

## A Rejoinder to Professor Bahm

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IT seems almost impossible to believe that Professor Bahm, in his "How can Buddhism become a Universal Religion?" (*Eastern Buddhist*, June 1970, pp. 147-149), really expects to be taken seriously. Yet he apparently so intends. Therein he urges Buddhism to "concentrate upon (its) enduringly practical truths" and to capitalize upon the fact that "we are all latent Buddhists whether we know it or not." This last is not *quite* the same as discovering that we are all latent *Buddhas* however, for he means only that all men experience life as frustrating, i.e. as suffering—which accords with basic Buddhist teaching. Therefore, according to Professor Bahm, the essence of Buddhism is this: in order "to avoid frustration, avoid desiring what will not be attained." This truth is "intuitively obvious" and an "immediately acceptable" principle for every man.

Quite so. Indeed the very law of life for *all* living beings is to avoid seeking the unattainable. Therefore all living creatures are already living by Buddhist principles. Why bother to convert them nominally to Buddhism?

But this is all too easy-simple. What does "avoidance of frustration" mean for Buddhism? Once, when much younger, at some expense and over a period of time, I tried to become a cellist. Long since I discovered that, for want of ability, cello playing was a frustration to me. Now is my present middle-aged avoidance of frustration, by having given up the cello, a particularly *Buddhist* sort of attitude? How was I to know that I *would* be frustrated therein—and therefore avoid it—till I tried it?

Surely this rueful experience-born wisdom is not the essence of the Four Noble Truths. Indeed the Truths *seem* to apply to *all* kinds of experience. For if I read them aright they radically question the true nature of both sweet success and bitter failure, frustration and non-frustration alike, by proclaiming that all individualized sentient existence in all its aspects is *inherently* frustrating. And early Buddhism had only one cure for the human predicament—Nirvana, that

transcendent state of benevolent detachment toward this life which finally fulfills itself only in an ultimacy beyond all time-space existence.

Now this suggests a quite different sort and level of the "avoidance of frustration" than does Professor Bahm's recipe. On the Four-Truth basis none of us is Buddhist at all in his blind-instinctive avoidance of frustration, but becomes "Buddhist" only when he begins to critically examine *both* his experience of and avoidance of life's frustrations, and to try to transcend them both. Further, the Four Truths were obviously framed in a context of a strong belief in repeated rebirths—which brings to mind the widely different world-views of West and East with regard to the meaning of history. This element is totally neglected by Professor Bahm, which is a crucial fault since "frustration" in these two contexts means very divergent things.

But even if we put early Buddhism aside as too starkly negative and go in for the Zen form of "avoidance of frustration," what have we? Professor Bahm says that Zen is an avoidance of frustration because it is a yea-saying to *all* of life. Granted that Zen does yea-say life, it does not do so either simply or in Western style. For as I understand it, Zen yea-saying has two most essential features which Professor Bahm leaves totally out of account: (1) There is involved here a specifically Buddhist-Eastern ontology according to which ordinary human individuality cannot overcome its inherent contradictions till it unifies the cerebral and visceral within, and overcomes the within-without separation from the Absolute Primordial Oneness by means of a "oneing" experience; (2) previous to and necessary for Zen yea-saying is a very radical *nay*-saying (the Great Death) in which all the existent types of self-hood, i.e. *ordinary* yea-and-nay saying to life, are shattered.

In short, by leaving out of account the specific Buddhist ontological presuppositions, and by disregarding the radical transformation of the nature or scale of frustrations (and their "avoidance") which is called for in the Buddhist tradition, Professor Bahm's Western-style neat-practical "Buddhism" reduces Buddhism to a commonplace triviality of ordinary adult experience and is not worth offering to anyone anywhere in place of what he now has.