

Sylvia Wetzel Heart of the Lotus

BUDDHISM IS CHANGING

Westerners frequently ask what Buddhism actually is: Is it a religion? A philosophy to live by? An ethical system? Or a refined psychological system? If one defines Religion as a spiritual system which concerns itself with the relationship between God and humanity, Buddhism is not a religion, since its questions do not center on God.

The historical Buddha thought that statements about a transcendental authority which the monotheistic religions call God could not describe an objective reality but were instead a reflection of the person or persons making the statement. We can learn much about the desires and fears of people in different cultures from the descriptions of God in their religions. Buddhism is a system of teachings and exercises which guides people out of their narrow, egocentric viewpoints so that they can consider the larger questions of life and death. In this respect, Buddhism is a religion. In the classic abridged version of his teachings, The Four Noble Truths, Buddha describes the daily existential suffering of humanity, its causes and the possibility of being freed from suffering; pointing the way to that freedom.

In contrast to the prophets of the revelatory religions, Buddha never answered questions which he did not consider relevant to liberation. He once took a handful of leaves and asked his students "what is larger, the number of leaves in my hand or the number of leaves in the woods? Just as there are more leaves in the woods, my knowledge of things is greater than that which I teach." That was how Buddha distinguished between that which he knew and understood and that which he taught. He also advised his students not to speculate about matters which were beyond their horizon at that time. Instead, he taught them methods to broaden their horizons.

Thus, Buddhism teaches above all methods of self-awareness. Buddha spoke about the strengths and weaknesses of people and emphasised that it is possible for them to develop further. In this sense, Buddhism is a distinctive psychology: it describes the mechanics of perception, of emotional processes and patterns of behavior. It distinguishes between conceptual and nonconceptual understanding and teaches methods of self-education. These are all subjects of Psychology and Psychotherapy but Buddhism is more than an intelligent system of Psychology because it

considers existential questions and points the way to trans-personal understanding.

Throughout its two-and-a-half- thousand year history, Buddhism has proven to be a living, effective religious way which, in every period and in every culture, developed and taught methods corresponding to the mentality of the people of that time and place. Those who came after Buddha found new symbols, systems and explanations for the path from suffering into freedom. But the strong emphasis on meditation and non-conceptual understanding kept the buddhist tradition alive until today. Without claiming to be complete, I would like to illustrate the flexibility of Buddhism by describing some of its historical development.

The historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, the wise one of the family of the Sakyas (S. Shakyamuni) lived and taught sometime in the 6th century B.C. in northern India. He taught ethics, concentration and understanding as the way out of suffering. The spiritual ideal of this early period was "the male as monk." Today, in the East and in the West the classic Theravada traditions in particular follow the ideal of this period.

Around the beginning of the first century A.D., both the buddhist Mahayana tradition in the East and Christianity in the West had their beginnings. Both taught that charity to our neighbors is an important element of the spiritual path. Empathetic love and wisdom are the major themes of Mahayana, and its ideal is usually the male but sometimes the female Bodhisattva, a being which strives for the "enlightenment of all." In the first century A.D., the Indian teacher Nagarjuna formulated the philosophical foundation of Mahayana in India with his refined metaphysics and evocative poetry of emptiness.

Mahayana is Sanskrit for "great vehicle," and the Mahayana tradition also calls the classical Theravada tradition Hinayana which is Sanskrit for "small vehicle." This intentionally condescending designation illustrates the conviction in Mahayana that Hinayana's goal of personal freedom from suffering is inferior to that of Mahayana, which is universal enlightenment. However, the oral tradition of Tibetan Buddhism stresses that one can only successfully practice Mahayana on the foundation of Hinayana and that Hinayana and Mahayana are not primarily separate traditions or lines of thought. The distinction is found much more in the approach to the training. The Tibetan Lama Thubten Yeshe often criticised the arrogance of his Western students with respect to Hinayana, remarking that they only meditated in order to feel good. In order to

strive for the goal of freedom from all suffering, however, one must understand the exact nature of his or her own suffering, which most of his students did not.¹

In strongly patriarchal India of the first centuries A.D, the old mother religions became more influential, with their respect for women, the physical body, the elements, the cosmos, relationships and daily life. Page 19 The encounter of these religions with Mahayana resulted in the buddhist Tantra tradition, Vajrayana. In China, Mahayana's encounter with the social ethics of Confucianism and the refined natural mysticism of Daoism, resulted in the unique Chinese Ch'an, which developed still further forms in Korea, Japan (Zen) and Vietnam. Buddhism came to schamanistic Tibet at the beginning of the 7th Century A.D. and developed there into the special form of Tibetan Vajrayana.²

Society and Culture

Buddhism, with its emphasis on personal experience, on immediate, direct perception and on the present, with its keen observation of inner attitudes and the motives of our actions, appears to offer a framework within which we can approach the questions of our time and avoid stepping backwards into dogma and rigidity. A spiritual system which assumes that we can perceive every moment as new and immediate, which trusts that we can attain freedom and enlightenment in the here and now, requires above all the courage, insight and strength to deal with all those questions which move women and men at the beginning 21st century.

In the West, we are seeing the beginnings of contemplative psychotherapy and Hospice groups, which offer comfort and companionship on the way to death based on buddhist principles. There are buddhist peace marches in the East and West, and a number of buddhist teachers are engaged in political parties. In Sri Lanka, the Saravodaya Shramadana movement is growing. This grass-roots movement, oriented around Ghandi and Buddhism, experiments with new forms of working together in the community. In Japan, psychotherapeutic practices based on Buddhism, using awareness and non-judgmental perception have been known since

¹ Compare Lama Yeshe, *On the Psychology of Sutra and Tantra*, printed series of the Aryatara Institute, Munich, Germany, Jägerndorf 1985 (in German). Address: see Appendix

² Compare Volker Zotz, *Geschichte der buddhistischen Philosophie*, Rowohlt's Enzyklopädie 537 (Reinbek 1996) on the history of Buddhist philosophy (in German).

the early 20th century. Newer practices, such as Naikan, work above all with empathy and compassion.³

Buddhist teachings and exercises strengthen the understanding that every change begins in our own heart and doesn't stop there but continues to affect everything we do. Since the early 80s, the 14th Dalai Lama has been interpreting the key theme of Mahayana, Bodhicitta – that is, the desire to awaken for the common good of all beings – as universal responsibility; he emphasises the obligation to be actively compassionate. Karma teachings explain how our inner attitudes work as inner causes in conjunction with outer conditions to create realities. Every wise, compassionate, generous thought is a building block to a better world. Every hate-filled thought increases suffering. If we can do anything to reduce violence, ruthlessness, exploitation and indifference, we should do it. According to Buddhism, however, the work for a better world only leads to that goal when we act out of generosity and affection, with insight and composure. As long as our actions arise from anger, for example anger at social, political and economic structures and at the persons who uphold these structures, our actions will result in suffering for all those involved. Anger is often the impetus to reflect about social, political and economic structures. When we then try to change outer conditions acting from a positive attitude, and not from fear or anger, we will reach much more.

The Core of the Teachings

The teachings are supposed to help us to master problems and develop abilities. The outer forms which make this possible are different in Tibet and Japan, in Burma and Vietnam, in Korea and Sri Lanka, in India and

³ Books of the following authors are all available in book stores: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Sarvodaya (Wohlfahrt für Alle)*, Hinder and Deelmann, Gladenbach 1975 (in German); Michael Blume, *Satyagraha*, Hinder and Deelmann, Gladenbach 1987 (in German); Christopher Titmus, *Green Buddha*, (Insight Books, Totnes 1995); Bernard Glassman, *Anweisungen für den Koch*, (Hoffmann und Campe 1997) (in German); Joanna Macy, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*, (New Society Pub. 1983); Raymond Corsini, *Handbuch der Psychotherapie, Bd. 2*, (Beltz 1994); Compare the sections: *Focussing, Meditation, Morita-Therapy, Naikan-Therapy* (in German); Raymond Corsini, *Handbook of Innovative Therapy, 2d Ed* (John Wiley and Sons 2001); Christine Longaker, *Facing Death and Finding Hope: A Guide to the Emotional and Spiritual Care of the Dying* (Doubleday 1998); An association has already been formed in Germany which concerns itself with socially-engaged Buddhism: Network of engaged Buddhists, *Mitwelt Verein Berlin*, a member group in the Deutschen Buddhistischen Union.

Thailand, but their essence is the same. Asked whether intensely concerning oneself with western philosophy and psychology could be in agreement with Buddhism, the Tibetan Lama Thubten Yeshe answered in 1983 as follows: "Two things are important: there is enlightenment, and it is possible for all beings. Everything which supports you in understanding and carrying that out is Dharma, even if it is called something else."⁴

"I only teach one thing, the way to freedom from suffering" is a much-quoted saying of Buddha. In Mahayana it is said that all beings have a Buddha-Nature. What is Buddha Nature? It is the fundamental openness, clarity and sensitivity of our mind – the nature of mind –, which makes enlightenment possible. If we recognise this and rest in it, the wisdom will arise which sees all things as they are. Our view is not distorted by disturbed emotions, expectations and fears, and we don't confuse things with our thoughts about them, with images, mental abridgements and concepts. This is called Wisdom in Buddhism, and all teachings, and exercises should help us in supporting its development.⁵

⁴ From a conversation of the author with Lama Yeshe in September 1983 in Istituto Lama Tsonkhapa, Pomaia, Italy.

⁵ What draws people to Buddhism in this day and time, and who is concerned with Buddhist meditation? The American Buddha scholar and Buddhist Elisabeth Napper described in 1997 three groups of people in the West who turn to Buddhism. They correspond approximately to the three effect levels of meditation which the American culture philosopher Ken Wilber distinguishes: the therapeutic, the existential and the soteriological or transcendental levels. (Cited from Roger Walsh in: Corsini, Handbuch, supra at p. 664.)/or: They correspond approximately to the levels of consciousness described by the American Culture philosopher Ken Wilber. See Ken Wilber, No Boundary: Eastern and Western Approaches to Personal Growth (Shambala 1985); Napper's evaluation agrees with my own experiences in the Buddhist movement in Germany: About one fourth of the people who read buddhist books and attend lectures and courses are interested in a new religious way; about one fourth see a new philosophy of life in Buddhism, and about one half of them are simply looking for help in their lives. They have nothing against Buddhism but are not interested in it as a religious or philosophical system. Quoted from E. Napper's lecture at the conference Frauen in Buddhismus, Frankfurt University, February 1997. The report of the conference is available from: Thea Mohr, Universität Frankfurt, Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik. Up until now, Buddhist centers in Germany and generally everywhere in the West directed their programs mainly to people seeking a new religion. A large part of the buddhist books on the market are directed to this group, and it is easier to concern oneself with the classical teachings. You need much experience and insight, however, to prepare these teachings as an aid to life in a culturally neutral manner or for a specific culture.

Some eastern teachers are looking for new ways to get the teachings across. In the 70's, the Tibetan Lama Choegyam Trungpa founded a Buddhist university in Boulder Colorado,

USA. The Naropa Institute in Boulder offers B.A. and M.A. programs in meditation, Buddhist philosophy, contemplative psychology, asian martial arts and Ikebana, for example. Compare the books of Choegyam Trungpa and his female student, Pema Choedroen, which are found in the Appendix.

In the mid-80's, the Tibetan lama Akong Rinpoche, working with western students who were psychotherapists, worked on developing a culturally-neutral transmission of Buddhist teachings. The result, the Tara-Rokpa-Process, is based on the central teachings and practices of Buddhism – mindfulness, love, compassion and insight – but transmits them in a secular framework. Methods from Western psychotherapy are also included: biography work, free painting and drawing, creativity, roll-playing, etc. You can get information about the Tara-Ropka-Process by contacting Tara Rokpa Germany, Markgrafenstr. 5 10969 Berlin.