

The Intermediary World

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The problem in its historical setting

Religious traditions are bound to be baffled when they encounter circumstances which were not anticipated when they began. The Lord Buddha did not think of smoking when he formulated the fifth precept, and so some Buddhists (e.g. the Tibetans) forbid, and others (e.g. the Ceylonese) allow it. The birth pill was probably not foreseen by the son of God when he founded Christianity. He left in any case no clear instructions on it, and so some Christians (like the Catholics) forbid, whereas others (i.e. most Protestants) permit it.

Over the last century the Buddhist tradition has been mauled about, and well nigh destroyed,¹ by the dominant civilization of the predatory white man, which is technological, militaristic, scientific, democratic, progressive, egalitarian and secular, and thus negates Buddhist standards of value in nearly every way. Overawed by the white man's technology many Buddhists in Asia have lost heart and are ready to agree to a serious truncation of their age-old beliefs.

* The basic formulations of this article were made in 1942, when in a wood in Godshill in Hampshire I lived a life devoted to agriculture and meditation in equal parts. In 1973, during my stay in Santa Barbara, Cal., Mr. Richard Levine, of the Zen Center in San Francisco, did a great deal of work putting my notes into a presentable form, verifying quotations, and so on. I had intended to name him as my co-author, but now, in 1974, I have rewritten the article so much that he cannot possibly be held accountable for what I have said.

¹ For a brief survey of this process see my article on "The present state and future prospects of Buddhism" in *Asia Handbook*, ed. G. Wint, 1969, 383-8. (Penguin Reference Books). Reprinted in *Furber Buddhist Studies*, 1974, 125-130.

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The spiritual tradition of mankind has everywhere and at all times taught that there is a *triple* world, the natural world, the spiritual world, and a world intermediary between the two. The modern outlook affirms the natural as the only one which matters. It concedes the remote possibility of a spiritual world, as long as it is totally impotent, and a matter of mere private aspiration, "the opium of the people, the sigh of the oppressed creature, the kindliness of a heartless world, the soul of soulless circumstance."²

As for the intermediate world, it has had a pretty rough passage. For the last 300 years the scientific, or rather the "sciential,"³ establishment has mounted a determined onslaught against it, and tried to deny its very existence. This attitude becomes increasingly credible with the increasing urbanization of mankind because the data of human experience which comprise the intermediary world have over the last century been increasingly forgotten by the enlightened European town-dwellers who have come to believe that they have outgrown them as primitive and outmoded superstitions. Among the professional intellectuals only the psychologists had some doubts, and tried to make room for some of the beliefs in the intermediary world,—though not for the phenomena themselves,— by pushing them into a black box labelled with a negative term, i.e. the "Unconscious," into which they jammed Puritan repressions together with the repression of myth and magic peculiar to modern industrialized countries. In passing we may remark that Jung, who was the one most willing to accommodate these phenomena by putting them into his "collective unconscious," had nowhere an appreciation of the spiritual dimension of Buddhism, as can be seen from his Prefaces to Buddhist writings.⁴ Finally, the frenzied rationality of scientists and technocrats has been accompanied by a groundswell of popular concern with magic and the occult, which, though in essence an attempt to return to sanity, is dismissed as a sign of the invincible ignorance of the masses.

It would be interesting, but at the same time rather invidious and contentious, to show in some detail what effect all this has had on the conquered

² K. Marx, *Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*.

³ For a definition of this term see my *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies*, 1967, 215-6, 233, 238n.

⁴ These can now be found all together in volume II of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, 1958; 2nd ed. 1969.

East. One can easily see that some Eastern Buddhists have, through their contact with the West, become "more catholic than the Pope" and are now openly contemptuous of anything that is mythical, magical or occult. The Dharma had constantly been described as *atarkyo' tarkāvacaṛab*, "outside and beyond the bounds of logical reasoning." Now, in what at times looks like a parody of the worst excesses of European rationalism, pride of place in the exposition of this Dharma is given to logicians who provide a sense of security and certainty which is completely spurious, because merely verbal, as solid and resilient as a *flatus vocis*.

Whatever may be the reasons for this attitude, or whatever may be its validity, it is clearly at variance with the unanimous and unchallenged traditions of all Asian Buddhists until quite recently. A belief in the existence of an intermediary world is attested in all Buddhist scriptures a thousand times. No Buddhist community has ever been without it. It is also, incidentally, reflected in the *trikāya* doctrine. There are three ways of looking at a Buddha. As the *rūpakāya* he is considered as an ordinary sense object within the commonsense world, and Gautama, or Śākyamuni, as he lived for eighty years in Northern India, is just part of the sensory world. The *sambhogakāya*, and its predecessors, such as the *āśecanakakāya*, etc., reveals itself only to faith, and shows the Buddhas as they are in the intermediary world. Finally, when considered by wisdom, the *dharmakāya* is a transcendental reality, absolutely outside this world, in which all Buddhas are one, since the transcendental world is above discriminations of any kind.

Four components of the Intermediary World

Traditional thought assumes, as I have said, that between the transcendental spiritual world on the one hand, and the sensory world on the other, there is an "intermediary"⁵ world which consists of those magic and occult phenomena, both cosmic and psychic, which interpenetrate the sensory universe.

⁵ The term goes back to Plato's *to metaxy*. See *Lexicon Platonicum*, vol. II. D. Fridericus Astius, 1969 (orig. publ. 1835), p. 319.—See, for example, *Plato, Vol. I, An Introduction* by Paul Friedlaender, orig. publ. Berlin 1954. C. 1958 Bollingen, p. 41. "(A view which) stems from Plato and must have been of the utmost significance to him. It is the idea or view of 'the demonic' as a realm 'intermediate' between the human level and the divine, a realm that, because of its intermediate position 'unites the cosmos with itself'." See*

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It extends between the sensory and the transcendental world, but of its boundaries only an unsatisfactory, because negative, definition can be given. Even its contrast to the "commonsense" sensory world is hard to define because the "matter of fact" world cannot be defined precisely, and is subject to considerable historical variations. Who has ever bothered to find out what a lumberjack, or a dairymaid, regards as actually real? And what degree of desecralization in the environment does one assume? It will here be sufficient to just mention the four main items which fall traditionally within the intermediary world. They are forces I. neutral to the spiritual life, II. hostile to it, III. beneficial to it, and IV. experiences expressive of the spiritual world.

I. Among the forces which may either help or hinder meditation and peaceful calm we have those magical and mysterious forces which are revealed in omens and other providential signs. This includes correspondences,—e.g. between celestial constellations or the lines of the hand on the one side, and the character, destiny and fate of people on the other. It includes also anything else which has the character of a fatal or karmic necessity. Here the disciple will be guided by the saying, *Volentem fata ducunt, nolentem trabunt*, and, by throwing himself open to these forces, attempt to adjust his work to their will. Viewed in their relation to spiritual progress these phenomena are, as such, neutral. They obstruct only when you violate the law of your own being by opposing them. Psychic gifts and experiences would come under this heading too.

II. By contrast, hostile to meditation and peaceful calm is the underworld of shadows, bound to the earth, and of malevolent semi-human beings (ghosts, evil spirits, devils, etc.). Contact with this world is brought about in connection with death, darkness, depravity, malice, cruelty, and excessive humiliation; also jealous envy of the pure, the artless, and the beloved, where love has gone sour and lust become exasperated. Black magic tries to use these forces. In relation to spiritual progress one must observe that curiosity and fascination may contaminate, and dread submerge. The perils of the soul

**Republic* X 614C, *Statesman* 309C, *Timaeus* 90A.—p. 346. See also Ernst Hoffmann, "Methexis und Metaxy bei Platon," *Sokrates*, 7. Jahrg., LXXII (1919), 48-78.—The theme occurs again in Thomas Aquinas: "Ordo rerum talis esse invenitur, ut ab uno extremo ad alterum non perveniatur nisi per media."—This once again shows that much modern European philosophy consists in making footnotes to Plato.

threaten when curiosity and dread are indulged in. There are indications that spiritual practices awaken those forces, in a manner which is not always easy to account for. Mara the Evil One is ever watchful, trying to prevent people from escaping out of his realm.

These demonic forces are always operative, but in this dark age, in this Kali Yuga, this Mappo era, we come up against two further factors which reduce our ability to fruitfully cope with them. In a society in which all soft and tender relations between people are apt to be bruised or tabooed, and in which an increasingly artificial civilization demands more and more instinctual sacrifices, libidinous obstacles, i.e. feelings of sexual incompleteness and deficiency, as well as unresolved residues of infantile experiences, are liable to cause much trouble. Secondly there is the bankruptcy and collapse of spiritual traditions which has to be reckoned with everywhere.

III. Liberating and beneficial forces and deities are objects of faith, who will see you through and whom you should trust and ask for help, or at least allow to help. Examples would be the guardian angels, the masters who teach the disciples in dreams, and the deities of the Mahayana. They help to combat the evil forces of II, and to fight the fascination and attraction of magic itself. Mere denial and dread are not sufficient,—true imagination is required. To the believer these forces appear in a sensory form,—either through sound, i.e. by mantras, or through sight, i.e. as visions. Some do also manifest themselves through the sense of smell.

In actual direct experiences, the reality character of these forces seems to be a very high one. As they can be perceived only with a concentrated mind, the one-pointed concentration required excludes critical comparison with the “objective” world, which might detract from their status as realities. How much reality philosophical reflection will assign to them depends on how far it has been impressed by the reality of deities and commonsense objects, respectively. To those who would regard any sense object as a hallucination, and a bad one at that, the deities are also hallucinations, though perhaps more helpful ones. A hallucination is an appearance which is not fully justified by the sensory data on which it seems to be based. It all depends on the status you give to sense data in general.

At this point I gave thirty years ago some thought to the physiological basis of these phenomena and to their connection with other psychological

states (e.g. with eidetic imagery). Their sensory appearance seems to result when the subliminal, or slightly superliminal, stimulations of the retina (as we find them in hypnagogic hallucinations, and in sensation-like memory-images), or the noises made by the endolymph in the cochlea, are shaped by true imagination. On further reflection I now feel that this line of enquiry fulfils no useful purpose, and only serves to gratify idle curiosity.

IV. Concrete visions and symbolic expressions or experiences of the transcendental world. In an advanced state of self-abandonment, of receptiveness and renunciation, there may occur a direct experience of "the emptiness which is form," in which elements from all the three worlds are fused together,—i.e. 1. some reflection of the transcendental reality, 2. an awareness of the inward laws, proportions, harmonies, and meaning of things as they are in themselves, plus 3. sensory elements. Of this kind are the ineffable visions of the Trinity, or of the Abode of the Buddhas; or mere apparitions of light which mark ecstatic trance in so many cases; or the expression of mysterious truth in symbols,—i.e. in numbers, geometrical figures, mythological persons, mantras, etc. Or the visions which accompanied the meditations of the Buddhist *yogin*, as they did those of Christian saints and Muslim Sufis. The Buddhists did not normally divulge them to the general public and for the earlier times we have chiefly the testimony of some fragments of a textbook found in the sands of Turkestan.⁶ These visions were not just a byproduct of the meditational process, but they were held to have a definite cognitive value. They are alluded to also in the very obscure terminology of the lists of *samādhis* which we find in many Mahayana scriptures,⁷ and it would be an exaggeration to say that we have so far found much of a clue to their meaning. Here the emptiness shines, or flashes, through into a world of non-instinctual objects, and unites with it. The symbolic expression of otherworldly truths can be found with the Pythagoreans, in the *Gāṇḍavyūha*, in Proclus, the Kabbalah, Alchemy, Boehme, Blake, Paracelsus, and so on. It was Paracelsus who said that magic is the hidden wisdom, whereas reason is the open folly.

⁶ D. Schlingloff, *Ein buddhistisches Yogalehrbuch*, 1964. A survey also in D. Schlingloff, *Die Religion des Buddhismus*, II, 1963, 86–99. The gulf which at this point yawns between Buddhism and Christianity is well illustrated by comparison with a Catholic textbook, i.e. Alfons Rosenberg, *Die christliche Bildmeditation*, München 1955.

⁷ e.g. *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*, trsl. E. Conze, 1961, 132–137.

'Photisms,' or visions of light, come after a great outburst of love, intense excitement, in epilepsy, or ecstatic trance.⁸ They seem to come from the same sources as those from which life itself springs. Images taken from light abound in descriptions of mystical experiences. To quote Plotinus:⁹ "It is certainly this that the Intellectual-Principle (Nous), hiding itself from all the outer, withdrawing to the inmost, seeing nothing, must have as its vision,—not of some other light in some other thing but of the light within itself, unmingled, pure, suddenly gleaming before it."

The Theravādins teach that at certain stages of meditation a state of clairvoyance leads to a manifestation of light (*obhāso*) and to the appearance of material shapes.¹⁰ According to Buddhaghosa:¹¹

"this illumination arises in one bhikkhu illuminating only as much as the seat he is sitting on; in another, the interior of his room; in another, the exterior of his room; in another the whole monastery, a quarter league, a half league, a league, two leagues, three leagues; in another bhikkhu it arises making a single light from the earth's surface up to the Brahmā world. But in the Blessed One it arose illuminating the ten-thousand-fold world-element."

⁸ So Leuba, James H. *The Psychology of Religious Mysticism*, p. 257, Harcourt, Brace & Co., Inc., 1925, New York.—See also: Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. II, ed. J. Hastings, D. D. s.v. Glory, pp. 183–187. T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1899.—Also: G. P. Wetter, *Phos. Eine Untersuchung ueber hellenistische Froemigkeit; zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verstaendnis des Manichaeismus*, 1915.

⁹ From *The Six Enneads*. Trans. Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page. Great Books of the Western World, Robert M. Hutchins, ed. in chief. William Benton, publ. Chicago 1952. Fifth Ennead V, 7.—To those who know French, Bréhier's translation may seem more intelligible. *Ennéades V. Etabli et traduit par Emile Bréhier (V, 5, vii)*, Paris 1956, 99–100: "De même l'intelligence, mettant un voile sur les autres objets et se recueillant dans son intimité, ne voit plus aucun objet; mais elle contemple alors une lumière qui n'est point en autre chose, mais qui lui est apparue subtilement, seule, pure, et existant en lui-même."

¹⁰ *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings*, trsl. I. B. Horner, III, 1959, 202.

¹¹ *The Path of Purification*, trsl. Bhikkhu Nanamoli, 1956, xx 108, p. 740. Buddhaghosa adds that they are at times a doubtful blessing and that they can corrupt the meditator when they distract him from the course of his intellectual cognition.

The brilliancy of pure emptiness is stressed in the saying from the *Śūram-gama Sūtra* which D.T. Suzuki quotes as, "All is Void, lucid and self-illuminating."¹² The teaching about a *prabhāvaracitta* belongs to both vehicles, although only the Mahayana knows what to do with it. The Tibetan *Bar-do thos-grol* even teaches that to each person, when on his death he is forced to part all of a sudden with the loot of a lifetime, "there will appear, swifter than lightning, the luminous splendour of the colourless light of emptiness,"¹³ and it adds that he will be saved then if he "recognizes that the boundless light of this true reality is his own true self."

How to gain access to the triple world

To each of the three worlds corresponds a subjective attitude. The natural is embraced by a mind governed by greed, hate and delusion. The spiritual world discloses itself to those who practise consistent self-denial, and that to the extent that they are successful in their practice of that. As for the intermediary world it depends on the section we consider.

With the neutral forces all one has to do is to find out what one is meant to do, and bravely do it. The possibility of fruitful, wholesome and safe contact with the hostile forces of Class II is held to depend on the presence of at least four conditions, 1. purity of motive, 2. fearless faith, 3. a disciplined and self-controlled mind, and 4. a considerable diminution of vanity and self-centredness, as well as a high degree of indifference to one's own individual existence. With the beneficial forces one must just be grateful for what one gets. And as to the revelations of IV, no harm is done as long as one does not get too dogmatic about them.

But in its precise details the intermediary world must always remain essentially hidden and secret. Experience with it should not be divulged to an indiscriminate audience. Tradition has always been more or less secretive, for different reasons in each case, about the various classes of facts which compose it. The neutral forces (class I) can be discussed almost openly, and any reluctance there may be to do so would be due to fear of being laughed at for seeming

¹² cf. e.g. in S. Beal, *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures from the Chinese*, p. 352.—Ch. Luk's translation pp. 55 and 116.

¹³ in E. Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures*, Penguin Classics, 1973, p. 227.

to believe in some special Providence for oneself, fear of overawing others by a display of psychic gifts, or, on the part of a professional priesthood, the desire to guard remunerative trade secrets. To some extent this is a question of good manners. This was brought home to me when I discussed with the Dezhung Rinpoche our memories of our previous lives. He listened with some interest to my offerings, but when I asked him in turn to tell me what he remembered it soon became clear that I had committed a bad *faux pas*, because as a *rinpoche* he was by definition very much the superior of a mere *pandita*.

With class II, however, a concrete, detailed and fully intelligible knowledge of the ways in which these malefic forces do their work should not be shared with others, except between master and pupil. Otherwise one might give information which others could use as a razor with which to cut their psychic souls. Also, according to the accepted laws of magic, those forces could be awakened, brought near and conjured up, so that for little benefit we might expose ourselves to untold dangers.

With class III we would wish to shield our most intimate experiences from the intruding gaze of strangers. *Secretum meum mihi*. Class IV has led to a voluminous literature, but to the uninitiated it can do neither harm nor good, since anyway he does not understand it. Just bored, he will remain inwardly unaffected.

The facts of the intermediary world are, ontologically considered, of such a nature that they cannot be dragged into the full light of the day and be inspected, tested and scrutinized by all and sundry at their leisure. They no more survive that treatment than the blushes of a virgin who is stripped naked and raped by passers-by on a crowded street every day between ten and eleven in the morning. All researchers of the psychic are familiar with the irremediable elusiveness of their material.¹⁴

“After 25 years of reading psychic literature and witnessing phenomena, (William) James admitted that he was ‘theoretically no further than I was at the beginning, and I confess that at times I have been tempted to believe that the Creator has eternally intended this departure (=department?) of nature to remain baffling’.”

¹⁴ quoted in *Time*, March 4, 1974, p. 48.

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That is why the intermediary world is spoken of in a language which is known as *sambhāṣya*, an esoteric, secretive, ambiguous, hidden mode of expression which can also be interpreted as a "twilight language."¹⁵ Anyone who has walked or cycled in twilight in an unfamiliar part of the country will know what is meant. One must learn to be contented with that. This is indeed one of the aspects of the virtue of Faith without which nothing can be done.

This is what I wanted to say on this subject, and I am grateful to the *Eastern Buddhist* for allowing me to say it in their journal. What we now would like to see is some comment and discussion of these issues which are probably slightly less clear than I have made them out to be.

¹⁵A. Wayman in *Mélanges d'Indianisme à la mémoire de L. Renou*, Paris 1968, pp. 789 sq.