

III. Buddhism

The Man Who Woke Up

Buddhism begins with a man. In his later years, when India was afire with his message and kings themselves were bowing before him, people came to him even as they were to come to Jesus asking what he was. 1 How many people have provoked this question—not “Who are you?” with respect to name, origin, or ancestry, but “What are you? What order of being do you belong to? What species do you represent?” Not Caesar, certainly. Not Napoleon, or even Socrates. Only two: Jesus and Buddha. When the people carried their puzzlement to the Buddha himself, the answer he gave provided an identity for his entire message.

“Are you a god?” they asked. “No.” “An angel?” “No.” “A saint?” “No.” “Then what are you?”

Buddha answered, “I am awake.”

His answer became his title, for this is what Buddha means. The Sanskrit root *budh* denotes both to wake up and to know. Buddha, then, means the “Enlightened One,” or the “Awakened One.” While the rest of the world was wrapped in the womb of sleep, dreaming a dream known as the waking state of human life, one of their number roused himself. Buddhism begins with a man who shook off the daze, the doze, the dream-like vagaries of ordinary awareness. It begins with a man who woke up.

His life has become encased in loving legend. We are told that the worlds were flooded with light at his birth. The blind so longed to see his glory that they received their sight; the deaf and mute conversed in ecstasy of the things that were to come. Crooked became straight; the lame walked. Prisoners were freed from their chains and the fires of

hell were quenched. Even the cries of the beasts were hushed as peace encircled the earth. Only Mara, the Evil One, did not rejoice.

The historical facts of his life are roughly these: He was born around 563 B.C. in what is now Nepal, near the Indian border. His full name was Siddhartha Gautama of the Sakyas. Siddhartha was his given name, Gautama his surname, and Sakya the name of the clan to which his family belonged. His father was a king, but as there were then many kingdoms in the subcontinent of India, it would be more accurate to think of him as a feudal lord. By the standards of the day his upbringing was luxurious. “I wore garments of silk and my attendants held a white umbrella over me. My unguents were always from Banaras.” He appears to have been exceptionally handsome, for there are numerous references to “the perfection of his visible body.” At sixteen he married a neighboring princess, Yasodhara, who bore a son whom they called Rahula.

He was, in short, a man who seemed to have everything: family, “the venerable Gautama is well born on both sides, of pure descent”; appearance, “handsome, inspiring trust, gifted with great beauty of complexion, fair in color, fine in presence, stately to behold”; wealth, “he had elephants and silver ornaments for his elephants.” He had a model wife, “majestic as a queen of heaven, constant ever, cheerful night and day, full of dignity and exceeding grace,” who bore him a beautiful son. In addition, as heir to his father’s throne, he was destined for fame and power.

Despite all this there settled over him in his twenties a discontent, which was to lead to a complete break with his worldly estate.

The source of his discontent is impounded in the legend of The Four Passing Sights, one of the most celebrated calls to adventure in all world literature. When Siddhartha was born, so this story runs, his

father summoned fortunetellers to find out what the future held for his heir. All agreed that this was no usual child. His career, however, was crossed with one basic ambiguity. If he remained with the world, he would unify India and become her greatest conqueror, a Chakravartin or Universal King. If, on the other hand, he forsook the world, he would become not a world conqueror but a world redeemer. Faced with this option, his father determined to steer his son toward the former destiny. No effort was spared to keep the prince attached to the world. Three palaces and 40,000 dancing girls were placed at his disposal; strict orders were given that no ugliness intrude upon the courtly pleasures. Specifically, the prince was to be shielded from contact with sickness, decrepitude, and death; even when he went riding, runners were to clear the roads of these sights. One day, however, an old man was overlooked, or (as some versions have it) miraculously incarnated by the gods to effect the needed lesson: a man decrepit, broken-toothed, gray-haired, crooked and bent of body, leaning on a staff, and trembling. That day Siddhartha learned the fact of old age. Though the king extended his guard, on a second ride Siddhartha encountered a body racked with disease, lying by the roadside; and on a third journey, a corpse. Finally, on a fourth occasion he saw a monk with shaven head, ochre robe, and bowl, and on that day he learned of the life of withdrawal from the world. It is a legend, this story, but like all legends it embodies an important truth. For the teachings of the Buddha show unmistakably that it was the body's inescapable involvement with disease, decrepitude, and death that made him despair of finding fulfillment on the physical plane. "Life is subject to age and death. Where is the realm of life in which there is neither age nor death?"

Once he had perceived the inevitability of bodily pain and passage, fleshly pleasures lost their charm. The singsong of the dancing girls, the lilt of lutes and cymbals, the sumptuous feasts and processions, the

elaborate celebration of festivals only mocked his brooding mind. Flowers nodding in the sunshine and snows melting on the Himalayas cried louder of the evanescence of worldly things. He determined to quit the snare of distractions his palace had become and follow the call of a truth-seeker. One night in his twenty-ninth year he made the break, his Great Going Forth. Making his way in the post-midnight hours to where his wife and son were locked in sleep, he bade them both a silent goodbye, and then ordered the gatekeeper to bridle his great white horse. The two mounted and rode off toward the forest. Reaching its edge by daybreak, Gautama changed clothes with the attendant who returned with the horse to break the news, while Gautama shaved his head and, "clothed in ragged raiment," plunged into the forest in search of enlightenment.

Six years followed, during which his full energies were concentrated toward this end. "How hard to live the life of the lonely forest-dweller...to rejoice in solitude. Verily, the silent groves bear heavily upon the monk who has not yet won to fixity of mind!" The words bear poignant witness that his search was not easy. It appears to have moved through three phases, without record as to how long each lasted or how sharply the three were divided. His first act was to seek out two of the foremost Hindu masters of the day and pick their minds for the wisdom in their vast tradition. He learned a great deal—about raja yoga especially, but about Hindu philosophy as well; so much in fact that Hindus came to claim him as their own, holding that his criticisms of the religion of his day were in the order of reforms and were less important than his agreements. In time, however, he concluded that he had learned all that these yogis could teach him.

His next step was to join a band of ascetics and give their way an honest try. Was it his body that was holding him back? He would break its power and crush its interference. A man of enormous will

power, the Buddha-to-be outdid his associates in every austerity they proposed. He ate so little—six grains of rice a day during one of his fasts—that “when I thought I would touch the skin of my stomach I actually took hold of my spine.” He would clench his teeth and press his tongue to his palate until “sweat flowed from my armpits.” He would hold his breath until it felt “as if a strap were being twisted around my head.”² In the end he grew so weak that he fell into a faint; and if the maiden Sujata had not been around to feed him some warm rice gruel, he could easily have died.

This experience taught him the futility of asceticism. He had given this experiment all anyone could, and it had not succeeded—it had not brought enlightenment. But negative experiments carry their own lessons, and in this case asceticism’s failure provided Gautama with the first constructive plank for his program: the principle of the Middle Way between the extremes of asceticism, on the one hand, and indulgence on the other. It is the concept of the rationed life, in which the body is given what it needs to function optimally, but no more.

Having turned his back on mortification, Gautama devoted the final phase of his quest to a combination of rigorous thought and mystic concentration along the lines of *b*. One evening near Gaya in northeast India, south of the present city of Patna, he sat down under a peepul tree that has come to be known as the Bo Tree (short for *bodhi* or enlightenment). The place was later named the Immovable Spot, for tradition reports that the Buddha, sensing that a breakthrough was near, seated himself that epoch-making evening vowing not to arise until enlightenment was his.

The records offer as the first event of the night a temptation scene reminiscent of Jesus’ on the eve of his ministry. The Evil One, realizing that his antagonist’s success was imminent, rushed to the spot to disrupt his concentrations. He attacked first in the form of

Kama, the God of Desire, parading three voluptuous women with their tempting retinues. When the Buddha-to-be remained unmoved, the Tempter switched his guise to that of Mara, the Lord of Death. His powerful hosts assailed the aspirant with hurricanes, torrential rains, and showers of flaming rocks, but Gautama had so emptied himself of his finite self that the weapons found no target to strike and turned into flower petals as they entered his field of concentration. When, in final desperation, Mara challenged his right to do what he was doing, Gautama touched the earth with his right fingertip, whereupon the earth responded, thundering, “I bear you witness” with a hundred, a thousand, and a hundred thousand roars. Mara’s army fled in rout, and the gods of heaven descended in rapture to tend the victor with garlands and perfumes.

Thereafter, while the Bo Tree rained red blossoms that full-mooned May night, Gautama’s meditation deepened through watch after watch until, as the morning star glittered in the transparent sky of the east, his mind pierced at last the bubble of the universe and shattered it to naught, only, wonder of wonders, to find it miraculously restored with the effulgence of true being. The Great Awakening had arrived. Gautama’s being was transformed, and he emerged the Buddha. The event was of cosmic import. All created things filled the morning air with their rejoicings and the earth quaked six ways with wonder. Ten thousand galaxies shuddered in awe as lotuses bloomed on every tree, turning the entire universe into “a bouquet of flowers set whirling through the air.”³ The bliss of this vast experience kept the Buddha rooted to the spot for seven entire days. On the eighth he tried to rise, but another wave of bliss broke over him. For a total of forty-nine days he was lost in rapture, after which his “glorious glance” opened onto the world.

Mara was waiting for him with one last temptation. He appealed this time to what had always been Gautama's strong point, his reason. Mara did not argue the burden of reentering the world with its banalities and obsessions. He posed a deeper challenge. Who could be expected to understand truth as profound as that which the Buddha had laid hold of? How could speech-defying revelation be translated into words, or visions that shatter definitions be caged in language? In short, how show what can only be found, teach what can only be learned? Why bother to play the idiot before an uncomprehending audience? Why not wash one's hands of the whole hot world—be done with the body and slip at once into *nirvana*? The argument was so persuasive that it almost carried the day. At length, however, the Buddha answered, "There will be some who will understand," and Mara was banished from his life forever.

Nearly half a century followed, during which the Buddha trudged the dusty paths of India until his hair was white, step infirm, and body nothing but a burst drum, preaching his ego-shattering, life-redeeming message. He founded an order of monks and nuns, challenged the deadness of *brahmin* society, and accepted in return the resentment, queries, and bewilderment his stance provoked. His daily routine was staggering. In addition to training monks and overseeing the affairs of his order, he maintained an interminable schedule of public preaching and private counseling, advising the perplexed, encouraging the faithful, and comforting the distressed. "To him people come right across the country from distant lands to ask questions, and he bids all welcome." Underlying his response to these pressures and enabling him to stand up under them was the pattern of withdrawal and return that is basic to all creativity. The Buddha withdrew for six years, then returned for forty-five. But each year was likewise divided: nine months in the world, followed by a three-month retreat with his monks during the rainy season. His daily cycle, too, was patterned to this

mold. His public hours were long, but three times a day he withdrew, to return his attention (through meditation) to its sacred source.

After an arduous ministry of forty-five years, at the age of eighty and around the year 483 B.C., the Buddha died from dysentery after eating a meal of dried boar's flesh in the home of Cunda the smith. Even on his deathbed his mind moved toward others. In the midst of his pain, it occurred to him that Cunda might feel responsible for his death. His last request, therefore, was that Cunda be informed that of all the meals he had eaten during his long life, only two stood out as having blessed him exceptionally. One was the meal whose strength had enabled him to reach enlightenment under the Bo Tree, and the other the one that was opening to him the final gates to *nirvana*. This is but one of the deathbed scenes that *The Book of the Great Decease* has preserved. Together they present a picture of a man who passed into the state in which "ideas and consciousness cease to be" without the slightest resistance. Two sentences from his valedictory have echoed through the ages. "All compounded things decay. Work out your own salvation with diligence."

The Silent Sage

To understand Buddhism it is of utmost importance to gain some sense of the impact of Buddha's life on those who came within its orbit.

It is impossible to read the accounts of that life without emerging with the impression that one has been in touch with one of the greatest personalities of all time. The obvious veneration felt by almost all who knew him is contagious, and the reader is soon caught up with his disciples in the sense of being in the presence of something close to wisdom incarnate.

Perhaps the most striking thing about him was his combination of a cool head and a warm heart, a blend that shielded him from sentimentality on the one hand and indifference on the other. He was undoubtedly one of the greatest rationalists of all times, resembling in this respect no one as much as Socrates. Every problem that came his way was automatically subjected to cool, dispassionate analysis. First, it would be dissected into its component parts, after which these would be reassembled in logical, architectonic order with their meaning and import laid bare. He was a master of dialogue and dialectic, and calmly confident. “That in disputation with anyone whomsoever I could be thrown into confusion or embarrassment—there is no possibility of such a thing.”

The remarkable fact, however, was the way this objective, critical component of his character was balanced by a Franciscan tenderness so strong as to have caused his message to be subtitled “a religion of infinite compassion.” Whether he actually risked his life to free a goat that was snagged on a precipitous mountainside may be historically uncertain, but the act would certainly have been in character, for his life was one continuous gift to the famished crowds. Indeed, his self-giving so impressed his biographers that they could explain it only in terms of a momentum that had acquired its trajectory in the animal stages of his incarnations. The *Jataka Tales* have him sacrificing himself for his herd when he was a stag, and hurling himself as a hare into a fire to feed a starving *brahmin*. Dismiss these *post facto* accounts as legends if we must; there is no question but that in his life as the Buddha the springs of tenderness gushed abundant. Wanting to draw the arrows of sorrow from everyone he met, he gave to each his sympathy, his enlightenment, and the strange power of soul, which, even when he did not speak a word, gripped the hearts of his visitors and left them transformed.

Socially, the Buddha’s royal lineage and upbringing were of great advantage. “Fine in presence,” he moved among kings and potentates with ease, for he had been one of them. Yet his poise and sophistication seem not to have distanced him from simple villagers. Surface distinctions of class and caste meant so little to him that he often appears not even to have noticed them. Regardless of how far individuals had fallen or been rejected by society, they received from the Buddha a respect that stemmed from the simple fact that they were fellow human beings. Thus many an outcaste and derelict, encountering for the first time the experience of being understood and accepted, found self-respect emerging and gained status in the community. “The venerable Gautama bids everyone welcome, is congenial, conciliatory, not supercilious, accessible to all.” 4

There was indeed an amazing simplicity about this man before whom kings bowed. Even when his reputation was at its highest he would be seen, begging-bowl in hand, walking through streets and alleys with the patience of one who knows the illusion of time. Like vine and olive, two of the most symbolic plants that grow from the meagerest of soils, his physical needs were minimal. Once at Alavi during the frosts of winter he was found resting in meditation on a few leaves gathered on a cattle path. “Rough is the ground trodden by the hoofs of cattle; thin is the couch; light the monk’s yellow robe; sharp the cutting wind of winter,” he admitted. “Yet I live happily with sublime uniformity.”

It is perhaps inaccurate to speak of Buddha as a modest man. John Hay, who was President Lincoln’s secretary, said it was absurd to call Lincoln modest, adding that “no great human being is modest.” Certainly, the Buddha felt that he had risen to a plane of understanding that was far above that of anyone else in his time. In this respect he simply accepted his superiority and lived in the self-

confidence this acceptance bequeathed. But this is different from vanity or humorless conceit. At the final assembly of one of his *sangha's* (order's) annual retreats, the Exalted One looked round over the silent company and said, "Well, ye disciples, I summon you to say whether you have any fault to find with me, whether in word or in deed." And when a favorite pupil exclaimed, "Such faith have I, Lord, that methinks there never was nor will be nor is now any other greater or wiser than the Blessed One," the Buddha admonished:

"Of course, Sariputta, you have known all the Buddhas of the past."

"No, Lord."

"Well then, you know those of the future?"

"No, Lord."

"Then at least you know me and have penetrated my mind thoroughly?"

"Not even that, Lord."

"Then why, Sariputta, are your words so grand and bold?"

Notwithstanding his own objectivity toward himself, there was constant pressure during his lifetime to turn him into a god. He rebuffed all these categorically, insisting that he was human in every respect. He made no attempt to conceal his temptations and weaknesses—how difficult it had been to attain enlightenment, how narrow the margin by which he had won through, how fallible he still remained. He confessed that if there had been another drive as powerful as sex he would never have made the grade. He admitted that the months when he was first alone in the forest had brought him to the brink of mortal terror. "As I tarried there, a deer came by, a bird caused a twig to fall, and the wind set all the leaves whispering; and I

thought: 'Now it is coming—that fear and terror.'" As Paul Dahlke remarks in his *Buddhist Essays*, "One who thus speaks need not allure with hopes of heavenly joy. One who speaks like this of himself attracts by that power with which the Truth attracts all who enter her domain."

Buddha's leadership was evidenced not only by the size to which his order grew, but equally by the perfection of its discipline. A king visiting one of their assemblies, which was prolonged into a full-moon night, burst out at last, "You are playing me no tricks? How can it be that there should be no sound at all, not a sneeze, nor a cough, in so large an Assembly, among 1,250 of the Brethren?" Watching the Assembly, seated as silent as a clear lake, he added, "Would that my son might have such calm."

Like other spiritual geniuses—one thinks of Jesus spotting Zacchaeus in a tree—the Buddha was gifted with preternatural insight into character. Able to size up, almost at sight, the people who approached him, he seemed never to be taken in by fraud and front but would move at once to what was authentic and genuine. One of the most beautiful instances of this was his encounter with Sunita the flower-scavenger, a man so low in the social scale that the only employment he could find was picking over discarded bouquets to find an occasional blossom that might be bartered to still his hunger. When the Buddha arrived one day at the place where he was sorting through refuse, Sunita's heart was filled with awe and joy. Finding no place to hide—for he was an outcaste—he stood as if stuck to the wall, saluting with clasped hands. The Buddha "marked the conditions of Arahatsip [sainthood] in the heart of Sunita, shining like a lamp within a jar," and drew near, saying, "Sunita, what to you is this wretched mode of living? Can you endure to leave the world?" Sunita, "experiencing the rapture of one who has been sprinkled with

ambrosia, said, 'If such as I may become a monk of yours, may the Exalted One suffer me to come forth!'" He became a renowned member of the order. 5

The Buddha's entire life was saturated with the conviction that he had a cosmic mission to perform. Immediately after his enlightenment he saw in his mind's eye "souls whose eyes were scarcely dimmed by dust and souls whose eyes were sorely dimmed by dust" 6—the whole world of humanity, milling, lost, desperately in need of help and guidance. He had no alternative but to agree with his followers that he had been "born into the world for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, for the advantage, the good, the happiness of gods and men, out of compassion for the world." 7 His acceptance of this mission without regard for personal cost won India's heart as well as her mind. "The monk Gautama has gone forth into the religious life, giving up the great clan of his relatives, giving up much money and gold, treasure both buried and above ground. Truly while he was still a young man without gray hair on his head, in the beauty of his early manhood he went forth from the household life into the homeless state." 8

Encomiums to the Buddha crowd the texts, one reason undoubtedly being that no description ever satisfied his disciples completely. After words had done their best, there remained in their master the essence of mystery—unplumbed depths their language could not express because thought could not fathom them. What they could understand they revered and loved, but there was more than they could hope to exhaust. To the end he remained half light, half shadow, defying complete intelligibility. So they called him Sakyamuni, "silent sage (*muni*) of the Sakya clan," symbol of something beyond what could be said and thought. And they called him Tathagata, the "Thus-come," the "Truth-winner," the "Perfectly Enlightened One," for "he alone

thoroughly knows and sees, face to face, this universe." "Deep is the Tathagata, unmeasurable, difficult to understand, even like the ocean."

The Rebel Saint

In moving from Buddha the man to Buddhism the religion, it is imperative that the latter be seen against the background of the Hinduism out of which it grew. Unlike Hinduism, which emerged by slow, largely imperceptible spiritual accretion, the religion of the Buddha appeared overnight, fully formed. In large measure it was a religion of reaction against Hindu perversions—an Indian protestantism not only in the original meaning of that word, which emphasized witnessing for (*testis pro*) something, but equally in its latter-day connotations, which emphasize protesting against something. Buddhism drew its lifeblood from Hinduism, but against its prevailing corruptions Buddhism recoiled like a whiplash and hit back—hard.

To understand the teachings of the Buddha, then, we shall need a minimal picture of the existing Hinduism that partly provoked it. And to lead into this, several observations about religion are in order.

Six aspects of religion surface so regularly as to suggest that their seeds are in the human makeup. One of these is authority. Leaving divine authority aside and approaching the matter in human terms only, the point begins with specialization. Religion is not less complicated than government or medicine. It stands to reason, therefore, that talent and sustained attention will lift some people above the average in matters of spirit; their advice will be sought and their counsels generally followed. In addition, religion's institutional, organized side calls for administrative bodies and individuals who occupy positions of authority, whose decisions carry weight.

A second normal feature of religion is ritual, which was actually religion's cradle, for anthropologists tell us that people danced out their religion before they thought it out. Religion arose out of celebration and its opposite, bereavement, both of which cry out for collective expression. When we are crushed by loss or when we are exuberant, we want not only to be with people; we want to interact with them in ways that make the interactions more than the sum of their parts—this relieves our isolation. The move is not limited to the human species. In northern Thailand, as the rising sun first touches the treetops, families of gibbons sing half-tone descending scales in unison as, hand over hand, they swoop across the topmost branches.

Religion may begin in ritual, but explanations are soon called for, so speculation enters as a third religious feature. Whence do we come, whither do we go, why are we here?—people want answers to these questions.

A fourth constant in religion is tradition. In human beings it is tradition rather than instinct that conserves what past generations have learned and bequeath to the present as templates for action.

A fifth typical feature of religion is grace, the belief—often difficult to sustain in the face of facts—that Reality is ultimately on our side. In last resort the universe is friendly; we can feel at home in it. “Religion says that the best things are the more eternal things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word.”¹⁰

Finally, religion traffics in mystery. Being finite, the human mind cannot begin to fathom the Infinite it is drawn to.

Each of these six things—authority, ritual, speculation, tradition, grace, and mystery—contributes importantly to religion, but equally

each can clog its works. In the Hinduism of the Buddha's day they had done so, all six of them. Authority, warranted at the start, had become hereditary and exploitative as *brahmins* took to hoarding their religious secrets and charging exorbitantly for ministrations. Rituals became mechanical means for obtaining miraculous results. Speculation had lost its experiential base and devolved into meaningless hair-splitting. Tradition had turned into a dead weight, in one specific by insisting that Sanskrit—no longer understood by the masses—remain the language of religious discourse. God's grace was being misread in ways that undercut human responsibility, if indeed responsibility any longer had meaning where *karma*, likewise misread, was confused with fatalism. Finally, mystery was confused with mystery-mongering and mystification—perverse obsession with miracles, the occult, and the fantastic.

Onto this religious scene—corrupt, degenerate, and irrelevant, matted with superstition and burdened with worn-out rituals—came the Buddha, determined to clear the ground that truth might find new life. The consequence was surprising. For what emerged was (at the start) a religion almost entirely devoid of each of the above-mentioned ingredients without which we would suppose that religion could not take root. This fact is so striking that it warrants being documented.

1. Buddha preached a religion devoid of authority. His attack on authority had two prongs. On the one hand he wanted to break the monopolistic grip of the *brahmins* on religious teachings, and a good part of his reform consisted of no more than making generally accessible what had hitherto been the possession of a few. Contrasting his own openness with the guild secrecy of the *brahmins*, he pointed out that “there is no such thing as closed-fistedness in the Buddha.” So important did he regard this difference that he returned to it on his deathbed to assure those about him: “I have not kept anything

back.” 11 But if his first attack on authority was aimed at an institution—the brahmin caste—his second was directed toward individuals. In a time when the multitudes were passively relying on *brahmins* to tell them what to do, Buddha challenged each individual to do his own religious seeking. “Do not accept what you hear by report, do not accept tradition, do not accept a statement because it is found in our books, nor because it is in accord with your belief, nor because it is the saying of your teacher. Be lamps unto yourselves. Those who, either now or after I am dead, shall rely upon themselves only and not look for assistance to anyone besides themselves, it is they who shall reach the topmost height.” 12

2. Buddha preached a religion devoid of ritual. Repeatedly, he ridiculed the rigmarole of *Brahmanic* rites as superstitious petitions to ineffectual gods. They were trappings—irrelevant to the hard, demanding job of ego-reduction. Indeed, they were worse than irrelevant; he argued that “belief in the efficacy of rites and ceremonies” is one of the Ten Fetters that bind the human spirit. Here, as apparently everywhere, the Buddha was consistent. Discounting Hinduism’s forms, he resisted every temptation to institute new ones of his own, a fact that has led some writers to characterize his teachings (unfairly) as a rational moralism rather than a religion.

3. Buddha preached a religion that skirted speculation. There is ample evidence that he could have been one of the world’s great metaphysicians if he had put his mind to the task. Instead, he skirted “the thicket of theorizing.” His silence on that front did not pass unnoticed. “Whether the world is eternal or not eternal, whether the world is finite or not, whether the soul is the same as the body or whether the soul is one thing and the body another, whether a Buddha exists after death or does not exist after death—these things,” one of his disciples observed, “the Lord does not explain to me. And that he

does not explain them to me does not please me, it does not suit me.” 13 There were many it did not suit. Yet despite incessant needling, he maintained his “noble silence.” His reason was simple. On questions of this sort, “greed for views...tends not to edification.” 14 His practical program was exacting, and he was not going to let his disciples be diverted from the hard road of practice into fields of fruitless speculation.

His famous parable of the arrow smeared thickly with poison puts the point with precision.

It is as if a man had been wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and kinsmen were to get a surgeon to heal him, and he were to say, I will not have this arrow pulled out until I know by what man I was wounded, whether he is of the warrior caste, or a brahmin, or of the agricultural or the lowest caste. Or if he were to say, I will not have this arrow pulled out until I know of what name of family the man is;—or whether he is tall, or short, or of middle height; or whether he is black, or dark, or yellowish; or whether he comes from such and such a village, or town, or city; or until I know whether the bow with which I was wounded was a chapa or a kodanda, or until I know whether the bow-string was of swallow-wort, or bamboo fiber, or sinew, or hemp, or of milk-sap tree, or until I know whether the shaft was from a wild or cultivated plant; or whether it was feathered from a vulture’s wing or a heron’s or a hawk’s, or a peacock’s; or whether it was wrapped round with the sinew of an ox, or of a buffalo, or of a ruru-deer, or of a monkey; or until I know whether it was an ordinary arrow, or a razor-arrow, or an iron arrow, or of a calf-tooth arrow. Before knowing all this, that man would die.

Similarly, it is not on the view that the world is eternal, that it is finite, that body and soul are distinct, or that the Buddha exists after death, that a religious life depends. Whether these views or their opposites

are held, there is still rebirth, there is old age, there is death, and grief, lamentation, suffering, sorrow, and despair.... I have not spoken to these views because they do not conduce to absence of passion, or to tranquillity and Nirvana.

And what have I explained? Suffering have I explained, the cause of suffering, the destruction of suffering, and the path that leads to the destruction of suffering have I explained. For this is useful.

4. Buddha preached a religion devoid of tradition. He stood on top of the past and its peaks extended his vision enormously, but he saw his contemporaries as largely buried beneath those peaks. He encouraged his followers, therefore, to slip free from the past's burden. "Do not go by what is handed down, nor on the authority of your traditional teachings. When you know of yourselves: 'These teachings are not good: these teachings when followed out and put in practice conduce to loss and suffering'—then reject them." His most important personal break with archaism lay in his decision—comparable to Martin Luther's decision to translate the Bible from Latin into German—to quit Sanskrit and teach in the vernacular of the people.

5. Buddha preached a religion of intense self-effort. We have noted the discouragement and defeat that had settled over the India of Buddha's day. Many had come to accept the round of birth and rebirth as unending, which was like resigning oneself to a nightmarish sentence to hard labor for eternity. Those who still clung to the hope of eventual release had resigned themselves to the brahmin-sponsored notion that the process would take thousands of lifetimes, during which they would gradually work their way into the brahmin caste as the only one from which release was possible.

Nothing struck the Buddha as more pernicious than this prevailing fatalism. He denies only one assertion, that of the "fools" who say

there is no action, no deed, no power. "Here is a path to the end of suffering. Tread it!" Moreover, every individual must tread this path himself or herself, through self-arousal and initiative. "Those who, relying upon themselves only, shall not look for assistance to any one besides themselves, it is they who, shall reach the topmost height." No god or gods could be counted on, not even the Buddha himself. When I am gone, he told his followers in effect, do not bother to pray to me; for when I am gone I will be really gone. "Buddhas only point the way. Work out your salvation with diligence." The notion that only *brahmins* could attain enlightenment the Buddha considered ridiculous. Whatever your caste, he told his followers, you can make it in this very lifetime. "Let persons of intelligence come to me, honest, candid, straightforward; I will instruct them, and if they practice as they are taught, they will come to know for themselves and to realize that supreme religion and goal."

6. Buddha preached a religion devoid of the supernatural. He condemned all forms of divination, soothsaying, and forecasting as low arts, and, though he concluded from his own experience that the human mind was capable of powers now referred to as paranormal, he refused to allow his monks to play around with those powers. "By this you shall know that a man is *not* my disciple—that he tries to work a miracle." For all appeal to the supernatural and reliance on it amounted, he felt, to looking for shortcuts, easy answers, and simple solutions that could only divert attention from the hard, practical task of self-advance. "It is because I perceive danger in the practice of mystic wonders that I strongly discourage it."

Whether the Buddha's religion—without authority, ritual, theology, tradition, grace, and the supernatural—was also a religion without God will be reserved for later consideration. After his death all the accoutrements that the Buddha labored to protect his religion from

came tumbling into it, but as long as he lived he kept them at bay. As a consequence original Buddhism presents us with a version of religion that is unique and therefore historically invaluable, for every insight into the forms that religion can take increases our understanding of what in essence religion really is. Original Buddhism can be characterized in the following terms:

1. It was empirical. Never has a religion presented its case with such unequivocal appeal to direct validation. On every question personal experience was the final test of truth. “Do not go by reasoning, nor by inferring, nor by argument.” A true disciple must “know for himself.”

2. It was scientific. It made the quality of lived experience its final test, and directed its attention to discovering cause-and-effect relationships that affected that experience. “That being present, this becomes; that not being present, this does not become.” There is no effect without its cause.

3. It was pragmatic—a transcendental pragmatism if one wishes, to distinguish it from the kind that focuses on practical problems in everyday life, but pragmatic all the same in being concerned with problem solving. Refusing to be sidetracked by speculative questions, Buddha kept his attention riveted on predicaments that demanded solution. Unless his teachings were useful tools, they had no value whatsoever. He likened them to rafts; they help people cross streams, but are of no further value once the further shore is reached.

4. It was therapeutic. Pasteur’s words, “I do not ask you either your opinions or your religion; but what is your suffering?” could equally have been his. “One thing I teach,” said the Buddha: “suffering and the end of suffering. It is just Ill and the ceasing of Ill that I proclaim.”

5. It was psychological. The word is used here in contrast to metaphysical. Instead of beginning with the universe and moving to the place of human beings within it, the Buddha invariably began with the human lot, its problems, and the dynamics of coping with them.

6. It was egalitarian. With a breadth of view unparalleled in his age and infrequent in any, he insisted that women were as capable of enlightenment as men. And he rejected the caste system’s assumption that aptitudes were hereditary. Born a *kshatriya* (warrior, ruler) yet finding himself temperamentally a brahmin, he broke caste, opening his order to all regardless of social status.

7. It was directed to individuals. Buddha was not blind to the social side of human nature; he not only founded a religious order (*sangha*)—he insisted on its importance in reinforcing individual resolves. Yet in the end his appeal was to the individual, that each should proceed toward enlightenment through confronting his or her individual situation and predicaments.

Therefore, O Ananda, be lamps unto yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast as a refuge to the Truth. Work out your own salvation with diligence.

The Four Noble Truths

When the Buddha finally managed to break through the spell of rapture that rooted him to the Immovable Spot for the forty-nine days of his enlightenment, he arose and began a walk of over one hundred miles toward India’s holy city of Banaras. Six miles short of that city, in a deer park at Sarnath, he stopped to preach his first sermon. The congregation was small—only five ascetics who had shared his severe austerities but had broken with him in anger when he renounced that approach, only to have now become his first disciples. His subject was

the Four Noble Truths. His first formal discourse after his awakening, it was a declaration of the key discoveries that had come to him as the climax of his six-year quest.

Asked to list in propositional form their four most considered convictions about life, most people would probably stammer. The Four Noble Truths constitute Buddha's answer to that request. Together they stand as the axioms of his system, the postulates from which the rest of his teachings logically derive.

The First Noble Truth is that life is *dukkha*, usually translated "suffering." Though far from its total meaning, suffering is an important part of that meaning and should be brought to focus before proceeding to other connotations.

Contrary to the view of early Western interpreters, the Buddha's philosophy was not pessimistic. A report of the human scene can be as grim as one pleases; the question of pessimism does not arise until we are told whether it can be improved. Because the Buddha was certain that it could be, his outlook falls within Heinrich Zimmer's observation that "everything in Indian thought supports the basic insight that, fundamentally, all is well. A supreme optimism prevails everywhere." But the Buddha saw clearly that life as typically lived is unfulfilling and filled with insecurity.

He did not doubt that it is possible to have a good time and that having a good time is enjoyable, but two questions obtruded. First, how much of life is thus enjoyable. And second, at what level of our being does such enjoyment proceed. Buddha thought the level was superficial, sufficient perhaps for animals but leaving deep regions of the human psyche empty and wanting. By this understanding even pleasure is gilded pain. "Earth's sweetest joy is but disguised pain," William Drummond wrote, while Shelley speaks of "that unrest which men

miscall delight." Beneath the neon dazzle is darkness; at the core—not of reality but of unregenerated human life—is the "quiet desperation" Thoreau saw in most peoples' lives. That is why we seek distractions, for distractions divert us from what lies beneath the surface. Some may be able to distract themselves for long periods, but the darkness is unrelieved.

Lo! as the wind is, so is mortal life:

A moan, a sigh, a sob, a storm, a strife.

That such an estimate of life's usual condition is prompted more by realism than by morbidity is suggested by the extent to which thinkers of every stripe have shared it. Existentialists describe life as a "useless passion," "absurd," "too much (de trop)." Bertrand Russell, a scientific humanist, found it difficult to see why people should take unhappily to news that the universe is running down, inasmuch as "I do not see how an unpleasant process can be made less so [by being] indefinitely repeated." Poetry, always a sensitive barometer, speaks of "the pitiful confusion of life" and "time's slow contraction on the most hopeful heart." The Buddha never went further than Robert Penn Warren:

Oh, it is real. It is the only real thing.

Pain. So let us name the truth, like men.

We are born to joy that joy may become pain.

We are born to hope that hope may become pain.

We are born to love that love may become pain.

We are born to pain that pain may become more

Pain, and from that inexhaustible superflux

We may give others pain as our prime definition. 24

Even Albert Schweitzer, who considered India pessimistic, echoed the Buddha's appraisal almost to idiom when he wrote, "Only at quite rare moments have I felt really glad to be alive. I could not but feel with a sympathy full of regret all the pain that I saw around me, not only that of men, but of the whole creation."

Dukkha, then, names the pain that to some degree colors all finite existence. The word's constructive implications come to light when we discover that it was used in Pali to refer to wheels whose axles were off-center, or bones that had slipped from their sockets. (A modern metaphor might be a shopping cart we try to steer from the wrong end.) The exact meaning of the First Noble Truth is this: Life (in the condition it has got itself into) is dislocated. Something has gone wrong. It is out of joint. As its pivot is not true, friction (interpersonal conflict) is excessive, movement (creativity) is blocked, and it hurts.

Having an analytical mind, the Buddha was not content to leave this First Truth in this generalized form. He went on to pinpoint six moments when life's dislocation becomes glaringly apparent. Rich or poor, average or gifted, all human beings experience:

1. The trauma of birth. Psychoanalysts have in our time made a great deal of this point. Though Freud came to deny that the birth trauma was the source of all later anxiety, to the end he considered it anxiety's prototype. The birth experience "involves just such a concatenation of painful feelings, of discharges and excitation, and of bodily sensations, as have become a prototype for all occasions on which life is

endangered, ever after to be reproduced again in us as the dread of 'anxiety' conditions."

2. The pathology of sickness.

3. The morbidity of decrepitude. In the early years sheer physical vitality joins with life's novelty to render life almost automatically good. In later years the fears arrive: fear of financial dependence; fear of being unloved and unwanted; fear of protracted illness and pain; fear of being physically repulsive and dependent on others; fear of seeing one's life as a failure in some important respect.

4. The phobia of death. On the basis of years of clinical practice, Carl Jung reported that he found death to be the deepest terror in every patient he had analyzed who had passed the age of forty. Existentialists join him in calling attention to the extent to which the fear of death mars healthy living.

5. To be tied to what one dislikes. Sometimes it is possible to break away, but not always. An incurable disease, a stubborn character defect—for better or for worse there are martyrdoms to which people are chained for life.

6. To be separated from what one loves.

No one denies that the shoe of life pinches in these six places. The First Noble Truth pulls them together by concluding that the five *skandas* (life components) are painful. As these *skandas* are body, sensations, thoughts, feelings, and consciousness—in short, the sum of what we generally consider life to be—the statement amounts to the assertion that the whole of human life (again, as usually lived) is suffering. Somehow life has become estranged from reality, and this estrangement precludes real happiness until it is overcome.

For the rift to be healed we need to know its cause, and the Second Noble Truth identifies it. The cause of life's dislocation is *tanha*. Again imprecisions of translations—all are to some degree dishonest—make it wise to stay close to the original word. *Tanha* is usually translated as “desire.” There is some truth in this—the kind we encounter in *Heartbreak House* when George Bernard Shaw has Ellie exclaim, “I feel now as if there was nothing I could not do, because I want nothing,” which assertion moves Captain Shotover to his one enthusiasm in the play: “That's the only real strength. That's genius. That's better than rum.” But if we try to make desire *tanha*'s equivalent, we run into difficulties. To begin with, the equivalence would make this Second Truth unhelpful, for to shut down desires, all desires, in our present state would be to die, and to die is not to solve life's problem. But beyond being unhelpful, the claim of equivalence would be flatly wrong, for there are some desires the Buddha explicitly advocated—the desire for liberation, for example, or for the happiness of others.

Tanha is a specific kind of desire, the desire for private fulfillment. When we are selfless we are free, but that is precisely the difficulty—to maintain that state. *Tanha* is the force that ruptures it, pulling us back from the freedom of the all to seek fulfillment in our egos, which ooze like secret sores. *Tanha* consists of all “those inclinations which tend to continue or increase separateness, the separate existence of the subject of desire; in fact, all forms of selfishness, the essence of which is desire for self at the expense, if necessary, of all other forms of life. Life being one, all that tends to separate one aspect from another must cause suffering to the unit which even unconsciously works against the Law. Our duty to our fellows is to understand them as extensions, other aspects, of ourselves—fellow facets of the same Reality.”

This is some distance from the way people normally understand their neighbors. The customary human outlook lies a good halfway toward Ibsen's description of a lunatic asylum in which “each shuts himself in a cask of self, the cask stopped with a bung of self and seasoned in a well of self.” Given a group photograph, whose face does one scan for first? It is a small but telling symptom of the devouring cancer that causes sorrow. Where is the man who is as concerned that no one go hungry as that his own children be fed? Where is the woman who is as concerned that the standard of living for the entire world rise, as that her own salary be raised? Here, said the Buddha, is where the trouble lies; this is why we suffer. Instead of linking our faith and love and destiny to the whole, we persist in strapping these to the puny burros of our separate selves, which are certain to stumble and give out eventually. Coddling our individual identities, we lock ourselves inside “our skin-encapsulated egos” (Alan Watts), and seek fulfillment through their intensification and expanse. Fools to suppose that imprisonment can bring release! Can we not see that “'tis the self by which we suffer”? Far from being the door to abundant life, the ego is a strangulated hernia. The more it swells, the tighter it shuts off the free-flowing circulation on which health depends, and the more pain increases.

The Third Noble Truth follows logically from the Second. If the cause of life's dislocation is selfish craving, its cure lies in the overcoming of such craving. If we could be released from the narrow limits of self-interest into the vast expanse of universal life, we would be relieved of our torment. The Fourth Noble Truth prescribes how the cure can be accomplished. The overcoming of *tanha*, the way out of our captivity, is through the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path

The Buddha's approach to the problem of life in the Four Noble Truths was essentially that of a physician. He began by examining carefully the symptoms that provoke concern. If everything were going smoothly, so smoothly that we noticed ourselves as little as we normally notice our digestion, there would be nothing to worry about and we would have to attend no further to our way of life. But this is not the case. There is less creativity, more conflict, and more pain than we feel there should be. These symptoms the Buddha summarized in the First Noble Truth, with the declaration that life is *dukkha*, or out of joint. The next step was diagnosis. Throwing rites and faith to the winds, he asked, practically, what is causing these abnormal symptoms? Where is the seat of the infection? What is always present when suffering is present, and absent when suffering is absent? The answer was given in the Second Noble Truth: the cause of life's dislocation is *tanha*, or the drive for private fulfillment. What, then, of the prognosis? The Third Noble Truth is hopeful: the disease can be cured by overcoming the egoistic drive for separate existence. This brings us to prescription; how is this overcoming to be accomplished? The Fourth Noble Truth provides the answer. The way to the overcoming of self-seeking is through the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path, then, is a course of treatment. But it is not an external treatment, to be accepted passively by the patient as coming from without. It is not treatment by pills, or rituals, or grace. Instead, it is treatment by training. People routinely train for sports and their professions, but with notable exceptions like Benjamin Franklin, they are inclined to assume that one cannot train for life itself. The Buddha disagreed. He distinguished two ways of living. One—a random, unreflective way, in which the subject is pushed and pulled by impulse

and circumstance like a twig in a storm drain—he called “wandering about.” The second, the way of intentional living, he called the Path. What he proposed was a series of changes designed to release the individual from ignorance, unwitting impulse, and *tanha*. It maps a complete course; steep grades and dangerous curves are posted, and rest spots indicated. By long and patient discipline, the Eightfold Path intends nothing less than to pick one up where one is and set one down as a different human being, one who has been cured of crippling disabilities. “Happiness he who seeks may win,” the Buddha said, “if he practice.”

What is this practice the Buddha is talking about? He breaks it down into eight steps. They are preceded, however, by a preliminary he does not include in his list, but refers to so often elsewhere that we may assume that he was presupposing it here. This preliminary step is right association. No one has recognized more clearly than the Buddha the extent to which we are social animals, influenced at every turn by the “companioned example” of our associates, whose attitudes and values affect us profoundly. Asked how one attains illumination, the Buddha began: “An arouser of faith appears in the world. One associates oneself with such a person.” Other injunctions follow, but right association is so basic that it warrants another paragraph.

When a wild elephant is to be tamed and trained, the best way to begin is by yoking it to one that has already been through the process. By contact, the wild one comes to see that the condition it is being led toward is not wholly incompatible with being an elephant—that what is expected of it does not contradict its nature categorically and heralds a condition that, though startlingly different, is viable. The constant, immediate, and contagious example of its yoke-fellow can teach it as nothing else can. Training for the life of the spirit is not different. The transformation facing the untrained is neither smaller

than the elephant's nor less demanding. Without visible evidence that success is possible, without a continuous transfusion of courage, discouragement is bound to set in. If (as scientific studies have now shown) anxieties are absorbed from one's associates, may not persistence be assimilated equally? Robert Ingersoll once remarked that had he been God he would have made health contagious instead of disease; to which an Indian contemporary responded: "When shall we come to recognize that health *is* as contagious as disease, virtue as contagious as vice, cheerfulness as contagious as moroseness?" One of the three things for which we should give thanks every day, according to Shankara, is the company of the holy; for as bees cannot make honey unless together, human beings cannot make progress on the Way unless they are supported by a field of confidence and concern that Truthwinners generate. The Buddha agrees. We should associate with Truthwinners, converse with them, serve them, observe their ways, and imbibe by osmosis their spirit of love and compassion.

With this preliminary step in place we may proceed to the Path's eight steps proper.

1. **Right Views.** A way of life always involves more than beliefs, but it can never bypass them completely, for in addition to being social animals, as was just noted, human beings are also rational animals. Not entirely, to be sure—the Buddha would have been quick to acknowledge this. But life needs some blueprint, some map the mind can trust if we are to direct our energies purposively. To return to the elephant for illustration, however great the danger in which it finds itself, it will make no move to escape until it has first assured itself that the track it must tread will bear its weight. Without this conviction it will remain trumpeting in agony in a burning wagon rather than risk a fall. Reason's most vociferous detractors must admit that it plays at least this much of a role in human life. Whether or not it has the power

to lure, it clearly holds power of veto. Until reason is satisfied, an individual cannot proceed in any direction wholeheartedly.

Some intellectual orientation, therefore, is needed if one is to set out other than haphazardly. The Four Noble Truths provide this orientation. Suffering abounds, it is occasioned by the drive for private fulfillment, that drive can be tempered, and the way to temper it is by traveling the Eightfold Path.

2. **Right Intent.** Whereas the first step summoned us to make up our minds as to what life's problem basically is, the second advises us to make up our hearts as to what we really want. Is it really enlightenment, or do our affections swing this way and that, dipping like kites with every current of distraction? If we are to make appreciable headway, persistence is indispensable. People who achieve greatness are almost invariably passionately invested in some one thing. They do a thousand things each day, but behind these stands the one thing they count supreme. When people seek liberation with single-mindedness of this order, they may expect their steps to turn from sliding sandbank scrambles into ground-gripping strides.

3. **Right Speech.** In the next three steps we take hold of the switches that control our lives, beginning with attention to language. Our first task is to become aware of our speech and what it reveals about our character. Instead of starting with a resolve to speak nothing but the truth—one that is likely to prove ineffective at the outset because it is too advanced—we will do well to start further back, with a resolve to notice how many times during the day we deviate from the truth, and to follow this up by asking why we did so. Similarly with uncharitable speech. Begin not by resolving never to speak an unkind word, but by watching one's speech to become aware of the motives that prompt unkindness.

After this first step has been reasonably mastered, we will be ready to try some changes. The ground will have been prepared, for once we become aware of how we do talk, the need for changes will become evident. In what directions should the changes proceed? First, toward veracity. The Buddha approached truth more ontologically than morally; he considered deceit more foolish than evil. It is foolish because it reduces one's being. For why do we deceive? Behind the rationalizations, the motive is almost always fear of revealing to others or to ourselves what we really are. Each time we give in to this "protective tariff," the walls of our egos thicken to further imprison us. To expect that we can dispense with our defenses at a stroke would be unrealistic, but it is possible to become progressively aware of them and recognize the ways in which they hem us in.

The second direction in which our speech should move is toward charity. False witness, idle chatter, gossip, slander, and abuse are to be avoided, not only in their obvious forms but also in their covert ones. The covert forms—subtle belittling, "accidental" tactlessness, barbed wit—are often more vicious because their animus is veiled.

4. **Right Conduct.** Here, too, the admonition (as the Buddha detailed it in his later discourses) involves a call to understand one's behavior more objectively before trying to improve it. The trainee is to reflect on actions with an eye to the motives that prompted them. How much generosity was involved, and how much self-seeking? As for the direction in which change should proceed, the counsel is again toward selflessness and charity. These general directives are detailed in the Five Precepts, the Buddhist version of the second or ethical half of the Ten Commandments:

Do not kill. Strict Buddhists extend this proscription to animals and are vegetarians.

Do not steal.

Do not lie.

Do not be unchaste. For monks and the unmarried, this means continence. For the married it means restraint in proportion to one's interests in, and distance along, the Path.

Do not drink intoxicants. It is reported that an early Russian Czar, faced with the decision as to whether to choose Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism for his people, rejected the latter two because both included this fifth proscription.

5. **Right Livelihood.** The word "occupation" is well devised, for our work does indeed occupy most of our waking attention. Buddha considered spiritual progress to be impossible if the bulk of one's doings pull against it: "The hand of the dyer is subdued by the dye in which it works." Christianity has agreed. While explicitly including the hangman as a role society regrettably requires, Martin Luther disallowed usurers and speculators.

For those who are intent enough on liberation to give their entire lives to the project, right livelihood requires joining the monastic order and subscribing to its discipline. For the layperson it calls for engaging in occupations that promote life instead of destroying it. Again the Buddha was not content with generalizing. He named names—the professions of his day he considered incompatible with spiritual seriousness. Some of these are obvious: poison peddler, slave trader, prostitute. Others if adopted worldwide would be revolutionary: butcher, brewer, arms maker, tax collector (profiteering was then routine). One of the number continues to be puzzling. Why did the Buddha condemn the occupation of caravan trader?

While the Buddha's explicit teachings about work were aimed at helping his contemporaries decide between occupations that were conducive to spiritual progress and ones that impeded it, there are Buddhists who suggest that if he were teaching today he would be less concerned with specifics than with the danger that people forget that earning a living is life's means, not life's end.

6. **Right Effort.** The Buddha laid tremendous stress on the will. Reaching the goal requires immense exertion; there are virtues to be developed, passions to be curbed, and destructive mind states to be expunged so compassion and detachment can have a chance. "He robbed me, he beat me, he abused me"—in the minds of those who think like this, hatred will never cease." But the only way such crippling sentiments can be dispelled, indeed the only way to shake off fetters of any sort, is by what William James called "the slow dull heave of the will." "Those who follow the Way," said Buddha, "might well follow the example of an ox that marches through the deep mire carrying a heavy load. He is tired, but his steady gaze, looking forward, will never relax until he comes out of the mire, and it is only then he takes a respite. O monks, remember that passion and sin are more than the filthy mire, and that you can escape misery only by earnestly and steadily thinking of the Way." 27 Velleity—a low level of volition, a mere wish not accompanied by effort or action to obtain it—won't do.

In discussing right effort, the Buddha later added some after-thoughts about timing. Inexperienced climbers, out to conquer their first major peak, are often impatient with the seemingly absurd saunter at which their veteran guide sets out, but before the day is over his staying pace is vindicated. The Buddha had more confidence in the steady pull than in the quick spurt. Stretched too taut, a string will snap; a plane that ascends too sharply will crash. In China the author of the *Tao Te Ching*

made the point with a different image: "He who takes the longest strides does not walk farthest."

Because the West has found the last two steps in the Eightfold Path of special importance for the understanding of the human mind and its workings—there are several meditation centers in the United States, catering disproportionately to mental health professionals, that are dedicated exclusively to their practice—these will be discussed at greater length.

7. **Right Mindfulness.** No teacher has credited the mind with more influence over life than did the Buddha. The best loved of all Buddhist texts, the *Dhammapada*, opens with the words, "All we are is the result of what we have thought." And respecting the future, it assures us that "all things can be mastered by mindfulness." 28

Among Western philosophers, Spinoza stands closest to the Buddha on the mind's potential. Spinoza's dictum—"to understand something is to be delivered of it"—comes close to summarizing his entire ethic. The Buddha would have agreed. If we could really understand life, if we could really understand ourselves, we would find neither a problem. Humanistic psychology proceeds on the same assumption. When "awareness of experience is fully operating," Carl Rogers writes, "human behavior is to be trusted, for in these moments the human organism becomes aware of its delicacy and tenderness towards others." The Buddha saw ignorance, not sin, as the offender. More precisely, insofar as sin is our fault, it is prompted by a more fundamental ignorance—most specifically, the ignorance of our true nature.

To gradually overcome this ignorance, the Buddha counsels such continuous self-examination as to make us wilt (almost) at the prospect, but he thought it necessary because he believed that freedom

—liberation from unconscious, robot-like existence—is achieved by self-awareness. To this end he insisted that we seek to understand ourselves in depth, seeing everything minutely, “as it really is.” If we maintain a steady attention to our thoughts and feelings, we perceive that they swim in and out of our awareness, and are in no way permanent parts of us. We should witness all things non-reactively, especially our moods and emotions, neither condemning some nor holding on to others. A miscellany of other practices are recommended, some of which are these: The aspirant is to keep the mind in control of the senses and impulses, rather than being driven by them. Fearful and disgusting sights are to be meditated on until one no longer experiences aversion toward them. The entire world should be pervaded with thoughts of loving-kindness.

Out of the semi-alertness that comprises the consciousness of the average human being, this seventh step summons the seeker to steady awareness of every action that is taken, and every content that turns up in one’s stream of consciousness. The adept becomes aware of the moment when sleep takes over, and whether breath was coming in or going out at that moment. Obviously, this takes practice. In addition to working at it continuously to some extent, special times should be allotted for undistracted introspection. Periods of complete withdrawal for the purpose must also be built into one’s schedule.

Here is a Western observer’s description of monks in Thailand practicing this seventh step:

One of them spends hours each day slowly walking about the grounds of the wat in absolute concentration upon the minutest fraction of every action connected with each step. The procedure is carried into every single physical act of daily life until, theoretically, the conscious mind can follow every step that goes into the generation of a feeling, perception or thought. A fifty-

year-old monk meditates in a small graveyard adjoining his wat, because he’s undisturbed there. He seats himself, cross-legged and immobile but with his eyes open, for hours on end—through the driving rain at midnight or the blistering heat of noonday. His usual length of stay is two or three hours.

Through this practice one arrives at a number of insights: (1) Every emotion, thought, or image is accompanied by a body sensation, and vice versa. (2) One discerns obsessive patterns in what arises in one’s mind and how these patterns constitute our misery (*dukkha*). For some it is a nursing of old grievances; others find themselves preoccupied with longings and self-pity, and still others simply feel at sea. With continuing practice the obsessive grip of these patterns loosens. (3) Every mental and physical state is in flux; none is solid and enduring. Even physical pain is a series of discrete sensations that can suddenly change. (4) The meditator realizes how little control we have over our minds and our physical sensations, and how little awareness we normally have of our reactions. (5) Most important, one begins to realize that there is nobody *behind* the mental/physical events, orchestrating them. When the capacity for microscopic attention is refined, it becomes apparent that consciousness itself is not continuous. Like the light from a light bulb, the on/off is so rapid that consciousness seems to be steady, whereas in fact it is not. With these insights, the belief in a separate self-existent self begins to dissolve.

8. Right Concentration. This involves substantially the techniques we have already encountered in Hinduism’s *raja yoga* and leads to substantially the same goal.

In his later years the Buddha told his disciples that his first intimations of deliverance came to him before he left home when, still a boy and

sitting one day in the cool shade of an apple tree in deep thought, he found himself caught up into what he later identified as the first level of the absorptions. It was his first faint foretaste of deliverance, and he said to himself, "This is the way to enlightenment." It was nostalgia for the return and deepening of this experience, as much as his disillusionment with the usual rewards of worldly life, that led him to his decision to devote his life completely to spiritual adventure. The result, as we have seen, was not simply a new philosophy of life. It was regeneration: change into a different kind of creature, who experienced the world in a new way. Unless we see this, we shall be unequipped to fathom the power of Buddhism in human history. Something happened to the Buddha under that Bo Tree, and something has happened to every Buddhist since who has persevered to the final step of the Eightfold Path. Like a camera, the mind had been poorly focused, but the adjustment has now been made. With the "extirpation of delusion, craving, and hostility," the three poisons, we see that things were not as we had supposed. Indeed, suppositions of whatsoever sort have vanished, to be replaced by direct perception. The mind reposes in its true condition.

Basic Buddhist Concepts

The Buddha's total outlook on life is as difficult to be certain of as that of any personage in history. Part of the problem stems from the fact that, like most ancient teachers, he wrote nothing. There is a gap of almost a century and a half between his spoken words and the first written records, and though memory in those times appears to have been incredibly faithful, a gap of that length is certain to raise questions. A second problem arises from the wealth of material in the texts themselves. Buddha taught for forty-five years, and a staggering corpus has come down to us in one form or another. While the net result is doubtless a blessing, the sheer quantity of materials is

bewildering; for though his teachings remained remarkably consistent over the years, it was impossible to say things for many minds and in many ways without creating problems of interpretation. These interpretations constitute the third barrier. By the time texts began to appear, partisan schools had sprung up, some intent on minimizing the Buddha's break with Brahmanic Hinduism, others intent on sharpening it. This makes scholars wonder how much in what they are reading is the Buddha's actual thought and how much is partisan interpolation.

Undoubtedly, the most serious obstacle to the recovery of the Buddha's rounded philosophy, however, is his own silence at crucial points. We have seen that his burning concerns were practical and therapeutic, not speculative and theoretical. Instead of debating cosmologies, he wanted to introduce people to a different kind of life. It would be wrong to say that theory did not interest him. His dialogues show that he analyzed certain abstract problems meticulously; that he possessed, indeed, a brilliant metaphysical mind. It was on principle that he resisted philosophy, as someone with a sense of mission might shun hobbies as a waste of time.

His decision makes so much sense that it may seem a betrayal to insert a section like this one, which tries forthrightly to identify—and to some extent define—certain key notions in the Buddha's outlook. In the end, however, the task is unavoidable for the simple reason that metaphysics is unavoidable. Everyone harbors some notions about ultimate questions, and these notions affect interpretations of subsidiary issues. The Buddha was no exception. He refused to initiate philosophical discussions, and only occasionally did he let himself be pried from his "noble silence" to engage in them, but certainly he had views. No one who wishes to understand him can escape the hazardous task of trying to discover what they were.

We may begin with *nirvana*, the word the Buddha used to name life's goal as he saw it. Etymologically it means "to blow out," or "to extinguish," not transitively, but as a fire ceases to draw. Deprived of fuel, the fire goes out, and this is *nirvana*. From such imagery it has been widely supposed that the extinction to which Buddhism points is complete, total annihilation. If this were so there would be grounds for the accusation that Buddhism is life-denying and pessimistic. As it is, scholars of the last half-century have exploded this view. *Nirvana* is the highest destiny of the human spirit and its literal meaning is extinction, but we must be precise as to what is to be extinguished. It is the boundaries of the finite self. It does not follow that what is left will be nothing. Negatively, *nirvana* is the state in which the faggots of private desire have been completely consumed and everything that restricts the boundless life has died. Affirmatively, it is that boundless life itself. Buddha parried every request for a positive description of the unconditioned, insisting that it was "incomprehensible, indescribable, inconceivable, unutterable"; for after we eliminate every aspect of the only consciousness we have known, how can we speak of what is left? 30 One of Buddha's heirs, Nagasena, preserves this point in the following dialogue. Asked what *nirvana* is like, Nagasena countered with a question of his own:

"Is there such a thing as wind?"

"Yes, revered sir."

"Please, sir, show the wind by its color or configuration or as thin or thick or long or short."

"But it is not possible, revered Nagasena, for the wind to be shown; for the wind cannot be grasped in the hand or touched; yet wind exists."

"If, sir, it is not possible for the wind to be shown, well then, there is no wind."

"I, revered Nagasena, know that there is wind; I am convinced of it, but I am not able to show the wind."

"Even so, sir, nirvana exists; but it is not possible to show nirvana." 31

Our final ignorance is to imagine that our final destiny is conceivable. All we can know is that it is a condition that is beyond—beyond the limitations of mind, thoughts, feelings, and will, all these (not to mention bodily things) being confinements. The Buddha would venture only one affirmative characterization. "Bliss, yes bliss, my friends, is *nirvana*."

Is *nirvana* God? When answered in the negative, this question has led to opposite conclusions. Some conclude that since Buddhism professes no God, it cannot be a religion; others, that since Buddhism obviously is a religion, religion doesn't require God. The dispute requires that we take a quick look at what the word "God" means.

Its meaning is not single, much less simple. Two meanings must be distinguished for its place in Buddhism to be understood.

One meaning of God is that of a personal being who created the universe by deliberate design. Defined in this sense, *nirvana* is not God. The Buddha did not consider it personal because personality requires definition, which *nirvana* excludes. And while he did not expressly deny creation, he clearly exempted *nirvana* from responsibility for it. If absence of a personal Creator-God is atheism, Buddhism is atheistic.

There is a second meaning of God, however, which (to distinguish it from the first) has been called the Godhead. The idea of personality is not part of this concept, which appears in mystical traditions throughout the world. When the Buddha declared, “There is, O monks, an Unborn, neither become nor created nor formed.... Were there not, there would be no deliverance from the formed, the made, the compounded,” he seemed to be speaking in this tradition. Impressed by similarities between *nirvana* and the Godhead, Edward Conze has compiled from Buddhist texts a series of attributes that apply to both. We are told that

Nirvana is permanent, stable, imperishable, immovable, ageless, deathless, unborn, and unbecome, that it is power, bliss and happiness, the secure refuge, the shelter, and the place of unassailable safety; that it is the real Truth and the supreme Reality; that it is the Good, the supreme goal and the one and only consummation of our life, the eternal, hidden and incomprehensible Peace.

We may conclude with Conze that *nirvana* is not God defined as personal creator, but that it stands sufficiently close to the concept of God as Godhead to warrant the name in that sense.

The most startling thing the Buddha said about the human self is that it has no soul. This *anatta* (no soul) doctrine has again caused Buddhism to seem religiously peculiar. But again the word must be examined. What was the *atta* (Pali for the Sanskrit *Atman* or soul) that the Buddha denied? At the time it had come to signify (a) a spiritual substance that, in keeping with the dualistic position in Hinduism, (b) retains its separate identity forever.

Buddha denied both these features. His denial of spiritual substance—the soul as homunculus, a ghostly wraith within the body that animates

the body and outlasts it—appears to have been the chief point that distinguished his concept of transmigration from prevailing Hindu interpretations. Authentic child of India, the Buddha did not doubt that reincarnation was in some sense a fact, but he was openly critical of the way his *Brahmanic* contemporaries interpreted the concept. The crux of his criticism may be gathered from the clearest description he gave of his own view on the subject. He used the image of a flame being passed from candle to candle. As it is difficult to think of the flame on the final candle as being the original flame, the connection would seem to be a causal one, in which influence was transmitted by chain reaction but without a perduring substance.

When to this image of the flame we add the Buddha’s acceptance of *karma*, we have the gist of what he said about transmigration. A summary of his position would run something like this: (1) There is a chain of causation threading each life to those that have led up to it, and to those that will follow. Each life is in its present condition because of the way the lives that led up to it were lived. (2) Throughout this causal sequence the will remains free. The lawfulness of things makes the present state the product of prior acts, but within the present the will is influenced but not controlled. People remain at liberty to shape their destinies. (3) The two preceding points affirm the causal connectedness of life, but they do not entail that a substance of some sort be transmitted. Ideas, impressions, feelings, streams of consciousness, present moments—these are all that we find, no spiritual substrate. Hume and James were right: If there is an enduring self, subject always, never object, it never shows itself.

An analogy can suggest the Buddha’s views of *karma* and reincarnation in a supporting way. (1) The desires and dislikes that influence the contents of my mind—what I pay attention to and what I ignore—have not appeared by accident; they have definite lineages. In

addition to attitudes that I have taken over from my culture, I have formed mental habits. These include cravings of various sorts, tendencies to compare myself with others in pride or envy, and dispositions toward contentment and its opposite, aversion. (2) Although habitual reactions tend to become fixed, I am not bound by my personal history; I can have new ideas and changes of heart. (3) Neither the continuity nor the freedom these two points affirm requires that thoughts or feelings be considered entities—things, or mental substances that are transported from mind to mind, or from moment to moment. Acquiring a concern for justice from my parents did not mean that a substance, however ethereal and ghostlike, leapt from their heads into mine.

This denial of spiritual substance was only an aspect of Buddha's wider denial of substance of every sort. Substance carries both a general and a specific connotation. Generally, it refers to something relatively permanent that underlies surface changes in the thing in question; specifically, this more basic something is thought to be matter. The psychologist in Buddha rebelled against the latter notion, for to him mind was more basic than matter. The empiricist in him, for its part, challenged the implications of a generalized notion of substance. It is impossible to read much Buddhist literature without catching its sense of the transitoriness (*anicca*) of everything finite, its recognition of the perpetual perishing of every natural object. It is this that gives Buddhist descriptions of the natural world their poignancy. "The waves follow one after another in an eternal pursuit." Or,

Life is a journey.

Death is a return to the earth.

The universe is like an inn.

The passing years are like dust.

The Buddha listed impermanence (*anicca*) as the first of his Three Marks of Existence—characteristics that apply to everything in the natural order—the other two being suffering (*dukkha*) and the absence of permanent identity or a soul (*anatta*). Nothing in nature is identical with what it was the moment before; in this the Buddha was close to modern science, which has discovered that the relatively stable objects of the macro-world derive from particles that barely exist. To underscore life's fleetingness the Buddha called the components of the human self *skandas*—skeins that hang together as loosely as yarn—and the body a "heap," its elements no more solidly assembled than grains in a sandpile. But why did the Buddha belabor a point that may seem obvious? Because, he believed, we are freed from the pain of clutching for permanence only if the acceptance of continual change is driven into our very marrow. Followers of the Buddha know well his advice:

Regard this phantom world

As a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,

A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,

A flickering lamp—a phantom—and a dream.

Given this sense of the radical impermanence of all things finite, we might expect the Buddha's answer to the question "Do human beings survive bodily death?" to be a flat no, but actually his answer was equivocal. Ordinary people when they die leave strands of finite desire that can only be realized in other incarnations; in this sense at least these persons live on. But what about the *Arhat*, the holy one who has extinguished all such desires; does such a one continue to exist? When a wandering ascetic put this question, the Buddha said:

“The word reborn does not apply to him.”

“Then he is not reborn?”

“The term not-reborn does not apply to him.”

“To each and all of my questions, Gotama, you have replied in the negative. I am at a loss and bewildered.”

“You ought to be at a loss and bewildered, Vaccha. For this doctrine is profound, recondite, hard to comprehend, rare, excellent, beyond dialectic, subtle, only to be understood by the wise. Let me therefore question you. If there were a fire blazing in front of you, would you know it?”

“Yes, Gotama.”

“If the fire went out, would you know it had gone out?”

“Yes.”

“If now you were asked in what direction the fire had gone, whether to east, west, north, or south, could you give an answer?”

“The question is not rightly put, Gotama.” Whereupon Buddha brought the discussion to a close by pointing out that “in just the same way” the ascetic had not rightly put his question. “Feelings, perceptions, forces, consciousness—everything by which the Arhat might be denoted has passed away for him. Profound, measureless, unfathomable, is the Arhat even as the mighty ocean; reborn does not apply to him nor not-reborn, nor any combination of such terms.”

It contributes to the understanding of this conversation to know that the Indians of that day thought that expiring flames do not really go out but return to the pure, invisible condition of fire they shared before

they visibly appeared. But the real force of the dialogue lies elsewhere. In asking where the fire, conceded to have gone out, had gone, the Buddha was calling attention to the fact that some problems are posed so clumsily by our language as to preclude solution by their very formulation. The question of the illumined soul’s existence after death is such a case. If the Buddha had said, “Yes, it does live on,” his listeners would have assumed the persistence of our present mode of experiencing, which the Buddha did not intend. On the other hand, if he had said, “The enlightened soul ceases to exist,” his hearers would have assumed that he was consigning it to total extinction, which too he did not intend. On the basis of this rejection of extremes we cannot say much with certainty, but we can venture something. The ultimate destiny of the human spirit is a condition in which all identification with the historical experience of the finite self will disappear, while experience as such not only remains but is heightened beyond recognition. As an inconsequential dream vanishes completely on awakening, as the stars go out in deference to the morning sun, so individual awareness will be eclipsed in the blazing light of total awareness. Some say, “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.” Others prefer to think of the dewdrop as opening to receive the sea itself.

If we try to form a more detailed picture of the state of *nirvana*, we shall have to proceed without the Buddha’s help, not only because he realized almost to despair how far the condition transcends the power of words, but also because he refused to wheedle his hearers with previews of coming attractions. Even so, it is possible to form some notion of the logical goal toward which his Path points. We have seen that the Buddha regarded the world as one of lawful order in which events are governed by the pervading law of cause and effect. The life of the *Arhat*, however, is one of increasing independence from the causal order of nature. It does not violate that order, but the *Arhat*’s spirit grows in autonomy as the world’s hold decreases. In this sense

the *Arhat* is increasingly free not only from the passions and worries of the world but also from its happenings in general. With every growth of inwardness, peace and freedom replace the turbulent bondage of those whose lives are prey to circumstance. As long as spirit remains tied to body, its freedom from the particular, the temporal, and the changing cannot be complete. But sever this connection with the *Arhat's* final death, and freedom from the finite will be complete. We cannot imagine what the state would be like, but the trajectory toward it is discernible.

Spiritual freedom brings largeness of life. The Buddha's disciples sensed that he embodied immeasurably more of reality—and in that sense was more real—than anyone else they knew; and they testified from their own experience that advance along his path enlarged their lives as well. Their worlds seemed to expand, and with each step they felt themselves more alive than they had been before. As long as they were limited by their bodies, there were limits beyond which they could not go; but if all ties were loosed, might not they be completely free? Once more, we cannot concretely imagine such a state, but the logic of the progression seems clear. If increased freedom brings increased being, total freedom should be being itself.

A thousand questions remain, but the Buddha is silent.

Others abide our questions. Thou art free.

We ask and ask; thou smilest and art still.

Big Raft and Little

Thus far we have been looking at Buddhism as it appears from its earliest records. We turn now to Buddhist history and the record it

provides of the variations that can enter a tradition as it seeks to minister to the needs of masses of people and multiple personality types.

When we approach Buddhist history with this interest, what strikes us immediately is that it splits. Religions invariably split. In the West the twelve Hebrew tribes split into Israel and Judah. Christendom split into the Eastern and Western churches, the Western church split into Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, and Protestantism splinters. The same happens in Buddhism. The Buddha dies, and before the century is out the seeds of schism have been sown. One approach to the question of why Buddhism split would be through analyzing the events, personalities, and environments the religion became implicated with in its early centuries. We can cut through all that, however, by saying, simply, that Buddhism divided over the questions that have always divided people.

How many such questions are there? How many questions will divide almost every assemblage of people whether in India, New York, or Madrid? Three come to mind.

First, there is the question of whether people are independent or interdependent. Some people are most aware of their individuality; for them, their freedom and initiative is more important than their bondings. The obvious corollary is that they see people as making their own ways through life; what each achieves will be largely of his or her own doing. "I was born in the slums, my father was an alcoholic, all of my siblings went to the dogs—don't talk to me about heredity or environment. I got to where I am by myself!" This is one attitude. On the other side of the fence are those for whom life's inter-connectedness prevails. To them the separateness of people seems tenuous; they see themselves as supported and vectored by social fields that are as strong as those of physics. Human bodies are of

course separate, but on a deeper level we are joined like icebergs in a common floe. “Send not to ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.”

A second question concerns the relation in which human beings stand, not this time to their fellows, but to the universe. Is the universe friendly—helpful on the whole toward creatures? Or is it indifferent, if not hostile? Opinions differ. On bookstore shelves we find volumes with titles like *Man Stands Alone*, and next to them *Man Does not Stand Alone* and *Man Is Not Alone*. Some people see history as a thoroughly human project in which humanity raises itself by its own bootstraps or progress doesn’t happen. For others it is powered by “a higher power that makes for good.”

A third dividing question is: What is the best part of the human self, its head or its heart? A popular parlor game used to revolve around the question, “If you had to choose, would you rather be loved or respected?” It is the same point with a different twist. Classicists rank thoughts above feelings; romantics do the opposite. The first seek wisdom; the second, if they had to choose, prefer compassion. The distinction probably also relates to William James’s contrast between the tough-minded and the tender-minded.

Here are three questions that have probably divided people as long as they have been human and continue to divide them today. They divided the early Buddhists. One group took as its motto the Buddha’s valedictory, “Be lamps unto yourselves; work out your salvation with diligence.” Whatever progress those in this group make will be the fruit of wisdom—insight into the cause of suffering as gained through meditation. The other group held that compassion is the more important feature of enlightenment, arguing that to seek enlightenment by oneself and for oneself is a contradiction in terms. For them, human

beings are more social than individual, and love is the greatest thing in the world.

Other differences gathered around these fundamental ones. The first group insisted that Buddhism was a full-time job; those who made *nirvana* their central object would have to give up the world and become monks. The second group, perhaps because it did not rest all its hopes on self-effort, was less demanding. It held that its outlook was as relevant for the layperson as for the professional; that in its own way it was as applicable in the world as in the monastery. This difference left its imprint on the names of the two outlooks. Both called themselves *yanas*, rafts or ferries, for both claimed to carry people across life’s sea to the shores of enlightenment. The second group, however, pointing to its doctrine of cosmic help (grace) and its ampler regard for laypeople, claimed to be “Buddhism for the people” and thereby the larger of the two vehicles. Accordingly it preempted the name *Mahayana*, the Big Raft, *maha* meaning “great,” as in *Mahatma* (the Great Souled) Gandhi. As this name caught on, the other group came to be known, by default, as *Hinayana*, or the Little Raft.

Not exactly pleased with this invidious designation, the Hinayanists have preferred to call their Buddhism *Theravada*, the Way of the Elders. In doing so they regained the initiative by claiming to represent original Buddhism, the Buddhism taught by Gautama himself. The claim is justified if we confine ourselves to the explicit teachings of the Buddha as they are recorded in the earliest texts, the Pali Canon, for on the whole those texts do support the Theravada position. But this fact has not discouraged the Mahayanists from their counterclaim that it is they who represent the true line of succession. For, they argue, the Buddha taught more eloquently and profoundly by his life and example than by the words the Pali Canon records. The

decisive fact about his life is that he did not remain in *nirvana* after his enlightenment but returned to devote his life to others. Because he did not belabor this fact, Theravadins (attending too narrowly to his initial spoken words, the Mahayanists contend) overlook the importance of his “great renunciation,” and this causes them to read his mission too narrowly.

We can leave to the two schools their dispute over apostolic succession; our concern is not to judge but to understand the positions they embody. The differences that have come out thus far may be summarized by the following pairs of contrasts, if we keep in mind that they are not absolute but denote differences in emphasis.

1. For Theravada Buddhism progress is up to the individual; it depends on his or her understanding and resolute application of the will. For Mahayanists the fate of the individual is linked to that of all life, and they are ultimately undivided. Two lines from John Whittier’s “The Meeting” summarize the latter outlook:

He findeth not who seeks his own

The soul is lost that’s saved alone.

2. Theravada holds that humanity is on its own in the universe. No gods exist to help us over the humps, so self-reliance is our only recourse.

By ourselves is evil done,

By ourselves we pain endure,

By ourselves we cease from wrong,

By ourselves become we pure.

No one saves us but ourselves,

No one can and no one may;

We ourselves must tread the Path:

Buddhas only show the way.

For Mahayana, in contrast, grace is a fact. We can be at peace because a boundless power draws—or if you prefer, propels—everything to its appointed goal. In the words of a famous Mahayana text, “There is a Buddha in every grain of sand.”

3. In Theravada Buddhism the prime attribute of enlightenment is wisdom (*bodhi*), meaning profound insight into the nature of reality, the causes of anxiety and suffering, and the absence of a separate core of selfhood. From these realizations flow automatically the Four Noble Virtues: loving-kindness, compassion, equanimity, and joy in the happiness and wellbeing of others. From the Mahayana perspective *karuna* (compassion) cannot be counted on to be an automatic fruit. From the beginning compassion must be given priority over wisdom. Meditation yields a personal power that can be destructive if a person has not deliberately cultivated compassionate concern for others as the motive for arduous discipline. “A guard I would be to them who have no protection,” runs a typical Mahayana invocation; “a guide to the voyager, a ship, a well, a spring, a bridge for the seeker of the other shore.” The theme has been beautifully elaborated by Shantideva, a poet-saint who has been called the Thomas à Kempis of Buddhism:

*May I be a balm to the sick, their healer and servitor until sickness
come never again;*

May I quench with rains of food and drink the anguish of hunger and thirst;

May I be in the famine of the age's end their drink and meat;

May I become an unfailing store for the poor, and serve them with manifold things for their need.

My own being and my pleasures, all my righteousness in the past, present and future, I surrender indifferently,

That all creatures may win through to their end.

4. The *sangha* (Buddhist monastic order) is at the heart of Theravada Buddhism. Monasteries (and to a lesser extent nunneries) are the spiritual dynamos in lands where it predominates, reminding everyone of a higher truth behind visible reality. Monks and nuns—only partially isolated from society because they are dependent on local people to put into their begging bowls their one daily meal—are accorded great respect. This veneration is extended to people who assume monastic vows for limited periods (a not uncommon practice) in order to practice mindfulness meditation intensively. In Burma “taking the robe” for a three-month monastic retreat has virtually marked the passage into male adulthood. Mahayana Buddhism, on the contrary, is primarily a religion for laypeople. Even its priests usually marry, and they are expected to make service to the laity their primary concern.

5. It follows from these differences that the ideal type as projected by the two schools will differ appreciably. For the Theravadins the ideal was the *Arhat*, the perfected disciple who, wandering like the lone rhinoceros, strikes out alone for *nirvana* and, with prodigious concentration, proceeds unswervingly toward that goal. The Mahayana ideal, on the contrary, was the *bodhisattva*, “one whose essence

(*sattva*) is perfected wisdom (*bodhi*)”—a being who, having reached the brink of *nirvana*, voluntarily renounces that prize and returns to the world to make *nirvana* available to others. The *bodhisattva* deliberately sentences himself—or herself: the best loved of all *bodhisattvas* is the Goddess of Mercy, Kwan Yin, in China—to age-long servitude in order that others, drawing vicariously on the merit thus accumulated, may enter *nirvana* first.

The difference between the two types is illustrated in the story of four men who, journeying across an immense desert, come upon a compound surrounded with high walls. One of the four determines to find out what is inside. He scales the wall, and on reaching the top gives a whoop of delight and jumps over. The second and third do likewise. When the fourth man gets to the top of the wall, he sees below him an enchanted garden with sparkling streams, pleasant groves, and luscious fruit. Though longing to jump over, he resists the temptation. Remembering other wayfarers who are trudging the burning deserts, he climbs back down and devotes himself to directing them to the oasis. The first three men were *Arhats*; the last was a *bodhisattva*, one who vows not to desert this world “until the grass itself be enlightened”.

6. This difference in ideal naturally floods back to color the two schools' estimates of the Buddha himself. For one he was essentially a saint, for the other a savior. Theravadins revere him as a supreme sage, who through his own efforts awakened to the truth and became an incomparable teacher who laid out a path for them to follow. A man among men, his very humanness is the basis for the Theravadins' faith that they, too, have the potential for enlightenment. But the Buddha's direct personal influence ceased with his *paranirvana* (entrance into *nirvana* at death). He knows nothing more of this world of becoming and is at perfect peace. The reverence felt by the Mahayanists could

not be satisfied with this humanness—extraordinary, to be sure, but human nonetheless. For them the Buddha was a world savior who continues to draw all creatures toward him “by the rays of his jewel hands.” The bound, the shackled, the suffering on every plane of existence, galaxy beyond galaxy, worlds beyond worlds, all are drawn toward liberation by the glorious “gift rays” of the Lord.

These differences are the central ones, but several others may be mentioned to piece out the picture. Whereas the Theravadins followed their founder in considering speculation a useless diversion, Mahayana spawned elaborate cosmologies replete with many-leveled heavens and hells. The only kind of prayer the Theravadins countenanced was meditation and invocations to deepen faith and loving-kindness, whereas the Mahayanists added supplication, petition, and calling on the name of the Buddha for spiritual strength. Finally, whereas Theravada remained conservative to the point of an almost fundamentalistic adherence to the early Pali texts, Mahayana was liberal in almost every respect. It accepted later texts as equally authoritative, was less strict in interpreting disciplinary rules, and had a higher opinion of the spiritual possibilities of women and the laity in general.

Thus, in the end, the wheel comes full circle. The religion that began as a revolt against rites, speculation, grace, and the supernatural, ends with all of them back in full force and its founder (who was an atheist as far as a personal God was concerned) transformed into such a God himself. We can schematize the differences that divide the two great branches of Buddhism as follows, if we bear in mind that the differences are not absolute:

THERAVADA

Human beings are emancipated by self-effort, without supernatural aid.

Key virtue: wisdom.

Attainment requires constant commitment, and is primarily for monks and nuns.

Ideal: the Arhat who remains in *nirvana* after death

Buddha a saint, supreme teacher, and inspirer.

Minimizes metaphysics.

Minimizes ritual.

Practice centers on meditation.

MAHAYANA

Human aspirations are supported by divine powers and the grace they bestow.

Key virtue: compassion. 41

Religious practice is relevant to life in the world, and therefore to laypeople.

Ideal: the *bodhisattva*.

Buddha a savior.

Elaborates metaphysics.

Emphasizes ritual.

Includes petitionary prayer.

Which one wins? Inwardly, there is no measure (or better, no such thing as winning); but outwardly (in terms of numbers), the answer is Mahayana. Part of the reason may lie in the fact that it converted one of the greatest kings the world has known. In the history of ancient royalty the figure of Asoka (c. 272–232 B.C.) stands out like a Himalayan peak, clear and resplendent against a sunlit sky. If we are not all Buddhists—Mahayana Buddhists—today it was not Asoka’s fault. Not content to board the Big Raft himself and commend it to his subjects—his Buddhist wheel of the law waves on India’s flag today—he strove to extend it over three continents. Finding Buddhism an Indian sect, he left it a world religion.

It would be going too far, however, to suppose that a single historical personage made Buddhism cosmopolitan, and the different ways Asia heard the Buddha’s message and took it to heart provides a final touchstone for distinguishing Theravada from Mahayana. The differences that have occupied us thus far have been doctrinal, but there is an important socio-political difference between them as well. 42

Theravada sought to incarnate a feature of the Buddha’s teachings that has not thus far been mentioned: his vision of an entire society—a civilization if you will—that was founded like a tripod on monarchy, the monastic community (*sangha*), and the laity, each with responsibilities to the other two and meriting services from them in return. South Asian countries that remain to this day Theravadin—Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia—took this political side of the Buddha’s message seriously, and remnants of his model are discernible in those lands right down to today. China’s interest in Buddhism (which she transmitted to the other lands that were to become Mahayanist: Korea, Japan, and Tibet) bypassed its social

dimensions, which included education as well as politics. In East Asian lands Buddhism appears as something of a graft. Buddhist missionaries persuaded the Chinese that they possessed psychological and metaphysical profundities the Chinese sages had not sounded, but Confucius had thought a lot about the social order, and the Chinese were not about to be lectured to on that subject by aliens. So China discounted the political proposals of the Buddha and took from his corpus its psycho-spiritual components with their cosmic overtones. The world still awaits a history of Buddhism that tells the story of the Theravada/Mahayana divide in terms of the way in which (for geographical and historical reasons) Theravada remained faithful to its founder’s vision of a Buddhist civilization, whereas Mahayana becomes Buddhism trimmed to its religious core: a module that could be grafted onto civilizations whose social foundations were securely in place.

The doctrinal differences between Theravada and Mahayana appear to have softened as the centuries have gone by. Following World War II two young Germans who were disillusioned with Europe went to Sri Lanka to dedicate their lives to the Buddha’s peaceable way. Both became Theravada monks. One, his name changed to Nyanaponika Thera, continued on that path; but the other, while on a sightseeing trip to north India, met some Tibetans and switched to their tradition, becoming known in the West as Lama Govinda. Toward the close of Nyanaponika’s life a visitor asked him about the different Buddhisms the two friends had espoused. With great serenity and sweetness the aging Theravadin replied: “My friend cited the Bodhisattva Vow as the reason for his switch to Mahayana, but I could not see the force of his argument. For if one were to transcend self-centeredness completely, as the *Arhat* seeks to do, what would be left but compassion?”

The Secret of the Flower

After Buddhism split into Theravada and Mahayana, Theravada continued as a fairly unified tradition, whereas Mahayana divided into a number of denominations or schools. The most popular of these, the Pure Land Sect, resembles the Pauline strand in Christianity in relying on faith—in its case faith in the “other power” of one of the Buddhas—to carry devotees to the Pure Land of the Western Paradise. In its popular reading this paradise bears many resemblances to the Christian heaven, though both admit of subtler interpretations in which paradise is regarded as an experiential state rather than a geographical place. Another important Mahayana school (*Ti'en Tai* in Chinese; *Tendai* in Japanese) introduced into Buddhism the Confucian predilections for learning and social harmony. It sought to find a place for all the Buddhist schools in a culminating treatise, *The Lotus Sutra*. We shall not go into these and smaller sects of Mahayana Buddhism; we shall reserve our space for, first, the Buddhism that Taoism profoundly influenced, namely *Ch'an* (*Zen* in Japanese), and second, the Buddhism that evolved in Tibet. The selection is partly determined by the fact that these are the branches of Buddhism that have attracted the most attention in the West, but there is the added advantage that they will take us to two quite different lands in which Buddhism has flourished.

Because the Communist takeover of China disrupted its religious life, we shall pursue the Ch'an/Zen sect in its Japanese guise. Like other Mahayanist sects, this one claims to trace its perspective back to Gautama himself. His teachings that found their way into the Pali Canon, it holds, were those the masses seized upon. His more perceptive followers heard in his message a higher, subtler teaching. The classic instance of this is reported in the Buddha's Flower Sermon. Standing on a mountain with his disciples around him, the

Buddha did not on this occasion resort to words. He simply held aloft a golden lotus. No one understood the meaning of this eloquent gesture save Mahakasyapa, whose quiet smile, indicating that he had gotten the point, caused the Buddha to designate him as his successor. The insight that prompted the smile was transmitted in India through twenty-eight patriarchs and carried to China in A.D. 520 by Bodhidharma. Spreading from there to Japan in the twelfth century, it contains the secret of Zen.

Entering Zen is like stepping through Alice's looking glass. One finds oneself in a topsy-turvy wonderland where everything seems quite mad—charmingly mad for the most part, but mad all the same. It is a world of bewildering dialogues, obscure conundrums, stunning paradoxes, flagrant contradictions, and abrupt non sequiturs, all carried off in the most urbane, cheerful, and innocent style imaginable. Here are some examples:

A master, Gutei, whenever he was asked the meaning of Zen, lifted his index finger. That was all. Another kicked a ball. Still another slapped the inquirer.

A novice who makes a respectful allusion to the Buddha is ordered to rinse his mouth out and never utter that dirty word again.

Someone claiming to understand Buddhism writes the following stanza:

The body is the Bodhi-Tree;

The mind is like the mirror bright.

Take heed to keep it always clean,

And let no dust collect upon it.

He is at once corrected by an opposite quatrain, which becomes accepted as the true Zen position:

Bodhi (True Wisdom) is not a tree;

The mind is not a mirror shining.

As there is nothing from the first,

Why talk of wiping off the dust?

A monk approaches a master saying, “I have just come to this monastery. Would you kindly give me some instruction?” The master asks, “Have you eaten your breakfast yet?” “I have.” “Then go wash your bowls.” The inquirer acquired the understanding he was seeking through this exchange.

A group of Zen masters, gathered for conversation, have a great time declaring that there is no such thing as Buddhism, or Enlightenment, or anything even remotely resembling *nirvana*. They set traps for one another, trying to trick someone into an assertion that might imply the contrary. Practiced as they are, they always artfully elude traps and pitfalls, whereupon the entire company bursts into glorious, room-shaking laughter.

What goes on here? Is it possible to make any sense out of what at first blush looks like Olympian horseplay, if not a direct put-on? Can they possibly be serious in this kind of spiritual doubletalk, or are they simply pulling our legs?

The answer is that they are completely serious, though it is true that they are rarely solemn. And though we cannot hope to convey their perspective completely, it being of Zen’s essence that it cannot be impounded in words, we can give some hint as to what they are up to.

Let us admit at the outset that even this is going to be difficult, for we shall have to use words to talk about a position that is acutely aware of their limitations. Words occupy an ambiguous place in life. They are indispensable to our humanity, for without them we would be but howling yahoos. But they can also deceive, or at least mislead, fabricating a virtual reality that fronts for the one that actually exists. A parent can be fooled into thinking it loves its child because it addresses the child in endearing terms. A nation can assume that the phrase “under God” in its Pledge of Allegiance shows that its citizens believe in God when all it really shows is that they believe in *believing* in God. With all their admitted uses, words have three limitations. At worst they construct an artificial world wherein our actual feelings are camouflaged and people are reduced to stereotypes. Second, even when their descriptions are reasonably accurate, descriptions are not the things described—menus are not the meal. Finally, as mystics emphasize, our highest experiences elude words almost entirely.

Every religion that has developed even a modicum of semantic sophistication recognizes to some extent the way words and reason fall short of reality when they do not actually distort it. However much the rationalist may begrudge the fact, paradox and the transrational are religion’s life blood, and that of art as well. Mystics in every faith report contacts with a world that startles and transforms them with its dazzling darkness. Zen stands squarely in this camp, its only uniqueness being that it makes breaking the language barrier its central concern.

Only if we keep this fact in mind have we a chance of understanding this outlook, which in ways is the strangest expression of mature religion. It was the Buddha himself, according to Zen tradition, who first made the point by refusing (in the Flower Sermon we have already alluded to) to equate his experiential discovery with any verbal

expression. Bodhidharma continued in this tradition by defining the treasure he was bringing to China as “a special transmission outside the scriptures.” This seems so out of keeping with religion as usually understood as to sound heretical. Think of Hinduism with its Vedas, Confucianism with its Classics, Judaism with its Torah, Christianity with its Bible, Islam with its Koran. All would happily define themselves as special transmissions *through* their scriptures. Zen, too, has its texts; they are intoned in its monasteries morning and evening. In addition to the Sutras, which it shares with other branches of Buddhism, it has its own texts: the *Hekigan Roku*, the *Mumonkan*, and others. But one glance at these distinctive texts will reveal how unlike other scriptures they are. Almost entirely they are given to pressing home the fact that Zen cannot be equated with any verbal formula whatsoever. Account after account will depict disciples interrogating their masters about Zen, only to receive a roared “Ho!” for answer. For the master sees that through such questions, seekers are trying to fill the lack in their lives with words and concepts instead of realizations. Indeed, students will be lucky if they get off with verbal rebuffs. Often a rain of blows will be the retort as the master, utterly uninterested in the disciples’ physical comfort, resorts to the most forceful way he can think of to pry the questioner out of his mental rut.

As we might expect, this unique stance toward scripture is duplicated in Zen’s attitude toward creeds. In contrast to most religions, which pivot around a creed of some sort, Zen refuses to lock itself into a verbal casing; it is “not founded on written words, and [is] *outside* the established teachings,” to return to Bodhidharma’s putting of the point. Signposts are not the destination, maps are not the terrain. Life is too rich and textured to be fitted into pigeonholes, let alone equated with them. No affirmation is more than a finger pointing to the moon. And, lest attention turn to the finger, Zen will point, only to withdraw its finger at once. Other faiths regard blasphemy and disrespect for

God’s word as sins, but Zen masters may order their disciples to rip their scriptures to shreds and avoid words like Buddha or *nirvana* as if they were smut. They intend no disrespect. 44 What they are doing is straining by every means they can think of to blast their novices out of solutions that are only verbal. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Zen is not interested in theories about enlightenment; it wants the real thing. So it shouts, and buffets, and reprimands, without ill-will entering in the slightest. All it wants to do is force the student to crash the word-barrier. Minds must be sprung from their verbal bonds into a new mode of apprehending.

Every point can be overstated, so we should not infer from what has been said that Zen forgoes reason and words entirely.

To be sure, it is no more impressed with the mind’s attempts to mirror ultimate reality than was Kierkegaard with Hegel’s metaphysics; no amount of polishing can enable a brick to reflect the sun. But it does not follow that reason is worthless. Obviously, it helps us make our way in the everyday world, a fact that leads Zennists in the main to be staunch advocates of education. But more. Working in special ways, reason can actually help awareness toward its goal. If the way that it is employed to do this seems at times like using a thorn to remove a thorn, we should add that reason can also play an interpretive role, serving as a bridge to join a newly discovered world to the world of common sense. For there is not a Zen problem whose answer, once discovered, does not make good sense within its own frame of reference; there is no experience that the masters are unwilling to try to describe or explain, given the proper circumstance. The point regarding Zen’s relation to reason is simply a double one. First, Zen logic and description make sense only from an experiential perspective radically different from the ordinary. Second, Zen masters are

determined that their students attain the experience itself, not allow talk to take its place.

Nowhere is Zen's determination on this latter point more evident than in the method it adopted for its own perpetuation. Whereas on the tricky matter of succession other religions turned to institutionalized mandates, papal succession, or creedal dicta, Zen trusted its future to a specific state of consciousness that was to be transmitted directly from one mind to another, like flame passed from candle to candle, or water poured from cup to cup. It is this "transmission of Buddha-mind to Buddha-mind" that constitutes the "special transmission" Bodhidharma cited as Zen's essence. For a number of centuries this inward transmission was symbolized by the handing down of the Buddha's robe and bowl from patriarch to patriarch, but in the Eighth Century the Sixth Patriarch in China concluded that even this simple gesture was a step toward confounding form with essence and ordered it discontinued. So here is a tradition that centers in a succession of teachers, each of whom has in principle inherited from his master a mind-state analogous to the one Gautama awakened in Mahakasyapa. Practice falls short of this principle, but the following figures suggest the steps that are taken to keep it in place. The master of the teacher under whom the author of this book studied estimated that he had given personal instruction to some nine hundred probationers. Of these, thirteen completed their Zen training, and four were given the *inka*—which is to say, they were confirmed as *roshis* (Zen masters) and authorized to teach.

And what is the training by which aspirants are brought toward the Buddha-mind that has been thus preserved? We can approach it by way of three key terms: *zazen*, *koan*, and *sanzen*.

Zazen literally means "seated meditation." The bulk of Zen training takes place in a large meditation hall. Visitors to these are struck by

the seemingly endless hours the monks devote to sitting silently on two long, raised platforms that extend the length of the hall on either side, their faces toward the center (or to the walls, depending on which of the two main lineages of Zen the monastery is attached to). Their position is the lotus posture, adopted from India. Their eyes are half closed as their gaze falls unfocused on the tawny straw mats they are sitting on.

Thus they sit, hour after hour, day after day, year after year, 47 seeking to waken the Buddha-mind so they may later relate it to their daily lives. The most intriguing feature of the process is the use they make of one of the strangest devices for spiritual training anywhere to be encountered—the koan.

In a general way *koan* means problem, but the problems Zen devises are fantastic. At first glance they look like nothing so much as a cross between a riddle and a shaggy dog story. For example:

A master, Wu Tsu, says, "Let me take an illustration from a fable. A cow passes by a window. Its head, horns, and the four legs all pass by. Why did not the tail pass by?"

Or again: What was the appearance of your face before your ancestors were born?

Another: We are all familiar with the sound of two hands clapping. What is the sound of one hand clapping? (If you protest that one hand can't clap, you go to the foot of the class.)

One more: Li-ku, a high-ranking officer in the Tang dynasty, asked a famous Ch'an master: "A long time ago a man kept a goose in a bottle. It grew larger and larger until it could not get out of the bottle any more. He did not want to break the bottle, nor did he wish to harm the goose. How would you get it out?"

The master was silent for a few moments, then shouted, “O Officer!”

“Yes.”

“It’s out!”

Our impulse is to dismiss these puzzles as absurd, but the Zen practitioner is not permitted to do this. He or she is ordered to direct the full force of the mind upon them, sometimes locking logic with them, sometimes dropping them into the mind’s deep interior to wait till an acceptable answer erupts, a project that on a single koan may take as long as a doctoral dissertation.

During this time the mind is intently at work, but it is working in a very special way. We in the West rely on reason so fully that we must remind ourselves that in Zen we are dealing with a perspective that is convinced that reason is limited and must be supplemented by another mode of knowing.

For Zen, if reason is not a ball and chain, anchoring mind to earth, it is at least a ladder too short to reach to truth’s full heights. It must, therefore, be surpassed, and it is just this surpassing that koans are designed to assist. If they look scandalous to reason, we must remember that Zen is not trying to placate the mundane mind. It intends the opposite: to upset the mind—unbalance it and eventually provoke revolt against the canons that imprison it. But this puts the matter too mildly. By forcing reason to wrestle with what from its normal point of view is flat absurdity; by compelling it to conjoin things that are ordinarily incompatible, Zen tries to drive the mind to a state of agitation wherein it hurls itself against its logical cage with the desperation of a cornered rat. By paradox and non sequitur Zen provokes, excites, exasperates, and eventually exhausts the mind until

it sees that thinking is never more than thinking *about*, or feeling more than feeling *for*. Then, having gotten the rational mind where it wants it—reduced to an impasse—it counts on a flash of sudden insight to bridge the gap between secondhand and firsthand life.

Light breaks on secret lots. ...

Where logics die

The secret grows through the eye.

Before we dismiss this strange method as completely foreign, it is well to remember that Kierkegaard regarded meditation on the paradox of the Incarnation—the logical absurdity of the Infinite becoming finite, God becoming man—as the most rewarding of all Christian exercises. The *koan* appears illogical because reason proceeds within structured perimeters. Outside those perimeters the *koan* is not inconsistent; it has its own logic, a “Riemannian” logic we might say. Once the mental barrier has been broken, it becomes intelligible. Like an alarm clock, it is set to awaken the mind from its dream of rationality. A higher lucidity is at hand.

Struggling with his *koan*, the Zen monk is not alone. Books will not avail, and koans that are being worked on are not discussed with fellow monks, for this could only produce secondhand answers. Twice a day, though, on average, the monk confronts the master in private “consultation concerning meditation”—*sanzen* in Rinzai and *dokusan* in the Soto sect. These meetings are invariably brief. The trainee states the *koan* in question and follows it with his or her answer to date. The role of the master is then threefold. In the happy event that the answer is correct, he validates it, but this is his least important role, for a right answer usually comes with a force that is self-validating. A greater service is rendered in rejecting inadequate answers, for nothing so

helps the student to put these permanently to one side as the master's categorical rejection of them. This aspect of *sanzen* is fittingly described in the ninth-century *Rules of Hyakujo* as affording "the opportunity for the teacher to make a close personal examination of the student, to arouse him from his immaturity, to beat down his false conceptions and to rid him of his prejudices, just as the smelter removes the lead and quicksilver from the gold in the smelting-pot, and as the jade-cutter, in polishing the jade, discards every possible flaw." 49 The master's other service is, like that of any exacting examiner, to keep the student energized and determined during the long years the training requires.

And to what does this *zazen*, *koan* training, and *sanzen* lead? The first important breakthrough is an intuitive experience called *kensho* or *satori*. Though its preparation may take years, the experience itself comes in a flash, exploding like a silent rocket deep within the subject and throwing everything into a new perspective. Fearful of being seduced by words, Zenists waste little breath in describing *satoris*, but occasionally accounts appear.

Ztt! I entered. I lost the boundary of my physical body. I had my skin, of course, but I felt I was standing in the center of the cosmos. I saw people coming toward me, but all were the same man. All were myself. I had never known this world before. I had believed that I was created, but now I must change my opinion: I was never created; I was the cosmos. No individual existed.

From this and similar descriptions we can infer that *satori* is Zen's version of the mystical experience, which, wherever it appears, brings joy, at-one-ment, and a sense of reality that defies ordinary language. But whereas the tendency is to relate such experiences to the zenith of the religious quest, Zen places them close to the point of departure. In a very real sense Zen training begins with *satori*. For one thing, there

must be further *satoris* as the trainee learns to move with greater freedom in this realm. But the important point is that Zen, drawing half its inspiration from the practical, common-sense, this-worldly orientation of the Chinese to balance the mystical other-worldly half it derived from India, refuses to permit the human spirit to withdraw—shall we say retreat?—into the mystical state completely. Once we achieve *satori*, we must

get out of the sticky morass in which we have been floundering, and return to the unfettered freedom of the open fields. Some people may say: "If I have [achieved satori] that is enough. Why should I go further?" The old masters lashed out at such persons, calling them "earthworms living in the slime of self-accredited enlightenment."

The genius of Zen lies in the fact that it neither leaves the world in the less-than-ideal state in which it finds it, nor withdraws from the world in aloofness or indifference. Zen's object is to infuse the temporal with the eternal—to widen the doors of perception so that the wonder of the *satori* experience can flood the everyday world. "What," asks the student, "is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?" The master answers, "The cypress tree standing in the garden." Being's amazingness must be directly realized, and *satori* is its first discernment. But until—through recognizing the interpenetration and convertibility of all phenomena—its wonder spreads to objects as common as the tree in your backyard and you can perform your daily duties with the understanding that each is equally a manifestation of the infinite, Zen's business has not been completed.

With the possible exception of the Buddha himself, in no one is that business ever completely finished. Yet by extrapolating hints in the Zen corpus we can form some idea of what the condition of "the man who has nothing further to do" would be like.

First, it is a condition in which life seems distinctly good. Asked what Zen training leads to, a Western student who had been practicing for seven years in Kyoto answered, “No paranormal experiences that I can detect. But you wake up in the morning and the world seems so beautiful you can hardly stand it.”

Along with this sense of life’s goodness there comes, secondly, an objective outlook on one’s relation to others; their welfare impresses one as being as important as one’s own. Looking at a dollar bill, one’s gaze may be possessive; looking at a sunset, it cannot be. Zen attainment is like looking at the sunset. Requiring (as it does) awareness to the full, issues like “whose awareness?” or “awareness of what?” do not arise. Dualisms dissolve. As they do there comes over one a feeling of gratitude to the past and responsibility to things present and future.

Third, the life of Zen (as we have sought to emphasize) does not draw one away from the world; it returns one to the world—the world robed in new light. We are not called to worldly indifference, as if life’s object were to spring soul from body as piston from syringe. The call is to discover the satisfaction of full awareness even in its bodily setting. “What is the most miraculous of all miracles?” “That I sit quietly by myself.” Simply to see things as they are, as they truly are in themselves, is life enough. It is true that Zen values unity, but it is a unity that is simultaneously empty (because it erases lines that divide) and full (because it replaces those lines with ones that connect). Stated in the form of a Zen algorithm, “All is one, one is none, none is all.” Zen wears the air of divine ordinariness: “Have you eaten? Then wash your bowls.” If you cannot find the meaning of life in an act as simple as that of doing the dishes, you will not find it anywhere.

My daily activities are not different,

Only I am naturally in harmony with them.

Taking nothing, renouncing nothing,

In every circumstance no hindrance, no conflict...

Drawing water, carrying firewood,

This is supernatural power, this the marvelous activity.

With this perception of the infinite in the finite there comes, finally, an attitude of generalized agreeableness. “Yesterday was fair, today it is raining”; the experiencer has passed beyond the opposites of preference and rejection. As both pulls are needed to keep the relative world turning, each is welcomed in its proper turn.

There is a poem by Seng Ts’an on “Trust in the Heart,” that stands as the purest expression of this ideal of total acceptance.

The perfect way knows no difficulties

Except that it refuses to make preferences;

Only when freed from hate and love

Does it reveal itself fully and without disguise;

A tenth of an inch’s difference,

And heaven and earth are set apart.

If you wish to see it before your own eyes

Have no fixed thoughts either for or against it.

To set up what you like against what you dislike—

That is the disease of the mind.

The Way is perfect like unto vast space,

With nothing wanting, nothing superfluous.

It is due to making choices

That its Suchness is lost sight of.

The One is none other than the All, the All none other than the One.

Take your stand on this, and the rest will follow of its own accord;

I have spoken, but in vain, for what can words tell

Of things that have no yesterday, tomorrow, or today?

Even truth and falsity look different. “Do not seek after truth. Merely cease to hold opinions.”

Fifth, as the dichotomies between self and other, finite and infinite, acceptance and rejection are transcended, even the dichotomy between life and death disappears.

When this realization is completely achieved, never again can one feel that one's individual death brings an end to life. One has lived from an endless past and will live into an endless future. At this very moment one partakes of Eternal Life—blissful, luminous, pure.

As we leave Zen to its future we may note that its influence on the cultural life of Japan has been enormous. Though its greatest influence has been on pervasive life attitudes, four ingredients of Japanese culture carry its imprint indelibly. In sumie or black ink landscape painting, Zen monks, living their simple lives close to the earth, have rivaled the skill and depth of feeling of their Chinese masters. In landscape gardening Zen temples surpassed their Chinese counterparts and raised the art to unrivaled perfection. Flower arrangement began

in floral offerings to the Buddha, but developed into an art that until recently was a part of the training of every refined Japanese girl. Finally, there is the celebrated tea ceremony, in which an austere but beautiful setting, a few fine pieces of old pottery, a slow, graceful ritual, and a spirit of utter tranquility combine to epitomize the harmony, respect, clarity, and calm that characterize Zen at its best.

The Diamond Thunderbolt

We have spoken of two *yanas* or paths in Buddhism, but we must now add a third. If Hinayana literally means the Little Way and Mahayana the Great Way, Vajrayana is the Diamond Way.

Vajra was originally the thunderbolt of Indra, the Indian Thunder God who is often mentioned in the early, Pali Buddhist texts; but when Mahayana turned the Buddha into a cosmic figure, Indra's thunderbolt was transformed into the Buddha's diamond scepter. We see here a telling instance of Buddhism's capacity to accommodate itself to local ideas while revaluing them by changing the spiritual center of gravity; for the diamond transforms the thunderbolt, symbol of nature's power, into an emblem of spiritual supremacy, while retaining the connotations of power that the thunderbolt possessed. The diamond is the hardest stone—one hundred times harder than its closest rival—and at the same time the most transparent stone. This makes the Vajrayana the way of strength and lucidity—strength to realize the Buddha's vision of luminous compassion.

We just noted that the roots of the Vajrayana can be traced back to India, and it continues to survive in Japan as Shingon Buddhism; but it was the Tibetans who perfected this third Buddhist path. For Tibetan Buddhism is not just Buddhism with Tibet's pre-Buddhist Bon deities incorporated. Nor is it enough to characterize it as Indian Buddhism in its eighth-and ninth-century heyday, moved northward to be preserved

against its collapse in India. To catch its distinctiveness we must see it as the third major Buddhist *yana*, while adding immediately that the essence of the Vajrayana is Tantra. Tibetan Buddhism, the Buddhism here under review, is at heart Tantric Buddhism.

Buddhists have no monopoly on Tantra, which first showed itself in medieval Hinduism where the word had two Sanskrit roots. One of these is “extension.” In this meaning Tantra denotes texts, many of them esoteric and secret in nature, that were added to the Hindu corpus to extend its range. This gives us only the formal meaning of the word, however. For the content of those extended texts we should look to the second etymological meaning of Tantra, which derives from the weaving craft and denotes interpenetration. In weaving, the threads of warp and woof intertwine repeatedly. The Tantras are texts that focus on the interrelatedness of things. Hinduism pioneered such texts, but it was Buddhism, particularly Tibetan Buddhism, that gave them pride of place.

The Tibetans say that their religion is nowise distinctive in its goal. What distinguishes their practice is that it enables one to reach *nirvana* in a single lifetime. 57 This is a major claim. How do the Tibetans defend it?

They say that the speed-up is effected by utilizing all of the energies latent in the human make-up, those of the body emphatically included, and impressing them *all* into the service of the spiritual quest.

The energy that interests the West most is sex, so it is not surprising that Tantra’s reputation abroad has been built on its sacramental use of this drive. H. G. Wells once said that God and sex were the only two things that really interested him. If we can have both—not be forced to choose between them as in monasticism and celibacy—this is music to modern ears, so much so that in the popular Western mind Tantra and

sex are almost equated. This is unfortunate. Not only does it obscure the larger world of Tantra; it distorts its sexual teachings by removing them from that world.

Within that world Tantra’s teachings about sex are neither titillating nor bizarre: they are universal. Sex is so important—after all, it keeps life going—that it must be linked quite directly with God. It is the divine Eros of Hesiod, celebrated in Plato’s *Phaedrus* and in some way by every people. Even this, though, is too mild. Sex *is* the divine in its most available epiphany. But with this proviso: It is such when joined to love. When two people who are passionately, even madly—Plato’s divine madness—in love; when each wants most to receive what the other most wants to give;—at the moment of their mutual climax it is impossible to say whether the experience is more physical or spiritual, or whether they sense themselves as two or as one. The moment is ecstatic because at that moment they stand outside—*ex*, out; *stasis*, standing—themselves in the melded oneness of the Absolute.

Nothing thus far is uniquely Tantric; from the Hebrew *Song of Songs* to the explicit sexual symbolism in mystical marriages to Christ, the principles just mentioned turn up in all traditions. What distinguishes Tantra is the way it wholeheartedly espouses sex as a spiritual ally, working with it explicitly and intentionally. Beyond squeamishness and titillation, both, the Tantrics keep the physical and spiritual components of the love-sex splice in strict conjunction—through their art (which shows couples in coital embrace), in their fantasies (the ability to visualize should be actively cultivated), and in overt sexual engagement, for only one of the four Tibetan priestly orders is celibate. Beyond these generalizations it is not easy to go, so we shall leave the matter with a covering observation. Tantric sexual practice is pursued, not as a law-breaking revel, but under the cautious

supervision of a *guru*, in the controlled context of a non-dualist outlook, and as the culminating festival of a long sequence of spiritual disciplines practiced through many lives. The spiritual emotion that is worked for is ecstatic, egoless, beatific bliss in the realization of transcendent identity. But it is not self-contained, for the ultimate goal of the practice is to descend from the non-dual experience better equipped to experience the multiplicity of the world without estrangement.

With Tantra's sexual side thus addressed, we can move on to more general features of its practice. We have already seen that these are distinctive in the extent to which they are body-based, and the physical energies the Tantrics work with most regularly are the ones that are involved with speech, vision, and gestures.

To appreciate the difference in a religious practice that engages these faculties actively, it is useful to think back to the raja yoga of Hinduism and Zen in Buddhism. Both of these meditation programs set out to immobilize the body so that for practical purposes the mind might rise above it. A snapshot could capture the body in those practices, whereas with the Tibetans a motion picture camera would be needed, and one that is wired for sound. For, ritualistically engaged, the Tibetans' bodies are always moving. The *lamas* prostrate themselves, weave stylized hand gestures, pronounce sacred syllables, and intone deep-throated chants. Audially and visually, something is always going on.

The rationale they invoke for engaging their bodies in their spiritual pursuits is straightforward. Sounds, sights, and motion *can* distract, they admit, but it does not follow that they *must* do so. It was the genius of the great pioneers of Tantra to discover *upayas* (skillful means) for channeling physical energies into currents that carry the spirit forward instead of derailing it. The most prominent of these

currents relate to the sound, sight, and movement we have referred to, and the names for them all begin with the letter "m." *Mantras* convert noise into sound and distracting chatter into holy formulas. *Mudras* choreograph hand gestures, turning them into pantomime and sacred dance. *Mandalas* treat the eyes to icons whose holy beauty draws the beholder in their direction.

If we try to experience our way into the liturgy by which the Tibetans put these Tantric devices into practice, the scene that emerges is something like this. Seated in long, parallel rows; wearing headgear that ranges from crowns to wild shamanic hats; garbed in maroon robes, which they periodically smother in sumptuous vestments of silver, scarlet, and gold, gleaming metaphors for inner states of consciousness, the monks begin to chant. They begin in a deep, guttural, metric monotone, but as the mood deepens those mono tones splay out into harmonics that sound like full-throated chords, though actually the monks are not singing in parts; harmony (a Western discovery) is unknown to them. By a vocal device found nowhere else in the world, they reshape their vocal cavities in ways that amplify overtones to the point where they can be heard as discrete tones in their own right. Meanwhile, their hands perform stylized gestures that kinesthetically augment the states of consciousness that are being accessed.

A final, decisive feature of this practice would be lost on observers because it is totally internal. Throughout the exercise the monks visualize the deities they are invoking—visualize them with such intensity (years of practice are required to master the technique) that, initially with closed eyes but eventually with eyes wide open, they are able to see the deities as if they were physically present. This goes a long way toward making them real, but in the meditation's climax, the monks go further. They seek experientially to merge with the gods

they have conjured, the better to appropriate their powers and their virtues. An extraordinary assemblage of artistic forms are orchestrated here, but not for art's sake. They constitute a technology, designed to modulate the human spirit to the wavelengths of the tutelary deities that are invoked.

To complete this profile of Tibetan Buddhism's distinctiveness, we must add to this summary of its Tantric practice a unique institution. When in 1989 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, that institution jumped to worldwide attention.

The Dalai Lama is not accurately likened to the pope, for it is not his prerogative to define doctrine. Even more misleading is the designation God-King, for though temporal and spiritual authority do converge in him, neither of these powers define his essential function. That function is to incarnate on earth the celestial principle of which compassion or mercy is the defining feature. The Dalai Lama is the bodhisattva who in India was known as Avalokiteshvara, in China as the Goddess of Mercy Kwan Yin, and in Japan as Kannon. As Chenrezig (his Tibetan name) he has for the last several centuries incarnated himself for the empowerment and regeneration of the Tibetan tradition. Through his person—a single person who has thus far assumed fourteen successive incarnations—there flows an uninterrupted current of spiritual influence, characteristically compassionate in its flavor. Thus in relation to the world generally, and to

Tibet in particular, the office of the Dalai Lama is chiefly neither one of administration nor of teaching but an “activity of presence” that is operative independently of anything he may, as an individual, choose to do or not do. The Dalai Lama is a receiving station toward which the compassion-principle of Buddhism in all its cosmic amplitude is

continuously channeled, to radiate thence to the Tibetan people most directly, but by extension to all sentient beings.

Whether the Dalai Lama will reincarnate himself again after his present body is spent is uncertain, for at present the Chinese invaders are determined that there will be no distinct people for him to serve. If there are not, something important will have withdrawn from history. For as rain forests are to the earth's atmosphere, someone has said, so are the Tibetan people to the human spirit in this time of its planetary ordeal.

The Image of the Crossing

We have looked at three modes of transport in Buddhism: the Little Raft; the Big Raft, with special attention to Zen; and, though it sounds odd in the context of a flotilla, the Diamond Raft. These vehicles are so different that we must ask in closing whether, on any grounds other than historical lineage, they deserve to be considered aspects of a single religion.

There are two respects in which they should be so regarded. They all revere a single founder from whom they claim their teachings derive. And all three can be subsumed under a single metaphor. This is the image of the crossing, the simple everyday experience of crossing a river on a ferryboat.

To appreciate the force of this image we must remember the role the ferry played in traditional Asian life. In lands laced by rivers and canals, almost every considerable journey required a ferry. This routine fact underlies and inspires every school of Buddhism, as the use of the word *yana* by all of them attests. Buddhism is a voyage across life's river, a transport from the common-sense shore of ignorance, grasping, and death, to the further bank of wisdom and

enlightenment. Compared with this settled fact, the differences within Buddhism are no more than variations in the kind of vehicle one boards, or the stage one has reached on the journey.

What are these stages?

While we are on the first bank it is in effect the world for us. Its earth underfoot is solid and reassuring. The rewards and disappointments of its social life are vivid and compelling. The opposite shore is barely visible and has no impact on our dealings.

If, however, something prompts us to see what the other side is like, we may decide to attempt a crossing. If we are of independent bent, we may decide to make it on our own. In this case we are Theravadins; we follow the Buddha's design for a sturdy craft, but we build ours ourself. Most of us, however, have neither the time nor the talent for a project of such proportions. We are Mahayanists and move down the bank to where a ready-made ferryboat is expected. As the group of explorers clamber aboard at the landing there is an air of excitement. Attention is focused on the distant bank, still indistinct, but the voyagers are still very much like citizens of this side of the river.

The ferry pushes off and moves across the water. The bank we are leaving behind is losing its substance. The shops and streets and ant-like figures are blending together and releasing their hold on us. Meanwhile, the shore toward which we are headed is not in focus either; it seems almost as far away as it ever was. There is an interval in the crossing when the only tangible realities are the water, with its treacherous currents, and the boat, which is stoutly but precariously contending with them. This is the moment for Buddhism's Three Vows: I take refuge in the *Buddha*, the fact that there was an explorer who made this trip and proved to us that it can succeed. I take refuge in the *dharma*, the vehicle of transport, this boat to which we have

committed our lives in the conviction that it is seaworthy. I take refuge in the *sangha*, the order, the crew that is navigating this ship, in whom we have confidence. The shoreline of the world has been left behind. Until we set foot on the further bank, these are the only things in which we can trust.

The further shore draws near, becomes real. The craft jolts onto the sand and we step onto solid ground. The land, which had been misty and unsubstantial as a dream, is now fact. And the shore that we left behind, which was so palpable and real, is now only a slender horizontal line, a visual patch, a memory without substance.

Impatient to explore our new surroundings, we nevertheless remember our gratitude for the splendid ship and crew who have brought us safely to what promises to be a rewarding land. It will not be gratitude, however, to insist on packing the boat with us as we plunge into the woods. "Would he be a clever man," the Buddha asked, "if out of gratitude for the raft that has carried him across the stream to safety he, having reached the other shore, should cling to it, take it on his back, and walk about with the weight of it? Would not the clever man be the one who left the raft, no longer of use to him, to the current of the stream and walked ahead without turning back to look at it? Is it not simply a tool to be cast away and forsaken once it has served the purpose for which it was made? In the same way the vehicle of the doctrine is to be cast away and forsaken once the other shore of Enlightenment has been attained."

Here we come to the *Prajnaparamita* or *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras, which are widely considered to be the culminating texts of Buddhism. The Five Precepts and the Eightfold Path; the technical terminology of *dukkha*, *karma*, *nirvana*, and their like; the committed order and the person of the Buddha himself—all these are vitally important to the individual in the act of making the crossing. They lose their relevance

for those who have arrived. Indeed, to the traveler who has not only reached the promised shore but who keeps moving into its interior, there comes a time when not only the raft but the river itself drops from view. When such a one turns around to look for the land that has been left behind, what appears? What of that land *can* appear to one who has crossed a horizon beyond which the river dividing this shore from that shore has vanished? One looks, and there is no other shore. There is no separating river. There is no raft, no ferryman. These things are not a part of the new world.

Before the river was crossed the two shores, human and divine, had to appear distinct from each other, different as life and death, as day and night. But once the crossing has been made, no dichotomy remains. The realm of the gods is not a distinct place. It is where the traveler stands; and if that stance happens to be in this world, the world itself is transmuted. It is in this sense that we are to read the avowals in *The Perfection of Wisdom* that “this our worldly life is an activity of *Nirvana* itself; not the slightest distinction exists between them.” Introspection having led to a condition described positively as *nirvana* and negatively as Emptiness because it transcends all forms, the “stream-winner” now finds in the world itself this same Emptiness that he discovered within. “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Emptiness is not different from form, form is not different from emptiness.” The noisy disjunction between acceptance and rejection having been stilled, every moment is affirmed for what it actually is. It is Indra’s cosmic net, laced with jewels at every juncture. Each jewel reflects the others, together with all the reflections in the others. In such a vision the categories of good and evil disappear. “That which is sin is also Wisdom” we read; and once again, “the realm of Becoming is *Nirvana*.”

This earth on which we stand

is the promised Lotus Land,

And this very body

is the body of the Buddha.

This new-found shore throws light on the *bodhisattva*’s vow not to enter *nirvana* “until the grass itself be enlightened.” As grass keeps coming, does this mean that the *bodhisattva* will never be enlightened? Not exactly. It means, rather, that he (or she) has risen to the point where the distinction between time and eternity has lost its force. That distinction, drawn by the rational mind, is dissolved in the lightning-and-thunder insight that annihilates opposites. Time and eternity are now two aspects of the same experiential whole, two sides of the same coin. “The jewel of eternity is in the lotus of birth and death.”

From the standpoint of normal, worldly consciousness there must always remain an inconsistency between this climactic insight and worldly prudence. This, though, should not surprise us, for it would be flatly contradictory if the world looked exactly the same to those who have crossed the river of ignorance. Only they can dissolve the world’s distinctions—or, perhaps we should say, take them in their stride, for the distinctions persist, but now without difference. Where to eagle vision the river can still be seen, it is seen as connecting the two banks rather than dividing them.

The Confluence of Buddhism and Hinduism in India

Among the surface paradoxes of Buddhism—this religion that began by rejecting ritual, speculation, grace, mystery, and a personal God and ended by bringing them all back into the picture—there is a final one. Today Buddhists abound in every Asian land except India; only recently, after a thousand-year absence, are they beginning in small

numbers to reappear. Buddhism triumphs in the world at large, only (it would seem) to forfeit the land of its birth.

This surface appearance is deceptive. The deeper fact is that in India Buddhism was not so much defeated by Hinduism as accommodated within it. Up to around the year 1000, Buddhism persisted in India as a distinct religion. To say that the Muslim invaders then wiped it out will not do, for Hinduism survived. The fact is that in the course of its 1,500 years in India, Buddhism's differences with Hinduism softened. Hindus admitted the legitimacy of many of the Buddha's reforms, and in imitation of the Buddhist *sangha* orders of Hindu *sadhus* (wandering ascetics) came into existence. From the other side, Buddhist teachings came to sound increasingly like Hindu ones as Buddhism opened into the Mahayana, until in the end Buddhism sank back into the source from which it had sprung.

Only if one assumes that Buddhist principles left no mark on subsequent Hinduism can the merger be considered a Buddhist defeat. Actually, almost all of Buddhism's affirmative doctrines found their place or parallel. Its contributions, accepted by Hindus in principle if not always practice, included its renewed emphasis on kindness to all living things, on non-killing of animals, on the elimination of caste barriers in matters religious and their reduction in matters social, and its strong ethical emphasis generally. The *bodhisattva* ideal seems to have left its mark in prayers like the following by Santi Deva in the great Hindu devotional classic, the *Bhagavatam*:

I desire not of the Lord the greatness which comes by the attainment of the eightfold powers, nor do I pray him that I may not be born again; my one prayer to him is that I may feel the pain of others, as if I were residing within their bodies, and that I may have the power of relieving their pain and making them happy.

All in all, the Buddha was reclaimed as “a rebel child of Hinduism”; he was even raised to the status of a divine incarnation. The goal of Theravada Buddhism was acknowledged to be substantially that of non-dual Hinduism, and even the Prajnaparamita's contention that eternity is not other than the present moment found its Hindu counterpart:

This very world is a mansion of mirth;

Here I can eat, here drink and make merry. (Ramakrishna)

Especially in Hindu Tantric schools, disciples were brought to the point where they could see meat, wine, and sex—things that had formerly appeared as the most formidable barriers to the divine—as but varying forms of God. “The Mother is present in every house. Need I break the news as one breaks an earthen pot on the floor.”

Huston Smith



