

AGAINST THE STREAM



BEACHCOMBER

1997

INTRODUCTION

IN 1984, I wrote my first book, *KEYS FOR REFUGEES*, mainly for the refugees of SE Asia, to encourage them to hold onto and understand their religion in the face of the concerted efforts of missionaries to convert them. Years later, I rewrote it under the new title of *DOWN TO EARTH*, updating and enlarging it. Now, almost ten years later still, it incarnates for the third time, with new name and form. And since I have also changed, I've taken on a new name, too, a name that I feel suits me more than previous names, for this is what I am and have been as far back as I remember: a *Beachcomber*. I have always enjoyed—and *still* do—strolling along the beach looking at what the tides have cast up: sea-shells, pebbles, driftwood, and so on. It is just an extension of this to look at life, open to the unexpected, trying to extract lessons therefrom, wondering how to use what others may find useless.

Collectively speaking, we are the most fortunate people in history, at a stage of evolution that has never been reached before. It is as if we are on a mountainside, with people below us for as far as we can see, until they look like tiny ants or grains of sand on the plain. We do not and cannot know who those people were, but we *can* understand that if they had not been where they were then, so long ago, we would not be where we are now. We are here now only because they were there then; if the chain of continuity had broken, we simply would not exist.

By ourselves, we accomplish nothing; whatever we are able to accomplish we do so only because of the support of countless others, living and dead; even our languages, which make our lives so very rich and meaningful, are not ours, but have come from others. There is nothing we can claim as our own; we exist only in context, as part of something *infinitely* bigger than our individual selves.

Humbled by the view below us and the realization that we owe so much to so many, turn, and look up: the mountain-top is so far above us, hidden in the mist and clouds, and cannot be perceived; we—you and I—will never reach the top. Like those before us, we are privileged to take just a few steps upwards before making way for others to come after us. We will die, of course, but if we live purposefully, we will die with the satisfaction of knowing that our living and striving will help others to climb higher than we did. For what are our lives otherwise? It is crucial to see and feel ourselves in perspective, in context, for if we think of ourselves in isolation, separate from the rest of existence, there is no meaning.

What we are doing when we embark upon a spiritual path is to deliberately turn our back on the ways of the world, and go *against the stream*, hence the title of this book. It is a choice we consciously make, and shouldn't be half-hearted about it. But it doesn't mean that we walk out on it altogether and retire to a cave as a hermit; it means we have decided to try to keep the Dharma at the center of our lives—around which all our activities revolve—instead of at the circumference; it is not something part-time.

Some articles herein are little-changed from *DOWN TO EARTH*, while others have been modified and upgraded, some of them considerably. Others are completely new. I am writing in small print, not just to economize on paper—though that is one reason, I admit—but to make it a bit harder for people to read. And why should I do that, instead of making it easier? Well, why should we treat people as little children, always to be spoon-fed? I know some people will complain about it being 'too small', so I'll forestall them by asking how they manage to read newspapers?

If you are sufficiently interested to want to read it, you will do so, even if you must use a magnifying-glass. And I guarantee that if you have the necessary interest, you will get something from it. It depends upon *you*; my aim, as always, is to turn you back to yourself.



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BELIEVING IS *NOT* SEEING

BELIEF IS CENTRAL AND ESSENTIAL to *Theistic* or God-based religions; without Belief they would not exist. This is one of the main points in which Buddhism (as well as Confucianism and the *Tao* of Lao Tsu) differs from other religions: being *non-theistic*, it doesn't require belief!

And why? Because we can see, for ourselves—if we wish—what it teaches. When we merely believe something our minds are already made up about it. How to discover what is true if our minds are already made up? We must be open-minded and eager to learn, not closed-minded and dogmatic.

Believe it or not, Belief is an obstacle to finding out what is true. *We believe when we do not know; when we know, we do not believe! Seeing is knowing; believing is not-knowing.* Belief changes; Knowledge does not. We know, for example, that fire is hot and water is wet; this is so now, it was so before, and it will always be so; it's not a matter of belief.

Belief and Disbelief are the opposite sides of the same coin; they go together, inseparably, like black and white, day and night; one implies the other. Only if we can put aside both belief and disbelief, will we be able to see, and not before.

Belief binds our minds more firmly than chains may bind our bodies. Most of us are prisoners of belief, in one form or another, and even *disbelievers* are prisoners of it—the very fact that they proclaim their disbelief so loudly proves this, for *Disbelief* is just the reverse side of Belief. We cannot *disbelieve* unless we first *believe*.

Hundreds of years ago, Europeans believed the Earth to be the center of the Universe, with the Sun and all the other stars and planets turning about it, as that is what the Church taught, and woe betide anyone who thought otherwise. But, after observing the skies through the newly-invented telescope, an Italian scientist named GALILEO (1564-1642), discovered that this was not so, and that our planet revolves around the Sun. When he made known his findings, however, there was an uproar, and the authorities—the Church of Rome, that is, which had tremendous power in all areas of life at that time—not ready to accept facts, persecuted him. Under threat of being burnt at the stake, Galileo was made to sign a confession stating that he was misguided and wrong; not content with this, the Church sentenced him to house-arrest for the remainder of his life. Perhaps he should have expected this and been more discreet (as should Salmon Rushdie in recent times). But then, the truth might have had to wait a little longer before finding its way to the surface.

In 1980—*1980, not 1580!*—a special Church commission met in Rome to *reconsider* the question of the Earth's position in the Solar System, and after discussing the issue at great length, agreed that Science had conclusively proved that the Earth revolves around the Sun, and that therefore Galileo had been right. Then, in May 1983, Pope John-Paul II presided over a meeting of a large gathering of Church dignitaries, historians and scientists, to openly admit the Church's mistake and absolve Galileo. What a loss of face for the Church that has so long regarded itself as *infallible* to admit this! At last, poor Galileo was vindicated—350 years after his death!—and the guilty conscience of the Church somewhat assuaged. So, Truth does eventually triumph—sometimes, at least—but too late to do Galileo any good.

We adapt amazingly quickly to technological change and take it in our stride; we are sophisticated and competent that way. Spiritually, however, most of us are rather backward, and thus there is a great imbalance in our lives. The happiness we desire so much eludes us; we do not understand that it is a spiritual quality instead of something material.

There is an urgent need to balance the inner and the outer life; many of our problems exist because we have failed to achieve a balance. Externally—technologically and materially—we have made tremendous progress in the past few centuries, and especially towards the end of the twentieth century. But mentally, we've not kept up; indeed, many of us live in mental caves, even while our bodies repose in fine houses. This causes trouble, of course.

Unless we are to be hopelessly impractical and discard the comforts and luxuries of modern life, we must update our minds, through understanding—and through living *according* to such understanding—how we inter-exist and depend upon others. If we cannot—or *will* not—do this, we shall always be torn between two worlds: the old and the new, the primitive and the modern.

Some people, trying to live by old standards that seem to them to have worked in the past, reject modernity and its products, but what we need is a way—a *practical* way—that will allow us to live by time-tested codes and standards in the present, without feeling dislocated. Is there such a Way? In order to find out, we must examine the history and structure of religions and philosophies, not merely believe; if we do so, perhaps we will find that some of them are just facades, like film-sets, or fit only

for books on mythology and fairy-tales. *You can give a dog fleshless bones, and for a time it will be happy with them, but not forever!*

Religions, over the ages, have offered palliatives for people's sorrows and hope concerning life-after-death. But many of them are 'fleshless bones'—things impossible to verify, things dependent on mere belief. Is *your* religion—the religion you have inherited from others, the religion you have accepted without question, or the religion you have, in some cases, chosen for yourself, for whatever reason—a collection of fleshless bones, an old skeleton in the closet, or is it alive and dynamic? Ask yourself this: honestly and fearlessly: "What does my religion offer? " Does it offer only worn-out explanations and unreasonable dogmas? Does it provide you with a world-view consistent with present and ever-changing conditions? Does it help you maintain your sanity in this insane world that is rushing headlong to destruction? Does it help you see unity in diversity? Does it help you to feel part of things, even if only a *small* part among others? Does it describe your place among, and relationship to all other things, living and non-living? Does it inform you of your importance, or does it grind you down into servility and insignificance?

When all they can throw at us are promises of salvation and life-in-heaven on the other side of death if we believe them, and threats of Hell for disbelieving, but nothing to live on now, it is a sign that they are spiritually bankrupt. How long are we going to be tricked by these cheaters posing as teachers?

The crux of the matter is FEAR; we are afraid to die, and even afraid to live; we are quite unadventurous and unwilling to think for ourselves. If we found meaning in our lives, if our lives were not so shallow and empty, then fear of living and dying, and of what happens after death, would diminish. We would need no motive for living well in the Here-and-Now, but would do what has to be done without thinking too much about results.

If we are honest with life, life will be honest with us; it's not a game without rules, and the sooner we learn the rules, the sooner we'll be able to play without continually losing.

If we examine our beliefs objectively, we may see if they are valid or not. It is not enough to accept the word of others, or believe what's written in books; we must strive to know for ourselves. We live in an enlightened age ('enlightened' in some ways, at least, though in other ways it seems to be 'ennightened'!) Why be content to call ourselves 'Buddhists', 'Christians', this or that, just because our parents and grandparents do/did? We have our own lives to live, and should be able to choose, for ourselves, which way we want to go. When we go shopping, we choose what we want to buy from a variety of goods, instead of buying the first thing we come to. It is possible now for most of us to study almost anything; there is no secret knowledge reserved for the elite few any more; the wonderful ability to read unlocks the door of the House of Knowledge. Surely, if such things as Happiness and Truth are important to us, we will search in many places, and not restrict ourselves to the ideas of those around us.

Sadly, it is much easier to cheat people than it is to enlighten them! Only lazy people believe what others tell them, and are easily deceived by the many crafty and unscrupulous people in the world, whether they are door-to-door salesmen, politicians, missionaries, or just plain liars and thieves!

The beliefs of many religions do not stand up to close scrutiny and investigation, as they are not based upon facts. We can, of course—and *do*—interpret things to suit ourselves, and find meaning where there are no meanings; we like to play hide-and-seek, and we play it so long that we forget it is a game and take it for real, and so get lost. Or we go to sleep, and sleep for a long time, until something—often something painful and unpleasant—comes along to disturb our dreams, and sets us on the Way once more.

Seldom do we see with our own eyes and minds, but usually through those of others: our family, friends, leaders, writers, public figures—sometimes even with the eyes of our enemies! We accept the standards of others, so what they call 'beautiful', 'ugly', 'good' and 'bad', we also do; thus, we are easily manipulated and controlled. If we used our own eyes and minds, we could learn to see things much clearer and deeper; we would become aware of much more wonder and beauty around us, even in things that are dismissed by others as 'commonplace' and 'ordinary'. Look for yourself, and see!

I'm not saying here, however, that we should not try to see things from other people's points-of-view, because it is extremely important to do so, and the more angles we can look at a thing from, the clearer the picture we shall get of it. No, what I mean is that we should not allow ourselves to be unduly influenced by others into accepting their viewpoints and beliefs without critical examination. We have the capacity to think, do we not? This is the major factor that distinguishes us from the lower animals, which live by instinct and have little choice over the way they live. *We* can think, *we* can choose and decide, *we* can change our lives—if we want to.

Can we live without belief about life-after-death, heaven, hell, etc.? Can we listen to others—teachers, preachers, parents, leaders, and so on—without belief, so that we may discover whether what they say is true and useful or not? I would say, "Yes, it is." Do not believe *me*, either. Try it, for yourself, and see.

Why be content with old bones?

Demand reality, now!



IF IT'S WRONG, DISCARD IT

YEARS AGO, there was a program on British TV called *Catweazle*, about a wizard from the time of the mythical King Arthur, who—because one of his spells had gone awry—found himself transposed into the 1960's. Imagine his surprise at the amazing things he saw all around him—things that we take so much for granted! An electric light-bulb fascinated him, and seemed like '*the sun in a bottle*'! And when he learned that the device by which we communicate with each other over long distances is called a *telephone*, he remembered that word as '*telling-bone*', as it had some resemblance to a bone! There were other funny things that I've now forgotten.

Now, suppose it were possible to take a TV set 500 years back into the past and demonstrate it to the people of that time: how do you think they would react? Undoubtedly, some would declare it sorcery—an instrument of 'the Devil'—and try to destroy it. Some would say it is a miracle, and make of it a new religion, with attendant priests to operate and use it to keep people in subjection. Others would denounce it as impossible, a fraud, an illusion. Still others would try to discover how so many people and things could get inside such a small box. Reactions would be varied. But would anyone understand it?

Nowadays, television is part of our lives, and almost no-one questions it; it's just there, and has been for as long as most of us can remember. But even so, few of us understand how it works. Some still deem it an instrument of 'the Devil' (just before I rewrote this, there was a report that the Muslim fundamentalist party that now controls most of Afghanistan—the *Taleban*—had ordered people there to dispose of their TV sets and VCRs within 15 days, claiming them responsible for immorality). Others still consider it a miracle (and in a way, it is); and some do, indeed, make of it a religion. Most people just turn it on and watch it.

My point here is that, as knowledge increases, ignorance decreases. Honest people—those who sincerely wish to find out what is true, and are not content to follow others or accept theories that have been handed down from the past—are not afraid to discard ideas that are wrong, useless and harmful when they know them to be so; they are not ashamed to admit that they don't know when they don't know, for it is from recognizing ignorance that knowledge arises; indeed, as Confucius is reported to have said: "To admit that you do not know *what* you do not know—that is knowledge", or, as the Buddha said: "The fool who knows he is a fool is wise to that extent, but the fool who thinks he is wise is indeed a fool!"

Why have Religion and Science been so long apart? Must Religion always be dressed up in superstition, ritual and silly beliefs? Can there be a religion that does not conflict with Science—a Scientific Religion, or a Religious Science? Can we, perhaps, look at things objectively and scientifically? Scientists are willing to change their theories when they see they no longer apply; it is because of this that Science has advanced so far and continues to advance. If we had advanced religiously at the same rate we have advanced scientifically, the world would not be in the confused state it is in; but most people seem to be 'living in caves' as far as religion is concerned, and afraid, unwilling or unable to bring themselves up-to-date in that area. Because of this, the world is still subject to so-called 'religious' conflicts and wars, and this will probably cause the almost-inevitable Third World War.

There are two kinds of knowledge: Direct Knowledge and Indirect Knowledge. Most of our knowledge is not our own but second-hand—that is, it comes to us from other sources: people, books, TV, etc; we know comparatively little by ourselves. On the way of self-discovery, however, there is no substitute for Direct Knowing; knowledge from others, from books, from hearsay—indispensable though it is in many areas—is not enough. We must experience Truth or Reality for ourselves, just like we experience the heat from fire: we *know* it burns, not merely *believe* it!

Knowledge about mechanics, computers, carpentry, printing, etc., etc., is very important, as it enables us not only to earn a living, but also to improve the world we live in. Life is much more than just earning a living and surviving, however; *that* kind of knowledge concerns the 'outer' life. But what of the 'inner' life? We must consider that, too, so that there is a balance, a harmony between the two, instead of conflict. The West has concentrated largely on external things and has advanced tremendously in this area; it has produced many things of great benefit for the whole world, but it has also created things of horror and detriment, like chemical and bacteriological weapons, etc. It neglected the inner life in favor of the outer life, so that now, there is great imbalance and conflict everywhere. That is often the way it is; we swing from one extreme to the other, like the pendulum of a clock, until,

learning that extremes are states of disharmony and suffering, we gradually find a balance, and the pendulum stops swinging.

The world is full of wrong and foolish ideas—in fact, the World itself—not the Planet Earth, but the World as a political structure; let us recognize the difference—is an idea! There is no separate reality or entity called ‘the World’; we have made it; it’s an idea, and ideas are subject to change, sometimes very quickly! If we understand this, it becomes possible to change wrong and foolish ideas into better ideas; there is no reason why we should not, and every reason why we should.

The Buddha said: “There are two things without limits: Space, and Human Stupidity”. How can suffering diminish when its cause prevails? It is the foolish ideas— ignorance—that cause most of the suffering and all of the evil in the world; it is not because we are bad and sinful that we do bad things, but because we are blind and stupid—either part-time or full-time. But must we remain so? Only if we want to.

As far as Understanding is concerned, there are four kinds of people in the world:

- (1) Those who understand quickly;
- (2) Those who understand slowly;
- (3) Those who do not understand;
- (4) Those who misunderstand.

AND IT IS BETTER TO KNOW NOTHING AT ALL IF WHAT YOU KNOW IS WRONG.
Wrong ideas will only cause you pain.

Have you noticed how we always consider ourselves right and others wrong? Obviously, we think Right and Wrong are people: *Mr. Right* and *Mrs. Wrong*. Indeed, we do not need to look very deeply to find this extremely-myopic way of viewing things at the root of many of the world’s problems. Should we not try to understand this? Right and wrong are *not* people, *not* I, *not* you, and if we would only stop to consider *what* is right and wrong in the context of a particular situation, instead of *who* is right and wrong, many of our problems would disappear instantly. Test it, for yourself, and see!



LEARNING

TO LEARN IS SOMETHING quite different than to study. Learning is basic and involves our own experience, and for this there is no substitute. Study, on the other hand, is academic, and usually of things already known, shown by others, cut-and-dried, like hay.

A little baby does not sit down and study how to walk from a book, but learns from its own experience, and after much failure, frustration, pain and tears. Even babies born blind learn how to walk; it is not merely a matter of imitating others. And so it is upon the Way.

If you wish to learn, pay no attention to the personality or appearance of the teacher; such things should not concern you. Listen to what he says, and think about it clearly, to see if it is true and useful or not. If you like or dislike the teacher, your vision will be clouded thereby.

Is there a difference between 'chicken' and 'kitchen'? Is there a difference between 'teacher' and 'cheater'? I have heard people, just learning English, confuse 'chicken' with 'kitchen'; just so, many people confuse cheaters with teachers. There are many cheaters posing as teachers, so we must beware; neither believe or disbelieve what the teacher says, but check it carefully. The teacher is important only insofar as what he says is true and pertinent. He should not cause you to depend upon him, as upon a drug, but should help you to learn and understand that everyone and everything is a teacher. This is his duty as a teacher.

Once, a king went out to visit a certain part of his kingdom, accompanied by his courtiers and servants. On the way, they came to a mango-grove, and the king noticed that, while one tree had a good crop of ripe mangoes, the other trees had none. Being fond of mangoes, like most of us, he thought: "On the way back, after I've concluded my business, we'll stop and gather some of these mangoes"; he then went on ahead. His followers, however, had different ideas. They were also fond of mangoes, but were not willing to wait until later; instead, unbeknown to the king, they took sticks and stones and knocked down every mango on the tree, and broke many branches in doing so.

When they returned later on that day, the king was looking forward to eating mangoes, but all he found was a battered tree stripped of fruit. Being a wise man, however, he didn't become angry or sad, but thought: "This is interesting. The tree that had much fruit is badly damaged, but the other trees, which had none, are untouched. There is a lesson for me here: Have much, and suffer much; have little, and suffer little." With this in mind, he returned to the palace, where he called his eldest son to him and placed the crown on his head, saying: "From now on, you are the king. Rule wisely". Then he changed his royal robes for the simple garb of a mendicant, left the palace, and went off to live in a forest, far away. And if anyone happened to come across him there and asked him: "Who is your teacher?"—a common question that seekers ask each other—he replied: "My teacher is a mango tree".

We should not always depend upon a teacher to teach us everything, but should cultivate a burning interest and unquenchable spirit of inquiry. It is infinitely better to learn than to be taught. All the teaching in the world is useless if we are not ready to learn.

The answers to all our problems cannot be found in any book or books. If we depend upon books to solve all our problems we shall be forever running to the library to see what the books have to say about them. This is not to deny the importance of books, because there are countless things we can learn from them, and it would be silly to discard them as useless. Understanding something of Dharma—which we might get from books—however, takes us further than books can, and helps and encourages us to develop the intelligence necessary to find our own answers.

To follow the Way, we must be learners, not students (it's not an academic pursuit), and this means being humble and ready to admit we don't know when we don't know. Pretending to know when we don't know, and taking academic knowledge as our own experience, is a great obstacle. There are people whose pride won't allow them to admit to not knowing; before they will do that, they will lie to conceal their ignorance, and so make a double error. Pride is an impediment, not a virtue. It has been written: "Be humble if you would attain Wisdom. Be humbler still when you have attained it."

It saddens me somewhat when I hear people say of my talks: "What can I learn from him?" I am sad not for myself, but for them, and say: "Yes, they may be right. But it's not because there is nothing to be learned; it's because their minds are already so made up, so full of ideas and beliefs, that nothing more will go in. If you know how to learn, you can learn something from anyone and anything, without exception; and when learning becomes sufficiently important to you, you will not mind who you learn from".

To illustrate this here, I want to tell a true little story that came to me from a doctor somewhere in Malaysia.

While serving in the Anaesthetic Department of a certain hospital, Dr Tan was often faced with the breakdown of the ageing anaesthetic machine. Whenever this happened, a hospital attendant by the name of *Muniandy* was sent for, as he was the only one who knew how to repair and get it running again. The doctor not only respected Muniandy for his quiet competence, but felt rather embarrassed that he, and no-one else, should know how to fix the troublesome machine; he decided that he had to learn to do it himself.

When he requested Muniandy to teach him, however, he was met with a look of astonishment. Muniandy was not highly educated; it was inconceivable to him that anyone as educated and qualified as a doctor should ask him for instruction. He humbly refused. The doctor insisted, however, saying that if he knew how to fix the machine himself, and it should break down when Muniandy was off-duty, his new ability could save someone's life. Muniandy saw the logic of this and therefore explained and demonstrated how the machine worked and how to repair it. Because Muniandy's knowledge was that of experience instead of mere theory, the doctor was easily able to absorb his lesson.

When he was transferred to another hospital, Dr Tan was confronted with an anaesthetic machine newly-imported from Germany, with the instructions all in *German*, which no-one there understood. What he had learned from the old machine, however, enabled Dr Tan to master the intricacies of it, without recourse to the instruction-manual; Muniandy was always in his mind whenever he approached the machine.

Years later, when Dr Tan started his own practice, Muniandy, who had by then retired, came by to visit him. They reminisced about old times together, and when the subject of the old machine arose, tears came to Muniandy's eyes. He said: "In all my 35 years of service as a hospital attendant, you were the only doctor to ask me to teach him anything. That is one of my happiest memories!"

Who knows everything? There is no reason to be so proud that we cannot or will not say, "I don't know". Only when and if we can say it, in all sincerity and humility, will we be able to make progress on a spiritual path.

Every situation, whether we like it or not, is an opportunity to learn. Painful and unpleasant things, especially, have good lessons to impart. A mosquito is a good example of this; it can help us to overcome our fear of pain, can help us to strengthen our minds, to develop patience and that highest of virtues: Compassion. How can a 'mozzie'—a thing so ordinary and despised—help us in so many ways?

Well, no-one likes being bitten by mosquitoes, of course, but our fear of the pain from their bites magnifies the pain out of all proportions, and is enough to keep some people awake at night, when these tiny but so-annoying insects come looking for dinner. You may test it for yourself, as an interesting experiment: Allow a mosquito to settle on you and bite. Without slapping it or brushing it off, observe it; it will take about ten minutes to drink its fill. Calmly watch the process and your own reaction, without fear or anger. You'll notice that the pain is minimal, whereas when you are afraid of it, it seems much more intense. Then, when it is full, allow it to fly away, without killing it; with a full stomach it will hardly be able to fly, and lumber away to digest its meal. It is said that only female mosquitoes bite and suck blood, which they need to fertilize their eggs; that is their nature; they have no choice about it.

Humans, however, *can* choose; we don't have to follow brutish instincts. We don't have to suck blood (though many humans—like arms-manufacturers and other war-mongers—do, living on the blood and suffering of others); we can choose to live lives of violence and destruction, or lives of peace and creation. No-one makes us behave like savage beasts.

After the mosquito has flown away, maintain mindfulness and observe the urge to scratch the itch the anti-coagulant it has injected into you has caused, and resist it. Under observation, when you are in control of your mind, you will find that the desire to scratch will not be half as great as when you do not observe it. It's a case of 'mind over matter', and it works.

Within a few minutes, the itchiness will wear off, whereas if you scratch it, it will last much longer; I have seen people with scars all over their arms and legs from the mosquito-bites they had scratched until they bled when they were children.

All living things wish to be happy and avoid pain, just like us. We do not like others to come along and disturb, hurt or kill us, and it's the same with all forms of life; as humans, we can and should reflect

on this. Even the single-celled amoeba will react and withdraw if a drop of weak acid is put into a dish with it; the dislike of pain is so universal.

The one who saves life is stronger than the one who kills. Anyone can kill; it doesn't require much intelligence. But to heal and save life is not so easy, and needs compassion, thought, and effort. If we cannot help, we should not harm.

Buddhists look upon the lesser animals, and other living things, as their younger siblings. They are not there for our sport, pleasure or food, no matter which person or book says so. They are there to live their own lives, to fulfill their own destiny, to evolve and grow, to climb, slowly and painfully, the Mountain of Perfection, where Birth and Death are no more. In this, they are not different from us. If we do not like them—as in the case of mozzies—we can admit our preferences, as they are of our personality, and will always be so. But, looking deeper, beyond the personality, with its myopia and narrow limits, we find LOVE, and this doesn't choose, but embraces all equally; it has nothing to do with 'you' and 'I', with like and dislike, for it is not of self. Self is the center of most of our activities, but LOVE has no center, and therefore no circumference, no limits, and we can know LOVE even if we are not yet enlightened, by understanding the limits of self, and going beyond them. And is that not Enlightenment already?



GREAT EXPECTATIONS, GREAT DISAPPOINTMENTS

IF YOU GO TO INDIA, away from the cities and towns into the countryside, you will find life going on much the same as it did hundreds, or even *thousands* of years ago. Many villages still have no electricity, TV, telephones, paved roads, or even running water; people till their fields using primitive ploughs pulled by cows or buffaloes, draw water from wells, cook over cow-dung fires, etc.

In such conditions, it is easy to visualize the Buddha walking, barefoot, from place-to-place, with just an alms-bowl; His robes would probably be dusty and travel-stained and not often washed. Nor would He be clean-shaven every day, as we now are. He wouldn't always have a specific direction in mind, and would not be in a hurry, but would spend time with people who wished to learn something, or whom He thought He might lead onwards. With His great wisdom, He could discern the capacity of people to understand, and teach them accordingly. Can you see Him, this Great Teacher?—Teacher, Human-being, *not* God, or Savior, for Buddhism rejects the idea that anyone can save another from the effects of his own deeds.

In Richard Bach's book, *Illusions, or the Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*, there is a delightful little anecdote about a colony of creatures that lived on a streambed. They spent their entire lives clinging to rocks and weeds, with the water flowing over them. Once, one of these creatures, tired of clinging to the same stone, announced that he would die of boredom if he lived so any more, and had decided to let go and see where the current would carry him. "Fool!", said the other creatures nearby, "No-one has ever done that before! You'll be dashed against the rocks by the current and will then die a lot quicker than by boredom!" But he, disregarding their warnings, let go, and was immediately carried away by the current.

At first, he *was* dashed against the rocks as the others had predicted, but wasn't killed. Instead of resisting the rushing water, he allowed it to carry him, and was soon lifted above the streambed, clear of the rocks and weeds. Other creatures below, seeing him pass by overhead, exclaimed in surprise: "Look—a being just like ourselves, yet he flies! He must be a Savior, come to save us! A Savior! A Savior!" "No!" he cried, "I am no Savior, but one just like *you*. I let go, and the current carried me. If you let go, you too will be carried along!" But they didn't hear him, or chose to ignore his words, and cried all the more: "A Savior! A Savior!" And he was swept along, out of sight, and the other creatures remained clinging firmly to the places where they had been born, making legends of a Savior.

Although the Buddha stated clearly that no-one can save another, but that all must work out their own salvation, many Buddhists look for saviors to save them, praying to various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to forgive their sins, erase their 'bad karma', etc. Indeed, it sometimes seems that they even expect monks to be saviors and supermen, too, not wanting them to be human at all. They pay so much respect to monks, and put them so high, that they almost need telescopes to see them in the sky! Then, if their heroes do something wrong or that they don't like, they are disappointed and the monks fall in their esteem. But why are they disappointed? Because the monks did something wrong, or because they put them so high to begin with? Great expectations breed great disappointments. And if monks let themselves be so elevated, how can they possibly live up to such expectations? To try is to court disaster, because although we might *like* to be enlightened, what we would *like* to be, and what we *are*, are two different things. We would *like* to be enlightened, of course, but we don't become enlightened merely by wishing to be enlightened; enlightenment comes to us when we have earned it and are ready for it, and not before.

Now, while elevating monks very high, at the same time many people put themselves very low, thinking, perhaps, that they are thereby exempt from the Law; they use the monks as an excuse for doing things that they know they shouldn't do. Once, a man came to tell me that he'd seen a monk smoking, and said he thought it was very bad for monks to smoke. I agreed with him, but said: "How can you talk about others when you are smoking even as you are telling me?" He rationalized this by saying that, as he was not a monk, it was alright for him to smoke. Was this sound reasoning, do you think? Let us examine the mechanics of such thinking a little here.

As a monk myself, I've seen things from both sides of the fence and so am qualified to say that the Buddha's Way, contrary to what many Buddhists obviously think, is not only for monks, nuns, and others who live in temples and monasteries. It is open for anyone and everyone who sincerely wishes to follow it. Not understanding this, many Buddhists, in their ignorance and indolence, want and expect others to do everything for them. To remedy such misconceptions, it should be clearly stated that there

are not two Laws of Life, one for monks and another for the laity, but only one. And this Law of Cause-and-Effect makes no distinctions as to whether a person shaves his head or not, whether he wears a robe or ordinary clothes, whether he stays in a monastery or at home with his family. It is impartial, and has no preferences. If a monk takes hold of a burning coal he will be burnt by it, just as would a layman. A monk is subject to sickness, aging and death, just as are lay-people; he is not exempt from these things.

According to the Buddha, intention is the strongest factor in the making of *karma*; He said: “Intention, O monks, I declare to be karma”. You get the results of *your* karma, and I get the results of *mine*. If it were possible to transfer our karma to others, our enemies would transfer all their ‘bad’ karma to us and be rid of it, leaving us to suffer the effects of their bad actions—and would not that be convenient for them? However, how could it be? And, in the same way, how could it be possible to transfer our ‘good’ karma to others? The reason why, as Buddhists, we are advised to practice transferring our merit to others—if we dare even suppose that we *have* any merit to begin with—is because it opens the mind and heart of the person doing it, which is a meritorious action in itself, is it not?

It is imperative to see the Buddha as He was when He was alive on this Earth: Enlightened, but a human being, a very warm and caring human being. To deify the Buddha, as many people have done, and pray to Him for assistance and salvation, is a great mistake, for He never told anyone to believe in Him or pray to Him, but to find the Truth for themselves and thereby become Enlightened and Liberated from Ignorance. The Enlightenment of the Buddha is just that: The Enlightenment of the Buddha; it is not *our* Enlightenment. So, too, with merit; we must acquire our own, not pray or beg for it, and find our own enlightenment; we shall remain within *Samsara* until we do, and no amount of praying to be saved will release us therefrom.

Saints—*Arahants* and *Bodhisattvas*—are rare today, and not to be found in every temple or church, and if we expect to find them there, we will surely be disappointed. And would we be justified in blaming anyone for that? Could we reasonably blame monks or priests for not living up to our expectations and not being saints? Who could we blame but ourselves, for expecting so much? The walking of the Way is the most important thing, and there is no substitute for this, no-one can do it for us, just like no-one can eat for us. If no seed is sown, there will be no harvest; if there are no causes, there will be no effects, and it will be absolutely useless to complain that the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas or the monks didn’t save us. View the monks as teachers of the Way, whether they themselves follow the Way or not; the most important thing is that we learn, and Learn, and LEARN. And when learning is sufficiently important to us, we will not mind who we learn from.

In school, when we study geography or history, do we care if the people who teach these subjects have ever been to the places they talk about or witnessed the historical events they describe? And do you suppose that when monks speak about Buddhas, Arahants, Bodhisattvas, Nirvana, Heaven, Hell, etc., that they are speaking from their own personal experience, or from what they have heard or read elsewhere? Maybe they *are* speaking from their own experience, but probably not. If they are, that still does not make it true for anyone else; we must experience for ourselves, and only then will we know. This is why the Buddha exhorted people not to believe what He said, but to “Test my teachings, as a goldsmith would test gold”.

Someone once told me of a certain famous monk (the founder of the particular sect of Vietnamese Buddhism that he followed): “He was an Arahant—100% sure!” I asked him how he could be so sure when he had not even met the monk, and was not an Arahant himself? To recognize an Arahant as such, a person would have to be an Arahant himself, would he not? Arahants—*genuine* Arahants and Bodhisattvas, not the usual *fake* ones of today, of which there are not a few—would hardly go around making a show and declaring themselves so. We might say—as I say about people like Thich Quang Duc or Mother Theresa—that we *think* such a person is an Arahant or Bodhisattva. But that would be just our personal opinion, and have very little to do with whether a person were actually so or not; our opinion would not make them so.

Years ago, I addressed a group of Catholic nuns in a Buddhist temple in Manila; they were about to go for missionary work in various countries with large Buddhist populations, and wanted to know something of Buddhism. During my talk to them, I quoted from the Christian Bible so as to emphasize certain points and make comparisons. When I had finished and it was time for questions, one nun said: “We heard you quoting from Holy Scripture”, (meaning the Christian scriptures, as if they are the *only* scriptures in the world regarded as ‘holy’); “Are you allowed to do that?” I replied: “A diamond is a diamond no matter where it is found”. We do not expect to find Truth only in books, and certainly not

only in *Buddhist* books. Truth is not limited like that, and if we understand what the Buddha taught, we will be able to see the Dharma not only in the scriptures of other religions, but in *everything, everywhere*. Dharma is beyond Name and Form, and without limits.

Although Mother Theresa was a Catholic nun herself, she did not care that most of the sick, destitute and dying people she helped on the streets of Calcutta were probably Hindus or Muslims; she didn't use her compassionate help as a means to convert them to Catholicism. The idea of doing so would probably never have entered her head! You see, the word 'Catholic' has two forms, one a noun, and the other an adjective. When used in its noun-form, we might say: "Such-and-such a person is a Catholic", meaning a follower of the Catholic branch of Christianity. But in its adjective-form, such as when we might say that a person "has a catholic point-of-view", it means 'universal', 'liberal', 'broad', 'wide-open'. I thought of Mother Theresa as being Catholic in its adjective-form rather than its noun-form. If people call her a saint (as many do)—or even a *devil!*— would that have changed what she was in any way? Her compassion and selflessness constituted her sainthood, and it was hers; to canonize her will be as superfluous as painting a rose!

Is it not strange that, while Buddhism teaches that there is no Self—that a separate, personal 'self' or soul is an illusion—personality matters so much to many Buddhists? We are usually more concerned with the personality of the teacher than with his teachings, and this becomes a great obstacle. Often, we hear people criticizing monks, and saying that they like *this* monk, but not *that* one, while usually disregarding the Dharma altogether. *This* side of Enlightenment, we have ego, and because we are limited thereby, are subject to making mistakes. However, even though we are still unenlightened, there is no need for us to be bound up within the limits of ego and to act in egoistic ways. We can, if we want, go beyond, by reminding ourselves that the Dharma should occupy central place in our dealings with others, and not self.



SEEKING HAPPINESS, AVOIDING PAIN

WE WOULD THINK IT funny if we saw someone climbing an apple-tree searching for bananas, would we not? But this is not as strange as it sounds. Looking for happiness in places where happiness cannot be found is stranger and less rational than searching for bananas up an apple-tree.

Some years ago, I was requested to speak to the Asian Buddhist students of a certain high school in Sydney. I observed that they straggled into class late, were not interested or attentive, and had lost—or discarded—their traditional Asian manners and respect.

In order to get their attention, I asked them what they thought people all over the world wanted or were looking for. Well, because most of them were refugees from Vietnam or Cambodia, several of them said “Freedom”, but I countered this by saying that many people have that already and so are not looking for it; indeed, some people have too much freedom and don’t know what to do with, so abuse and destroy it instead of taking care of it like the treasure it is. This means, of course, that they are not ready for it; freedom is wasted on people who do not or *will* not understand, appreciate or take care of it; it must be earned, not given to us, for if we do not strive for it, we will not value it, and thus, it will easily be wasted and lost.

Some others said “Money”, but, again, although many people—maybe we could even say *most*—are looking for it, and though money is, without a doubt, the ‘religion’ with the most devotees in the world, not everyone is looking for it. There are some rare folks who have money and who are not looking for more (Bill Gates is not one of them, obviously). Someone said “Love”. Well, you know, even though the word has been so over-used that it is almost worn-out, Love—the quality—is still something we all need, in one form or another. The answer I wanted from them was “Happiness”. I asked them: “If you had been happy in your own country before, would you have fled as refugees?” “No”, “Probably not”, came the answers. “So, you fled your country because you were not happy there, because life there was too difficult”.

I have been to about 40 countries and have seen that, although there are differences between people, the basics are the same: Everyone wants to be happy; no-one wants to be sad or to suffer. “Therefore”, I continued, “happiness must be something very important, no?” “Yes”, they agreed. “Well, since happiness is very important, do they teach you about it here in school?” There was a unanimous cry of “No, never!”

How strange, that something so very important as happiness is completely neglected in our schools! Why should this be? Is it because happiness cannot be taught, but must be earned or found by the individual himself? Can or should nothing be said about it? Or has it been shunted aside as ‘too emotional’, thrown into the trash-can in favor of the over-emphasis on ‘success’?

Personally, I regard the education-system, as it stands today, as Public Enemy Number One, for it inculcates in people many qualities that the world needs much less of instead of more, and which lead directly to conflict: competitiveness, ruthlessness, selfishness, pride, greed, envy, acquisitiveness, thoughtlessness about others, etc.

Some people will argue that without competition, we would not progress, but I would disagree, for we would probably make better progress, and with much less conflict, if we learned how to cooperate with each other for the common good. And I believe that we *can* be taught and shown, from a very early age, *how* to cooperate. World War Two—to name the most outstanding of senseless conflicts—caused the death of 50 million people, and untold irreparable damage and destruction. But we still haven’t learned; the Twentieth Century was the bloodiest of all. And, right now, there are numerous conflicts of various sizes going on in the world, and it looks as if we’ll be very lucky to avoid a Third World War!

With the present education-system—which, in reality, is the ‘American system’ that everyone else seems to take as their model—are we happy? Far from it! We have turned the world into a jungle full of wild and savage animals, where it is not safe to go out on the streets at night—or even in the daytime!—in some places! It’s amazing—is it not?—how we can put men on the moon and send them to the bottom of the ocean, but we cannot teach our children—for this is where it must begin—how to live together with others in understanding and peace.

The ways in which we seek happiness are countless; seeking happiness and trying to avoid unhappiness, are pursuits that take up a great proportion of our lives. We may safely generalize and say that everyone wants to be happy and avoid pain; we all have this in common. But how many of us are happy? We are happy sometimes, and some people are happier than others, but do you know anyone who is happy *all* the time? I don't.

Some people seek happiness in ways that are harmless to others, while others willingly hurt others in their efforts to find it; they will kill, steal, lie, cheat, etc., if they think it will yield the happiness they seek in their frustration. But are they happy? A little, perhaps, and briefly, but when their actions ripen, where is their happiness?

There are many formulas for happiness that people hold, the most common being *Money = Happiness*. "Oh, if only I were rich, I would be happy", they think. Of course, it would be very difficult to be happy if one's family was hungry or homeless, but riches, in themselves, do not solve all problems or bring happiness. Many rich people are very unhappy.

Other formulas go like this: "If I had a beautiful girlfriend (or handsome boyfriend), I would be happy". "If I were young again / healthy / powerful / famous / popular / had many friends, etc., I would be happy". But *can* happiness be formulated? Perhaps it would be better to pause awhile and ponder on man's frantic and eternal search for happiness.

Happiness cannot be sought and found, for it—and *unhappiness*, too—are results of the way we live our lives and how we see things. In fact, the search for happiness is the greatest obstacle to finding it, though we usually do not see this until after we have sought for it to the point of exhaustion.

It has been said that: "Happiness is a perfume that you cannot sprinkle on others without getting a few drops on yourself". This is the key: Forget self and help others, do what is right according to the situation, and happiness may find us, though really, this should not be our motive for helping others. We should do so simply because we have the opportunity and capacity to do it, and not for what we think we might get in return, for that is the same as seeking, and usually results in disappointment.

Why do we look for happiness? If we were happy already, if there were no pain and suffering, there would be no need to look for it! It is because we are not happy, because we are subject to pain and suffering, that we search for it.

What is pain? It is a response to certain causes or conditions; it is the effect of causes, like everything else, and if we can discover and understand the causes, we might be able to avoid the effects we don't like.

There are two kinds of pain: physical and mental. We have a body, so naturally, we experience various bodily pains; though many of these pains could be avoided if we took better care, some pains are unavoidable, as it is natural and inevitable for the body to break down and decay—like any machine—and one day, it will die. This is why Lao Tsu said: "Accept misfortune as the bodily condition, for without a body, how could there be misfortune?" Or, as someone else said recently: "Exercise regularly; eat moderately; die anyway".

Mental pain, on the other hand, is not inevitable, as it is possible for us to be in much greater control of our minds than we are. We cannot prevent the body from growing older and dying, but the mind is ours to control, if we will. We need not suffer from worry, grief, despair or anger; we need not give way to jealousy, revenge, malice and pride; our minds need not be filled with greed, hatred and stupidity. But they often are, aren't they? And we suffer so much because of the presence of these negative and harmful emotions; they cause us pain even on the physical level, through the mind acting on the body. What a lot of trouble comes from the mind!

Now, nobody—at least, no reasonably-sane person—likes to suffer. Most people try to avoid pain, most hate and fear it, but few try to understand it, to listen to it, to hear what it is saying—and it *does* have something to say. Pain is Nature's way of telling us that something is wrong—out of balance—and needs attention. It is not really the enemy we think it is, for if we listen to it and learn from it, it becomes useful, and may be considered a friend in disguise—a teacher—even if its face is ugly. From our own pain, we begin to understand the pain in others. This gives rise to Compassion, the greatest virtue, and Compassion is what compelled the Buddha to go out to show the Way to those who were ready to see. If we have never suffered ourselves, it is difficult to sympathize with others.

Our world is a sad place, though it often wears a mask to conceal its pain, because to face the pain constantly would quickly drive us mad. Sometimes, when we are sensitive, we can feel the infinite sadness of the world, and if we have no knowledge of the Law of Cause-and-Effect, we might easily

feel overwhelmed by it. But, knowing that there are no accidents in the Universe, and that everything arises from causes, imbues us with a feeling that we are *not* impotent, and that there *is* something we can do about it.

Again, there are two kinds of suffering: natural suffering and man-made suffering. As our knowledge increased over the ages, we have been able to lessen the suffering caused by Nature. We are able to predict earthquakes, storms, volcanic eruptions, etc., and are able to take precautions against them; we can mitigate the effects of drought and floods; we have eliminated or controlled many killer-diseases, and undoubtedly will do so with many more. Most of the suffering, and all of the evil in the world, however—such as war, crime and drug-abuse—is not natural, but man-made, and it is in this field that we can—using intelligence and compassion—have the greatest success. And this is perhaps the most important thing I have to say in this book: ***Each and everyone of us has the capacity to increase or decrease the suffering in the world.*** And the same can be said about happiness. We might not have much of an impact, but we can do our share, and every little bit helps. It's our world. Won't you join us?



FORGIVE YOURSELF

WE LABOR AND STAGGER ALONG under the burdens of our sins and mistakes, not knowing how to put them down. We've all made mistakes, done things we shouldn't have done, and not done things we should have done. Because of this, regret and remorse follow us like shadows, from the past, to, and through, the present. Although we *should* feel remorse for our mistakes, life must go on, we must continue on our way, for we cannot live in the past, and attempts to do so only tear us apart. How can we put down the burdens of the past and go forward with lighter hearts?

Many people believe that sin must be forgiven by a 'God-who-made-everything'; others believe we must be saved by some 'superman', otherwise we will go to Hell for-ever. Others see these things, these beliefs, as psycho-logical techniques, from which we may gain the strength to bear our responsibilities, accept the consequences of our deeds, and go on living. They are valid as long as they remain techniques, for without them, many would find life too hard to bear, and there would be a much-higher suicide-rate than there is. But when a technique isn't understood as such, and becomes an article of belief, an indispensable dogma, it is a fetter, instead of a means of support. This is why new techniques must constantly be devised, before the old ones become rigid and lifeless.

It seems quite clear that the practice of Confession in Catholicism was adopted, in the early Christian era, from Buddhism,¹ along with other things; however, it became a dogma in Catholicism, and very few people understand the real meaning. Most Catholics believe that when they confess their sins before the priest, who admonishes them and perhaps allots some penance to perform, that *that* is the end of it, and they may start again with a clean slate. Protestants—who also do not understand clearly about Confession—ridicule Catholics for this; in fact, one of the things that caused Martin Luther—one of the main founders of the Protestant branch of Christianity—to break with the Church of Rome, was the priestly practice of selling certificates-of-forgiveness, known as '*Indulgences*'. Perhaps he was not against the certificates as such, but against the lucrative business they constituted; the rich could afford to have their sins 'absolved' in this way, while the poor could not. The priests claimed that, as the 'representatives of God', they had the power and right to forgive sins—for a price, of course.

How can we buy off the effects of our sins? No amount of money can do this. But to confess our sins and mistakes to another person is the first step of coming to grips with them, so that eventually, by doing as little evil, and as much good as possible, we may overcome them.

Buddhism teaches that we are punished *by* our sins, not *for* them, as do other religions; if we sow the seeds, and *if* they germinate and grow, we get the results, *not* someone else. Buddhists don't believe there is a 'God' or anyone or anything else to reward or punish us; when we are free of such beliefs we can do something about our own lives, and be more in control of the way we live.

Therefore, to whom, or to what, do Buddhists pray? Certainly, we pray to no 'God', and neither should we pray to the Buddha, as He never asked people to do that, and in fact, warned against it, telling people to follow the Dharma instead, and thereby find their own enlightenment. The Buddha never claimed to be a savior of any kind; it is the Dharma, the Truth, which saves and liberates us, not the Buddha, or anyone else. When we understand this, we immediately avoid the trap of personalizing things, which is a trap that catches many of us.

But many people *do* pray to the Buddha, do they not? Yes, it appears they do. But, though this might not be correct, and might impede progress on the Way, it is not necessarily bad. You see, many people have no-one in whom they can confide and tell their troubles to. Very few people have what is known, in Buddhist terminology, as a 'good friend' (*kalyana mitta*, in Pali language), someone who will listen sympathetically without condemning, who will help and give constructive advice or criticism when necessary. Without such friends, they keep their feelings and problems bottled up inside, afraid, unable, or unwilling to express them to anyone. Like this, their problems go around and around inside them, causing so much tension and misery, and often growing bigger and stronger, until, somehow, they find ways of 'getting out'.

Often, if we cannot release or express our problems ourselves, they accumulate and increase in strength until, suddenly and uncontrollably, they burst out like a volcano exploding, and can be very destructive. We need to find ways to release our problems so that their potential for causing damage is

¹ Until today, in Theravada Buddhist communities, where the *Patimokkha* (the disciplinary rules of the monks) is recited twice-monthly, monks 'confess' their transgressions one to another; in most cases, however, this is a perfunctory practice, maybe because they feel they have little to confess.

minimized. Therefore, although it is not really correct to pray to the Buddha in a symbol, such as a picture or an image, it can act as a way of releasing the tensions of accumulated worries and problems. In this way, as a technique, it can be good. We should not worry about others criticizing us or accusing us of ‘worshipping idols’, because most of them are guilty of doing that which they accuse us of; Christians pray to ‘God’, which is just their own mental creation or projection, for although they claim that “God created Man in his own image”, it is actually the other way around: *Man* created God in his own image, due to his hopes, fears, and wishful thinking!

In some cases, however, we must admit that this accusation is justified: *some* Buddhists *do* worship the images and talk to them as superior beings, and pray to and beseech them for help and favors, etc. But if people understood what the Buddha taught, they would not worship the images; the images and icons are merely symbols on which to focus our attention, to help raise our consciousness to higher levels.

No-one knows what the Buddha looked like. The books say that His body had a number of special marks on it, but I suspect that these marks were visible only to people who had developed certain psychic powers such as clairvoyance—that is, the ability to see things that people without such powers are unable to see, like ghosts. In the scriptures, there are cases of people meeting the Buddha and not recognizing Him.² Surely, if His special marks — such as the protuberance on the crown of his head, His long ears, and the halo around His head—had been visible to everyone, He would have been widely known by reputation of these things, and anyone meeting Him would have recognized Him immediately!

In 326 BCE—more than 200 years after the Buddha passed away—Alexander the Great led his armies down through the mountain-passes of what is now Afghanistan to the plains of India. Undeclared until then, he was halted at the River Beas by the forces of Emperor Chandragupta—Ashoka’s grandfather—and could go no further. Alexander died in Persia on his way back to Greece, but some of his troops remained and settled in N.W. India, and established kingdoms there. Being philosophically and artistically inclined, the Greeks were very impressed with the teachings of the Buddha that they encountered in India, and embracing them, were the first to carve images of Him, in the likeness of their Sun-god, Apollo, who represented Light and Reason. Many of these graceful early images remain till now, housed in various museums.

There are many styles of Buddha-images: Indian images, Chinese images, Tibetan images, etc.; we can even see painted Buddha-images with blue eyes and brown hair now, looking like Anglo-Saxons! But it doesn’t matter; we should understand the purpose of the images.

Everyone *knows* the images (it is incorrect to call them statues, as we do not know what the Buddha looked like, and we can make a statue of someone only if we know how he looked) began in someone’s mind—like everything else that people have made. Everyone *knows* an image of the Buddha is not the Buddha; everyone *knows* the Buddha-image will not reach down and eat the fruit before it. Offerings are made before the image out of respect to the memory of the Buddha, as our Teacher; as such, the offerings benefit those who make them, if they make them with pure minds. It is similar to the way Christians place flowers on the graves of their relatives or friends. Why do they do so? To show love and respect to the memory of the departed, and nothing more; they are not worshipping the graves!

Have you ever seen a Buddha-image with a sad face or an expression of suffering? Maybe, but not if the image was properly and well made. Many people, out of faith and devotion, like to make Buddha-images, but lacking skill, often produce monstrosities, which remain, for a long time, to cause embarrassment. If we cannot make something beautiful, we should not make something ugly; to make an ugly Buddha-image is an insult, not an act of respect, and only provides some people with an opportunity for mirth; an ill-made or ugly Buddha-image (and there are great numbers of such) only defeats the purpose of the image, which is to inspire people by its expression of peace and unshakeability, to evoke a sense of that which lies beyond the smile on its face: Enlightenment, Wisdom, Compassion.

Sit quietly and gaze for a while on the peaceful countenance of a well-made Buddha-image (if you are fortunate enough to find one among all the ill-made ones). Let your mind become free of desires—temporarily free, at least. Perhaps you will find a sense of calm creeping up on you, and a Buddha-like smile breaking like a gentle wave across your face; it begins deep in the heart, when we are not looking or striving for anything.

² For a good example of this see Sutta number 140, of the Majjhima Nikaya, Pali Canon.

The Buddha-image is only a means, and not an end. Certainly, we should not be so attached to an image that it becomes an obstacle, and we should never bow before an image in fear or hope of reward. When we bow, we do so out of respect—loving respect, not fearful respect—and gratitude to someone who showed us such a good Way to live by in this confused and confusing world. Many people have tried to indicate Truth, but no-one has shown the Way so clearly as the Buddha did; moreover, He did it without calling people to believe or follow Him, but encouraged them to investigate things for themselves in order to find the same state of enlightenment that He had found.

The purpose of the Buddha-image, then, is to reflect our true face as in a mirror, to evoke Buddha-like qualities in us, so that we may find the Buddha within, and not outside in a stone.

If we are going to talk about ‘idol-worship’, we must look nearer than mere images or pictures. The most popular and powerful ‘idol’ that people of all times and places have worshipped—and from which all the other idols, images and statues have come—is, of course, their *self*, and everything is used in this worship, including religion! By thinking and saying that *their* religion is the only *true* religion, and that all other religions are false—as so many people do think and say—shows that their own tiny self is at the center of their religion, like a spider at the center of its web, manipulating things for its own ends. Their religion thus becomes an extension of their ego—is ego—and strengthens it instead of weakening it. Is *that* the purpose of religion?

If you examine your religion, to see *who*, or *what*, is at the center, perhaps you will find yourself enthroned there, in which case you are an idol-worshipper, and your self is the idol!

However, while praying to the Buddha as a technique for releasing tension is far from being bad, we must beware, and not let it become a habit that we get addicted to. It should be resorted to only under conditions of stress, just as a man with a broken leg would use a crutch to help him walk. As far as possible, we should develop self-reliance, understanding that, somehow, whatever we experience, is a result of causes, and should therefore be accepted for what it is—accepted, examined and assessed to see what can be made of it, and where we can go from there.

If you pray to the Buddha-image, expressing your problems and asking for help, the image will just sit there, with the eternal smile on its face, saying not a word, moving not a muscle. If you ask for a winning-number for a lottery or help with a job-interview, the Buddha-image will not bend forwards and whisper: “Buy this number . . .”; it won’t say: “Don’t worry; I’ll fix it for you”. The answer to your prayers—if there *is* an answer—must come from yourself, and this depends upon how you release and unburden yourself and express your problems. Very often, while expressing our problems, we find the answers for ourselves, hand-in-hand with the problem. That is why many teachers—of many subjects—learn from themselves as they teach; the effort to express and clarify themselves to others brings about further understanding for the teachers, so that they might sometimes catch themselves in mid-sentence and think: “What am I saying? I’ve said this same thing so many times before, but I never understood it like this until now!”

Therefore, to pray to the Buddha, to talk to the image— if you have no-one in whom you can confide—can be therapeutic and good. However, remember: the image is only wood or stone, and the Buddha is not a savior or an information-bureau, but a teacher who gave practical advice for living. You should, therefore, learn about His teachings and try to apply them in your life, so that many problems may be avoided altogether, and the remainder may be approached with wisdom instead of with fear.

To build up a good reputation is not easy, and takes a long time, but to lose it can happen very quickly. Likewise, while it is difficult to undo the effects of a bad deed, those of a good deed can be undone in a moment.

Many of us go through life arguing and disagreeing, and never attempting to resolve the arguments. If we cannot completely avoid arguments and conflicts, we should try to resolve them as soon as possible, so that they don’t harden and set like concrete; while concrete is still wet, we may do something to change it, but once it hardens, it is difficult to do so. Jesus of Nazareth advised people to make peace with their adversaries while they are still in touch with them and have the opportunity to do so, in case the adversary makes a charge against them and brings them to court. Because of stubbornness and clinging, many foolish cases are brought to court that could have—and *should* have—been easily settled between the contending parties themselves; but because of pride and stupidity neither party is willing to recognize its mistakes. Sometimes, people harbor grudges for years, unwilling to forgive and forget, thereby burning themselves up. It requires a lot of energy to maintain a conflict and hate; is it worth it to destroy oneself? As the Buddha said: “ ‘He abused me, he beat me, he

defeated me, he robbed me'; in those who harbor such thoughts, hatred is never appeased. 'He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me'; in those who harbor *not* such thoughts, hatred *is* appeased". Is it not better to let things go, considering that people hurt each other through ignorance and not because they are really bad? Buddhists, especially, should know this, as we are taught that everyone has Buddha-nature, and can become enlightened. With Loving-kindness, we can overcome enmity towards others, rid ourselves of the poison of hate, and draw nearer to Enlightenment.

Venerable Narada, in his famous book: *The Buddha and His Teachings*, records that the Buddha, when discoursing on generosity, told *Anathapindika* (a wealthy lay-supporter, the one who presented the *Jetavana* monastery to Him), that alms given to the Order of Monks, together with the Buddha, is very meritorious; but more meritorious than such alms is the building of a monastery for the use of the Order; more meritorious than building such monasteries is Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels; more meritorious than Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels is the observance of the Five Precepts; more meritorious than such observance is meditation on Loving-Kindness; and most meritorious of all is the development of insight into the fleeting nature of things.

Ven. Narada goes on to say: "It is evident from this discourse that generosity is the first stage of the Buddhist way-of-life. More important than generosity is the observance of at least the Five Rules of regulated behavior that tend to the disciplining of words and deeds. Still more important and beneficial is the cultivation of such ennobling virtues as Loving-Kindness that leads to self-development. Most important and most beneficial of all self-discipline is the sincere effort to understand things as they truly are".

To conclude here: Overcoming our sins and shortcomings begins with recognizing and accepting them, and giving them up; sincere repentance brings relief.

Forgive yourself ... and go on!

THE BIRD OF IRON

MANY BUDDHISTS ARE PROUD of the fact that not a single drop of blood has ever been shed in Buddhism's name, but they are proud only because they compare Buddhism's history with the records of other religions, which cannot make similar claims; the history of several world-religions is written in blood. Buddhism never waged war, nor did it ever practice blood-sacrifice of any kind, nor persecute anyone for holding different beliefs. But that is no reason to be proud, for it is only right that blood should *not* be shed in the name of religion (or for any other reason, for that matter); religion should be used to *heal*, to *improve*, to unite others in understanding, not to hurt, destroy, or cause division where no natural division exists.

During its history of over 2,500 years, Buddhism never spread by means of violence or coercion, but by means of Reason; people embraced it from understanding, not because of force. And although Buddhism in Asia is now old, tired, and declining, in the West it is alive and growing, fulfilling ancient prophesies. One such prophesy, made about 1,200 years ago, by *Padma Sambhava*, the great Indian Buddhist teacher who spread Buddhism throughout Tibet, and whom Tibetans revere as *Guru Rimpoche—The Precious Guru*—is recorded thus:

When the Bird of Iron flies, and Horses run on Wheels, then the people of Tibet will be scattered like ants across the face of the earth, and the Teachings of the Blessed One will go to the Land of the Red Man.

1,200 years ago, there were no such things as air-planes or automobiles, and America—the *Land of the Red Man*—was yet to be discovered by Europeans. For centuries, Tibet had been isolated and was known as 'The Forbidden Land'. But when the Chinese communists took-over Tibet in 1958, many Tibetans, with the Dalai Lama, fled their homeland as refugees, taking with them their culture and religion, and settled in various parts of the world, like India, USA, Europe and Australia. The West gained what the East lost; many Westerners have eagerly received the Buddha's Teachings from Tibetans since then; the Tibetans have been extremely successful in spreading Buddhism in the West.

But others, too, have carried the Teachings of the Buddha to the West, and a great drama is unfolding here.

Many Westerners now openly declare that they have no religion, but this doesn't mean that they are irreligious. In many cases, it means that they could no longer accept the dogmas and unreason of religions that require belief in things that have no factual support; many of them are deeply religious in the sense of living by principles that are important to them. If they can hear the Teachings of the Buddha explained in a clear and reasonable way, many will accept and live by them.

If we are to present the Buddha's Teachings in such a way, we must, therefore, be able to distinguish the Dharma from the customs and traditions that have grown up around it in Asia, for Dharma is not something local or regional, but Universal. The West will never adopt Asian culture wholesale; it has its own culture and superstitions to deal with. Dharma should be propagated in the West in suitable and acceptable ways, shorn of Asian superstitions and cultural accretions as far as possible. Western forms of Buddhism will develop as time passes; we need the *Essence*—the *Dharma*—to inform and invigorate them.

All religions have elements of the miraculous, and Buddhism is no exception; there are stories from the life of the Buddha that are simply incredible. According to the legends, when the baby Siddhartha was born, he raised one hand towards the sky and pointed the other towards the earth, saying: "In the heavens above and in the earth below, I see no-one who is my equal. This is my last birth; I shall cross the Ocean of Existence". He is also supposed to have taken seven steps, and from each footprint a lotus-flower sprang up.

Some people still believe these things really happened, but it is highly unlikely they did. Of course, we cannot prove they didn't, any more than we can prove they did, but it is more likely they were added to the account later—by people with more faith than wisdom—to glorify the Buddha, to 'gild the lily', as it were. As it stands, the statement attributed to the baby prince: "I see no-one who is my equal", seems rather egoistic for someone who would later proclaim a life of humility, simplicity and self-effacement— even supposing that he *was* able to speak as soon as he was born! However, in Buddhism, such things are not regarded as important, and Buddhism neither stands nor falls because of them; it is based upon a much-firmer foundation than legends of miracles that cannot now be verified.

Buddhism has two parts: the part of the past—with accounts of things that cannot be tested or proved by personal experience, and some of which is very doubtful, like the myth above—and the part of the present, the Here-and-Now. This is the Dharma that people *can* test for them-selves and get the results therefrom, just as the Buddha said we should: “Test my Teachings as a goldsmith tests gold”. These Teachings do not require belief, but are to be “comprehended by the wise, each for himself”.

We often hear people telling of how ‘God’ saved them from danger or sickness, etc. But what about all those not saved? If ‘God’ *did* save someone, it must follow, as the inverse of the claim, that ‘He/It’ must also have neglected to save the others. The believers conveniently disregard this aspect of it.

Many Buddhists think of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas as ‘saviors’, but this is just weak-mindedness. The Buddha has nothing whatsoever to do with our living and dying; that is entirely our own affair, and we should not try to implicate Him! And if we knew what He taught, we would understand this.

In the Dhammapada, verses 11 and 12 of the first chapter, the Buddha says:

In the unessential they see the essential;
In the essential, they see the unessential.
They who entertain such wrong thoughts
Never realize the essence.

What is essential they regard as essential;
What is unessential they regard as such.
They who entertain such right thoughts
Do realize the essence.

The Essence is more important than the Name and Form.

DON'T FOLLOW ME

“I AM A DISCIPLE OF Master So-and-so”, he said. “What do you think of him?” This put me in rather a difficult position, as I had already written about this master, and knew that my questioner had read it. I did not want to hurt his feelings unduly, but, on the other hand, I must be true to myself and not compromise my principles.

I told him I had recently had a letter from someone in Australia asking why I never print photos of myself in my books. In my reply, I said it is because I like to downplay personality and emphasize Dharma, as that alone deserves center-place. What use are pictures of myself? There are much better things than that! I want to give people *good* things, things that can stand on their own and which do not depend upon me, things self-evident, things that can be used again and again without becoming worn-out. Don't be concerned about me—about personality—if you want to make progress in Dharma.

Turning to the disciple, I asked him what he had learned from his master that he could use again and again throughout his life. He thought for some time before sadly admitting that he couldn't think of anything right then, but added that he had felt good while participating in ceremonies with his master. I made no comment. After a few more moments, he said: “I understand”. He had answered his own question.

I know that some of the things I write and say are controversial and provocative; I *intend* them to be. Because of this, someone once asked me: “Are you not afraid that you'll become unpopular as a result?”

“Like everyone”, I answered, “I like people to like me; this is quite normal. But there is something more important to me than this, and that is to say what I think is right and needs to be said. If the price for this is unpopularity, so be it. And you should be thankful that there is someone willing to speak out and say things that should be said, because it is for you, too, and not merely for self”.

Here, I will reproduce a letter that I wrote to the *New Straits Times* of Malaysia in August 1998³

“A few days ago, I had an experience that I feel should be brought to public notice: I was traveling by air-conditioned bus from ----- to -----, and my seat was directly behind the driver.

“About an hour into the journey, the bus stopped at a road-side restaurant for a while. Resuming his seat thereafter, the driver did not put out his cigarette. I requested him to do so, but he ignored me except for giving me an unfriendly look, and continued to smoke. I said nothing more about this until he lit up again, but again, he ignored my remonstrations, even though I pointed to the *NO SMOKING* sign above his head, and said that I would report him. True, no-one else complained, but that does not change the fact that it was against the law. It was/is my right to complain about this and demand that the law be followed; I was a paying passenger, and he should have respected our rights. Suppose the bus had been full of other non-smokers like myself: would his response have been any different?

“Probably angry because I had complained of his smoking, he stepped on the accelerator, recklessly endangering the lives of everyone in the bus; by this time, we were on twisting mountain roads, and he was taking sharp bends on the wrong side; fortunately, there is little traffic on this highway. Not wishing to appear a habitual complainer, I restrained myself from saying anything about this, until another passenger—a young man— came to the front and asked the driver to slow down. Knowing, therefore, that I was not the only one concerned about his irresponsible driving, I added my voice, but he still did not decrease speed. Only when I raised my voice and told the co-driver to tell him to slow down, did he do so, and slammed on the brakes so hard that the smell of burning rubber from the tires permeated the bus.

“Then he stood up, turned around, and started to berate me, calling me ‘Stupid’, and saying things in Malay that I did not understand (I am visitor from Australia). I also called him ‘stupid’, but I was justified in this, whereas he had no reason to call me so, as I had done nothing out of place.

“He then ordered me to get off the bus, offering to reimburse me for the ticket-cost. Had he any right to do this? I had caused no trouble. All I had done was stand up for what was not only *my* right and the right of the other passengers, but for *what* is right, and voice a legitimate complaint. Of course, I did not get off. He then shouted at me: “Okay, *you* drive!”

“The other passengers, however, seemed ready to die or suffer horrific injuries rather than complain, because when I turned round and asked: “Do you agree with me?” the only person who gave a quiet ‘Yes’ was the young man who had asked the driver to slow down; the others remained silent.

³ Published on August 17th 1998.

Looking back on their passivity, I was/am rather amazed! How to help people who won't help themselves?!

“As I had said I would, I reported him. Soon after submitting my complaint—by the hand of a friend—I received a call from the manager of the bus-company, thanking me for my report and apologizing profusely for what had happened. He said he'd had other complaints about this particular driver before, and would definitely take action against him, as I had demanded.

“I wrote to him again the same day, and told him that because of his positive, polite and sincere response, although I still intended to write to the press about this incident, I would omit the name of his company and the bus-route, adding that if I ever traveled that route again, I would not boycott his company.

“Several days later, the manager called again, thanking me for my second letter and informing me that the offending driver had admitted his fault and apologized, but that, in view of the seriousness of the offence, he had dismissed him. I told him that I hadn't complained out of desire for revenge, and was sorry that the man had lost his job, but it was really the only thing to do, in the interest of public safety. “Prevention is better than cure”, where cure is possible; but there is no cure for death!

“If my complaint can save just one person from death or serious injury, it will have been well-worth my trouble. I've seen and heard of too many people lying mangled and dead on the road. *I care!*”

When we speak out against or for something, let us be clear in our minds that it is not just for ourselves but for others—and, better still—for what is right. We can and should put up with quite a lot of personal inconvenience, but it is a different matter when others are involved, and restraint or silence may not be appropriate. Regarding the bus-incident described above: *If* the bus had gone off the road or—*worse*—crashed into another vehicle, and some passengers had been killed and others injured, *hundreds* or maybe even *thousands* of people would have suffered as a result, and not just the dead and wounded. Their mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, children and other relatives, their friends, employers/employees and associates would also have suffered, and because *those* people would suffer, other people behind them would also be affected. Surely, all would agree that the smash was detrimental in every way, and that if someone or something had prevented it, it would have been a great blessing. The manager of the bus-company was quite right to appreciate my complaint, as it was in his interest, too; he might have lost his business, his position, and his wealth if the bus had crashed. And the errant driver himself benefited—even though he lost his job as a result of my complaint. He could *also* have been killed or injured as a result of his carelessness, and then *his* wife, children and other relatives and friends would have suffered. Had I not done what I did, I also might not be alive to tell of it. How *could* I have kept quiet and said nothing?

I am not boasting here, or thinking of myself as a hero for preventing all these possibly disasters, as I was only doing my duty, even if I did it alone, with no back-up support except for a quietly-spoken ‘Yes’ from a single person.

Two men were sitting in the stern of a sinking boat, looking at others in the bow frantically bailing out water. One said: “Lucky for us that the water's at *their* end instead of ours!”

Many of us are like this. While feeling entitled to enjoy the benefits of society, we feel no responsibility to contribute anything to it. We only want to take, and take, and take. We are blind, and our reluctance to participate in society's problems and help solve them makes things worse, and we are to blame for decline and destruction. We expect others to carry and feed us, like babies. The funny thing is, though, we are also pulled down when society's boat sinks, but we cannot, do not, or will not see this until it's too late.

If you hate society, or if you do not want the obligations and responsibilities of being a member of it, the honest thing to do is to give up the benefits of society, too, and go away to a forest or an island somewhere and live on your own. If you are not willing to do this, try to understand what it means to be a member of society, and how you benefit in so many ways therefrom. Try to love your country, or the place where you happen to be at any time, and do your best to improve it; it doesn't have to be the place where you were born, but it is part of your world, wherever it is, and supports your life. And if there's nothing you *can* do to improve it, then try to do nothing to make it worse. If you are doing nothing to improve it, but just sitting on the fence, indifferently watching life go by, but expecting your ‘rights’ anyway, you are making it worse. Therefore, do not complain when you suffer, too.

You know, the concept of ‘Human Rights’—and it *is* only a concept—is very good and important, but have you ever stopped to wonder about these ‘rights’ and where they came from? The concept is comparatively new—it's only a few years since the UNO formulated it—and though it has been given lip-service by most countries, it is still flouted whenever it suits nations to do so. Talk of ‘human

rights' to the late demon Pol Pot when he was in power in Cambodia, and your head would leave your body! Protests about violations of human-rights in Vietnam and other places would earn you a place in a 're-education camp'. In the West, therefore, although violent crime is increasing and society is being increasingly terrorized, and where injustice and police-brutality are not uncommon, we are still very lucky and have much to be thankful for. We should take care of the good things we've got while we have them, as they can be easily lost, and when they are lost, they are not ours to take care of anymore.

When there is a power- or water-cut we moan and complain, but that's not the time to be surprised; on the contrary, the time to be surprised is when there *is* power and water, as it is much easier to lose something than to gain it. The fact that we are so used to having things provided, however, blinds us to this; we take so much for granted, and always expect things to be ours at the touch of a button; then, when they are lost, we suffer.

Nature knows nothing of 'human-rights', and cares not if we live or die. Life is not a right but a bonus, day-by-day, and we shouldn't take it for granted, like we usually do, for one day, we will die, maybe unexpectedly and without warning.

It is good, now and then, to go to poor countries like India, Bangladesh or places in Africa, and see how people live there, as it helps us to realize how lucky we, in the West, are. We have such a high degree of material comfort—much higher, in fact, than kings and queens of former centuries had. I imagine Queen Cleopatra of hot and dusty Egypt would have envied anyone with an air-conditioned room. Alexander the Great or Napoleon would have been overjoyed with an 'ordinary' Toyota or Ford—even a second-hand one!

Many of us, having thoughtlessly grown used to the good things of life, expect the standard of living to always go on the incline, from good to better. But life is not like that, as a brief review of history soon shows; many empires and civilizations arose, remained a while, and declined. Life rises and falls like the waves of the sea; nothing lasts forever. If we understood this better, we would suffer less than we do.

In conclusion, here is a Key: Don't think so much about what you've lost, as it is no longer yours to think about. Think, instead, of what you still have, and Take Care.



TRUTH

WE OFTEN HEAR TALK about Truth. Most religions claim that they—each of them, exclusively—possess Truth (otherwise how could they justify their existence, and get and keep devotees?) But who can demonstrate It? When questioned about It, they insist that we must believe before we can see It.

The myriad sects of Christianity are in conflict not only with non-Christians, but even among themselves about their ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways. The Catholics, Baptists, Mormons, Methodists, etc., etc., all claim that they alone are right and have Truth (else why would there be so many sects?), while others do not. But who is right? Are they all right, or are they all wrong? Are they partly right or partly wrong? How can we know? Perhaps we can know by trying to find out *what* is right, instead of *who* is right.

First of all, Truth must be universal, otherwise it wouldn’t be Truth, would it? For example, fire is hot and water is wet; they were so before, they are so now, and they will be so; no-one can dispute this. Secondly, being all-pervasive and vast, it cannot be grasped and monopolized by any grubby little hands; nor can extremely-limited minds—like frogs in a well—claim it, like a material possession. It is far beyond anything we can refer to by the possessive ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘mine’ terms. No boxes, barriers, walls or names can hold it. The word ‘Truth’, likewise, is not Truth.

What did the Buddha say about Truth? He explained how all things, from a pebble to the greatest star in this incomprehensible Universe, are subject to laws. The greatest and all-inclusive of these laws is that of Cause-and-Effect. There is nothing—animate or inanimate—outside this Law. It follows that—as modern science has demonstrated—everything is in a state of flux, of becoming other than it is.

There are no accidents—things that happen by themselves—in the Universe; everything is the result of causes—innumerable causes. Think of a grain of sand and what is involved in its being: one thing leads to another in a chain-like connection; it’s not simply a sand-grain. If you try to trace its origins, you will find the whole Universe involved in it, and still not get to its beginning. Buddhism says that the Universe can be found in a grain of sand—and in everything else, too!

This means everything is interconnected, and that, somehow, everything depends upon everything else, though we usually do not see this, as it requires deep insight, penetrating and clear. We may compare the Universe to a fishing-net: pick up a single knot, and you pick up the whole net. Everything is a part—great or small—of the Whole, being composed of atoms which, in turn, are composed of even smaller particles—electrons, protons, neutrons—that are in constant motion. Therefore, what we call ‘solid matter’ is not solid at all, but merely energy; nothing exists in and by itself, and therefore, everything is devoid of self.

This, however, is something that most people do not want at all; what they want is something they can hold onto, possess, and claim as ‘mine, not yours’; they wish to be able to exclude others from *their* Truth; hence the existence of so many theories about Truth.

Whether we know it or not, like it or not, believe it or not, is immaterial; we are all subject to the laws, being swept inexorably onwards, becoming something else. Moreover, these laws are not holy or sacred; prayer to them for mercy or forgiveness will change nothing; there will be no answer. When we understand about these laws and learn how to use them, to work with them instead of against them, we will know how to bring some direction into our lives; we will have our hands on the steering-wheel.

To see the working of these laws does not require belief at all, because it is always going on in and around us, non-stop. If we choose to ignore it—as most of us do—and pretend it is otherwise, that is not the fault of what is there, but of our own immaturity.

About the numerous people who claim to have found Truth (or who talk about God), the Buddha gave an illustration; He said: “Suppose there is a man who says he loves the most beautiful woman in the world, but who, when asked her name, says he doesn’t know. When further questioned as to where she lives, who her parents are, her age, the color of her hair and skin, etc., he also says he doesn’t know. From such questions and answers, therefore, it is revealed that the man who says he loves he most beautiful woman in the world, without as much as having seen her, or knowing anything about her, is just talking nonsense”.

People suppose much, but have little, if any, knowledge of the things they suppose about. What is written in a book, or in books as high as a mountain, can never be conclusive evidence about Truth, as Truth must be experienced directly, by the individual himself. *Zen*, the apex of Buddhism, teaches: “No reliance upon scriptures or external authority, but a direct seeing into the heart of man!” Anyone can write a book—just look at this one!—but does that mean its contents are true?

This is the way Buddhism approaches life: by observation of the way things are, not by belief or supposition. It makes no attempt to explain the origin of things, and smiles at those who do, for no-one knows, nor ever can know. Moreover, it regards attempts to find out as useless and a waste of time, as a first beginning of things is not to be seen. The end of something is always the beginning of something else, one thing changes into another, and therefore there really is no beginning or end of anything. Since the past has gone, and the only time there ever is NOW, emphasis is laid on LIVING—not just existing—in the Present.

The search for Truth is funny and paradoxical. It is like taking a candle to search for the Sun. Is it necessary to search for the Sun? Does not the Sun shine whether we search for it or not? Why do we make mysteries out of everything? Truth is not an idea; ideas about Truth are not Truth. Everyone has ideas about Truth—crude or sophisticated—but they are usually subjective, self-centered imaginings.

Truth must be omnipresent, in everything, but we do not see it because we look for it in the wrong way—because, in fact, *we* are absent. Our minds are usually somewhere else than in the present, dreaming about the past or the future, worrying about Truth or Enlightenment, Heaven or Hell. And perhaps we do not want to see Truth, as it might not conform to our ideas about It. So we turn away, and look for other truths, and others, and others, and we never find the Real.



TRANSLATION

BECAUSE MY TALKS are often translated, I want to say something about translation for those whom it may concern.

The job of a translator is often a thankless task, as the attention is on the person he is translating for; he himself is supposed to be faceless at that time, yet without him, nothing much can be said to people who do not understand the speaker's language. His job is very important, and must be seen as such.

After speaking in public for many years, I have grown wary of translation as I have seen how inaccurate and misleading it can be. Over translation into Thai, Vietnamese or Indonesian, for example, I have some control, as I speak enough of those languages to be able to check when something I say is translated from English, and tell whether it is accurate or not. This is not because I speak those languages fluently—I don't—but because there are various ways to verify translation, such as, if it is much longer, or much shorter, than what has been said; if there is some hesitation on the part of the translator, as if he is unsure; if certain key words are used that should not be used, or not used that should be used; by looking at the faces of people in the audience; and so on.

Strange as it may sound, I speak more of a foreign language than I understand by hearing. It is usually the other way around: that people understand more by hearing than they are able to speak. So, how is this? It is because I have never learned another language formally, but only picked up words here and there, stringing them together in my own way. Consequently, the Vietnamese, Thai, Malay, etc., that I speak are *my* versions—*pidgin* versions—of those languages, and not the authentic ones. I mean, I can get my basic meaning across, if people are willing to listen to me and meet me half-way, so to speak, but when people speak proper Vietnamese or Thai to me, I don't understand much at all.

This sometimes causes me embarrassment, because when people hear me speak a few words of their language, some think I speak it fluently, and try to converse with me in it; I'm then stuck, and must explain that I speak only very little of their language. And even in the middle of translation, if I correct the translator, it doesn't mean—as some listeners think it does—that I understand every word; it merely means that I know the context, and what should and should not be said. Checking translations of things I have written, I've detected mistakes and asked the translator: "What does *this* mean? It doesn't seem right", and it often turned out that the words or terms used were not correct. One develops a feeling for it.

Although many people do not know it, there is a great difference between translation and interpretation. Translation means to *convert*—or change—one language into another, as clearly as possible, with as little change in meaning as possible. Interpretation, however, leaves much room for inserting one's own ideas about what has been said. One is objective, and the other subjective. When people come to me and introduce themselves by saying: "I will be your interpreter tonight", I tell them: "I do not want and will not have an interpreter; I want a translator—someone who will give *my* ideas, and not *his own* ideas about what I say".

There are good reasons for being so particular; it is not a matter of playing with words. I talk mainly about non-material things, abstract things, ideas, concepts, and so on; things that change our lives by acting on and through our minds; things equally important as the material side of life, and maybe moreso. It is relatively easy to translate words about material things, for we can point to them, touch them, show them, and say: "What do we call this in your language?" For non-physical things like ideas, however, it is not at all easy to translate, for how can we be sure that the translator has the same idea as the speaker about the concept being discussed?⁴ If he doesn't, or if he doesn't understand at all, how will he translate and convey that idea in *his* language? I have known many 'translators' try to muddle through and say just whatever came into their minds instead of asking for clarification; it was as if they were afraid to admit that they didn't understand, which meant pride, of course, a thing that has no place in translation; as said earlier, a translator has—or should have—no face of his own at the time of translating. How difficult it is to understand and keep this in mind. How noble is this task if properly undertaken and carried out.

⁴ Imagine how hard it must have been to translate the Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit to Chinese almost 2,000 years ago, for example, when there were no such aids as cross-lingual dictionaries. The accuracy of the translations, therefore, should not simply be assumed.

No doubt many people would say I am a difficult person to translate for; indeed, I admit this to be so. And why? Because I take seriously the subject-matter being translated. If the translation—as often happens—is not accurate, people may be misled, and I feel it's better to say nothing at all than to mislead people, as the harm done—the impression created—may take a long time to undo.

Many years ago, I was requested to give a talk in the oldest temple in Malacca. I went a few minutes before the scheduled time, and met the man who would translate for me. I'd never met him before then, but his English seemed adequate, so I thought: "Okay, let's go". During the talk, I said something like this: "It's not necessary to think about Enlightenment (Nirvana); just do the work that's needed". *After* the talk, when I had returned to my abode, someone told me that the translator had badly mistranslated what I had said about Nirvana, and had said: "Don't work for Nirvana". This was diametrically opposite to what I had said and meant, and it made me very cautious about translation ever since.

I have had Malaysia's best-known translators translate for me over the years, and though I do not doubt their competence, even with my limited understanding of Mandarin, I knew that they didn't catch certain of my ideas. Perhaps it was because my ideas are somewhat different than the ideas they were used to translating, and they were therefore not prepared for them. One example is the distinction I draw—or perceive—between *Dharma* and *Buddha-Dharma*. Dharma is what the Buddha discovered beneath the Bodhi-tree, *not* something He invented or formulated. What He formulated, and what we have in the scriptures, is *Buddha-Dharma*. It is extremely important to discern the difference. In their translation, my translators did *not* make this distinction, and when I spoke about *Dharma*, as distinct from *Buddha-Dharma*, they translated it as the latter. Because they were older than me, however, I let it go, and did not correct them, as I would have done if they were younger; to have corrected them in public would have caused loss of 'face'.

At the end of 1995, I met someone who became my best-yet translator, someone who understands my ideas quite well, and who seldom hesitates in his translation. He is always willing to translate for me when he can, and expects nothing in return. Nor does he seem to mind when I neglect to thank him at the end of a talk. (This is why I say it is a thankless task, because I have seldom heard anyone else thank the translator; he appears to be taken for granted, which is very sad, considering the important work he does). Grateful for all the help he has given me (as far as many people are concerned, I would be dumb without him), several times I have said to him: "Where have you been all my life? If only I had met you twenty years and more ago!" Thanks a lot, C.W.! You are not faceless for me!

Some people who translated for me over the years were very casual about their task; one was even chewing gum while doing it! Another indicated me with his thumb and said: "That's what *he* said!" when someone questioned his choice of words. This is more disrespectful towards the Dharma than to the speaker personally, and as I have written elsewhere in this book, if respect for Dharma is not there, better not to arrange Dharma-talks; better stay home and watch TV.

The 'colleague' who I mentioned elsewhere in this book once offered to translate for me during a joint-talk we gave somewhere, but I noticed that his 'translation' of what I had said soon turned into his own words; he hijacked my turn and made it an extension of his own, when the audience was under the impression that he was translating my words. I would not have minded if he had not *offered* to translate for me, but this was quite unethical of him. It is hard to resist doing this, however, especially if we do not agree with what is being said, which he didn't, I know—our ideas are so different. This is why a good translator is like a precious gem: hard to come across.

WHAT HAVE WE GOT?

IT IS EASY TO DESTROY OR distort things, while to create, or clarify things, is hard. This is why religions, over the ages, lose their clarity and vitality. Buddhism is no exception; it has absorbed many things that were not originally there, and is often misrepresented. Take the *kung-fu* movies churned out in Hong Kong, for example: as light-entertainment, these films may have some value, but often erroneously portray Buddhism and Chinese philosophy. Thus, when a genuine attempt to propagate Buddhism is made, we are confronted with nonsense that impressionable people have absorbed from such movies, under the idea that it has something to do with Buddhism. It becomes like having to clear the weeds, rocks, and garbage from a piece of ground in order to plant crops there.

Years ago, I saw a Japanese movie about the Buddha, but it was so inaccurate, long and boring, that I almost went to sleep during it, and couldn't wait for it to end. Then there was the *Shaolin Temple* movie from China, showing monks eating dogs, drinking wine, fighting and killing—things quite contrary to the life-style of monks. And a cheaply-produced Hong Kong trash-film about the Buddha showed Him being dragged from His seat beneath the Bodhi-tree by demons, and then rescued by a white 'monkey-god' which defeated the demon-king by its magic and kung-fu! It was extremely boring and silly, though it was obviously appreciated by the monk in whose temple I saw it in San Jose, USA! Why do movie-makers have to distort things so much?

Are these movies a result of popular demand? Do they really reflect people's tastes? If so, why are people so undiscerning? We are better-educated now than ever before (though not necessarily more intelligent), and yet we turn to rubbish for entertainment. Is everyday life so boring that we must escape into silly and unrealistic fantasy? Apart from the costumes and architecture, these movies are dull and unconvincing; the plots vary very little; the kung-fu scenes go on far too long, with the combatants rarely sustaining injury or getting tired or dirty; the magical-element is too fantastic, and the sound-effects amateurish. When the Buddha or Kwan Yin are shown, they look foolish, seated on flashing, revolving, jet-propelled lotus-flowers in the midst of multi-colored clouds, the Buddha with some outlandish coiffure, etc. Are these deliberate attempts to misrepresent and belittle Buddhism? If so, they succeed quite well. What kind of impression do people who know nothing about Buddhism get from such movies?

If you intend to buy a house, it is advisable to have it evaluated first, otherwise you might later find that you paid far too much for it. Should we not also evaluate our religion and philosophy of life? Dare we do so? Would our religion stand up to honest scrutiny today? Why do so many Buddhists discard Buddhism and embrace other religions? Is it merely for material gain, or, as refugees, to acquire sponsorship? Have they found something better than they had? Did they understand what they had before changing? And do they understand the religion they are changing to? We should really be prepared to ask such questions and not to go blindly on, thinking that "Our religion is better than others", as we often do. If we were asked to explain why we think our religion is better than others, would we be able to?

We can see that, as far as social-service is concerned, Buddhism is so far behind that it is nowhere in sight! And as for ceremonies and rituals, well, other religions have such, too. What constitutes Buddhism's difference, and why should it continue to exist in this world, more than 2,500 years after it began? Why should it not have followed into oblivion the ancient Greek and Roman religions, remains of which we can find now only in museums and books on mythology? Does Buddhism offer to people anything at all that they cannot get elsewhere? If we are afraid to ask such questions, it means we have not really understood, and have no real faith in what the Buddha taught. We should not think it disrespectful to doubt and inquire, for this is what the Buddha encouraged, not belief. When He was about to pass away, He asked His monks if they had any doubts or questions about anything. When they all remained silent, He said that, if they didn't like to ask, out of respect for Him, they should get a friend to ask for them. There was still no response, and the Buddha knew this was because they had understood, and had no doubts, and not because they were afraid or shy to ask.

Unlike some other religions, Buddhism did not develop as a branch or out-growth of a previously-existing religion, but as a result of the Buddha's Enlightenment. Buddhists therefore claim it is based upon verifiable facts, and does not require its followers to accept and believe things unquestioningly.

There is, in Buddhism—as in most other religions [indeed, some religions are based upon it]—a 'miracle-aspect'. However, it is not emphasized or regarded as important, as it is unverifiable, and *that* part of it is from the past, while the important aspects are of the present, the Eternal NOW. Even today, there are people with 'supernatural powers' who can perform 'miracles'. The Philippines is famous for its psychic or spiritual healers, who are reputed to be able to perform complicated surgical operations with just their bare hands and effect miraculous cures. India has countless *yogis* and holy-men, many of whom are supposed to possess magical powers; perhaps the most famous of these today is SAI BABA, whom many people have witnessed producing various objects from thin air. It cannot be disputed; there are certain things that most people, including skeptical scientists, know nothing about. Scientists cannot explain, for example, how people can walk on fire, without getting even minor burns, yet this feat is not rare in some Asian countries.

The importance—or lack of it—that Buddhism places on 'magic and miracles' is illustrated by a little anecdote told about the Buddha. One time, while walking beside the Ganges River, He came to a hermitage. After exchanging greetings with the long-haired ascetic there, He inquired about his discipline. The ascetic replied that he had been there for many years, practicing austerities in order to be able to walk on the water, and now, at last,

his efforts were about to bear fruit. The Buddha smiled—perhaps a little mischievously—and said: “But don’t you know that just upstream is a ferryman who can take you across for two pence?”

Psychic-power is said to be available to anyone who practices certain kinds of meditational disciplines, but the Buddha stipulated that, if His monks *did* develop such powers, they were not to display them but keep them hidden. The Scriptures say that He had psychic-powers Himself, and there *are* accounts of Him performing miracles such as creating the illusion of multiplying Himself for others to see, making fire and water issue from His body, disappearing from one place and reappearing in another, and so on. But these things are not regarded as important. The *real* miracle of Buddhism is the attainment of Enlightenment, of Waking-up to Reality, and this possibility is open to everyone. The Buddha did not claim the monopoly on Truth; He said that anyone could find what He had found. His own cousin, Devadatta, though he was a monk and had psychic-powers—whereby he could fly through the air, pass through walls, walk on water, etc.—was not enlightened; indeed, having such powers caused him to become vain and corrupt, and he died in a state of anguish.

Yes, Buddhism was, and still is, a Way that leads to Awakening, while living in *this* world. This is what constitutes Buddhism’s *raison d’etre*; Buddhism *does* have something to offer to our world—a world that, in spite of the wonderful advances of science and technology, is still filled with ignorance, superstition, hatred, fear, intolerance, darkness, and suffering. We must rediscover our heritage as Buddhists, dust off our treasures and bring them out for all to see. Many people are waiting for what we have to offer; shall we withhold it from them? Before we can give it to others, however, we must first understand and appreciate it ourselves, and know it is *worth* offering to others.

To approach Buddhism, requires both Faith and Wisdom, and they must balance each other. When there is too much Faith and not enough Wisdom, things go wrong, and we can see the results in some other religions: they become naïve and unrealistic, superstitious remains of Man’s primitive past. Moreover, these imbalanced religions have often been productive of intolerance, fanaticism, persecution, conflict, and war. Why do people not look deeper into things, instead of seeing only surface-appearances, and believing?

What is Faith? Many of us equate Faith with Belief, but actually, it is quite different. We tend to believe people we respect or like, even if we have no proof or knowledge that what they say is true; we are often misled this way. Belief exists in the absence of knowledge. For example, most people would probably answer “Yes” if asked whether they believe in ghosts or not, even though they have never seen a ghost. And if you ask those who say “No” to accompany you to a cemetery at night, they would probably refuse, which would seem to indicate that they *do* believe. Belief and Disbelief go together, and we often find that one is the mirror-image of the other. But Faith has little to do with Belief, for it arises *out of*, or *because of* knowledge, not in the *absence* of it. For example, you have seen *Kodak-film* advertized; the manufacturers spend huge sums to promote sales; maybe you have been influenced into buying Kodak-film by such promotions yourself. Until you buy and use it, and get good results from it, however, you can only *believe* it is good, but when and if you get good results from it, then *Faith* in it arises, and you would probably buy Kodak-film again. If you had poor results from it, you would not have faith in it, and would not buy any more. So, Faith (Trust, or Confidence) arises from direct, personal experience, and displaces Belief. When we have faith in something, we don’t believe anymore, because we *know*.

Two people go to the market to sell their wares. One conceals his goods and calls out to people, very loudly, to come and buy them, saying that if they miss this opportunity they will regret it for the rest of their lives. He requires people to believe what he says without giving them any evidence to support his claims. The other man spreads his goods out for all to see and examine, but neither threatens nor promises; if people want to buy, they buy, otherwise not. This person is like the Buddha, who never called anyone to believe or follow Him, saying that if they did, they would be saved and go to heaven when they died, but if not, they would go to hell.

What is Wisdom? Wisdom is the ability to distinguish between the True and the False, the Right and the Wrong, the ability to see things as they are, and not as we would like them to be. And it is the capacity to live according to that seeing and understanding. It leads us to Enlightenment, which is something that might make even a blind person say: “Oh yes, I see! I understand!” Stevie Wonder, the blind singer, once said: “I want to help people to see the beauty that is all around us!” *See? Without eyesight?* Yes, that’s right! Wisdom is seeing. Many people have good eyesight but not much wisdom, so they see and understand very little.

This world, and everything in it, changes and passes away; all our works, good or not, crumble, eventually, to dust. Buddhism offers Enlightenment, nothing less.



KING CANUTE REVISITED

To be honest and not falsely modest,
 I must say that I like to be liked—
 Just as other people—
 But not to the point where I'll allow
 Opinions about me
 To paralyze and prevent me
 From saying what I feel must be said,
 For who will take my place
 When it's time to die?

SOMEONE WHO CONSIDERS HIMSELF my friend has the habit of 'ear-jacking' me for hours on end and flattering me outrageously, saying things about me that are not always true. I don't know why he does this, and what he expects to get from it, but I don't like it; he must take me for an idiot! Fortunately, I know myself better than he does, and so his hollow praise doesn't go to my head. I would like to tell him the story of King Canute.

Canute (died 1035) was a Danish king of England, Danes having overrun and conquered that uncivilized and defenseless land in the 10th and 11th centuries. His court—hardly a center of civilization itself—had the usual sycophants and hangers-on. But he was no fool, and did not let their flattery swamp his common-sense. Consequently, when the 'sweet-tongues' out-did themselves and began to attribute supernatural abilities to Canute, claiming that his power was so great that even the winds and waves would obey him, he decided it was time to teach them a lesson.

Ordering his throne to be carried to the seashore and placed on the beach, he waited until the tide was coming in, then sat there and commanded the waves to come no further. His flatterers stood around uneasily, knowing they were about to be rebuked. The waves came nearer and nearer until they were lapping at the king's feet, ignoring his repeated commands. When his robes were quite wet, he said to his followers: "You see", he said, "how hollow and meaningless was your praise? In future, restrain your tongues from falsehood, otherwise you will have to be restrained".

If only someone had explained to me when I was young the kind of things that I now explain to others, I would have been so lucky; I might have understood and saved myself so much time and trouble!

But it's not too late to atone for things that I now regret, and I can try to turn my mistakes and stupidity around, and make something positive of them. Perhaps some others can learn from *my* experience, and if they do, then my mistakes will not have been in vain.

Following the Way is often an uphill battle, of course, as we must face and come to grips with our mental defilements. Most people don't even want to know of this and prefer to live carelessly, wasting their *precious human rebirth*—as Tibetans term our condition—and sliding backwards. But although it often *is* difficult, there is something built into our mental make-up that is on our side and helps us on our journey upwards; we call it our *Conscience*, or inner voice. It makes us feel uncomfortable at times, but it is in our own interests.

Because we have set out upon the Way does not mean that we are incapable of doing wrong; we've only just begun, so of course we can do wrong, like people who know nothing of the Way. The difference between us and them is that *we* cannot forget; our wrong-doing bothers us and will not let us live in peace. We either feel remorse and try to correct our mistakes, or 'confess' them to someone else, and in this way, put them behind us and try to see it as part of our learning-process. It may be taken as an indication of our progress in Dharma: that we can do wrong, but not feel good about it.

I don't *have* to tell anyone about this, and I'm not trying to show off, but I want to 'confess' here something I did that has bothered me since. In doing so, it might be useful in helping some others avoid doing the same kind of thing.

While in Kathmandu in 1998, I went to a second-hand book-shop. In keeping with the custom, I haggled about the price of a book, and got it for 300 rupees, instead of the marked-price of 400 rupees, the understanding at such shops being that one may get a 50% refund later. Some days later, having finished the book, I went to return it, expecting to recover 150 rupees, but there was a different assistant in the shop. When he opened the book and saw 400 rupees written there, he asked me if that

was what I had paid for it. I regret to say that I replied “Yes”—just one word. He therefore gave me back 200 rupees, when I should actually—and according to our agreement—have received only 150. I walked out thinking, “Well, he made 100 rupees profit anyway, and didn’t really lose on me”.

Yes, he made a clear profit, and didn’t lose. It was *I* who lost. I caused suffering to no-one but myself; I was stupid! Thinking I had gained 50 rupees (about US\$0.80), I actually lost much more, and wish I could rewind the tape and undo what I had done; it has bothered me, and I’m ashamed of it.⁵

Telling of this incident, most people have understood and agreed with me, but one woman was aghast, and said: “But you are a monk! How could you do such a thing?!” “Yes, I am a monk”, I replied, “but that doesn’t prevent me from doing wrong. And I told this story to illustrate to you how *this* side of Enlightenment, we are subject to doing wrong. Moreover, I want even my weaknesses—not to mention my strong points—to be a source of strength to others. It is my gift to you, but if you regard it that way, you will benefit nothing from it!”

I am not in the habit of doing such things; in fact, I have written about this sort of thing elsewhere in this book⁶, and I do try to practice what I preach. The very fact that I said *try*, however, means that I don’t always succeed, which is why I wrote the other article, *DON’T FOLLOW ME*. I am aware of my limitations, and don’t want others to get involved with them, as they have enough of their own to deal with. But I feel that it helps to know that we are all in the same boat, and not in a position to point fingers at others and feel superior. We are weak, but it is from weakness that strength comes. I don’t want to boast of my successes, but I *have* had some; indeed, if I had had nothing but failures, I would not be here now talking of it. I’m confessing my lapses, not boasting of my successes.

Although we should be capable of introspection and self-criticism, it should be objective and fair, without exaggeration, self-debasement or self-flagellation. We often expect too much of others, and often too much of ourselves; consequently, we become disappointed. This does not mean, however, that we should not have ideals to aim for, but should accept the likelihood of failure, and not be too disappointed when it happens. It may be seen as an opportunity for further striving and eventual success, instead of an excuse for giving way to self-pity and despair.



⁵ I wonder how George Soros—whose name would perhaps be better spelled ‘Sorrrows’—sleeps at night? Can he *really* feel nothing—really have no conscience—about causing suffering and hardship to so many millions? I am amazed at his ignorance, spiritual poverty and heartlessness. He must be desperately unhappy; a happy person could not do such.

⁶ In *NOT JUST IN THE MIND*.

YES, YES, NO, NO

WHAT DO WE MEAN when we say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’? It is a valid question, not a flippant one, as many of us seem to regard giving our word as unimportant; we make appointments that we have no intention of keeping, and say ‘Yes’ when we don’t mean it, or even when we mean ‘no’.

Let us look into this somewhat, because clear seeing can help us avoid unnecessary trouble, and anything that does that is surely useful and good.

Why do we speak so lightly, without considering the consequences of our words? Why are we such hypocrites? Must we be so? Are we happy this way? Have we no choice about it? See how a dog wags its tail: with its heart, sincerely. Why are we *less* sincere instead of *more* sincere than dogs?

Certainly we have some choice—not as much as we think we have, and not as much as we would like, perhaps, but certainly we have some. We are not helpless victims unless we think we are and then, of course, we conform to our beliefs and bring upon ourselves that which we believe; it’s called ‘wish-fulfillment’; but it comes from weak-mindedness and ignorance.

If someone makes an appointment with you and then stands you up, how do you feel? You won’t be very pleased, of course, even if you understand that many things can happen to prevent the genuine non-keeping of appointments. But there is little excuse these days for not calling to say that we won’t be able to make it, and apologize. And if that is how we feel, we should be able to understand how others feel if we do not keep our appointments with them; it works both ways, and we have responsibilities to observe, not just rights to enjoy.

We should beware of people whose ‘yesses’ and noes’ don’t indicate what they mean. Either they are weak and dare not say what they mean (they might think it’s polite, out of fear or desire not to offend anyone), or they have no principles and won’t commit themselves to a clear answer, or they have ulterior motives. We may not have liked Maggie Thatcher personally, for example, but she certainly flew her flag for all to see, and left no-one in doubt that when she said “No”, that was exactly what she meant. To that extent, at least, she could be trusted. Silly Bill falls far below her standard!

Deep inside, we know what is right and wrong; our criticism of others for doing wrong shows that we know. But we often practice double-standards, and blame others for things we ourselves are guilty of. This is why we are hypocrites. But must we be like this, even to the point of hating ourselves at times? We sacrifice our integrity and willingly say and do things we later regret, just to keep up appearances and not upset others; our living is a performance, a charade, a lie. It’s not surprising we are unhappy, alienated and fragmented, when we always live to impress others.

For some years, I’d known there was little love between this lawyer and his wife, but when he came and told me his wife had left him for another man, he revealed another side of himself. He asked me for advice on how to deal with this situation, but it was clear that he just wanted to state his point-of-view, and didn’t really want advice. He held the other man responsible for “breaking up my family” as he put it. I was not having this, however, because although I’d never met his wife, I knew that she, too, had her story. I told him so, and asked if he thought she’d had no choice in leaving him for the other man. If he felt that the fellow had abducted her and was holding her against her will, he should have recourse to the law and bring him to justice, which should not be hard to do. But, since his wife had gone off on her own accord, this must be taken into account, and he should ask himself if she was justified in leaving him. What was she getting outside that she couldn’t or didn’t get at home?

He persisted in claiming he’d been maligned and wanted revenge, going so far as to ask me what to do. It was then that I asked him if he’d ever had an extra-marital relationship himself (as stated elsewhere in this book, I play the role of *the Devil’s Advocate*, don’t forget). He admitted that he’d had, but said: “So what? That’s beside the point”. “No, it’s very much to the point”, I said. “How come it is alright for you to philander, but not for your wife? You are a lawyer, but are practicing double-standards. Would your position stand up in court?”

Clearly, this is still a man’s world, in which men have always assigned women second-place, and for most part, women have submissively accepted this. But is there any good and natural reason why this should be so? Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant branch of Christianity, wrote, in 1533: “Girls begin to talk and stand on their feet sooner than boys because weeds always grow up quicker than good crops”.⁷ What is this but pure prejudice?!

⁷ Taken from *The “Natural Inferiority of Women”*, compiled by Tama Starr (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991).

In China and India, males have always been regarded as higher and better than females, and female infanticide is widespread; consequently, the greater ratio of males to females now is productive of great trouble.

In India, there are many cases of what are called 'Dowry Murders'. Out of uncontrolled greed, young wives are deliberately set on fire by the husband or/and his mother, and the excuse given—and usually accepted by the authorities—is that the kerosene-stove exploded while she was cooking and her clothes caught fire. Few of these murderers are brought to justice and convicted, and the husband is free to marry again and get another dowry.

The saddest thing about these awful crimes, and the most difficult to understand, is that the mother-in-law—who is probably the real culprit, having instigated her son to do the dreadful deed—has been a bride herself, so should know what it's like to be in that sad, unenviable position and sympathize with her daughter-in-law! It is often women themselves, therefore, who oppose and retard the lawful rights of women as a whole, when they should be in the front line! They betray their gender.

This, again, boils down to ignorance and superstition. In what way is a man better than a woman? There are things that men can do that women cannot do, of course, but the opposite also holds true. And most men claim to love women—some women, anyway, and their wives in particular (until they get married, at least; sorry for my cynicism; it's not unfounded, I feel)—but their treatment— instead of defense—of women is an obvious contradiction of this. How is it that men treat women so badly? Is it because of fear of woman's special ability to bring forth new life? Is it because man feels diminished by the realization that he depends upon woman to be what he is? If so, there is really no need for it, as he cannot change what is, unless he goes in for cloning and bypasses the need for sexual reproduction and the pleasure therefrom.

Who would like to live in a world only of women, or only of men? Well, no doubt some would, but most of us would not. Let us, therefore, try to see things in a clearer perspective, recognizing that we are not self-sufficient and that we cannot do without others. To be honest and open enough to say, "I need you" does not imply weakness or diminish us, but is merely stating an obvious fact. Actually, to acknowledge the truth implies strength and courage. Who can do it?



PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN WAR

THE WORLD-POPULATION is presently about 6 billion— that is, 6,000,000,000—and increasing rapidly. In poor countries like Ethiopia and Somalia—the most outstanding examples—famine and starvation cast their ominous shadows over millions of people, and it is easy to imagine it becoming much more widespread. Even with this awful reality, however, people continue to procreate uncontrollably, though this is probably Nature's blind urge to ensure the survival of the species.

Any solutions to the global environmental problems must be carried out coincidentally with drastic population control and reduction. According to environmental expert David Suzuki, the birth of each extra person in an industrialized country is more disastrous than the birth of 50 people in undeveloped countries like Bangladesh, for example. It is people in industrialized countries who produce the bulk of the carbon-dioxide and CFC's that are causing the Greenhouse Effect and the depletion of the Ozone Layer.

Over-population causes misery in many forms: pollution, starvation, deforestation, water-shortage, land-degradation and war. Whoever opposes birth-control unspokenly supports war, as war is one of the outcomes of overpopulation. We have only to look back over history to see what happens when a country's population becomes too big to be supported by that country: people will not just lie down and die of starvation if they can see plenty and to spare in the next country's fields, will they? We can also see it in the animal world, with rabbits, mice and locusts as examples. They know nothing about contraception, and look what happens with them!

Pope John-Paul II is notorious for opposing contraception; he denounces it continuously. His stand is a classic example of how Christianity, in particular, has opposed Science—and not just Science, but *Common Sense*— through the ages. Why does he behave in such an irrational and irresponsible manner? We are not talking about Abortion here, which Buddhists, Hindus and Jains also oppose, as Abortion is murder; life begins at the moment of conception, when the three elements of sperm, ovum and incoming-consciousness come together. Contraception, however, is just a matter of preventing the three elements coming together and conception taking place; there is no killing involved. And today, with numerous forms of contraception available, governments can and *must* afford to carry out birth-control programs; the costs are minimal compared with the alternative costs of over-population.

The Pope says that contraception is unnatural. Well, yes, it *is* unnatural; no-one denies this. But why single out and condemn contraception on this basis, when so much else about us is unnatural? If he is going to use that as his rationale for condemning it, he should be consistent and not live in a building of any kind, not use any form of transport, not eat cooked food, and not wear clothes. Nor should he use a toilet, but should perform the bodily functions of excretion just where and when the feeling to do so comes upon him, like animals. Maybe he is harking back to the time in the Bible, when 'God' told 'Adam and Eve' (Genesis 1:28): "Be fruitful, and multiply". Well, in the early days of man's history, prolific reproduction was a necessity as mortality rates were very high and life short; but that is hardly so today, and in fact, the opposite is needed: not increase but decrease! Such exhortations must be understood in context and not applied for eternity. But if this biblical injunction *is* the Pope's reason for opposing birth-control, why is he himself celibate? From where did the Catholic Church get the priestly practice of celibacy? The Jews did not practice it. I can think of no passage in the New Testament where Jesus spoke directly about celibacy, or encouraged it, let alone made it a rule for his disciples (except one passage about eunuchs⁸). Maybe it is one of the many influences of Indian thought on early Christianity. Incidentally, some of the Popes were not celibate, but openly had wives and children. (The history of the Papacy, like the history of Christianity as a whole, is very interesting!)

It is fortunate that the Popes of our time do not have the power over people's lives that earlier Popes had. Now many Catholics pay no heed to the Church's ideas about birth-control, and hopefully more of them will listen to the Voice of Reason instead of to the Voice of Popish Dogma. It is imperative now to face facts if the human race is to avoid annihilating itself or devolve into an inferior condition. We can no longer insulate ourselves in ignorance and superstition, but must see how we—each one of us—contribute to the problems besetting the Whole of Humanity. The Whole is made up of parts, and the parts are people, like you and I. We must accept responsibility before it's too late to do anything. We do not live alone in the world; the world is not our personal property, but belongs to us all, for a while; we share it with others now, and will pass it on to those who will come after us. Is it not in our own interests to think about things and take care of them?

⁸ Matt. 19:12.

The solutions to the problems facing us lie not only with Science but also with Religion, which still exerts a very powerful influence over our lives, as shown above. Albert Einstein wrote: “The religion of the future will be a Cosmic Religion. It should transcend a Personal God, and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the Natural and the Spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense of all things, Natural and Spiritual, as a meaningful unity”.⁹ He also wrote, in the same work:

“Though I have asserted that in truth a legitimate conflict between religion and science cannot exist I must nevertheless qualify this assertion once again on an essential point, with reference to the actual content of historical religions. This qualification has to do with the concept of God. During the youthful period of mankind’s spiritual evolution human fantasy created gods in man’s own image, who, by the operations of their will were supposed to determine, or at any rate to influence, the phenomenal world. Man sought to alter the disposition of these gods in his own favor by means of magic and prayer. The idea of God in religions taught at present is a sublimation of that old conception of the gods. Its anthropomorphic character is shown, for instance, by the fact that men appeal to the Divine Being in prayers and plead for the fulfillment of their wishes”.

And further: “The main source of the present-day conflicts between the spheres of religion and of science lies in this concept of a personal God. It is the aim of science to establish general rules which determine the reciprocal connection of objects and events in time and space. For these rules, or laws of nature, absolutely general validity is required—not proven. It is mainly a program, and faith in the possibility of its accomplishment in principle is only founded on partial successes. But hardly anyone could be found who would deny these partial successes and ascribe them to human self-deception. The fact that on the basis of such laws we are able to predict the temporal behavior of phenomena in certain domains with great precision and certainty is deeply embedded in the consciousness of the modern man, even though he may have grasped very little of the contents of those laws. He need only consider that planetary courses within the solar system may be calculated in advance with great exactitude on the basis of a limited number of simple laws. In a similar way, though not with the same precision, it is possible to calculate in advance the mode of operation of an electric motor, a transmission system, or of a wireless apparatus, even when dealing with a novel development.

“To be sure, when the number of factors coming into play in a phenomenological complex is too large, scientific method in most cases fails us. One need only think of the weather, in which case even prediction only a few days ahead is impossible. Nevertheless, no-one doubts we are confronted with a causal connection whose causal components are in the main known to us. Occurrences in this domain are beyond the reach of exact prediction because of the variety of factors in operation, not because of any lack of order in nature”.

Again: “The more a man is imbued with the ordered regularity of all events the firmer becomes his conviction that there is no room left by the side of this ordered regularity for causes of a different nature. For him neither the rule of human nor the rule of divine will exists as an independent cause of natural events. To be sure, the doctrine of a personal God interfering with natural events could never be *refuted*, in the real sense, by science, for this doctrine can always take refuge in those domains in which scientific knowledge has not yet been able to set foot.

“But I am persuaded that such behavior on the part of the representatives of religion would not only be unworthy but also fatal. For a doctrine which is able to maintain itself not in clear light but only in the dark, will of necessity lose its effect on mankind, with incalculable harm to human progress. In their struggle for the ethical good, teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal God, that is, give up that source of fear and hope which in the past placed such vast

⁹ Albert Einstein: *Out of My Later Years*.

power in the hands of priests. In their labors they will have to avail themselves of those forces which are capable of cultivating the Good, the True and the Beautiful in humanity itself. This is, to be sure, a more difficult but an incomparably more worthy task. After religious teachers accomplish the refining process indicated they will surely recognize with joy that true religion has been ennobled and made more profound by scientific knowledge”.

Still further on, he says: “If it is one of the goals of religion to liberate mankind as far as possible from the bondage of egocentric cravings, desires, and fears, scientific reasoning can aid religion in yet another sense. Although it is true that it is the goal of science to discover rules which permit the association and foretelling of facts, this is not its only aim. It also seeks to reduce the connections discovered to the smallest possible number of mutually independent conceptual elements. It is in this striving after the rational unification of the manifold that it encounters its greatest successes, even though it is precisely this attempt which causes it to run the greatest risk of falling a prey to illusions. But whoever has undergone the intense experience of successful advances made in this domain, is moved by profound reverence for the rationality made manifest in existence. By way of the understanding he achieves a far-reaching emancipation from the shackles of personal hopes and desires, and thereby attains that humble attitude of mind towards the grandeur of reason incarnate in existence, and which, in its profoundest depths, is inaccessible to man. This attitude, however, appears to me to be religious in the highest sense of the word. And so it seems to me that science not only purifies the religious impulse of the dross of its anthropomorphism, but also contributes to a religious spiritualization of our understanding of life.

“The further the spiritual evolution of mankind advances, the more certain it seems to me that the path to genuine religiosity does not lie through the fear of life, and the fear of death, and blind faith, but through striving after rational knowledge. In this sense I believe that the priest must become a teacher if he wishes to do justice to his lofty educational mission”.

[I have quoted Einstein at length here in order to share something of his thoughts with others who might otherwise not be aware of them].

Nowadays, people are becoming aware that this Earth of ours functions as a Whole, and is affected by all the living things on it—especially by humans, with their propensity for destruction. Until recently, very few people cared about pollution, deforestation, or the slaughter of wildlife—to the point of extinction, in many cases. But now, faced with the reality that we are all directly involved with what is happening, people are beginning to awaken from their apathy, and realize that if the boat sinks, we will all go down with it. However, it will take a great deal more to keep them awake and inspire them to participate in doing something positive to counter the effects of centuries of neglect and exploitation. Now we must see beyond the narrow barriers we have created, must understand the ‘*human-ness*’ we have in common with others, must move towards the ‘Cosmic Religion’ that Einstein envisaged; it is imperative to do so!



WHAT, NOT WHO

WHEREVER THERE ARE PEOPLE, THERE are problems of various kinds. Some problems are logistical, such as the matter of producing food and other basics necessary for survival, and which, though they can be streamlined, can never be completely eliminated. It is not this kind of problem that I am concerned with here, but with those that are—by using a little wisdom or common-sense—avoidable.

Do you like to suffer? You will say “No!” of course. But there is a little bit of sado-masochism in most of us, else why would we pay to watch horror-movies that scare us and even cause delayed-reaction nightmares? Or why are champion boxers paid millions for a few rounds in the ring, during which they bash each other to bloody pulp, if not for the entertainment and satisfaction of those who delightedly watch and applaud their violence? Something inside us *does* like suffering, if not our own, then in others. Strange, isn’t it?

Each person sees the world from his own unique viewpoint, and there is nothing unusual about this. Problems arise, however, when we think that the world must be exactly as we perceive it to be, not thinking that others might see it differently, according to *their* particular viewpoints. Clinging to one’s viewpoint, unwilling to look at things from others’ viewpoints, leads to intolerance, bigotry, fanaticism, and all kinds of tensions, conflicts, and problems, small and great.

We live now in a world where cultures and religions touch and overlap each other on all sides, unlike in former centuries when nations had little commerce or contact with each other, and little was known or understood—but much misunderstood—about the cultures and religions of others. Now, looking back, we can clearly see the trouble and misery that has been directly caused by the idea of ‘the Chosen and the Damned’ throughout history. Is it not time that we updated our way of looking at things? We are, after all, now in the 21st Century (using the arbitrary Christian dating-system that the whole world has got stuck with).

Isn’t it sad that, while the world’s wisdom—and there is no shortage of it, really—should be freely available to anyone who can think and read, in any bookstore or library (even in newspapers and magazines!), many people should be as happy in their ignorance as ‘pigs in muck’, or content to live like ‘frogs in a well’, thinking that their own narrow way of looking at things is the totality of life?! It would be alright to let them remain so, if they were content to allow others to differ, but they continually try to drag others down into their darkness with them. This cannot/should not go unopposed. The world needs more light instead of more darkness.

We can—i.e., it is possible—look at things from others’ viewpoints without necessarily agreeing with or endorsing them. And if we can do so, we will become greatly enriched thereby. The more sides we are able to look at a thing from, the clearer the picture we will get of it; try it, right now, and see: Without moving from where you are as you read this, look at any object near you: a TV, refrigerator, car, or even a person. Your view of it, your perception of it, is only as a two-dimensional object, like you see on a TV screen.

Can you drive a two-dimensional car, sit on a two-dimensional chair, eat a two-dimensional meal, or embrace a two-dimensional person? If you go to buy a car, you would not take just one look at it, from a particular angle, and then buy it, would you? You would walk all around it, look beneath it, get inside, inspect everything, and probably test-drive it first. In the same way, it would help us—and the world—if we looked at others’ points-of-view objectively. We need not like them, or agree with them, but we can agree to differ, without wanting to destroy. The unwillingness to do this displays a deep-seated insecurity about one’s own viewpoint, and reduces us, often, to intolerant bigots and fanatics, whose war-cry is: “*I* am right, and *you* are wrong!”, whether on a personal level, or on an increasingly large-scale level such as “*my* family”, “*my* tribe”, “*my* nation”, “*my* race”, “*my* religion”, and so on. Have we not personalized everything, and made things like ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ into persons? Watch yourself the next time you have an argument with someone: Do you think that “*He* is right, and *I* am wrong”? If we thought like that, there would be no basis for argument, would there? Arguments arise and go on because each person considers himself to be right and others wrong. Is there anything we can do about this? Certainly there is. Try to see that:

WHAT MATTERS IS WHAT IS RIGHT,
NOT WHO IS RIGHT.



THE MONK AND THE BODHI-TREE

THERE WAS ONCE A MONK who recalled that Sakyamuni attained Enlightenment while sitting under a tree known to Buddhists ever since as *The Bodhi-tree* or *Tree of Awakening*. So he decided to sit under such a tree, thinking *he* might become Enlightened thereby.

It is not hard to find *ficus religiosa* trees (the Latin name for this kind of tree) in Asia; their seeds, dropped by birds, lodge in cracks and crevices, and grow very easily and quickly; they can even force apart huge stones. So, choosing a nice shady tree, the monk sat there, but as time passed and nothing happened, he began to wonder what was wrong, and why he hadn't become enlightened.

He turned around and looked at the tree, wondering where the enlightenment could be, but couldn't see it anywhere—not in the trunk, not in the branches, not in the leaves. "Where *can* it be?" he thought. "Ah ... maybe ... er ... maybe it's *inside*". So he got up, and went to get an axe, and began to cut down the tree, expecting to find enlightenment inside. But at the last stroke of the axe, when the tree crashed down, a ferocious demon jumped out and tore him limb from limb!

The Buddha did not become Enlightened by sitting under a particular kind of tree, but by the fruition of the wisdom He had developed. After His Enlightenment, the tree came to be known as 'the Bodhi-tree', as that is where he was sitting when He became Enlightened. We respect it for this reason, and not because it is better than any other kind of tree. It could just as easily have been another kind of tree He was sitting under when it took place—like a mango-tree, tamarind, or oak-tree—but He could sit under only one kind of tree at a time, just like you and I.

Realization of Truth does not depend upon trees, no matter what kind or how beautiful they are. Nor is one day better than another, whether it be the day of the full-moon or any other; the full-moon also had nothing to do with the Buddha's Enlightenment, which could have taken place on any other night, and not just on the night of the full-moon. We attach undue importance to trivial things.

In Thailand, there are about 300,000 monks, most of who go out to gather alms every day. Sometimes, because there are so many of them, it is difficult for some to get enough to eat. But on the days of the new-moon and full-moon, it is easy to get more than enough, as those days are considered more auspicious than other days, and so more people make offerings to the monks then, thinking they will acquire more *merit* thereby. This, of course, is not so; one day is *not* better than another—different, yes, but better, no. Surely, it is more meritorious to feed a person when he's hungry than when he has too much to eat. Such giving is clearly motivated by greed, the wish to get something in return for their offerings, not content to let effect follow cause, fruit follow seed. They are really giving to themselves in this way, not to others. They are not the only ones so motivated, of course; it is normal.

Some years ago, when Tibetans fled their land as refugees, Christian missionaries visited one of their refugee-camps in Nepal, intent on gaining converts. They let it be known that those who converted to Christianity would be given material aid. But Tibetans are—or *were*, at that time—very staunch Buddhists, whose faith could not be shaken by mere material trifles, and they told the missionaries, very plainly, that if their 'aid' was given only as bait on hooks, they had better go elsewhere, and take their 'gifts' with them. Unable to catch any fish there, the missionaries went away disappointed. All praise to those Tibetans! If only other Buddhists—like many of the Vietnamese and Cambodians, who succumbed to the unethical pressure applied to them—had been as firm as them, instead of allowing themselves to be swayed and cheated!



THINK ABOUT IT

SOME OF MY IDEAS *MIGHT* BE UNUSUAL and different, I know, and I make no apologies for this, because what would be the point in writing a book if there were nothing different in it than in other books?

Now, today—at least in Western countries—we have the precious freedom to investigate anything. Nothing is sacrosanct and beyond honest scrutiny anymore, unlike in medieval Europe, when people who had ideas different—even *slightly* different—than those taught by the Church of Rome, were branded as ‘witches’ or ‘heretics’, and often horribly tortured and burnt to death. We have made progress, therefore, and should take intelligent advantage of our freedom to investigate—and should protect it, too—so that we may break the bonds of ignorance and superstition.

Yes, some of my ideas *might* be a bit strange, but I ask no-one to believe me; on the contrary, I ask people *not* to believe, but to keep their minds open and to think clearly about things. Are you ready for another ‘strange idea’?

It sometimes surprises people when I say I feel closer to Jesus than to the Buddha, and I can almost hear them thinking: “What’s he *talking* about? He’s a Buddhist monk! How can he say such a thing!?” Well, you see, in the Buddhist scriptures, there is no record of the Buddha ever displaying anger, fear or sadness, and, at my stage of evolution, with an imperfect mind, I must admit that I cannot understand such a state, although I *would* like to be there. But, according to the Christian Bible—insofar as it can be relied upon at all—Jesus sometimes did get angry, afraid and sad, and this is something I can relate to, because I am subject to those emotions, too; aren’t you? This doesn’t mean that I’m condoning or justifying them here, but just being honest and realistic.

Christian apologists will say (and they *always* have explanations and excuses for things, even if their explanations are seldom convincing, and sometimes obscure matters even further) that Jesus deliberately showed anger, sadness and fear, so that ‘ordinary mortals’, like you and I, could see to what levels he was prepared to descend in order to help us understand and accept him as ‘our personal savior’; in other words, he was only *pretending* to be sad, angry and afraid, but wasn’t really so!

Like me now, Jesus had not yet gone beyond these emotions, and so—although he was undoubtedly further along the Way than I am—I can still see him, and understand him very well, whereas the mind of the Buddha, to me, is right now unfathomable. This is why I feel closer to Jesus than I do to the Buddha. The Buddha has crossed the Ocean of Existence, while Jesus is still in the process of doing so; he’s still walking on the water, somewhere between the Buddha and myself.

The Teachings of these two Teachers, however, is another matter—something apart from personality. As they stand today, it is difficult to compare them, because there has been plenty of time and opportunity, over the centuries, to edit and change them. We cannot reasonably suppose that they have come down to us in the present exactly as they were spoken by those Teachers so long ago. The recorded Teachings of the Buddha are still quite clear, though undoubtedly there have been additions. But those of Jesus are often cryptic, ambiguous, contradictory, lacking in compassion, and in parts, downright incredible—though this, I suspect, is due more to those who controlled and compiled the books of the New Testament than to what Jesus actually said. Much has been put into his mouth by people with vested interests who came after him.

Perhaps we shall never know what Jesus really said, as the records have been so distorted; the New Testament is probably the most-tampered-with book in the world. And there is the 18 years’ blank—like a deliberate erasure—in the account of the life of Jesus, from when he was 12 years old until he was 30. I often wonder why the Christians never found or invented things to fill up this mysterious and glaring gap, when they were so good at falsifying things. Can Jesus really have said nothing to his intimate disciples about his activities during these most-important formative years? It seems probable that—like in the ‘Watergate Scandal’, whereby Nixon and his henchmen erased or destroyed incriminating evidence about the secret and unauthorized bombing of Cambodia—some people got together and decided to omit what, to them, seemed ‘unsuitable’ for the general public. Such practices are known as ‘editing’ or ‘censoring’.

This blank in the life of Jesus has provided ample scope for speculation about what he was doing during those years. One concept is that he went to India to study the ancient wisdom there, and this is why his teachings have an Indian flavor about them in parts. But it would not have been necessary for him to go so far to learn about Indian thought, for the caravan-routes from the Orient to Egypt passed through Jerusalem. And 250 years before Jesus was born, the Indian Emperor Ashoka sent Buddhist missionaries to many places beyond the boundaries of his empire, including Damascus in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt, to reach which they would have had to pass through Palestine. So, the Teachings of the Buddha were known in that part of the world long before Jesus lived. There is speculation that the sect of the *Essenes*—whose records, the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, were found in a cave near the Dead Sea in 1947—came into being and developed out of Ashoka’s missions. The Essenes were ascetics who lived in desert communities, practicing vegetarianism and—in some cases—celibacy, which was something alien and unknown to orthodox Judaism. Jesus is thought to have been a member of the Essenes.

Now, the reason I have spoken about this here is to show that there are other ways of looking at things than the ways generally accepted by the masses of people—ways that are *no less* valid than theirs, and maybe *more* valid and logical.

I once considered myself to be a Christian, but not any more, and never will again—at least, not in *this* life, and I don't plan to become one in a future life, either. In *my* opinion—based upon my research into Christian history—Christianity is the greatest hoax that has ever been perpetrated upon humanity. But this does not prevent me from respecting Jesus, does it? He had no control over what his followers did with his teachings after his death. I have said that I understand him very well, and I respect him greatly. He was a human being, like you and I, though more highly developed spiritually, of course. What a pity that his followers never understood him as such, but insisted upon seeing him as someone forever apart and different from them; no-one can follow in the footsteps of a 'divine being', but we can all follow those of a *human* being, can we not? Where one has gone, we can all go, as the Buddha said.

Is this idea so different that it cannot be considered a possibility?



MANY FACES

I ONCE TOLD SOMEONE that there are four types of people in the world:

- (1) Those who are beautiful or handsome externally, but who are not so internally—that is, in their hearts;
- (2) Those who are not good-looking externally, but who are kind and 'beautiful' inside;
- (3) Those who are not good-looking externally, and who are also not good on the inside;
- (4) Those who look good outside, and who are correspondingly good on the inside.

The person who I explained this to then asked me how to distinguish good people from bad, when the outer appearance is not always indicative of their 'inside'. I realized and admitted that what I had just told him wasn't as clear-cut and simple as the way I had conveniently categorized people for him. We humans—unlike other animals, which live mainly by instinct—are extremely complex and unpredictable. While it is true that we often function by habit, we are more prone to change than the other animals; one day, we will do something in a particular way, and the next day, we might do the same thing quite differently, depending upon our mood or feeling at the time.

All religions tell of the eternal conflict between Good and Evil, a conflict that is going on inside and outside each of us. Most of us take sides in this conflict, or get drawn into it, but because our minds change so quickly and are not yet firmly decided, sometimes we find ourselves on *this* side, and sometimes on *that* side. No-one is either 100% good or 100% bad; we are a mixture, not really knowing where we stand from one day to the next.

If asked, "What color is the sky?," most people would say, "Blue". Well, certainly, it *is* blue, but not always, is it? Sometimes it is gray, or white, or black; sometimes it is orange, pink, or red. Likewise, it is incorrect to say about someone: "He's a bad man", for although he might be bad at times, there would surely be times when he isn't bad.

Here is a quotation from *The Gulag Archipelago*, by prominent Soviet dissident author Alexander Solzhenitsyn: "If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good from evil runs through the heart of every human being, and who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

As a species, we are still evolving, though *from* what *to* what, we are not sure. Now, with improved communications and ease of travel, people of different religions and cultures intermingle, until the edges become blurred and not so distinct. It is an age of rapid change, and as a result, there is a lot of confusion and conflict; but if we are not too rash and can restrain ourselves from destroying everything in our impatience, much good will come of it. We will probably emerge from it—like a butterfly from a chrysalis—as more-balanced, tolerant and wiser human beings. Surely, we shall all need to make compromises in this transition period, and that is seldom easy, but the fact that we have survived this far is ample testimony of our ability to do so.

Now is a time for 'traveling light', a time to sort through the baggage we have collected over the ages, to discard the obsolete and unnecessary while retaining the essence of our experiences—things that are valuable and useful in any situation. It is like embarking on a refugee-boat, where space is very limited and few possessions can be taken along: before boarding, we must decide what we shall take with us: only the bare essentials. If necessary—as most refugees know—we can get by with very little.

Buddhists are fond of saying that all living beings have 'Buddha-nature'—that is, the capacity to become enlightened, though this doesn't mean that they will become enlightened as animals, fish, birds, etc. It means that, after many lives in many forms, they will finally wake up to Reality, as human beings; the human condition is therefore looked upon as very fortunate. It *may be* that we have 'Buddha-nature', but we should realize that, along with the capacity to become enlightened, we also have other propensities—*darker* aspects—that impel us to behave badly and cause suffering. And in most of us, the lower urges are stronger than the impetus for good—just as darkness is stronger than light. Some people might not agree with this, and say that darkness and light are equal, as in day following night, or that light is stronger than darkness. Well, we all know that day follows night and that night doesn't last forever; but for the sake of my illustration of Man's nature here, I still say that darkness is stronger than light, because, look: we don't pay for darkness, do we? It's free, whether we want it or not; but the electricity-bills we have to pay show that light is not!

Yes, maybe we do have ‘Buddha-nature’, but we have ‘animal-nature’, ‘demon-nature’, and ‘hungry-ghost-nature’, too. What is ‘Hungry-Ghost-nature’, you ask? Well, the Buddhist scriptures say that, as a result of karma done in previous existences, ‘hungry ghosts’ are miserable beings who can never satisfy their constant hunger because of their immense stomachs, mouths the size of a needle’s eye, and necks, arms and legs so thin that they look like twigs. Well, I don’t know if there really are such beings—*I’ve* never seen any—but there are many people who, though well-dressed and good-looking, behave like Hungry Ghosts; their greed to acquire and possess is unquenchable; this is what it means to be a Hungry Ghost!

Most people know the old fable of the Goose that laid Eggs of Gold, but it illustrates very well what I am talking about here, so it will do no harm to repeat it:

There was once a couple who had a remarkable Goose that laid an egg of *solid gold* every day. For some time they were happy and content with this; who wouldn’t be? But, as the Goose continued to lay the daily egg of gold, the woman and her husband came to expect it as their right, and took it for granted that there would be an egg of gold every day. No longer did the man ask his wife: “Did the Goose lay today?” when he came home from work. Thus, they came to look upon this wonder as commonplace.

Of course, it wasn’t long before their expectation turned to greed, which grew and grew, like a cancer—as greed does—until the man said to his wife: “Look here, this goose lays one egg a day, no more and no less. It must have a great store of gold inside it, from which it produces the eggs. If we kill it and cut it open, we’ll be able to get all the gold in one lump, rather than waiting for it in pieces, day-by-day”. Seeing the logic of this, the wife reached for the knife. But alas! After the goose had been killed and disemboweled, there was no gold to be found! Their grief and remorse knew no limits, but too late. Overcome by greed, they had destroyed their good fortune!

Each of us has his own life to live. Should we not think for ourselves and decide what we want to do with our lives, and which way we want to go? Sometimes, it may mean swimming against the stream, as many people seem to have no minds of their own and act like sleepwalkers or zombies. If others want to follow the way of Hungry Ghosts, that is up to them, of course, but does it mean that we have to do so, too?

FULL-CIRCLE

AS WE CAN ALL very clearly see, Change, or Impermanence, is the Law of Life. Our new house doesn't remain so forever, the shiny new car gets scratched, dented, breaks down, wears out; we ourselves grow older from the moment we are born, and finally, after a period of time that varies with each individual, we die.

All things, having come into being, move towards dissolution. Meetings end in partings, construction ends in destruction, birth ends in death. We might not like this, and there is nothing we can do to prevent or change it, but we *can* accept and try to understand it. Complaining and struggling blindly and feebly against it doesn't help, but only makes matters worse.

Buddhism, too, with its philosophy based upon Change, is not exempt. See how the great Way of Freedom proclaimed by the Buddha over 2,500 years ago has degenerated and come almost full-circle. Many monks have become *priests* (some even term themselves so), like the *Brahmins* of the Buddha's time, who considered and taught that they were a class apart, the highest of the four castes of the brahmin-dominated system that prevailed in those days (and largely still does). They claimed to have been born from the mouth of their supreme God, *Brahma*, hence their caste-name: *Brahmins*. The second caste were the *Kshatriyas*—nobles, rulers, statesmen and warriors—who were said to have come from the arms of Brahma. (Prince Siddhartha was of the *Kshatriya* caste; his father was a *Raja* or minor king; perhaps that is why it is said that Siddhartha was born from the right arm-pit of his mother, instead of in the usual manner). Next in the hierarchy were the *Vaishyas*—merchants, artisans and farmers; the Brahmins said the Vaishyas came from Brahma's loins. The lowest of the four castes were the *Sudras*, who were said to have come from Brahma's feet, and who were permitted to do only menial work like sweeping, cleaning toilets, garbage disposal, etc; they were considered *Outcastes* or *Untouchables*, whose very touch to a brahmin was considered defiling; if touched by an Untouchable, even accidentally, a brahmin was required to immediately bathe and put on clean clothes. Society was so stratified.

The brahmins, through long centuries of brow-beating and intimidation, had convinced the people that they had the monopoly on religion. They claimed to hold the 'keys to heaven', and taught that anyone wishing to be reborn there had to pass through their mediating influence and rituals—for a fee, needless to say. Just as Christians of today claim —though without the slightest scrap of evidence—that only through Jesus can a person be 'saved' and go to heaven after death, the brahmins taught that their rituals and sacrifices were necessary for a heavenly rebirth. It is not hard to see how this led to all kinds of excess and corruption. The brahmins grew rich and arrogant through exploiting the gullibility of the unlearned and superstitious masses.

The Buddha wasn't the only one to denounce the caste-system, of course; there were other free-minded individuals who saw through the fallacy and iniquity of it. But it was He who spoke out against it the most clearly and effectively, and it reeled under the impact of His wisdom and compassion. Whereas the brahmins taught that caste was a matter of birth, and that a person could never, within a particular lifetime, change caste, the Buddha said: "Not by birth does one become high-caste or low, but by his actions".

The Buddha spent His life going from place-to-place, patiently teaching and explaining to anyone who was ready to listen. Sometimes, He would speak to large crowds, sometimes to small groups, and often, just to individuals, trying to lead them on to enlightenment. He never performed ceremonies or engaged in rituals as the brahmins did. Indeed, He identified attachment to rites and rituals as one of the three fetters cut through when a person attains the First Stage of Enlightenment (*Sotapatti*, literally: *Entering the Stream*).

How come, then, that in many temples, there is so much emphasis on ceremonies and rituals, and so little on teaching of the Dharma? Why have the monks become mere performers of ceremonies instead of teachers of the Way? Is it good enough to say: "Oh, well, it's the *Kali Yuga* (Dark Age) now"?

Shortly after His Enlightenment, the Buddha called His disciples together. There were only 60 of them, but they had become enlightened through listening to His Teachings. He said to them: "***Go forth, O monks, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit and happiness of gods and men. Let not two of you go the same way. Preach, O monks, the Dharma, which is excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, and excellent in the end, both in the spirit and in the letter. Proclaim the Holy Life, perfect and Pure. There are beings with just a little dust in their eyes who, not hearing the Dharma, will fall away. There will be those who will understand the Dharma.***"

He did not say: “Go forth, O monks, and build big temples, and exhort people to make offerings to you and the temples”, as the brahmins did. We might say: “Yes, but those monks were already enlightened, they were *Arahants*, while we are not”. You see how we evade the issues? If we are going to wait until we become enlightened before we do anything, or sit down and wait for someone who *is* enlightened to come by and teach us, we will probably wait for a very long time. These days, it seems, there are very few enlightened people in the world, and they are not to be met on every street-corner or in every temple. But because enlightenment—like a thermometer—has many degrees, it would not be incorrect to say that many of us have *some* degree of it, even though we might be nearer to the freezing-point than to the boiling-point. If we know a little, we can share it with others; if we know a lot, we can share that; but we do not need to be Fully-Enlightened—or to show certificates of *Arahantship* or *Buddhahood*—to share something of the Dharma with others. We might know only a little, yes, while others might know much more than us, but there are countless others who know even less than we do, and who are in greater darkness.

“The best gift of all is the gift of Dharma”, we say. So, why are we so unconcerned about bestowing this best-of-gifts on others? We call it ‘*the Dharma-Jewel*’, but do we understand what this means? In many temples, the Dharma is relegated to the background, and a Dharma-talk is the exception instead of the norm; it shows that we don’t really consider the Dharma to be a jewel at all; in fact, some Buddhists obviously regard it as *rubbish!* Or can it be that, in these years of inflation and economic insecurity, we are stock-piling and hoarding it, waiting for the price to rise before bringing it out to sell.

Buddhism was originally a Way of Life, a Way of freedom from superstition and ignorance, but it has become a ‘Way of Death’, centered around ceremonies for the dead, a Way of Bondage and dependence upon the monks. Many Buddhists feel monks are indispensable to perform ceremonies. In this way, the monks are like a drug that people have become addicted to—*monk-addiction!* I have looked at it from both sides of the fence, and so can say that there is absolutely nothing that a monk can do that a lay-person cannot do, if he wants to do it. It is we, not the Dharma, that make distinctions between monks, nuns, and lay-people.

Some years ago, when I was staying in a large and very wealthy temple in Manila, the chief monk grumbled at me for not joining the other monks in performing ceremonies, but going to the jail to be with “all those bad people” (as he called them). I remained silent until he had said what he wanted to say. Then I replied: “I also can perform ceremonies for the dead if I wish to, but my way is more for the living than for the dead. I don’t think I can help the dead very much, but I might be able to do something for the living”. He wasn’t able to say anything else to me then, but soon after, he stopped the monthly allowance I had been given. However, no-one can keep me quiet for \$10 per month! I am not for sale like that!

If you buy a can of lemonade, do you buy it for the can or for the contents? Buddhism, as an organized religion, with its temples, monks, devotees, ceremonies, rituals, traditions and whatever, is like a container. Unfortunately, few Buddhists are aware of this, and do not know what it contains. It is the Container of the Buddha’s Teachings, and the Contents are more important than the Container.

Many people, who have never thought of it or investigated, assume that Buddhism and the Buddha’s Teachings are one-and-the-same-thing, but it is very useful to know the difference, especially in these times when materialism reigns, and decline and corruption of religion is evident all around, causing people to lose their faith. If we understood the difference, our faith would be strengthened instead of weakened.

Buddhism began at a specific point in time, when the Buddha went out to teach at the age of 35, shortly after His Enlightenment. It had a beginning in time and so, too, it will have an end. Moreover, during its existence so far, it has grown, changed, adapted, absorbed various elements that it came into contact with, developed rituals, ceremonies and traditions, and became an establishment long ago. Things have been added and taken away, and it certainly underwent the inevitable process of editing. We can be sure that it is quite different now than when it started out on its long journey.

Going deeper into Buddhism, the religion, we find the Teachings of the Buddha, but this is also a Container—a Container within a Container—because, after His Enlightenment, the Buddha had to attempt to describe what He had discovered in order to share it with others. Of course, this was very difficult—like trying to explain to a blind man about colors or flowers, etc. He formulated His teachings around what He had seen, and called it *The Middle Way*; He explained about *Suffering*, the *Cause of Suffering*, the *End of Suffering*, and the *Way*—known as *The Eightfold Path—to the End of Suffering*; These He called *The Four Noble Truths*. These basic Teachings did not change during the rest of His life, although He did present them in many different ways.

So, although His Teachings were His own way of presenting what He had found, He was merely trying to point out to others, who saw less clearly than He, what was already—and is always—HERE. He spoke about facts, which He did not invent, and which do not depend upon Him, as everyone can see. Therefore, there are three levels that we should know about: (1) *Buddhism*, the religion; (2) *Buddha-Dharma*, or the Teachings of the Buddha; and (3) *Dharma*, or the Facts of Life. A Buddha is one who realizes these Facts (Dharma) and reveals them to the world through His Teachings (Buddha-Dharma), as far as He is able to; Buddhism, the organization, developed out of His Teachings.

Now, after so many centuries, Buddhism is old and tired, and—not unnaturally—beset with sickness and corruption. In Asia, many temples have degenerated into business-houses or funeral-parlors, where blessings are dispensed, fortunes told, horoscopes cast, charms made, spirits exorcised. Many monks have become magicians and medicine-men, pandering to the desires of people who are quite ignorant of what the Buddha taught, instead of helping them to understand. Perhaps, soon, we must hold a funeral-ceremony for Buddhism!

Seeing all these things—which, really, have little to do with Buddha-Dharma—many people become disgusted and lose their faith in Buddhism; they either turn to other religions or choose not to identify with any. For this, they cannot be blamed, and can even be understood, but it is a pity that they see only the Container and get no glimpse of the Contents. This is largely because almost nobody—the monks whose duty it is to explain the Way to others—cares to try to help them understand, and also because the people themselves are lazy and not interested to learn.

A new car will be shiny and spotless, but, after driving it 100,000 kms or more, you could hardly expect it to be as bright and clean as when it was new. So, although the Container is not now the shining, crystal flask that it once was, and it somewhat stained and covered with the dust of Time, we owe it a debt of gratitude. It has preserved the Contents down the ages for us, and we can, with a little effort and perseverance, still see the Contents through the dust. Do not be too disappointed if the Container is no longer bright and shiny.

**THE CONTAINER IS NOT THE CONTENTS!
BUDDHISM IS NOT BUDDHA-DHARMA!
LOOK DEEPER!**



HIGH-AND-DRY

IT IS SAID that the Buddhist scriptures were first written down about the beginning of the Christian Era. Until then they were transmitted verbally from one to another and memorized by heart—a prodigious feat, as they are so voluminous. Indians were very good at such memorization.

We do not know who undertook the task of recording them in script but they must have had a very high level of scholarship and lots of patience. It is one thing to listen to someone preach, and quite another to set his words down in writing—more so when it was 500 years after he passed away. How did they dare to undertake the task? 500 years is a long time. The sound of the Buddha's voice had long since ceased to echo.

Reading the work of those scholars, can we hear the Buddha's voice and see His face? We must use our imagination, or the words will be just ink on paper. Can we hear His pauses, His emphases, His nuances? Can we see His smile, the twinkle in His eyes as He said something humorous? Can we see His gestures, His raised eyebrows and other body-language? Although He would always have been calm and composed, He would not have sat motionless, like a statue, and His voice would not have been robotic and monotonous, but probably very expressive.

Several times, as an experiment, I've had someone read out a passage from one of my books before an audience, and I then read out the same passage myself, to demonstrate the difference in feeling. The person who read the passage first had no way of knowing how I felt when I wrote it, and could only interpret, whereas I read it as I wrote it, from my heart.

We must keep it in mind, when reading the scriptures, that the people the Buddha spoke to were often simple and illiterate, and had a different way of looking at life than we of today. To them, demons, ghosts and gods—although not visible—were as real as the other people and things around them. The Buddha would have taken this into account and spoken to them accordingly. Had He come straight out and denied these things, had He spoken to them at His level, few people would have listened; consequently, He spoke to people in their language, at their level, and slowly led them onwards; He was very skilful at this. If He were here now, He would speak in a different way, according to the conditions of our time.

Many people won't have this, however, and insist on seeing the Buddha as a figure of the past, like an old fossil. They take everything in the scriptures at face-value. One of my 'colleagues'—whom I've known for 20 years—is like this, and has become fundamental in his approach, convinced that because a thing is found in the scriptures, it must therefore be true. During his talks and in his writings, he quotes frequently from the scriptures, impressing many people, but it is a smoke-screen—mere parrotry—and not from his own experience. Such quoting would not be accepted in a law-court and would soon be dismissed.

Recently, someone informed me that he had told a group of people—*educated* people—that Kuala Lumpur's water-shortage of the past few months was a punishment by the *devas* for it being a 'sinful city'. Well, having heard him make several illogical claims like this over the past three years, I recognized it as his style and wasn't surprised. The only thing that struck me as 'strange' about it was the word 'sinful', which I can't imagine him using, but I could be wrong; maybe it was another word, similar in meaning. I asked one of the people who had heard him say this if he had objected to it, and he said: "What's the point?" "*What's the point?*" I echoed. "The point is that this is blatant superstition, and he should not be allowed to get away with it!"

There are people—many of them kind but naïve—who will believe things like this simply because he's a monk, but it should not pass unchallenged. It is hard enough trying to combat existing superstition without others spreading more!

What an arrogant statement to make! What gives him the right to set himself up as a judge, as if he perceives all the causes of something that affects a city of two million people?! Is he so all-knowing, so all-seeing as to explain a water-shortage in this way? From where has he got such strange ideas? No doubt he can quote from the scriptures about this, too, but that proves nothing except his gullibility. Has he seen *devas*, and does he know what they think and why? This is pure fundamentalism, in complete disregard of the explanations of science. The *El Niño Effect* is a recently-observed and understood phenomenon; it has just entered our vocabulary. We do not know if it existed at the time of the Buddha, but it probably did. In those days, however, there was no science of meteorology, and the causes of different weather-patterns were not known. Perhaps people attributed storms, thunder,

lightning, floods, and so on, to the intervention of gods or *devas*; some people obviously still do. I myself prefer the explanations of science; I don't want fairy-tales any more.

No doubt there are some 'sinful' people in Kuala Lumpur (every city has its share), but we cannot be so sweeping as to condemn a whole city as 'sinful'; there are—there *must* be—many good people in K.L.; in fact, *his* family is there; does he include them in his judgment, whereby he is saying: "You deserve whatever you get, otherwise you wouldn't get it! And, because this water-shortage is a form of suffering, the causes of it must be such as to produce such an effect!?" He is a *Karmite*—a professor of *Karmology*—believing that whatever happens to us is a result of our karma, whereas this is definitely *NOT SO*. There are other forces at work in our lives apart from the law of Karma, which—come on, let's be honest—at our level, is still a concept and not a proven fact.

Some years ago, this 'colleague' of mine sent me tapes of some of his talks with a note saying: "If you meet anyone who would like to listen to pure, unadulterated Dhamma, you may give them these". I was astounded, and it was quite some time before I could even bring myself to listen to them; I was afraid the earth might quake or something, as it was supposed to have done when the Buddha gave His first sermon! When I finally summoned up the courage to play them, however, and nothing extraordinary happened, I wasn't surprised to find them dry, scholastic and hair-splitting, full and overflowing with scriptural references: "*Sutta* number so-and-so; this *Nikaya*, that *Nikaya*", and so on. I could not, in all conscience, have given them to anyone; I don't want to scare people off!

Please, people, be very careful with this concept, lest it do you more harm than good. Be very careful about listening to monks explaining Dharma. Don't automatically assume that they are authorities and simply believe whatever they say, but listen to them attentively and use your intelligence to decide whether what they say is true and useful to you or not. The Dharma should not leave us high-and-dry, like whales stranded on the beach!



BACK TO THE ROOTS

SOME PEOPLE LIKE to make soup of religion, putting several or all together and mixing them up. The result? More confusion than before!

There are more than enough separate and different religions in the world already; is it not more important to find out why we *need* religion at all, as we obviously do? Where does the religious impulse come from? We should go to the roots and not just deal with twigs and leaves.

Let us imagine how it was in primitive times, thousands of years ago, when there were no houses, roads, no fine food or clothes; there weren't even any metal implements! People lived on fruit they gathered, or on animals they were able to trap or hunt with sharp sticks and stones; they wore skins and went barefoot. Life was precarious, dangerous and short, and far from easy or pleasant. They were subject to all kinds of sickness and disease, and had no cure for them; they lived in caves or simple shelters of branches and grass. As well as hunting, they were often hunted; tigers, wolves and other wild beasts preyed on them. They were also subject to and powerless against the elements; droughts, famines, floods, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions destroyed them in great numbers; it is amazing that mankind survived.

How did they feel to be so imperiled by natural disasters, over which they had no control? Cringing in terror, they began to personify and worship the forces of nature; in their ignorance and fear of these destructive forces, they imagined angry spirits, demons, or gods at work, and felt themselves to be the objects of their anger. In attempts to appease the imagined spirits or gods, therefore, they began to make offerings of things that were important to them, like food—fruit, and animals they had slaughtered. If the earthquakes or eruptions subsided, they attributed it to the gods being pleased with their offerings;¹⁰ but if the disasters continued, they would take it that the gods were still unhappy, and make more offerings, even to the extent of sacrificing their innocent children.¹¹ Religion began this way, its roots going back to prehistoric times. Its tap-root is ignorance, its side-roots fear, hope and greed.

Later, people were selected to become priests or leaders of religion—or appointed themselves as such—particularly if they were more intelligent than others and knew something of the art of healing. The priests became the most powerful and respected members of those primitive societies.

Time passed; rituals developed; mumbo-jumbo took hold. Shrines were built, later becoming temples; myths were concocted and handed down; religion became more complicated and refined. The gods, hitherto worshipped as beings inside the storms, earthquakes, mountains, sun, etc., were given names and forms and installed on altars; their worship became the center of all activities; people would do little without first praying to their gods, whether it was planting their fields, moving to new locations, going to hunt, setting off to war, and so on. Each tribe had its own special deities, as well as the major ones common to their area, and, when contact with other tribes was made, differences in beliefs and rituals caused conflict, as each group naturally considered its gods and ways of worship best, as people still do. History shows that such differences sometimes led to 'Holy Wars', and sadly, even in our times, such madness goes on, started and fueled by misunderstanding, fear, intolerance and hatred.

Men were—as now—afraid of the painful realities of life, and developed ideas to explain and help them cope; various concepts about what happens after death arose. Attempting to bring order into society—as well as increase their own power—the priests expounded ideas of Heaven and Hell, or rewards and punishments in the afterlife for those who lived within and without the dictates of their authority. Religion became ever more oppressive and authoritarian.

2,600 years ago, compared with Northern Europe and other parts, India was quite highly civilized. Although there were towns and cities, it was mainly a rural civilization, of course, and the people lived peacefully, content to farm and worship their gods. But the priests were powerful and corrupt, oppressing the people with temple-fees, taxes, and teachings of priestly superiority, claiming that rebirth in heaven was only for those who obeyed them, and that low-caste people were meant to serve the higher castes.

¹⁰ For an example of this, see *Genesis*, chapter 4, in the Christian Bible, and ask yourself why the God thereof loves blood so much.

¹¹ Human-sacrifice has been, for the past 2,000 years, at the heart of the largest and most-aggressive religion in the world until today. The followers of that religion do not practice it, but its founder was a human-sacrifice, according to the way they look at it! They replaced their imperfectly-understood doctrine of Karma—as expressed by Paul in Galatians, 6:7 thus: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap"—by belief in salvation through the blood of their crucified leader (it is known as *vicarious atonement*).

Not everyone accepted this system, of course, and there was quite widespread resentment against the authority and arrogance of the priests; some people rejected their teachings, and sought for truth in other ways. One such rebel was a young nobleman, who, at the age of 29, impressed by the painful realities of life around him, left the comfort and security of his palace and went off into the forest in search of Truth. After six strenuous years, during which he almost died, he found what he had been seeking, and thereafter was known as *The Buddha*, or *The Awakened One*. After His Enlightenment, He formulated His Teachings according to what He had found and realized. They contained no reference to a ‘Supreme God’ that had created everything and who was in control of it all, rewarding or punishing as it saw fit; natural phenomena were not personified or worshipped, and the way to enlightenment was declared open to all who would make the necessary effort. His Way had no need of priests or intermediaries. He exhorted to live righteously and to work out their own salvation. This did not require any kind of worship or prayer. The gods were dethroned.

Buddhism is based upon facts that we can experience and verify for ourselves, not upon ignorance, fear and superstition. Its roots are not hidden in the mists of time, shrouded and obscured in antiquity. It is not a ‘revealed’ religion, but began at a time when civilization was quite highly developed, and grew out of the Buddha’s Enlightenment, out of direct experience and objective observation of the realities of life. And, since realities do not change, what the Buddha found and pointed out is always *Here* for anyone to experience who will. He did not speak of a ‘Creator-God’ to explain the way things are; nor of a first beginning of things, saying that to speculate about it is a waste of time. No-one knows—nor ever *can* know—how things began. Indeed, nothing comes from nothing; everything is the result of many causes; there is always something before everything.

The Buddha stressed that what is important is *Now*, as it is the only time we have. But what is *Now*? Are we content with things as they are? If we are, there is no reason to desire to change or escape from them, but if we are not, we must look for a way to do so. The Buddha offered us such a way: first, to examine what is *Now* and understand it, and then, by making efforts, or new causes, to change the effects we do not like. There is no need to pray to external agencies; we must learn to depend upon ourselves.



MAHAYANA AND HINAYANA

TWO WORDS—*Mahayana* and *Hinayana*—cause much confusion among Buddhists, I would like to offer a different way of looking at them. They concern the Buddhist approach to life.

Mahayana literally means ‘Great Vehicle’ (of Liberation from *Samsara*, or the “Wheel of Change”), somewhat like a jumbo-jet, that carries many people. *Hinayana* is a derogatory term meaning ‘Small Vehicle’ or ‘Inferior Vehicle’ (like a skateboard, which carries only one), used by people who claim to follow the ‘Mahayana’ to refer to followers of the *Theravada* school or ‘Way of the Elders’, as if they themselves have already passed that stage. They say ‘Hinayanists’ are selfish, thinking only of their own salvation, instead of—like them—the salvation of ‘all beings’. There is tremendous egoism underlying this claim, and we can be sure than anyone making it has not understood much at all! Actually, the word ‘Hinayana’ is a misnomer and should not be used to refer to people at all, for both ‘Mahayana’ and ‘Hinayana’, as I will show, are not schools of Buddhism, but attitudes of mind.

Nowadays, Buddhism is little more than a thing of tradition in most parts of Asia, and ‘Mahayana’ has degenerated into a system of worship and prayer to numerous Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that hope, fear and superstition have populated the cosmos with. Ignorant of the Buddha’s Teachings about Karma and the importance of developing spiritual self-reliance, people weak-mindedly turn for help and salvation to celestial beings. They imagine Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as remote from them—somewhere in the sky, perhaps—similar to the deities of other religions. And so, they miss the whole point of the Buddha’s parting injunction: “Work out your own salvation with diligence”. Enlightenment is an intimate inner experience, not something that comes to us from outside.

All Buddhists—regardless of the sect or school they might follow—acknowledge the Bodhisattva-ideal as being the highest path, as it is the way of the aspirant to Buddhahood. Upon reaching his goal and becoming a Buddha, he then has the capacity to help others become Enlightened (not to forgive their sins and save them, but more in the sense of a school-teacher instructing his pupils and helping them wherever possible, so they might pass the exams and graduate; he can’t pass the exams for them). Reaching Enlightenment he is a Bodhisattva no more, but a fully-fledged Buddha. While he *is* a Bodhisattva, as in the case of Prince Siddhartha until he was 35 years old, he is not yet fully-enlightened; indeed, he doesn’t even know that he is a Bodhisattva. An *Arahant* is someone who, by following the Dharma of a Buddha, reaches Enlightenment, and the Enlightenment he reaches is the same as that of a Buddha (it being unconditioned and without grades or divisions). He, too, may assist others, but his capacity to do so is less than that of a Buddha. A Buddha is an *Arahant*, too, but an *Arahant* is not a Buddha, just as every doctor is a man (or woman, of course), but not every man or woman is a doctor. Both Buddha and *Arahant* are free from the chains of *Samsara* (phenomenal existence); they no longer have a sense of separateness and selfishness. (All this, of course, is from the scriptures, and not from my own experience).

Far from being a way of petition and prayer for help from superior or celestial beings, Mahayana is a way of tremendous effort. A person on *that* Way does not pray to the Buddha or Bodhisattvas, but, by using the Dharma, strives to become a Bodhisattva himself. He does so, not by rejecting the world, but by understanding that he *is* the world, and that he does not—*cannot*—live by and for himself alone. Self-interest and fear for self decrease in direct proportion as to how much he sees himself as others, just as a sense of separateness and ego increase the fear for, and pain of, the self.

As an illustration, let us say that there are three kinds of people in the world: (1) Blind people; (2) Selfish people; and (3) *Selfless* people. Blind people—*spiritually* blind, that is—wander aimlessly through life, knowing and caring nothing about Dharma, infatuated with themselves, but acting in ways that are inimical to themselves and that only result in suffering; they think they love themselves, but actually they don’t. They are not bad, *or* selfish, but foolish; selfishness is something above and beyond them, because selfish people know how to take care of themselves, at least, while blind and foolish people do not, and only hurt themselves. There are so many blind people in the world; the world is sinking beneath their weight. If they woke up, they would change their ways.

Selfish people have seen something of *Dharma*, and try to live by it, but their insight is not deep, and they are motivated by self-interest. Though they would try not to hurt anyone, and do what is right and good, it is either out of fear of suffering or from desire for gain—materially and/or spiritually. But if the world had more people of this kind, it would be a much better place, for *real* selfish people do not kill, steal, lie, cheat, start and perpetuate wars, etc.; it is the foolish people who do such things. Abstention from doing evil, and the goodness of selfish people, though motivated by thoughts of self, benefits the world in many ways, and keeps it afloat. Like the bud of a flower, however, goodness at

this level is not full or complete, but it is a necessary stage of the Path; we must begin with self in order to understand and go beyond it.

Of course, selfishness here is not as generally understood, as something negative and anti-social; not at all! This kind of selfishness recognizes others and feels for them, even though it puts itself first. It may be called the *Hinayana* stage, and it shouldn't be looked down upon, but respected and praised, as it is already a high level. Often, we find that people claiming to be *Mahayanists*, and who look down on others they consider *Hinayanists*, have got little more than silly and empty names.

Going beyond self, to the third stage—that of *Mahayana* —is accomplished through seeing, clearly, that we do not live alone, by and for ourselves. Life is a Whole, with many parts, like a multi-faceted diamond; we are not separate and alone, but inter-exist with everything that is. And whereas, before, we were motivated by thoughts of self— fear of suffering, old age, sickness, death, of not attaining Enlightenment, and of therefore remaining in *Samsara* indefinitely—now, through *insight*, we have power over the vicissitudes of life. We see that most of our suffering comes from ignorance and stupidity, and so can be avoided—a discovery of tremendous importance! Instead of looking for the causes of our problems outside ourselves, we find them inside! It is then within our capacity to communicate this to others who might be ready for it, to shout it from the rooftops, to proclaim to others that the only chains that bind us are of our own forging. *This*—and not a Buddhist sect or thinking with a separatist mind—is *Mahayana*; it is the essence of Enlightenment, and available to all.

We can follow the Mahayana, but nobody with any modesty would say that he does so; indeed, he would probably not be aware of it, and might even deny it! There are no outward signs by which a Bodhisattva might be recognized; certainly, he would not float around on a lotus-flower, as depicted in popular but misleading Buddhist art. And if a Bodhisattva can help someone, he will help; it is not necessary to pray to him, but only necessary to put oneself in a position where one can be helped by first helping others. If one does not prepare oneself in this way, one will have no basis for receiving help from others. We must first give out before we can receive, sow the seeds before reaping the harvest.

Conclusion: *Mahayana* and *Hinayana* are attitudes of mind or levels of consciousness, *not* sects or schools of Buddhism.



NOBODY'S MONKEY

ALTHOUGH I WAS TAUGHT to respect age, I respect arrogance in no-one, regardless of years.

There are many different kinds of people in the world. Going around from place to place to give talks, I meet not only many kind and friendly people, but inevitably—I guess—quite a few rude ones, too; the rude people make the kind ones stand out in contrast, and *vice versa*. Some people are rude deliberately, and others without intending to be, just because they know no better.

Usually, I try to bite my tongue and say nothing when I encounter rude people, but at times, I feel something must be said for their sakes, because somewhere down the road, we all have to learn, and to explain why it is improper to be rude may be an act of compassion. And why *is* it improper to be rude? Simply because it limits us, and we do not like others to be rude to us, so should try not to be rude to others; it's not hard to understand this, is it?

A few years ago, in a Malaysian town, I met an old wind-bag whose fondest pastime was wagging his tongue and showing people how much he knew. I met him several times over the years, and each time, he tried to 'ear-jack' me. He wasn't interested in learning anything, and had forgotten—if he had ever known to begin with—that he had two ears and one mouth, instead of the other way around.

Finally, tired of him talking down at me and showing off his intellectual understanding of the Dharma, I refused to talk with him any more, despite his several requests. My time is better spent with people who sincerely want to learn something, and in the absence of such, I must think a bit of myself; I also need rest, among other things, and am not—just because I'm a monk—public property. I'm willing to serve and go places where most other monks probably would not go (and have a track-record to prove this), if I think I might help someone understand something, but I am not a servant, and will not be treated as such!

I was asked to speak in that town again recently, and when I arrived there, was told he was boycotting me and would not attend my talks, and that if I wanted him to come, I must ask him to. I said: "Tell him not to hold his breath waiting for me to ask him, as that will never happen!" He didn't come, but I didn't mind; in fact, I wish he had boycotted me during my previous visits, for he obviously got nothing from me then. I began my talk by asking the audience if they had come to see me or to learn something of the Dharma. They said—as I hoped they would—that they were there for the Dharma. "Then we may profitably proceed", I said. "The speaker, his personality and history, may be disregarded; what is important—or what *should* or *might* be—is what he says, and to ascertain this, you have to listen carefully and use your discrimination, instead of merely believing. Don't come here for my sake and think you are doing me a favor, but for your own sakes. Obviously, I think I have something important to say, otherwise I wouldn't say it, but that doesn't automatically make it important to you; only you can decide if it is or not".

If Old Windbag thought he was doing me a favor by attending my talks, he actually did me one by staying away! His loss (he *might* have gained something if his mind had been more open) was my gain: he was off my back!

In late '97, I made a speaking-tour of East Malaysia. After my talks in Sandakan, the chairman of the Buddhist Society there openly told me that he had earlier asked someone in K.L. to send him a tape of one of my talks there (to see if I were 'suitable' for his group; apparently, this was his 'standard procedure'; he'd already screened or censored me in advance). He was a bit embarrassed when I said: "Well, I'm glad I passed your test". I later wrote to ask if he issued certificates of approval, and if so, would he send me one. I'm still waiting.

For some time, I have felt the need for something to be said about the arrangement of Dharma-talks. It is really a shame that it needs to be said at all. But because I have not heard or read of anyone else saying it, I will say it, knowing, as I do so, that some people will not like it. Well, too bad.

There are several conditions, all of which concern respect for the Dharma, and which really must be there, otherwise there is no point in organizing Dharma-talks. The purpose of a Dharma-talk is to lead people towards enlightenment; therefore, it should not be treated lightly, as a mere formality.

◆ The President or Chairman of the organization should not be merely a rich person who has hijacked the position, but should be qualified for it by understanding and caring about the Dharma. He

should set a personal example to those who elected him by attending Dharma-talks; the fact that this seldom happens shows the need for improvement. Usually only when a high-ranking or famous monk is to speak, can the presidents be seen. They obviously think the speaker is more important than the Dharma. This should not be the case. We speak of the Dharma as a *Jewel*: the *Dharma-Jewel*. We must understand and treat it as such, not as *Dharma-rubbish!*

◆ Punctuality is a quality to be cultivated as part of one's Dharma-practice. A Dharma-talk should start at the stated time and not take second-place to TV programs, as this demeans the Dharma. If people are unwilling to make the effort to come on time, it shows they are not interested. People manage to get to work on time or go to the movies before the film starts, so why the laxity regarding Dharma-talks? It is a habit that can and should be broken.

◆ An **usher** should be appointed to show people to their seats and see they are seated and ready before the speaker is invited to the front; the speaker should not have to wait for the audience. Then, while he is speaking, the audience should listen and not talk among themselves, get up, wander around or go out. Some people get up and leave when they do not get the 'fairy-tales' they expect in a talk, thus depriving themselves of any possibility to learn anything. Many people consider it meritorious just to attend a talk, but not necessary to listen. Merely attending is not enough; people should listen and try to understand. If they don't want to listen but insist on talking among themselves, instead of 'making merit' by attending, they will only make *demerit*. It would therefore be better to stay at home, as not only is their talking disrespectful, but it disturbs others and prevents *them* hearing. There will be time for them to speak after the talk, when it is opened for questions and answers.

◆ Mobile-phones should be switched off during a talk so as not to cause interruptions; the workaday mind should be left outside with the shoes.

◆ Concerning the customary offerings made to speakers by Buddhist Societies: Firstly, a price cannot be put on the Dharma, so offerings are not a form of payment, but a token of appreciation. It seems, however, that offerings are often made on the basis of a speaker's rank, fame and so on, with different amounts being offered to different persons for the same service. This is incorrect. There should be equal treatment. Whatever is offered to one should be offered to all; there should be no discrimination on the basis of personality. Monks who perform ceremonies should *not* be offered *more* than those who teach Dharma, as this is *very* disrespectful towards Dharma, and therefore harmful to those who practice it.

If I play the role of *The Devil's Advocate*, it is because someone must. Without a political opposition-party to speak out, we would see much more abuse of power than we do; it is therefore a healthy and necessary thing. I am not asking anything other than equal treatment—no more and no less—but merely trying to correct some of the discrepancies I have observed. I am in a position to do this, too, as I have no temple of my own to take care of. If I had, I would not be free to say what I think should be said, but would have to say things to please people, in order to get their support. The Dharma would then be compromised, and that would be everyone's loss.



FACT, NOT FICTION

SURELY, TO BE FAIR, we should scrap all one-sided systems that favor particular groups, and look for impartial foundations for our living in Nature. Present-day concern over environmental-pollution and conservation is a good step in the right direction, as it involves everyone on the planet. Maybe ecology will be the religion of the future, as we become more and more aware that we share our Planet with countless other life-forms, and learn to live *with* instead of *on* them. We have many things to learn from Nature.

In our pride and arrogance at being able to walk upright, we have lost our sense of relationship with the rest of Nature, and see ourselves apart *from* it instead of part *of* it. Thus, we have tried to master and control it, until now, we find ourselves in a hell-of-a-mess! We can understand ourselves only in relation to the Whole of which we are parts, but we've cut ourselves off, and live apart from the rest of existence, so how to understand ourselves? We have countless theories and philosophies of life, but if we wish to find out what is true, we must look to Nature, not to Man and his ideas, for Nature has not forgotten what is True.

And Nature is at the heart of Buddhism, not the person of Gotama Buddha; Truth is not a Person or a Being. The Buddha never said things like: “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”, but showed others the Way to find Truth themselves, so He explained about Life in an *impersonal* way. He spoke about *Three Universal Facts of Life*, which no-one, looking impartially and objectively, can deny. Here is a passage from the *Pali Canon*, entitled: *DHAMMANIYAMA SUTTA (The Discourse on the Fixed Law of Dharma)*:

THUS HAVE I HEARD: At one time, the Exalted One was staying at Savatthi in Prince Jeta's Grove, in the Park of Anathapindika. Then the Exalted One spoke thus to the monks: “O monks”. Those monks replied to the Exalted One: “Lord”. The Exalted One then said: “Monks, whether there is the appearance of Tathagatas¹² or there is not the appearance of Tathagatas, there is this established condition of Dhamma, this fixed Law of Dhamma: All that is conditioned is Impermanent. That, a Tathagata has fully-awakened to, He fully understands. So, awakened and understanding, He announces it, points it out, declares, establishes, expounds, explains and clarifies that: All that is Conditioned is Impermanent.

Monks, whether there is the appearance of Tathagatas or there is not the appearance of Tathagatas, there is this established condition of Dhamma, this fixed Law of Dhamma: All that is Conditioned is *Dukkha*. That, a Tathagata has fully awakened to, He fully understands. So, awakened and understanding, He announces it, points it out, declares, establishes, expounds, explains and clarifies that: All that is Conditioned is *Dukkha*.

Monks, whether there is the appearance of Tathagatas or there is not the appearance of Tathagatas, there is this established condition of Dhamma, this fixed Law of Dhamma: All things are Without Self. That, a Tathagata is fully awakened to, He fully understands. So, awakened and understanding, He announces it, points it out, declares, establishes, expounds, explains and clarifies that: “All things are without Self”.

Thus spoke the Exalted One. Delighted, those monks rejoiced in what the Exalted One had said.

These are the Three Universal Facts of Existence. By perceiving and understanding them, Sakyamuni became the Buddha, Enlightened and Free.

ANICCA (Impermanence):

All things, having come into being, move towards dissolution: all meetings end in partings, all building ends in destruction, all birth ends in death.

To cling to that which changes results in pain, anguish, suffering. In all this seemingly-fair show of Earth, there is nothing that will not change and pass. In whatever form one might be born, the natural and inevitable result of that birth is death. Therefore, the intelligent person uses his opportunities to search for Truth while living in this world; he does not expect to find it only after death.

DUKKHA (Unsatisfactoriness):

¹² The Buddha used the term *Tathagata* when speaking of Himself; it means: ‘He who has thus come (or gone)’.

The word Dukkha—like *Anicca* and *Anatta*—is *Pali*, and we will understand it if we know how the Buddha defined it. He said this: Birth is Dukkha, Old Age is Dukkha, Sickness is Dukkha; Sorrow, Lamentation, Pain and Dejection is Dukkha. Separation from the Loved is Dukkha; Association with the Unloved is Dukkha; not getting what we want is Dukkha; getting what we don't want is Dukkha; and finally, Death is Dukkha. In short, the bodily condition is Dukkha.

Continuing, He taught that it is possible for Dukkha to come to an end, without Craving remaining, in the abandoning, forsaking, release from Craving, in Non-Attachment.

And the Way to this state—which He called *Nirvana*, and which can be experienced in this very life, and not in some far-off after-death state or place—consists of following the *Noble Eightfold Path*:

Right Understanding
 Right Aspirations.
 Right Speech.
 Right Action.
 Right Livelihood.
 Right Effort.
 Right Awareness.
 Right Concentration.

The Buddha's *Noble Eightfold Path* is a *Middle Way* of Peace, Knowledge, Understanding and Enlightenment.

ANATTA (Without Self):

Nothing exists in and by itself; things arise according to various factors, remain a while, then cease to be. Nothing is independent; everything depends upon many things; indeed, if we would look at things clearly, we would find that everything is involved with, and connected to, everything else. This means *interdependence*, *inter-existence*, Unity of Life. Brotherhood is therefore not an abstract idea, a far-off dream, but a reality; however, it is a reality we would usually rather not see, preferring to live in conflict with each other.

The Buddha's way does not require belief but only practical and intelligent application. In fact, belief is regarded as an obstacle, and, contrary to what many people think, belief and faith are quite different, for belief exists where there is no knowledge, while faith is born of knowledge applied; faith means confidence in something that one has some knowledge and experience of.¹³

From this, it may be seen that the Buddha's Way does not center around Him personally, but around facts that are visible and verifiable. It is a clear, democratic and non-authoritarian Way, a Way that is right HERE and NOW; all this is required is to walk it!



¹³ Here is an example of the difference between Belief and Faith: Ask Christians if they believe in Satan, the Devil. They will almost certainly say "Yes". Then ask if they have *faith* in Satan. I doubt very much if they will answer affirmatively.

A LETTER TO MY OLD SCHOOL-TEACHER

DEAR MR. RAVENSCROFT,

I have not written to you for quite some time, and there is something I would like to say. Would you mind if I tell it as I often tell it to the refugees in the Camp here?

When I was a boy, I hated going to school, not because I was dull and incapable of learning, but maybe because I did not like being made to learn. I was a naughty boy, and sometimes used to play truant; perhaps I was the naughtiest boy in the school—I cannot think of anyone who was naughtier; I was caned many times.

When I left school, I was very happy to do so, but now, after all these years, I realize that I never left, and that I am *still* in school, but that the school I am now in has a roof but no walls—the sky being the roof. There is a difference now, though: I enjoy learning; my life, day-by-day, is an adventure, an unfolding, a journey of discovery.

I learned many things from you, and some of the things I learned have surfaced only in recent years, so long after. And did you not explain to me, several years ago, that what is *not* in a painting is just as important as what is there? This is redolent of Eastern philosophy—Chinese in particular. Like the empty space between the notes of music, or between words: without the space between, there would be meaningless confusion. Did you ever study Eastern philosophy, Sir?

I'm writing this to express my belated gratitude to you for your patient efforts with me (even the canings were good for me—maybe I should say: *especially* the canings!) It takes time for a seed to germinate and grow; it does not immediately become a fruit-bearing tree. As I look back, I don't know why I didn't receive more canings; I certainly deserved them! Now I am somewhat in the position that you were then, and I understand how difficult it is to be a teacher trying to impart knowledge to others. People call *me* 'Sir' now, and expect me to know things that they don't know. Well, what I feel I have to say is that we should break out of the habit of always waiting to be taught, and, in all humility, become a learner—which is something quite different than being a student, wouldn't you say? I feel that everything is trying to tell us something; should we always think that all knowledge lies in a person or persons? The nature-studies we had in school were excellent lessons; I only wish there had been more of them.

Once, I had a desire to become a history teacher, but that never came about. Now, although I realize that the present rests upon the past, like the snow-cap on a mountain-peak, I have lost interest in history as it is recorded—after all, it is 'his story', and is often biased and distorted. To be sure, there are many things that we can, and should, learn from the past in living in the present, but it has gone, beyond recall, and cannot ever be changed. There is only one 6-Aug-1982; there has not been such a day before, and there will never be another. Life, with all its pain and sham, is still worth living, as long as we learn something from it; we will then not depart empty-handed.

(Bataan Refugee Camp, Philippines. 6-Aug-1982).

There is something I should add to this, as an up-date. You see, I returned to England at the end of 1985, and on New Year's Day, 1986, went to visit Mr. Ravenscroft. I found him old and shrunken, and so senile that he could not remember me. But *I* could remember *him*, and that was the important thing; *I* could remember *him* and thank him, in person, for helping me understand something. I left feeling lucky to have seen him again.

Ten years later still, I was again back in England, and went to visit my home-village. There, in the church-yard, among the ancient moss-covered tombstones, I came upon a new granite slab marking the resting-place of my old school-teacher and his wife. I gazed for some moments in remembrance.

Since I wrote that letter in '82, there have been many changes, of course. One change in me has been the resurgence of my interest in history, because, although it is no less true now than then that recorded history is *his* story, the past is an immense treasure-trove for us to enrich ourselves from. We can make sense of the present only by means of the past; otherwise, it has no meaning.

The present *is* the past, with a little added to it; without it, there would be no present. Perhaps we may compare it to a coral-reef, slowly and imperceptibly being built up by countless tiny polyps. The past has not gone, as many of us think, but is still here, speaking to and teaching us in so many ways; we are so indebted to it. As stated elsewhere in this book, we accomplish whatever we *do* accomplish, not simply by our own efforts, but because we are enabled to do so by others before us; by ourselves,

alone and in isolation, we can do nothing. Being a member of the human race should inspire us to contribute whatever we can to its continuous unfolding.



NO MARATHON

SOMETIMES, PEOPLE ASK: “How long have you been a monk?” or “How long have you been vegetarian?” or “How many precepts do you keep?” etc. These are not nice questions, as they are often meant to measure, compare, or judge.

On the Way, we are in competition with no-one, not running a race to see who can win, be the best, or the holiest, but striving to improve ourselves, and in so doing, to improve the world.

Vegetarians must be careful not to become proud of being vegetarian, otherwise they will lose any merit they might have gained from it. In reality, they have done nothing positive, but only stopped doing something negative—that is, eating meat—though this has a positive effect, *for the animals!* Abstain from eating meat because it is right to do so, and not from any low thought of ‘making merit’, or of being healthier. There is no reason to be proud of doing what is right.

It is funny how, even in religious organizations, people struggle and scheme for positions of power and prestige, and only become proud thereby, thus defeating the whole purpose of following the Dharma. Often, once they are *in* power and position, they neglect to do the work that the position entails, or even misuse their power. I saw it in the Refugee Camps, how people would wriggle their way into any position, whether they were qualified for it or not. Maybe, in their own countries before, they had high positions, and then, becoming refugees, found it intolerable to be reduced to a case-number, a faceless statistic on paper. I saw them on temple-committees in the Camps, knowing little about Buddhism, doing nothing for the propagation of the Dharma there, but most unwilling to give up their petty positions and make way for someone better qualified for the post and who could/would have done something. They were like chickens pretending to be eagles. An eagle can fly down to the ground and see things from the chicken’s point-of-view, but a chicken can fly only a few feet, and can never see things from the eagle’s point-of-view. It is like a fishmonger going to a big hospital claiming to be a heart-surgeon: he might well be able to cut up fish, but that would not qualify him to perform heart-surgery on humans. Perhaps this kind of thing—holding onto strategic offices by people not qualified for them—is one of the reasons for the collapse of many countries. When will we ever learn?

The branches of a fruit-laden tree bend beneath the weight, but the branches of a fruit-less tree are held high. Likewise, proud people hold their heads high, while those who are humble are not ashamed to bend their heads.



WHAT IS A TEMPLE?

A TEMPLE MEANS DIFFERENT THINGS to different people.

To some, it is a public place, like a park, where they can go to relax, take photos, meet friends, have picnics, scatter garbage, etc.

To some, it is a place where they can get something 'free', and many things fly away without wings.

To some, it is a place where they can change their footwear—old for new.

To some, it is a place for seeking 'face', power, position, name.

To others, it is a place to 'make merit', while to others, it is a place to burn forests of incense-sticks and make 'holy smoke'.

To some, it is a place to beg and grovel, to petition for help or salvation, to ask for 'lucky numbers', or for success in exams, love, etc.

To some, it is a place to seek solitude and solace, away from the problems and pressures of home and work.

And to some—always only a few—it is a school, where they can learn something useful to apply in their lives outside.

Today, although there is a resurgence in religious fundamentalism, the number of people who will openly admit to following no religion has grown tremendously, and continues to grow. These trends seem to form two opposing camps; let's take a brief look at them:

Life in our time has become so fast and complex—we might even say mechanical—that many people find it difficult to adapt to its rapid change, and it is easy to understand why they become alienated, frustrated and neurotic. In need of something stable to hold onto—an anchor—some fall back on things of the past, things our ancestors held onto and seemed to gain strength and comfort from, especially religion. This is why we see a rise in what is called 'Fundamentalism'—a clinging to ancient forms which are considered time-tested and indispensable elements of religion, in the hope/belief that the answers to all the problems of the present and future lie therein. But, if anything, this only increases the problems, because, first of all, the realities of the present are often ignored and avoided in a looking-back instead of a looking-ahead. Secondly, this fearful clinging to beliefs and ideas—which, more often than not, have no factual basis—further divides people and makes for more conflicts and problems, so that, even today, we still have the curse of *Jihad* or 'Holy War' with us. Fundamentalists, like Iran's late Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors, are often dangerous fanatics; and in a world where terrible consequences can be brought about by people with itchy fingers on buttons, their ideas of alone being right while others are therefore automatically wrong, are frightening to contemplate.

Many of the world's troubles can be directly traced to this narrow thinking of "I/we are right, and you/they are wrong". Fundamentalists seldom have a balanced view of life, and make themselves conspicuous by their unflagging zeal to influence and infect others with their ideas. In the political field, the communists were the best example of this in recent times, while in the religious field, it is all too-obvious who would win the prize for it, without mentioning any names here.

On the other end of the stick are people who have either rejected religion in totality for any of many reasons, or who never had any interest in religion to begin with. Religion has no restraining influence upon these people, and if and when they think about it at all, many of them would just shrug off religion as anachronistic and irrelevant in the present. Though this is also an extreme, I can better understand and sympathize with such thinking than with that of the fundamentalists. Many of them have been over-dosed and turned-off by the untenable dogmas and superstitions that religion has tried to foist off on them. It is quite right that such things should be rejected as obsolete and unacceptable.

Sometimes, however, people 'throw out the baby with the bath-water' in their wholesale rejection of everything to do with religion; they discard the good as well as the bad. But they cannot really be held responsible for this, as it is usually a reaction against the past. It is up to the leaders of the various religions to perform a house-cleaning, from top to bottom, and bring religion into line with the findings of modern science and psychology (or at least, not hold it in opposition to them). The sooner this is done the better it will be for the whole world.

Religion and Science have been divorced and opposed for far too long, although there is really no natural reason for them to be so; it is mainly because Religion has often required blind belief in things that it was unprepared or unable to provide proof for. But now, in the Space Age, the need to bridge the artificial gulf between these two great areas of human activity is more imperative than ever.

Gone—thank goodness!—are the times when Religion could dictate to its followers what to think and do. Sadly, though, many people don't know what to do with the freedom that has suddenly come to them as the result of the efforts of others. Some of them would be much better off without it, for having it, they do more harm than good, both to others and themselves.¹⁴ Democracy is something that many people are obviously not ready for, like dogs incapable of appreciating diamonds; it has been served to them on a plate instead of them earning and deserving it themselves.

¹⁴ Witness the behavior of British soccer-fans at soccer-matches; it is clearly an abuse of freedom.

During that part of European history known as ‘The Middle Ages’, and even until as late as the 17th century, the Popes of Rome maintained their own armies, and occasionally even directed them in battle! But today, religion has lost its claws and such temporal power, and in most cases, is separated from the power of the state. However, it still has a very important—and beneficial—role to play in the world, if only it will not insist on living in the past.

For many years, my efforts at propagating Dharma have been confined mainly to Asians, because I feel that Westerners are easier able to learn about Dharma—if they want to—than are Asian Buddhists. Why do I feel this? Not because I’m an *Asiaphobe* (I’m not; if anything, I’m just the opposite!). Nor is it because I think Westerners are more intelligent or better in any way than Asians. It is because, if Asians wish to learn about Buddhism, they have to struggle through the accumulated traditions and superstitions of centuries which have grown up around it, and which have sometimes little or nothing to do with Buddhism. A good example of this is the burning of all kinds of objects made of paper—houses, cars, TV’s, hell-money, etc.—in the belief that dead relatives will get these things in more-concrete form on ‘the other side’. Once, in Malacca, I witnessed the burning of a paper palace, replete with furnishings and tiny liveried servants, etc., that had cost about US\$4,000! The monks in the temple where this took place, however, did nothing to discourage this expensive, wasteful and useless superstition, and so, by their silence, tacitly condoned its continuation.

If an Asian wishes to learn about Buddhism it might be difficult to know where to begin. Many, not bothering to investigate at all—indeed, probably not even aware of the mix-up of gold and clay to begin with—just accept the whole thing unquestioningly. Admittedly, ignorance is sometimes blissful, and people do seem to derive solace and satisfaction therefrom, but that is not what Buddhism is all about. Would the young people of today and tomorrow accept things without question? Many Asians living in the West, now having the opportunities to indulge their hitherto unfulfilled desires, become more materialistic than Westerners. Many of them abandon their culture and religion and adopt Western ways, but without understanding them first. Does religion have anything for these opportunistic people? Many of them will not go near a temple except for the funeral-ceremonies of relatives or friends. But can they be blamed for this when almost no-one cares enough to try to explain things to them?

Confucius is reported to have said something like this: “If you love, and nobody responds to your love, look into your love”, meaning to be capable of self-criticism. Should not Buddhist leaders try harder to understand the situation instead of expecting to be understood, or just saying: “Well, it’s the Dharma-ending time now; what can we do?”

Buddhism is a way based upon Change, and its forms have changed many times, and *will* change. As long as the essence is retained, however, it doesn’t really matter. Between the Chinese/Vietnamese forms of Buddhism, and the original Indian Buddhism, for example, there are so many differences. Nor is this surprising, for Buddhism is like a stream of water which, at its source high in the mountains, is crystal-clear. But as it runs downwards, it is joined by other trickles of water, growing larger as a result, and bearing along with it things it has picked up along the way—sticks, leaves, stones, mud, sand, dead animals, and sometimes, perhaps, some specks of gold. Before it reaches the sea, it has long ceased to be a stream of clear water, and has become a mighty river whose waters bear along thousands of tons of sediment and man-made pollutants; indeed, how could it be otherwise? The estuary is far from the source, both in time and space.

Fewer and fewer people go to the temples regularly now. Many of those who formerly used to go often, but now do not, if asked why, might say that they are too busy and have no time. But this is just one reason; there are other reasons, unvoiced, I’m sure. I will readily admit that the Western way of life—which prevails not just in the West but in other areas, too—is very fast and hectic. But I will not accept that it is to be blamed for all our troubles; it is unfair to always blame external conditions for whatever happens to us; we should look nearer to home for the causes. Many Asians change a lot after living in the West for a while; I have heard people complain about how much they find their friends have changed after meeting them again years later.

We change, yes—everything changes, constantly—but are we always to be the victims of Change, and *devolve*, or can we, perhaps, understand and use Change to *evolve* and become better? A boat without a rudder is at the mercy of the wind and waves, while one *with* a rudder can be steered in any direction desired.

Some years ago, I was surprised to learn that no less than 14 Vietnamese monks had disrobed and left the monkhood since arriving in Australia as refugees; that number must be higher now. Something is obviously wrong here, and I think we should endeavor to find out what. It is not good enough to blame the attractions and seductions of the Western way-of-life—although these things undoubtedly play a part in it. Is it that the Vietnamese Buddhist system hasn’t adapted to conditions in the West and is therefore out-of-touch with reality? And can it not adapt? If not, it is in danger of following the way of the dinosaurs, whose bones we see in the museums; it must be expected that, as the older devotees depart from us, there will be few others to replace them.

Has anyone seriously thought to consult people about this state of things? What does ‘the-man-in-the-street’ think about it? What do the young people—tomorrow’s adults and leaders—think? Should *they* not be consulted, and as many points-of-view on these things as possible gathered, so the picture becomes clearer, and solutions to the problems found?

For years, I have said that every temple should have—to balance the ubiquitous Donation-box—a Suggestions-box, wherein people may put their written suggestions, ideas, or complaints concerning the temple, with or without their names, as they saw fit. In this way, as in a democratic system, everyone could feel they have

a say in the way things are done in the temple. The temple committee could learn what people wanted there (it would also act as a check against the possible abuse of power by people in positions).

At this point, it might be appropriate to explain the difference between a Monastery and a Temple: A monastery is especially for monks, and is controlled and administered by them, not by others. A temple, however, is different, being mainly for lay-people, as a place for them to worship and hopefully to learn something. A temple is run by lay-people and belongs to the Buddhist community in general, not to any individual. A monk who stays in a temple does so in the capacity of spiritual advisor to the lay-people, and his role is a very exalted one, for people call him ‘Teacher’, and expect to learn from him something of the Buddha’s Way. The temple is *not* the personal property of the monk, who has embraced the homeless life and should not be looking for another home in place of the one he left.

The distinction between Monastery and Temple should be emphasized, for many people now do not understand, and have come to depend too much upon the monks, instead of upon the Dharma, and consider them indispensable. I have been to many temples where there are no monks, and where people said to me that they were very sad because they had no resident monk. Whenever I heard this complaint, I tried to explain that they should not worry about it, but should try to understand the Dharma themselves, and not always to wait for someone to come along and teach them. If they have a monk visit them for a few days once in a while, to sow some Dharma-seeds by talks or counseling, and then go away, to be followed, later, by a different monk with other seeds to sow, it might actually be better than having the same monks staying there for years. People tend to become bored of hearing the same thing after a while, and begin to look for something new. It’s like eating the same kind of food for every meal, day after day; no matter how delicious we might find it in the beginning, we would soon become tired of it and desire something else.

It is not—as some shallow-minded people think—that I am against monks and temples; I think the role of the monk and the temple is still very important. But let me state, clearly, in what *way* I think they are important: *THE MONK IS A TEACHER, THE TEMPLE IS A SCHOOL*. The temple should be a place where people can go to learn something of the Buddha’s Teachings (though a temple, of course, is not the *only* place where one may learn about that). A monk is someone who should be able to help people understand that the Dharma is everywhere, and not just in the temple. He should be concerned about guiding people to become self-sufficient by understanding and depending upon the Dharma, not upon any person. His aim, in fact, should be to ‘do himself out of a job’ as a teacher, although he need never worry it would ever happen. We understand slowly, one-by-one, not en masse.

Someone once told me that he looked upon the temple as a hospital, where people go to be cured of sickness, but that, since he was not sick, he felt no need to go there. Following his analogy, I replied: “A hospital needs doctors and nurses to treat the sick, so if you feel no need to go there to be treated, perhaps you can go there to help treat, in some capacity, instead”. We might say that, when we have learned all that can be learned in the temple—if ever—there is no need to go there anymore; but that would be a selfish way of looking at it. We could still go, but in the capacity of teacher or Dharma-friend to those who are still learning, instead of as a learner, like before. So, you see, although I might have different ideas about temples than others, I do not consider them unimportant; this is why I established two temples in the Refugee Camp in Bataan, Philippines.

The exiled leader of Tibet’s Buddhists, the Dalai Lama, was awarded the Nobel Peace-Prize for seeking to liberate Tibet from China by peaceful means. In a publication called, “Opening the Eye of New Awareness”, His Holiness said:

“Each of us has responsibility for all humankind. It is time for us to think of other people as true brothers and sisters, and to be concerned with their welfare, with lessening their suffering. Even if you cannot sacrifice your own benefit entirely, you should not forget the concerns of others. We should think more about the future and benefit of all humanity.

“Also, if you try to subdue your selfish motives—anger, and so forth—and develop more kindness and compassion for others, ultimately you yourself will benefit more than you would otherwise. So, sometimes I say that the wise selfish person should practice this way. Foolish selfish people are always thinking of themselves, and the result is negative. Wise selfish people think of others, help others as much as they can, and the result is that they, too, receive benefit.

“This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples, no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness”.

Wonderful words, and they don’t contradict what I’ve just said about the temple, either, for the temple should be a place where people can learn the meaning of the Dalai Lama’s words. He himself lives in a temple, does he not?

John Lennon upset a lot of conservative people with his song, “Imagine”, in which he sang:

“Imagine there’s no country—
It isn’t hard to do;
Nothing to kill or die for—
And no religion, too”.

Seen as Dharma, this makes perfect sense, but it was also what led to John Lennon being killed himself! He was killed by someone who was obviously stuck on the external aspects of religion, and who failed to see the essence.

It is up to the leaders of the temples to help people understand—and to understand, themselves—that if they do so, they will not lose support. In fact, by giving people a new and refreshing look at religion, by helping them see that it is not a museum-piece (as it often seems to be), they will probably gain support as a result of being in touch with the times we live in.

We must get our priorities in order, and I do not consider the purchase of a bell costing A\$22,000 (for a temple in Sydney), nor the acquisition of a set of Buddhist scriptures in Chinese costing several thousand dollars for a *Vietnamese* temple in Melbourne, to be priorities, for very few people are able to read it now, and in the future there will be even less. The Buddhist scriptures are not things that, by the mere possession of them, or just being able to remember and recite portions of them by heart, will bring about magical results. It amuses me to hear people talk about this-or-that *sutra* being ‘very good’ or ‘very powerful’, in the sense of efficacious against danger or misfortune; they ask each other: “Do you know how to chant the Lotus Sutra?”, or “Can you recite the Surangama Sutra?”, etc. This is not the purpose of the Buddhist scriptures at all; by treating them in this manner, we reduce them to mumbo-jumbo.

We really must try to demystify religion if it is to have any relevance in the future; we must try to rid it of elements of magic and superstition if it is not to continue losing ground. It is necessary to present things in languages that people understand—their own everyday languages, languages that they think, speak, and dream in. What is the use of knowing words of foreign languages without knowing their meanings? (I once read somewhere of a Chinese gentleman meeting an American lady at a dinner-party and, noticing she was wearing a polished brass medallion with some Chinese characters on it, he asked her where she had acquired it. After telling him she had come across it in a curio-shop in Hong Kong, and had taken a liking to it, she asked him if he could tell her the meaning of the characters on it. Somewhat hesitantly, and with a shy smile, he said: “City of Shanghai. Licensed Prostitute”. It was a relic from pre-revolution days!).

To end this off, I would like to say that the aforewritten—like all my writings—is just my opinion about things; I do not claim that it represents ‘official Buddhism’, even if there were such a thing. Therefore, beware, and do not just accept my ideas and adopt them as your own without thinking of them; I would not be flattered if you did that, but would consider you ‘dumb’. If you have made the effort to read through all this, I would like to ask you to think about these things clearly and carefully, and ask yourself if they are true and useful to you or not. If you would like to write to me and tell me what you think of what I’ve written, please feel free to do so; I would like to know *your* opinions, too, as they might help me to present things better. I want to know what you want to know, then I might easier decide if I am ready, willing and able to provide what you want. Let me say, though, that if all you want is ceremony and fairy-tales, better go to someone else, for though I can—and sometimes do—perform ceremonies for the dead, my way is more for the living.



TAKE A BREAK—HAVE A HOLI-DAY

WHY DO WE INSIST ON cutting life up into parts—the *ordinary* and the *special*, the *mundane* and the *supramundane*, the *holy* and *unholy*, etc? Is life really divisible like that, or is that just *our* way of looking at it?

We torture ourselves with our ideas and never see things clearly. We spend our time grubbing in the dirt for money and exhaust ourselves in this pursuit. Then we look forward to a ‘holiday’, little knowing what this word means, but taking it to mean a day or days when we don’t need to work. Do *you* know what it means? It means *holy* day.

Most of us think there are only a few ‘holy days’ each year—that is, days we regard as ‘special’ and of greater religious significance than others. But this is only an idea; in reality, no day is more special than any other. For example: today is the 28th of September, 1998. Has there ever been a 28th of September 1998 before today? And will there ever be a 28th of September 1998 after today? No, because there is only one today, whatever date we may give it, and that is what makes it special and important and holy. Yesterday has gone, and tomorrow never comes; we have only today, and so should regard it as a *holy* day (*holiday*). Whether we have to work or not, stay home or go away on vacation, doesn’t change the fact that it is a special and therefore a *holy* day.

Every year has 365 holidays, and each one of them has religious significance; we can make every day a holiday by living religiously. Religion should not be kept in the closet with our best clothes, to be brought out only on special occasions and then put back in the closet with the moth-balls, but should be an *ordinary, every-day, special* thing.

Dharma should be at the center of our lives, around which all our activities turn, not something at the circumference, which we think about only now and then; it should be something that regulates our lives.

Today is like a new land
Where no-one’s been before—
Full of things to learn about,
Enjoy, discover, explore.

When we wake up in the morning, surprised to find ourselves still alive, we should face the day with a spirit of adventure, eager to discover and learn what it has to offer.

Some people say: “My life is so boring; nothing interesting ever happens to me!” This, of course, is not true; life is *never* boring; instead, it is we who are bored and dull, not seeing the wonderful things around us; it is as if we are asleep, even while our eyes are open.

And, just as every day is a special day—no day being more special or important than another, unless we make it so—in the same way, every person is a special person, because each person is *that* person, and not another. Already, just as we are, we are special, without doing anything or trying to be so. However, because we do not see this, we are not content to be special in our own unique way, so we *try* to be special, and in this we are *not* special, as so many other people are doing the same thing: trying to be special, different and better than others. There is no *need* to try to be special; just discover who you are. You are not me; I am not you. Be yourself!

And, before you go to sleep, mentally review the events and activities of the day just past. If you lived well, you may sleep peacefully with a smile on your face, thinking: “How lucky! I lived through another day, and am still alive!”

A life unlived and wasted is a cause for sorrow, but a life well-lived brings spiritual satisfaction.



INCREDIBLE

IS IT NOT AMAZING THAT, while the Christian Bible is full and overflowing with errors and discrepancies, many Christians believe it is ‘the Word of God’? *This* is the real miracle about Christianity: that people should believe it so blindly! What is the use of having brains?!

For example, take the family-tree of Jesus, as found in the first book of the *New Testament*¹⁵. it is traced from Abraham, through David, to *Joseph*, the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Christians have attached great importance to this, seeing in it the supposed fulfillment of biblical prophesy. But they hold Mary¹⁶ to have been a virgin and to have conceived Jesus supernaturally—that is, by means other than through the agency of a man! This is where the contradiction lies, for if Jesus really was so conceived, his genealogy should be traced back through his *mother’s* side, not Joseph’s! Now, which is right: that he was a descendent of Abraham and David through Joseph, or that he was born of a virgin? They can’t both be right, for they exclude each other, do they not? So here, in the very first chapter of the book that is the basis of Christianity, is a glaring inconsistency. If every word of the Bible is God’s Word—as many Christians still claim—why the many discrepancies that have been pointed out by scholars and which are visible to anyone who reads the book?

Gina Cerminara, in her wonderful book, *Insights for the Age of Aquarius*, said this on the topic¹⁷ : “Virgin births were common in ancient ‘pagan’ religions. Buddha, Zoroaster and Krishna, among others, were declared by their later followers to have been miraculously conceived and born of virgins—the idea apparently being to establish divine authority for them in this way. The same fate seems to have befallen Jesus, who again and again called himself the Son of Man. But it was to satisfy and impress ‘pagan’ converts that theologians claimed a virgin birth for him”.¹⁸

Now, Mary apparently had other children after or besides (they may even have been *before*)—Jesus, but so zealous were some Christians in holding Mary sacred, that one Pope declared her ‘eternally Virgin’. Others, in turn, appointed her ‘Mother of God’, and ‘Queen of Heaven’ (and the present Pope, John-Paul II, seems on the verge of declaring her Co-Savior with Jesus’), getting further and further away from reality! These titles were bestowed on her posthumously by cunning and fallible people, who had vested interests in doing so. The rest of the populace in Europe at that time were either illiterate and gullible, or too cowed and intimidated by the Church to say anything in protest or disagreement.

It is different now, however, in that we have the freedom and right to speak out and question things—freedom that was dearly bought for us by others. But this does not mean that we shall always have such freedom, for it can be lost, as history has repeatedly shown. We can again sink into periods such as *The Dark Ages*, which, unlike the few decades of Communist oppression, lasted for a thousand years, during which the Christian Church was the undisputed and tyrannical power. Such freedom as we in the West now enjoy—and which other countries are still struggling for—should not be taken lightly, but should be used in trying to understand and fortify it, so that it won’t be easily lost and we don’t slide again into cultural and spiritual darkness. Freedom is our greatest treasure and we should try to realize this while we have it, for if we lose it, we can only bewail our stupidity for not having taken better care of it. Now we have it, but

For several centuries, Catholic Europe suffered under ‘The Holy Inquisition’ of the Church; hundreds of thousands were horribly tortured and burnt to death and their property confiscated by the insatiable Church. The Protestant ‘Reformation’ dealt no less savagely—though on a lesser scale—with ‘unbelievers’. John Calvin, the dour founder of Calvinism, had people burnt alive for deviant ideas.

Millions have been killed and entire cultures ruthlessly eradicated by followers of the Cross in the name of their religion. Verily, the history of Christianity is written in blood! And if we are complacent and allow it, ‘religious’ madness may return to plague our poor world again on a large scale; indeed, the current rise in fundamentalism across several world religions does not bode well for peace and stability.

¹⁵ And another account in *Luke*, whereby the ancestry of Jesus is traced back all the way to *Adam, the first man!* Readers are advised to check the inconsistencies of these two lists for themselves.

¹⁶ Protestants did until quite recently; Catholics still do.

¹⁷ Page 114.

¹⁸ The Hebrew word in the famous passage in Isaiah [7:14] that was translated as ‘virgin’, which is taken to prophesy the Virgin Birth of Jesus— *almah*—is now, in some of the modern versions of the Bible, correctly translated as ‘young woman’ rather than as ‘virgin’—*bethula*—which makes a considerable difference, does it not?

Our *real* enemy is Ignorance, disguised in many forms. Like Confucius and the Buddha—but unlike Christianity, which insists that Man is ‘sinful’—I believe in the basic-goodness of Man. Realistically, however, I also see that such basic-goodness is, in most cases—like diamonds in the earth—covered and concealed by a whole mass of things that are not good. It is—or should be—the purpose of religion and education to help us discover our basic-goodness as humans, not as ‘Buddhists’, ‘Christians’, ‘Hindus’, ‘Muslims’, etc.

As most people who have done any research will recognize, Jesus was not the founder of Christianity. We can read his injunction to his disciples,¹⁹ not to go to the lands of the ‘Gentiles’²⁰ but to the “lost sheep of the House of Israel”. Jesus was a reformer of the Jewish religion; it is doubtful that he intended to start a new religion.

Paul—who probably never even met Jesus—was the *real* founder of Christianity as a religion separate from Judaism. It was he who waived aside such Jewish requirements as ritual circumcision for males, and made Christianity a religion for Jews and Gentiles alike. It should, in fact, be called ‘Paulism’ or ‘Paulianity’ rather than Christianity. According to Paul, Christianity offers to the world no more and no less than the blood of Christ and the salvation that comes from it. If Jesus did *not* die on the cross (as many now suspect), and if he was *not* resurrected (as there are many reasons to think), then Paul’s contention that only through the blood of Jesus can salvation be found,²¹ falls flat on its face! Jesus specifically said ²² that salvation comes through keeping the commandments. But Paul changed all that by saying: “If Christ be not risen from the dead, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is also vain”.²³ The poor Christians should be in a dilemma over this; who to believe: the Master of the disciple?

I am no longer a Christian, but this does not mean that I do not respect Jesus any more; it means that I see him differently than I did. No longer bound by the fetters of Christianity, I am free to look, and can honestly say that I understand Jesus now much better than I did while I considered myself a Christian. Myths about his ‘virgin-birth’ and ‘resurrection’ I now see as fabrications of his over-zealous followers; this is what happens in *all* religions—Buddhism not excepted—when people have too much belief and little wisdom. Such imbalance has caused *incalculable* disastrous consequences.

The four accounts of the life of Jesus—those of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, known as ‘the Gospels’—do not tally in many places, and indeed, often contradict each other. It is therefore not surprising that there is so much disagreement about him as a man, as a teacher, and as the ‘Son of God’. We shall probably never know much for sure about him, but is that reason for accepting the incredible accounts that have come down to us through the centuries—accounts which put more than a little strain upon the imagination? Let us look at some more points as recorded in the Gospels, although the list is almost endless:

Jesus was supposedly crucified on a Friday afternoon and his corpse taken down from the cross and placed in a tomb before sunset that day, sunset on Friday being the start of the Jewish *sabbath*, during which no work of any kind might be done. Now, Christians claim that Jesus lay dead in the tomb for three days and three nights. By what system of reckoning they calculate this, however, is hard to imagine, because, when some of his women-devotees went to the tomb early the following Sunday morning, they found the body of Jesus gone—though there is no mention of how long it had been gone by then. But supposing that the body had been removed—or ‘got up’, ‘stood up’, which is what the word ‘resurrected’ means—just before the women arrived, it could have been there only *two* nights and *one* full day, at most! How, therefore, can they claim a total of *three* days and *three* nights? Can’t they count?

Then, Matthew says that an *angel* appeared in the tomb; Mark said it was a *young man*. Luke said there were *two men in shining garments*, and John reported that there were *two angels!* Was the sight of *angels* so common in those days that they couldn’t agree on how many appeared?! And what this man/angel—or *men/angels*—said also differs in the four accounts, as all who can read may verify in the New Testament. When the women saw the men in the tomb, Luke (24:5) has them—the men—saying: “Why seek ye the living among the dead?”, referring to Jesus. This is a very important question, and it has been overlooked because the Christians have had a myth to support and perpetuate:

¹⁹ Matthew 10:5-6.

²⁰ Jewish way of referring to non-Jews. They always set themselves apart as ‘special’ and ‘chosen’—a trait the Christians readily adopted and applied, to the great detriment of the world.

²¹ The Jews had a morbid fascination with blood, as can be seen throughout the Old Testament.

²² Matt 19:16-17.

²³ I Corinthians 15:14.

that Jesus died on the cross and rose again from the dead three days later. It is rather like having a set of curtains or an armchair, and constructing a house around them to suit the curtains and chair, instead of vice-versa; Christianity has been made to center around the fantastic notion of the 'resurrection' of Jesus, instead of around his teachings. As mentioned above, this was largely the doing of Paul, the later apostle.

The question of the 'angel(s)' is very clear: "Why seek ye the living among the dead?" *Living?* Jesus was supposed to be dead! "Yes", say the Christians, "He *was* dead, but he rose again, don't you see?" Brushing aside such objections, which are not worth much, might it be that he didn't really die on the cross, but only appeared to be dead? In those days there were no stethoscopes or ECG machines, and there is no record of anyone taking his pulse or checking for vital life-signs when they took him down from the cross. They only stated he was dead and were anxious to bury him before the sabbath began. Now, supposing that those of his disciples who took him down realized he was still alive; would they, overjoyed, have shouted: "*He's alive! He's still alive!*"? Certainly not! They would have been most careful to conceal the fact from anyone who might have reported it to the authorities.

Let us pursue this hypothesis: John has Mary alone see the 'angels', who ask her: "Why are you weeping?" (20:13). She answered: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have put him". Then she turned and saw Jesus standing there, but took him for a gardener and didn't recognize him. Jesus spoke to her: "Woman, why are you weeping?" Whom do you seek?" Still unaware it was Jesus—who knew who he was speaking to, of course—she replied: "Sir, if you have removed him, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away". Then Jesus—who must have been enjoying his little joke with her—spoke her name—"Mary"—probably in a special way, so that only then did she realize it was he. "*Master!*", she exclaimed, and would have embraced him, but he forbade her to touch him, no doubt feeling sore and sensitive after his ordeal. The point here is why did Mary, who had been so close to Jesus after he 'converted' her, not recognize him, but took him for a gardener; she didn't even recognize his voice until he spoke her name! How could this be? Was Jesus disguised as a gardener, perhaps, so that no-one would know him? This is a possibility, and maybe even a probability. But why should he be disguised? Might he not have been afraid that if the Jews who had had him crucified discovered that he was still alive, they would really 'finish him off'? But why, if he were 'resurrected' from the dead, should he fear death? He should have been beyond death. Jesus *was alive*, as you and I are alive! He had not died! He later met his disciples on several occasions, and had them touch him, to prove that he was flesh-and-blood, and not a spirit or ghost; he had them put their fingers in his wounds. If he had really been resurrected, would he have carried his wounds with him? What if he had lost a limb: would his resurrected body have been missing a limb? These wounds belonged to his earthly body, and the presence of them signified that he had not died and left this life, but was alive! He even asked for food and ate, to prove it!

Now, why do I, who am not a Christian, spend so much time writing about such things? Why don't I concern myself with my own religion? Well, first of all, my religion is Life, and since Christianity, Christians, Jesus and his teachings are part of Life, how can I cut myself off from them? We are connected, whether we like it or not. And Christianity has played such a big role in the history of the world—and continues to—that it would be irresponsible of me to see things in the way that I do and keep quiet. But, although I must accept it as one of the world's major religions, it doesn't mean that I must accept it as being truly representative of Jesus and his teachings, any more than I must accept Buddhism as truly representing the Buddha and His Teachings. I believe in freedom, and feel that everyone is entitled to their own opinions; if Christians feel entitled to peddle their religion from door-to-door as they do, surely I am entitled to my opinion about Jesus of Nazareth, particularly when the accounts of him are so hazy and obscure. I will take from his teachings what I think is good and useful to me and try to apply it in my life; what is important to me is what he taught, not the myths that have accumulated around him, like barnacles on a ship.

In this way, Jesus of Nazareth—or *Jesus bar Joseph* (son of Joseph, to use the Jewish form of address; and Jesus *was* a Jew)—is still alive to me!

If Christians do not like what I have written, let them do as much research into the Buddha and His Teachings as I have done into Jesus and his, instead of condemning without knowing anything, as they have so often done. Come now, I challenge you! I am not saying mine is better than yours, but inviting you to open your minds.



SHEEP

IF YOU MADE CAKES for sale, you would not tell people they taste terrible, would you? You would like to sell them, so would say they taste great!

Many people are trying to convince others that their way alone is right and that therefore others are wrong; they are all trying to sell something. But can they *demonstrate* that their way is best, with conclusive evidence? They say their way is the best, of course, but does merely *saying* something make it true? Are we so naïve as to believe everything people say?

The most-vocal of such people are those who say that everyone who doesn't believe as they do will go to Hell forever (isn't it *embarrassing* to hear people say such things these days, when we are better educated than ever before?) According to them, all Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and even *Catholics* (unless they are the ones saying it, as is sometimes still the case), etc., are sure to go to Hell.

One particular sect—known as 'Jehovah's Witlesses'—is well-known for going from door-to-door pushing their narrow beliefs; they believe that of all the billions of people who have ever lived on this Earth, are living now, and *will* live, only 144,000 will be 'saved' and go to Heaven—and of that miniscule number, all but 9,000 have already been chosen! Can we imagine anything more silly? How can people even consider such things, unless from the egoistic desire to feel superior to others?

Compare such narrowness with the expansiveness and all-embracingness of Buddhism, which exhorts us to think about *all* beings, and holds out the possibility of Enlightenment for *all*! (The Jehovah's Witlesses, by the way, are very fond of predicting 'The End of the World'; no less than *six times* have their predictions failed to come true—1914, 1918, 1925, etc.—and now they are doing it again. They obviously can't wait for it to happen, because they believe that only when it does, will Jesus come again. From this, we can easily see that fanatics have a vested interest in starting another World War—a war to end everything—feeling they have nothing to lose but everything to gain! The USA has more than enough of its fair share of such people).

If it is really as these people say, and if we were to say to them: "Look here, the Buddha, Lao Tsu, Confucius, and countless other great people didn't believe in Jesus or accept him as their personal savior, so, according to you, where will they be now?" they would be forced to say: "In Hell, of course, with all the other non-believers!" So, if we must go to Hell merely because we don't believe in Jesus as they do, we shall be in good company there, no? But maybe they got the words mixed up, and have confused *up* with *down*, *Heaven* with *Hell*.

To believe and follow blindly is to be like sheep, and sheep, as we know, are timid and rather foolish. They are usually kept together, in flocks, and if, for some reason, one of them gets scared and starts to run, the others will automatically follow, without understanding why.

In the abattoirs of Australia, so I've heard, are sheep especially trained to lead unsuspecting groups of other sheep in to be slaughtered; the trained sheep then come out to lead in another batch, until finally, it's their turn, and they don't come out alive again. Such sheep are called 'Judas sheep', after the disciple who betrayed Jesus.

Many humans are similar to sheep in the way they follow others. Some of us will follow anyone—it doesn't matter whom or where he leads, as long as the followers need not think for themselves or accept responsibility for their own lives. It is nothing to be proud of, to be like a sheep, yet that is how the followers of the world's largest religion describe themselves.

We should listen to others with open minds, not with minds full of prejudice (that is: *pre-judgment*). But this does not mean we should accept everything that every Tom, Moses or Matthew tells us, as that would be foolish. We should use our intelligence, our sense of discrimination, and try to separate the true from the false.

And, if you are tired of people coming to your door to pressure you to accept their religion—and if they are Christians of one of the myriad sects or another, as is usually the case—try this on them: Ask if they themselves really believe that the Bible is the 'Word of God', as they so loudly claim. They will almost surely say "Yes, I do!" Then ask them to turn to the Book of Mark, chapter 16, verses 17 and 18, in the Bible they always carry with them, and read it aloud. They will read this: "*And these signs shall follow them that believe: In my name they will cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues. They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not harm them*".²⁴ Ask the

²⁴ These words are attributed to Jesus, although—like with many other things he is supposed to have said—it is doubtful; many words have been put into his mouth to support his followers' claims about him.

person at your door if he/she is prepared to undergo a test of his/her faith. Tell him you have a variety of poisons in your home—weed-killer, rat-poison, oven-cleaner, etc.—which you could mix with syrup to make a sweet drink; would he be willing to drink it? It is highly unlikely he would accept this challenge, even though the Bible says that a believer wouldn't be harmed thereby. It is a guarantee against that person coming to your door to bother you again!



TAKING REFUGE

SOME OF THE BUDDHA'S last advice, before He passed away, was: "Be an island unto yourselves; be lamps unto yourselves; be a refuge unto yourselves. With the Dharma as your Refuge, go to no external refuge".

A Refuge means a place or state of safety, and the Buddhist state of safety lies nowhere except in the depths of our own hearts, in the Study, Application and Realization of the Dharma.

A Buddhist learns about Natural Law and begins to see that all things—from the smallest to the greatest—come from causes, like plants come from seeds. He sees that all things come and go, arise and perish. And when he sees this, he realizes it is useless to look for lasting peace and happiness outside himself, and that the only true peace and happiness can be found in the heart that has grown wide and deep, calm and clear. He sees how useless it is to blame other people and things for the situation he finds himself in, and that he himself is not totally responsible for it. He may not understand it or want it, but he sees that it must have arisen because of causes, most of which are beyond his control. He therefore assesses it to see what he may learn from it and how it may be turned around. If it is still not to his liking, he knows it will not last, but will change and become something else.

The practice of 'Taking Refuge' must have existed in India *before* Buddhism began. It was probably common for people to say: "I Take Refuge in you and your teachings" when they were satisfied with what they heard a teacher say and wished to take him as *their* teacher; it would come from themselves. We cannot imagine the Buddha saying: "Repeat after me: 'Buddham Saranam Gacchami ... Dharmam Saranam Gacchami ... Sangham Saranam Gacchami' "!

The first people to *Take Refuge* as Buddhists were two merchants who came upon the Buddha sitting in the forest shortly after His Enlightenment. According to the legend, they were the first people to meet Him after that most momentous event. So impressed were they by His appearance that they greeted Him respectfully and offered Him some food. Now, there is no record of what He said to them in what should rightly be considered His *First Sermon*,²⁵ but whatever it was so convinced them that they spontaneously *Took Refuge* in Him and His Teachings by saying: "*Buddham Saranam Gacchami, Dharmam Saranam Gacchami*". Since the Buddha had not yet any disciples, and there were no monks, they did not say "*Sangham Saranam Gacchami*". They Took Refuge only in the Buddha and the Dharma; there was not yet a *Sangha*²⁶ so they could not say: "*I Take Refuge in the Sangha*".

Nowadays, many people recite the Triple-Refuge formula without really understanding its meaning, as something they have learned by heart. Actually, it is meaningless unless and until we are convinced that the Buddhist Way, and no other, is the Way we want to follow; it is a matter of expressing one's confidence in the Way. We can do this only when and if we have investigated other Ways and found them unsuitable. We must know why we choose Buddhism over other Ways.

A Buddhist Takes Refuge in the *Triple Gem* or *Three Jewels*: The *Buddha*, as the Teacher; the *Dharma*, as the Teachings, or—more—as the *Law*; and the *Sangha*, as all those who have attained some fruit of the Way by following the Dharma. From the Buddha's last advice, however, we understand that the Ultimate Refuge—the Dharma—is not outside of ourselves.

Taking Refuge means deciding to follow the Buddha's Way to the best of our ability, for the purpose of self-development, of becoming better people, or reaching enlightenment. A Buddhist must have faith in the Three Jewels, but it is not blind faith or mere belief; it is faith based upon knowledge and perception of the truth and validity of the Buddha's Teachings, faith sprung from experience. When a person has such faith, he may Take Refuge, as he is convinced that it is the right way for him. It is a solemn and serious undertaking and does not mean just reciting an ancient formula; as an important step, it should not be taken lightly. It is different from the baptism of other religions, whereby babies are baptized into the religion, because a person becomes a Buddhist by his own choice, when he is old enough to *understand and choose* for himself. A little baby cannot be considered a Buddhist, as it cannot think for itself and understands nothing.

²⁵ It is taught, and generally believed, that He gave His First Sermon to the Five Ascetics in the Deer Park near Benares, some weeks after His Enlightenment.

²⁶ The word *Sangha* simply means 'community', but in this context, it means 'a *spiritual* community'. Later on, it came to mean the Order of Monks founded by the Buddha. If we are referring to *this* Sangha, we should be specific, and say *Bhikkhu-Sangha*. In another sense, it means the whole Buddhist community, comprising monks, nuns, laywomen and laymen. The Sangha that we *Take Refuge* in when we say "*Sangham Saranam Gacchami*", however, refers to the *Ariya* (Noble) *Sangha*—that is, those who have attained some degree of supramundane awakening or enlightenment, and that may mean anyone, not just ordained people like monks or nuns.



NOT JUST IN THE MIND

Measure not with words the Immeasurable,
Nor sink the string of thought into the Fathomless;
Who asks doth err, who answers errs;
Say nought.

THE INTELLECT IS VERY IMPORTANT, and we should use it as far as it can take us, but recognize its limits.

There is a little story to illustrate this: A certain proud and scholarly man sometimes used to cross a bay by ferry. Looking with scorn on the poor ferryman, one day he asked: "Have you ever studied meteorology?"

The ferryman replied: "No, sir, I haven't".

"Oh, you poor fool", said the professor, "you have wasted a quarter of your life".

The next time he took the ferry, the scholar asked the boatman: "What do you know of oceanography?"

"Oceanography?" said the boatman, "What's that?"

"You mean you don't know what oceanography is?" said the scholar, haughtily; "You've wasted half of your life!"

"Have you learned about nautical engineering?" the scholar asked a few days later. The ferryman replied that he didn't know anything about *that*, either, and in fact, had not even been to school. With a look of horror, the scholar said: "What a waste of three-quarters of your life, just ferrying people across the bay!" The ferryman was silent.

One day, when the scholar got into the boat and they were halfway across the bay, the ferryman said to him: "Sir, have you ever studied swimmingology?"

"No, why?" the man asked nervously.

"Because there is a storm coming, and if the boat capsizes, we'll have to swim! Your whole life might be wasted!"

Intellectual analysis and speculation will not lead to enlightenment but only to further entanglement. J. Krishna-murti once said this about it: "The Immeasurable cannot be sought by thought, for thought has always a measure. The Sublime is not within the structure of thought and reason, nor is it the product of emotion and sentiment. If you are seeking the highest you will not find it; it must come to *you*, if you are lucky—and luck is the open window of your heart, not of thought".

We must allow our hearts to open, and this happens when we are in contact—*gentle*, not *harsh* contact—with life. Without joy in our lives, our hearts will never open; so there must be a tremendous interest in life, a willingness, as it were, to bend down and touch the earth, which hitherto we have considered unclean.

Truth—like the wind—cannot be caught in a bottle and stored up as a personal possession, to be gloated over as '*mine, not yours!*' It cannot be preserved in formaldehyde. It is not something of the past, like the bones of dinosaurs, nor of the future, in some far-off time or place, but of the Here-and-Now, and must be experienced as such, continuously. To try to catch it in webs of words—as so many of us try to do—is as useless as trying to chain and hold the sea.

There were two famous teachers. One had gathered his knowledge in an academic way, from reading books and attending lectures, while the other had gained his from his own direct experience and observing the life around him.

One day, someone decided to test these teachers to see if they really knew what they were talking about. He went first to the one who had studied much and said: "Sir, would you, while standing on one foot, explain to me your teachings?"

The teacher was angry at the man's impudence and scolded him, saying: "How can anyone expect me to explain in a few minutes what it has taken me a lifetime to learn? Get out of here, and don't waste my time!"

He went to the other teacher and asked him the same question. *This* teacher smiled and said: “Yes, listen: What you don’t like others to do to you, don’t do that to others. Anything else that can be said is just commentary to this”.

This is known as *The Golden Rule*; it is taught by most religions in one form or another, and is the monopoly of none. Christians like to think of it as *theirs* because Jesus taught it, so they might be surprised to learn that it was already old long before Jesus was born, and that both the Buddha and Confucius taught it, as well as many others! It worked then and it works now, if we care to apply it. It is the Great Key, and there is no mystery in it; it’s actually quite simple and effective to use in our relationships with others.

Suppose you go into a shop to buy something at—let’s say—\$10, and you hand the shop-keeper a \$50 bill. Thinking you gave him \$20, he gives you only \$10 change instead of \$40. Would you think: “Oh, never mind; it’s only \$30 difference”, and leave without saying anything? Of course not! You would say: “Excuse me, but you’ve made a mistake and given me the wrong change”, wouldn’t you?

Suppose, however, the shop-keeper makes a mistake the other way, and instead of giving you change for \$50, gives you change for \$100. Would you then tell him he had made a mistake and return the excess to him? Or would you think: “How lucky I am!” and leave quickly without revealing his mistake?

One day, Farmer A went to Farmer B to complain that *his* bull had gored one of his cows, and demanded compensation. Farmer B said: “Well, I’m sorry to hear about your cow, but animals are not responsible for their actions, so I can’t be held liable to pay compensation”.

“Ah, so”, said Farmer A, “but I’m afraid I stated the case wrongly. You see, it wasn’t *your* bull that gored *my* cow, but *my* bull that gored *your* cow!”

“What!” shouted Farmer B; “In that case, I must consult my lawyer to see if there’s a precedent for this; probably I’m entitled to compensation!”

Justice is a two-way street; if we want others to be fair with us, we must try to be fair with others; we cannot expect to reap where we have not sown. The problem is, people want others to respect *their* rights and freedom, but do not always respect the rights and freedom of others; they think laws are good if they protect them, but bad if they restrict them from doing just whatever they want to do.

If we wish to find Truth we must be honest. As Chuang Tsu said: “There is no Truth where there is no Truthful man”, meaning that it is useless to seek Truth if we have not abandoned dishonesty.

Some people gather so much knowledge without using it that they become ‘intellectually constipated’ thereby; like this, knowledge becomes a useless burden. The Dharma must be applied if there are to be results; it is no use if it is just a matter of belief or an intellectual plaything.

THE SWASTIKA

TOO LONG HAVE I WAITED TO WRITE about something that should have been explained long ago; had I written earlier, some trouble might have been averted. However, it is 'better late than not at all', and I write these words now in the hope that they will obviate more trouble in the future.

If we think about it, we will soon see how much we live by symbols, which are not realities in themselves, but only indicative of other things. Money, for example, is the most obvious symbol in our lives: it is a symbol of wealth, a token of exchange; but in itself, it is not worth much. It has often happened that a government has suddenly devalued its currency, and, overnight, it was much reduced in value or become even worthless! While it has value, we use it as a means of exchange to buy things with; but what happens if there is a famine, with no food available? Can we eat money?

All kinds of crimes—including the worst crime of all: War—have been and are committed because of symbols. The Communists carried their Hammer-and-Sickle flag with them into battle, just as the Christians carried the Cross in their unholy 'Holy Wars'. Buddhists have never debased their religion by violence. There has never been a *Buddhist* war, and hopefully never will be; indeed, it is difficult to imagine how a war could be carried out in the name of Buddhism, the first principle of which is Reverence for Life.

Words are symbols, and not the things they represent. All words are adjectives, no matter whether we call them nouns, verbs, or whatever; an adjective is a describing-word, but is not the thing it describes.

The Buddha-image is a symbol of the wise and compassionate Teacher who lived so long ago, and who gave us good advice to live by. Who treats the images as living things, mistaking the symbol for the symbolized? Who, for a moment, imagines that this Teacher, who was born a Prince, but gave up all his worldly wealth and position to become a homeless wanderer, and finally an Enlightened One, really looked like the images we have made to represent Him? How would you feel if you saw someone looking like the Buddha-images on the street—with a lump on his head, ear-lobes touching his shoulders, hair curled into tight little knots like snails, and the other signs which—according to the books—are supposed to be the distinguishing marks of a superman? Would you not feel rather surprised? Some people, without a doubt, would think they were seeing an extra-terrestrial being! Here, by speaking thus, I am not intending to be—and hope I don't appear to be—disrespectful, but am merely trying to indicate how we get stuck on symbols, and never see beyond.

In 1985, I went to visit Vietnamese refugees in Norway. While there, I was told of something unfortunate that had happened not long before—something that, with a little bit of foresight, could have been avoided. A Vietnamese Buddhist had died, and his family had had a Swastika sign engraved upon his tombstone. Now, the Swastika, to Vietnamese Buddhists—as it is to people of various religions in Asia—is an auspicious symbol, else why would these people have placed it on the tomb-stone? Many Vietnamese and Chinese Buddhists also wear small gold swastikas around their necks, or have them tattooed on their arms. Having inquired of a number of people wearing this symbol as to its meaning, however, I discovered that not many knew. Well, according to one account I came across, this symbol originated in ancient Persia, about 3,500 years ago. It therefore predates Buddhism by 1,000 years, and whichever way it is used in Asia—either clockwise or anticlockwise, it symbolizes Safety, Well-Being, or Happiness.

However, while in the East, the Swastika always symbolizes something good, in the West, because Adolph Hitler adopted it, it has come to be regarded as a symbol of evil. Very few Westerners know of its ancient origin and meaning.

Norway, like many other European countries, was overrun by and suffered under the occupying forces of Nazi Germany during World War II. So, when some Norwegians saw the Swastika on the Vietnamese tombstone in a public cemetery, the memories of Nazi terror rushed to the surface, and there was a furore. At first, the Vietnamese did not know what all the fuss was about, as they say the way the Buddhists use the Swastika—clockwise—is different than the way Hitler used it—anticlockwise. Well, this might be so to them, but I'm sure most Westerners are not aware of the difference, and so it was in Norway. Antagonism flared, and the Vietnamese had to explain and apologize publicly, and remove the mark from the stone.

I know there have been other incidents regarding this symbol in the US, and therefore, because I do not want to see the Vietnamese Buddhists in trouble or danger, I have tried to explain, various times. It is advisable not to use this symbol anymore, as it may cause confusion and misunderstanding. It is not the only symbol that Buddhists may use, after all; there is the Lotus, or the Dharma-Wheel, too. We should be practical in this, as in all things. It would be impossible to explain to everyone, that the Buddhist Swastika is different from the Nazi Swastika—impossible! And not only might the use of it cause trouble, but it can only impede our efforts to propagate the Dharma in the West; some people, who might otherwise be sympathetic towards Buddhism, would feel alienated by the presence of Swastika signs in temples.

Therefore, it is *we* who must understand, bend and adapt on this point, not *they*. If the Vietnamese and Chinese Buddhists continue using this symbol in the West, they will only invite trouble and have only themselves to blame for the consequences. This is my well-meant advice, meant to preserve, prevent and protect, to bring about a little of the quality that the Swastika originally symbolized: Safety and Well-Being.

DESTRUCTION AND CREATION

BEFORE WE CAN CREATE SOMETHING, something must first be destroyed: in order to make furniture, trees must be felled; to make clothes, cloth must be cut and arranged.

If we destroy something, however, let us be sure to create something from our destruction; let us become artists of life, always striving to improve things, instead of leaving behind just a trail of garbage and destruction.

Wherever humans have been, there you will find garbage, pollution and destruction. Mountains, forests, rivers, beaches and other places that were once clean and beautiful are befouled by the passing of Man. Animals do not make the mess that we do. Why are we so stupid? This Good Earth is our home, for a while. It is in our own interests to keep it clean and care for it, so it will last longer and be pleasant for living.

We can all make the world a better place to live in. If you like to live on a garbage-dump—as it seems many of our race do—continue to throw garbage everywhere; be a garbage person, careless and dull! But if you prefer cleanliness and beauty, take care to put your garbage in the proper place, clean up where others have made dirty, develop community-spirit, be alert and sensitive, *dare to care*. A thoughtful and sensitive person is a religious person.

Criticism is an example of how a thing can be either positive or negative, creative or destructive. In this book—as in my other books—I have criticized a number of things, but not—I think—destructively. When I criticize something, I try to offer a better alternative; I do not want to take away people’s crutches and leave them with nothing.

All religions embody some truth, some more than others, but *no* religion contains *all* truth. This is because Truth cannot be transmitted from one to another; it must be “experienced by the wise, each for himself” as the Buddha said, or, as Lao Tsu wrote: “The Way that can be spoken of is not the *Real* Way”.

Although we may hint at it, all attempts to define it are doomed to failure from the start. The word ‘cake’, for example, cannot be eaten; the word ‘Truth’ is not Truth; in fact, we can say nothing about it, for immediately we use the word, we’ve lost it. If we understood this, we would not hate and fight each other over our different concepts of right and Truth or Reality; blood and life are more important than words and ideas!

Teachers of the Way often seem to contradict those before them, not necessarily because the earlier Teachers and their teachings were wrong, but because the attention-span of most of us is of short duration. If we hear something a few times, explained in the same way, we think we know it and therefore pay no more attention; we become bored with repetition and begin to look for other, more-interesting things. Therefore, a Teacher who wishes to impart his message to others must devise new ways to say the same thing, to present it in different ways, to vary the packaging, the approach, so that it appears new and fresh; people do not want ‘stale bread’. The Buddha said that, in all His years of preaching, He had spoken about nothing but the *Four Noble Truths*,²⁷ meaning that this had been and was the essence of His Teachings, and everything else He had said centered around it.

Most of us do not go deeply into things, but only touch the surface. It is true that “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing”. Religious fanatics usually understand little—or *misunderstand*—about religion; their great zeal, coupled with meager understanding, is very dangerous.

Many of us begin things enthusiastically, but soon lose interest, like a person who cuts cloth to make a shirt, but never sews the pieces together; the pieces of cloth are useless as such, and he has no shirt to wear. Again, it can be likened to throwing gasoline on a fire: the flames immediately *whoosh* upwards to a great height, but just as quickly die down again. We should try to keep our interest constant, *burning with a steady flame*, instead of high one minute and low the next.

We are ‘instant-coffee’ people, wanting quick results, and if we don’t get them, don’t find Enlightenment or Truth in a Way after following it for a short time (and not deeply, at that), we change to another, and another, and find nothing. Perhaps it is because we don’t know how to learn, but always wait for someone to teach us, instead. Today, it seems, many kids go to school thinking they are

²⁷ Suffering, the Cause of Suffering, the End of Suffering, and the Way to the End of Suffering.

thereby helping the teachers earn a living instead of the teachers helping them; their ill-manners, disrespect and bad behavior in school are signs of this.

Religion is commonly considered irrelevant and out-of-date in today's 'high-tech' world, and given only peripheral acknowledgement, maybe because religion, down the centuries, has been presented in dogmatic, authoritarian and unscientific ways, and has therefore alienated many people. This is understandable. But does religion have to be unscientific? Certainly, there must be some mystery and indefinability about it, but cannot there be an amalgamation of Religion and Science? Must they always be opposed mutually exclusive? Not if we would investigate religion, and taking care not to lose the essence, purge it of its dross. The world desperately needs religion—more than it needs further technological development, in fact. Without religion to guide and monitor our technology—taking the human element into consideration, that is—it will be hard to restrain ourselves from destroying everything with the enormous powers we have created and developed for that purpose. Our fingers will itch to push buttons, merely because we would like to see what will happen when the buttons are pushed!

But we need to understand religion differently than it has generally been understood, and not just accept the prevalent concepts about it. It doesn't have to be something archaic that we inherit unquestioningly from our ancestors. It need not depend upon the past for its authority. It can be something clear and self-evident in the Here-and-Now, something that helps us to be open-minded and wise, ready for the Vision of Truth that one Master referred to when he said: "You shall see the Truth, and the Truth shall set you free". But we must have prepared ourselves first, so that we are ready to see It, otherwise it will mean little to us, and may even be dangerous.

Religion is something to be lived, not much spoken of; it is beyond names and words. I once saw someone wearing a T-shirt bearing the words: "Every person is a holy place". That's it! If only we understood this, we would live and let others live, without trying to pin silly names on them. In the Refugee Camps of S.E. Asia years ago, it was common to see people wearing T-shirts with legends like "Jesus Loves You", "Jesus Cares for You", "International Christian Aid", "Baptist Refugee Ministries", and so on, handed out by missionaries trying their hardest to catch fish. The refugees thus became walking bill-boards, letting everyone know who had been so good and kind as to give them clothes. The gifts of the missionaries were not what they appeared to be, but were means towards an end: the subversion and conversion of the refugees, most of who considered themselves 'Buddhists'. What tremendous arrogance, to go to the Camps with this purpose in mind, exploiting the poverty and suffering of those poor unfortunates just so that they could gloat over how many 'heathen souls' they had 'saved'! This is surely religion gone astray!

Everyone who follows a religion naturally considers their religion the best, otherwise they would look for another. Buddhists are no exception. But why *do* people think their religion the best?

Is it because:

- (1) They have investigated other religions to find out what they teach, in order to choose which is the best for them?
- (2) They are merely lazy and stupid, and just accept, without question, whatever others tell them?
- (3) They are so naïve and egoistic as to assume that, because it *is* their religion, it must therefore be the best?

Sadly, few people fit into the first category; more fit into the second category, and still more—maybe we could say 'most'—into the third category. And why? Because we all consider ourselves to be the center of the Universe, around which all else turns. We think and say 'I', 'Me' and 'Mine' almost continuously, and consequently think that *my* way is and must be the best. We cannot seriously consider that another way might be better or as good as ours, can we? Over the years, a number of Christians and Muslims have tried to convert me, but I know, very well, why I am not a Christian or a Muslim, thanks!

But if we begin to see things a little differently, with more clarity, sanity and balance, we will no longer look at ourselves in such an egocentric way. We will be able to examine other things, other ways, and when we do, come to see what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false. It will no longer be a matter of thinking "I am right and you are wrong", for we will have stepped out of our insular way of looking at things. This is what it means to be 'born again', *not* to go back to the outmoded ideas and bankrupt answers of the past, but to see clearly what is *Now*, as things always are: New and Fresh. No-one can do this for you; you must open your own eyes, and see!

Then you will cease calling yourself 'Buddhist', 'Christian', 'Hindu', or whatever, for no name is adequate or necessary. You will begin to live, yourself—a little unsteadily at first, perhaps, but

becoming more confident with each step. And you will not say *your* way is the best and only way, for although it *may be* the best and only way for *you*, yourself, it is not so for everyone or anyone else, as each person must find his own way. And because each person is special and different, so also, his way will be special and different. It has been said: "The Ways to Truth are as many as the lives of men". We cannot, therefore, proclaim that *our* way is the best and only way for everyone; those who do so (and there are many), merely display their ignorance, and are like frogs in a well. They have much to learn.



MEASURING TIME

Yesterday has gone, just like a dream;
Tomorrow never comes.

What time have we to call our own?

The present is like a bubble on the water:
Grasp it—and it's gone.

Are not our hands always empty?

Swept along, endlessly,
Becoming old, against our will;
Where are we going?

Do you have time?

Think again:

Perhaps it is Time that has you!

We measure Time in many ways. For ordinary everyday affairs, in our relationships with others, and for our convenience, we measure time by the clock, which divides the day into hours, minutes and seconds, all of which are artificial, man-made divisions; nowhere, in Nature, can we find an hour with sixty minutes or a minute with sixty seconds. But these are useful inventions that we all agree on; they enable society to run efficiently and smoothly; we can be punctual and keep appointments because of these agreed-upon measurements.

We further divide time into days and nights, weeks, months and years. Well, *these* divisions, as we know them, are realities on this planet only, and if we were to go into Space, what we call days, weeks, months and years would not exist. And, even while we are on the planet, really, there is no such thing as a week with seven days. Again, this is man's invention, and is unnatural; we cannot observe a natural division into seven days. Actually, the 7-day week originated in the Jewish-Christian Bible, and, because of the aggression and conquests of the European pirates/colonists, it—and the English language that is now the international language—has been accepted worldwide, and for no other reason.

Space is so inconceivably vast that it is meaningless to measure it in miles or kilometers, so we measure it in time. We are told that the distance from the Earth to the Sun is about 93 million miles (approx. 150 million kms), and since light travels at 186,000 miles (approx. 298,000 kms) per second, it takes about 8 minutes for light to cover this distance. But some of the Stars are *so* distant that it take *hundreds-of-thousands*—or even *millions*—of YEARS for their light to reach Earth! We cannot comprehend the immensity of this, for compared to such time, our brief lives are less than a finger-snap. But it is good to look up at the night sky and ponder on our smallness; our problems and worries often feel different and less potent by the light of the stars.

Few people live beyond a hundred years; compared with the life of a butterfly, of course, this is an unthinkable age, but as measured beside the giant Redwood trees of the West Coast of the USA—some of which are more than 2,000 years old—it is not very old at all.

We measure time, most of all, by our feelings: our joys and sorrows, hopes and fears. An hour in a leaking boat on a stormy sea might seem an eternity, while a happy hour passes like a minute; however long it might be, our happiness always ends too soon, while our sadness drags its feet.

But, when things have passed, they seem to be part of a dream, and we cannot be sure if they ever really happened; maybe we only dreamed they did. This is why life is spoken of as a dream, a rainbow, a mirage; it is not ours, but comes and goes, uncatchable. If our life really belonged to us, we could say: "I'm not going to grow old, get sick or die". Well, we can say it—it's *easy* to say it—but we grow old (if we are lucky), get sick, and die anyway.

Time, in whatever way we measure it, is like a one-way street: we move from the past, through the present, to the future, never the other way around. Every day is important. Take care of it, therefore, so you have no regrets about growing old.

THE BUDDHA'S FIRST JOURNEY

“DON'T FORGET HE'S A KING'S SON, and always lived in luxury before. Maybe we expected more from him than he was capable of. But come, let's go to him!”

“We're leaving, *Rajaputra*”, said the stern-faced spokes-man of the Five, *Kondanya*. “We can stay with you no longer, since you abandoned your search and started to eat again!”

“But I *haven't* abandoned my search. *That* was the wrong way, don't you see? It brought me nothing but exhaustion, and I almost died! There has to be a better way, an intelligent way that avoids extremes like that!”

“No! If you had persisted, you would have found that which you sought. We never saw or heard of anyone else who went as far as you. We followed you for years, thinking that if anyone could make the breakthrough, it would be you. All our hopes were pinned on you. And now you've let us down. We've lost our respect for you!”

“And where will you go?”

“What is that to you? We can go wherever we like; it doesn't matter. But we've heard of a Deer Park near *Varanasi*, where many *yogis* and seekers stay. Perhaps we'll go there.”

With that, they left Siddhartha in the forest, to carry on his quest alone. But he soon recovered from his disappointment, because, having seen the futility of the way he had been on, he felt confident now of finding the right way.

Some weeks later:

“What peace, what clarity has come to me! Everything seems different and vibrant, though it's still the same! It was here—all along—what I sought, only I did not see it before. I feel light, as if a great burden has been put down! Done is what needed to be done. My search is at an end. I am liberated from ignorance and the bonds of desire. I see the past, the way by which I have come. Whoever would have thought it would be like this, and that even the bad things, the suffering, the pain, had parts to play?”

“But who will believe me? How to explain to others what I have found? How can words convey it? To try explaining it will only be needlessly troublesome for me. Better stay here in the forest, enjoying the peace and bliss of realization until I die.”

So He thought at first, but as the days passed and His joy continued unabated, He felt that His great discovery should not—*could* not—be kept to Himself; He would have to share it with others. “But who will understand? It is so profound, and beyond the comprehension of people lost in the world of sense-pleasures, seeking happiness and trying to escape pain. And yet, like lotus flowers in a pond—some below the surface, some just at the surface, some above the surface but not yet open, and others in full bloom—so there are people at different levels. There are those completely lost in ignorance, others with little intelligence, and some with greater intelligence, people who are not completely ignorant and blind, with not much dust clouding their vision. The two teachers who I spent time with before—noble-minded, selfless men—who taught me all they could, are no longer alive; the news of their deaths reached me just the other day. And the five who were with me before were deluded and convinced that the only way to Enlightenment was through self-mortification, but they were not stupid. *They* might understand if I were to explain to them. But would they listen? They abandoned me before; maybe they would only harden their hearts and turn away again. Then again, they might not; it is possible that they might listen and understand. It is worth the risk. I will go”.

Having made up His mind, He set out towards the west, but had not gone far when He met *Upaka*, a wandering ascetic, who said to Him: “Your appearance, friend, is pleasing, your countenance radiant and clear. You must have found something extraordinary. Would you tell me who is your teacher and what he teaches?”

“There is no-one I call teacher. By my own efforts have I attained Enlightenment and become a Buddha.”

Upaka was unimpressed, and thought He was boasting—a thing not rare in those days. “It may be so,” he said, “It may be so,” and went off on his own way. The Buddha realized it was a mistake to be so forthright, and decided that different approaches should be used with different people.

Traveling by day until the searing heat persuaded Him to seek the shade of a tree, He would resume His journey in the late afternoon, when it was cooler. He slept wherever He happened to be at

nightfall—usually outside, but sometimes in a village meeting-hall or hut—and ate whatever food He was able to obtain along the way. He met many people in the villages and countryside through which He passed, many of whom greeted Him respectfully and offered Him what food they could spare; but some were rude and either ignored Him completely or rebuked Him for living off others instead of earning his living by His own labor. Some came to Him with problems and tales of sorrow, and He listened sympathetically, saying little; people would leave Him feeling calmer and clearer in mind. Always, when He spoke, He used words and examples suitable to His listeners. Mostly, because He was traveling in the countryside, He used the language of the peasants and farmers, speaking of the changing seasons, ploughing, sowing, reaping, seeds and fruit. He spoke of the simple joys of life, and the need to do what is right. Most people who listened to Him were impressed and inspired by the sincerity and warmth of His speech.

“We have seen many wandering ascetics like this, with matted hair and beards, almost naked and carrying only a bowl and staff,” said one man to those around him; “But this one is different; he’s so calm and dignified! Can this be the one we’ve heard of—the one they call the *Sakyamuni*— he who was a prince but gave up everything to go forth in search of Truth? It is said that our good king, *Bimbisara*, offered him half the kingdom of *Magadha*, but he declined, saying that he had already given up one kingdom and was not in search of another. Our king was amazed at his determination, but respected it, and requested the *rishi* to return when he had found what he was seeking, and share it with him. It *must* be him. It can be no other. Let us also pay our respects to him, and ask him to speak to us.”

The Buddha consented, happy to share something of what He had found with people eager to learn. Where He saw that people were not interested, however, He kept quiet. “I cannot make people understand,” He thought; “When they are ready, only then will they learn.”

One day, He came upon a party of hunters who, knowing that such yogis were vegetarian, greeted Him with derision. The Buddha remained silent and did not respond. “Come, *sadhu*, and eat with us what we have caught,” one hunter jeered. Another restrained his companion, saying: “Each to his choice, brother; each to his choice. This *sadhu* said nothing to us. Why do you taunt him like this?” Chastened, the first admitted his mistake and apologized to the Buddha. He, seeing an opening, said: “While I lived the family life, I also ate the flesh of animals. But, having gone forth, I abandoned this, and now nothing lives in fear of me. All beings love their lives and none desires pain. I restrain myself from causing pain to even the lowest being. I may still have enemies, but no-one’s enemy am I.”

Often, He saw people at their religious devotions in their homes or at their temples, making offerings and beseeching the gods for help and favors, but He heard no answers. Twice along the way, He chanced upon bodies being cremated, and felt the sorrow of the mourners.

Eventually, He reached the Ganges, which He would have to cross. There were men who earned a living by ferrying people over, but He had no money and could not pay. This did not worry him, however, and He did not ask to be taken across. Instead, He sat on the bank, quietly contemplating the river flowing silently past, thinking of how it began as a tiny stream high up in the snow-clad mountains far away, and merged eventually with the sea, losing its separate identity but not its substance therein. “Life is a process, like this river,” He thought, “never still for a moment, but always changing. Nothing stands still, nothing stays the same; nothing can be grasped, possessed, and called ours. If we understand this, we can help others to understand that while living here, we should avoid doing evil as far as possible and do as much good as we can. In this way, we may give life a meaning, so that it doesn’t just flow on purposelessly, like this river, which knows not where it came from, where it is, nor where it is going.”

His musings were interrupted by one of the boatmen. “I know you have no money to pay me with,” he said, “but if you will wait until I have other passengers, I will take you across.” The Buddha smiled and said: “You are very kind.”

Soon, other people came, and took places in the boat. The boatman beckoned to the Buddha, and asked Him to sit near him. Then, with strong arm, and quick, sure strokes of his oars, he launched the craft from the bank, out onto the broad river. The current wasn’t strong, as the rains had yet to come, so he didn’t need to exert himself much. The passengers chatted among themselves, most returning home from various errands; the boatman knew them all, and spoke to them by name. But the Buddha was clearly someone special, and in mid-stream, he turned to Him and said: “I know you are a homeless one, but may I know where you have just come from, and where you are going?”

Courteously, the Buddha replied: “I came recently from Gaya in Magadha, and am bound for the Deer Park known as *Isipatana*. Perhaps you have heard of this place?”

“Indeed I have. Indeed I have,” said the ferryman. “It is a pleasant place frequented by *sadhus* and *rishis* like yourself, and is about two hours’ walk from here, going west.

“I always carry *sadhus* across free, knowing they have no money. Some are grateful, and others not, considering it their right to be taken across for nothing. Some of them say they are holy men, and that I can make merit by taking them across. But I never see this merit they talk about, and sometimes I feel I’m being cheated. These other people have to pay for my service, which is my way of earning a living and supporting my family. I cannot live on nothing.”

“Well said,” replied the Buddha. “You perform a useful service by which you earn an honest living. How else would people cross the river if there were no-one like your good self to take them? There is no bridge or ford. Now, just as *you* provide a useful service to others, do you benefit from others in any way?”

“Of course I do,” said the ferryman, “We all depend on others for many things. While I am ferrying people across the river, I can’t be working in the fields, and consequently, I get my food from others. And my clothes. And medicine when I or anyone of my family need it. And whatever else I need.”

“Quite true,” said the Buddha. “You are perceptive. We all depend upon others, and it is fortunate for us that different people do different things. If all men were boatmen like yourself, for example, how would they get their food? If all were farmers and produced food, how would they get their clothes and other necessities? How would they cross the river?”

“But life is not merely a matter of exchanging goods and services; there are other things that people need, things that can’t be bought and sold. We need friends. We need love. We need kindness. Now and then, we need someone to listen to us. We are not complete in ourselves; we need others; everyone does. And just as we like others to be kind to us and help us in various ways, so others like it if we are kind to them. We should not always count the cost, and think of what we can get in return.”

“I understand,” the ferryman said, with tears of joy in his eyes. “What you are saying is that we should feel happy at the time of helping others, without thinking of gaining anything from it; that doing good or right is all the result we need. Thank you. You have given me something that will help me for many a long day; I am well-paid for taking you across. Whenever you need to cross again, please look for me. My name is *Nyanapala*, and my home is over there, among those trees. I will be honored to see you and serve you again.”

“May you and yours be well and happy,” said the Buddha as the boat reached the bank and He stepped out. “If I pass this way again, I will look for you.” He then made His way up the slope, and the boatman watched Him with admiration until He disappeared from sight. Later that evening, when the boatman reached home, his wife could see his eyes shining, and asked him what had happened. He told her: “I met a very special person today and took him across the river—one of these wandering ascetics that we see now and then, with long hair and beard, and clad only in rags. But he was different; there was something about him that made me feel good; meeting him has given me hope and a great feeling of self-worth. I have been blessed, and will never forget him.” His wife felt his happiness as if it were her own.

The sun had almost set as the Buddha got down from the boat, and He didn’t want to reach the Deer Park in the dark, so while it was still light enough, He bathed in a pond covered with lotuses, and selected a tree beneath which to spend the night. There were houses not far away where He might get some food in the morning.

He did not sleep immediately, of course; it was still early evening, and so, according to His custom, He sat cross-legged and reviewed the day just gone, and the people He had met and spoken with. “Each has his or her own story,” He thought; “each sees the world in his own way; each has his hopes, fears and aspirations; each wishes to be happy and avoid suffering. There is so much to be understood about life; we do not need to suffer as much as we do. If only people would open their minds and hearts and live considering others, the world would be a much better place to live in. I can help people to see this, but only if they are ready to see; if they are not ready, or refuse to see, no-one can help them.”

The next morning, after He had been to the houses nearby for alms and had eaten the rice and vegetables the people there had kindly put into His bowl, He set off for the Deer Park of *Isipatana*. Arriving there, He inquired of two yogis He met if they knew of a group of five others who might be staying there. They told Him that there was such a group of five in the park, and directed Him to the place they had chosen as their abode. Thanking them, He followed the way indicated, and saw the five in the distance. They also saw him coming.

“Look who’s coming!” said two of them together; “It’s Siddhartha! What can *he* want? Maybe he’s on his way back to Kapilavastu, to inherit his kingdom, and is just stopping by to show off!” Another said: “Why should *we* care? He abandoned his search and reverted to a life of sense-pleasure. We don’t respect him anymore, remember? That’s why we left him. Look how sleek and well-fed he is! He’s obviously been stuffing himself since we left!” Yet another said: “Ignore him, and if he comes here, well, we can’t stop him, but don’t get up to welcome him!”

As He came closer, however, they were so impressed with His bearing and dignity, that they forgot their resolutions to ignore Him and rose from their seats as one to receive Him. “We respected him before,” said one, quietly, “but there’s something different about him now; something has *happened!* He *shines!*”

“Welcome, Friend Gotama,” they said, “It is good to see you again. How have you been? How did you know where to find us?” One took His bowl, one took his upper robe, one gave Him water to drink, and another water to wash his face and feet, while the fifth prepared a seat for Him.

“Do you not recall saying, when you left me, that you might come here? I took a chance on finding you here. But it is not appropriate for you to address me by name or as friend,” said the Buddha. “I am not now as I was then. I have found that which I sought. I am now a Buddha”. Remembering His encounter with Upaka, He knew He was taking a risk in saying this, but felt there was no other way.

“But how can that be?” said one of the Five. “You tried everything in your search, and went further in the practice of austerities than anyone had ever gone, and became known as *Sakyamuni* as a result. But still you didn’t find it, and now you expect us to believe you when you’ve gone back to a life of sense-pleasure?”

“The ways I tried before were useless,” said the Buddha, “and led nowhere. When I saw they were wrong, I turned from them. But I did not give up my search, and though I eat, it is only to sustain my life; I have not gone back to a life of sense-pleasures as you think. I have found a Middle Way that avoids useless extremes.”

“It is hard to believe, and yet there is something about you that was not there before.”

“When we were together earlier,” said the Buddha, “did you ever hear me make such a claim?”

“No, never. We always knew you as one who spoke only the truth.”

“Come, then, and pay attention. Open are the gates to the Deathless. I will explain to you what I have found.”

Convinced, the Five sat, listening attentively as the Buddha spoke about Suffering, the Cause of Suffering, the End of Suffering, and the Way to the End of Suffering. His voice carried authority, wisdom and compassion. And, as He spoke, the light of understanding appeared on the face of Kondanya, and the Buddha saw it and said: “Kondanya has understood! Kondanya has understood!”

Thus was the Buddha’s message proclaimed. He uttered His ‘Lion’s Roar,’ which has not yet ceased to reverberate.

During the next few days, while speaking to them again, they all became enlightened and free from ignorance. And with these Five as the nucleus, the Buddha started His Order of Monks that until today, we call the *Sangha*, or more specifically, the *Bhikkhu Sangha*. It is the oldest continuous organization in the world.

What Siddhartha achieved was not for Himself alone, but for countless others. The impact the Buddha made on the world cannot be measured.

N.B. This story is not from the Buddhist scriptures, but from my own imagination. I wrote it because the scriptures say nothing about this journey of 250 kilometers. It is said that He gave His First Sermon to the Five Ascetics in the Deer Park, but what about all the people He must have met along the way—did He have nothing to say to them? I imagine He must have been bursting with joy to share what He had found with others; His words must have been full of Dharma. A sermon need not be a long and wordy affair, but can be something short and to the point.



EPILOGUE

SUPPOSE a man got the idea to cover the whole Earth with leather, to protect his feet from all the sharp stones, thorns and broken glass that lie around: would he ever be able to do so? Wouldn't he be wiser to wear shoes?

We waste a lot of time complaining of external circumstances and blaming other people and things for the situations we find ourselves in. We think: "Oh, if *only* my life were different, if *only* it could be like that instead of like this, then I would be happy", and so on. We depend too much upon others and use them to excuse our own weaknesses. In the preceding pages, I have tried to point inwards, to indicate that, in our own minds, we have the necessary resources to face all the hardships and unpleasant things that life throws at us. The fact that we have not become completely mad already—and not just a little bit, as most of us are—testifies to this.

We may spend all our lives trying to change the outside world and make it conform to our ideas and desires, but will never completely succeed, although this shouldn't prevent us from trying. Many things are in need of change, and *can* be changed; others we should try to change, even though we are not sure if we can change them. If, throughout history, we had not tried to change things, we would still be living in caves, and most of us wouldn't like that very much. But often, when we focus on trying to change the outside world, we neglect the inner life, so that the peace and happiness we seek evades us, because it is inside, not outside.

We often say of things: "Oh, it's difficult! I *can't* do that!", even before we've tried. If we don't try, it will not only be difficult but impossible! It's easy to take things fatalistically and suffer and complain, and if we are content to do so, then why are we—I and you—writing and reading this book?

This advice is for *Diamond People*, not for those who want others to carry them around and feed them with spoons, like babies, or to forgive their sins and save them. If that sounds cruel, I'm sorry, but those who will make no effort to help themselves will just have to await the slow process of evolution, and learn under the harsh tutelage of Suffering. People who promise assistance and salvation to others without the need to do anything but believe are frauds, no matter how nice and kind they may appear to be, and if they are not deliberate frauds, they are deluded. The Buddha stated, very clearly, that each person must make the necessary efforts for himself. His Teachings may be summed up thus:

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 walk the Path,
 Buddhas only show the Way.

THE END

