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Upaya  
Stratagems of  
the Great Compassion

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RELATIONS BETWEEN THE various religious traditions have undergone a sea change since my childhood on the Dutch-Belgian border when an abyss of suspicion and animosity gaped between Catholics and Protestants. Hardly any more Christian love was lost between the fifty or so Protestant denominations in our little Holland, of which each one trumpeted its divinely guaranteed monopoly on truth. After World War II the shouting match gradually became a more civilized exchange which in time evolved into that “dialogue” which was to turn into somewhat of a rage among the religious intelligentsia on the threshold of the third millennium after Golgotha, strangely coinciding with the spectacular exodus from the churches, all over Europe and especially in Holland, England and France. The interfaith fervor, however, soon washed across its Christian borders and went trans-cultural. The dramatic collapse of the obstructions which spiritually—if not commercially—had separated East from West for centuries, that impermeable membrane which in Kipling’s time still prevented “the twain to meet,” had sprung leaks. Eastern values and insights, the verities of Buddhism, Taoism, Vedanta not only oozed through the by now leaking membrane but became a steady stream that threatened to become a torrent. Spiritual export from West to East, on the contrary, remained as anemic as it had been ever since in the 17th century the efforts of Jesuits like Ricci and Valignano to convert China to Catholicism ended in a spectacular flop. Rome’s semantic inflexibility and doctrinal petrification after the Council of Trent prevented its missionaries from seasoning the Good News to tempt Chinese appetites. Their Protestant colleagues’ equally unpliant vocabulary was not any more successful. Still, Arnold Toynbee, the great historian, could write: “A thousand years from now, historians looking back upon our century, may remember it less for its conflicts between democracy and communism than for the momentous encounter between Christianity and

Buddhism," and he expressed the hope that through this encounter the deep humanity which Buddhism and Christianity hold in common, might guide our species through the next thousand years. In the same prophetic mood Toynbee speculated that the initiation of the West into Mahayana Buddhism, Zen in particular, by Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870–1966) might be a historical event comparable in importance to the invention of nuclear fission. . . .

I must have been affected by this East-West "encounter" at its very inception when as a medical student in Utrecht in the late twenties my eye fell on a pamphlet with the riddlesome title "ZEN" in big black letters, written by a mathematics professor at our university. It fascinated me. Years later, in the forties, when Suzuki's writings on Zen started to become available from British publishers, I had the sensation of having been parachuted into a landscape never seen before where I recognized every tree, every bush, every hillock. In 1971 it made me set out on a "Pilgrimage to Now/Here"<sup>1</sup> which resulted in a spiritual travelogue through Sri Lanka, India, the Himalayas and Japan. In it—among many drawings—for I am an artist, not a theologian, I report on the numerous conversations I had with religious figures, Hindu, Mahayana and Theravada on my way. They made me realize that my fascination with the East, with Zen in particular, was not a personal idiosyncrasy at all, and much less part of some fashionable fad. On the contrary, it was symptomatic of the deficiency diet supplied by the desiccated Western religions, lacking the most vital nutrients, hence leaving whole generations famished for Meaning. There were occasional glimmers of hope: the Second Vatican Council called by Pope John XXIII, genius of the heart, seemed to promise the recovery of those life-giving riches of a Church that briefly appeared to be on the point of converting itself to its own spiritual roots. But following the death of this bodhi-sattva-pope it reverted with a vengeance to the old authoritarianism, be it under new labels, complete with censorship and both formal and less formal types of excommunication. The task of religion obviously was not seen as stimulating an awareness of the unfathomable depth dimensions of our Being, of existence as such, of what it means to be born human in particular. Theology was forced back into serving as a testing device for conformity, setting the stringent criteria for belonging or being alien to the Body of Christ.

The attraction of Buddhism became more and more pervasive. In Catholic and Protestant journals ads became commonplace offering zazen, insight-meditation, sesshins, yoga retreats. Obviously these Oriental imports were more than exotic curiosa. They were indispensable additives to a deficient diet.

<sup>1</sup> *Pilgrimage to Now/Here* (Orbis Books, 1974); *Fingers Pointing Toward the Sacred* (Beacon Point Press, 1994); *The Buddha Eye* (Crossroad, 1993); *To Be Human Against All Odds* (Royal Fireworks Press, 1995).

A feverish digging started for equivalents in that Christian mysticism which had been forcefully repressed by a Vatican suspicious of “religious experience” through the centuries.

Nicholas of Cusa, Hildegard of Bingen, John of the Cross, Catherine of Siena, Meister Eckhart—the latter only escaped the pyre by dying prophylactically—were mobilized to counteract what made the ultra-conservative Cardinal Ratzinger proclaim: “The Church must make every effort to combat the influence of Buddhism.” Ratzinger, conduit for Pope John Paul II, chose to set an example by punishing a distinguished but somewhat unconventional septagenarian theologian in Sri Lanka, Fr. Tissa Balasuriya, with excommunication, without process, without defense and without appeal. The medieval verdict struck precisely on a weekend early in 1997 when by a fluke I found myself a guest in one of those gatherings devoted to interfaith dialogue. Amiable ladies and benevolent gentlemen, some in Roman collar, one even supplementing it with mauve shirt and pectoral cross, sat sipping Earl Grey and nibbling Pepperidge cookies—only the gentleman in the yarmulke abstained—while dialoguing in high professional style. Since my 85th birthday my hearing aid has become somewhat selective, and so much did escape me, but I do remember some passionate statements about Resurrection versus *sive* Reincarnation, and the word *gnosis*—or was it *kenosis*, or both?—almost rhythmically repeated as in a refrain. For a moment the ambience of cordiality seemed in the balance when the sharp contrast between Christian *agape*—impartial divine love—and Buddhist *Mahakaruna*, the Great Compassion was tactlessly overstressed and the Oriental gentleman across the table became visibly annoyed. He was not the only one present who a mere two generations ago would have been black-balled as heathen or even idolator. By now, however, the only criterion for being welcomed to the dialogue seemed to consist in being reliably representative of some respectable religious institution, and preferably a professional. I am neither, so I kept mum. As an unaffiliated *homo religiosus* I sat there trying to tie some of the fragments of the dialogue together and I wondered whether this charming tea party and even interfaith dialogue as such, did not belong to a period long past, well before the planet-wide onslaught by the highly organized anti-faith of nihilism which unleashed the hurricane of neo-barbarity that is engulfing the globe with its contempt for life, for human rights, for social justice, for compassion with the suffering of humanity’s great majority, in short, contempt for anything but “the market” and profits. This cynical nihilism is the dynamic of the gigantic transnational corporations which, free from all restraints, setting their own rules, poison the soil, the air, the water, while hiding behind respectable masks of public relations. Worst of all they invade the very soul of humans, especially of the young, by an uninterrupted bombardment with electronic offal and the vile seductions of their ad-

vertising. It is a massive assault on the very humanness of the human spirit, most irreplaceable of “resources.” In this crisis it is not interfaith dialogue that will save us, but a trans-religious solidarity in defense of human inner life, of human dignity and of that religious attitude to Existence-as-such and to the unity of all Existence in its infinite differentiation. Is this not an insight all great traditions share?

The word *upaya* sprang to mind, a Sanskrit term with which I had become familiar while reading Buddhist scripture and literature, and which had proven equally helpful when reading the Gospels and the mystics of East and West—all masterly jugglers with *upaya*—which has been translated as “skillful means,” as “appropriate ways,” as “methods,” even as “stratagems” effective in helping us uninitiated ones to see, to grasp, even to “understand” those ineffable, yet existentially indispensable in-sights, mysteries and truths which our everyday language lacks the tools to handle. In the Lotus Sutra, for instance, *upaya* refers to those compassionate stratagems by which the Buddha and the bodhisattvas succeed in transmitting the wisdom, *prajna*, the mysteries of awakening, of liberation, by adapting their terminology to the level of intellect and of spiritual maturity of the person spoken to. Actually all of Buddhism has been described as being *upaya* to help us mortals “reach the Other Shore.” Are not all religious systems, their doctrines, their rituals in this sense *upaya*? What I was listening to all of a sudden struck me as a compulsive game in which these invaluable “means,” these *upaya* were almost mechanically objectified, their ineffable beauty and tenderness dulled into cerebral theologisms. “Fingers pointing at the moon” were revered, but also debated as if they were what they were pointing at, and as if the Unsayable at which they were pointing was a subject of dialogue rather than of silent contemplation. Did not *upaya*, once objectified, change into their opposite, turn from being powerful sharpeners, stimulants of the spirit, into its tranquilizers? Have not *upaya*, dogmatized and absolutized, been tools of oppression and manipulation from time immemorial? The mis-use of these “skillful means” has been the malediction that rests on all exoteric religion. In the West Christianity is inextricably interwoven with a history and a culture that betrayed its essence, caused witch hunts, pyres, persecutions, inquisitions and religious wars. What Christianity at this juncture might still learn from Buddhism—instead of “combating it”—is the awareness of *upaya* as being just that, no more, no less, and that the ignorance, the unawareness of the nature of *upaya* as “compassionate stratagems” is symptomatic of *avidya*.

*Avidya* is another Sanskrit term. It refers to that primal ignorance, that congenital flaw in our make-up that causes us to mis-perceive Reality and then makes us compound that faulty perception by mis-interpreting it further. It is interesting to reflect whether what Buddhism speaks of as *avidya*, that radical

alienation from Reality, from “God,” and that “lies at the root of desire which itself lies at the root of suffering” (de Lubac), might not be equivalent or analogous to what Christians call Original Sin.

Here I stopped writing, suddenly puzzled how what I jotted down here about *upaya*—at the end of a life that spanned almost all of this appalling century—I must have felt in my bones as a child: that symbols, *upaya*, are indeed “fingers pointing at” That Which Matters, the Unsayable. Was it this hunch that prevented me from ever becoming a card-carrying Catholic, but also from labeling myself a Buddhist, a Taoist or whatever and that made me suspect all such boastful self-labeling as “I am a this” or “I am a that” as mere posturing, superstition or self-deception.

Still, I sometimes think that culturally speaking I must have grown up as somewhat of a Catholic, not by choice but, let’s say by karma. . . . For I happened to be born, almost nine decades ago on a tiny agnostic family island in the fiercely Catholic ocean of Southern Holland. Not having inherited the agnostic temperament, I eagerly absorbed, by sheer osmosis, the Catholic symbol system that surrounded me and offered me the scaffolding to which I could attach my first intimations of that Unsayable, that Reality, that Encompassing, that Divine, known as “God”. . . .

As I am writing this, events keep looming up that in retrospect strike me as the mini-satoris of childhood, most often induced by confrontation with these “fingers pointing,” these Catholic symbols, these *upaya*, unspoilt, undistorted by a religious indoctrination I escaped. The cast-iron crucifixes and sky-blue madonna shrines standing on every crossroad adorned by jam jars full of field flowers, were pointing at dimensions of being, to a deep poetry which transcended the platitudes of everyday routines.

Symbols, as Raimon Panikkar stresses in his writings, do indeed not demand explanation, hermeneutics, exegesis. On the contrary, symbols simply symbolize, communicate directly—or fail to communicate—with intuition, heart and intellect. They release—or do not release—an “immediate awareness,” a firsthand seeing. The most powerful of these symbols was surely the lifesize crucifix on the back wall of the cathedral I passed on my way to and from school every day. I did not so much look-at the naked man hanging there dying day after day. I *saw* him. I saw him each time as if it were the first, saw those wounds in his feet, his hands, his side, saw that tortured face turned to heaven. It was in the midst of the First World War that raged from my fifth to my ninth year, just south of our border. Endless streams of wounded and dying soldiers on pushcarts and such improvised ambulances passed our window. “They are like you!” I would say to the man on the cross. “Yes, we are like you!” He had become, I could not verbalize it until a lifetime later, sheer

*upaya*: timeless Presence of the fully Human in time, timeless victim of human *avidya*.

On Easter Sunday, all church bells clanging I saw him rising in full glory, a skylark high in the sunny blue sky: the Unkillable Human! Despite all that has happened, all I had to witness throughout this bloodstained century, I still believe in the Unkillable Human.

There is more. . . .

I can't remember whether I was ten or twelve when I was shown that stone carving of a fish that had been found in a Roman catacomb. "The fish, *ichtos*, you know, is the oldest symbol of Christ. . . ."

One could not miss catching such things in our Catholic town. I also must have caught something about the "Mystical Body of Christ." I had not the faintest idea what that could mean, but it kept resonating like an organ chord. And so it must have happened that in my imagination the fish from the catacombs and the resonating organ chord fused, and took the form of an enormous Fish. Every scale on the Fish's blue and silver body was a human face, every kind of human face. On my evening walks I saw this immense Fish take off from the cluster of old houses surrounding the Basilica of Our Lady Star of the Sea, saw it rise steeply in the night sky, cross the river Meuse, swim away among the stars in the direction of Orion: the Cosmic Fish.

The Cosmic Fish never paled. The symbol stayed with me all through life. I have drawn it, painted it, sculpted it in steel, in wood.

A lifetime later when I had become acquainted, even somewhat intimate with Buddhist terminology, my Cosmic Fish transposed itself spontaneously into what in Japanese is known as the *jiji muge hokkai*, that profound insight of Kegon—*Hua yen* in Chinese—based on the Avatamsaka Sutra's supreme insight into the mystery of the relationship of the One and the Many and of the radical interdependence, to the point of unimpeded mutual interpenetration, of the Many, of all phenomena in the universe. My Cosmic Fish now stood for, pointed at, even embodied that radical relativity, that dependent arising, *pratitya samutpada*, that looming up of all phenomena as "temporal condensations" of the Absolute No-Thingness, that is the Absolute Plenitude of *Shunyata*.



The Fish's scales, those innumerable scales, each one a human face, were what Nicholas of Cusa, 14th Century Christian mystic, had seen: "In all faces

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is visible the Face of faces, veiled as in a riddle.” For Cusa that Face of faces was the Face of Christ. May I say that he saw the Christic Principle, however hidden, incarnate in every human?

Then what else than the Buddhist principle could be what Hui Neng (7th century) saw in every human face, when he challenged his disciples: “Show me the Original Face you had before even your parents were born,” that Original Face, that True Self that is a no-self, that is our ur-nature, that is Bankei’s Un-born, that is both—or neither—*atman* and *anatta*, but that is surely the Specifically Human in us.

What is being practiced as Interfaith Dialogue may be immensely preferable to the mutual demonization that preceded it for centuries, though it cannot get as close to That Which Matters as do the four trans-religious lines of an 11th century Japanese poem:

What is it that dwelleth here  
I know not  
But my heart is full of awe  
and the tears trickle down.

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