

## THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

that moment ceases to be, and a radiance of 'foolish' joy illumines all one's being, never to be entirely lost in the days to come.

Whether or not these moments, when carefully distinguished from mere psychic eruptions with which they are easily confused, are comparable with the 'first peep' of *kensho* we know not. But this we know, that by deep study of Zen literature at its finest, application of these truths in meditation and daily life, and the modified form of the *kōan* exercise described above, the mind is calmed, ennobled and raised, to be ready for those moments of more spiritual awareness which make the years of training enormously worth while. We know that such experience is but the beginning of the Zen path. But if we thus enter, shall we not the more easily 'Walk on'?

Is it along these lines that the Ch'an tradition of China and the later Zen tradition of Japan will be rooted in the English mind and find new flowering? At least its life in England is strong enough to be seeking new forms of expression. Is this still true in Japan?

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## GOTAMA'S EARLY PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPERIMENTATION

TERESINA R. HAVENS<sup>1</sup>

Once when the Lord was staying at Savatthi in Jeta's grove . . . he addressed the listening Almsmen as follows:  
"In the days before my full enlightenment, when I was . . . not yet all-enlightened, the idea came to me to sort out my thoughts into two separate and distinct groups."<sup>2</sup>

Although almost every account of the Buddha's life includes his visible outward experiments in self-torture, even critical scholars have overlooked the evidence in the Pāli texts that the night under the Bo tree was made possible by a long series of prior inward steps in psychological discovery.

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<sup>1</sup> The author of *Buddhist and Quaker Experiments with Truth*. Dr. Havens lived for a time at Itto-en near Kyoto, Japan. She received her Ph. D. from Yale University in Buddhist philosophy and is a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

<sup>2</sup> *Further Dialogues of the Buddha*, translated from the *Majjhima Nikāya* by Lord Chalmers (London: 1926), hereafter abbreviated as *FDB*, Vol. I, p. 79.

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Almost forty years ago E. J. Thomas and Mrs. Rhys Davids made notable contributions to sorting out various strata in the canonical lives of the Buddha. Thomas in *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History* (1927)<sup>1</sup> scrutinized many versions of the Enlightenment experience, noting accretions of formulae absent from the earliest accounts. Mrs. Rhys Davids used her earlier textual studies as a springboard for the highly imaginative reconstruction, *Gotama the Man*, published in 1928.<sup>2</sup> But neither of these pioneer scholars made use of a series of scattered episodes in the *Nikāyas*<sup>3</sup> in which Gotama himself, speaking in the first person as in the quotation at the head of this paper, tells his disciples precisely how, prior to his full Awakening, he came to discover certain laws of the inner life through experimentation. Two or three of these episodes have been noted in isolation by Thomas or by more recent scholars, but the significance of the series in revealing Gotama's *method of finding truth* has not, so far as I can discover, been pointed out heretofore.

The unusual historical value of these documents is highlighted by the absence of any similar clues to the workings of the mind of Jesus of Nazareth during the "hidden years" between his infancy and his encounter with John the Baptizer. If Jesus ever revealed to his disciples any early doubts or difficulties prior to his temptation, such memories were not included in the authorized account. Hence it seems to me far easier to get inside the mind of the historical Gotama than into that of the historical Jesus.

### *Types of Experimentation*

The following categories, although they overlap to some extent, cover the main types of questions or experiments recorded in ten autobiographical passages (exclusive of the standard formulae for austerities and Enlightenment):

- I. Childhood experience of spontaneous *jhāna* (an untranslatable term for a kind of peak-experience, supernormal consciousness, or "ecstatic musing" not original with Buddhism.)<sup>4</sup>
- II. Efforts to find the right balance between over-strain and over-

<sup>1</sup> London. Kegan Paul. See esp. p. 230.

<sup>2</sup> London. Luzac.

<sup>3</sup> *Nikāyas*—the earliest collections of the Buddha's full-length dialogues and discourses, roughly equivalent to the synoptic gospels of the New Testament. Lord Chalmers considers that the *Digha* and *Majjhima Nikāya* "present the essentials of early Buddhism in their oldest extant form." Introduction to *FDB* I, p. vii.

<sup>4</sup> *FDB* I, p. 176-177. This episode has been noted by many biographers but is included here for the sake of completeness.

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- sluggishness.<sup>1</sup>
- III. Early difficulties in concentration (*FDB* II, p. 246ff.)
  - IV. Introspective studies in the nature of *feeling* (these will be merely outlined, not discussed in the present article):
    - A. Observation of intermixture of pleasant and unpleasant feelings (*KS* II, p. 113ff.)
    - B. Recognition of need for higher satisfaction (*FDB* I, p. 66ff., 356).
  - V. Breathing exercises (*KS* V, p. 280).
  - VI. Investigations of causes and effects of various states of mind.
    - A. Sorting thoughts into categories and observing results of each type (See quotation at head of this article and footnote <sup>1</sup>).
    - B. Analysis of why certain states of mind fade away (overlaps with III).
    - C. Analysis of origin of pleasurable and painful feelings (overlaps with IV).

### *Authenticity of Autobiographical Passages*

Before discussing their psychological significance, a few words should be said concerning the credibility of this series of autobiographical passages. First, the sheer honesty of self-observation has an authentic ring. Who but the one who experienced it could report an inner failure in this way? (A similar argument has often been adduced for the authenticity of the temptation stories in the New Testament synoptic gospels.)

Second, it is extremely unlikely that later editors would have invented stories like these which portray a gradual process of discovery decidedly at variance with the later myth of a sudden overnight eruption into Buddhahood.

Third, the note of empirical inquiry is not an isolated emphasis in these passages, but rings true to the spirit of other early Buddhist documents which urge each disciple to find the truth for himself rather than relying on anyone else's authority, even the Master's. Closely allied is the emphasis on growth and process in many of Gotama's parables and sermons. It seems consistent with this that the Founder would be concerned to share with his disciples what he could of his own process of discovery. In contrast, the later myth, like most myths anywhere, tends to telescope, to leave out the false steps, to see the predetermined end from the beginning, to omit the step-by-step struggles which attest the humanity of the Founder. The autobio-

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<sup>1</sup> *Kindred Sayings*, translated by F. L. Woodward (London, 1930), hereafter abbreviated as *KS*, Vol. V, p. 235ff., 251ff.

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graphical passages reveal early stages in the unfolding of precisely the kind of mind, the kind of thinking, which comes to fruition in the full-fledged Master's later dialogues with seekers, disciples and antagonists.

### *Gotama as Empiricist*

In his reminiscences may be seen in germ the Buddha's flair for catching a state of mind or a feeling as it were "on the wing," for discerning how it originates and how and why it changes. Here are recorded some of the early experiments building up to his life-long insistence that "*consciousness arises only through assignable conditions.*" This recognition that states of mind do not arise arbitrarily or spontaneously but are conditioned by foregoing states of mind was a major break-through in man's observation of orderly process. At almost exactly the same time in Greece, Heraclitus was affirming the universal law of change, change according to regular order. Characteristically, the western pioneer discovered this law first in the area of outward natural phenomena, while the eastern explorer observed it in the psychological realm of his own inner thoughts and feelings.

Crucial steps in Gotama's discovery and use of psychological laws are revealed in a conversation with three monks about his own early difficulties in concentrating (*FDB* II, pp. 246ff.). In the course of a pastoral call on Anuruddha, Kimbila and Nandiya in their woodland retreat, the Master, as was his custom, inquires about their outward and inward welfare and progress, especially in higher states of realization. The Brothers reply that although they sometimes succeed in achieving certain higher states,<sup>1</sup> these soon fade away.

"I myself too," responded the Master, "in the days before Enlightenment, got these higher states; but they soon faded away, and I asked myself why they did . . . Thinking it over, I concluded that this turned on the degree of my mental concentration. So I resolved to develop mental concentration along three lines."

The first step in this analysis was to note, objectively, the fading away of the higher states. The second, still more crucial, was to ask: "*Why* did they fade away?" This step was of vital import because it presupposed some

<sup>1</sup> The technical terms for these stages of concentration—involving progression from an outer object to a mental image to a luminous "reflex image" (*patibhāganimitta*) and thence into *jhāna*—are elucidated in *A Survey of Buddhism* by Bhikshu Sangharakshita, Bangalore, India, 1957, p. 164, and in Mrs. Rhys Davids' translation of the *Dhamma-saṅgāṭi: A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics*. London, 1900. See index under "Kasina meditation." Compare her *Buddhist Psychology*. London, 1914, p. 106.

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orderly sequence of cause and effect in the way in which states of mind change. The following steps are more complicated, in that Gotama discovered a kind of chain of causes. The higher states faded, he concluded, because of his slackening concentration. This in turn was caused by certain blocks, which are listed below. The cure lay a) in removing these negative blocks; b) in cultivating concentration by positive exercises.

The long list of "blemishes" which interfered with his concentration reveals Gotama's ruthless honesty of self-analysis, as well as throwing much light on the kinds of temptations with which he struggled. The further fact that he made this list available to his disciples when they were going through similar difficulties shows what systematic use he later made of his discoveries. The blocks which he analyzed and took measures to remove he catalogues as follows:

- " (1) Doubts,
- (2) intellectual shortcomings,
- (3) flurry and worry,
- (4) palsied fear,—Just as palsy would arise in a traveller on a long journey if on either side murderers appeared, so that palsy came on him from right and left,—so did palsy arise within me.
- (5) elation,—Just as elation would arise in a man hunting for a buried hoard if he came on five hoards all at once, so did elation arise within me.
- (6) lewdness,
- (7) excessive effort,—Just as a man grasping a quail with might and main in both hands would kill the bird, such was the excessive effort which arose within me.
- (8) slackness,—Just as a quail would slip from the hand of a man who held it in a loose and slack grasp, such was the slackness which arose within me.
- (9) aspirations,
- (10) multiplicity in sensory perception, and
- (11) over-meticulous analysis of the phenomena."

On this last blemish, the Buddha comments:

*"Leading a life that was strenuous, ardent and purged of self, I got the aura and the apperception of Form, but they soon faded away, and I asked myself why they did. Then thought I:—Meticulous analysis of the phenomena has arisen within me and consequently concentration has passed away and with it the aura and apperception; I will take measures to stop this meticulousity of*

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analysis too from occurring in future.”

This list has a significance over and above its actual content. The fact that Gotama must have made mental notes of his difficulties at the time, and that he codified them, as it were, in his memory, is further indication of his gift for self-analysis and his fondness for systematizing psychological data. Indeed, this fondness could itself be a hindrance. Gotama’s shrewd self-knowledge about his own temptations at just this point appears in his recognition that “meticulous analysis of the phenomena” could at times interfere with his concentration. Apparently he became so fascinated with detailed analysis of his states of mind that he found the realization at which he aimed slipping away.

The problem of finding the right balance between striving too hard and becoming lethargic seems to have been another major one in Gotama’s pilgrimage. On another occasion at Savatthi he told the monks:

“Formerly, monks, when I was unenlightened, but just a Bodhisattva, this occurred to me: What, I wonder, is the cause, what is the motive for cultivating the bases of psychic power? ... What, I wonder, is the way, what the practice for the cultivation of the bases of psychic power? (p. 235, 251).”

“At the thought, monks: This is the basis of psychic power which has for its features desire (*chando*—wholesome motivation) together with the co-factors of concentration and struggle,—in things unheard of before there arose in me vision, there arose in me knowledge, insight arose, wisdom arose, light arose (p. 229).”<sup>1</sup>

The note of elation over a new discovery comes through unmistakably in this passage. Apparently “cultivation of psychic power” was an existing practice in India in Gotama’s youth. His fresh contribution was to examine the rationale and method of this exercise and then to utilize it specifically for the regulation successively of desire, energy (*virya*), thought (*citta*) and investigation (*mimāṃsā*), so that each in turn should be neither over-sluggish nor over-strained.

### *The Buddha as Spiritual Director*

Further self-observation along this line probably lies behind the Master’s

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation from page 229 has been included where it seems to belong with the passages on pages 235 and 251, although it is not immediately preceded, as they are, with a reference to the days before Enlightenment.

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advice concerning “wrong and right seasons (KS V, 95ff.)” The cultivation of tranquillity, he points out, would be just the wrong exercise for the brother who was in a phase of inertia. That would be just the time to practise the stirring up of energy and zest. He goes on (p. 97):

“At such time, monks, as the mind is elated, then is the wrong season for cultivating the limb of wisdom that is Norm-investigation . . . energy, or . . . zest. Why so? Because, monks, the elated mind is hard to be calmed by such conditions . . .

“At such time, monks, as the mind is elated, then is the season for cultivating the limb of wisdom that is tranquillity . . . concentration . . . and equanimity. Why so? Because, monks, the elated mind is easily calmed by such conditions.”

That this was an original contribution of the Buddha is indicated by the text, which asserts that the discrimination of wrong and right seasons was “beyond the scope . . . of Wanderers of other views” and was grasped by the Buddha alone (p. 95). It is the mark of a master spiritual director to be aware of the dangers of misuse of spiritual exercises, and to be able to help each disciple to find the right exercise not only for his own peculiar temperament, but for his specific lack of balance at a given time.

In summary, the Buddha’s gift for making his own experiences—failures as well as successes—available to his disciples must have been a major factor in his power and continuing influence as a spiritual director. Light on his *method* of discovering laws of inner growth is especially significant insofar as the genius of Buddhism lies precisely at the point of method rather than metaphysics. In its systematization and transmission of certain methods for achieving Enlightenment lies the secret of the power of “The Buddha’s Way” to meet the spiritual needs of a varied succession of Eastern cultures and to challenge seekers in the West today as well.

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