

# Suffering in the Light of Our Time, Our Time in the Light of Suffering

ABE MASAO

IT IS A great pleasure for me to participate in this international conference on Buddhism and Christianity at De Tiltenberg. I have been asked to talk about suffering in the light of our time. As you may know, suffering is the first of the Four Noble Truths, the fundamental teaching of Gautama Buddha, which goes as follows:

- Existence is suffering;
- the cause of suffering is craving or thirst;
- by the extinction of craving, nirvana may be attained;
- the means for the attainment of nirvana is the practice of the Eightfold Path of right view, right intention, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

This is, I think, familiar to you.

## *Existence is Suffering*

When Gautama Buddha says that existence is characterized by suffering, he does not simply mean human life is full of suffering and devoid of pleasure. As a visiting professor at Claremont Graduate School in 1966, in a lecture I told my students of how Gautama Buddha empha-

\* This paper was originally published in the Proceedings of the Conference on Buddhism and Christianity (June 1988), De Tiltenberg, Netherlands, under the title, "Suffering in the Light of Our Time; Our Time in the Light of Suffering: Buddha's First Holy Truth." It is presented here in slightly revised form in cooperation with the author.

sized human life is suffering, to which one of my students then remarked, "Gautama Buddha might have said so because ancient India was very poor and without pleasure. But in America our lives are full of pleasure, so a pessimistic teaching like Buddhism is not applicable to the United States." But when Gautama Buddha says that human existence is characterized by suffering, he does not simply mean it in that literal sense. There is obviously pleasure as well as suffering in life—in India, in the U.S., anywhere in the world. But, in our comportment of daily life we make a distinction between pleasure and suffering; we seek for and cling to what is pleasant, and we avoid and detest what is painful—this being an inclination inherent to human nature. But, according to Buddhism, real suffering lies precisely in this inclination. Pleasure and suffering are in reality inseparably intertwined, and one is never found without the other. Hence, the position that they are rigidly opposed is an abstraction divorced from reality. The more we cling to pleasure and try to evade suffering, the more entangled we become; it is this process which constitutes "Suffering" (with a capital S). When Gautama Buddha says that "existence is characterized by suffering," he is referring to Suffering in this sense, and not to suffering as opposed to pleasure. It is the reality of this non-relative Suffering which a person must realize in his or her existential depths. Since life and death are the fundamental sources of pleasure and suffering, and human existence is embroiled in its attachment to life and aversion to death, human existence is understood in Buddhism to be bound to *samsara*, the cycle of birth and death.

Accordingly, when Gautama Buddha says that "the cause of suffering is craving," by "craving" he means not simply the attachment to pleasure, but a deeper and more fundamental attachment that is rooted in human existence: that of one's attraction to pleasure and aversion to suffering, which is the phenomenon accompanying one's drawing a distinction between the two. According to Gautama's teaching, this fundamental attachment originates in an illusory view of one's life in the world, which arises out of the basic ignorance innate to human nature. Craving is a human passion linked to humankind's entanglement in the duality of pleasure and suffering and is deeply rooted in the ego. It is by extinguishing this craving that nirvana can be attained. Thus nirvana is not a negative or *lifeless state*, as the mere annihilation of human passion would suggest, but an existential awakening to egoless-

## SUFFERING IN THE LIGHT OF OUR TIME

ness, *anattā* or *anātman*, attained through liberation *from* craving, liberation *from* attachment to the dualistic view that distinguishes pleasure as something to be sought after and suffering as something to be avoided.

The position of the Buddha clearly emerges in his first sermon after his attainment of Enlightenment, when he says: "Monks, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth as a wanderer. What two? Devotion to the pleasure of sense, a low practice of villagers, a practice unworthy, unprofitable, the way of the world on the one hand; and on the other, devotion to self-mortification, which is painful, unworthy and unprofitable. By avoiding the two extremes the *Tathāgata*, the Buddha, has gained knowledge, a calm, special knowledge: enlightenment, nirvana."

In this connection the following four points are to be noted:

1. Gautama the Buddha takes the Middle Way, transcending both hedonism and asceticism. Accordingly, he does not negate human desire as such, but, in avoiding these two extremes, relegates it to its proper position in human life. The Middle Way is not simply a midpoint between pleasure and suffering, but rather is the Way which *transcends* the very duality of pleasure and suffering. Thus, living the Middle Way is none other than being in nirvana.

2. For Buddhism, the Middle Way or nirvana is not an objectively observable state or something which can be considered merely a goal of life, but rather an existential ground from which human life can properly begin without becoming entangled in the duality of pleasure and suffering. By living the Middle Way, in nirvana, we can be master of, and not enslaved by, pleasure and suffering. In this sense, nirvana is the source of human freedom and creative activity.

3. In his awakening to egolessness or no-self, Gautama Buddha overcame duality itself by transcending the particular duality of pleasure and suffering. In other words, he could awaken to egolessness or no-self only when he became free from duality itself. This he achieved by breaking through the particular duality which impinged upon him most as a burning existential dilemma—the duality of pleasure and suffering. Accordingly, nirvana as the existential awakening to egolessness or no-self is beyond any kind of duality, including that of good

and evil, right and wrong, life and death, man and nature, and even that of man and God. To attain nirvana in this sense is salvation. Nirvana as the awakening to egolessness or no-self is most clearly realized in Mahayana Buddhism. In that tradition, to enter nirvana is not to die a physical death, but to die the death of the ego and thereby to live a new Life, to live the life of the true Self.

4. Although nirvana is beyond duality, it is not characterized by a monistic view. Monism is not yet free from duality, for it is still opposed to dualism or pluralism. Being beyond duality, the view of one who has attained nirvana is not monistic, but rather non-dualistic. This is why Buddhism does not proclaim the one God, but speaks of Sunyata (Emptiness). Emptiness is realized by going beyond the one God and thus is not the relative emptiness of a mere vacuum.

Sunyata, which is often translated as Emptiness, sounds quite nihilistic. Some time ago I discussed the Christian notion of the *creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of nothingness. It is said that God creates everything out of nothingness, but nothingness in this context is negative, and God is beyond this type of nothingness. And so God creates everything out of that type of nothingness. But the Christian mystics talk about Godhead, "Gottheit," from which the personal God emerges, and a Christian mystic, Jakob Boehme, speaks of Godhead as "Das Nichts." And so the personal God emerged from "Das Nichts." That "Das Nichts" is not nothingness in a negative sense, but rather in a positive sense, because that nothingness or "Das Nichts" is the source for a personal God. Where Buddhism talks about Emptiness, Sunyata, this may roughly correspond to the Christian mystic notion of "Das Nichts" or "Godhead."

Being beyond the one God, Emptiness is identical to individual things; it makes them truly individual. In this Emptiness everything is itself in the sense that everything is as it is, and yet at the same time everything is equal in its as-it-is-ness. And so a dog is a dog and a cat is cat; they are very different. A pine tree is a pine tree, an oak tree is an oak tree; they are very different; we might say they have their own as-it-is-nesses, yet they are equal in terms of their as-it-is-ness. And so everything and everyone has its own distinctiveness, its own as-it-is-ness, and yet in terms of their as-it-is-ness they are not different.

The following Zen mondo between a monk and Chao-chou (778-

897) illustrates the point that the universal or ultimate reality can be realized in particular things, not apart from their particularity. The monk asked Chao-chou, "All things are reduced to the One; what is this One to be reduced to?" Chao-chou replied "When I was in the province of Tsin I had a monk's robe made that weighed seven pounds."

That which is ultimate or universal is not the one to which all things are reducible, but a particular thing, absolute and irreplaceable, such as a monk's robe, which has a particular weight and is made in a particular place at a particular time. The universal and particular are things paradoxically One in the realization of Emptiness, which goes beyond the understanding which sees all things as reducible to the One.

Oneness as a universal principle, if it is substantial and self-existing, must be overcome; otherwise we as particular entities lose our individuality and cannot possibly awaken to reality. From the Buddhist point of view, this is true even for God, the "only One." On the other hand, if each and every particular thing is respectively self-identical, since everything is self-centred there would be no equality between them. Both Emptiness as the negation of oneness, and egolessness as the negation of everything's self-centredness, are necessary for awakening. In the realization of Emptiness, which is another term for nirvana, all particular things are respectively just as they are and yet equal in their suchness. This is expressed in Mahayana Buddhism as "difference as it is, is sameness; sameness (of things in their suchness) as it is, is difference." This very realization is the source of wisdom and compassion, in which both ignorance and self-centredness are overcome. Just because nirvana is in itself empty, it is full of particular things functioning freely, which neither lose their particularity nor impede one another.

What significance does Buddhist nirvana hold for us today, East and West, with regard to contemporary thought and life, especially as it pertains to the problems of understanding ultimate reality, nihilism, the relation of man to nature, the irrational in human existence, the achieving of true community, and the understanding of the meaning of history? To clarify the contemporary significance of the Buddhist notion of awakening, or nirvana, I would like to deal with this problem from the standpoint of Mahayana Buddhism, a form of Buddhism developed in East Asia, especially in China and Japan, and based on the dynamic interpretation of Gautama's teachings.

*Nirvana: Dynamic Relativism*

First of all, nirvana has relevance to the human understanding of ultimate or universal Reality, in that it overcomes the major objection to monistic absolutism. The concept of the one God who is essentially transcendent, self-existing and apart from everything relative, is considered unreal in Buddhism, since a self-existing God cannot be spoken of without a knower. In Buddhism, mutual relativity or interdependency is taken as the ultimate truth, while those doctrines of absolute truth which exclude other views of truth as false are considered unreal or illusory. In the Buddhist awakening, nothing is independent, self-existing, or permanent; having no permanent selfhood, every thing is mutually related to each and every other thing. This is not a fixed relativism that simply rejects absolutes, resulting in a form of scepticism or nihilism, but a dynamic relativism in which even the absolute and the relative, the holy and the secular, the divine and the human, are all totally inter-related. This idea of the total interrelatedness of each and every thing at every moment is termed in Buddhism "pratitya-samutpada," which may be translated as "dependent co-origination." This dynamic relativism, beyond the opposition between relativism and absolutism, is a paradoxical truth that can be realized not through speculation but only through existential practice. Hence, the practice of the Eightfold Noble Path and sitting meditation, or *zazen*, have been emphasized.

The position of Buddhism towards other faiths is often characterized as one of tolerance by Western scholars. It may, however, be that the term "tolerance" has been applied according to Western, especially Christian, standards, and is misleading in that it does not get to the heart of Buddhism. Grounded in nirvana, the Buddhist position is a "positionless position" in the sense that, being itself entirely nonsubstantial, it lets every other position stand and work just as it is. Buddhism naturally does not exclude other faiths as false, but recognizes the relative truths which they contain. This recognition, however, is a starting point, not an end or goal, for Buddhist life. More precisely, through this basic recognition of the relative truths contained in other positions, Buddhists hope to work critically and creatively to achieve a productive dialogue in cooperation with other faiths.

The Buddhist position as realized in nirvana may prove effective in the contemporary world which, as it becomes more closely united, is

## SUFFERING IN THE LIGHT OF OUR TIME

witnessing the remarkable rise of a sense of pluralism and diversity of values. The dynamic relativism of nirvana may provide a spiritual foundation for the formation of the rapidly approaching One World in which the co-existence of a variety of contrasting value systems, ways of life and ways of thinking, will be indispensable.

### *Nirvana Beyond Nihilism*

Second, nirvana offers a freedom beyond nihilism. One of the serious problems in the world today is the permeation of the nihilism proclaimed by Friedrich Nietzsche and others. The collapse of traditional value systems and the cry that "God is dead" are almost universal phenomena in industrialized societies in the West. A loss of the sense of the holy and despair with regard to the corruption and impotence of the established forms of religion prevail in the world today. As a consequence of the pervasion of the scientific way of thinking, it has become increasingly difficult for modern people to believe in a personal God; nevertheless, people today are searching seriously for something to fill the vacuum which has been created in their spiritual lives. In this respect, Nietzsche is a touchstone for religion for he advocated, as a prototype of future humanity, the active nihilist, the positive nihilist who, grounded in the will to power, courageously faces emptiness without God.

It is unlikely, however, that Nietzsche's active nihilism can successfully serve as a substitute for religion. I have no time to discuss this background in detail, but it would seem that what is needed today and in the future is a religion beyond active nihilism, that is, a religion beyond "emptiness without God." Buddhism, which is based on nirvana, is precisely a religion of this sort. Negating the existence of the one God, Buddhism advocates Sunyata (Emptiness), which is not a nihilistic emptiness, but rather a fullness of particular things and individual persons functioning in their full capacity and without mutual impediment. In Emptiness, everything is realized as it is, in its total dynamic reality. This radical realism involves not only liberation from "God," but also the overcoming of an active nihilism such as that advocated by Nietzsche. Thus, nirvana is a realization of great freedom, both from theistic pietism with its dependence on God and from nihilism in a Nietzschean sense with its dependence on the will to power,

making possible genuine self-determination by removing the illusion of a determinator.

*Nirvana, Humankind and Nature*

Third, nirvana has relevance to our understanding of the relation of humankind to nature. Christian scholars often contend that Buddhist nirvana is impersonal. Christian personalism, if I am not mistaken, is based on human responsibility to the word of God. Unlike other creatures, humans are created in God's image and can respond to the calling of God. Nature is ruled by God through humans whom God gave "dominion over other creatures." In this sense, Christian personalism is connected with anthropocentrism among creatures. Buddhist nirvana, on the contrary, is based on egolessness and is not anthropocentric, but rather cosmological. In Buddhism, humans and the things of the universe are equally subject to change, equally subject to transitoriness or transmigration. A person cannot achieve emancipation from the cycle of birth and death until he or she can eliminate a more universal problem: the transience common to all things in the universe. Here we see that the basis for Buddhist salvation is cosmological, not personalistic as in an I-Thou relationship with God, and thus impersonal and trans-anthropocentric. However, it is only humans with self-consciousness and free will who can go beyond anthropocentrism and reach an awareness that transience is not limited to humanity but is common to all things. As you know, Buddhism talks about universal transience, transience in everything, including the most minor things in nature. And so the realization of universal transience, one of the key points of Buddhist awakening, is not anthropocentric but a cosmological realization.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Buddhist salvation is primarily concerned with individual persons and is not simply concerned with humankind in general, for as is written in a sutra, "One is born alone, dies alone, comes alone, and goes alone." In this sense, Buddhism may also be said to be personalistic and existentialistic. Yet this does not mean that the human is understood in Buddhism in terms of a divine-human encounter in which nature is excluded, but rather that the human is grasped as a being with self-consciousness and free will on a cosmological basis which includes all of nature. Without the realization

## SUFFERING IN THE LIGHT OF OUR TIME

of transience and selflessness on such a cosmological basis, a human being cannot become an "awakened one."

Thus the following two aspects of Buddhist salvation must be noted:

1. Buddhism is primarily concerned with salvation of a human as a person who, unlike other living beings, has self-consciousness and free will and thereby alone has the potential to become aware of and emancipated from the transience common to all things in the universe. This is the existentialistic and personalistic aspect of Buddhism.

2. However, a cosmological dimension is the necessary *basis* for this Buddhist salvation: in Buddhism salvation is not from sin as rebellion against God, but emancipation from the cycle of birth and death which is part of the transience of the universe. This is the cosmological aspect of Buddhism. These two aspects are inseparable: the more cosmological the basis of salvation, the more existentially thoroughgoing the salvation. In this sense, the Buddhist cosmology, which is the basis of nirvana is an existential cosmology, not an objective scientific cosmology, and Buddhist existentialism or personalism may be called "cosmo-existentialism" or "cosmo-personalism."

The Buddhist position with regard to the relation of humankind and nature may contribute a spiritual foundation out of which could arise a solution to one of the most pressing problems with which human beings are today faced: the destruction of the environment. This problem is inextricably connected with human estrangement from nature. It results from anthropocentrism whereby a person regards nature merely as a means or obstacle to the realization of selfish goals and thus continually finds ways to utilize and conquer it. The cosmological view, which is the basis of Buddhist nirvana, does not see nature as something subordinate to human beings, but sees them as subordinate to nature, or more precisely, as a part of nature from the standpoint of "cosmos." Thus the cosmological view allows human beings both to overcome estrangement from nature and to live harmoniously with nature without losing their individuality.

### *Nirvana and the Irrational*

Fourth, let us consider what significance Buddhist nirvana may have

in dealing with the irrational in human existence. Interest in mythology and primitive cultures as well as an irresistible demand to satisfy instinctive, especially sexual, desires are on the upsurge in highly industrialized societies. These phenomena may be regarded as reactions to the emphasis on human rationality and science which has developed in modern European culture and has formed the basis for industrialization. Western thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Marx, Freud, Jung and, more recently, Camus and Marcuse, among others, have emphasized the importance of the irrational aspects of human existence. More critically, modern European culture has completely neglected the problem of death, a problem which has concerned humanity since time immemorial and is for modern people the supreme irrationality.

In short, modern European culture with its scientific orientation, pervasive as it is in highly industrialized societies, is based on human rationality and a preoccupation with life, while neglecting to deal with the irrational elements in human existence, especially the problem of death. It is neither desirable nor wise, however, for us simply to accept and follow present reactionary tendencies, which try to counteract, by means of an influx of irrationality, this emphasis on rationalism. What is necessary today in order to deal successfully with this problem is a profound basis upon which the conflicts between the rational and the irrational, reason and desire, life and death, can be resolved. Buddhist nirvana, or the Middle Way, in which people overcome duality and extinguish the "craving" deeply rooted in human existence, can provide such a basis.

### *Nirvana and Community*

Fifth, let us consider what significance Buddhist nirvana may have in the understanding and achieving of true community. It is the realization of nirvana described previously as "difference as it is, is sameness; sameness as it is, is difference," which provides for Buddhism an existential ground for true community. We find ourselves equal, not as children of the one God, but in the common realization of egolessness or no-self or Emptiness, which is at the same time the realization of true Self. Realization of egolessness is not something negative, such as losing one's self-identity; rather, it is positive in that, through this realization one overcomes one's egocentredness and awakens to Reality,

that is, to one's own true Self as well as the true Self of others. It is in this awakening that one can live with others in true community, sharing the realization of true Self. In nirvana, the loss of ego-self is the gain of true Self, and the sameness among individuals in their egolessness and the difference between individuals in their true Self-ness are paradoxically one.

Accordingly, in the realization of nirvana, I am not I because I am egoless, and yet I am absolutely I because I am my true Self. Likewise, you are not you because you are egoless, and yet you are absolutely You because you are your true Self. Moreover, since I am not I, I am you, and since you are not you, you are I. Each person remains just as he or she is, yet each person is equal in that each is his or her true Self. This dynamic interrelationship occurs in the realization of egolessness and Emptiness which is possible and in fact necessary for each human existence. This realization provides the Buddhist foundation for human beings in true community. Furthermore, this realization applies not only to our human relationship to other human beings, but also that to all things in nature, from dogs to mountains.

#### *Nirvana and the Meaning of History*

Sixth and finally, what significance does nirvana have in regard to understanding the meaning of history? Since there is no God in Buddhism, there is no creation or last judgement, but rather Emptiness. Thus, for Buddhism, history has neither beginning nor end. This view of history derives from the deep realization of the *karma* of human beings. *Karma* is the universal law of act and its consequence, which is self-operating in making the world a process of perpetual becoming. Thus it is the driving force behind all action, which produces various effects according to the nature of the action and which binds people to the wheel of birth and death. Unlike the Hindu concept of *karma*, however, *karma* in Buddhism is not deterministic, since there is in Buddhism no idea of a God who is the controller of *karma*; rather, Buddhism takes *karma* as moral power, emphasizing the possibility of final release from the round of transmigration through a free decision of the will. Accordingly, on the one hand, we are bound by our own *karma* which shares in and is inseparably linked to *karma* operating in the universe. On the other hand, however, we as beings with self-conscious-

ness and free will have the opportunity to be liberated from *karma* through our own free act of will performed by our own personal choice: an act which is based on the total realization within oneself of the beginningless and endless process of *karma*, that is, *karma* operating in the universe beyond oneself. In this total realization of *karma*, personal and universal, past, present, and future, one is liberated from *karma* and awakens to nirvana.

At the very moment we truly realize the beginninglessness and endlessness of history, we transcend its boundlessness and find the whole process of history from beginningless beginning to endless end intensively concentrated within the here and now. If you realize the beginninglessness and endlessness of the process of human history at this moment, the whole process is concentrated into your present being. And so you are no more confined by the endless process of endless transmigration, but rather you become master of that endless process of transmigration. Apart from the realization of the here and now, there is no history. We realize our true life and true Self at this moment in which beginning and end, time and eternity, one and many, are not seen in duality but in dynamic oneness. This is nothing other than the realization of nirvana.

Universal *karma* can be realized not objectively, but only subjectively, that is, in and through the existential realization of personal and individual *karma*—and personal *karma* can be truly transcended only when universal *karma* is Subjectively overcome within oneself. Thus, to one who has attained nirvana through the total realization of *karma*, the whole universe discloses itself in its reality and history. And as the endless process of *karma* ceases to operate, eternity manifests itself therein; in this sense, history ends in nirvana. This is the universal salvation of nirvana realized by an awakened one and constitutes the wisdom aspect of nirvana. At the same time, though, for an awakened one history begins in nirvana, because those who, despite *the fact of* universal salvation realized by an awakened one, *believe themselves* to be “unsaved,” remain innumerable in the world and will appear endlessly in the future. Thus, history takes on new significance for an awakened one—it is an endless process in which he or she must try to actualize universal salvation in regard to those who fill the ranks of the “unsaved.” This constitutes the compassion aspect of nirvana. Since the wisdom and compassion aspects are inseparable in nirvana, history be-

## SUFFERING IN THE LIGHT OF OUR TIME

gins and ends at each and every moment in the realization of nirvana.

In short, for an awakened one who is living in nirvana, universal salvation is completely realized in the here and now, and yet it is to be realized endlessly in the process of history for those who think themselves to be "unsaved." These two aspects are dynamically united in nirvana. Accordingly, at each and every moment of history a development toward the endless future is at once the total return to the root source of history, which is eternity, and conversely the total return to the root source of history that is eternity is at once a development toward the endless future. The process of history is a succession of such moments whose dynamic structure consists of an advance which is simultaneously a return, a return which is simultaneously an advance. This Buddhist view of history leads us to a double realization that, in the light of wisdom, eternity manifests itself in the here and now, and life at this moment is not a means to a future end but is the end itself, while, in the light of compassion, life is an endless activity of saving others, an instrument for universal salvation.