

Talks on Buddhism

I

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The General View of Buddhism

Recently I heard a very fine story from our friend Mr. Boris Erwit. It impressed me very much and I'd like to share it with you.

In the dark mountains a crowd of homeless beggars struggled through a winter storm on their way to the Ganges River. Under their rags, their starved bodies were blue from rain and wind. For two days they had had no shelter or fire.

Suddenly, in the darkness of the forest, a building loomed. It was a temple. They entered to find shelter. There they saw on a high throne a giant statue of Sakyamuni. In the purple crown of this statue a huge diamond was gleaming. Said one beggar, "Brothers, the night is dark and deserted. Nobody can see us. For this diamond we can get piles of bread and clothes and silver. Buddha does not need this precious stone, for he, the lord of the heaven, has myriads of brilliant stars in the sky."

I may remark here that, though the beggars felt the Buddha didn't need the precious stone, it may well have been that the Buddha needed it every bit as much as did the beggars. Moreover, somebody else had put the diamond there, not the Buddha himself. The beggars' reasoning was not very sound.

Silently, the beggar thieves approached the statue. But when their

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sacrilegious hands touched the holy image, thunder and lightning shook the earth, and a gust of wind threw the beggars down. The crowd remained paralyzed with fear.

One beggar, however, stepped calmly forward. "Thou art wrong!" he said to the Buddha statue. "Or did thy priests lie to us that thou art merciful and compassionate, that thou bringest relief to sorrow, and light into the darkness? For a useless jewel thou punisheth us who are helpless in the dust before thee, but who like thee are endowed with an immortal soul."

If the beggars really had understood that they were endowed with an immortal soul, they would not have demanded the diamond from the Buddha. But they did not truly realize that such an immortal soul existed within them.

The beggar continued: "Now what are thee, to throw fire and sand upon this miserable crowd? Shame on thee, O Lord of Heaven, to rise mightily and put fear into a group of homeless beggars deprived of bread. King of Kings, punish me, a miserable fellow! But with my head high I call witness to earth and sky, and am equal to an eagle. O Lord of the World, I tell thee: Thou art wrong!" So he spoke, and stood challenging and silent.

A miracle then happened. To help the beggars reach the precious stone, the giant Buddha statue bent its crowned head, and, on his knees, meek and humble before a crowd of beggars, the Lord of Lords laid in the dust.

This story, I understand, comes from a Russian writer. Mr. Erwitt does not remember exactly where he read it or who the author was. The writer himself may have taken it from another source. But however the story happened to come to Russia, I think it is very fine, in spite of some inconsistencies which I will perhaps point out later.

The story tells us that the statue had a diamond in its forehead. Sometimes, instead of a diamond, there is a tuft of white hair on the Buddha's forehead, from which he occasionally emits a light. The light from these sources is said to illuminate the whole world. Not only this world, but even beyond it, for there are an infinite number of worlds, not just one. That radiant light issuing from the Buddha's forehead illuminates all places.

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This was the precious stone the beggars tried to reach. It was quite natural they could not do so. Whether it was a natural phenomenon or because of something in themselves, something happened that made them fall from the Buddha's body. At all events, they could not reach it. They had no right to blame the Buddha as they did. But that is human nature. We blame others when we ourselves are at fault. We do not know why this happens, but it does. We try to justify our acts, especially when we have done something not altogether proper or just.

We are told that one beggar, who may have been their ringleader, spoke up for all the rest. We can say that he is acting not as a particular individual, but as someone who represents or symbolizes us all. In speaking his mind, then, he spoke the minds of his fellow beggars and of all mankind as well.

We tend to think that wealthy people have so much money they should let us have some of it. The beggars reasoned that the Buddha didn't need the diamond. They thought it belonged to the Buddha and that he did not want it. Of course, we have no right to make judgments like that on our own, especially under such circumstances. I have my experiences and you have your own. We have no way of judging what another person needs or does not need.

The beggars reproved the Buddha for having something which they thought he did not need. Perhaps they thought they had a right to it. The Buddha did not argue. He simply bent himself down and let them take the diamond, so that he himself crashed into the dust. (Here I am not sure it wouldn't be better for the story to have the Buddha return to his original position.)

The story is very interesting from a Buddhist point of view. Whatever your own interpretation of it is, it should be your own version. You should try to get what you can of Buddhism—or what you conceive Buddhism to be—out of this story.

Another story I'd like to tell you is about a Buddhist monk who lived over 1,000 years ago in China. His name was Chōka, meaning "bird's nest," because he lived in a tree. I do not think he spent his entire life up there, however. It must have been inconvenient to climb down several times a day. But in this fashion he sometimes helped himself up and spent his time in meditation, and he became widely known for his virtue and his saintly life. The governor of the area was the great poet and scholar Hakurakuten. Hearing about this unusual tree-dwelling Buddhist monk,

he visited him. "Is it not dangerous living in the trees?" he asked the monk. "I am safe enough," the monk said. "You'd better mind your own position. You think you are safe enough as you are on the ground. But the elements which make up your body and your existence are likely to dissociate themselves without warning. When that moment comes you will die. I am sure that I am much safer than you are." This statement seemed quite reasonable to the poet-governor.

He then asked the monk what his general view of Buddhism was. What do Buddhists consider their teaching? The monk said, "Not to do evil, to do all that is good, to purify your own mind—that is the attitude of all Buddhas." When he heard this, the poet-governor said, "That's what everybody—even a three-year-old child—knows." The monk replied, "Everybody may know it, even a three-year-old child, but it is difficult even for an eighty-year-old adult to practice it." The governor thought this a very wise remark.

When Chōka said, "Not to do anything evil, to practice everything good, to purify one's mind—that is the doctrine of the Buddha," he was quoting a gatha or verse very famous in Buddhism. Anyone who knows anything about Buddhism, when he is asked about the general view of Buddhism, will give an answer similar to this one. You might like to hear what this verse sounds like in Pali:

*Sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ
kusalassa upasampadā
Sacitta pariyodapanam
etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ.*

We can even say that it is enough if we know just this one gatha. We needn't go any further.

If I were to repeat it to you, you would say (as the poet-governor did) that everybody knows that he or she should not do anything bad, should do everything good, and should purify the mind of all defiled thoughts, ideas, and feelings. That is not only the doctrine of all Buddhas, but the principle of all religions and all spiritual leaders. But somehow we don't seem to be able to practice it. I happen to be older than this Buddhist monk, but I find it very difficult to practice this doctrine. My daily life is far from being the ideal, and before I die I don't think I will ever be able to put it into practice.

About 1,000 years ago, there was a Chinese monk whose name was

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Jōshū Jūshin. In the mountain monastery in which he lived, was a natural stone bridge, for which the place was noted. A monk came to see Jōshū and asked him, "We've heard of a natural stone bridge on your monastery grounds, but I see it is not a stone bridge. It is just an old log bridge. Why is it so famous?" The master said, "You just see the rickety log bridge. You don't see the real stone bridge." "What stone bridge?" asked the monk. The master said, "Asses pass, horses pass: that is the stone bridge."

But in this modern day we can add that human beings like yourselves (that is, those of you who cannot see the stone bridge and see only the log bridge) also pass. Trains pass, automobiles pass, rickety wagons pass, even rickshaws pass. All things pass, but the stone bridge does not say anything or give any complaint. It does not ask a toll for crossing; everybody's free—that is the stone bridge.

I would say that this stone bridge suggests some very interesting ideas about reality. We seem bent on wasting natural resources these days. If our natural resources are depleted, it is we ourselves who are to be blamed, not nature. Perhaps, if we are resourceful enough, we will be able to find some supply of energy that we can make use of, and possibly also make wasteful use of. Not merely wasteful use, but outright abuse, such that it brings untold misery upon us. Nature, God, or reality itself is not to be blamed for it. It is our own fault. This is the most important point. Even as we talk a great deal about responsibility, we fail to realize that we are responsible for what we do.

I brought a copy of a little book called the *Dhammapada*. Dhamma, or Dharma, means truth or reality; pada means maxims or epigrams. The title thus can be rendered as "Epigrams of Reality." It is one of the earliest Buddhist scriptures, a collection of short passages taken, I suppose, from the sutras circulating in those days. It is written in Pali, which is akin to Sanskrit, but less complicated and much more readable. There are several translations in English. I do not think it should be difficult to get hold of one of them. The one I have here happens to be a translation by the Indian Buddhist Thera (that is, priest) Narada. There is also one by Radhakrishnan, who is the Vice-president of India. Another translation, in the Sacred Books of the East series, is by Max Müller; it is, however, included among other Buddhist texts, so it cannot be obtained separately.

There is another translation which I like very much. Unfortunately I mislaid it and could not bring it here today. This one was done by Professor

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Irving Babbit, who used to teach English literature at Harvard University. One thing I especially remember about his work is that although Professor Babbit had no knowledge of Pali, when he heard about this book, it interested him so much that he began studying Pali, and then translated the *Dhammapada* from the original Pali into English. He must have been very interested in the *Dhammapada*, to take the trouble of learning a new language just so he could translate it. In the introduction, he makes the observation that the West has a great deal to learn from the East, that it is not just the exploitation of natural resources which Western people should aspire to. He urges them to pursue the wisdom the East has to offer as well. That is the same spirit in which Max Müller undertook the Sacred Books of the East series, which comprises many volumes. Through him, the West gained a much greater knowledge of Eastern wisdom.

Prior to Max Müller's work, the American Transcendentalists of New England took deep interest in the East. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for instance, gives the gist of Eastern thought in his famous poem *Brahma*. If you have not read it, I urge you to do so; I am sure it will interest you very much.

To my knowledge there are these translations of the *Dhammapada*. There may be more I do not know of. At any rate, if you wish to know something about Buddhism you'd do well to get yourself one of these translations and read it thoroughly.

It's always the case when we read a translation, however good it may be, that it is difficult to get into the spirit of the original. Although the great German scholar Schopenhauer made it a rule to read everything in the original, works in Sanskrit and Pali were perhaps beyond his reach. Perhaps he didn't have time to learn those languages, and had to read such works in translation. Still, he was very much influenced by Eastern thought. It is reflected in his great work *The World as Will and Idea*. Though he did not have a thorough understanding of Buddhism or Indian thought, he understood it in his own way. Translations are not always satisfactory, but when we cannot manage the original, our only recourse is to translations.

The *Dhammapada* puts much emphasis on individual responsibility. Everything one does one is responsible for, and one can never get away from the responsibility that befalls one; that is, whatever you sow, you reap—you cannot escape it. This is what the *Dhammapada* stresses. Even

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were you to hide yourself deep in a cave far away from the world, what we call karma—karma is individual responsibility—will find you, and you will have to reap what you have sown. Buddhism speaks in very strong terms when talking about individual responsibility.

But there is another perspective from which to view individual responsibility. One has to reap the results of everything one does, but at the same time there is something in every one of us that makes us endeavor to take that responsibility away from the doer. If we see some unfortunate person getting drunk or becoming an alcoholic, we want to think that it is not his fault. Perhaps his physical makeup compelled him to resort to alcohol. In a way, he cannot be held responsible for his constitution. We can say his parents are responsible. If we trace back to the furthest ancestor, Adam and Eve would be responsible for it. And who made Adam and Eve? Then God himself would be held responsible for his condition.

There is something deep in our hearts that tells us we must do something to keep him from his bad ways. Bad ways and their consequences are what the doer himself has to reap. But at the same time those around him are very much concerned, as if they themselves were just as responsible for his condition. This idea or feeling, which makes us regard others not merely as reaping their own evil karma for things they did in the past, is due to our being greatly moved to do something for them. It does not matter whether they are responsible for it or not, we just wish to help them out. That is at the bottom of our philanthropic feelings.

Buddhism is built on that feeling in every one of us that compels us to help others, sometimes risking our lives in the process. Was it this morning that I read in the newspaper of a teacher sacrificing herself to save one of her pupils? That kind of thing must happen almost every day. I read many years ago of a sightseeing boat that used to cruise around New York. One evening it capsized. One of the passengers worked very hard helping the women and children. The officials, highly impressed by his actions, wanted to give him something in recognition of his bravery, for he almost sacrificed himself to save others. They were shocked to discover that he was not an ordinary, respectable citizen, but a rather undesirable character. On such occasions, those who may not be respectable citizens, who may even be murderers, will thus sacrifice themselves to help others. There must be something in every one of us that compels us to do so.

Sometimes we say that what makes us bad is not found in ourselves but our environment. But environment alone does not wholly account for

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what we are. There is something far beyond environment, or much deeper in it, that makes people do what we do not expect of them.

In this connection I am reminded of another story about Jōshū. Jōshū was approached by an eminent person of his time, who asked him, "You are a very virtuous and excellent person. Do you think you will ever go to hell?" A strange question. But it must have actually been asked. The master said, "I am the first one to go to hell." The other man was struck by this answer. He then asked, "But why? You are noted for your virtue. How could that happen to you?" Jōshū replied, "If I did not go to hell, who would ever try to help you out?" This kind of thing is not a joke. It touches the very core of our being.

In another story, an old woman came to Jōshū and asked, "When I was a child I had to obey my parents. When I was married I had to obey my husband. Now I am an old woman, and I have to obey my children. They say women are sinful and it is difficult for them to obtain enlightenment. Is there any means in your power to help me out?" The master said, "Well, all other people enjoy their happiness, or what they think is happiness. As for me, *as for this old woman myself*, I go through all manner of suffering. Enjoy your riches, honor, and reputation, but I am willing to submit myself to suffering." After he said this, I believe the old woman was better able to accept her lot.

Some people may say this is the virtue of passivity, of simply accepting everything. Western people think that Oriental countries are unable to advance and remain underdeveloped because they overstress a doctrine of passivity and accept everything. The Communist thinker Karl Marx regarded religion as an opiate of the people, something which makes the ignorant masses obey the orders of a despotic ruler. But to apply this doctrine of passivity to despotism, liberalism (which is another form of oppression), or Christianity is untenable.

There will be something in every system that we do not like, of course. But the passivity Eastern people talk about is not something which should be applied to our political or moral life. This passivity belongs to what we call our spiritual life. Spiritual life is something which our ordinary logic or our ordinary political reasoning cannot justify.

Every one of us has a certain desire to be passive altogether, to "let thy will be done." This life of absolute resignation and passivity is emphasized not only in Buddhism, but in Christianity and other religions as well. When we meet with this idea of absolute passivity, we may think it con-

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flicts most drastically and in a most tragic way with the idea of self-responsibility. But we must remember that self-responsibility belongs to the realm of morality, and that liberty or despotism belongs to our political life. Beyond politics and morality, however, is the realm of spirituality. Spirituality is the realm where passivity comes into play; it is the principal note that is struck in this realm.

Although all religious teachings, Buddhism and Christianity alike, talk about this doctrine of passivity, Buddhism has its own unique ways of developing this spiritual intuition. It is a theme I would like to deal with in my next talk.

Of course I do not know very much about Christianity, or, as far as that goes, about Buddhism either. I have no right to talk about a general view of Buddhism. But I have my own idea of Buddhism, which I'd like to discuss further, and which I would like to compare with Christianity. In so doing, I hope what Buddhism is will be brought out in better terms.

Again, if you wish to know about Buddhism, I recommend that you read the *Dhammapada*. There are other works, but they are rather difficult. The *Dhammapada* will serve as the easiest approach to the study of Buddhism. And you should interpret it in your own way. Don't depend on others. When you depend on others, what you understand is another's point of view, not your own. What is of utmost importance in the study of religion is to develop things out of yourself, otherwise your understanding will never be your own.