

BUDDHISM AND FREEDOM

A BOUNDED PATH

Introduction

‘As the great ocean has but one savor, that of salt, so my teaching has but one savor, that of freedom.’ These words of the Buddha are found in the *Anguttara Nikaya*, Part IV. They are clearly meant as a defining statement, made all the more telling through being delivered in an impressive figure of speech. Nothing in the visible world is greater than the ocean, so therefore we are not to think of freedom as a narrow concept; nor, again figuratively, as a thin stream trickling through a stony landscape. The comparison is with a great expanse of water in which we may all at least bathe our feet. In other words, layfolk have as much access to it as religious, though the latter are committed to a deeper ingress. Second, the image suggests that freedom imparts its savor to our lives and helps preserve their integrity. The Buddha might have chosen a different image, one suggesting sweetness, or one less imposing than the ocean, to illustrate the inseparability of his Dharma and freedom. It may be that Sakyamuni, whose life was spent in the valley of the Ganges, never actually set eyes on the ocean; if so, then by an act of imagination he seized upon it, the greatest object in the phenomenal world, as the right image for the greatest value in his teaching: freedom.

But, it may be protested, even if the savor of the Buddhadharma is that of freedom, surely its goal is nirvana, which is to be attained by following the Noble Eightfold Path? This is perfectly true; and there is no contradiction, for the great synonym for nirvana in the canonical literature is *vimutti*, meaning freedom. Nirvana, or nibbana in its Pali form, is a mysterious term on which substantial quantities of ink have been spent down the centuries, not least since, some two hundred years ago, it became known in the West. A less direct approach may be helpful towards understanding it, and a consideration of freedom may provide one. Here we do well to bear in mind what is meant by the savor of salt: how it permeates the ocean, and is found in every part and particle of it: wherefore we should surely ask ourselves how truly the idea of freedom permeates our lives as we tread the Buddhist Path.

Before proceeding, I should remark that this essay does not deal with the question of free will, for the plain reason that all schools of Buddhism take it for granted. It is an endowment without which spiritual freedom is hardly conceivable, but in itself does not signify this freedom.

A final introductory note: ‘nirvana’, ultimate spiritual freedom, is sometimes translated as ‘liberation’. I propose using this word for the

ultimate, so as to distinguish it from the forms of freedom which challenge us in our daily lives as we tread the Path.

A Little History

Western philosophers and theologians had long debated the question of freedom before Jean-Jacques Rousseau heralded the modern era with his statement that ‘Man is born free but is everywhere in chains’. Although Rousseau was in some respects an unfortunate man, his influence was immense, touching figures as diverse as Thomas Paine, Kant and Chateaubriand. It was an inspiration of the Romantic Movement and the French Revolution. ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’ is a Rousseauvian motto. The young General Bonaparte was fired by the ideal it proclaimed, although the Emperor Napoleon would interpret it in his own particular manner. He allowed the citizen liberty to support his policies, or else entertain the secret police; he personally would have equality with the Austrian and Russian Emperors; and as for fraternity, he would place his brothers and sisters on the vacant thrones of Europe. But the degradation of the ideal had begun some time before all this, what with the Terror at home and neighboring lands invaded. It may not be entirely fair to trace these courses back to Rousseau, but there was in his message a certain license for compulsion, as expressed in his theory of the General Will, which requires the total subjection of the individual to the common good. Best that such subjection be voluntary, but if not it might be compelled, and the uncooperative individual ‘forced to be free’. Coleridge saw through it; he wrote of ‘those who bear the name of freedom graven on a heavier chain’. Beethoven saw through it and changed the dedication of the *Eroica Symphony* into a message of mourning as the last hopes of the Revolution were lost in the Napoleonic Empire.

Most of the Romantics probably knew and cared little or nothing for the idea of the General Will; the movement produced individualists with a horror of compulsion and a love of personal and political freedom. But most of them probably believed that man is born free. This is the point on which Buddhism would seem to be in fundamental disagreement with Rousseau. It affirms that man should have freedom to be born, but that is a very different matter.

Among the celebrated western writers who have dealt with the question of freedom are the philosophers John Stuart Mill, Nikolai Berdyaev, John Dewey and Jean-Paul Sartre. Ironically, in view of their country’s later history, German writers such as Hegel, Schelling and the great poet Schiller have written memorable things on the subject. In recent times Isaiah Berlin’s contribution has been much debated. These are not only writers of impressive depth and scope but men of wide culture, and yet their terms of reference are limited to the western intellectual tradition;

rarely is a Buddhist influence to be discerned. In Friedrich Schiller's case there is a simple explanation for the absence of any reference to Buddhism: when he was writing, at the time of the French Revolution, it was quite unknown in the West as a religious and philosophical system in its own right, distinct from Hinduism. In the other cases we see how difficult it is, even at the highest level, to admit the ideas of an alien system into one's own.

Two of these ideas are karma and rebirth. Pythagoras and Plato and other early thinkers knew the latter under the name of metempsychosis. It has a place in the western tradition. With the rise of Christianity, however, it faded almost to nothing, and has never regained its former respectability, for all that Plato is esteemed as one of the very greatest of philosophers. Only Rudolf Steiner among the moderns seems to have dealt seriously with the subject, but his system of anthroposophy, being esoteric, has remained on the margin of the tradition.

This is not the place for an exposition of karma and rebirth. I would touch only on their liberating quality, so often overlooked. The Pali word for rebirth is *punabbhava*. It might better be translated as 'reliving', for it implies that the new life inherits something left unresolved or not completed by the previous, and that this must be recognised and dealt with, or else it will be passed on to the succeeding life. A moral continuum is envisaged, a succession of individuals forming a single destiny in different times and, as likely as not, in different places. Thereby one becomes in the fullest sense a citizen of the world – of the universe, indeed, as Buddhism does not put earthly limits to destiny. It does not, on earth, confine the individual to one land or to one family, an especially notable grace in an age when the notion of historical guilt is promoted so strongly and the sins of the fathers, and of grandfathers too, are visited on offspring who may not have been born when the guilty deeds were done.

Karma is believed to be the agency by which new lives are disposed. Its basic meaning is 'action', and it comprehends not only the deeds of individuals but a faculty in the cosmic order which expresses the quality of justice inherent in it. The rigor and indeflectibility with which justice is understood to be applied varies with the sects. The Theravada tends to be strongly consequentialistic: what we sow, we shall reap, as the traditional metaphor has it. The Mahayana sees the Buddha as a cosmic power able to mitigate the just severity of karma. Understandably the Mahayana has had the greater popular appeal in Buddhist history.

Earlier I referred to the Buddhist affirmation that man should have freedom to be born. In opposition to this is the view that the unborn, while human, are not as fully human as their parents, whose rights, or wishes, count for more. It is not enough that the unborn have potentiality; the parents have actuality, visible existence in the world, which is deemed

superior to invisible existence in the womb. In the Buddhist view, however, the wombchild has not only potentiality but achievement to its credit, not only a future but a past, in its own right. It is not entirely the creature of its parents. Its relationship with them is biological, and important as such; but there is also the moral substance brought in from anterior lives. In its truest being the child is the creature of its own deeds, evaluated through the medium of karma, which Buddhists see as the spirit of justice operating in the cosmic scheme, and effecting dispositions that transcend sex, family, color, country, race and religion, and thus acting as an instrument of liberation from these inevitable constrictions.

Speaking to the Unconverted

A modern westerner approaching the Buddhist Scriptures for the first time is in for an unfamiliar experience. The Mahayana texts have a grandeur – and a length – which is often overwhelming. Their setting is celestial and the personages who move through their voluminous pages are denominated by an exotic and polysyllabic nomenclature. These sutras do convey the sense which the early Buddhists, perhaps uniquely, had of the immensity of time and space, and the feeling of their being at home in the splendor of a parapolygalactic cosmos. They are infinitely sublime and transcendently imposing, though they do exemplify, *in excelsis*, what classical critics used to call ‘the Asiatic style’.

The Theravada suttas by comparison are generally modest and down to earth. Their drawback for the lay modern is that they are so much taken up with the life of the Sangha, the community of bhikkhus and bhikkunis founded by the Buddha. They are of course very interesting in their own right and much may be learned from them about the essentials of the Buddhist life as understood and practised by an early sect. But many of them, inevitably, are ‘monkish’, to use the favorite pejorative of a great pioneer in western Buddhist scholarship, that is, they tend to be rather negative, introverted and scholastical. Fortunately the texts are not all confined to the narrow life of the Sangha. Some of the most rewarding present the Buddha in converse with ordinary folk. One such is the *Kalama Sutta*.

I have dealt with this discourse at some length in *Buddhism and the Western Heritage*. The Kalamas were a North-Indian tribe from which the Buddha’s first teacher had come. Sakyamuni was but the latest in a line of sages to visit them, each with his own ideas and unedifyingly intolerant of all others. ‘We just don’t know what to think,’ said the tribesmen in effect; ‘Can you help us?’ The Buddha was sympathetic and we are told that he advised them as follows. ‘Do not accept anything just because you have heard it repeated over and over, or because it is part of your tradition. Do not accept anything at second hand, or because it is in a holy book. Do not

go on speculation, or on rhetoric, or on facile reasoning, or on prejudice, even when it seems well founded. Do not accept anything just because it comes from someone in authority, or because the person giving it out is your teacher. When you know that things are bad, blameworthy, disapproved by the wise, and conducive to harm and ill, you should not do them. Conversely, when you know that things are good, blameless, approved by the wise, conducive to benefit and welfare, then you should do them.'

There is nothing even remotely like this in the scriptures of any other religion.

Next, the Buddha proceeds to deal with what he has found to be the three roots of human wickedness: self-interest, ill-will and delusion. These are the vices that lead to harm and ill, as their opposites are the virtues that lead to benefit and welfare. The wise will endeavor to eradicate the vices even as they cultivate the virtues.

No longer dominated by self-interest, ill-will and delusion, the disciple now enters on the practice of the *Brahmaviharas*, the Four Sublime States, in which he cultivates amity, compassion, gladness and equanimity for the benefit of all living beings. This exercise reminds us of how the early Buddhists understood the active mental faculty, *ceto*. In the words of Rune Johansson in *The Psychology of Nirvana*, *ceto* 'could be directed outwards like radio beams', to fill the world with good feelings. This activity, he writes, 'was considered to be a real influence.'

If it was a real influence then, it must be the same today. If intended for all living beings, it must have included enemies as well as friends, in war and in peace. Five hundred years later, Jesus of Galilee would preach love and forgiveness and turning the other cheek, and his message would reach into every corner of the western world. But that part of the message, the part which distinguishes it from the other semitic faiths, has been largely rejected by his followers. Christians, from Ireland to the Balkans, have hated and persecuted each other with as much if not more virulence as they have unbelievers. The faithful pray for peace, but the God of Battles does not always yield to the God of Love. It might help if even a few were to sit and actively bend their minds to the transmission of good feelings to those who hate them and whom they, perhaps with good reason, hate in return.

Be that as it may, let us return to the sutta. The Buddha has taken the Kalamas from perplexity, where they attempt to evaluate the worth of ideas, to effort, where they struggle with the vices and work with the virtues, and then to the generous mentality of the Sublime States, where they give of themselves for the benefit of all living beings. Here are three phases in the aspiration to freedom: intellectual independence, recognition of the task

ahead, and nobility of spirit as success is achieved. And yet, for them, there is a fourth phase.

The Kalamas were not followers of the Buddha when he spoke to them. The discourse is not a sermon to the converted, for it contains no reference to the fundamental doctrines of *dukkha* and *dukkhanirodha*, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The fourth phase is not a disquisition on the nature of nirvana or the metaphysics of liberation, but some words of help for living with uncertainty, or, paradoxically positive, for gaining freedom from certainty.

Here, as earlier, there is no suggestion that the honest tribesmen should look to a god or a pantheon for enlightenment or support. In Buddhism, the gods men worship are fallible and imperfect, and in need, they too, of the light of the Dharma. The Kalamas, if they accept the Buddha's counsel, are to put it into practice of themselves. The good life is presented as self-validating.

But 'What then?' it may be asked. With all that independence of mind, all that moral striving, all that generosity of spirit, what then? What of the hereafter?

Well, says the Buddha, let us agree that there is a hereafter where deeds done here count. The one who has lived the good life and freed his mind of hate and malice and purified it of defilements may well arise in a happy heavenly world. — But what if there is no hereafter where deeds done here count? Is that person not happy in this world, his mind being free of hate and malice and purified of defilement? — Then again, suppose that evil befalls the evil-doer. The person of good life will not be affected as he does no evil himself. — Finally, if evil does not befall the evil-doer, the person of good life has the satisfaction of being just that, which is no mean thing.

In other words, this freedom from anxiety about the future, here or hereafter, is something all serious people can hope to enjoy. Which impresses the Kalamas mightily. It is as if a way had been pointed to someone lost, they say, with other laudatory figures of speech. But they want more. They wish to set their feet firmly on the way, on the Noble Eightfold Path. And so, like Ambedkar's Untouchables in a later age, they ask as a group to become followers of the Buddha; meaning that they accept the fundamental insight of *dukkha* and *dukkhanirodha*, elaborated in the Four Noble Truths, of which the Eightfold Path is the last.

The Great Metaphor

Reassured and confident, the Kalamas may be imagined returning to their homes in Kesaputta to tell the good news to family and friends and neighbors. When next a teacher comes among them he may well find a number of people practising an altruistic form of meditation and discussing the *Ariya Atthangika Magga*, the Noble Path of Eight Angas, commended to them by a previous teacher. He will be greeted amiably and fed and lodged, and if he has something of interest to say he will be heard. Being a teacher, he will know that the idea of a path is a figure for nothing less than the conduct of life, though he may not be prepared for the fullness of the metaphor in this eight-part variation practiced by his hosts.

I have said elsewhere that we are all Kalamas now, and, admitting to the exaggeration attendant on an adapted phrase, I believe it to be true, for so many people today have something of the perplexity of those tribesmen and of their confusion in the face of numberless offered solutions. But the Kalamas finally encountered the Buddha and were put right, and we have encountered the Dharma and may be put right. The Scriptures tell us that those who see the Dharma see the Buddha, so in essentials we are as fortunate as the Kalamas, and the Path set before them is the same as the Path set before us.

The *Kalama Sutta* has been called the Buddha's 'Charter of Free Inquiry'. In according it this approbation, however, we may find ourselves rather blandly assimilating it to current liberal conventions and not taking due notice of its challenge, which is that true freedom is to be achieved from within, entailing struggle with the self and requiring generosity of spirit. We live in an age of great if flawed international institutions, lofty in ideals and benevolent in sentiment. The freedoms for which they work – freedom from hunger, fear, persecution and so on – are admirable and desirable aims, but for the Buddhist they cannot be the whole story. If we posit the causes of our troubles only in external factors, we implicitly accept the culture of blame so prevalent in the world today, and in some sort justify the attitudes which this mentality breeds: dependence, resentment, antagonism, to name but three.

Blame has no place in the Noble Eightfold Path. The struggle there is with the self, not with the other, however that be denoted. Which is not at all to imply that it is merely a refined solipsistic exercise. The Path is a way of life, and our lives are spent in society. Even the most eremitically inclined of the Buddha's disciples had to go from door to door with bowl in hand for sustenance. The discipline was designed to help them win the maximum of interior independence but not at the cost of separation from society. Accordingly a consideration of the Path, especially the central angas, Right Speech, Action, Livelihood, is very much a consideration of our relations with society.

When we envisage any road or way we see it as having a beginning and an end. It is defined by them, but not by them only. There are also lateral bounds. The Noble Eight-fold Path is bounded by Buddhist morality, the most concise formulation of which is the *Pañcasīla*, the Five Precepts: to free oneself from tendencies to violence, theft, lust, dishonesty and sloth. We may think of morality as in the form of rails running alongside the Path; we can duck under or jump over them to leave it if we will, but it is always there to be rejoined at any time.

The Theoretical Angas

The Path has three divisions, theoretical, practical and disciplinary. Right View and Right Application form the first part. Right View means acceptance of the Buddhist vision of reality so far as we are able to fathom it. It is expressed most succinctly in terms of the Four Noble Truths: understanding of suffering, of its origin, of its ending, and of the way thereto. Western believers will generally attach themselves to one of the great traditions, Northern or Southern, Mahayana or Theravada, each of which embodies a particular conception of Right View and a particular ideal of attainment, the bodhisattva or the arahant. The former is likely to have the greatest appeal to layfolk brought up in a Christian denomination. It conforms accessibly to the Christian virtues of love, charity and helpfulness without the theological justifications, which to a Buddhist are supererogatory. To love one's neighbor for the love of God; to respect Nature as a God-appointed steward: here and elsewhere the believer sees no need of a divine imperative, and would relate to neighbor and Nature for what they are in themselves and find it sufficient.

The Theravada prides itself in having Scriptures closer to the original Buddha-word than the Mahayana. The comparison is not of the highest importance in that both Canons, in Pali and in Sanscrit, were compiled long after the Parinirvana, the death of the Buddha. But certainly the Theravada has been the more conservative tradition while the Mahayana has shown greater vitality down the centuries; which may commend it more to the western mentality, if we can speak of such a thing. The Theravada may be transplanted but it does not seem to develop. If there is to be an authentic western Buddhism it will surely be a development rather than a transplantation, one arising from the concept of the Buddha as a living spiritual entity, a power to help those struggling on the Path, rather than a long-dead Teacher however great, and however true his teaching. This is not to imply that such a development will arise out of the Mahayana only. All the schools and sects may have something to contribute – a few perhaps in a cautionary way – as we work out a Right View that has clarity, depth and balance.

With the second anga, *Samma Sankappa*, we move from theory as belief to theory in application. The basic meaning of *sankappa* is resolution, and in the words of the *Digha Nikaya* we resolve to live free of worldliness, malice and cruelty. Thus we are called to think of our situation in the world and how to bring Buddhist values to bear on it. Thinking requires time and leisure, preferably leisure chosen, not enforced, as in sickroom or prison, though they too have sometimes been productive in this respect. Rarely, however, in recent times among supposedly free people has there been such pressure to work longer hours, weeks, years as there is now to secure adequate income and pension. The economic imperative rules, as if money-making in its many varieties were the justification of human existence and the criterion of national worth. This cannot be a good thing either for a person or a nation, which severally are more than their worldly wealth and are not to be reduced to the level of economic atom or plc, as is so often done today, and not only by business people but by politicians and journalists, who ought to know better.

Right View and its application raise questions about freedom of thought and intellectual development. Were society to be resolved into economic atoms there would seem to be no good reason why these units of humanity, while fed, medicated and entertained, should know anything beyond the skill required to perform their economically productive tasks. The idea of a liberal education would be meaningless. They would have no reason to associate with people of diverse views, whether in person or otherwise. The internet, or whatever may supplant it, might well become means of entrapment and control.

For the time being at least we in the West are not subject to such external determinants on thought, and individuals may still apply their minds to the questions facing them as members of society, and look for honest answers.

The Social Angas

Right Speech

With the third anga we enter upon the part of the Path dealing with social relations. Of all the eight, this is the anga that is closest to one of the Five Precepts, the injunction against falsehood. But there is more to Right Speech than simple truthfulness. A formulation in the *Digha Nikaya* enjoins against malicious and unkind talk and urges us to refrain from idle chatter. A more detailed one is found in the *Anguttara Nikaya*. It would have us be conciliators in dissension, promoters of friendship, and workers in the cause of peace and harmony in general, using language that is sincere, appreciative and not tedious: morality, of course, but manners too; substance, but also consideration.

In the modern West we think in terms of Free rather than Right Speech in both the spoken and the written word, and pride ourselves on enjoying it as a right. On inspection, however, it is seen to raise a number of questions. It is not free in the sense of a free gift, for it had to be won, sometimes at heavy personal cost, by brave men, and was only grudgingly conceded by authority, from the time of the Greeks to our own. It is always under threat, even in avowedly liberal countries. The powers that be are prompt to curtail it when opportunity occurs. Ironically, the greatest curtailments are imposed (and accepted) in time of war, when supposedly the most cherished freedoms are being defended.

Neither is Free Speech, as we know it, free in the scope of its exercise. It cannot be, for at its widest it would have to comprehend slander and libel, incitement to crime, and violation of any code of decency however accommodating.

But although easily subject to misunderstanding, our heritage of Free Speech is very precious, and we are bound to cherish and promote it. We owe no less to the fame of those who won it for us. Limits there must be, and if Buddhist principles were strictly applied some of them might be rather tight. The growth of the advertising industry is one of the great success stories of modern times; but one of its main purposes is the excitement of appetite for unnecessary things, whereas the Buddhist discipline is directed to the reduction of appetite even for what is commonly thought necessary. Even so, the spirit of the culture, as distinct from the principles, is to let things be, and the 'right to do wrong' has its place in the Buddhist scheme of things.

There are arguments to be made for and against this attitude, which implies a form of society characterized by diversity. History has not always been favorable to such an attitude. In the great dictatorships of the twentieth century, political uniformity ruled. In large parts of the world today, religious uniformity rules and its empire is widening yearly.

Democracy and uniformity do not go comfortably together. At its best democracy means harmony of disparate, even discordant strains, for the general good. It has often fallen into the trap of virtual uniformity, where the party with the greatest number of votes takes all power to itself, and harmony is sacrificed to a dull or strident monotone. But this is a derogation from an open and generous system that invites participation, accepts criticism and tolerates protest.

It may be worth noting here that *vaca*, 'speech', is frequently used in the sacred texts as a surrogate for *vedana*, the feelings, which are the second of the *skandhas* composing the Buddhist model of man. This suggests that if speech – expression in the widest sense – is denied its proper office, the

domain of the feelings will not be right and the organism as a whole will suffer. Is it reasonable to argue from the individual to society? If so, then, just as personal health may suffer when feelings are denied or suppressed, so a society may sicken when freedom of expression is denied or suppressed although its outward aspect may for a time seem sound.

A society cannot be reduced to its political any more than to its economic element. However important, they are only parts of a greater whole. A society is in the largest sense a cultural entity; the arts are also a part of it, an essential and not merely a decorative part – its speech, one might say, in words, music and dance, in paint, metal and stone. It was the great virtue of the Romantics to affirm this, as ‘the unacknowledged legislators of mankind’, the writers and artists, became conscious of their place in history.

If writers and artists are the true legislators it behoves them to be true to the responsibility of their calling. Those of them who are Buddhists should be sensitive to the boundaries of the Path as it concerns expression. They, like all others of the faith, are enjoined not to be malicious or unkind; to conciliate in dissension, to promote friendship, and to work for peace and harmony; following their aesthetic vocation while not losing sight of moral principles.

Right Action

Right Speech, as said above, is the closest of the angas to one of the Five Precepts. Right Action, according to the definition of the Digha Nikaya, is close to three of the other four: to refrain from killing, from theft and from sexual misconduct. In some respects it is the most challenging of the angas, especially if we think positively as well as refrenatively, that is, in terms of compassion, generosity and loving-kindness. It may be more compassionate to put an animal out of misery with a killing blow than to let it suffer a lingering death. And what when a man or woman or child is enduring unbearable pain with more and worse in prospect, and begs for release? It is forbidden to assist in suicide; even so, it is natural to feel compassion for anyone who, out of compassion, performs the fatal service. Here is one of those deep dilemmas found at the heart of ethical systems, reminding us that their injunctions may better be seen as counsels rather than directions: aids for the fallible, not prescriptions for the perfect.

Non-violence

The injured animal and the agonized patient may be encountered at any time, and challenge us to act. Fortunately, as yet, one of the greatest dilemmas of the age only challenges us to think. This, of course, is the question of nuclear weapons; which brings into the harshest relief the confrontation between the precept of non-violence and the value of freedom.

For the most part, these weapons since first developed have been in the keeping of secular democracies, states in which the political and religious domains are kept apart, none of them a unitary state in which an ideology rules, pervading all its offices and directing all its powers. But such states do exist in parts of the world and one day they will have nuclear weapons; quite possibly, in some of them, under the control of the chief ideologue. Almost by definition ideologues are enemies of freedom, whether of thought, speech or action. Certain with the certainty of an infallible doctrine such a one need have no qualms as to the rightness of destroying its foes. Of course, even the most assured ideologue would prefer to gain his objective without resorting to nuclear weapons. The mere threat might be sufficient against a weak enemy or one that puts safety before values – ‘better red than dead’ as some protestors used to say in the days of the old Cold War. If, however, a people’s values are central to its idea of itself, it will not be cowed by threats, but either on its own or in combination with like-minded allies will endeavour to ensure that its defensive resources will prove a deterrent to the other. This is where the idea of non-violence may be said to cohabit with that of freedom: in nuclear weapons as a deterrent and not a threat.

But with the best will and most pacific intent, such a course still begs the question ‘What freedom is worth the destruction wrought by a nuclear war?’ What ideal would not be degraded thereby? There would seem to be little arguing with this. The question, though, may be reversed. What belief, what ideology is justification for even the threat of a nuclear war? Who, with even the meanest notion of freedom, could bear to contemplate living under the rule of such as would gain their ends by those means? In seeking thus to impose a belief-system, however true and holy in their eyes, they would put themselves outside the community of civilized societies, and give at least a tincture of moral coloring to action taken against them. This is the sort of dilemma which Buddhists among others may have to face in the perhaps not very distant future. And Buddhist countries, too, if neighboring countries armed with nuclear weapons and driven by the spirit of fanaticism were to see them as easy victims because of the place non-violence has in their lives.

Generosity

Generosity, *dana*, is a central virtue in Buddhism, a *paramita*. Traditionally the clergy has relied on it and still does in many places; without the openhandedness of the faithful the Sangha might well have died out and with it the Dharma. We in the West are not normally called upon to support monks and nuns, but there are many other calls on our generosity. Charity has become an opulent industry, slick and savvy in its methods. Then there are the beggars, supposedly growing ever more numerous in our cities. Now and again some of them are exposed as not the genuine article, but opportunists adept at making fools, as they see them, part with their money.

On a dull day for news there may be a headline in ‘workshy parasites’ and ‘misplaced altruism’.

From a Buddhist viewpoint, however, there is hardly such a thing as misplaced altruism. It is the intention of the giver, not the worthiness of the recipient that counts. What one gives physically one receives spiritually. And even if it were not so, it is better to be generous at a loss than mean at a profit. Every generous action is an affirmation of freedom from greed, which, with hatred and delusion, is considered to be a radical vice.

Then there is the peculiarly Buddhist form of generosity known as transference of merit, by which the believer dedicates the spiritual benefits of virtuous actions to others. Practiced daily it can be an ongoing exercise in selflessness. It can also be a reminder of the rather disquieting Buddhist idea that we should endeavour not only to free ourselves from our vices but also to cultivate detachment from our virtues, lest they in turn become a bond on the spirit.

Love

Freud introduced the idea of infantile sexuality. Goethe told in his *Trilogie der Leidenschaft* how the arrow of Eros could strike the most controlled of men even in old age. Thousands of poets have sung the joys and sorrows of sex and as many scientists have collected data on it. In Christianity it is considered so threatening that a sacrament has had to be devised to sanctify and contain it within the bounds of marriage. It is the dionysian impulse *par excellence*, and as established religions tend to the apollonian they inevitably have trouble with it.

In my previous essay, *Buddhism and the Erotic*, I tried to show how a western development of the Dharma might integrate sexuality and the spiritual life. The Tantra is the one form of Buddhism which has attempted to do this; but it leans to the esoteric, and by its nature esoterism is the preserve of the few whereas sex runs through the whole of animate nature and affects all mankind. If the Tantra is to benefit more than the few, it will surely have to divest itself of some at least of its esoteric elements and come into the open where the greater part of mankind endeavors to cope with this powerful and subtle force.

It should not be an overly difficult transition. Tantrism is based on four familiar Buddhist virtues, which in the above-mentioned essay I translated as tenderness and imagination, understanding and openness. In the Tantric tradition, the first pair is ascribed especially to the male, the second to the female, but all four are within the scope of most reasonable people and allow for the exercise of Right Action in this debatable area.

In sexual matters, as in so much else, we tend to believe and act as if our credal and cultural norms are universal, if not in application then at least

in desirability. As in modern Buddhist lands, monogamy is the normal type of marriage in the West, though with ample provision for divorce and remarriage, so much so that the norm as now operative has been described as serial polygamy. Multiple marriage was a feature of life in the Buddha's time, polygyny at any rate, for we read of kings having as many as five hundred wives. There have been times in western history when a relaxation of the monogynic rule would have been a good thing. Modern warfare has been monstrously wasteful of men's lives, especially the industrialized conflicts of the twentieth century. After the First World War, notoriously, it was impossible for many women to find husbands, since a whole generation of young men had been wiped out in the trenches, the deserts and oceans where old men had sent them to fight. Those women had to face lives of unwanted celibacy with little scope for marrying and forming a family. Some non-western, that is, non-christian societies have dealt more compassionately with the aftermath of war. This is not to advocate polygamy in either of its forms (polyandry was a feature of life in Buddhist Tibet), only to observe that in certain circumstances it may be a reasonable course. And at least where it is practiced, unofficially and under other names or none, the children of its unions should not be subject to stigmas or penalties which the conventionally generated escape.

Right Livelihood

Consideration of this anga follows naturally from that of Right Action, as livelihood is the combination of activities by which we acquire the means to live. I say acquire rather than earn since the Sangha, the monks and nuns of the Buddhist Order, do not, in the worldly sense, work. They depend on the charity of the faithful for food and raiment and indeed for shelter, as it is the money and labor of their communities that build the viharas where they live. And living in this case means performing the duties of their calling 'for the benefit of gods and men' as the traditional phrase has it: educating the young, advising the troubled, supporting the distressed, and forming a link between the visible and the invisible worlds, while offering the example of a frugal, unselfish and harmless lifestyle to the people.

The Pali text relating to Right Livelihood – *Samma Ajiva* – would seem to be intended specifically for the Sangha. It concentrates on the failings and temptations to which the religious life, in the widest sense of the term, is subject. It reads like an admonition that the community, many of whom were of brahman origin, should be especially alert to faults associated with the priestly caste. These are spelled out as deceitfulness and hypocrisy, soothsaying and magical practices, and finally greed for worldly gain (*Majjhima Nikaya III, 75*).

The Sangha developed in opposition to the brahmanical system. The brahmins vied with the khattiyas, the warrior caste, for leadership of society. Their boast was that they had been born from the mouth of the

Great God Brahma, and were thus the divine word made flesh, while the other castes had supposedly originated from inferior parts of the god's anatomy. The Buddha, himself of khattiya origin, dismissed their pretensions. He would not have it that priests should rule the rulers.

There is a legend that the Buddha had a choice between being a military or a spiritual leader. Although he chose the latter way he never condemned the soldier's calling. This is of some significance in the presentation of the Dharma to the West, where it is often regarded as a form of pacifism. It is true that Buddhism has been less associated with war-making than other major faiths, but all Buddhist countries, even Tibet, have had armies, and they have gone into battle like Jewish, Christian, Muslim or Sikh armies to fight and kill and die. Freedom is the supreme value, not peace at any price, and freedom requires its khattiyas; optimally to deter those who would destroy it, but to defend it when the need arises. It seems to me that Right Livelihood does not exclude the military life for Buddhists outside the Order, and that they may in good conscience enlist in national armies to defend their countries, ideally in a strategy of deterrence, and with some sort of assurance that in the event the methods employed would be proportionate and humane. This word may be the key to understanding Right Livelihood, or Lifestyle, as *ajiva* might be translated, and whether we are discussing human beings or animals.

One of the salient differences between the early Buddhists and the brahmins was that the former ate meat and the latter, for reasons of caste purity, did not, although they sacrificed animals on the vedic altars. The Buddha desired his message to reach all castes, so his followers made no distinction when they went from house to house with bowl in hand for food, prepared to expound the Dharma upon request to the householder and his family. The food might be rice, vegetables, fruit, or it might be meat. This was acceptable on condition that the animal had not been killed specially for the mendicant. Later the Mahayana tended towards vegetarianism, and many western Buddhists have continued the tendency, with the result that in the popular mind Buddhism is associated with the vegetarian movement, just as it is with pacifism.

The old criterion, whether the animal has been killed specially for him or her, remains a good one for the lay Buddhist. If not, then its flesh is but so much dead matter with no moral consequences for the consumer. This is the minimal position. One may wish to go beyond it and argue that purchasing meat helps sustain a bloody business and that abstention would help undermine its economic basis, to the benefit not only of its animal victims but of every person involved in it, from the slaughterer to the shareholder, liberating them from association with an essentially wrong activity. This is a reasonable position and perhaps an increasingly popular one. Even so, the minimal position is not to be despised. There are those who for constitutional or dietary considerations need to eat meat, and it

would be wrong to exclude them on that account from the benefits of the Dharma.

In all areas of perceived abuse there are abolitionists and meliorists, the former urging total and immediate rectification, the latter working for gradual improvement. In this area, humane people, meat-eaters as much as abstainers, endeavor to secure better conditions in the rearing, transporting and slaughter of animals. It is an uphill struggle, marked by failure as much as success, but perpetually a challenge to indifference and a reproach to callousness.

The question however remains: Can more be done? There are some provocative persons who say that if humane people, including vegetarians and vegans, would make a real difference to the suffering of animals they themselves should go into the trade and improve it by example. I don't know if the challenge has ever been taken up. For Buddhists, governed by the Principle of Non-violence as enunciated in the First Sila, it would be something of an antinomian course. But the suggestion has a rationale; and for some Buddhists it might be said to have a double rationale, both animal and human. In Buddhist countries where meat is a regular part of the diet, those who provide it are likely to find themselves ostracized by the people who consume their product. This is not in keeping with the Buddha's own example. The Scriptures tell that he consorted with hunters and fowlers and showed them understanding and compassion. Indeed he drew on the image of the skilful butcher to illustrate aspects of the doctrine, according to the Great Discourse on Mindfulness. If ostracism of the providers of meat is not good for them, it can hardly be good for the animals they deal with: people do not deal kindly with what they perceive as the cause of their troubles. The ostracising attitude is not found, at least not overtly, in the West, but one does come across instances of a sort of spiritual pride among non-meat-eaters, and spiritual pride goes against the compassionate ethos of the Dharma.

The idea that humane people should do what they consider wrong in a cause they consider right poses a nice problem for ethicists. It asks the question: Can I justify doing something (which would happen anyway) in a more humane manner for the victim's sake, although it contravenes my basic beliefs? In Buddhist terms it asks: Can the bodhisattva not only delay but perhaps even sacrifice the attainment of nirvana for the sake of others? In a short essay one can only raise such an issue, not explore it, hoping that better-qualified persons will take it on.

One may, however, point out that there is a difference between this idea and that which represents the end as justifying the means. The difference lies herein, that the Buddhist would be doing the debatable deeds entirely for the sake of the victims and not for any remoter end separate from their fate. The question of animal experimentation arises here, a

question very much of ends and means. Promoters of this practice have much to say in its defense, and some of it presumably they find convincing. But one thing which cannot be said is that what is done to laboratory animals is done for their individual sake. The most that can be claimed is that directly, as in veterinary experiments, or indirectly as a by-product of work for the good of human health, other animals will benefit. Allowing the claim to have validity, and no doubt the first part of it has, the question remains; for while I as a Buddhist may feel justified in sacrificing my life or even my salvation for another creature, I cannot see that I have the right to impose any such sacrifice, be it of life or of wellbeing, on another. My freedom in the sphere of Right Livelihood does not extend to this.

The Spiritual Angas

Commentators divide the Noble Eightfold Path differently. All seem to agree on the first two angas forming the theoretical part, but some have three and others four in the social, and then three or two in the final or spiritual part. I have a preference for the former division, with three angas in the middle and last parts; it allows for a more meaningful understanding of the sixth anga, *Samma Vayama*, usually translated by the rather vague terms ‘Right Effort’ or ‘Right Endeavor’.

The description of it in the *Digha Nikaya* is unusually long. It is in four parts, delivered, as is usual, to the Sangha, not the laity. The bhikkhu is to do everything possible to prevent unwholesome attitudes from arising, and to eliminate any that may have arisen; everything possible to produce wholesome attitudes, and to promote them once arisen. That is it in brief. It endeavors to consolidate any progress made in the previous angas and *paññavimutti* and *cetovimutti*, the first relating to wisdom and founded on insight (*vipassana*) prepares for the final two. In this preparation it reminds us that the Scriptures regularly describe liberation using two distinct terms, the second relating to the will and founded on *samatha*, a state of calm in body, feelings and mind. *Pañña*, wisdom, is better known in its Sanskrit form, *prajña*, and in the Mahayana, whose language is Sanskrit, the cult of Prajna amounts to deification. *Ceto* is often translated as ‘heart’. It has qualities which since the rise of mechanistic science, we have become shy of attributing to the heart. The Buddhist concept of *ceto* comprises not only feelings but intelligence, intuition and will. Its special office is to deal with *raga*, passion, as that of *pañña* is to deal with ignorance, *avijja*.

The Buddha is described as ‘liberated in both ways’, with perfect balance of will and wisdom. His two great disciples, Sariputta and Mogallana, are similarly described, the former inclining to wisdom, the latter having the sort of mental power by which miracles are performed.

The description of liberation under two headings suggests that the quest for it may be considered in terms of inclination, aptitude and even temperament. Everyone is called upon to overcome unwholesome attitudes and to promote wholesome ones, in accordance with the sixth anga. Meditation will help, and the aspirant may investigate the forms of it associated with vipassana and samatha before deciding which is the more suitable for his or her personality and temperament – the pointed introspection of the first or the broader spiritual culture of the second. Then the aspirant will have a clearer idea which of the last two angas to concentrate on, *Samma Sati* or *Samma Samadhi*.

The great text on the former is the Discourse on Establishing Mindfulness (*Digha Nikaya xxii*), attributed to the Buddha and addressed to a company of monks. As with the other texts, it was probably compiled some centuries after his death, and so we are not obliged to believe that it contains his very own words; sufficient that it conforms in general terms to the spirit of the Dharma. It sets out a demanding discipline, but even before beginning upon it one is expected to have already overcome two particular failings, which might be interpreted as ambition and resentment – ambition for spiritual aggrandizement and resentment against any who may have made true progress on the Path. Purity of intention, then, is an indispensable requirement, and so is patient acceptance of disappointment when one's best efforts much repeated seem to have led to no advance.

In due course these failings may be overcome and then the aspirant sets about establishing the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, essentially an investigation into the elements by which we recognise ourselves as what we are, or seem to be.

The first object of mindfulness is the body – one's own body – in its breathing, postures, movements, contents and structure. Then the bhikkhu is to reflect upon a dead body. Not all who died in ancient India were decently cremated; many were just flung into charnel grounds where birds and dogs and other scavenging creatures disposed of them. In such places there would be ample occasion to observe the insubstantiality of flesh and form and to reflect 'my body is the same as these and will not escape their fate.'

Feelings are the next object of mindfulness, carnal and spiritual feelings, experienced as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Then the mind itself becomes the object of the discipline, in its stages of progress from vicious, torpid or distracted to developed, concentrated and eventually, if so it be, liberated.

Finally in this seventh anga there is the examination of dhammas. What 'thing' is to the English language and 'res' was to Latin, 'dhamma' is to Pali, only more so, covering as it does everything from the solid earth to

the mystery of nirvana itself. It is a truly universal term. Here its meaning ranges from doubt and scruples through the skandhas, the senses, the ‘factors of wisdom’, which include joy and equanimity, to the Four Noble Truths. These are of course the beginning of the Buddhist life; it is to be assumed that by now a much deeper understanding of them will have been achieved and this naturally comprises a deeper understanding of the Path.

The chief feature of this anga, *Samma Sati*, is its non-judgemental attitude. The most lurid fantasies, the most wicked motivations, the most shameful memories may declare themselves before its cool scrutiny. They are not condemned, not wished away, but allowed to show their faces freely and as often as their morbid energies insist. Soon or late, it is to be hoped, they will die of themselves and no longer distract the aspirant from the struggle with avijja.

However regarded, the eighth anga, *Samma Samadhi*, is the most difficult to deal with. This is in part because of the number of technical terms associated with it. Being both ancient and exotic, many of them will not necessarily mean a lot to the modern lay Buddhist in the West. Some of the terms we have already met. This anga is particularly associated with samatha, calm, and with ceto, the heart, in its traditional, universal sense. The term *cetosamadhi* is found several times in the Canon.

Samma Samadhi itself seems to comprise the mindfulness of sati and perhaps we may think of it as beginning where *Samma Sati* ends, that is, with a deepened understanding of the Four Noble Truths, moving from analysis to synthesis, from intellectual observation to spiritual experience, as the *jhanas*, those ever more rarefied levels of meditation are traversed and cetovimutti is approached. Unfortunately, the jhanas are not readily understood and would be impossible to practice without expert supervision and unlimited time, optimally spent in a monastery.

Even so, my reading seems to suggest, what one would most likely get is an intensification of Right Mindfulness, *Samma Sati* honed to a sharper point. But if that earlier term *cetosamadhi* means anything, surely we should be thinking of broadening the mind and expanding the spirit, looking outward again after all the inwardness of the previous anga, engaging with culture and history, the present and the past, and bringing our hard-won insights to bear upon the future.

Buddhism has sometimes been presented as if virtually any worldly experience were to be viewed with suspicion; as if any action might contribute to the dukkha of the world and of the believer. It is an attitude that one can appreciate in relation to monks and nuns and the restricted lives they lead; and indeed it reminds us that the religion began as a way of life for a sect of recluses in ancient India. Today, as then, the Sangha has its Code of Discipline, the *Vinaya*, to support and guide it. But the lot of the

laity is very different, especially where the Sangha has no presence. Men and women in the world have to shape their fates in accordance with a more general prescription, of which the Noble Eightfold Path is a major part. For most of its length it is no more problematical (in theory if not in practice) than other variants on the metaphor of the Way: virtuous thought, speech, action, a decent mode of livelihood – the unobjectionable staples of any moral code. But the later, spiritual angas, especially the last, present special problems. The eighth anga faces the modern lay Buddhist with, above all, the problem of reinterpretation.

How, in good faith, to deal with it? If my idea is valid and the eighth anga, *Samma Samadhi*, is essentially the same as cetosamadhi, then we may think non-technically about a generalized spiritual culture to be pursued dispassionately and conscientiously in everyday life, rather than venture into the arcane realm of the jhanas. The term ‘samadhi’, without prefix or epithet, is defined in the Pali Canon as *citassa ekaggata*, a phrase combining the concepts of mind or personality and singleness or unity. I do not think it would be untrue to the phrase to render it as ‘integration of personality’ – a progressive fulness of being, characterized by dispassion and dedicated calmly to the enlargement of freedom in oneself and hopefully to its advancement in the lives of others.

Coda: The Last Freedom

It is impossible in a short essay to deal with many of the issues relating to freedom. Among them are questions touching on the confinement of people and animals in prisons, asylums, zoos and circuses. In what sense are compulsive personalities who murder, thief, rape or defraud to be considered free, such that confinement would deprive them of anything other than freedom of action? What freedom do instinct-governed animals lose, apart from the physical, when held in menagerie or circus? Conversely, by what right does society cause some of its members to be locked away for short or long periods, even for the whole remainder of their lives? By what right do we subject animals to an unnatural existence in cages, factory-farms and laboratories?

Most people do not belong either among the confined or the confiners, and most animals – beasts, birds, insects and water-life – live free to the level of their capacity. But all have to die, and there the last question of freedom arises, simple for some and complex for others.

The dying animal in the wild seeks a quiet, safe place, away from disturbance and predators. The domestic animal when its time comes may be humanely ‘put to sleep’. There is a question of rights in this, and as so often in ethical matters it presents a dilemma: has the animal the right to live to the bitter end or has it the right to be put out of its suffering? Individual

people are the arbiters, and different cultures encourage different resolutions.

But men and women in unbearable pain are sometimes heard to say, ‘An animal would not be allowed to go on suffering like this.’ Here is the ultimate challenge to compassion, that *karuna* which is one of the marks of the true Buddhist life. What one would not humanely deny an animal can one deny another human being? The weight of the Buddhist ethos is against it, but in extreme situations one may claim freedom to break rules. Here the laity has a simpler choice than the Sangha, whose members are bound by a sacred code which they have voluntarily adopted. But monks and nuns however spiritually detached can never be insensible to the promptings of *karuna*. Detachment should equalize, not abolish, compassion. For anyone committed to the Buddhist Way the question of fatal interference in the life of another is a terrible one, arguably even more terrible than the question of ending one’s own life.

In the *Culakammavibhanga Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya* the Buddha discourses on the karmic consequences of various actions good and bad. First we read that cruel people who take life, if reborn as humans, will be short-lived. Then angry, envious, mean, proud and wilfully ignorant people are considered, and the fates they incur. Nowhere is there a mention of suicide as a specific category with its own unhappy consequences.

And there are instances of actual suicides in the Canon, when bhikkhus at the stage of arantship but in unbearable pain choose to end their lives. The Buddha does not condemn them. Neither does he suggest that their action tells against their spiritual achievement; if liberation has been established it cannot be annulled.

For those who are not liberated the idea seems to be that while suicide may provide relief from an intolerable condition, inasmuch as the condition may have been a consequence of wrongdoing it will have to be faced again, and as often as requital necessitates, until it be endured and overcome; in a different form perhaps but one no less challenging. At most, the act seems to be considered ill-judged; unwise rather than wicked.

The hard attitude to suicide taken by the monotheistic religions down the ages derives from the belief that we are creatures placed here on earth by a Supreme Being, and as such have no right to dispose of lives that are in reality his, thereby putting our immortal souls beyond the sphere of divine mercy. This is not an argument that weighs heavily with Buddhism, which does not naturally give itself to the idea of a deity who lays down the law for mankind. The Dharma does not trace its origins to a revelation from such a being but to the insights of a man, albeit one who claimed lineage with enlightened sages and their ever valid message right to the dawn of time. If a Supreme Being, infallible by nature, or his inspired representative,

infallible by vocation, forbids suicide, the believer has little choice but to follow their dictates. This hardness is not be ascribed to a lack of charity on the part of these religions, but to faith in their respective scriptures and traditions, and to the acceptance of the constriction on freedom which it imposes. Buddhists, while not less faithful to the message of the Founder, do not operate under such a limitation, their bounds being the Silas, which, unlike the Ten Commandments, have no reference to anything beyond the human, meaning their own conscience and good faith. If then the believer, in conscience and good faith, concludes that it is impossible to go on, and can sustain as real the prospect of having to face an equivalent situation in a later existence, it is not easy to see how the exercise of this fatal freedom can be deprecated.

Nor is personal pain the only cause of admissible suicide. The men and women, religious and lay, who immolated themselves in Vietnam in the nineteen sixties, were protesting against the persecution of the Dharma by a tyrannical regime. They harmed no one but themselves; or, should one say nothing but their own bodies. Their act had a radical selflessness, a quality not unique to them; for others, neither Buddhist nor flame-wrapped, have sacrificed themselves in the cause of justice. The selfless act is a free act; the tragic thing is that injustice is so often what provokes it.

To conclude, if freedom be the highest Buddhist value, the question of suicide cannot be considered apart from it: freedom and the right it may be said to confer – right over oneself, right to dispose of one's life at one's own will.