

## Chapter 2

# *Finding A Way*

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### *Buddhism in a Word*

If there is one word more than others that suggests the true character of Buddhism it is 'openness'. The Dharma is open on both sides: there is a door for all who wish to enter and a door for those who wish to leave. Many westerners use the entrance and of them some use the exit. They are free to do so, and this applies to monks and nuns as well as to lay folk: free because Buddhism is the religion of freedom. Everyone knows that it is founded upon the Buddha's attainment of a state of enlightenment called *nirvana*; less known is the fact that the commonest synonym for nirvana is *vimutti*, meaning freedom. The light that the Buddha's Enlightenment shone into the world was the light of freedom, which is nothing other than the reflex of nirvana in the various aspects of living. It comprises the freedom to leave the community without explanation and without fear. This is more than can be said of other religions. Apostasy has always been seen as a peculiarly reprehensible act, and the apostate as the worst sort of traitor. The old catechism left children in no doubt as to this, quoting harsh words from St. Paul. And Nero and the other persecuting emperors were regarded with hardly more horror than Julian the Apostate; less, perhaps, since they made martyrs and saints and thereby strengthened the Church, whereas Julian's rejection was seen to threaten it in a particularly dangerous way. Today the Church accepts apostasy where it must with as good grace as it can. Islam continues to take a hard line.

Some of the most dedicated enemies of Buddhism in modern times have been apostates. Mao Zedong was born into a Buddhist family, but Marxist ideas came to dominate his life and subsequently the life of his country, to the great detriment of Buddhism, both there and in Tibet, 'reclaimed' as part of China. There are suggestions that towards the end of his life Mao may have come to regret some of the excesses of his regime. We have to hope that his last moments were brightened by a reconciling light. Pol Pot has already been mentioned. There is no more painful example of what can happen when absolute power and radical ideas combine. In the end, when he had ruined his

country and murdered millions of his people, he was overthrown, and died a fugitive in the bush. His funeral rites were conducted by a Buddhist monk, a sign perhaps that he repented at the end, and may thus be better able to receive any merit directed his way. To each according to his needs...

A westerner coming to Buddhism is likely to have been baptized into one or other of the Christian sects. In certain respects these are now much closer to each other than they used to be. In the bad old days before ecumenism opened its wide umbrella, a Catholic was likely to hear sermons poking fun at the Protestant denominations. The names of some of them were good for a laugh – Quakers, Shakers, Holy Rollers and so on – and their number seemed to be endless, a sure sign of incoherence. There they were, quaking, shaking and rolling in a morass of error, in contrast to the majestic progress of the Roman Church under the leadership of an infallible Pope. At that time, too, the Catholic press was notable for its mocking tone, especially towards Anglicans. This was altogether an unedifying business. Then there was the recruitment of the arch-apostate James Joyce in support of the Church. At the end of *A Portrait of the Artist*, his autobiographical hero is asked by a companion if he intends to become a Protestant, and he answers that while he may have lost his religion he has not lost his self-respect, and has not abandoned an absurdity which is logical and coherent to adopt one which is illogical and incoherent. It was disturbing to find this quoted in a Catholic paper, without attribution, just as the words of ‘a famous Irish writer’, when one had read that his first book of fiction had been bought up and burned by a Catholic organization.

### ***Freedom and Control***

The effect of all this, however, was the opposite of what was intended, for one began to have reservations about the sort of institution that would treat its fellow Christians so uncharitably. Under the ceremony and the grandeur and the divine inspiration claimed, there seemed to be something cheap at the heart of it. The face of a rather unpleasant clown too often showed smirking under the finery. I did not then know that some Protestant sects were just as bad, and have continued to be so, even as the Roman Church has seemed to be mending its ways.

Catholicism in those days seemed to live in the shadow of Pius X, an ultra-conservative Pope, dead before the First World War. He was undoubtedly a remarkable person, as a poor boy who rises to such an eminence must be. His faults, however, seem to have been as great as his virtues and they were reflected in the narrow-mindedness, illiberalism and spiritual timidity of Catholic society. But at least, it might be argued, the people knew what they were supposed to believe. Maybe so, for better or worse. In Buddhism at any

rate the case is certainly different. We all have to find out for ourselves what the Dharma is. This can mean that a statement of belief becomes something else, something starting as an enquiry and ending as a reinterpretation. But the Buddha called his Way '*Ehipassika*', not only a description but an invitation: literally, 'Come, see'; and everyone sees something different and this is allowed for, thanks to the spirit of openness which the Buddha infused into the Way.

This spirit is of particular importance to Buddhist writers. Their intellectual freedom is taken for granted. There is no organization with claims upon them, and anxious lest they misrepresent it. All that is required of them is to tell the truth as they see it – strictly a matter for their intelligence and integrity.

This major difference between the two faiths may arise from a simple metaphor. Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd and his followers sheep. The relationship between shepherd and sheep – the pastor and his flock – became the norm in the Church. A shepherd gives care and protection to his charges, and if one of them strays he follows and brings it back, knowing that being with the flock must be better for the errant creature than the dangers of wandering alone. Benign as it may be, the relationship of shepherd and flock is one of supervision and control. So, from very early on, the leaders of the Christian community were called supervisors – in Greek, *episkopoi*, an appellation of which the word 'bishop' is a well-disguised derivative.

In ancient India the sheep seems to have been unknown as a domesticated animal. There were others, of course, most notably the cow, but no metaphor based on the herdsman's work was developed in Buddhism. This being so, while lay Buddhists may look to the clergy for guidance and instruction in the moral sphere, they are always free to go where they will in the wide fields of Dharma and to make mistakes and even misinterpretations, without fear of authority, provided only they go in good faith and do not leave their critical faculty behind.

### ***Selecting from the Buddhist Scriptures***

So far, so good. But the fields of Dharma are very wide indeed and it is easy enough to get lost without a guide. There are of course many guides in the West today, some of them very good. The best guide however is the Buddha himself and the best way to avail of his guidance is to read the Scriptures. They are available in the major western languages, though sometimes the translations are not from the original languages but from earlier English translations; not a satisfactory state of affairs.

Buddhism is the doctrine of the Middle Way, the way of moderation, and one might expect it to be reflected in the quantitative aspect of the Scriptures. Unfortunately, moderation seems to have been forgotten when the Scriptures were compiled. It is one thing to urge the reading of them, and easy enough to start. But where does one finish? It is a long way from the opening of the *Dhammapada* to the end of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* or the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*, and probably very few people, even dedicated scholars, make it in one life. It is a good thing that we believe in rebirth. One life of common span is not enough.

Then, in addition, there is the difficulty of laying hands on a particular text when one has time on hand. There are sutras and tantras that I shall probably never see. One of them may contain the precise set of words that would enable me to fly along the Path where now I plod. Tant pis. And anyway the magic might well be lost in the translation. For even the most accessible texts have not always been best-served in that respect; which, of course, is understandable, considering the difficulties of the undertaking. It is not only that the texts are so numerous, but that western languages, saturated as they are with the religious, philosophic, social, and scientific influences that have shaped our history, are not always receptive to Buddhist ideas.

Words, like people and institutions, become set in their ways. Descartes, Hume, Kant, Wittgenstein, have laid down what some of the important ones are supposed to mean and those words will not readily extend themselves further. If there is one thing in Buddhist scholarship which is regrettable above all other, it is that the successors of Alexander the Great did not, when they converted to Buddhism, have such scriptures as were then in existence translated into Greek. A version in a language that had proved adequate to the thought of Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle but was still, in the philosophical domain, young and receptive, would be invaluable. It would also have had benefits at the time. One of the most glaring defects of the classical period was its lack of an ethic of compassion. The Stoics were perhaps the closest in some ways to the early Buddhists; Stoicism has indeed been called Buddhism without compassion. Acquaintance with the Buddha's thought might have moved them from *apatheia* to *sympatheia* and their famous 'world-citizen' might have brought not only light but warmth with him, not only righteousness but mercy. But the Milindas and other kings did not have the discourses translated, or if they did, the texts have been lost, like so much ancient literature. Some two thousand years were to pass before Buddhism became known in the West and its Canon was translated into a western language.

But it is translated now, and there is a lot of it, and one of the challenges it poses is that of selection. The texts are not all of equal value. One devotes time and thought to a chosen few – those which one is likely to choose will either contain the fundamentals of the faith or seem particularly relevant to the

world of today or to one's own situation. The rest may be postponed to another time, another life.

It has always to be borne in mind that the texts were not written down until centuries after the Buddha's death, so that we cannot attribute them to him word for word. Some will see this as a most unsatisfactory state of affairs. On the positive side, it leaves us with a body of doctrine which directs but does not bind, a system suited to men and women who value independence and aspire to freedom.

