

WHAT BUDDHISM MEANS TO ME

By Lama Anagarika Govinda

Buddhism to me is neither a dogma nor a set of beliefs, represented by a particular sect or school or religious organisation, but a mighty stream that has come down to us through the millenniums and that embodies the experiences of untold generations of devotees, poets, artists, scholars and saints, all of whom have contributed to its richness.

The source of this stream is the Enlightened One, or better still, the experience of Enlightenment, a state of consciousness of such universality that even after 2,500 years we have not yet exhausted its possibilities of expression and its manifold ways of realisation.

Great religions and spiritual traditions are not individual creations, though they may have been given their first impetus by great individuals. They grow from the germs of creative ideas, great experiences and profound visions. They grow through many generations, according to their own inherent law, just like a tree or any other living organism.

What the Buddha could teach in words was only a fraction of what he taught by his mere presence, his personality and his living example. And all these together are only a fraction of his spiritual experience. The Buddha himself was conscious of the shortcomings and limitations of word and speech. He hesitated to teach in words something that was too profound and subtle to be gasped by mere logic and ordinary human reasoning. Nevertheless there are still people who cannot see anything more in Buddhism than a "religion of reason" and to whom "reason" is strictly limited to the scientific illumination and the infallible logic of the last century!

Those who blindly believe in words, as well as those to whom historical antiquity is more important than Truth, will never admit this, because it would deprive them of their neatly arranged, preconceived ideas, their well-defined concepts, and their ready-made judgements, which relieve them of the necessity of thinking for themselves. They accuse later Buddhist schools of having gone beyond the Buddha, where in reality they have only gone beyond the time-conditioned concepts of the Buddha's contemporaries and their successors.

DIVERSE SCHOOLS

In order to gain a more balanced view of what constitutes Buddhism, we cannot rely on the testimony of one particular school only, however ancient it may be, since even the oldest records known to us were not committed to writing until

four centuries had elapsed after the Buddha's passing away, and by then no fewer than eighteen different schools of Buddhism had come into existence.

All these schools reflected the Buddha's teachings as truthfully and honestly as possible for human beings of different temperaments and different mental capacities. All were truly devoted to the Buddha and approached his teachings with the deepest reverence. It therefore does little credit to most of our scholars, that, being misled by the mere accident that the records of one school are better preserved or more easily accessible than those of others, they take these to be the only genuine source for determining the actual teachings of the Buddha.

"The human desire to see only one phase of the truth which we happen to perceive, and to develop and elevate it into a perfect logical system, is one reason why our philosophy is bound to grow stranger to life. He who talks about truth injures it thereby; he who tries to prove it there maims and distorts it; he who gives it a label and a school of thought kills it; and he who declares himself a believer buries it," says Lin Yutang.

The Buddha himself once asked Ananda whether he followed His teaching merely because he believed in the Teacher and his word. Ananda answered that he did not follow the Buddha's teaching because he believed in it, but because he himself had experienced it and found it true.

This describes the Buddhist attitude in a nutshell. The Buddha did not want to start a new religion or to formulate a new dogma, but rather to encourage every single individual to experience the truth for himself and to awaken to that ultimate Reality which we call Enlightenment. The Buddha did not regard himself as the inventor of a new teaching, but as the torch-bearer of an eternal spiritual law (dharma) which had been realised and propagated by innumerable Enlightened Ones before him, and which would likewise be propagated by other Enlightened Ones to come.

UNIVERSAL TEACHING

It is this universality of Buddhism which has ever been an inspiration to me and which has filled my life with increasing wonder at the manifold richness of spiritual experience and ways of realisation, which do not allow of mental stagnation or complacency but open up new vistas at every turn and corner.

In my early youth the tender humanity of the Buddha and the reasonableness and directness of his teaching appealed to me. There was nothing that contradicted the laws of nature or violated one's common sense. Universal law and normal law, the inner and the outer world, blended into one harmonious picture.

The law of Karma, of action and reaction, and of “dependent origination” which established the idea of causality in the realm of nature, seemed to close the gap which for ever has yawned between what are commonly understood as “religion” and “science”. Even the doctrine of rebirth – though a deep-seated conviction and a matter of personal experience – appeared to me more natural and convincing than the idea of coming into existence by a mere accident of material circumstances, and ending with utter annihilation or an equally undeserved eternal existence in a heavenly realm, after having been non-existent for an eternity in the past.

I was fortunate enough in early youth to have had the opportunity of informing myself of the main tenets of all great religions, without being influenced or compelled in any one or other direction, so that when I chose Buddhism it was the very expression of my innermost nature and not something forced upon me by circumstances. I certainly was a Buddhist long before I was born!

However, it is always interesting to see how, at different times, different aspects of the same thing appeal to us. While in youth the rational side of Buddhism and the “historical” figure of the Buddha stood in the foreground of my religious conviction, the experiences of later years showed me the shallowness of intellectual reasoning and convinced me of the irrational quality of Reality and of the spiritual character of the Buddha, by which the historical impulse of the past is transformed into a living force of the present into a living reality within us.

A VISION

When I said that Buddhism appeared to me like a river, a vision flash through my mind of the journey along this river and of the infinite variety of vistas which it revealed to me. I shall describe some of them, though I am conscious of the personal nature of such a vision and of the inadequacy of words and symbols to depict it.

In the beginning, the landscape was dominated by the mighty mountains of the Four Noble Truths: The Truth of Suffering, the Truth of its Causes, the Truth of Liberation, and the Truth of the Path of Liberation. The first of these mountains looked dark and sinister and was covered with ashes and black volcanic rock, bare of all vegetation, while an ominous indigo coloured cloud hovered over it like a pail of doom.

The second mountain belched forth fire and smoke, and streams of incandescent lava licked the sides of the summit with red, glowing tongues, while a rain of stone and fire crushed and extinguished all life around the raging mountain. And a thunderous voice filled the air: “Verily I tell you, the world is on fire. It burns with the fire of greed, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion!”

The third mountain was bathed in brilliant sunshine, and its peak gleamed with eternal snow in the dark-blue sky – unearthly, pure, far beyond the reach of mortals...But a fourth mountain loomed beside it, rising in eight lofty steps – and from the last and highest of them a multi-coloured radiance issued and threw a rainbow-bridge towards the white, gleaming peak. And again Buddha’s voice filled the air: “The path of deliverance is found, the Eightfold path that leads through Right Understanding, Right Aspirations, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Awareness, Right Meditation, to the final liberation of Nirvana.

There were lovely groves at the foot of the Mountains of Liberation, and many who wanted to prepare themselves for the steep ascent retired into their peaceful realms and devoted themselves to a life of renunciation and contemplation. And they built walls around themselves as a protection against the world and its disturbing influences; but the more they shut out the world, the less they were aware of those mighty mountains, and the sound of the waters of the great river became fainter and fainter.

Finally the walls became so high that even the Mountains of Liberation was lost to sight. But the recluses preserved the memory of the four mountains and of the Eightfold Path, leading to the summit of the highest and wrote many a learned tome on the dangers and wonders of those mountains. And though the world which they had shut out still fed them and clothed them, they felt that they had become independent of it, and thus there was no more necessity to leave their sheltered grove and to set out for a strenuous climb, which only few had attempted and even fewer accomplished. And those few had never returned.

But the river flowed on as ever. Thus many a year passed in this pleasant grove, until one day the call of the river reached some of the recluses whose yearning for liberation had not yet been lulled to sleep. And they set out on the great adventure of the river, and the further they travelled the more they realised that the river flowed towards the very aim they had been searching, and that, as it grew in width and in volume ever more pilgrims joined the spacious vessel that carried them along.

CONSUMMATION

It was as if the vessel grew with the river, and all the world were welcome to it. And suddenly they realised that the Eightfold Path leads right through the world and its first step is the recognition that there is nothing that separates us from our fellow-pilgrims, unless it be the illusion of our own uniqueness or superiority. A wave of warm love broke from their hearts and enveloped their fellow-pilgrims and all that lives until they felt wide and open and free as the sky. The spiritual path and the river had become one and flowed towards the

setting sun, into which it seemed to merge. And the radiance of the Waters of Life mingled with the radiance of the Sun of Enlightenment, and it seemed as if the lonely mountain of individual liberation received its glory only from the reflected light that emanated from the river and the setting sun into which it flowed.

And the radiance of the setting sun was filled with innumerable Buddhas and Bodhisatvas – all those who had gone before and all those who were still to come – because it is the realm where time is extinguished and past and future are one within the eternal present. Therefore the setting sun, towards which the river flows, will never set, and its radiance will never be extinguished for those who travel along the river.

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