out of these ruins was born the present dynasty of Thai kings which began in 1782.<sup>34</sup> In rebuilding the nation, all the modern Thai monarchs have combined patriotism and religion. King Mongkut was a Buddhist priest for twenty-six years before ascending the throne in 1851. Studying Latin under the Catholic bishop and English with two Protestant missionaries, as well as being a brilliant Pali scholar, he did much to purify and modernize Thai Buddhism. He purged the faith of spirit worship, Brahmin rites and Mahayana legends, established preaching services, revised the liturgy and corrected the Buddhist texts on the basis of more authentic Ceylonese versions of the *Tripitaka*. His son continued this valuable work of reform.

All the kings have spent some time in the temples as novices, and four Buddhist festivals are recognized as national holidays. Government funds are used to maintain the temples, promote monastic education and provide radio programs on Buddhism. In 1946 the two training schools for Buddhist monks were elevated to the position of universities. When time came for the celebration of Buddha's 2500th anniversary in 1956, the king prepared for the event by retiring to a monastery for two weeks, then watched the commemorative events in front of the palace.

For most Theravada Buddhists—those in Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Laos and India—the faith has been kept in the face of

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<sup>33</sup> A summary of Karuna Kussalassaya, *Buddhism in Thailand*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Ceylon, 1965. pp. 2-13.

<sup>34</sup> Kenneth E. Wells, *Thai Buddhism, Its Rites and Activities*, The Christian Bookstore, Bangkok, 1960, introduction, pp. vii-viii.

tremendous obstacles. Hence their Buddhism is far more militant, and at times, even revolutionary.

### **Buddhist Revival in India**

In 1921 Indian census takers reported that in a population of 312 million there were 216 million Hindus, 68 million Muslims, and only 11 million Buddhists (including those in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma).<sup>35</sup> However, this trend was suddenly halted, and in fact reversed, by something totally unforeseen: an amazing Buddhist revival. Within the Republic of India alone the Buddhists that were only 180,000 strong in 1951 grew to more than three million by 1961. And a decade later, the renaissance continued as great numbers of Christians and Hindus converted to Buddhism due to missionary efforts among the outcastes.

How a nearly extinct religion could come alive as it has in India is one of the surprises of modern history. But Buddhism has reappeared and is becoming a significant religious, moral, intellectual and artistic force in the development of the republic. At the beginning of the century, the venerated shrine of Bodh Gaya where the Buddha achieved enlightenment was in a state of deplorable neglect. What survived of Buddhism as a popular religion at that time was largely limited to scattered communities in Bengal. Today, Buddhism has totally renovated shrines, scores of recently erected temples, publishing houses, monasteries and universities, and thousands of new converts. In addition it is being praised by the most noted intellectuals in India. And perhaps as the most visible symbol of its resurrection, the Buddhist wheel of Dhamma forms the center of the Indian flag and hangs above the deputies of the national parliament.

The story of this revival begins in the late nineteenth century. When Sir Edwin Arnold wrote a series of articles in a London newspaper in 1885 lamenting the ruin of the shrine where Buddha's enlightenment took place, a Ceylonese layman took note. This ex-Christian and Theravada Buddhist named Dharmapala vowed

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<sup>35</sup> A.C. Bouquet, *Comparative Religion*, Penguin Book, Harmondsworth, England, 1967, pp. 116-118.

to restore Buddhism to India.<sup>36</sup> In 1891 through his efforts the Mahabodhi Society was organized in Ceylon and four monks were sent to Bodh Gaya; the same year an international conference was convened at the site to promote the restoration of the temple as a center for world Buddhism. The Mahabodhi Society also renovated Buddha's birthplace, the deer park where he preached his first sermon, the place where he entered Nibbana, and other historical sites.

Dharmapala visited America twice. There he spoke at the 1893 Parliament of Religions in Chicago, sponsored the publication of a Buddhist magazine in English, prompted the creation of Buddhist study circles in the United States and Germany, and raised large amounts of money to finance the Mahabodhi cause. The Society then built a new temple in Calcutta and persuaded Lord Ronaldsday of the British colonial government to authorize the transfer of sacred Buddhist relics from the Madras museum to the shrine. The society was active in other areas also. It agitated for the elimination of caste and raised funds from Buddhist countries for relief work in the Bengal famine of 1897. The abandoned jungle village of Bodh Gaya that Dharmapala saw in 1891 had become by 1949 the site for a college, free hospital, school, academy and Buddhist library. Buddhist centers were also set up in Bombay, New Delhi, Lucknow and other cities. In 1952, in the presence of the prime ministers of India and Burma, relics of the two chief disciples of Buddha were put back in the shrine at Sanchi after having been kept in the British Museum for a century.

Tagore the poet, Radhakrishnan the philosopher and Gandhi the statesman-saint lent their influence to the revival of Indian Buddhism. In addition, the University of Calcutta and other institutions of higher learning authorized studies in Pali, the ancient Buddhist language. Translations of Buddhist scriptures were published in Hindi, Tamil, Urdu and other languages. Lectures on

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<sup>36</sup> Dharmapala, born David Hewavitarane, was the son of a Ceylonese nobleman, reconverted to Buddhism by the American Theosophist Col. Henry Steele Olcott. The pioneer work of the Theosophical Society—Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Colonel Olcott and Christmas Humphreys—in reviving Hinduism and Buddhism can hardly be overestimated.

Buddhism were delivered in most of India's cities. And modern Indian artists looked to the frescoes in the Buddhist cave monastery of Ajanta for models, themes and styles.

Besides the revival of interest in Buddhism as an intellectual and artistic stimulus for free India, the conversion of masses of Hindu untouchables was equally remarkable. Dr. B . R. Ambedkar had labored in vain to promote a mass conversion of the untouchables to Christianity because Indian Christians practiced the same caste and social distinctions as the Hindus. Frustrated by the Christian segregationists, Ambedkar turned to Buddhism. At the first World Buddhist Conference at Colombo, Sri Lanka, Ambedkar announced his own conversion to Buddhism and urged his 140 million followers to do likewise. In 1956 Indian newspapers reported that at a huge rally in Nagpur over a half million untouchables became Buddhists. Several thousand Christians were among the converts. All the provinces thereafter saw vigorous activity on the part of the Buddhists. While shock and anger were to be expected from the Christians, even the Indian government looked with some alarm at what was taking place. According to the constitution of the republic, caste had already been declared illegal. A decade after liberation, mass conversion of untouchables to Buddhism showed that caste had not been eradicated.

In the opinion of Ambedkar, Buddhism is the most perfect religion because of its attitudes toward social reform and social service. He believed in "social gospel" Buddhism and established a Buddhist center in Bangalore: a seminary, a monastery, temple, library, publishing house, orphanage, vocational school and hospital.

Ambedkar also advocated the creation of a convenient authoritative Buddhist Bible containing a brief life of Buddha, the *Dhammapada* manual of ethics, some of Buddha's key speeches, plus proper liturgical services for birth, marriage, burial and initiation into the Buddhist community.<sup>37</sup> He proposed that monks return to the original three-fold purpose of the *Sangha: 1*) to

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<sup>37</sup> Several such Buddhist Bibles have been created but as yet none has won wide acceptance.

provide a model of what Buddhist society should be; 2) to train an intellectual elite capable of leading the rest of society; 3) to become a group totally devoted to the service of the people. After Ambedkar's death in 1958, another Indian Buddhist, Jivaka, pointed out what such reform would mean in specific cases: abolishing the rule that monks cannot handle money, getting rid of the traditional contempt for women, and especially prohibiting the practice of begging. Why should the modern lay Buddhist community be asked to feed a horde of unemployed holy men?<sup>38</sup>

The future looks bright for Indian Buddhism. Nationalists regard Buddha and the Buddhist emperor Asoka as two of the country's greatest figures. Buddhism, unlike Christianity, cannot be criticized as an alien faith, a reminder of European imperialism or a tool of the American military-industrial complex. With the aid of the intellectuals and the friendship of the lower classes, Buddhism can promote needed reform in India. And because it is a newly-replanted faith, it is not quite so bound to traditional Theravada practices as is the case with Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand.

Indian Buddhists also have strong friends in nearby nations. Sikkim and Bhutan, between India and China, are completely Buddhist countries and Nepal is half-Buddhist. In addition, large numbers of Tibetan refugees now reside in India and provide moral support for the Indian Buddhists. Buddha, oft-called the Light of Asia, seems once more to illumine his homeland.

## **VI. DISTINCTIVE MARKS OF NEO-BUDDHISM**

So many political and social changes have taken place since World War II that one can now speak of neo-Buddhism. While the essentials of Theravada philosophy and practice are deeply rooted

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<sup>38</sup> Ernst Benz, "The Revival of Buddhism in India," *Buddhism or Communism*, Doubleday and Co., Garden City, N.Y., 1965, pp. 56-59. Cf. Jivaka, *Critical Studies of the Vinaya*, Sarnath, India, 1960. This section relies heavily on Benz, *ibid.*, pp. 19-60. Benz, a church historian at the University of Marburg, was guest professor at Doshisha University in Kyoto during 1957-58 which gave him an opportunity to make a study of contemporary Buddhism.

in the past, Buddhism today has several quite distinctive features: 1) its missionary zeal, 2) its social activism, 3) an ecumenical spirit, 4) an encounter with communism, and 5) a somewhat messianic outlook. None of these represents a sharp break with the historic faith yet together they reveal a major shift in direction. Hence, a book about Buddhism written in 1900 or 1940 is quite outdated as a description of contemporary followers of the Enlightened One.

### **Missionary Zeal and Buddhist Humanism**

Buddhist missionary activity goes back to the time of the emperor Asoka but until our own day there had been little zeal for winning the entire world to the cause. Like Islam and Hinduism, Buddhism is now committed to global witnessing. Ceylon in particular has become the center for distributing Theravada literature to English-speaking peoples. Besides the continuing mass conversions of Indian untouchables, in 1969 Thailand reported that its monks had converted 100,000 animists in the hill country to the Buddhist faith. No less significant has been the creation of Buddhist study groups in many of the major cities of the Western world. As Christian churches declined in Europe and America, a sizeable number of seekers have looked for inspiration and guidance to the religions of the East. In most colleges and universities, young people have been attracted to a study of comparative religions, giving the gospel of Buddha a chance to be heard. The attraction of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) for Western youth in the 1960s was comparable to the popularity of Sir Edwin Arnold's poem "The Light of Asia" in the closing decades of the 19th century.

Some types of Buddhism—Mahayana, Tibetan and Zen—have become popular because of their affinity with the occult or their praise of mystical experience. Theravada's missionary zeal, however, has a different appeal. According to Theravada writers, Buddhism is superior to the declining religions of the West because it is avowedly humanist rather than theist. While Western thought is rapidly abandoning a personal God, Buddhism can offer a



substitute. The Buddhist, we are told, can politely say to his Christian brother that there is no need for theism. In its place one can find wisdom and compassion from the impersonal, yet utterly just, natural law.<sup>1</sup>

Buddhists believe in the existence of many lesser gods but no creator, no supernatural omnipotent savior, no Absolute. When a Brahmin asked if there are gods, Buddha answered: "There are. The world is loud in agreement that there are gods."<sup>2</sup> These are helpers in need; they grant worldly goods to those who petition them; they protect men from danger but their functions are limited, like those of Christian, Jewish or Islamic angels. They come into being due to their good karma achieved in previous lives and after these spiritual merits are used up they are reincarnated as humans. Like men, the gods are bound to the wheel of fate until they too reach Nibbana.

A justice of Burma's Supreme Court has clearly expressed the militantly anti-theistic side of contemporary Buddhism. In his opinion, most religions are based on unscientific assumptions that there is a Supreme Being who regulates the universe, that there are revelations which show His will, that men possess an immortal soul and will enjoy a life after death. When "science says there is no ground for belief in a Creator-god, it is merely confirming an essential doctrine of Buddhism."<sup>3</sup> To believe in the theory of a Creator-god does not solve any problems but only complicates the existing ones. If a thing must have a creator who existed before it, the creator must have had a creator, and so on, back to infinity. But if the Creator did not need to have a creator, then logically why does any existing object require one? For Buddhism there has never been any first act of creation or any First Cause. Time and relativity are a closed circle in which no point of beginning can be located.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. Humphreys, introduction to H. von Glasenapp, *Buddhism—A Non-theistic Religion*, George Braziller, N.Y., 1966, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in von Glasenapp, *ibid.* p. 19. Von Glasenapp provides a careful study of Buddhist divinities based largely on the ancient Pali texts.

<sup>3</sup> U Chan Htoon, *Buddhism and the Age of Science*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Ceylon, 1967, p. 53.

U Chan Htoon, *ibid.* pp. 25, 31-34.

Theism claims to be based on direct divine revelations. In the opinion of this modern Buddhist, "faith in 'divine revelation' is as dead as the brontosaurus." <sup>5</sup> Buddhism has no interest in "unsupported" dogmas because it teaches the ultimate truth concerning life discovered by one who approached the subject without any preconceived ideas. As a scientist investigates the external world, so Buddha investigated the internal world of man's consciousness. He was, say his followers, "the only religious teacher to bring scientific methods of approach to bear on the questions of ultimate truth." <sup>6</sup>

In the writings of a scholarly Ceylonese monk, the superiority of Buddhist humanism is similarly extolled. For Buddhism man is the supreme object of religious concern. Man has the ability on his own to overcome suffering, transcend evil and become God. God as a personal creator disappears; God is merely man at his highest, the human symbol of truth and goodness. "God has not made man but man has conceived God and become God. . . . Natural Law is the Creator which is neither a person nor an infinite intelligence. Natural Law is also the Truth (*Dhamma*) or reality and therefore God." <sup>7</sup>

According to the Ceylonese monk, humanism is a perfectly natural step in religious evolution. Whereas the old religion was a dictatorship of the omnipotent Creator, modern humanism is homocentric and democratic. Discarding supernatural phenomena like the Creator, the soul, heaven, hell and judgment day, man now has a rational, humane religion which alone can save him from disaster. Humanism does not preach self-denial but shows a spiritual ideal, does not command or dictate, but explains why and persuades. It does not threaten punishment or promise reward but simply shows what is right and wrong. By directing us toward goodness and truth, humanism brings about healthy minds and bodies.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Dickwela Piyananda, *The Need for a Modern Religion*, Young Men's Buddhist Association, Kurunegala, Ceylon, 1967, p. 10.

Nevertheless, because modern humanism is still in its infancy it is subject to many pitfalls. Neither ends nor means are clearly, concretely known. Western humanists have no leader who has followed the path to its end. Buddhism corrects these defects because it is an old, experienced humanism with a guide who renounced a life of selfish pleasure and achieved self-perfection. Therefore, Buddhism offers complete humanism, an elder-humanism which comes to the rescue of modern man. <sup>8</sup>

While all Theravada Buddhists would maintain that theism is false, no one has equalled the sharp denunciation of it made by the Burmese minister of education U Ba Yin. In his opinion, the concept of an omniscient, omnipotent God who exacts unquestioning loyalty is the root of all dictatorship. To understand this charge one must know the simplistic logic upon which it is based, and with which many Asians would agree: theism = Christianity, Christianity = the white man's religion, white men = the former European imperialists; therefore theism = oppressive government. Starting with these commonly held assumptions, U Ba Yin wrote: "By knocking the God-idea on the head, Buddha tried his best to free humanity from the bondage of a dictatorship. . . . Dictatorship—whether God's or Man's—is totalitarian with all the seeds inherent in such a system. . . . Buddha clearly saw what a dictatorship was in essence, and by his denial of the existence of the Great Dictator he freed mankind from the bondage of all forms of dictatorship and killed the germs of human tyranny." <sup>8</sup>

### **Social Gospel**

Besides being inspired with missionary zeal in proclaiming the virtues of an elder humanism, since World War II Theravada monks and laymen have become social activists. Though previously Buddhism had been criticized as an escapist, world-negating and monkish faith, it is presently identified with Asian nationalism and social reconstruction. "What is perhaps the most significant development of all is that present-day Buddhism is displaying a

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pp. 8-9.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Benz, Ibid. p. 231.

distinct sense of political mission, as against the Western world. As modern Buddhism sees it, the Buddhist nations of Asia have a special task of achieving the Buddhist conception of peace."<sup>11</sup>

Because of long sad experiences as downtrodden subjects of European superpowers, Buddhists in Ceylon, Burma, India, Cambodia, Laos and to a lesser extent Thailand and Vietnam have become outspokenly anti-western. Buddhist statesmen joined with Muslims, Hindus and "deviationist" Communists like Tito and Chou En-lai to create a Third World bloc of non-aligned nations equally opposed to America and the Russians. As soon as possible Burma cut all ties with the British, while some South Vietnamese monks openly opposed the Diem and Thieu regimes because the latter were Catholic (therefore, allegedly puppets of imperialism). Both Red China and the Soviet Union have repeatedly encouraged Buddhists of southeast Asia to oppose the western imperialists and their propaganda has often been successful."

After converting from Hinduism to Buddhism, the leader of India's untouchables claimed that the gospel of Buddha is superior to all rival religions because of its social relevance. He saw its value as fourfold: 1) Buddhism says society must be built on respect for the moral law; 2) it is in harmony with reason and science rather than relying on transrational revelation or a priestly hierarchy; 3) Buddhism believes in liberty, equality and fraternity for *all* men—not just rich men or white men; 4) it refuses to glorify poverty but preaches the virtue of a middle path between materialistic self-indulgence and ascetic self-negation.<sup>12</sup>

In sympathy with the concept of Buddhist socialism, the Burmese Prime Minister U Nu pushed a law through parliament nationalizing all the land in the country. Whether such drastic methods help or hinder national development is debatable, but the

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<sup>11</sup> E. Benz, *Ibid*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Benz, *Ibid*, pp. 201-209. From Sept. 1955-August 1956 the Chinese conducted a tour of Burma displaying the sacred tooth of Buddha which had been kept in Peking, and in 1961 the relic was carried around Ceylon which is famous for another of Buddha's teeth kept in a temple at Kandy. This somewhat quieted Buddhist criticism of Red China for its invasion of Tibet.

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Ambedkar, quoted in Benz, *Ibid*, pp. 48-49.

religious motivation behind U Nu's act he himself made quite clear. While Buddha teaches that man's most urgent duty is to attain Nibbana in the shortest possible time, the propertied class and the masses have exhausted their energy in constant warfare over material things. Obsessed with their need to get land and hold it, people have neglected their duty to attain Nibbana. Property is only of value to help men meet their needs in their journey to a state of supreme enlightenment.

### **Buddhist Ecumenicity**

Contemporary Buddhism has developed much the same sort of ecumenical spirit as the Christians. The Buddhist World Fellowship was organized in 1950 with headquarters in Bangkok, while the World Council of Churches was established two years earlier with its central offices in Geneva. Meetings of the B.W.F. have been held biennially in various cities in the Buddhist world. Since Buddhism is not as highly organized as the Christian denominations, these international conferences are largely inspirational gatherings. Like the W.C.C., ecumenical Buddhism is not yet a major concern of the rank and file monks or laymen."

Rapprochement between the Theravada and Mahayana schools has barely commenced. Besides substantial differences over doctrine, scripture, ritual and monastic discipline, the northerners and southerners are separated by geography, language barriers, cultural backgrounds and over two thousand years of division. In modern times efforts to construct an ideological platform upon which all Buddhists could agree were initiated by an American and an Englishman. In 1891 Colonel Olcott prepared a brief statement of fourteen "Fundamental Buddhistic Beliefs" which he persuaded some Japanese, Burmese, Ceylonese, Mongolians and Indians to approve.'<sup>4</sup> In 1945, Christmas Humphreys drew up a second statement of twelve Buddhist principles which was endorsed by seventeen Japanese sects, the Siamese Supreme Patri-

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<sup>13</sup> Benz, *ibid*, pp. 83-93.

<sup>10</sup> For the full statement, see C. Humphreys, *Buddhism*, pp. 71-73.

arch, as well as Chinese, Burmese and Ceylonese leaders."

The most impressive of all Buddhist assemblies thus far convened at Rangoon (1954-56) to celebrate the 2500th anniversary of Buddha's entrance into Nibbana. Under the direct guidance of the Prime Minister U Nu, the Burmese erected the World Peace Pagoda and a rough granite council hall made to look like the cave in which the first Buddhists assembled. At the end of the council 2500 novices were simultaneously ordained as monks, symbolizing a renaissance of Buddhism in the next two and a half millennia. <sup>6</sup>

Since Buddhist spokesmen claim to represent nearly one third of the world's population," if all of them could work together Buddhists would be a decisive factor in world affairs. While that dream is still to be realized, the B.W.F. expends its energies on more modest goals: education, social work, doctrinal studies and worldwide missions. Among its immediate objectives are the restoration of ancient Buddhist sanctuaries, introduction of the Buddhist calendar, establishment of study centers and an international Buddhist university, the formulation of a simple Buddhist catechism and the improvement of religious education programs. As for social action, Buddhists have resolved to abolish the death penalty" and repeatedly issue pleas for international peace. Nevertheless, as agents of social righteousness they have often been ineffective. This is probably best indicated in the timid response of world Buddhism to the brutal conquest of Tibet by the Red Chinese.' <sup>9</sup>

Besides the growth of an ecumenical spirit among the varied sects of Buddhists, most recently dialogue between Christians and Buddhists has begun on a limited scale. At the Nairobi General Assembly in 1975 the W.C.C. invited non-Christian leaders to attend as official guests. In spite of considerable protest against "syncretism" from evangelicals and traditionalists, both the

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Humphreys, *Ibid.*, pp. 74-76.

<sup>6</sup> Benz, *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>7</sup> U Chan Htoon, *Ibid.*, p. 1, a claim made at the Chicago Congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom, August 12, 1958.

<sup>8</sup> A practical application of *metta*: compassion for all life.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Benz, *Ibid.*, "Glossing over the Annexation of Tibet," pp. 196-200.

World Council and the Vatican are conducting interfaith discussions among all men of goodwill. Buddhists have responded favorably to such concrete examples of a growing tolerance."

### **The Marxist Threat**

Like the Christians, Buddhists have been confronted by Marxism. In Theravada countries, communism however has had the advantage of masquerading as an ally in the protracted struggle for national liberation. This has been true in Laos and Cambodia, once colonies of France, and in India, Burma and Sri Lanka, once part of the British Empire. There can be little doubt that Communists won considerable support in southeast Asia because they posed as liberators resisting foreign capitalists and imperialist armies of occupation. Only gradually after these nations had won their independence did it become apparent to Asians that Marxism was a dangerous foe instead of a sympathetic friend. For Burma, communism meant bloody revolts; for India it produced war with China and Chinese annexation of a sizeable portion of the disputed northern frontier; for Sri Lanka it resulted in internal unrest; for Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia it caused prolonged civil war and finally imposition of cruel Red regimes. In many cases Theravada Buddhists heard the warning of their Thai colleague far too late: "The Communists are Knocking at the Door—Beware!"<sup>21</sup>

Several Buddhist arguments against Marxism have been developed and widely circulated in Theravada lands. First, Buddhists resent the Communist slogan that Karl Marx provides all the answers to our human problems. In an address delivered to the Burmese parliament, U Nu said of the Communist, ". . . when he has the effrontery to say that Marx was wiser than the Lord Buddha, then it is our duty to call him down. . . . The wisdom or knowledge which can be ascribed to Karl Marx is less than a tenth of a particle of dust lying at the feet of our great Lord Buddha."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Winston L. King, *Buddhism and Christianity*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1962, for a sympathetic study of Theravada Buddhism by a liberal Protestant.

<sup>21</sup> Title of a pamphlet by Dr. Suriyabongse Pisuthiapataya discussed by Benz, *Ibid*, pp. 217-218.

<sup>22</sup> Speech of Oct. 3, 1950, quoted by Benz, p. 222.

A Ceylonese writer also criticizes Marxist totalitarianism. According to Marxist theory and practice, the state is almighty, the supreme organ to which all individual liberties must be sacrificed. The Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China demonstrate the vast gulf which exists between Marxism and Buddhism, he states. Communism relies on compulsion and men will always hate to be coerced. No one will voluntarily surrender to a dictated happiness. Against the Buddhist doctrine of man are Communist repression of personal freedoms, denial of a free press, opposition to liberty of conscience and suppression of dissenting minorities.<sup>23</sup> By contrast with Marxist methods, Buddha relied on reason and compassion to bring men to perfection.

Buddhism and Marxism are likewise incompatible in the light of the latter's dialectical materialism, insists one Burmese leader. In his opinion "Buddhism is the precise antithesis of materialism."<sup>24</sup> Whereas the materialist contends that mind is only the by-product of matter, Buddhism states that mind precedes matter, is superior to matter and shapes matter to suit the mind's purposes. Buddha sought enlightenment—not material well-being. His followers have always insisted on the power of the human spirit to transcend physical limitations. For Buddhists the mental and spiritual faculties of man are far more important than his economic needs or his class structures. Hence modern Buddhists praise both contemporary physicists who reduce matter to energy-events and parapsychologists who validate the existence of telepathy, clairvoyance and ESP.

Marxism underlines the significance of class warfare: capitalists against laborers, rich against poor. According to a Ceylonese intellectual, all this propaganda about the class struggle reveals the immoral foundation of communism. Marx relied on hatred as his chief weapon in the political struggle. Quite naturally, the poor hate the rich, the powerless hate the powerful, those ruled hate their rulers. "What Marx did was to erect hatred into a cosmic principle and the source of all progress."<sup>25</sup> In essence, Marxism is

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23 Vijayavardhana, *The Revolt in the Temple*, quoted by Benz, p. 220.

<sup>24</sup> U Chan Htoon. *Buddhism and the Age of Science*, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in *Benz, Ibid*, pp. 220-221.



built upon the most debased instinct of man—his desire for revenge. Completely different is the Buddhist ethic of love, sympathy and kindness! As a Thai writer notes, "Buddhism counters the Communist call for class hatred, revolution and world conquest by its own commandments of kindness, friendliness, sympathy and tolerance."<sup>26</sup>

A Thai princess who was elected president of the World Buddhist Fellowship points out the utter dissimilarity between Marxist and Buddhist endeavors at social reform. "One should first purify oneself to be able to show the way to others. We can only have a better world when we first have better people. Fear, jealousy, ego-centrism, hatred, and greed are the original causes of human strife, be it petty crime or global war. Education, legislation and arbitration, while useful countermeasures, will not suffice to penetrate to the core of human motivation and alter one's basic feelings."<sup>27</sup>

In metaphysics, ethics, spirituality and practice Theravada Buddhists are opposed to Marxism in general, Leninism and Maoism in particular. Unfortunately, whether foreign pressures and political conditions inside their nations will force them to accommodate their Buddhism to Marxist dictatorship, is something no one can predetermine.

## VII. BUDDHIST MESSIANISM

### The Buddhist Satan

Books on Buddhism written for Westerners pay scant attention to the fact that Buddhists believe in a personal devil. Nevertheless, the Evil One whom the Christians call Satan appears in Buddhism as *Mara*, the lord of misfortune, sin, destruction and death.<sup>28</sup> Mara is the ruler of desire and death, the two evils that

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 218.

<sup>27</sup> Princess Poon Pismai Diskul, quoted in R.C. Lester, *Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1973, pp. 155-156. Lester's book contains a useful bibliography on Buddhism in Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand for students who wish additional information.

<sup>28</sup> James W. Boyd, *Satan and Mara*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1975, a comparison of Christian and Buddhist symbols of evil.

chain man to the wheel of ceaseless rebirth. Mara reviles man, blinds him, guides him toward sensuous desires; once man is in his bondage, Mara is free to destroy him.

Buddhist tradition holds that Buddha encountered Mara on several occasions. When he abandoned the traditional ascetic practices of Hinduism, Mara reproached him for straying from the path of purity. Mara later reappeared as a Brahmin, criticizing him for neglecting the techniques of the yogins. At another time, Mara persuades householders in a village to refuse to give alms to the Buddha. Mara also accuses Buddha of sleeping too much, and not keeping busy like the villagers.

In a famous incident similar to Jesus' temptation, Mara urges Buddha to become a universal king and establish a great empire in which men can live in peace. He reminds Buddha that he can turn the Himalayas into gold—if he but wishes—so that all men will become rich. Buddha replies that a single man's wants are so insatiable that even two such golden mountains would fail to satisfy him.<sup>29</sup>

While Mara is unable to subjugate Buddha, he is more successful with Buddha's followers. As the source of evil, he causes misunderstanding between teachers and pupils, casts doubt on the value of Buddha's sayings by calling them nothing but poetry, or encourages monks to waste their time on abstruse speculations. Worse, he appears in the guise of a monk, nun, relative or prominent Brahmin, bringing false news that a disciple is destined to be a new Buddha. If the disciple succumbs to the temptation, he will be filled with sinful pride. Mara could even appear in the form of Gautama Buddha in order to confuse Buddhists or lead them astray.

Mara is lord of all men who are bound by sense desires. His origin, according to Theravada commentators, was as a rebellious prince who seized control of our world from the supreme god of the highest heaven. As prince of this world, Mara can boast of possessing great majesty and influence. Though he has only a spirit body, he is endowed with the five modes of sensual pleasure, has plenty

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<sup>29</sup> Boyd, *Ibid* , pp. 81-82.

to eat and drink, and lives to amuse himself.

Besides controlling a host of servants and a vast army of demons, Mara has wives, three daughters and five sons. His daughters are named "craving," "discontent," and "passion," and appear as beautiful and seductive young women whose chief ambition in life is to ensnare monks. Nevertheless, for Buddhists, sooner or later all living souls, even Mara, will attain Nibbana.<sup>30</sup>

Because many scholars do not believe in a personal Satan, they imply that Buddha's references to Mara are mere figures of speech; but the Buddhist texts do not necessarily imply anything of the sort. In Theravada countries, veneration of good spirits and the placation of evil spirits are characteristic Buddhist practices. For example, the Burmese hang a coconut tied with a bit of red cloth near their home altars as an offering to the spirits. Special dances are also performed during the winter harvest season, during which a participant becomes "possessed" by spirits in order to bless the crops.<sup>31</sup>

Buddhism has a specific, living prince of evil; but, as Buddhist writers take pains to point out, it has no Adam and Eve story and no doctrine of original sin. Yet for Buddhists, the present state of human existence is "fallen" in that men are caught in a web of illusion, and long for liberation. Even though, according to Buddhist theory, men have not inherited the guilt flowing from an original sin, they are still trapped in a present state of suffering as a result of evil committed in numerous past lives. Buddhism and Christianity agree that man is far from what he should be and his world is subject to the control of a malicious spirit, a powerful king of desire.

### **The Coming Buddha**

Until recently, almost no Buddhist scholar, Western or Eastern, would term Buddhism messianic. While all books on the religion mentioned briefly the traditional hope in a Buddha-to-come, no one felt that it deserved more than passing notice.

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<sup>30</sup> Boyd, (*hid*, pp. 115-116.

W.L. King, *A Thousand Lives Away*, pp. 50-51.

Messianism, however, has reappeared in contemporary Theravada Buddhism, especially in Burma.<sup>32</sup>

According to Buddhist scripture, Gautama predicted that at some future time another Buddha would come to help men set up an ideal kingdom of righteousness and peace. The coming Buddha is called *Mettaya*, (Sanskrit: Maitreya) meaning "love." In Theravada temples he is portrayed as a king rather than a monk because of his role as a ruler in the new world order. Most of the time the Maitreya hope has not been a major part of Buddhist piety. However, when Theravada monks and laymen were freed from colonial subjection after World War II, in the excitement of winning their independence, a new age seemed at hand. If the first 2500 years was a time of toil and trial for them, the next 2500 years would be filled with dazzling victories.

In one of his speeches Dharmapala briefly explained the Maitreya hope. The present cosmic aeon is called the great good one because four Buddhas have already come and a fifth is expected when a new race of men appears. The present human race will continue to deteriorate; righteousness will gradually disappear as injustice, cruelty and lust increase. This aeon (Kaliyuga) will last for 2,500,000 years, and then will begin the dawn of a new era. Men as we know them now will gradually die off but the remnant will provide the nucleus for a better race to come. The next Buddha, declared Dharmapala, would be born at Benares in a family of Brahmin caste. With his advent a reign of perfect righteousness will commence. There will no longer be any killing, stealing, adultery, drunkenness, filth or mud huts. The cities will all be lighted; parks and gardens will abound. Then, man will enjoy heaven on earth.<sup>33</sup>

However, Burmese nationalists today believe in an imminent

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<sup>32</sup> Benz gives credit to Emmanuel Sarkisyanz, *Russland und der Messianismus des Ostens—Setzungsbewusstsein und politischer Chiliasmus des Ostens*, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1955, for this discovery. Professor Sarkisyanz treats Buddhist messianism as background to the Burmese revolution, Chinese Lamaistic messianism and its political effects, as well as Russia and its Lamaistic messianism. Cf. Benz, *Ibid*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>33</sup> A. Dharmapala, *Return to Righteousness*, Ministry of Education, Ceylon, 1965, pp. 113-114.

messianic age without the advent of a personal messiah. Premier U Nu reminded his fellow countrymen of man's original bliss in a long-lost Paradise. According to an old Burmese tale, in the early days of our world there was a magic tree whose fruit gave people everything they needed. Everybody was happy, until a few men got greedy. When the covetous grabbed more than their share at the expense of their brethren, the magic tree promptly disappeared. According to the Burmese statesman, Buddhist socialism could lead the nation back to the perfect age of the magic tree. Paradise will reappear because Burmese leftists will restore society to one based on needs alone.<sup>34</sup>

Certain aspects of Maitreya messianism deserve brief consideration. First of all, Buddhists clearly distinguish between Gautama and Maitreya. In Buddhist eschatology, Gautama is not expected to return; Maitreya is a different person whose mission and status are identical to that of Gautama. According to the oldest texts, Buddha does not promise to come back; what he promises is that Maitreya will become the next Buddha whose success will be far greater than his own.

Also, Maitreya will bring to fulfillment the Buddhist Dhamma and inaugurate an era of cosmic bliss; he will do so as a teacher and holy man. As the Dialogues of the Buddha report, Maitreya will be "fully awakened, full of wisdom and a perfect guide, himself having trodden the path to the very end; with knowledge of the worlds,<sup>35</sup> unsurpassed as an educator, teacher of gods and men, an Exalted Buddha. . . . From his own understanding and penetration of it, he will proclaim (the nature of) this universe. . . and (the nature of) living beings. And he will proclaim the teaching that is lovely in its origin, lovely in its progress, and lovely in its consummation. . . the higher life will be made known in all its fullness and in all its purity. . . . He will be the head of an order of many thousand monks, just as in the present period I (Gautama) am the head of an order of many hundred."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Benz, *Ibid*, pp. 113-114.

<sup>35</sup> A reference to the many levels of existence from Nibbana to hell in our present universe and the cycle of successive cosmic epochs.

*Digha-Nikaya*, IV: 25, 26; quoted in von Glasenapp, *Ibid*, p. 150.

In the past Buddhism offered to the Orient the hope for the highest kind of individual contentment based on liberation from worldly cares. Without denying this supreme goal, Buddhists today stress the value of creating a just and prosperous social order. This is the necessary prerequisite for the pursuit of the higher joys of the spirit; only in a just environment will men have the security and leisure they need for spiritual advancement. Gautama Buddha and Maitreya Buddha actually complement each other, the first reminding us of individual self-perfection, the second challenging us to bring about the messianic age of justice and material abundance for all.

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