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*Buddhism in Modern Times*¹

ONE of the most eminent of Buddhist scholars, La Vallée Poussin, once remarked that the study of Buddhism is only fifty years old, and yet it is paved with dogmas. Many of these dogmas we shall be able to avoid by confining ourselves, as far as possible, to what I am proposing to speak about: Buddhism in modern times. But it will be necessary to look back a little at the history where these dogmas abound.

What Buddhism was at the beginning has been variously judged. All agree that in the fifth or sixth century B.C. a great teacher began to preach a new way of life resting on the truths that he had discovered. But some scholars hold that the original teaching was something very different from what we find now, though they do not agree as to what it was. Only two facts are clear: one that these theories all contradict one another, and that the investigators agree that the supposed primitive teaching no longer exists. What we have to deal with is Buddhism as the Buddhists know it, and as it exists at the present day.

Another way in which Buddhism is very variously estimated is its value as a religion. I am not proposing to speak of the validity of its religious doctrines in comparison with other religious systems. I will quote the words of the Russian scholar Otto Rosenberg:

'Buddhism has long ago attracted general attention as the only one among the systems of world-religions which, in its influence extending over peoples of the most varied races and the most varied stages of culture, can be compared with Christianity and Islam. All the more astonishing are the different estimates that can be found of Buddhism. Buddhism is a force for which some feel extreme aversion; others welcome it with the greatest sympathy. Sometimes Buddhism is held up as an example of senseless idolatry, entirely undeserving the name of religion, or again as an example of a religion very close to Christianity, or even as a religion that can be combined with modern science as the religion of the future'.

1. Lecture delivered before the Royal India, Pakistan and Ceylon Society, December 6, 1944. Published by kind permission of the Society.

Without passing any general judgment on Buddhism we can first ask what is its attitude to other religions at the present day, and what kind of people they are who revere the name of Buddha.

There are several points to be noted in its attitude to other forms of belief. Buddhism claims to be a universal religion. It claims to replace all other religions except so far as it can assimilate their principles. But there is a fact more fundamental than Buddhism itself; that is, that it started from special Indian beliefs, which it took for granted. The chief of these were the belief in transmigration and the doctrine of the retribution of actions. These are not doctrines which the early Buddhists would think it necessary to put among their articles of belief—they were already taken for granted as a commonly accepted view of life by most Indian religions.

The doctrine of the retribution of actions or *karma* is in principle the same as the teaching that whatsoever a man doeth that shall he also reap, but when this teaching was combined with the belief in an endless succession of lives it became all-embracing. It made it possible to give an explanation of all misfortunes. A man's unexplained unhappiness in this life must be due to misdeed in a past existence, and he will reap the fruit of all his present actions either in this or some future life, unless he can break the chain of his continued rebirths. That is also what the rival Indian systems mostly taught. But Buddhism taught what it held to be the true way of breaking the chain.

These two doctrines seem to me to give Buddhism as well as other Indian systems a quite peculiar position. Buddhism is separated from Hinduism not only by its new teaching about the way of escape, but also by the doctrine of caste. Hinduism is not merely a religion; it is also a social structure. It includes a belief in the divinely ordered structure of society, and this is an essential part of Hindu religion.

Buddhism was far from neglecting the importance of caste. It was only within the Order of monks that caste became extinguished, but it never made caste an obstacle to the winning of release. At the moment the question of caste does not concern us, for Buddhism at the present day is mostly held by peoples who have never come within the framework of caste.

Buddhism claims to be a universal religion, and it makes this claim more distinct by basing it on the teaching of a unique person. Other religions do the same kind of thing in a way that makes compromise impossible. When a religion claims to be universal, it is a case of either—or. No universal religion can sink its teaching in that of another without admitting its own superfluity, and Buddhism least of all is likely to cancel its first principle, which says: I go to the Buddha as a refuge.

One feature Buddhism has in common with other religions, perhaps all the higher religions; that is, it is mystical. The highest truth is known and

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grasped, not by any reasoning process, but by intuition. But the knowledge gained by intuition cannot be expressed in terms of this world. That is why the mystics are unable to tell us anything of their experiences except in symbolical language, and that is why the Buddhist has nothing positive to say about the highest state which he aims at; and which he calls Nirvāṇa. It is something to be experienced, but it is inexpressible.

Apart from these purely religious questions there are points of contact and parallel modes of thought shared by Buddhism with the thought of the West. Buddhism, like other Indian religions, is also a philosophy—that is, it holds views about the nature of the world and the place of the individual in it, as well as religious doctrines which tell men how to act for their own welfare in the face of these surroundings. Just as in Christianity the key-word is salvation, so in Buddhism it is release.

We speak of Northern and Southern Buddhism. These terms were invented under a misapprehension, for both forms originated in much the same region of India. But the earlier form was transplanted to Ceylon, and from there it spread to Burma and as far as Indo-China, so that with its disappearance in India it has become Southern Buddhism. The other great division spread at a later period to China and Japan, and can well be called Northern Buddhism.

The differences between the two are fairly well known. The Northern, calling itself Mahāyāna, 'the great career', made additions to the earlier teaching. It holds that every individual may form, and ought to form, the resolve to become a Buddha. There is nothing in this contradictory to the earlier teaching. Buddha himself started ages ago as an ordinary man, and gradually through birth after birth realised his aim by his own efforts. While he was so striving he was a Bodhisattva, and he is recognised as such by all schools.

The other chief feature of Mahāyāna is that it developed a new theory of reality, the theory that everything that we perceive is unreal. This was a great step philosophically, and it arrived at conclusions which were often strange to earlier Buddhism. But it was not set forth in opposition to the earlier teaching. The old teaching in fact lent itself to this development. All the old Scriptures were retained, though they had sometimes to be interpreted in special ways. One way in which this was done was by introducing the doctrine of two truths—everyday truth and truth in the highest sense. The consequence was that on the level of everyday truth Mahāyāna could accept all the older teaching. But I shall have more to say of this when we come to China and Japan.

We find evidence for this Mahāyāna movement from about the Christian era, but the development must have begun earlier. This was in the system

of teaching in the monastic establishments. There was a body of Scripture consisting of two parts, the discipline (*Vinaya*) and the doctrine (*Dhamma*). These became fixed, but still the discipline allowed of expansion when additional cases had to be decided. In the *Dhamma* also questions of interpretation arose, and these were discussed in the monastic places of instruction. Such discussion was known as *Abhidhamma*, further *Dhamma* or special *Dhamma*. The original *Dhamma* of the Scriptures was left untouched, but the practice of discussion led to the composition of further works. These now form the third part of the Canon, the *Abhidhamma*. But this name still kept its wider meaning of discussion of the *Dhamma*, and works of this kind are still composed.

Abhidhamma also widened the scope of its inquiries, and came to be a philosophy in the sense of an inquiry into all branches of human experience. This divides into an inquiry into the nature of the world outside us—that is, cosmology—and the world within, the nature of the self, what we call psychology.

What I have to say now may appear rather technical, but it is necessary if we are to approach the line of thought in which an educated Buddhist, whether of Ceylon or Japan, looks at the question.

What does the world consist of? We can leave aside the question of its origin, for this, both to Buddhist and Hindu was a conception taken for granted. It was the view that the universe passes repeatedly through a stage of evolution into a more static stage, and then gradually into a state of decay or devolution until after a stage of rest the evolution begins again. In this view the chief difference made by the Buddhists was to exclude from discussion the question whether this process ever had an absolute beginning. But the nature of the world that we actually experience was a matter for examination and analysis. We are familiar with European theories. Ancient science was content to say that the outer world consists of four elements, mixed up in different proportions, which produce everything that we see or experience. Modern science tells us of elements in a different sense, and groups them all under matter and motion. The Buddhists did not start from these abstractions. They did not even have a word for matter in general. They looked at the world and saw that it consisted of a number of things—the word for thing is *dhamma* or *dharma*, the same word as the word for 'doctrine', but quite distinct in meaning. It has an important place in *Abhidhamma*, and also in *Mahāyāna* theory. The business of the student of *Abhidhamma* was to classify these 'things'. The first great division that they made was of things outside us, everything that we perceive with the five senses; and things within us, our ideas and all our mental experiences. These mental phenomena are for the Buddhist also things, and their classification is what we call psychology.

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The Buddhists had several ways of classifying them. One is according to the different senses, visible things perceived by the eye and so on. But each sense can only perceive the objects for which it is fitted. The eye has no perception of sounds or tastes. But there is one sense which can take account of all classes of consciousness. This is the mind, and accordingly Buddhism speaks of six senses. These six senses make up the conscious life of the individual. This life along with the unconscious processes of the body goes on in a continuous stream. It is always changing, but it is never broken, even between two births, for it is held that by means of special training a person can remember his previous births. The whole of this teaching is thus a system of psychology much as we understand it, but it is not psychology for its own sake. Its analysis of the elements of the mental life forms a refutation of the *ātman*-theory, and it is all part of the training for going on the path to *Nirvāṇa*. Consequently it is interested in describing the states of mind attained as the disciple rises higher and higher in stages of contemplation.

Psychology is the science of the soul, the *psyche*. You are aware of the view that Buddhism denies the existence of the soul. When that is stated in English it is merely one of the dogmas that we have to avoid. If, when we speak of the soul, we mean the totality of an individual's consciousness with all its ideas, thoughts, volitions, feelings, memories, and so on, then Buddhism does not deny the soul. What it denies is the Hindu theory of the soul or *ātman*, the theory that behind all these changing states of consciousness there is some permanent entity, the *ātman*, which passes unchanged from birth to birth. That is what Buddhism denies, but it is equally emphatic in holding that the group of mental states of the individual is continuous. What a man is now is continuous not only with what he was as a child, but with what he was in every previous existence. That is why a man is responsible for what he may have done in births a million years ago if the karma has not ripened, and this will continue up to *Nirvāṇa*. What happens then? Will he be annihilated? Here we have another dogma. *Nirvāṇa* has been translated annihilation. But Buddhism expressly denies that *Nirvāṇa* means the annihilation of the individual.

There is another classification of things, covering both internal and external—that is, into compound things and uncompound. The compound are ordinary things, which are always changing and passing into something else. The uncompound are *Nirvāṇa* and, as some schools say, space. For Buddhism believes not only in constant change, but also in an absolutely real, something absolutely unchangeable. This is the state reached by the emancipated person. Nothing is said about its nature, for the only one who can do that is the one who has attained it.

All these questions are naturally matters only for the educated and for those who are directly aiming at the goal, but they are still studied not only

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in Southern Buddhism but also in the schools of China and Japan. In the popular teaching they are not prominent. The ordinary man is not directly concerned with Nirvāṇa. He knows that while he is living an ordinary life and enjoying the pleasures of the world he is not going to win the final goal ; but he believes that if he leads a good life his next existence will be a happy one. Consequently the popular teaching and preaching is concentrated on those parts of the Scripture that teach practical morality. The Buddhists of Ceylon have periodical meetings for lay people, which correspond somewhat to our preaching of sermons, and a favourite work in use is the *Jātaka*. This is a work that consists of tales of the Buddha's previous existences. Some are Hindu fables adapted to Buddhist morality, and serve the same purpose as our parables. They teach many virtues, but the great lesson of all is expressed in a verse which is found in several parts of the Scriptures :

The deeds of mortals perish not
Even in a hundred million ages ;
When the fulness of time has come,
Then do the deeds of men bear fruit.

The most popular Jātakas are long stories of the romantic adventures of the Buddha in his existence as a king or a sage or a king's minister. A favourite one is the tale of Vessantara, the prince who reached the perfection of the virtue of almsgiving. Both in Burma and Ceylon it has been turned into a play. Captain Forbes, speaking of the Burmese performances, said that it attracted audiences ready to spend the night in hearing of the trials of the prince and the devotion of his wife. Captain Forbes also said that he had seen men moved to tears by a good representation of the play, and he describes a performance by children in a village of about 200 houses :

' The eldest performer was about fourteen, the daughter of the headman, a slight, pretty girl . . . They were regularly trained by an old man as stage manager . . . The little company used to perform this piece capitally, but the acting of the little maid of fourteen in the part of the princess could not be surpassed, she seemed to have lost herself in her part '.

Another favourite Jātaka tells the story of Mahosadha, who was the future Buddha in his life as the skilful minister of a king. It has a curious interest from the fact that it includes an incident which is found in the First Book of Kings, the well-known Judgment of Solomon. Mahosadha, before he became minister, had to decide nineteen difficult problems. On one occasion two women were disputing about the possession of a child. He drew a line, and said that the one who could pull it over the line should have the child. Naturally, as soon as the child began to cry the real mother let go. The Jātakas have always been popular means of instruction, for we find them represented on Buddhist monuments as early as the third century B.C.

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The most completely Buddhist country at the present day appears to be Thailand. It is a country which is not easy to view from within, but there is a very objectively written book by an American author Kenneth Elmer Wells, which came out a few years ago.² He does not deal with the studies of the monks, but he gives a detailed picture of their activities among the people, the many feasts and ceremonies, and the organisation of the Church. One peculiar feature is that it has adopted a hierarchical system. Older Buddhism recognised no rank except seniority of age, and each community was independent in its own parish. But in Thailand what Dr. Wells calls an episcopal form of government has been established. There is a supreme head, whom he calls a patriarch, and next in rank four members of the clergy, who might be termed Archbishops. These together form a Supreme Council. The whole country is divided into seventy-five provinces. In describing the life of the people he says :

‘ A Thai child moves in a Buddhist milieu from birth . . . When little more than a month old he may be taken to a bhikkhu to have his birth-hair shaved from his head and a benedictory service performed. When the child is six or seven he may go to a school within the temple ground. The monks will enable him to make merit daily by his presenting them with food, they will give him moral and religious instruction, invoke the blessing of good fortune upon him on birthdays or at house-warmings, assist at his wedding, and above all conduct the necessary funeral rites when death enters his home. From Buddhism he derives his metaphysics, his conception of the world, heaven, hell, the nature and end of man, his idea of karma or the working of the moral law, and his belief in metempsychosis and Nirvāṇa. If what he wants is purely a philosophy of life—Buddhism is that ; if he wants a religion—Buddhism is that, a religion with prayers, austerities, devotional exercises and communal worship ’.

Although Thailand appears to be the most orthodox of Buddhist countries, there is one interesting feature brought to light by Dr. Wells, and that is a tendency to rationalism. Magical rites and formulas have always existed in Buddhism, and they are used at the present day in Thailand. One is the *Ātāṇātiya sutta*, a charm for obtaining the goodwill of evil-disposed spirits. King Chulalongkorn reproved both the believers in spirits and the sceptics by insisting that the essential matter in the sutta was the worship of Buddha.

His successor, King Vajiravudh, even rationalised the life of Buddha. He said :

‘ I do not believe that it was possible for King Suddhodana or anyone else to have prevented Gotama from knowing the laws of nature

2. *Thai Buddhism, its Rites and Activities*, Bangkok, 1939.

regarding old age, sickness, and death. He knew Brahmanism, and it deals with sickness, old age, and death, so he was not ignorant of these'.

When rationalism begins in a religion it usually leads not to reform but to scepticism. It is too early to say what direction Buddhism will take.

If we turn to Northern Buddhism we find no tendency to rationalism there. This form of Buddhism in China, Korea, Japan, Tibet and Mongolia is well known as Mahāyāna. For its interpretation of the ordinary facts of experience it accepted the teachings of Abhidhamma, but it went beyond the Abhidhamma position (as expounded in Sarvāstivādin works) by holding that everyone ought to become a Buddha, and also by developing a new theory of reality. It shared with the other schools the ordinary theory of reality, the view that what is perceived consists of a world of things or objects all in constant change. But this reality is only transient existence. It has no *svabhāva*. Behind all this is an absolute reality, reality in the highest sense, and hence all perceptible changing things are said to be void or empty of reality.

This teaching has been called nihilism. I will not try to argue the point here, but I will only say that the word *śūnyatā*, 'void' or 'voidness', does not mean nihilism, and that a system which at the same time asserts an absolute reality can hardly be called nihilistic. This reality is called *tathatā*, 'suchness'; it is indescribable, and it can only be said that it is *tathā* 'so' or 'such'. This reality is so absolute that nothing else can be called real in the same sense. Spinoza had the same thought when he said that God is the Cause whose essence involves existence—that is, it is a kind of existence which cannot even be imagined to be non-existent.

But Mahāyāna doctrine was not introduced into China and Japan in the form of a philosophical principle. The Chinese had a philosophy of their own, but it did not amalgamate with Buddhism. The new teaching came rather as a revelation. This was so even with the metaphysical side of the teaching. It did not present itself as a solution to the problems already existing in the native philosophy, but gave an outlook on aspects of experience that were quite new to the Chinese. From the fourth to the seventh century Chinese travellers visited India and Ceylon, and brought back all they could find. In the fifth century Fa Hian visited both India and Ceylon and returned with books and images. A century later two other travellers brought back one hundred and seventy volumes of Mahāyāna sūtras, and in the seventh century Hiuen Tsiang returned with one hundred and twenty sūtras and so many other works that twenty-two horses were required to carry them.

It was on the basis of these works that schools were founded. Some particular sūtra was taken, which formed the basis of the teaching of each school. There are four important schools, which were afterwards introduced into Japan, and I shall refer to them by the Japanese form of their names.

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The Tendai school has as its chief sūtra the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, 'the Lotus of the Good Doctrine'. This teaches that all men are destined to become Buddhas, and it contains little reference to metaphysical teaching. But it shows a remarkable development in its teaching about the nature of a Buddha. It tells how, when a disciple asked how the Buddha can have taught so many individuals in the space of forty years, Buddha explained that he has always existed. He merely makes a show of being born and teaching the doctrine. The reason is (though it is not expounded in the sūtra) because Buddha and all other Buddhas are only manifestations of one ultimate reality, this reality being tathatā. Buddhism has here become a system very like Vedānta. In fact it uses the same word *māyā* to describe the illusory world, behind which is the reality which the Vedantins call Brahman and the Mahayanists Suchness.

But the new teaching came to the Chinese in a number of sūtras which appeared to teach no consistent doctrine. They tried to sort it out, and decided that the early sūtras were meant for simple minds, who could not comprehend the higher doctrine, and they seized on the latest sūtras with their gorgeous descriptions and mystifying revelations. It suited the type of mind that delights in the marvellous, and this can be seen in Mr. D. T. Suzuki's description of the sūtra called *Buddhāvataṃsaka*, 'the Adornments of the Buddha', the Scripture of the Kegon sect. He says of it:

'To my mind no religious literature in the world can ever approach the grandeur of conception, the depths of feeling and the gigantic scale of composition, as attained in this sūtra. It is the eternal fountain of life from which no religious mind will turn back athirst or only partially satisfied'.

These are the words of a religious spirit that feels a joy in contemplating a marvellous vision and finding an escape from the harsh realities of life. But there is nothing of the solid thinking whereby the Indian Buddhists built up a consistent system.

Another school also looked for practical means of escape but in a quite different way. This was the Zen school, which made contemplation their chief occupation. Zen is a corruption of Skt. *dhyāna*, but it had little to do with the Indian practice of meditation. It is said to have been introduced from India to China by Bodhidharma, but it was so modified that Suzuki calls it 'a native product of the Chinese mind'. It flourishes in Japan, and is said to have greatly influenced the military class, the Samurai.

The most popular of all schools, however, is the Pure Land school. One Japanese scholar has calculated that at least half the number of Buddhists in Japan accept its teaching. The school which is specially devoted to it is Jōdō, the Pure Land school, it has two sūtras, *Sukhāvati-vyūha*, which describe the Happy Land Sukhāvati, where the Buddha Amitābha is supreme.

This means that the historical Buddha is put on one side. He appears in the sūtras as describing the Happy Land and its dwellers, but all devotion is directed to the Buddha of this land, Amitābha, or as the Japanese call him, Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light. He does not even exist in this universe, for the theory is that there can be only one Buddha at a time. Otherwise it would imply that he cannot do all his work completely. But as there are hundreds of thousands of millions of universes, there can be innumerable Buddhas not only in succession, but at the same time in different universes. The universe of Amitābha is at the west of this universe.

In the sūtra Buddha—that is, the historical Buddha—gives Ānanda a list of eighty-one Buddhas, the last of whom was the Buddha Lokeśvara-rāja. This Buddha told one of his disciples of the glories of all these Buddhas, and the disciple formed the idea of combining all the excellences of these eighty-one Buddhas into one Buddha-realm, and then made the vow to become Buddha of this realm. This disciple is now the Buddha Amitābha, and his universe is the Happy Land, to which all may go who devoutly repeat the name of Amitābha.

It is sometimes said that Amitābha-worship is a complete departure from the original teaching. That is merely a dogma of non-Buddhists. It does not substitute residence in heaven for the attaining of Nirvāṇa. It may be that many Japanese who repeat the name of Amida do not look beyond the hope of reaching the bliss of the Happy Land, but this is not the teaching of the school. The end in all schools is the attainment of Nirvāṇa, and Amitābha makes the way easier. Those who reach the Happy Land become Bodhisattvas, and go on without hindrances until they reach the goal by becoming Buddhas.

All this is Buddha-worship, but there is another aspect of Mahāyāna which in India itself has had a great influence on the religion of lay people. This is the theory of the Bodhisattvas. When a Bodhisattva has completed his course, he has amassed a great store of merit, which he can bestow on others. Hence the layman came to revere some particular Bodhisattva, from whom he might expect great blessings in this life. One of the most popular is Avalokiteśvara, who in China became transformed into a woman, and appears as the goddess of mercy, Kwan yin, or as the Japanese call her, Kwan non.

There are other schools besides these, some of which originated in Japan, but they can scarcely be said to set forth any important principle. Some of them are really based on the old Japanese beliefs in magic and shamanism. They have received a Buddhistic colouring through their gods being identified with Bodhisattvas.

But all this is popular Buddhism. Behind these beliefs of the people a study of the fundamental doctrines goes on in the colleges of Japan. It

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begins, as in older Buddhism, with the subject of Abhidharma, and this is Abhidharma as interpreted by the Sarvāstivādin schools. It could be easily adopted by the Mahayanists, for the facts of experience had to be dealt with, even though they were no longer facts but only a series of illusions. This scholastic Buddhism has also developed in another way. For some years it has been the custom of Japanese students to come to India and Europe, where they can study the methods of Western scholars. They have also developed the systematic investigation of the history of the subject, and have published important Sanskrit and Chinese texts.

To express any general verdict on Buddhism in China and Japan would not be becoming for one who has not lived among the people, but these words of a Catholic missionary who has long been resident in China seem to be of great weight :

‘ The physiognomy of ancient China has certainly changed since it became a republic : that is a visible fact. But what of its ideas ? Well, it is also a fact that beneath the American “ feelings ” with which certain of the young people have sprinkled it . . . it is a fact, I say, that fundamentally the Chinese people still think as they thought for milleniums since their remote origin. Confucius is no longer the author studied by scholars ; he is more, for he is recognised as the moralist, the economist, the politician of China. Taoism, which had fallen to the level of a despised and dreaded superstition, is now considered by certain scholars to be the real national philosophy. Buddhism, whose good old legends once only raised a smile, is rising again in China, as it has risen in Japan, under a Mahayanist or Amidist form, winning minds by the loftiness of its idealism, and winning hearts by the sweetness of its charity ’.³

Here we have the two sides of Buddhism, the philosophical and the religious. The philosophical side was never absent, for the religious aim was the attainment of knowledge, but it was always directed to knowledge held to be advantageous to progress on the Noble Way. That was so even in the case of the most extreme metaphysical developments, and the teaching about the End has always remained the same.

We can see how Buddhism in various parts of the world is now flourishing with renewed life, but I cannot see that it has ever come into contact with modern thought—and by modern thought I mean Western thought. In its religious aspect it is opposed to any form of Western religion. It admits much of the ethical value of the teaching of other religions, but it replies, *that* is what we have already learnt from our own Master. These are some of the aspects which in a small degree I have tried to express.

E. J. THOMAS

3. Péro L. Wiegier, S. J. *Textes philosophiques, Confuciusme, Taoïsme, Buddhismme* 1930.