

OLYMPIA: BODY

There are certain words which open a door into another culture. Such a word in matters Grecian is *agon*, whose meanings range from ‘lawsuit’ to ‘prizefight’. With its derivatives ‘protagonist’ and ‘antagonist’ it does not suggest peace or peaceful solutions. Yet, when the great games, the *agones*, were held, the wars stopped, and Greeks turned from fighting on the battlefield to competing in sports under the patronage of Castor and Pollux. Games were celebrated at Delphi, Nemea, Isthmia, Dodona and other smaller places. The greatest were at Olympia, in honor of Zeus, the greatest of the gods, believed to dwell on Mount Olympus.

Today tourists disport themselves among the ruins, the fitter ones on the dusty track where long ago Theagenes of Thasos gained so many prizes. Theagenes was an athletic wonder, winner of more than a thousand races. But the greatest wonder at Olympia was the statue of Zeus, the first indeed of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, a gigantic figure made of gold and ivory, and so majestic that it seemed to be imbued with the spirit of the god. It was the work of Phidias the Athenian whom the Greeks esteemed as the greatest of sculptors. Ironically, he only came to be working at Olympia because a politically motivated lawsuit drove him from his city. Rising above his troubles he made this statue an embodiment not only of majesty and power, we are told, but of serenity and fatherly concern. One may think of it both as looking back to Homer and the heroic age and forward to the Stoics and Cleanthes, the retired boxer who became the second leader of that school, and wrote a fine poem to the Father of gods and men:

...

*Your impulse charges all the works of nature;
Thus you direct the Universal Word
To move through all, mingling with sun and stars.*

...

*Father, raise us from ignorance and gloom
Disperse them from our minds, let us attain
To Reason, the high quality you trust
To ensure your rule is never less than just.*

The games took place over just five days every four years during the month-long Sacred Truce. There were competitions for men and boys. They ran, wrestled, boxed, threw javelins and drove chariots. The Greeks saw divinity in the human body and the games were both a celebration of it and an offering of its beauty and force to the gods. In most of the events the competitors were naked. The Greek word is *gymnos*, whence ‘gymnasium’, the place where not only athletes trained but where citizens generally kept

their bodies in trim. Whence also the word ‘gymnosophist’ as the Greeks called the naked ascetics they found in India, when Alexander the Great led them to that distant land. Asceticism, naked or otherwise, was uncongenial to the Greeks, though not entirely unknown. Diogenes the Cynic was the home-grown example, a wise man who was also a wit, and the first to call himself a citizen of the world, *cosmopolites*, and who declared freedom of speech to be the most beautiful thing in the life of man. Alexander was greatly impressed with Diogenes, as he was to be later in India with Calanus the gymnosophist, who when his time came mounted the funeral pyre and died conscious in the flames with the Greek host gathered around.

It is unlikely that Calanus was a Buddhist. The *civara* made of saffron cloth was required to be worn by the bhikkhu in life and death. Nakedness was not a feature of the Buddhist way, nor adoration of the body. It was to be treated with respect, neither neglected nor indulged: mortification was anathema; so was luxury. But the body has prime position in the skandha model of man. Called *rupa* or *kaya*, it is the basis on which life is founded. We are enjoined to look after our body but not to be dominated by its demands. It should be neither slave nor master, but a partner in the discipline of the good life.

When the Greeks went to India they took their culture with them, and part of it was the glorification of the body as expressed in their *agones*. The natives would see them wrestle and box, run and ride in competition. Indians were used to violence as entertainment, though it seems to have been mainly in combats between beasts. As members of the Buddhist Sangha were forbidden to attend such sports, it is unlikely that they would have gone to see men fighting each other. At Olympia the gods themselves were believed to have come down to compete: Apollo, the god of the arts, beat Ares, the god of war, at boxing. Would that have impressed the bhikkhus? Or would they have said, violence is violence whosoever perpetrates it, and no less a breach of the First Morality if a god is its author. *We* may see a deep symbolic meaning in this struggle between culture and destructiveness, but to most people of that time, in India or Greece or anywhere on the wide earth, divine powers were real, and when they were described as fighting, it was believed that real blows were struck.

The early Buddhists, however, had a rather offhand attitude to the gods, the *devas*. They saw their state as continuous with that of man. Greek gods, in the popular mind, might take on human form, as when Castor and Pollux were believed to go about the country testing places for their hospitality to strangers; for the occasion they appeared as men. The Indian *devas* had been men and would be again. Their time in heaven was the result of merit won on earth and when the merit was used up they faced life in the world again. The Buddhists thought of them as self-indulgent and, in the higher reaches, inclined to an unjustified self-importance. Projecting such

attitudes onto the new Greek gods, they might not have been entirely surprised to hear of foreign devas having fist-fights at Olympia, though they might have contrasted such energy with the indolent ways of the Vedic pantheon.

In the ancient Olympics boxing, *pygmakhia*, was not as brutal as it would become under the Romans, but even in the early days fatalities were not unknown. In England many centuries later, it was honored as ‘the noble art of self-defence’. In so far as physical force is confined to defense it is surely not contrary to the First Principle or Precept which forbids violence against living beings. But that is not how boxing works. With two men absolutely on the defensive there is no contest. One or both must attack. The violence may be strictly regulated but it is essential, and thus questionable under the First Principle.

One thing especially that makes boxing hard to justify is its incompatibility with the structure of the human body. Brain and sense organs are located in the head, and the head is the main recipient of punches in the ring. Every blow inflicts an injury great or small, and the effect is cumulative and the consequences inescapable. There have been so many tragedies behind the glamor; they make painful reading for anyone who remembers great boxers in the days of their glory. If they violate the First Principle, they certainly pay for it in this life.

To people of my age it seems not so long ago that there was an Apollo-like boxer named Muhammad Ali whose light feet and heavy fists seemed to ensure immunity from the fate of ordinary fighters. Not so. Even he succumbed to the accumulation of punishment. What is a Buddhist to think about a sport which, more than any other, would seem to violate the First Precept of Buddhist Morality?

As said above, self-defense is surely not contrary to the First Precept. But the force used should be proportionate at most and minimal ideally. Buddhist monks in China thought out a sort of metaphysical minimalism and developed techniques arguably compatible with the Precept in that they warded off the aggressor’s force so that it turned back upon him, requiring no direct contribution from the intended victim.

In boxing, however, the violence cannot be minimal. The training is directed to the maximal output of force, the maximal delivery of blows and infliction of hurt. Of course if this were the whole story it would be a simple matter to condemn the sport and its practitioners out of hand. But the men who box for a pastime as amateurs or for their livelihood as professionals are not to be identified with this one activity: that would be contrary to the central Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*. Outside the ring they are often among the gentlest of men, as averse from violence as any other person.

The problem is made more complicated for a western Buddhist by the fact that Thailand, a Buddhist country, has developed a form of boxing which uses feet as well as hands and so would seem to be doubly violent. What may be the attitude of the Thai Sangha to kick-boxing I do not know, but the sport has now come West, and is growing in popularity here.

Men will fight. If they choose to do so in the ring, better that the practice be regulated so that it is kept as humane as possible and the risk of injury is minimized. This is best done by keeping the thing legal. Otherwise it will go underground and the safeguards will be reduced or abandoned. Lay Buddhists will do best to follow the Discipline of the monks and not attend fights; they may also choose not to give boxing the metaphysical support of watching it on television. On the positive side they will support efforts to make violent sports of whatever kind safer and less injurious.

Turning from the physical, it is notable that even intellectually the *agon*, the competitive spirit, is not strongly developed in Buddhism. The eristic quality of the Platonic dialogues is not found in most of their Buddhist counterparts, which tend to be expository, and understandably so, for the Buddha is not seeking the truth – he claims to have found it; he is conveying a mode of salvation, not demonstrating an intellectual instrument. ‘We may disagree but let us not argue’, he is reported to have said. Argument fosters the notion that the quest for truth is a purely intellectual enterprise. In Buddhist terms this is not so. The whole person must be committed, body and feelings along with the intellect. In the Greek tradition it is something of this sort which raises Socrates to a level above that of philosophy. When the time of dialectical agonism was over he showed that he had mastered his emotions and gave up his body without fear in a final act of witness. Until then, as reported, his way was an intellectual love of truth; in his last days it was something more.

Greek life was essentially social. Aristotle’s famous phrase universalizes the quality: man is a *politikon zoon*, a social animal. We know a great deal about this life, which centred on the agora, the market place, in every city. But we know much less about the inner life of the Greeks. Their conception of the gods changed more than a little after Homer; not so it would seem, their ideas of living. They continued to live an essentially outward life. Was it Aristotle also who said that solitude was not to be borne but by a god or a beast? – it was not a thing for man. The Cynic philosophers were exceptions to this, but while their attitudes were noted, their general influence was slight, in part, it may be, on account of their indifference to things that engaged the popular mind, and among those things the great games were pre-eminent. When Alexander asked Diogenes if he could do anything for him, ‘Get out of my light’, he snapped. He

would hardly have been more civil to a victor in the games however many crowns of olive leaves adorned him.

The Buddha would have been more polite, though not any more impressed by the ‘great Emathian conqueror’ than by an athletic celebrity or a philosopher. The probability is that he would have considered the *agon* as another form of *tanha*, the craving – carnal, emotional, intellectual – that binds us to the recurrent round of existence.

Yet it would be a mistake to think that there is no such thing as the *agon* in Buddhism. It is there, but in another mode. The Dharma is predicated on the idea of struggle, only it is not struggle with others on the physical or intellectual planes. In the Buddhist *agon* the opponent is the self, the location is the spiritual sphere, and the prize is an ever-deepening quality of freedom.