

Expectations and Assertions

Perspectives for Growth and Adaptation in Buddhism

LUIS O. GÓMEZ

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: A PERSONAL VIEWPOINT

We have been asked to address the difficult question of the significance of Buddhism—especially Zen—in the modern age. Sometimes this question is expressed with high-sounding phrases such as “What can Buddhism do for mankind?” or “What is it that Buddhism has to offer humanity?” Whatever the apparent purport of the question, the answer will have apologetic implications. In other words, one can hardly speak about “significance” or “meaning” in this sense of the words without evaluating, recommending or choosing certain ideas to the exclusion of others. The moment we set for ourselves the task of evaluating or predicting the role of Buddhism in the modern world, we have accepted, without further questioning, several assumptions that may or may not be at all consonant with the ideals of Buddhism as we ourselves propound them. One can easily undertake the difficult project of apologetics or proselytism without asking first what is the final object of the enterprise. To do so is to risk undermining, perhaps not the success, but most definitely the honesty of the undertaking.

I am speaking of underlying objectives, not the avowed goals of the spiritual path. Ultimately the way we understand or judge the significance of religious philosophy and interreligious dialogue will depend mainly on

* This paper was presented at the International Symposium for Religious Philosophy (Kyoto Zen Symposium) held by the Kyoto Seminar for Religious Philosophy under the auspices of The Institute for Zen Studies, Hanazono College, Kyoto, on March 26–30, 1983.

EXPECTATIONS AND ASSERTIONS

what we, as private individuals, expect of our own intentions and how we judge the intentions of others. This is not meant as a denial of the purported goal or function of religion as a spiritual discipline. In a certain sense personal objectives and the goals of the spiritual path may overlap. That is to say, a certain religious practice may, so to speak, retrace in inverse order the steps of the purely personal or self-centered life. But it is also true that the ego may direct religious values and symbols to less noble causes.

The subtle correlation of these forces in the mind is better left to those who are knowledgeable in the field of psychology. The ethical issues, less amenable to the methods of the social sciences, deserve a more detailed and formal discussion in a different forum. For the present symposium I have limited myself to a cursory, and personal examination of the way in which historical and cultural variation affects this subtle interaction. I say a "personal" examination, because in matters of intentions and expectations I'd rather not judge the feelings and attitudes of others, yet I must assume that theirs are somehow similar to mine. Given this frame of reference, the pages that follow should be understood as a description of a personal, unfinished journey. This point of view has the weaknesses of subjectivity, but the strength of familiarity.

Using this vantage point, I would like to propose that my statements on any matter, however removed they might seem from my personal life, reflect self-centered motivations of different kinds. This paper is itself a mirror of my expectations. My ideas and words are informed or constructed by personal hopes and desires. Furthermore, I would like to submit to you that this inordinate domination of my view of things by the self is even stronger and more preponderant in areas of explicit social significance, such as religion. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the fact that, paradoxically, some religions, such as Buddhism, aim at attacking precisely the subjective domination that I have just said characterizes my view of the world.

Turning to the matter at hand, the above statements imply that when I speak about Buddhism or Zen my first tendency is to use this activity as a means of bolstering or enhancing a certain self-image that often will have a life of its own, independent from the "universal" or "objective" import of my statements. It does not matter whether I declare myself a Buddhist or not, my ego is at stake. Of course, if I do declare myself a believer or practitioner, the stakes are much higher. Furthermore, it seems, the act of

saying something about Buddhism becomes not only an exteriorization of the ego, it is also a further construction of ego. In other words, the abstract formulations I utter become an extension of ego, and as such, may well become more significant as protective layers of selfhood, than as accurate descriptions of any external reality. In fact, this may explain why we need to construct an object called “Buddhism,” an “ism” to buttress and label ourselves.

I have made you suffer this long preamble to make the point that our first step when we talk about what Buddhism “is” or “will be” should be to analyze carefully what we are saying, what we mean, and what we are doing *to* Buddhism by talking *about* it. Whether our statements describe what Buddhism *is* or only serve to shape Buddhism in our own image depends on a delicate balance between the desire to make Buddhism intelligible in our own terms, and our capacity to transcend the limitations of our intentionality. What we expect from Buddhism is ultimately what we want for ourselves. Therefore, what we say and do about Buddhism may well be just what we want things to be and not what Buddhism has to tell us.

In this connection, one must introduce yet another distinction, for the activities of talking and doing can be carried out with or without a claim to “belonging” to the tradition. This claim introduces a further sociological complication in the question of intentions or hidden expectations. Presumably the outsider is merely an observer, whereas the insider has both a commitment and a privileged point of view. However, as suggested previously, I question the purity of the believer’s commitment (including my own, of course), as well as the advantage of his “privileged” access to the tradition. Moreover, I also question the unassailable integrity of the “objective” observer, for he, like the believer, has a “person” behind his “personal viewpoint,” an ego that can be threatened or bolstered in some way by his “findings” about Buddhism. This is not to deny that the believer is usually more vulnerable, for he has much more to lose (or so he thinks) if he is found to be in error. Be that as it may, however, I am more concerned about the possible weaknesses in the believer’s position in itself, and not in contrast to that of the non-believer. As an avowed Buddhist I am particularly concerned about my own honesty with myself. Accordingly, I do want to question the special access of the believer, by asking the questions, access to what and to what purpose? A hidden transmission, a whispered secret? Or is it not that the believer, by the mere fact of his de-

EXPECTATIONS AND ASSERTIONS

clared belief becomes the spokesman, and thereby the creator of tradition?

If there were the infallible access to the tradition of the believer that some claim, one would expect a unity in the religious tradition that simply is not there. The truth of the matter is that, strictly speaking, there are no true insiders any more than true detached observers. Both—the one claiming to be a neutral researcher, and the one who would consider himself a spokesman for the tradition—are under similar, historical and personal limitations. Therefore, either way one is under the obligation of checking (that is, inspecting and correcting) the shortcomings of one's positions. I would like to suggest that this can be done by responding honestly to three questions:

1. What do I mean when I say "Buddhism"?
2. What do I, as an egocentric individual, stand to lose or gain from what I may learn or say about Buddhism?
3. What do I expect, in a more general way, from my talking about or doing Buddhism?
4. What can I do to seek an answer to questions 1, 2 and 3?

I will not pretend that I can answer these question for anyone else but myself, and I will not attempt to answer them well in the space I have at my disposal. I will only respond briefly to the problems raised by these questions, in the hope that this will stimulate discussion among those concerned with the theme of this symposium.

USES OF THE TERM "BUDDHISM"

Provisional Definition

Most believers in a given religious tradition speak of the formulations of their beliefs in terms that would suggest that their doctrines are unchanging reflections of eternal truth. Naturally, one should not expect less from someone who has made a choice and a life commitment. However, this approach to established belief is not without disadvantages for the person who is thus engaged in the pursuit of a particular form of the religious life. For once such an attitude is assumed the tradition no longer speaks to the believer and his circumstances. Furthermore, paradoxically, by clinging to what appears as a literal obedience to the past, one has closed the doors to the past, both as a dynamic complex of changing views and practices, and as a grammar of symbols that derived its meaning from a context.

Faithfulness to tradition should be faithfulness to its complexities and contradictions, a quest for the circumstances in which it has been significant, and openness before to the voices that contradict our preferred interpretations. If we are to follow the method that is suggested by the self-criticism outlined above, then we must begin by defining Buddhism in terms that are concrete enough to serve as a point of contrast or touchstone for our own expectations or fancies about “Buddhism.” In other words, we cannot at the outset begin by speaking in general terms about what Buddhism is truly or “essentially” saying. We must first enter a dialogue with the tradition, an exchange that may well contradict all our assumptions and thwart all our expectations. This Buddhism has to be defined in non-normative terms. That is, our starting point will be the common use of the term “Buddhism” to refer to the aggregate of ideas, practices and attitudes held as the norm by those who in the past and the present have claimed to be heirs to the teaching of Śākyamuni Buddha—in the broadest sense and including those who would see Śākyamuni as being somehow superseded by other elements in the tradition (as in Tantra, and in a certain manner of speaking, in Pure Land Buddhism), and those who could be considered naïve or simple-minded by scholars and stuffy clerics.

The implications of such a definition are obvious: Buddhism, as a partner in dialogue, is not the friend that echoes my thoughts, but a number of voices, sometimes contradictory among themselves, often contrary to my expectations. These voices force on me an examination of my expectations and intentions: “What do I, as an egocentric individual, stand to lose or gain from what I may learn or say about Buddhism? Are my intentions in this regard consonant with the message of Buddhism?”

Self-Interest and “Buddhism”

It is evident to me that, having declared myself “a Buddhist,” I stand to lose face, credibility, and acceptance in a society that is primarily non-Buddhist, if not outright hostile to Buddhism. On the other hand, there is also the possibility of “success,” that is to say, persuading others that unusual—not to say “exotic”—ideas and practices can be meaningful. Still, with acceptance one discovers a paradox, an inner tension in the fabric of one’s aspirations; for the crude manifestation of ego becomes stronger as success in understanding and explaining Buddhism increases. Yet by being the antithesis of what Buddhism stands for, this expression of the ego tends to undermine the value of any success in understanding and

explanation. This point might seem like a simple confession of human weakness (which it is), but it also is presented here because it is pertinent to the problem of making Buddhism meaningful in the modern age. For, the internal reality of the power of ego requires that we act with extreme caution. In our struggle to find purpose, meaning and relevance, the highest goals can be perverted by this power. Achieving our most dear aspirations is not necessarily the same thing as giving meaning to our life. Meaning and import are not measured by success, nor sought for that purpose; rather, it is ultimately nothing but the significance of facing the challenge of a tradition that seeks to challenge, rather than to confirm our fancies about ourselves. To answer to the call for dialogue with the tradition is to enter that place where the self faces the self in total loneliness. To paraphrase a Zen aphorism: within oneself one is alone, yet as in a crowd, checked by many eyes and voices, but among those voices one is as if alone, never protected by others. All speculation about the “meaning of Buddhism” must be subject to this acid test.

Accordingly, we must ask, “Is there a Buddhism outside my own ideas of Buddhism?” We have to admit that there is, unless we are willing to assume a solipsistic hermeneutics—not at all a rare phenomenon, but for that reason no less absurd. I do not mean to suggest that there is only a subjective Buddhism, nor do I intend to deny the existence of an extra-subjective force or complex of forces, to which I must refer with the word “Buddhism,” for lack of a better word. The existence of “an objective Buddhism,” however amorphous it might be, is one factor in making possible the dialogue between my subjective intentions and Buddhism. The possibility of such an exchange is a necessary condition for this symposium, and for any “talk about Buddhism.”

Of course, whatever the nature of the external force, I must first bring to the surface my own intentions in order to establish the dialectic that will generate meaning as transformation. As I review my sincerity in this way, I may rediscover in myself the sources of the Buddhist tradition, and thereby change my intentions and goals. This rediscovery may appear to me as a revelation of “the nature of things,” not as a reality dictated by a doctrinal tradition. Still, dialogue with the Buddhism that exists outside my limited self is a necessary condition for calling my efforts “Buddhism.” Without this dialectic what we “did about” Buddhism could be a perversion of the tradition and of our own declared intentions.

Expectations and Experiences

An Analogy. We are now ready to consider point three of our tripartite question: What do I expect from my talking about or doing Buddhism? The problem is more complex than it seems, for the point is that our expectations color our perception of Buddhism. It should be evident, from my discussion of point two, that eventually one must face and combat the hidden motivations of one's "spiritual quest." One way of doing so is by considering the nature of the complex expectations that accompany the spiritual path, as spiritual path. To approach this issue I will use an analogy which I believe illustrates well the complexities of investigating human motivation, and thereby may illuminate our search for new ways to understand Buddhism. This usage of the term "understanding" assumes a pragmatic definition. To understand here means to find ways of talking or acting that will make Buddhism "make sense" in our cultural and historical contexts.

If I could paraphrase a well-known Zen illustration, and twist a bit an old Pāli parable without offending your sense of tradition, I would like to explore some parallels between the experience of savoring a cup of coffee or tea (green, black or herbal, if you will), and religious experience. The comparison is useful as long as we keep in mind that it is a partial analogy, and that one should not assume that religious experience is merely an aesthetic experience.

If one enjoys drinking coffee, wine or tea, there is no question that enjoyment follows from an experience of taste. In a certain sense, therefore, when I drink a cup of coffee, I do not have to investigate or label the nature and origin of the coffee, nor is it necessary to demand a justification for the activity of drinking my morning coffee. However, the metaphor is not as self-evident as it seems, for in real life we do increase our enjoyment of coffee or tea by enhancing sense pleasure with the aesthetics of cultured reflection. Furthermore, we can be lead to tasting a particular kind of coffee by certain verbal signs. Lastly, we do often have motivations that go "deeper" (in the sense of farther away from the surface) than our avowed reasons for drinking coffee. Tea is generally drunk to enjoy it, but the enjoyment may include knowledge about tea or coffee, as well as our own pride and delight in knowing about coffee, and our past experiences (individual and social) with this particular drink.

Three Types of Religious Knowledge. This modified version of ancient wisdom, is presented here to show that the metaphor of “pure experience” already tells us that there is more to experience than a simple apprehension of an object. As in the drinking of good tea, wine or coffee, in religion too some forms of intellectual effort and conditioning accompany the experience and behavior of tasting. Furthermore, certain—at times aberrant or perverse—forms of self-seeking or ego-building may be more than accidentally connected with the experience. The following discussion of the illustration should dispel any fears that this is proposed as an unconditional rejection of the concept of direct religious experience. Tasting is still tasting. But one cannot be initiated into the art and pleasure of coffee or wine without certain preliminaries (and a person who is able to taste and does not want or is unable to share the joys of his experience is indeed an antisocial gourmet). These preliminaries are usually of two kinds: a tradition of manners and a tradition of justification. That is, enjoyment of a drink or a dish occurs in a certain cultural context, which enhances or creates the meaning of the participant’s actions, feelings, and perceptions. But the latter aspect is not always invisible; it can also be expressed or explicit, for instance, if the custom is justified by a religious festival or a myth, or in the speculation of theologians. When the tradition is presented to an outside observer the explicit formulation of meaning becomes essential. It is sometimes not enough to say “taste!” or “drink!”—complex explanation or invitation is required.

Once the initial or habitual resistance to tasting has been overcome, and the wine has been enjoyed more than once, taste is developed and refined. New angles are explored—including new ways of attracting others to the enjoyment of that taste. Sometimes this last stage is so important that persons will spend a great deal of energy in reflecting *ex post facto* or even in purely abstract terms on the joys and advantages of tasting the savored meal or drink. Or someone may be primarily intent on “showing off,” or gaining adepts to his or her favorite tastes.

Now, on the last point the analogy breaks down, at least on a normative level; for the enjoyment of coffee can be replaced by the purely abstract consideration of the activity and its social or cultural margins. Moreover, the cultivation of “learning about coffee” for no other purpose than intellectual greed is not always frowned upon. Religious behavior and experience, on the other hand, are understood, in the Buddhist tradition at least, as standing in a sphere of experience wholly different from intellectual ab-

straction, a realm which should lie beyond any form of greed and pride. A contradiction is therefore perceived—especially in the Zen tradition—between enjoying the tea or coffee of Buddhism and craving for it or talking about it.

Still, the preliminary or initiatory stage and the subsequent intellectual appreciation and distillation remain as a common ground in both categories of “tasting,” aesthetic and religious. No matter how direct, practical and positive one’s approach to tasting might be, there is the initial invitation and the subsequent sharing of one’s insight into the activity with those who either cannot or will not make the required effort to reach the actual object.

Among its many scholastic categories, the Indian Buddhist tradition included three types of religious cognition: preparatory, transcendent, and subsequent. The first and third have a definite intellectual or conceptual content. Only the second one is non-conceptual. It goes without saying that it is also the most important, the one without which the others would be pointless and meaningless. The other two are nevertheless indispensable. If I were to express this in non-traditional terms, I would formulate the following interpretation: the unquestionable and ineffable source of meaning must be conceived of through the metaphor of “the non-dual experience of tasting.” The question of the meal’s significance cannot be legitimately raised while it is being tasted. Meaning arises from tasting. Still, it is only in conveying to others an invitation to the meal, in setting out towards the dining room, in sharing with others the meal, that the intent and import become problematic. Consequently, one must then raise the questions of expectation and motivation.

QUESTIONS OF MEANING

Meaning and Explanation

There is, therefore, a fundamental difference between the experience of tasting and the activity of explanation or justification, however interdependent they may be. Furthermore, one can hardly exaggerate the importance of the latter function in the history of Buddhism, including Zen. “Buddhism” as an idea and as an institution is by definition an ideological system, rhetorical structure, a social reference point for other things. Our interaction with such structures may or may not (though it should) redirect us towards introspection, intimate awareness and self-transformation, but

the rhetorico-social aspect cannot be ignored, because all religious activities begin and end with this phase. We deceive ourselves if we preach and uphold “Buddhism,” while denying at the same time its content as an ideology and socio-political force. Communication with others is influencing others, developing effective rhetorical devices—we justify and explain coffee drinking in order to get others to agree with us, and if possible, join in our enjoyment of coffee. The common rejection of conceptual thought, the emphasis on a non-dual ineffable experience, which are so common among Buddhists, is often nothing more than a way of protecting ourselves from criticism—“the truth” as the last stronghold of the ego. Criticism by others serves as a constructive way of attacking our own self-image.

An exchange of criticisms is essential to any type of dialogue—dialogue across cultural barriers is no exception. One must pass through an initial stage of openness to a different grammar of symbols before undertaking a rebuttal or a concession. Similarly, adoption and modification require gradual assimilation and adaptation, if one seeks to maintain the continuity of the tradition. That is to say, if the goal is neither recalcitrant fundamentalism nor expedient accommodation, then the expression of tradition is a dialectic between traditional forms and the historical context in which it is expressed, including other symbolic or doctrinal orders.

Dogmatics and rhetoric are often assumed to be non-existent in Buddhism. This is most unfortunate, because lack of awareness of what is actually there leads to superficial understanding and weak apologetics. The rhetoric of emptiness (and nothingness) is often taken too literally without an understanding of its functions as metaphor or metalinguistic device. The hackneyed appeal to “experience” and “practice” obscures the value of scrupulous and responsible practice. It numbs, moreover, one’s capacity to understand the intimate connection existing between self-cultivation and sharing. An unqualified appeal to simple practice conceals the fact that even “experience” and “practice” have dogmatic, rhetoric and social frames of reference.

Much could be gained by exploring in which way Buddhist practice and experience can be accurately described as ritual, and therefore as particular forms of symbolic expression. This is one area where we might have something to learn from the Indian approach to Buddhism, with its full awareness of ritual, and the understanding that “the non-dual experience” is not the whole story, for the props are there and are not to be abandoned that easily.

We cannot legitimately raise the question of the meaningfulness—or lack thereof—of a religious order except in those cases in which the experience becomes an idea, or a system; that is, when it is somehow asking to be received into another setting. There is, of course, a sociological dimension to this distinction, for the extent to which a set of beliefs, attitudes, or practices is meaningful is obviously dependent on the degree to which it has penetrated the unquestioned assumptions of a cultural order. In this sense, the apparently purely religious, and Buddhist, issue of communicating a so-called “mystical” experience to others takes on an urgent historical character. Once it becomes an unquestioned and integral part of a system, the set of beliefs will be challenged only when the cultural order changes or is forced to change.

The question of meaning arises when the message of the religion implies expectations which are different from those of the social context in which it is found, or from which it is observed. To speak in more concrete terms: Buddhism was certainly meaningful to millions of Asians for twenty-five hundred years, but it is no longer meaningful to many Asians, and certainly does not make much sense to most Westerners.

The problem then arises naturally, “Is Buddhism at all meaningful?” This question is deceptively simple and obvious. Precisely expressed, it should be reformulated to say, “Is Buddhism meaningful for group X or Y or Z?” The more general statement of the question is not wholly absurd, however, because Buddhism itself has already an implied claim to validity beyond a certain group, a claim which makes its meaning out to be something more than simply meeting the expectations of a particular group of people. Or, to turn once more to the concept of a critical encounter or dialogue, the issue is not simply whether Buddhism met the expectations of person X, or whether it will meet my expectations. The question is how is Buddhism to change one’s expectations.

In a certain sense, meaningfulness is a function of the (seemingly) unchanging ideological structures of a religion and the cultural matrix within which it lives or dies. But, in another sense, meaningfulness is derived from the capacity to transform, in an interaction between religious ideology and action as a force external to a given social context, however brief these encounters may seem. The pressing issue for us in the West—and I suspect for many contemporary Japanese—is fundamentally “Why Buddhism?” Whether we accept this question as relevant or not, it certainly overshadows all our attempts to underline or highlight the particulars of history or the

non-dual, unquestionable experience.

There are, moreover, pressing social and historical forces that we cannot ignore by hiding in a cocoon of mystical platitudes. The institutions of Buddhism are not independent from or beyond the realities of the social and cultural context in which they occur, so that one would be naïve to hope that Buddhism could remain immune to the changes that we are witnessing today. The Buddhist religion is perceived as irrelevant and marginal to the development of modern technology, that is, to the instruments of worldly success. This means that Buddhism is indeed under threat of extinction.

The second question is how to make Buddhism a factor of consequence under present cultural and economic circumstances. In other words, what is necessary to translate Buddhism from a religion of Asia, and a religion of the past, to a contemporary religion? Much has happened in Buddhism, especially in countries like Japan, to bring it to date with the contemporary world. But the truth of the matter is that the more established sects—the ones with the greatest intellectual wealth—have remained comparatively static, so that the most aggressive and positive attempts at accommodation have been made by groups which in truth can hardly be considered representatives of the highest ideals of the religion of Śākyamuni.

Meaning and Adaptation

This brings us to the last of the four questions or issues listed earlier, for the importance of the preparatory and resulting actions that accompany religious experience already points to the importance of method. This question connects also with the problem of Buddhism in the contemporary world; for once we begin to investigate our common expectations, the hopes and needs that we share with others, we encounter the problem of our cultural and historical conditioning. At this point we have to ask about specific methods or strategies for establishing a fruitful dialogue between the tradition and ourselves.

In replying to the first of the four questions with a broad definition of Buddhism that recognizes inconsistency and change as an important element in understanding a religious tradition, the believer's relation to the tradition is also redefined. The purpose of trusting this tradition is to establish a transforming dialogue, a critique of the ego-centric individual that clings to one, unmoving faith (question 2). This level of exchange and adaptation (within the individual) leads now to a second level: acceptance

of change and adaptation as a necessary condition for the manifestation of meaning.

There is, furthermore, a close connection between adaptation and communication. Our need to avoid deceiving ourselves does not require that we withdraw into ourselves. The self-critical process may contribute to one's capacity to accept other challenges, which are primarily social or historical. In fact, these challenges must become part of our attack on the ego. There are, therefore, certain expectations that we may have about Buddhism which are necessary or legitimate in the sense that they are genuine responses or effective strategies in dealing with the demands of Buddhism itself. Translating this statement to the terms used in this paper, we may say, that we can find a call to transformation in important and leading strands of thought in the history of the community that inherited the mythology and message of Śākyamuni. The activity of transforming the self is inseparable from changing one's style and content in communicating and interacting with others; in short, it is a form of adaptation, and in the social dimension it is normally perceived of as adapting to circumstances, though the conditions that produce the change include invisible strata from one's intimate thought world.

Since the believer participates in the community's belief system, and since use of the word "Buddhism" presupposes a socio-historical reference—that is to say, self-criticism and transformation must occur within the framework of extra-personal circumstances—, adaptation is (or should be) the fruit of a dialogue between a person's perception of him or her self, the expectations of a certain point in history and the cumulative wisdom of the expectations of Buddhists in other points in history. We can view this process of adaptation as occurring at several forms. For the sake of order, let us say that there are three levels:

1. *Doctrinal adaptation*, which has three aspects:
 - a. dogmatic (terminological and rhetorical)
 - b. scriptural or exegetical, and
 - c. philosophical.
2. *Practical adaptation*, the embodiment of belief in:
 - a. sacred ritual, and
 - b. social ritual—through monastic and lay institutions, the position and role of lay people, women, children, etc.
3. *Adaptation by experimentation*—new forms, bold innovations or marked breaks with tradition.

EXPECTATIONS AND ASSERTIONS

STRATEGIES FOR ADAPTATION

Change in Doctrine and Exegesis

Doctrinal adaptation may be regarded by some as change, in the sense of surrender or betrayal. Others may assume that adaptation means distortion and confuse this philosophical presupposition with historical criticism. However, the believer and the historian may both profit from understanding in which ways the transmission of meaning presupposes a transformation in the form of the message as the context changes. It is difficult to say to what extent this kind of adaptation is already taking place within established Buddhist sects in Asia. It is even more difficult to judge how much of this transformation is indeed so radical that the spirit of the teaching has been distorted. As a matter of fact, it might be that it is impossible to determine what is substantial change and what is not—as the concept of the “essence” or core of the teachings cannot be separated from the doctrine’s import. Now, the significance of a symbol or doctrine is not simply an object or entity to which it refers; it is more an intention, an implied “sense,” “drift,” or “direction,” which is a command for action in a particular situation. That is to say, what a given tradition *means* to a particular individual or social group is the direction in which it points the life of that individual or group in the specific historical context in which the religion is experienced and carried out. This “direction” becomes the “essence” of the teaching. Therefore, when the group or individual perceive the religion as an effective guide for action, the tradition is meaningful. When significance, import and purport are perceived as movement in the same direction as in the past, religious traditions speak of “the essence of the tradition”; but ultimately there is no essence beyond the sense of the tradition, its general direction. To regain or have meaning is thus tantamount to “acquiring an essence,” so that change may be the only way a message acquires meaning, or “gains an essence,” instead of the way to lose it. This view seems to me more consonant with Buddhist notions of impermanence and no-self-existence (*niḥsvabhāva*), which are seldom applied to Buddhism itself. Returning to our initial discussion regarding self-deception, I would like to suggest that often when we seek for an unchanging core that we want to protect from the ravages of time, we may be in fact projecting our thirst for a substantial ego on the idea “I am a Buddhist, Buddhism is true.”

These issues are further complicated by traditional sectarian divisions in

practice and interpretation. For not all Buddhist sects give the same role or signification to emptiness and practice. There is in Zen both a daily practical emphasis on ritual and accurate expression, and a critique of mere emptiness (especially as empty talk about experiencing emptiness).

Another phase of the concerted attack on self that is facilitated by the historical situation in which we live is the skillful use of scriptural and exegetical tools. The concept of dialogue with tradition suggests to me the need for more exact and analytical approaches to the study of Buddhist scriptural traditions. We should seek less confirmation and more new insights. In terms of scholarship this means greater emphasis on the critical study of texts, and on new approaches to interpretation. It is obvious that a reevaluation of existing techniques for scriptural and exegetical study is necessary if Buddhism is to become intellectually acceptable in the West. But the direction in which Buddhist exegesis and hermeneutics will or should move is not clear.

Perhaps the greatest exegetical problems are in the scholar's attitude towards the text. We are still too literal minded, we have very little sense for metaphor and mythology. Among Buddhists in the East as well as in the West, understanding of the mechanics of philological criticism seems to have jumped well ahead of the capacity to search for meaning in the text. There is still a dearth of scholarly translations, only a couple of modern commentaries, and the conventions of translating literary formulae and imagery, and technical terminology can only be described accurately as Babel. Hermeneutical methods are still crude, and knowledge of the sources imperfect. It is therefore easy to bring to bear sectarian preferences long before the tradition is given an opportunity to express itself.

Traditional interpretations offer both problems and solutions, but very little has been done to attain a modern, and conscious, understanding of classical Buddhist hermeneutics. It remains to be seen whether modern students of scripture can adopt much from classical Indian or Chinese approaches to exegesis. One should also explore other, less obvious techniques of scriptural interpretation. The Zen tradition, for instance, may offer, *mutatis mutandis*, a model for a form of demythologization that is not reductionistic.

Traditional Zen attitudes toward doctrine and tradition perhaps throw some light on this point. The constant reformulation of doctrine in "dharma combat" is in Zen a critical method—a method with subtle historical and psychological insights. This way of adapting doctrine presupposes a tacit

understanding that the most important feature of meaning is the application of the teachings to one's own personal circumstances. Traditional Zen teaching styles suggest that one cannot grasp the sense of the teaching, and that no true transmission can occur apart from one's own appropriation of the teachings—a point illustrated by Gutei's rejection of his disciple's imitation, or by Lin-chi's parting words. This appropriation and this application are shaped by a critique of oneself and a critique of the traditions. Accordingly, it is not enough to want to follow the Buddha's path. One must kill oneself. And it is not enough to kill oneself, one must kill the Buddha, and kill the Patriarchs of the Zen tradition.

The issue for Buddhism, especially Zen, is whether one can apply these fundamentally religious, but still critical ideals to historical and social transformation. On the surface at least, historical awareness and Zen seem to be convergent methodologies. In terms of the sociology of knowledge, there are strands of Zen which parallel Western concepts of progressive revelation and kairology.

There are, of course, Indian roots to this Zen attitude. Its foundation are the Buddhist concepts of the two truths (with a special emphasis on the notion of *saṃvṛti* as *upāya*), and the doctrine of the decline of Dharma (understood in a manner somewhat different from the *mappō-shisō* version). But these are topics for a more extensive discussion.

Progress in this area will require a great scholarly effort, an effort which probably will result in a new kind of Buddhist believer and practitioner, and a new type of Buddhist scholar. Buddhists will have to reassess the importance of Indian materials, while attempting a more eclectic approach to non-Indian traditions. Those who pride themselves on being only "practicing Buddhists" must learn to appreciate the importance of scientific textual work and critical self-awareness. The policy of open doctrinal discussion and questioning must extend, of course, to communication with other Buddhists. The time when it will be too late to attempt ecumenical cooperation in Buddhist scholarship is rapidly approaching.

Philosophical Adaptation

At this point it may be worthwhile to discuss some misunderstandings that may arise with regard to the notion of a religion without an unchanging doctrine. It is common, for instance, to assume that the notion of "dynamic essence" or absence of an essence is synonymous with antinomianism, relativism, or some extreme form of the "perennial philosophy," which

would assume that all doctrines are true. Another common extension is the idea that Buddhist doctrine is not open to criticism, since Buddhism has no fixed doctrine. Nāgārjuna himself is to blame for this dangerous assertion, since he says as much in his *Vigrahavyāvartanī* and *Ratnāvalī*. However, he is to be exonerated from any guilt by association with some of the extreme forms that his statement takes in the lips of his interpreters. The simplistic escapism is derived from his writings only through an erroneous interpretation. The assumption is that we—the Buddhists—do not affirm anything, and therefore there is nothing in our doctrine to be criticized. This is an incomplete statement of the notion of emptiness. For, if the assumption is that the doctrine of emptiness is a type of *coincidentia oppositorum*, and this is understood literally to mean that all opposites actually coincide, and all statements are equally valid, then we have only restated one of the *catuṣkoṭi* and the Naiyāyika position is true. If, on the other hand, it is assumed that doctrine's purport is that all entities are equally unreal and all statements equally false, again this is understood literally to mean that all things are actually the same, and this reverts as well to the antinomies.

Perhaps we should attempt a different explanation of the context of Nāgārjuna's statement. The context is the use of emptiness itself as a critique of other views. Emptiness is not a position in the sense that it does not belong to the class of statements made with the purpose of establishing an unmoving essence as a refuge for the mind. The moment we change it into such, it is no longer emptiness, and we become thereby open to criticism. Nāgārjuna's intent is more in the way of (a) putting an end to all views as philosophical *via purgativa*, and (b) transcending the symbol to attain true unity with the reality of emptiness. But, by definition, this unity is by way of no-thing; that is, emptiness is not a thing, therefore, not a refuge, not a certain truth, nor a certainty about truth. It is not meant either as an all-encompassing reality that will erase differences and remove difficulties. Translating this to the language of this paper: if Buddhism offers a refuge and a confirmation for ourselves, the whole enterprise is open to suspicion and criticism. If Buddhism solves social and historical difficulties by erasing distinctions, it is only a subtle confirmation of the ego.

Philosophical adaptation, as well as doctrinal adaptation, is of vital importance in contemporary Buddhism. Philosophical discourse is still an important route to intellectual import and respectability. In the West it has been the most important road to theological and intellectual integrity since

the Middle Ages. Established sects must all give a cogent theological account based on the most contemporary philosophical critique. But not surprisingly, the requirement is for contemporary explicability. In this, most exercises in religious philosophy have come short. By appealing superficially to philosophical forms that hold little or no attraction for modern Western intelligentsia, Buddhism displays, to the Western analyst at least, a certain lack of vitality.

We all prefer, of course, to look for earlier parallels—there is something in the form of Buddhist philosophical argument that brings it close to medieval or—perhaps—to nineteenth century philosophy. It is also easy to seek the more mystical, speculative or intuitive forms of Western philosophy as parallels. Apart from the problem of spurious or meaningless parallels (similarities that are only superficial), one should also seek to establish precise analogies, that is, parallels that will open Buddhism to critical philosophy. Presumably, by the ensuing critique, a healthy and vigorous speculative philosophy will develop. One example that has been discussed extensively is the parallel with Wittgenstein. I have my reservations with this model, but it is an example of a fertile parallel.

The latter approach is necessary to bring Buddhist philosophical discourse closer to more contemporary currents of critical philosophy. It is far more crucial, however, to find alternative categories and methods within the tradition than it is to establish parallels that will enlighten us on the critical nature of Buddhist thought. There has been an excessive reliance on the more obvious aspects of Buddhist philosophy (emptiness, non-duality, etc.). Other categories that could bring Buddhist philosophy into the camp of Western debates should be used: causation, language (*prajñapti* and *apoha*), logical criticism, etc. Other aspects of Buddhist philosophic discourse have less explicit potential, but may bear fruit after some systematic reworking or development; for there are areas in which Buddhist doctrine has implicit analytical approaches only waiting to be discovered and expanded in a contemporary setting—such is the field of moral philosophy. In this connection a revival in our study of Indian Buddhism is an important desideratum.

Zen itself is, in its own way, a form of critical thought. That is, it sets itself against an accepted doctrine, which is rejected in order to establish a higher synthesis, or a critical understanding of the doctrine thus criticized. The critique of language is one of the most important elements in this tradition, and suggests a link with contemporary notions of linguistic

analysis, deconstruction, etc.

As a part of interpretation, philosophical discourse in Buddhism needs to be more consciously grounded in the study of Buddhist philosophical tradition and the critical study of the sūtra literature. In this approach there is no doubt in my mind that the Indian philosophical tradition should play a more important role than it has played so far in contemporary Buddhist hermeneutics. And I refer here not to our favorite vague references to Mādhyamika non-duality, and the *nīta-neya* distinction, but to the study of Buddhist theories of epistemology, logic, metaphysics, and hermeneutics.

Practical Adaptation

In the area of spiritual exercise and institutional reform we are faced with another complex set of problems, dominated by the tension between the monastic specialist and the lay adherent. The “secular age” has changed radically the balance in this polarity. From the point of view of Buddhist doctrine the issue is not only the social and political force of the laity in the modern world. Changing social conditions may reveal important, and previously neglected aspects of Buddhist doctrine—the laity as embodiment of the bodhisattva, and a deeper understanding of the import of the identity of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. The crucial question should be how to achieve a balance between laity and monkhood (or priesthood, as the case may be). In other words, as laymen we must let monasticism serve its role as a symbol of the loneliness of the path, as a critique of attachment; but monks must open themselves to the value of the lay ideal as a critique of withdrawal from the world, as a symbol that reestablishes the balance between emptiness and form.

Be that as it may, social involvement and social work should be considered in terms of another doctrine that, in spite of its centrality in Mahāyāna Buddhism, has not been exploited to its maximum potential. This is the doctrine of *upāya*, understood as the relevance of the use of effective strategies in assisting living beings. In other words, I understand the doctrine of *upāya* as a statement on the nature of emptiness as active emptiness, as the practical application of the empty mind to the solution of particular human situations.

With the issues of laicization and “means,” the philosophical problem of ethical reflection must take a new turn. Moral choice as it arises in modern pluralistic societies or in societies with severe problems of social

justice, uncovers problems that Buddhists have faced before in extremely different contexts. Following the adoption of Western concepts of freedom, social justice and social action—whether in the capitalist or the socialist model—Buddhist cultures have entered the most serious ideological and social crisis in their history. In this area I tend to assume a conservative stance; that is, I am suspicious of attempts to make of Buddhism an “active” religion on the Christian model. A full discussion of these issues must be left for another occasion, as it would require more space than I have available here. One must, however, point to several key practical implications.

We are used to arguing that Buddhism has the complete and perfect version of the spiritual path—we never bother to ask which style of Buddhist practice we are talking about. May I risk rushing where angels dare not tread by suggesting that a more careful consideration of the doctrine of *upāya* may enrich Buddhist notions of practice by instilling new life into a neglected aspect of Mahāyāna doctrine? I am referring to the notion of *upāya* understood as *ethical and social strategies*. Conceived as specific practical methodologies for the alleviation of human suffering, *upāyas* can contribute to the proper application of the full force of Buddhism as a critique of self-centeredness. Areas such as psychotherapy, social work, family counseling, relations between the sexes and the races, are all aspects that require *practical* strategies, which lie dormant in Buddhism awaiting to be made explicit and active.

Further implications of the development of social awareness in Buddhism would have to be attested empirically, but one may expect important changes in all aspects of the Buddhist perception of society. Naturally, change in time is not the only challenge; even without the rapid transmutations of the present, in any given moment in history each and every one of a variety of social orders can be regarded as “the Buddhist order.” Change has been occurring in both dimensions, as diachronic and synchronic variation. But it seems that in more recent times Buddhist institutions have been too slow to react in more than one phase of adaptation. For instance, only recently have Buddhists begun to address the question of the traditional position of women. The Mādhyamika view on sex differences is often presented as an antidote to sexual bias. Among Zen practitioners, too, sex differences are brushed aside with a theoretical or rhetoric appeal to emptiness. The history of Buddhism, however, indicates that these problems require the skillful application of specific plans of action. In other words,

whatever one's interpretation of emptiness, problems of social ethics are problems of practical reason and methods to be applied to specific human situations. An appeal to religious transcendence, whether philosophical (the "non-dual") or social (the monastic model), is essential to the Buddhist approach as a critique of the conceptual constructs that generate various forms of suffering. But this critique fails to meet the immediate needs of those who are faced with an ethical choice or judgement, and who rightly expect from Buddhism a solution, or at least a guiding doctrinal position.

Experimentation: Words of Caution. I do want to offer, however, the following warning. At this stage of adaptation, especially in the West, dedication to conventional forms of practice—that is, training under established masters, and in traditional settings—is far more important than any conscious or studied attempts to create new forms. At least in America, the danger of discontinuity is greater than the danger of irrelevance. Traditional patterns of practice and doctrine should not be replaced uncritically by a new commitment to open secularization. Intense spiritual exercise means also less speculation on the essence of Zen, and more familiarity with its past; not less adaptation, but more research into the past, and gradual transformation arising from this understanding is needed. The only urgent change is in the direction of greater discipline and discerning analysis.

The problem is avoiding the unrestrained and unsystematic, individual meditation and speculation that often goes for Buddhism in the West, while allowing for new creative forces. Evidently, it is no easy enterprise to create an environment of respect for tradition while maintaining the momentum for reform and growth. I have no facile answers, but if Buddhism is to be something more than a superimposed exotic order, it will have to seek for such a balance. Some hierarchies will have to be abandoned, others will have to adapt to new formats. Alternative expressions or formulations of authority will have to appear in an environment of toleration towards diverging forms.

CONCLUSIONS

We are used to thinking that the believer or practitioner has no alternative but to distinguish between the nature (or "essence," if you will) of his reli-

gion and the particular forms that it takes—whatever might be the specific explanation you choose to explain the interface between the two. There are, however, some alternatives to this quandary. In this paper the model of a dialogue with tradition has been suggested as an alternative. According to this model, one does not have to seek or find a single voice in tradition. The nature of, for instance, Zen would therefore take more than one form, and clinging to any particular form could be a shortsighted way of betraying the elasticity of its “nature.” One tends to think that meaningfulness requires a fulcrum or unchanging pith, that otherwise one must give up his quest for meaning. But the “nature” of a religious system and practice is not necessarily an unchanging essence; rather, the historical reality of religion, like other human phenomena, suggests a much more complex model. Perhaps one can speak of recurring themes, a dynamic tone or an intertwining of strands. Although it does not make much sense to speak of mainline or essential Buddhism, one can distinguish different strands or dominant ideas and practices that repeatedly constitute the ideal, or the characteristic, or the common, etc.

Could it be that one should imagine future forms of Zen in which some or much of what we know today as Zen were missing? At which point then, does Zen stop being Zen? Or to express it otherwise, what is it in Zen that we want to preserve? What is it that we may, in fact, want to discard—not just because historical circumstances force us to discard it, but because it is now perceived as a contradiction, an inconsistency within the tradition, or an unnecessary trapping from the past. This paper has discussed these issues cursorily combining two perspectives: that of a historian, and that of a believer. From the former point of view one speaks only of the direction in which events move. From the second point of view, one lists requirements and desiderata.

No purpose is served by hiding behind the metaphysical loftiness of emptiness. Whatever our view on the ultimate meaninglessness of success, Buddhism as a historical reality faces almost insurmountable odds, that the possibility of success for Buddhism in the West is limited, and that its decline in Asia seems inevitable. The courage to accept these facts—or whatever other facts history may have for us—should not substitute our concern for the survival of the tradition.

Leaving aside the significance of *mappō* doctrines as doctrines of interpretation, I would like to suggest that, *mappō* or no *mappō*, there is much that Buddhists can do. For one, we should search for alternative strategies

and develop new attitudes. The first attitude that must be changed is the assumption that emptiness has to do with passivity and resignation. There is such a thing as active emptiness—or what the *Ratnacūḍa* calls “emptiness adorned by all the virtues.”

In conclusion I would like to return to my original three questions. The lofty question “What is it that Buddhism has to offer mankind?” I have transformed into “What is Buddhism?” (or rather, “What do I mean by ‘Buddhism’?”) and “What do I expect from Buddhism?” These questions I have further refined by looking into myself and my true intentions, and forcing myself to accept the rephrasing, “Who are Buddhists?” and “What do I expect from identifying myself with what they say and do?” With this change I expect to have gained in sincerity and clarity what I have lost in loftiness.

To the first question I have answered: Buddhists are all those who claim to follow any strand in the complex fabric of traditions that are traced back—genetically, so to speak—to Śākyamuni Buddha. This fabric may or may not form a coherent system—historically speaking it probably does not, but it does not matter, since I am not looking for a system. The fundamental assumption is that in their various expressions these human beings have found different layers of meaning in the doctrine and mythology of Śākyamuni Buddha and the history of the Saṃgha. I am assuming that we can find similar inspiration.

Therefore, I am not interested in consciously or purposefully pursuing a path of interpretations that will lead to a system of philosophy in a Western sense. Nor am I concerned immediately with the social or political success of any particular group of Buddhists. But, ultimately, much is at stake for me in this success, for I cannot deny my interest in seeing those ideals prosper and grow. For these reasons, I am indeed interested in seeing a more positive approach to adaptation.

The strategies for adaptation that can be used in pursuing this goal are many, and they can be applied in a variety of permutations. This paper does not claim to be anything more than a partial listing of some of these alternatives, a brainstorm for a program. Among the options open to us, the following figure prominently. The nature of the tradition, and the notion of a (never-ending) dialogue with its complex past require some form of hermeneutical and scholarly pluralism (or ecumenism). There is still room for a greater emphasis on the dissemination of the teaching, which one should try to achieve without the aggressive proselytizing tech-

EXPECTATIONS AND ASSERTIONS

niques usually associated with missions, and with a greater promotion of contemporary interpretations and methods. The latter will require, of course, a shift in emphasis in some traditional Buddhist approaches to doctrine and practice, in Buddhist views of scholarship, philosophy, history, individual responsibility, and social action. Buddhism can make the change without any major transformation in its mythology and rhetoric. But it may be, I am afraid, more difficult to be successful in implementing the changes in time to make Buddhism socially adaptable.