PERSONS—OBJECTS OR OBSERVERS?

A Dialogue with Buddhism

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OF ALL THE MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS Buddhism has been the most flexible and the most open to dialogue, producing a rich array of cultural and religious forms. Tibet, Sri Lanka, China, Japan have all developed a 'local' Buddhism, peculiar to their own culture. Modern forms of Buddhism are also developing, both in the East and in the West. In Britain, for example, the Network of Engaged Buddhists flourishes side by side with a revitalized *sangha*, a community developing its own version of the forest-dwelling Thai Theravada tradition in the sedate calm of Hertfordshire and Sussex. It is almost as if the very nature of Buddhism lies in dialogue. Whatever the external form, somehow Buddhism is open and adaptable yet remains recognizably the same, a testament as much to the central coherence of its teachings as to the wisdom of its teachers.

This article looks at the dialogue between Buddhism and the Spiritual Exercises—but not in such a way as to repeat what has already been done elsewhere. My question is less about what that dialogue *says about* the persons who engage in dialogue and more about what the dialogue *does to* them. Which is why I want to begin not with the Exercises but—with a perversity appropriate to the subject—with that ill-defined trend within contemporary cultural and philosophical thought known as post-modernism.

As David Tracy has pointed out, the nearest western affinity to Buddhist thought is to be found not in Hegel but in Derrida.

> Like the Buddhists' attack on Vedantic thought, the post-moderns reject every form of presence—now labelled pejoratively logocentrism and foundationalism—in Western literature and philosophy.[1]

Often portrayed as an iconoclast, but more accurately as a thorough-going critic of the religious assumptions of his time, the ascetic Gotama knew all about the collapse of 'master narratives'. His enlightenment may have inaugurated a new religious civilization, but it was based on

the hermeneutics of suspicion not a revitalized 'grand theory'. He was nothing if not an eclectic pragmatist, and distinctly anti-metaphysical.

This is a useful insight—one which goes some way towards correcting the popular version of Buddhism which the West has inherited. But it is possible to overstate the point and to make of Buddhism no more than a projection of Western and particularly European concerns. It has happened before. The earliest accounts of Buddhism—and even some more recent ones—often reveal more about the observers than the observed.[2] There is an irony here since Buddhism is all about correct observation, about recognizing the unconscious bias caused by desire and ignorance and about how to learn to practise a detachment which is not stoical indifference. If Buddhism is to be hitched to the post-modernist bandwagon, it must be as an example of how to live with the radical otherness which the post-moderns uncover, not as ancient justification of the deconstructive turn within post-modern philosophy.

Reflecting on the Way

While it may be true that Buddhism exists today in a number of dialogical forms, it is first and foremost a spirituality of liberation, described in the language of the religious culture of India. The aim of this article, therefore, is less to pursue a comparative line, whether with post-modernism or with the Spiritual Exercises, than to reflect on practice.[3] Or, to put it in a somewhat more ponderous way, it is to consider the implications for self-understanding of that conscious process of comparison which is often called dialogue. Our theme is the person who speaks and listens, whose identity is found at the heart of the dialogue. Buddhism comes to some sense of what it means to be fully human less in the development of a particular type of discourse than in a strategy which, while it has much in common with the more positive side of post-modernism, is closer to traditional forms of Christian spirituality—and, in particular, to the Spiritual Exercises.

In asking what light Buddhist practice might throw on the Christian tradition as it is presented in the Exercises, we will find ourselves drawn to reflect on an underlying issue. While the imagery they use is very different, Buddhists and Christians do share a number of assumptions about the value, if not the form, of spirituality. The *way* in which they come to terms with themselves and the source of their existence has something of the nature of a dialogue.

The differences between Buddhism and Christianity do not need to be emphasized. Buddhism is not a revealed religion. It does not depend on the language about God or ultimate truth handed down in the classic

texts of an ancient tradition. Rather it consciously rejects any use of such language, either explicitly or implicitly accepted by a community, and grounds itself in a process of deliberate and systematic doubt about the possibility of any language being adequate to its stated purpose: the enlightenment of the human person. Christianity, on the other hand, insists that we may only speak about God in so far as God has first taught us how to speak. In earliest times God spoke through the prophets, 'but in these last days', as the letter to the Hebrews puts it, 'he has spoken to us by a Son' (1:1). The language of the community is privileged because it is the Word which God himself speaks. To be fully human is, therefore, to learn God's language.

There are plenty of 'family resemblances'—even if these often turn out, on closer inspection, to be superficial. Buddhists and Christians do the same sorts of thing, follow similar moral codes and are often motivated by comparable ideals. Beyond that, their faith and practice very often appear to be based on totally different premises—about the nature of ultimate reality, the world and the human person. To put the disjunction at its bluntest, if Christianity is theocentric, Buddhism is anthropocentric. If the one stresses a personal relationship with a beneficent creator God, the other denies the existence of such a creator—and even of the human soul.

At the same time dialogue between such unlikely partners not only happens, it often turns out to be remarkably fruitful. Not so long ago I presented the Spiritual Exercises, or at any rate a much truncated overview, to a group with which I had been involved for some years. It was complemented by an introduction to a Buddhist classic of the spiritual life, the *Bodhicaryavatara* of Santideva, a seventh-century Mahayana commentator and spiritual guide. What followed was a remarkable conversation which ended with several of the Buddhists saying that they felt they could benefit considerably from making the Exercises. Since then, our exchanges have always been based on a shared meditation which leads, more often than not, to a discussion of experience rather than an argument about abstract ideas.

It was but one example of the way persons discover that their identity is found not in fixed ways of thinking, but in the myriad ways through which they seek to relate to each other and to communicate whatever they take to have ultimate value in their lives. If experience is anything to go by, dialogue comes alive when people confront each other not with what they—or faceless authorities—*say* but with what they *do*. The inadequacy of language to speak of the most intimate and personal of experiences is not an exclusively Buddhist insight.

Becoming Buddhist

To become a Buddhist is not a matter of esoteric initiation or complex community ritual. It is to take the three refuges: to declare one's intention to 'go for refuge' to the Buddha, the *Dharma* and the *Sangha.* These 'three jewels' are the heart of Buddhism: the teacher, the teaching and the community of disciples which embodies and continues that teaching. Strictly speaking, Buddhism is not a 'new' teaching but a rediscovery of ancient wisdom, *Dharma,* the truth about human existence. The Buddha's first sermon contains the essentials of the teaching in summary form: the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path. All of Buddhism is here. But it would be a mistake to regard it as in any way analogous to the Christian creed. Rather, we are speaking of a first introduction to the Buddhist experience. The Buddha is the teacher of *Dharma,* and it is this truth that the Buddha claims to have experienced. Hence the title *Buddha* or enlightened one. It is the way to the same experience that the Buddha claims to teach.

In the middle of that first sermon comes an empirical description of the human person as the 'five *skandhas*'. The Sanskrit word means something like 'stem' or 'trunk', as in a tree. For the Buddha it is used to indicate that what is called a person is made up of five constituent elements, 'groups' or 'aggregates'. These consist of one physical element, the body, and four mental: feelings, perceptions, volitions and consciousness. In the first sermon this description is simply mentioned without comment, but it is important to note where it is mentioned: at the end of the section on the first Noble Truth. This is not given in propositional form but summed up in the single untranslateable word, *Duhkha,* with its connotations of limitation and suffering. The Buddha is saying that life as we experience it is not satisfactory. The text, as recorded in the Pali Canon puts it like this:

> The Noble Truth of Suffering is this: Birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant is suffering; dissociation from the pleasant is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering—in brief, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering.[4]

What we call a person can be analysed, says the Buddha, into a number of elements which are held together by 'attachment'. This analysis is intended to exhaust all items of possible experience. No person, ego or 'self' is to be found. The Buddha goes through a process of systematically distancing himself from every temptation to identify a substantial self. Of each element encountered in human experience one

says: 'This does not belong to me. This I am not, this is not my ego'.[5] In the same collection of sermons he elaborates the point:

> When one says 'I' what he does is that he refers to all the aggregates combined or to any one of them, and deludes himself that that was 'I'. Just as one cannot say that the fragrance of the lotus belonged to the petals, the colour or the pollen, so one could not say that the form was 'I' or the sensation was 'I' or any of the other aggregates was 'I'. There is nowhere to be found in the aggregates 'I am'.[6]

There is no permanent duration of any of the aspects of the human person; to speak of personality, self, ego, is just to use a mode of speech. To recognize the limits of language and the extent to which our vision of reality is coloured by our capacity for projection is the object of Buddhist meditation—and therefore of Buddhism as a whole. The doctrine of 'no-self' has an essential truth-function, without which the intellectual edifice of Buddhism would have no coherence. As with its correlate, *Nirvana*, the ultimate value of the doctrine cannot be categorized. What the doctrines do is to point the practitioner in a certain direction, they make for the structure by which salvation can be achieved.

The person in Buddhism

The Buddha thus develops a critique of religiosity in general—and, in particular, of that ego-centred type of thinking which deludes itself that the human person is an independent substantial entity. The second Noble Truth expands the point, analysing the causes of suffering. We suffer, says Buddha, because we are constantly attached to what is beyond our reach—the unchanging and unlimited. Using the metaphor of 'thirst', Buddha tries to show that there is something deeply rooted in human nature which enmeshes us in an unending destructive cycle of grasping after what is unattainable. When, therefore, he somewhat bluntly identifies suffering with the 'five aggregates of attachment' he is saying that the seeds of human destruction are contained within human nature itself. If we would be enlightened we have to come to terms with that destructive process. In short, we have to recognize and overcome the roots of desire. This is the task of the Noble Eightfold Path, a sequence of ethical and meditative practices which enhances a correct vision or 'right view' and leads to *Nirvana*, enlightenment. The aim, so simply stated but so difficult in practice, is to see things as they really are: the all-pervading truth of human suffering.

Put so briefly, Buddhism might appear as an agnostic fatalism. In fact, the civilization and rich religious culture to which it has given rise

indicate how profound are the principles on which it is based. In particular, its analysis of the human person merits careful attention. Buddha is not saying that there is no such thing as a human being, that all that is 'really' there is a series of physical and mental elements. The analysis is pragmatic and soteriological: it is to be used in the process of gaining *Moksa*, release. The problem, he says, is that we naturally assume that this particular individual has some sort of inherently substantial or permanent existence. Not only are we attached to particular possessions and things, we are attached to life itself and to some sort of objective personal identity which is set up over against other particular identities. We think that 'this is mine', 'this is I', without giving any attention to what that 'I' consists of, still less to the subversive process of attachment which thinks it can identify things simply by naming them.

This is *Anatmavada*, the 'doctrine of no self'. The Buddhist analysis begins with the concept of *Atman*, or substantial and eternal self, often unhelpfully translated as 'soul', and asks where this is to be found. If the first Noble Truth is taken seriously it cannot be somehow contained within the human person who is, properly speaking, an insubstantial collection of physical and mental elements, forever changing. Not even the element of consciousness is eternal. Since it is always consciousness *of* something, consciousness does not exist independently: it is constantly in flux, dependent on something else. What is *Atman*, the substantial Self, cannot be compounded with what is manifestly *anatman*.

Going beyond the ego

The language used, of course, reflects the debates and concerns of the Buddha's day, but the issue is as relevant today as it was in the seventh century BCE. Buddha's teaching represents a radical challenge to conventional thinking about the way we identify people and things as consisting of a central unchanging 'core' at the heart of various external, changing elements. To some extent that teaching asks us to examine the way we use language, the way we think that the act of naming makes for substantial existence. More particularly, however, it forces us to consider the nature of the human person: if I am not constituted by a 'soul' what am I?

Most Christian thinking on this topic is bedevilled by the Platonist philosophy of a world of forms. This empirical world is, at best, a poor mirror-image of the 'real thing'. Ignatius in the Exercises gives just such a dualist account of the human person as body and soul in unhappy and temporary conjunction. The best-known example comes in the First

Week, in the very first prelude to the first exercise. Here Ignatius asks his exercitant to 'see in the imagination my soul as a prisoner in this corruptible body, and to consider my whole composite being as an exile here on earth, cast out to live among brute beasts. I said my whole composite being, body and soul.'[7] The meditation on hell talks of using the imagination to see the souls of the damned consumed by fire, while the first contemplation of the Fourth Week speaks famously of the separation of Christ's body and soul prior to the resurrection.

Other examples could be given but it would be unhelpful to overemphasize the point. As a theologian Ignatius was a product of his time, and in many ways the Exercises are remarkable not for their dull conformity to scholastic traditions but for the way in which the wholeness and psycho-physical integrity of the human subject are stressed. There is no space to pursue the point here; it is sufficient to note that Ignatius' aim is to help his exercitants to experience the truth to the very roots of their being.[8] Ignatius is no more a metaphysician than the Buddha. Both must be judged as spiritual teachers. And Ignatius' *dharma*—if one may speak in such terms—is a Christian equivalent of the Noble Eightfold Path: a sober and exact analysis of the human condition, a reflection on human need and an account of divine response.

Both, in very different ways, stress the importance of a careful scrutiny of the content of experience. For Ignatius this is the heart of discernment, attending to the movements of the Spirit; for the Buddha it is the essence of mindfulness, the penultimate stage of the Noble Eightfold Path, which seeks to objectify every action and reaction and thus to learn that there is nothing about which it can be said that 'this is mine', 'this is I'. In this way Buddhist meditation is different from the concentrative type of meditation typical of the mainstream yogic tradition. The latter centres itself on a specific focus—a symbol, an icon, a *mantra* or sensations such as accompany breathing or walking—thereby to be absorbed into it. Mindfulness, on the other hand, and the insight meditation (*Vipaśyana*) which springs from it, consciously avoids any control of the focus but seeks rather to develop an uninterrupted awareness of whatever emotions, feelings and thoughts arise spontaneously. The distinction between the two is never absolute, of course, and the Buddha took over many types of yogic meditation which could be adapted to his purpose. What is specific to Buddhist meditation, however, is this emphasis on careful and exact observation. It seems not to matter precisely which practice is employed as long as the meditator develops a conscious shift from the attitude of grasping and control towards a more passive or receptive mode, which observes, and—to be

deliberately paradoxical about it—becomes aware of, awareness or mindfulness itself.

Buddhist meditation, therefore, is not based on any particular method or technique but on that attitude of reflexive consciousness which seeks to see things *as they really are.* In the first sermon the Buddha speaks of a Middle Way between the extremes of self-indulgence and pure asceticism. But he also teaches another Middle Way—that between the extremes of what the texts call 'annihilationism' and 'eternalism'. The one refers to the materialist philosophy of his day, the other to the upanisadic belief in the eternal round of rebirth: on the one hand a hedonistic pessimism, on the other a 'body-soul' dualism. The Buddhist account is quite different: 'I am' only in some sort of dialogue or network of relationships with other 'selfless persons'.[9]

If this account of the Buddha's own experience and teaching is correct, then 'ego-thinking' with its focus on a substantive self or soul, is replaced by 'consciousness-thinking' which seeks to observe the continuities within consciousness and to recognize them as dependent and conditioned. Nothing we experience exists independently of anything else; no particular thing or person has inherent or substantial existence. There is, therefore, no such thing as an independent ego. This does not mean that Buddhism denies a significant personhood, as if the concept of person is no more than a comforting illusion for the religiously immature. Buddha's point is that persons do not exist in themselves or even for themselves. Persons exist, like everything else, *interdependently.*

Objects or observers?

Another way of putting the Buddhist insight is to say that persons, precisely because they are the agents of awareness, cannot be treated as if they are objects. The point is developed with some cogency by the psychiatrist Arthur Deikman in a study which owes a great deal to Buddhist meditation. Deikman draws attention to the value of meditation and mystical traditions for psychotherapy. At the heart of this analysis is a distinction between the 'object self' and what he calls the 'observing self'. The former thinks it obvious 'that each person is a finite biological entity, capable of communicating with others but essentially alone' while the latter is

> 'the transparent center, that which is aware . . . prior to thought, feeling and action, for it experiences these functions. No matter what takes place, no matter what we experience, nothing is as central as the self that observes. In the face of this phenomenon Descartes' starting point, 'I think; therefore I am', must yield to the more basic position, 'I am aware; therefore I am'.[10]

As Deikman points out, awareness or mindfulness in the Buddhist sense is the primary source of self-experience. By establishing the distinction between the observer and the observed from the outset, the meditator realizes the transitoriness of all experience and thus overcomes the desire for sensory gratification and fulfilment which is the source of suffering.

Deikman quotes a Zen saying which makes the point more succinctly than many a tortuous commentary. 'Renunciation is not giving up the things of the world, but it is accepting that they go away.'[11] The 'object self', the 'petty ego', which we are so careful to preserve and protect has to be given up, as all things have to be given up. But this does not mean self-destruction; such would be the 'annihilationism' to which the Buddha is opposed as much as he objects to its opposite, the reliance on the 'eternalism' of the *atman*. The task is to learn to see oneself in a different way: defined not in 'object-terms' as separate from others but in 'observer terms' as inextricably bound up with other observers in an unbroken nexus of relationships.

Wisdom and compassion

Persons are identified, therefore, by an ineradicable difference from each other—but a difference, nevertheless, which is only recognized as such because the existence of a person implies the existence of another. If, as I argued at the outset, the very nature of Buddhism lies in dialogue, then its version of the human person is dialogical too. According to *Anatmavada*, the human subject is more than an 'object', an intrinsic part of the world, but stands apart from the world as 'observer'. The sort of thinking which the Buddha criticized was only concerned with the former: a monistic individualism. What replaced it was the Middle Way which, in the hands of later commentators, if not those of the Buddha himself, was fashioned into a dialectic which resolves the endless conflicts of differing opinion 'by rising to the higher point of criticism'.[12] Through the dialectic came wisdom—but not through some sort of process of pure intellectual extrapolation. In Buddhist terms the dialectic of ideas goes hand in hand with a dialogue of persons; a passive wisdom born of mindfulness is inseparable from an active compassion.

Compassion is often considered the preserve of the Mahayana version of Buddhism. In fact it is as much part of the Buddhist mainstream as love is for the Christian. And once set in the context of the 'observer version' of the human person it is easy to see why. Other observing selves, subject to the same truth of universal suffering, are part of the world one is trained to observe. The truly mindful person cannot but be affected by the suffering of others.

The Buddhist aim is bound up with the ideal of 'seeing things as they really are'. This does not, however, imply a special *gnosis*, nor a renunciation, but essentially the compassionate action of letting what is 'non-self' be what it truly is: the other whose demands force the petty ego to accept that it is not, and cannot be, the centre of the universe. Identity is not given nor found through a purely intellectual process, but through recognizing and taking responsibility for the other. Using the language of wisdom, we can say that an originally egotistic subject is necessarily put into question by the arrival and presence of the other; using the language of compassion, the practice of mindfulness leads not to a passive detachment from a troublesome other but puts the needs of all 'sentient beings'—to use the Buddhist phrase—at the centre of awareness.

The two modes of discourse are interdependent. In the Spiritual Exercises the final contemplation does not present a logical argument, in the manner of the Principle and Foundation. Rather the attitude proposed in the latter, indifference to all created things, has become a reflex response: a result of that wonder and gratitude which sees all things 'coming down from above' as the gift of a beneficent creator. For the Buddhist there is no enlightenment without renunciation—accepting that things 'go away'. At the beginning of the Noble Eightfold Path the Buddha's teaching is taken on trust; later, once the practice of mindfulness has become second nature, wisdom and compassion begin to interact. But the ideal is only achieved through a practice which takes into account the reality of the other, not through the development of an isolated self-assurance.

This is the ideal of the *Bodhisattva*—which is sometimes interpreted as the 'putting off' of one's own enlightenment in order to enlighten others. Paul Williams has recently pointed out that such an interpretation is incoherent. The true *Bodhisattva* always aims for full Buddhahood, that enlightenment which involves both perfect wisdom and perfect compassion.[13] Such a misinterpretation finds its echoes in purely ascetical versions of the Exercises which stress action with Christ for others at the expense of working out *how* the union with Christ is to be achieved. In some versions the Exercises seem to begin and end with the Kingdom. But, if the 'observer model' of the human person and the *Bodhisattva* ideal which I have described are correct, then the whole question of the 'way'—in *any* spirituality—assumes enormous significance. The Contemplation for Achieving Love attains its proper place. Once one observes the Christ at work in the world and, more especially, in the other, the 'petty ego' has to die. To be 'truly human' is to take responsibility for oneself, not alone but *in dialogue with the other.*

NOTES

[1] David Tracy, *Dialogue with the other: the inter-religious dialogue* (Louvain: Peeters Press, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p 72.

[2] See, for instance, the splendid account of the European encounter with Buddhism in Guy Richard Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvana and its Western interpreters* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press; 1967).

[3] There are a number of studies based on comparisons of the Exercises and various aspects of Buddhism, notably that of Daniel O'Hanlon, 'Zen and the Spiritual Exercises', *Theological studies* vol 39 (1978), pp 737–768. O'Hanlon draws attention to the works of William Johnston (notably *Christian Zen*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979), Hugo Enomiya Lasalle (*Zen, way to enlightenment*, New York: Taplinger, 1968; *Zen meditation for Christians*, New York: Open Court, 1974), and Kakichi Kadowaki (*Zen and the Bible*, London: Routledge, 1980). Cf also my 'The Spiritual Exercises: a Zen perspective', *Way Supplement* 55 (1986), pp 89–99.

[4] Samyutta Nikaya, 56.11.

[5] Samyutta Nikaya, 21.5.

[6] *Ibid.*, 22.95.

[7] Exx 47, translation from Louis J. Puhl (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951).

[8] For a more extended discussion see my 'The body in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola' in *Religion*, 19 (1989), pp 263–273.

[9] The title of Steven Collins' masterly study of the concept of *Anatta* in Theravada Buddhism (Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[10] Alfred Deikman, *The observing self: mysticism and psychotherapy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), pp 65, 94.

[11] *Op. cit.*, p 79.

[12] T. R. V. Murti, *The central philosophy of Buddhism* (London: Unwin, 2nd edn 1960), pp 40–1.

[13] Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: the doctrinal foundations* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp 52–4.