

### ***DELPHI: CONSCIOUSNESS***

The excursion buses open their doors, and groups from the old barbarian lands drift up the Sacred Way among the ruins. The ruins are extensive: ruins of Apollo's temple, of the theatre, of the stadium; ruins of treasuries, for Delphi was a centre of wealth where cities and islands deposited gold. The visitors will also see the Museum and its famous statue of the Charioteer. The site at the foot of Mt. Parnassus is said to be magical in moonlight, but the buses will not wait for the moon. In an hour or two the guides will gather their charges and see them back to their various resorts. Some of the visitors will have picked up a stone or plucked a sprig of thyme. All will have memories of the visit, even if only of a mild disappointment, for in this most celebrated of Greek holy places they may have hoped for some small sense of the god's presence. But it is a long time since a numen pervaded Delphi. As far back as the fourth century it was already in decay. That was when the apostate Emperor Julian tried to revive the cult of Apollo. His representative came here before the fatal campaign against the Persians. The oracle spoke for the last time:

*The splendid fane is fallen, the god has no shelter now;  
The mantic laurel is gone, the fountain's mouth is dry.*

So very different from the great days of the cult. High summer was the time of pilgrimage and people came daily in their thousands to worship a god who more than all the others seemed to represent the spirit of Hellas: Apollo the god of light and of the arts. When the Olympic torch was lit this year the ceremony was preceded by a prayer to him. Even after two thousand years of Christianity one felt it was not an empty set of words.

In ancient times the oracle was of course at the heart of the cult at Delphi, which the Greeks believed to be the very centre of the world. Not only Greeks but foreigners resorted to the oracle, most famously Croesus, the rich and generous king of Lydia. Contemplating war with Cyrus of Persia, he sought counsel from the Pythia, as the priestess was known. She spoke, and on the strength of her words, that if he crossed the river Halys he would destroy an empire, he advanced. Like other leaders before and since, he saw only encouragement where there was also warning. The empire destroyed was his.

Although such stories entertain us still, we do not believe in divine oracles any more. Delphi lives on however in its admonitions, the most famous of which is 'Know yourself'. If one phrase could be said to encapsulate the spiritual life of modern man, it would surely be this.

Attributed to Thales, the Ionian philosopher, it has a sort of prophetic quality, as if conceived with us rather than the ancient Greeks in mind. Through it, an outward-looking people, who had no doubts as to who they were, speaks directly to an age beset by such doubts. These go back a long way and have a distinguished history: Montaigne, Rousseau, Maine de Biran introduced the subjective theme; Freud and the psychologists built their systems on it; existentialists and phenomenologists gave it philosophical tone. Now the quest for self-knowledge has become the problem of identity.

At the beginning of the new western millenium the expression 'Crisis of Identity' is heard more than ever before, often in relation to unsettled minorities, but not confined to them: there is the ever-increasing number of redundant workers whose jobs previously 'defined' them. How can you know yourself when your identity is in doubt? – when some of the terms by which you recognized yourself have no more meaning?

Identity. The Greeks may have had a word for it, but the West has opted for a Late Latin term to signify the idea and the problem. It comes from *idem*, meaning 'the same', and thus it necessarily points to something other than the subject. This observation is made because we tend to think of identity as an inherent property established and validated in and by the self, whereas it is rather an *eidolon mentis*, an idol of the mind, established through a process of identification with something else. This may be a single personal quality – sexuality, intellect – or an external entity such as religion or country.

One says, 'My family, culture, language are all part of my identity', and this is a natural and inexceptionable use of the term. Analogously a Buddhist may say the skandhas are severally part of his being. The problem with the skandhas arises if we define ourselves too straitly in terms of any one of them – body, feelings, intelligence – for then the doctrine of *anatta* is impugned. Anatta, in my understanding of it, means non-identification of the personality as a whole with any of its constituent parts, and is a protection against the psychic imbalance that such identification would cause. As regards identity, the doctrine of anatta may also function as a guard against the factors brought to bear upon the psyche from without. They become a danger when, from being a part of my identity, one or other of them takes it over. Family, tribe, caste, nation, occupation, culture, religion, ideology: any of these may enlarge from partitive status to dominate the whole person. Then I no longer say, 'This is part of my identity', but 'I am part of this. It, and nothing of my own, fulfils and justifies my existence.' I merge into a larger entity with whose inmost nature I believe or desire mine to be identical. Upon this entity – race, faith, cause – I lay the burden of an incomplete or inadequate existence and assume in exchange a share of its collective burden. The weight may not be

much less, it may indeed be more, but that is unimportant; having entered into this spiritual participation I walk with a lighter step, for the general burden is shared and I am one with my fellow-sharers, and we are none of us obliged any longer to have full responsibility for our lives.

This of course, it need hardly be said, is not the same thing as the discharging of familial, civic or other responsibilities. They belong to a different category. The distinguishing element is that there one has room for detachment, criticism, even withdrawal or reversal. In identification there is no such room. Even in the statement ‘My country right or wrong’ there is acknowledgement of the possibility of error. With identification this is denied: that in which I have sunk my identity must always be right; I have invested my all in it, and doubt would mean disaster.

If this danger is inherent in it, then surely one may question the adequacy of the idea of identity to deal with the crisis that bears its name. If, to feel whole, to feel real, I need to merge my identity with something larger than myself, is not the resulting sense of well-being gained at the expense of integrity, which grows from within? Integrity makes a pair with responsibility; identity with dependence.

This is not to impugn the sense of inadequacy or incompleteness which everyone feels at some time, a feeling whose intensity may range from perplexity to despair. That sense is certainly real. With its ethos of personal striving, however, Buddhism cannot but be wary of an idea which requires an agency outside the individual to make him whole. Which is not to gainsay the existence of spiritual forces ready to help the distressed person who calls on them; but there is the profoundest difference between being helped and being taken over, between the process of maturation and that of absorption. If one must identify with something, better that it be something arising from one’s own developing integrity.

Returning to the Delphic motto, one observes that it does not say ‘Know your identity’ or ‘Be yourself’; it says ‘Know yourself’. But, given the idea of anatta, who is the knower and what is to be known?

In *Buddhism and the Western Heritage* I suggested looking at the skandhas in conjunction with the idea of *sunyata*, that mysterious term usually translated as ‘emptiness’. Finding this translation not entirely satisfactory I proposed some alternatives, among them ‘openness’ and ‘otherness’: meaning that sunyata is a part of us held in readiness for something which is not the self, a part without whose fulfilment we may not be able to realize integrity. Here again I will quote the last line of Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*: ‘I stop somewhere waiting for you’ – for the other individual who, seeing me, may also stop, and there will be mutual recognition, and we will embrace and go on together. This is the otherness

of love. Then there is the otherness of service, in which one puts aside all thoughts of fulfilment and gives what one is to others for their benefit only. What one is may be little enough in terms of qualities and development, but one gives it free and entire. The world is wondrously rich in such people, caring for relatives, friends, strangers, and asking for nothing in return; not thinking of praise or reward, of identity or self-enhancement. The Buddha's attendant Ananda is the type of these good people, the exemplar of this dissolving.

Then there is the third form of otherness, particularly associated with the Indian tradition.

Survival after death is a universal religious belief. The early Buddhists said that there are five 'bournes' in which beings work out their destinies, and that death is a point of entry, or re-entry, into them. They are the hells, animality, ghostliness, human life, and the heavens. The best bourne for the purpose of realizing nirvana is the human. The hells, or *nirayas*, are conceived as painful, but not everlasting as in other religions. Animality means the sphere of *adharma*, where appetite and instinct rule and not the sense of right and wrong. Ghosts, or *pretas*, suffer distress for misdeeds done in the corporeal state; they are said to linger about human habitations. As for the devas, they are believed to live on the capital of merit accumulated when human; their good fortune, however, tends to make them complacent, and they think little of the day when the merit will be gone. Modern westerners will have difficulty with some of these ideas; to some the whole notion of rebirth will be unacceptable. A sceptical attitude is often a healthy one, but so is a mind open to all possibilities. Which brings us back to the third understanding of otherness.

If I accept that I have a duty to my successor in a continuum of lives, there, it may be suggested, is the third kind of otherness to be practised: in living so as to make the karmic burden as light, the moral substance as fine as possible. I should be mindful that with every action I do in this life I am forming that successor in the womb of the future. To know myself, in Buddhist terms, means to know a being whose existence emerges from a past I have forgotten and extends into a future I shall not see. To act for the benefit of that other provides a possibility of going beyond self-knowledge towards self-transcendence. Exotic and improbable, it may be said. Perhaps. If so, at least the other 'othernesses' will hardly be denied: that love and service may take us beyond self-knowledge towards self-transcendence.