

CHAPTER THREE

BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

Of all religions, Christianity has felt most acutely the need for its followers — particularly its clergy — to accept a set of agreed orthodox doctrines. By contrast, Buddhism, in common with a number of other religions, often claims to be a ‘religion without dogma’. In claiming this, Buddhists mean that it is more important to practise the Dharma than to believe a set of truths set out in a creed. Nevertheless, Buddhism has produced many scholars and developed some very elaborate teachings.

The Buddha’s first sermon at Benares contained not merely the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, but many basic teachings which were almost immediately regarded as central to the Buddhist faith. This chapter explores some of the teachings which stem from the ‘perfect view’ expounded by the Buddha. Although we will confine ourselves to the basics and not the complexities of Buddhist philosophy, this material may still prove much more difficult to assimilate than preceding and subsequent chapters. Readers who believe in ‘skipping’ chapters may therefore proceed directly to Chapter Four. I have included this material, partly because some will find it of interest, but also because we would not do justice to Buddhism if we ignored its teachings, scholars and thinkers.

The Three Marks of Existence.

In the Benares sermon, preached to the five monks, the Buddha taught that there are three important Marks of Existence (often called ‘signs of being’ in English). They are:

- (1) dukkha (‘unsatisfactoriness’).
- (2) anicca (‘impermanence’).
- (3) anatta (literally ‘non-self’).

We have already described dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), which pervades all of existence. All is dukkha because everything is impermanent. As the well-known Christian hymn puts it, ‘Change and decay in all around I see.’ Objects change: the car I purchased a few years ago has begun to decay with rust, its colour has faded, its upholstery is worn. People change: a lover may find that love has become cold; we may have trusted someone implicitly and found one day that our trust was misplaced. Medically speaking, our cells are changing all the time, as they die and (for the most part) replace themselves; no-one’s body possesses a single cell that existed seven years ago, so in a sense I am not the same person as I was in the year 1981. The only state which is unchanging is nirvana — enlightenment. Once a being is enlightened, there is no falling back into the cycle of birth and rebirth.

This brings us to the doctrine of anatta, the ‘non-self’. With a few minor exceptions, Buddhists have taught that the ‘self’ is unreal: there is no enduring soul which will survive death, or enter nirvana. Equally there is no ‘world-soul’ or creator God who sustains the universe. The doctrine of the ‘non-self’ is not easy to understand. An early Buddhist king called Milinda once demanded an explanation from a monk called Nagasena. Nagasena explained this teaching by comparing the ‘self’ with a chariot. What is it that makes a chariot a chariot? The wheels are not the chariot; the axle is not the

chariot; the frame is not the chariot; the yoke that ties the chariot to the horse is not the chariot. Yet when we have listed all the parts of the chariot, we do not find a further thing called 'chariot-ness' (if one may put it so), which really makes the chariot the chariot: once we have itemised the parts, there is nothing more. Thus it is with the self. I am not the same as my hair, my arms, my legs, or any of my organs; yet, Nagasena explained to the king, there is no 'self' which exists over and above the physical parts of which I am composed.

It is not enough to be convinced in our minds that this teaching is true: we must experience anatta too. We are usually unable to do this because we are so possessive by nature, insisting, 'This is mine!', or complaining, 'I don't like this,' or 'I hurt myself'. According to Buddhist teaching, we suffer from three 'fires' — ignorance, greed and hatred. It is easy to see greed and hatred as 'fires' which we can fuel; yet although ignorance is not so obviously a fiery element within us, ignorance lies at the root of all huamnkind's problems, because it gives us the sense of 'I', which we take to be so important. It is ignorance which makes us think that there is some permanent substance or soul which lies inside our 'body, feelings, sensations, "mental formations", and consciousness'. (The five items just listed are known as the 'Five Aggregates' or 'five heaps' which make up our personality.)

Rebirth without selves?

It is because there is no real enduring self that Buddhists prefer to talk about 'rebirth' rather than 'reincarnation', for there is no soul which transmigrates from one existence to the next. This presents us with an obvious problem. If Buddhism holds that there are no such things as 'selves', how can future existences be caused by 'myself'; and, if there is no real, permanent, enduring self, what is it that is reborn?

Strictly speaking, nothing at all carries over from one existence to the next. The explanation is something like this. Let us take the example of the author, conventionally known as 'George Chryssides'. According to the Buddhist, I have no eternal soul, but, because my behaviour in this life has left a lot to be desired, I have 'generated karma' because of my past actions. Therefore, unless I gain enlightenment (which is improbable), my karma will cause a further being to be born after I die. It is unlikely that this new being would be called 'George Chryssides' — a most surprising coincidence! In all probability, this being would not look like me or act like me, and indeed he or she may not even be a human.

So there is both a continuity and a discontinuity between this life and the next: existence in 'my' next life is a result of deeds done in this life, but the being who is born is neither the same nor different. Buddhists often make a comparison with a candle flame. One candle flame can light another candle: the flame is passed on and the second flame can outlast the blowing out of the first. The first flame causes the second, but it would be senseless to say that the two flames were one and the same, and there is certainly no substance called 'fire' or 'flame' which passes from one candle to the next.

This train of thought leads on to another important Buddhist teaching. It has a rather forbidding name — 'Dependent Origination'. It is presented in the form of a list, as indeed many Buddhist teachings are. Buddhism is very fond of numbered lists: we have already encountered the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the three Marks of

Existence, the Three Fires, and the Five Aggregates, and there are several more lists still to come. The list runs as follows:

Past life 1 Ignorance
 2 Karma formations
 3 Consciousness
 4 Name and form
 5 The six senses

Present life 6 Sense-contact
 7 Feeling
 8 Craving
 9 Grasping
 10 Becoming

Future life 11 Birth
 12 Old age and death

The simplest way to think of it is to imagine a row of candles, where only the first is lit. The first candle is then used to light the second, the second to light the third, and so on. By the time the last candle is lit, let us imagine that the first candle has gone out and needs to be rekindled by the last. Each stage on the list is like the candle flame which kindles the next.

It is not Buddhist belief that there is a supply of bodies which awaits the arrival of the appropriate karma: it is one's karma which creates the mind and the body of the living being which takes its birth. The chain of Dependent Origination then continues in motion, and comes round full circle. After death, ignorance and karma-formations will give rise to consciousness, and so it goes on. The chain is called 'Dependent Origination' because each link depends on the previous one. But each stage does not follow inevitably: it is possible to break the link, by removing ignorance or selfish desire (craving).

The comparison with the candle has often made Westerners think that nirvana is the blowing out of the candle, the extinction of the self. But this is quite wrong. One cannot extinguish the self if there is no self to extinguish. What is extinguished in nirvana is the ignorance which results in selfish desire. When selfish desire, the cause of unsatisfactoriness, is eliminated, then nirvana is attained, and one is never again reborn. It seems strange that the extinction of desire should be confused with the extinction of the self. If I have a tremendous thirst and quench it by having a drink, no-one would suppose that I had extinguished myself as well the thirst! Yet similarly muddled thinking takes place when it is supposed that because nirvana is the end of thirsting after material things, that it is the end of the (non-existent) self which thirsts for them.

'Karma' and rebirth.

In common with Hinduism Buddhism teaches that there are many lives before reaching nirvana. We have the fortune of having been born human in this birth, and a Buddhist regards this as a great and possibly rare opportunity. It is only as a human that one has the opportunity to hear the Dharma (teaching), and to advance on one's spiritual path. In

particular, it is only as a human that one can pursue the monastic life which, at least in the Theravada tradition, is normally regarded as a necessary step in the attainment of enlightenment.

We have seen that we are reborn as a result of our deeds. To follow the Eightfold Path, to observe the Precepts, to perform acts of devotion, or to lend support to the Sangha will all earn merit to secure a favourable rebirth. To act wrongly — for example by killing, stealing, or slandering — is to store up conditions which will result in a less desirable existence. That we are born according to our deeds is a fixed and unalterable law of the universe, and it is known as the law of karma.

The law of karma is not a divine punishment. There is no celestial being who judges us according to what we have done. Karma is a law that operates in the world quite independently of the wills of people or of gods. Just as the law of gravity entails that a weight will fall if it is dropped from a height, so the law of karma entails that one will be continually born and reborn in accordance with one's actions. The only difference between the law of gravity and the law of karma is that the former is a physical law, while the latter is a spiritual law; but common to both is the fact that they cannot be defied — just as I cannot decide to remain suspended in mid-air if my parachute will not open, I cannot secure myself a good rebirth if my actions do not merit it.

The law of karma provides an explanation for the inequalities and the sufferings of human and animal life. It also helps to explain why some people are born with particular skills and talents; for example, the infant prodigy may have learned his or her skills in a previous birth. Human experiences which are otherwise difficult to account for find a ready explanation in the law of karma: a child who dies young may once have been a murderer of a child, who now experiences the appropriate result of that misdeed.

Although the effects of one's actions will be reaped in time, the catching-up is not always immediate. It may take several successive existences to burn out all the effects of actions committed within one single existence: what I am experiencing in this life may therefore be the consequence not of my immediate past life, but of existences lived several lives ago. Although someone may sometimes seem to escape from the consequences of actions, ultimately no escape is possible. If I should be foolish enough to think that suicide might prevent me from reaping the results of previous misdeeds, I must realise that the suicide will be reborn somewhere else in the universe — perhaps as a ghost or in one of the hells. I can end this present life, but I cannot stop living in some form or other; and, of course, since suicide is itself a misdeed, the act of taking my own life would itself accrue bad karma which must work itself out in the form of suffering.

It is sometimes suggested that belief in karma makes Buddhists (and Hindus too) complacent about their lot in life. Why should a sick person seek a cure if the illness is due to previous misdeeds? Since one cannot ultimately escape from the effects of one's deeds, will not the law of karma catch up at some later stage with someone who recovers? In answer to this question, the Buddha listed altogether four causes of illness. Karma is one cause, but the weather, food, and faulty posture are three others. Getting soaked through can cause a chill; poisoned food can cause dysentery; a faulty gait can cause curvature of the spine. So the law of karma is only one of several natural laws which govern the universe. There are, in sum, five natural laws:

- (1) the order of seasons;

- (2) the germination of seeds;
- (3) laws governing mental activities;
- (4) karma; and
- (5) other laws which we cannot explain, such as the law of gravity.

The Six Realms.

Buddhism holds that there are six different realms into which one can be reborn. First, there is the human realm which we all currently inhabit.

Second, there is the realm of the animals, who are ignorant and incapable of understanding the Dharma.

Third, there is the realm of the gods: we previously saw that Buddhism does not deny that there are gods, but claims that gods, like humans and animals, are involved in the cycle of samsara. Divine pleasures will not last for ever, and once the life-span of a god or goddess is ended, he or she will be reborn in one of the other five realms.

Fourth, there is the realm of the asuras, or 'anti-gods' (sometimes called 'titans'). These beings covet the realm of the gods and engage in combat to gain access to a tree of life. Although they are coveting something desirable, their aims are misguided, since the asuras should be seeking enlightenment, not the pleasures of the gods' realm.

Fifth, there is the realm of the pretas, or hungry ghosts. These wraith-like beings are often portrayed with swollen bellies and pin-sized mouths which prevent them from satisfying their hunger. When any food or drink touches their lips it is transformed into something totally revolting and inedible. Wraiths or ghosts have always been somewhat of a puzzle to humankind: do they really exist?; why are they not properly dead?; how can they be 'laid' or exorcised? In Buddhist thought, ghosts are as real as any other being who is caught up in the wheel of samsara; they are ghosts because this is the appropriate consequence of some of their past karma, and they will cease to be ghosts when that these elements of their karma are burnt out and they are enabled to pass on to a subsequent existence in another of the six realms.

Finally, there are the hells. In Buddhism it is often stated that there is not merely one hell, but many. Often their very names are enough to indicate what the unfortunate offender might expect: 'Molten Brass', 'Flowing Fire', 'Ploughing Tongues', 'Head Chopping', 'Burning Feet', 'Flying Knives', 'Eye Pecking', 'Much Hatred'. Buddhist writings sometimes give gruesome descriptions of these states. Here is one:

There is a hell in which the offender's tongue is stretched out and plowed through by cattle; there is a hell in which the offender's heart is pulled out and eaten by yaksas [demons]; there is a hell in which the offender's body is fried in cauldrons of seething broth; there is a hell in which the offender is made to embrace a red-hot bronze pillar; there is a hell in which the offender is followed everywhere by fire; there is a hell in which there is cold and ice; there is a hell in which there is limitless dung and urine; there is a hell in which there are flying maces; there is a hell in which there are many fiery spears; there is a hell in which one is constantly beaten on the chest and back; there is a hell in which one's hands and feet are burned; there is a hell in which the offender is wrapped and bound by iron serpents; there is a hell in which there are running iron dogs; and there is a hell in which the offender is yoked between iron donkeys.²

If one wonders how one can survive the hells for any length of time, the answer is that one is constantly revived in order to experience continued torment. Flying knives

may kill, but one can die and be reborn hundreds of times within a single moment. Different Buddhists will understand the hells in different ways: some take these descriptions literally; others view them as symbolic of states of torment which must be undergone in human lives as a result of misdeeds. Thus a hell-being might be viewed as a person in acute mental torment, or a god as someone who experiences every comfort in life: someone might move from one realm to another within the same earthly existence. There is one thing on which Buddhists would agree, however: the hells are not the handiwork of some malevolent being: they are the products of ourselves, created by our own evil karma.

Nirvana

To escape from these six realms is to reach nirvana, the ultimate goal of the Buddhist. Nirvana is difficult, indeed impossible to define; it is much easier to say what nirvana is not than it is to state what nirvana is. Although Buddhists sometimes speak of 'entering' nirvana, unlike the Christian concept of the kingdom of heaven, nirvana is not a place in a spiritual world where enlightened people go after death. Yet nirvana is not oblivion. What we can say is that it is the only state which is truly worth attaining and which is not subject to the unsatisfactoriness of our present physical world. Nirvana is something which cannot be understood fully until it is experienced. There is a Buddhist fable which illustrates this point, and which is worth quoting.

Once upon a time there lived a fish and a turtle who were friends. The fish, having lived all his life in the water knew nothing whatever about anything else. One day, as the fish was swimming in the water, he met his friend, the turtle, who had just returned from an excursion on land. On being told this, the fish said, "On dry land! What do you mean by 'dry land'? I have never seen such a thing — 'dry land' is nothing!"

"Well," said the turtle, "you are at liberty to think so, but that is where I have been all the same."

"O, come," said the fish, "try to talk sense. Just tell me, what is this 'land' of yours like? Is it all wet?"

"No, it is not wet," said the turtle.

"Is it nicely fresh and cool?" asked the fish.

"No, it is not fresh and cool," replied the turtle.

"Is it clear, so that light can come through it?"

"No," it is not clear. Light cannot come through it."

"Is it soft and yielding, so that I can move my fins about in it and push my nose through it?"

"No, it is not soft and yielding. You cannot swim in it."

"Does it move or flow in streams? Does it ever rise up into waves with white foam on them?" asked the fish, becoming rather impatient at the string of "No's".

"No," replied the turtle, "it never rises up into waves."

The fish then asked, "If the land is not a single one of these things, what else is it but nothing?"

"Well," said the turtle, "if you are determined to think that 'dry land' is nothing, I cannot help you. But anyone who knows what is water and what is land would say you

were a silly fish for you think that anything you have never known is nothing just because you have never known it.”³

The Two Levels of Truth

Far from meaning extinction, it is only nirvana which is real, according to the Buddhist. Everything else is subject to delusion. Not only the self is illusory, but the entire physical world is riddled with delusion.

It may be puzzling to be told that we do not see the world as it really is. Does this mean that we are constantly hallucinating? Has the Buddhist no means of distinguishing between the illusory mirage and the real oasis in the desert? Or does this mean that if I were a Buddhist I would be lying if I told you that I was really and truly sitting in a real room, writing a real book?

One Buddhist thinker who lived in the second century CE was particularly important in trying to explain this. His name was Nagarjuna, and most Buddhist thinkers today accept his doctrine of the ‘two levels of truth’.

His teaching can be explained as follows. There is ‘conventional truth’ and there is ‘ultimate truth’. Conventional truth is what we accept most of the time, barring human error. It is conventionally true that I am sitting at a table, writing this book, since anyone else who happened to watch me would agree. It would be ‘conventionally false’ to believe that I was Ronald Reagan and used to star in Hollywood films, and most people would regard me as insane if I claimed that this were true.

But what we conventionally accept as a true statement is not an ‘ultimate truth’, for the author George Chryssides is no permanent enduring being, and this book is not a permanently enduring book. But it is an ‘ultimate truth’ that there are three Marks of Existence — impermanence, the absence of a permanent self, and unsatisfactoriness — and someone who has reached nirvana recognises this. However, if asked ‘How many people are in this room?’ an enlightened person would not say ‘none’, for even the very few who are enlightened still have to live out the remainder of their lives in the world of our conventions.

A further example might help to explain this, but it must be remembered that it is only a rough analogy. Tables and chairs look solid, but a physicist will tell us that they are really large bundles of atomic particles, swirling round in constant motion. ‘Conventionally’ the table looks solid, but in reality most of it is empty space. Yet what physicist has ever refused to sit in a chair because it is not solid or not stationary? Although the physicist may have discovered the real nature of chairs, he or she will still act in the conventional way when it comes to sitting down.

Something like this is true of enlightenment. When nirvana is reached, tables and chairs do not seem to disappear into oblivion. In fact, the everyday world must exist if it is constantly changing. The enlightened one does not see something different from the unenlightened, but ‘something more’ in the world of samsara in which enlightened and unenlightened alike both live.