LIVING FAITHS
and
ULTIMATE GOALS

Salvation and World Religions

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BUDDHIST *NIRVANA*: ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT AND LIFE

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I

_Nirvana_ is often misunderstood in the West as being something negative. This misunderstanding sometimes occurs even in the Buddhist world, for the literal meaning of _nirvana_ is the extinction or annihilation of passion, often compared to the extinguishing of a fire. But is _nirvana_ negative? What is the real meaning of _nirvana_?

The fundamental teaching of Gautama the Buddha (the founder of Buddhism), the Four Holy Truths, is as follows: that existence is suffering; that the cause of suffering is craving or habitual thirst; that by the extinction of craving, existence may attain _nirvana_; and that the means for the attainment of _nirvana_ is the practice of the Eightfold Holy Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

When Gautama the Buddha says ‘existence is (characterized by) suffering’, he does not mean that human life is simply full of suffering without any pleasure at all. It is obvious that there is pleasure as well as suffering in human life. In daily life we distinguish between pleasure and suffering, seeking for and clinging to pleasure while avoiding and detesting suffering. This is inherent in human nature. However, according to Buddhism, real suffering (henceforth referred to as Suffering with a capital ‘S’) lies in this very inclination. Pleasure and suffering are in reality inseparable — one is never found without the other — and the position that they are rigidly separable is abstract and unreal. Therefore, the more we try to cling to pleasure and avoid suffering, the more entangled we become in the duality of pleasure and suffering. It is this whole process which constitutes Suffering. When Gautama the Buddha says ‘existence is (characterized by) suffering’, he is referring to this Suffering and not suffering as opposed to pleasure. It is the reality of this non-relative Suffering which man can realize at the existential ground which lies deep within himself beneath the duality of pleasure and suffering. Since life and death are the fundamental sources of pleasure and suffering, human existence is

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understood in Buddhism to be irrevocably bound to *samsara*, the cycle of birth and death.

Accordingly, when Gautama the Buddha says ‘the cause of suffering is craving’, he means by craving not simply the attachment to pleasure but a deeper and more fundamental attachment that is rooted in human existence, that of loving pleasure and hating suffering, with its accompanying phenomenon of making a distinction between the two. According to Gautama’s teaching, this fundamental attachment originates in an illusory view of life in the world which is the result of basic ignorance innate in human nature. Craving is a human passion linked to man’s entanglement in the duality of pleasure and suffering, and deeply rooted in the ego. It is by extinguishing this craving that *nirvana* can be attained. Thus *nirvana* is not a negative or lifeless state such as the mere annihilation of human passion would suggest, but an *existential* awakening to egolessness, *anatta* or *anatman*, attained through liberation from craving, the attachment to the dualistic view which distinguishes between pleasure as something to be sought after and suffering to be avoided.

The position of Gautama the Buddha can be clearly seen in his first sermon after his enlightenment:

Monks, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth as a wanderer. What two?
Devotion to the pleasure of sense, a low practice of villagers, a practice unworthy, unprofitable, the way of the world (on the one hand); and (on the other) devotion to self-mortification, which is painful, unworthy and unprofitable.

By avoiding these two extremes the Tathagata (the Buddha) has gained knowledge of that Middle Path which giveth vision, which giveth knowledge, which causes calm, special knowledge, enlightenment, nirvana.  

In this connection, the following four points are to be noted:

1) Gautama the Buddha takes the Middle Way, transcending both hedonism and asceticism. Accordingly, he does not negate human desire as such but, in avoiding these two extremes, relegates it to its proper position in human life. However, the Middle Way is not simply a midpoint between pleasure and suffering, but rather is the Way which transcends the very duality of pleasure and suffering. Thus living the Middle Way is none other than being in nirvana.

2) For Buddhism, the Middle Way or nirvana is not an objectively observable state nor something which can be considered a goal of life, but rather an existential ground from which human life can properly begin without becoming entangled in the duality of pleasure and suffering. By living the Middle Way, in nirvana, we can be master of, and not slave to, pleasure and suffering. In this sense, nirvana is the source of human freedom and creative activity.

3) In his awakening to egolessness, Gautama the Buddha transcended not only the particular duality of pleasure and suffering, but duality itself. In other words, he could awaken to egolessness only when he came to be freed from duality itself, and this he achieved through overcoming the particular duality of pleasure and suffering. Accordingly, nirvana as the existential awakening to egolessness is beyond any kind of duality, including that of good and evil, right and wrong, life and death, man and nature, and even that of man and God. To attain nirvana in this sense is, for Buddhism, salvation.

4) Although nirvana, or the Middle Way, is beyond duality, it is not characterized by a monistic view. Monism is not yet free from duality, for it is still opposed to dualism or pluralism. Being beyond duality, the view of one who has attained nirvana is not monistic but rather non-dualistic. This is why Buddhism does not proclaim only one God, but speaks of Sunyata (Emptiness). Emptiness is realized by going beyond.

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one God and thus is not the relative emptiness of a mere vacuum. Being beyond one God, Emptiness is identical to, or, more strictly speaking, "non-dualistic" with respect to individual things, making them truly individual. Indeed, in Emptiness, all is all in the sense that all is as it is and at the same time all is equal in its as-it-is-ness. The following question-and-answer dialogue between the Chinese Zen master, Jōshu (778-897), and a monk illustrates the point. The monk asked Jōshu, "All things are reduced to the One; where is this One to be reduced to?" Jōshu replied, "When I was in the province of Tsin I had a monk’s robe made that weighed seven pounds." That which is ultimate or universal is not the One to which all things are reducible but a particular thing, absolutely irreplaceable, such as a monk’s robe, which has a particular weight and is made at a particular place at a particular time. The universal and a particular thing are paradoxically one in the realization of Emptiness, which goes beyond the understanding which sees all things as reducible to One.

Oneness as a universal principle, if substantial and self-existing, must be overcome; otherwise we as particulars lose our individuality and cannot possibly awaken to Reality. From the Buddhist point of view, this is true even for God, the only One. On the other hand, if all particular things are respectively self-identical, there is no equality between them and everything is self-centred. Both Emptiness, the negation of Oneness, and egolessness, the negation of everything’s self-centredness, are necessary for awakening. In the realization of Emptiness, which is another term for nirvana, all particular things are respectively just as they are and equal in their suchness. This is expressed in Mahayana Buddhism as ‘difference as it is, is sameness; sameness (of things in their suchness) as it is, is difference’. This very realization is the source of wisdom and compassion in which both ignorance and self-centredness are overcome. Just because nirvana is in itself empty, it is full of particular things functioning freely, neither losing their particularity nor impeding each other.

II

What significance does Buddhist nirvana hold for us today, East or West, in contemporary thought and life, especially in regard to the problems of understanding ultimate reality, nihilism, the relation of

1 Pi-yen chi (The Blue Cliff Collection), Case 45. See also Suzuki, D. T.: Introduction to Zen Buddhism. Rider & Co., p. 72.
nature and man’s personality, the irrational in human existence, achieving true community, and understanding the meaning of history? I would like to deal with these problems from the viewpoint of Mahayana Buddhism, a form of Buddhism developed in northern Asia, especially in China and Japan, and based on a dynamic interpretation of Gautama’s teaching. First of all, *nirvana* has relevance to man’s understanding of ultimate or universal reality in that it overcomes the major objection to monistic absolutism. The concept of one God who is essentially transcendent, self-existing apart from everything relative, is illusory to Buddhism in that He cannot be spoken or without a knower. In Buddhism, mutual relativity is the ultimate truth, and doctrines of absolute truth which exclude other views of truth as false are similarly considered illusory. In *nirvana*, nothing is independent, self-existing, or permanent; having no permanent selfhood, everything is mutually related to each and every other thing. This is not a fixed relativism simply rejecting absolutes and resulting in a form of scepticism or nihilism, but a dynamic relativism in which even the absolute and the relative, the holy and the secular, the divine and the human, are all totally interrelated. This idea of the total interrelatedness of each and everything at every moment is also termed ‘dependent co-origination’ in Buddhism, the realization of which is none other than *nirvana*. Dynamic relativism, being beyond the opposition between relativism and absolutism, is at once dynamic absolutism. This paradoxical truth can be realized not through speculation but only through existential practice (e.g., the practice of the Eightfold Holy Path, and Buddhist sitting meditation).

The position of Buddhism toward other faiths is often called ‘tolerant’ by Western scholars. However, it may be that the term ‘tolerant’ has been applied according to Western, especially Christian, standards, and is misleading in that it does not get to the heart of Buddhism. The Buddhist position, founded in *nirvana*, is a ‘positionless position’ in the sense that, being itself empty, it lets every other position stand and work just as it is. Naturally, Buddhism does not exclude other faiths as false, but recognizes the relative truths which they contain. This recognition, however, is a starting point, not an end, for Buddhist life. Properly speaking, Buddhism starts to work critically and creatively through this basic recognition of the relative truths contained in other positions, hoping for productive dialogue and cooperation with other faiths. This Buddhist position realized in *nirvana* may prove effective in a contemporary world which is seeing a remarkable rise of a sense of the
diversity of values as it becomes more and more closely united. The dynamic relativism of nirvana may provide a spiritual foundation for the formation of the rapidly approaching One World in which the co-existence of a variety of contrasting values and ways of life is indispensable. Secondly, nirvana offers a freedom beyond nihilism. One of the serious problems in the world today is the permeation of nihilism such as was proclaimed by Friedrich Nietzsche. The collapse of traditional value systems and a cry of ‘God is dead’ are somewhat universal phenomena in industrialized societies. A loss of the sense of the holy and despair of established forms of religion prevail in the world today. It has become more and more difficult for modern man to believe in ‘God’ with the pervasion of the scientific way of thinking; yet people today are searching seriously for something to fill the vacuum which has been created in their spiritual lives. In this respect, Nietzsche is a touchstone for religion, for he advocated as a prototype of future man the active nihilist who, being based on the Will of Power, courageously faces emptiness without God. However, it is unlikely that Nietzsche’s active nihilism can successfully serve as a substitute for religion. It would seem that what is needed today and in the future is a religion beyond active nihilism, i.e. a religion beyond ‘emptiness without God’. Buddhism, which is based on nirvana, is precisely a religion of this sort. Negating the existence of one God, Buddhism advocates Sunyata (Emptiness) which is not a nihilistic emptiness but rather a fulness of particular things and individual men functioning fully and without hindrance. In Emptiness, everything is realized as it is, in its total dynamic reality. This radical realism involves not only liberation from ‘God’ but also the overcoming of an active nihilism such as advocated by Nietzsche.4

Nirvana is a realization of great freedom, both from theistic pietism with its dependence on God and from nihilism with its dependence on the Will to Power, making possible self-determination by removing the illusion of a determinant. Thirdly, nirvana has relevance to our understanding of the relation of nature and man’s personality. Christian scholars often complain that Buddhist nirvana is impersonal. Christian personalism, if I am not mistaken, is based on man’s responsibility to the Word of God. Unlike other creatures, man is created in God’s image and can respond to the calling

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of God. Nature is ruled by God through man whom God gave 'domi-
nion over' other creatures. In this sense, Christian personalism is
connected with anthropocentrism. Contrary to this, Buddhist nirvāṇa
is based on egolessness and is not anthropocentric but rather cosmolo-
gical. In Buddhism, man and nature are equally subject to change,
transitory and transmigratory. Man cannot achieve emancipation from
the cycle of birth and death until he can eliminate a more universal
problem — the transience common to all things in the universe. Here
we see that the basis for Buddhist salvation is cosmological, not persona-
listic as in terms of an I-Thou relationship with God, and thus impersonal
and trans-anthropocentric. However, it is only man with his self-con-
sciousness and free will who can go beyond anthropocentrism and reach
an awareness that transience is not limited to man but is common to
all things. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Buddhist salvation is
primarily concerned with individual persons, not necessarily man in
general, for, as is written in a Scripture, 'One is born alone, dies alone,
comes alone, and goes alone.' In this sense Buddhism may also be said
to be personalistic and existentialistic. Yet this does not mean that man
is understood in Buddhism in terms of a divine-human encounter in
which nature is excluded, but rather that man is understood as a being
with self-consciousness and free will on a cosmological basis which
includes all of nature. Without the realization of transience and self-
lessness on such a cosmological basis, a person cannot become an
'awakened one'.

Here we see the following two aspects of Buddhist salvation: 1) Bud-
hist is primarily concerned with the salvation of man as a person who,
unlike other living beings, has self-consciousness and free will and thereby
alone has the potential to become awakened to and emancipated from
the transience common to all things in the universe. This is the existen-
tialistic and personalistic aspect of Buddhism. However, 2) a cosmologi-
cal dimension is the necessary basis for this Buddhist salvation because
the salvation of man is in Buddhism not salvation from sin as rebellion
against God, but emancipation from the cycle of birth and death which
is part of the transience of the universe. This is the cosmological aspect
of Buddhism. These two aspects are inseparable — the more cosmo-
logical the basis is, the more existential the salvation is. In this sense, the

\[\text{\textit{The Larger Sukhavati-ryūka.}}\]
\[\text{\textit{Abe, Masao: 'Man and Nature in Christianity and Buddhism', Japanese Religions, Vol. 7,}
\textit{No. 1.}}\]
Buddhist cosmology which is the basis of *nirvana* is an existential cosmology and Buddhist existentialism or personalism may be called 'cosmo-existentialism' or 'cosmo-personalism'.

The Buddhist position with regard to the relation of man and nature may contribute a spiritual foundation toward the solution of a pressing problem that man is faced with today — destruction of the environment coupled with estrangement from nature. This problem is a result of man's anthropocentrism whereby he regards nature merely as a means or obstacle to the realization of his own selfish goals, and thus continually finds ways to utilize and conquer it. On the other hand, the cosmological view which is the basis of Buddhist *nirvana* does not see nature as something subordinate to man, but sees man as subordinate to nature, more precisely as a part of nature from the standpoint of 'cosmos'. Thus the cosmological view both allows man to overcome his estrangement from nature and to live harmoniously with nature without losing his individuality.

Fourthly, let us consider what significance Buddhist *nirvana* may have in dealing with the irrational in human existence. Interest in mythology and primitive cultures as well as an irresistible demand to release instinctive, especially sexual, desire is on the upsurge in highly industrialized societies. This phenomenon may be regarded as a reaction to the emphasis on human rationality and science which grew up in modern European culture and formed the basis for industrialization. Western thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Marx, Freud and Jung, and, more recently, Camus, Marcuse and others emphasize in various ways the importance of the irrational aspects of human existence. Another important problem of human existence which modern European culture has completely neglected is the problem of death, for modern man the supreme irrationality.

In short, modern European culture with its scientific orientation, pervasive as it is in highly industrialized societies, is based on human rationality and the principle of life, while neglecting to deal with the irrational elements in human existence, especially death. However, it may not be wise for us simply to accept and follow present reactionary tendencies to this emphasis on rationalism. What is necessary today in order to deal successfully with this problem is a profound basis upon which the

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conflicts between the rational and the irrational, reason and desire, or life and death, can be resolved. Buddhist nirvana, or the Middle Way, in which man overcomes duality and extinguishes the 'craving' deeply rooted in human existence, may provide such a basis.

Fifthly, let us consider what significance Buddhist nirvana may have in the understanding and achievement of true community. It is the realization of nirvana, quoted previously, that 'difference as it is, is sameness; sameness as it is, is difference' which, for Buddhism, provides an existential ground for true community. We find ourselves equal, not as children of one God, but in the common realization of egolessness or Emptiness, which is at the same time the realization of true Self. Realization of egolessness is not something negative, like losing one's self-identity, but is positive in the sense that through it one overcomes one's ego-centredness and awakens to Reality, that is, to one's own true Self as well as the true Self of others. It is in this awakening that one can live with others in true community, sharing the realization of true Self. In nirvana, the loss of ego-self is the gain of true Self, and the sameness among individuals in their egolessness and the difference between individuals in their true Self-ness are paradoxically one.

Accordingly, in the realization of nirvana, I am not I because I am egoless, and yet I am absolutely I because I am my true Self. Likewise, you are not you because you are egoless, and yet you are absolutely you because you are your true Self. Moreover, since I am not I, I am you, and since you are not you, you are I. Each person remains just as he is, yet each person is identical in being his true Self. This dynamic interrelationship occurs in the common realization of egolessness and Emptiness. This realization provides the Buddhist foundation for man in true community. Furthermore, this realization applies not only to man's relationship to man, but to all things in nature, from dogs to mountains.

Sixth and finally, what significance does nirvana have in regard to understanding the meaning of history? Since there is no God in Buddhism, there is no Creation or Last Judgment, but rather Emptiness. Thus, for Buddhism, history has neither beginning nor end. This view of history derives from the deep realization of the karma of human beings. Karma is the universal law of act and consequence which is self-operating in making the self transform unceasingly from one life to another and the world a process of perpetual becoming. Thus it is action-energy which produces various effects according to the nature of the action and which binds men to the wheel of birth and death. Unlike the Hindu concept
of *karma*, however, *karma* in Buddhism is not deterministic since there is in Buddhism no idea of God who is the controller of *karma*; rather, Buddhism takes *karma* as moral energy, emphasizing the possibility of man’s final release from the round of transmigration through the exercising of his free will. Accordingly, on the one hand, we are bound by our own *karma* which shares in and is inseparably linked to *karma* operating in the universe but, on the other hand, we, as beings with self-consciousness and free will, have the opportunity to be liberated from *karma* through our own free act, an act which is based on the total realization within oneself of the beginningless and endless process of *karma*, i.e. *karma* operating in the universe beyond oneself. In this total realization of *karma*, personal and universal, past, present and future, one is liberated from *karma* and awakens to nirvana.

At the very moment we truly realize the beginninglessness and endlessness of history, we transcend its boundlessness and find the whole process of history from beginningless beginning to endless end intensively concentrated within the here and now. Apart from the moment of realization, there is no history. We realize our true life and true Self at this moment in which beginning and end, time and eternity, and one and all are not seen in duality but in dynamic oneness. This is nothing other than the realization of nirvana.

Universal *karma* can be realized not objectively but only subjectively, i.e. in and through the existential realization of personal and individual *karma* — and personal *karma* can be truly transcended only when universal *karma* is subjectively overcome within oneself. Thus (1) *to one who has attained nirvana* through the total realization of *karma*, the whole universe discloses itself in its reality and history as the endless process of operating *karma* ceases, eternity manifesting itself. In this sense history ends in nirvana. This is the universal salvation of nirvana realized by an awakened one, and represents the wisdom aspect of nirvana. At the same time, however, (2) *for the awakened one* history begins in nirvana because those who, despite the fact of universal salvation realized by an awakened one, *think themselves* to be ‘unsaved’, remain innumerably in the world and will appear endlessly in the future. Thus history has a new leaning for an awakened one — it is an endless process in which he must try to actualize universal salvation in regard to those ‘unsaved’. This represents the compassion aspect of nirvana. Since the wisdom and compassion aspects are inseparable in nirvana, history begins and ends at each moment in the realization of nirvana.
In short, for an awakened one who is living nirvana, universal salvation is completely realized in the here and now, and yet it is to be realized endlessly in the process of history by those who think themselves to be 'unsaved'. These two aspects are dynamically united in nirvana. Accordingly, at each and every moment of history a development toward the endless future is at once a total return to the root and source of history, i.e. eternity, and vice versa, where history is a succession of such moments. This Buddhist view of history leads us to a double realization: in the light of wisdom eternity manifests itself in the here and now, and the present life is not a means to a future end, but is the end itself, while in the light of compassion life is an endless activity of saving others, an instrument for universal salvation.