

PARADOX AND NIRVANA

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**Je me suis moi-même appliqué à composer  
un Nirvâna par des “coupages” compliqués :  
un peu de nihilisme, un peu d’optimisme,  
un peu d’agnosticisme et beaucoup de mystère.**

**M. LOUIS DE LA VALLÉE POUSSIN**

# PARADOX AND NIRVANA

A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS ULTIMATES WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE  
TO BURMESE BUDDHISM

By

ROBERT LAWSON SLATER

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## PREFACE

"Buddhism," remarks a Christian theologian, "is the crux of all theories of religion."<sup>1</sup> It is at least true that statements concerning the nature of religion in general are frequently based on some estimate of Buddhism. Thus it is claimed, on the one hand, that Buddhist agnosticism proves the possibility of vital religion without belief in God, and even the superiority of such religion. On the other hand, it is suggested that later developments in Buddhist history prove that man cannot live without God: denial must ultimately yield to faith.

These and similar statements frequently assume that the Southern Buddhist is both more orthodox and more negative than his northern brother. And this more orthodox Buddhism, maintained today in the monasteries of Ceylon, Burma and Siam, indicates, it is sometimes said, that original Buddhism was not a religion at all but an ethic or philosophy in search of religion. The further suggestion is made that this search was only satisfied when Buddhism, re-born and travelling north to China and Japan, became syncretic, turning aside from the original narrow orthodoxy to quench its spiritual thirst at the wells of more positive, more speculative, more religious traditions.

If it is objected that such an estimate fails to account for the missionary vitality of original Buddhism, the reply is sometimes made that Southern Buddhism, while remaining substantially orthodox, degenerated and became a static, monastic scholasticism. To some this presents a picture of monkish moralists who found it possible to sustain an ascetic discipline through long centuries without any vision of those Eternal Realities which inspired similar disciplines elsewhere: a proof that man can dispense with such vision. Others see rather a picture of an excluded laity, outside the monasteries, a picture of ordinary men and women, Buddhists in name perhaps, but animists at heart, left so desolate that they must cling to primitive superstitions: a proof that man, normal man, cannot live without some vision, however inadequate, of the Beyond.

In this present work a very different picture of Southern Buddhism is presented. Here the monastic life is seen in full, creative relationship to

<sup>1</sup> W. R. Matthews, *God in Christian Thought and Experience*, chap. viii, p. 162.

Burmese life and culture, a relationship persisting through many centuries, and it is suggested that if Buddhism is indeed the crux of all theories of religion, this picture must be considered, not only by those more particularly interested in Buddhism, but by all students of Comparative Religion. It may also be of topical interest to those concerned with social and political developments in South-East Asia today.

For others, however, the main interest of this work may lie in its relevance to the subject of religious paradox, a subject which is receiving increasing attention by Christian theologians and others. "The observation that there is 'a way of paradox' demanding analysis and formulation," states a recent writer, "has been one of the major discoveries of Christian thought during the last century, and the task of relating it to classic ways of negation and analogy . . . has only been taken up in our own time and is still far from the stage of achievement."<sup>2</sup> Meantime, various preliminary questions arise. It is, for example, sometimes taken for granted that the paradoxical expression of the Christian faith is, in itself, a proof of the distinctive character of the Christian Revelation. Or it may be held that this form of expression indicates the 'objective' character of the Christian Revelation. Discussions of the subject, however, are frequently determined by the evidence provided in the Judaic-Christian tradition alone. The present work points the need for a wider reference, and it is believed that the questions raised by the study of the paradox of Nirvana will be of considerable interest to theologians and others.

These questions are perhaps the more significant because they are the result of an empirical approach, an approach begun in Burma with an attempt to find some point of contact between Buddhist aspirations and the Christian faith. It was observed that, while certain monks were conditioned against any attempt to discuss grounds for belief in God, they were better disposed to consider the Christian hope of Eternal Life in relation to the Buddhist hope of Nirvana. Further study obliged recognition of the paradoxical expression of this Nirvana faith and the relation of this expression to similar language in other religions.

The fact that I was concerned to inquire what it was that constituted Buddhism a living religion, able to inspire the loyalty of the Burmese people through so many centuries, led gradually to the conclusion that paradoxical expression is intimately associated with vitality in religion. This conclusion was the more interesting because it was found to be affirmed by other writers, starting from different premises. A Swedish theologian, for example, claims that "every revival in the history of the

<sup>2</sup> J. V. Langmead Casserley, *The Christian in Philosophy* Part I, chap. 1, pp. 41-42; cf. Part II, chap. 1, pp. 179-182.

church has been connected with a consciousness of the paradoxical content of faith."<sup>3</sup>

My inquiry, thus begun in Burma, was continued in Ceylon and India and concluded in New York. It has been pursued, with various interruptions, for some twenty years. In listing my acknowledgments, I am therefore aware that I may omit some who have given me generous help, more especially in the earlier days in Burma, since some of the notes relating to this period were lost during the Japanese invasion. I must also make it clear that acknowledgment of help given does not imply approval of the views expressed in this work. I am fully aware that some of these views are debatable. Any Western writer, knowing how much confusion has been caused by the temptation to read Western preconceptions into Buddhist thought, is bound to feel hesitant in expressing his own conclusions. He looks for the day when other scholars from the Orient such as the late U Shwe Zan Aung, themselves acquainted with our Western idiom, will assist our interpretation. Meantime he can only hope that his own efforts will promote that better understanding between East and West which may yield new insights in the universal search for truth.

While in India, I was invited to Union Theological Seminary, New York, and I am most grateful to the President, Dr Henry P. Van Dusen and the members of the Seminary for this invitation and the subsequent hospitality and facilities received there which enabled the preparation of this work as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy awarded by Columbia University. I am especially indebted to the following for their generous encouragement and assistance: Dr Horace L. Friess, Dr Frederick C. Grant, Dr Arthur Jeffery, Dr Richard Kroner, Dr August Karl Reischauer, Dr David E. Roberts and Dr Herbert W. Schneider.

In his devoted work for the Missionary Research Library, the late Mr Charles H. Fahs collected books and documents on Burma not available elsewhere, and I am glad to have this opportunity of acknowledging his most courteous assistance. I am similarly very grateful for the help I received from Dr Lucy W. Markley and the staff of the Union Seminary Library; Dr Marguerite Block of the Low Memorial Library, Columbia University; and from the librarians of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University.

To the Rev. R. F. Spear, American Methodist Mission, Pegu, Burma, I am very grateful for permission to read and quote from his MS thesis,

<sup>3</sup> G. Ljunggren, "The Paradox as a Theological Expression," *Swedish Theological Quarterly Review*, (1928), p. 333, quoted by Gustaf Aulén, *The Faith of the Christian Church* (trans. by Wahlstrom and Arden, 1948), Part I, p. 101.

*The Syncretism of Animism and Buddhism in Burma*, and to the Northwestern University and Garrett Biblical Institute, Evanston, Illinois, for allowing me to consult this MS.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

|          |     |                                                    |
|----------|-----|----------------------------------------------------|
| J.B.R.S. | ... | Journal of the Burma Research Society.             |
| J.P.T.S. | ... | Journal of the Pali Text Society                   |
| M.B.B.   | ... | Modern Buddhism in Burma (ed. Purser and Saunders) |
| P.E.D.   | ... | Pali-English Dictionary (P.T.S.)                   |
| P.T.S.   | ... | Pali Text Society                                  |
| R.A.S.   | ... | Royal Asiatic Society                              |
| S.B.B.   | ... | Sacred Books of the Buddhists                      |
| S.B.E.   | ... | Sacred Books of the East.                          |

## *Pali Canon*

|      |     |                  |
|------|-----|------------------|
| A.   | ... | Aṅguttara-Nikāya |
| D.   | ... | Dīgha-Nikāya     |
| Dhp. | ... | Dhammapada       |
| M.   | ... | Majjhima-Nikāya  |
| S.   | ... | Saṃyutta-Nikāya  |
| SN.  | ... | Sutta-Nipāta.    |
| Ud.  | ... | Udāna.           |

Translations consulted are noted in the Bibliography.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### *1. The Yes and No of Faith*

Three of the following chapters are concerned with Buddhism, and with Buddhism in a narrow field — the country of Burma. The ultimate interest, however, is much wider; the final issue is universal: it is the challenge of bewilderment which is everywhere twin brother to Faith, the No which accompanies our Yes. This final issue concerns the nature of that Reality which shapes our lives, both quickening and confounding our philosophy.

It is an issue which branches out into many questions. We may ask whether religion is a necessity or a luxury, a healthy response to life or a stumbling attempt at escape, a recognition of truth or a runaway from truth; whether philosophy or religion must have the final word, whether philosophy is religion's rival, religion's successor, religion's partner or religion's jailor; whether the language of religion corresponds to the language of philosophy, and whether one should be subject to the other; whether language most manifests faith when it is most voluble or when it exhibits a seemingly reserve; whether denial of God is the final proof of God.

These and similar questions gather around the problem of paradoxical religious expression with which we shall be confronted in this inquiry. The resort to paradox arouses frequent distrust: it appears to cover a retreat from the challenge of logic to a realm of confused statement. Distrust is further inflamed by the fact that many who emphasise the significance of paradox fail to define the term. But the omission is understandable, since definition is beset by difficulties. It is easier to denote than to define, pointing to such examples as St. Augustine's confession: "What art Thou then, my God, what, I ask, save the Lord God . . . most far and yet most near . . . ever busy, yet ever at rest; gathering, yet never needing . . . seeking, though Thou hast no lack. . . . Men give Thee more than Thou dost claim, that Thou shouldest be their debtor, yet who possesses aught that is not Thine? Thou payest debts which Thou dost not owe; Thou forgivest debts and lovest nothing. . . . What can anyone say when he speaks of Thee?"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Confessions*, Book 1, chap. iv (trans. by C. Bigg).

Whenever religious faith ventures furthest with bold affirmation, it is obliged in the last resort to express this affirmation in negative as well as in positive terms. A Yes is uncomfortably joined with a No. This union may appear in one challenging proposition, or the Yes and the No may be found in separate passages related to the same symbol. In either case, the union is regarded as indissoluble, and a distinction is drawn between the language of religious paradox and the language of logical opposition. The logician makes ready with his knife to sever or prune the apparently discordant terms and thus relieve the tension. But his surgery is refused. "There can be no going behind or pretending to resolve the paradox. To evade the paradox is to lose the truth."<sup>2</sup> Whether this refusal is justified is one of the questions in debate. What perhaps is indicated by religious paradox is an imaginative contrast rather than a logical opposition, a contrast derived from the fact that the imaginative language of analogy is joined with the language of negation.

Any adequate discussion of the problems involved, however, depends upon a wide survey of the context of religious paradox, a survey not limited to the Christian tradition. This present inquiry may be regarded as a contribution towards such a survey, for the situation which gives rise to religious paradox is nowhere more strikingly exemplified than it is by the Buddhist symbol of Nirvana.

The essentially religious character of this Nirvana symbol, however, has been questioned, especially with reference to its statement in the context of Southern or Hīnayāna Buddhism, where the negative emphasis appears to obscure the basic affirmation.

Our inquiry, therefore, has two aspects. In the first place we are concerned to show that Burmese religion is a living tradition of Hīnayāna Buddhism in which Nirvana is the religious ultimate term, paradoxically affirmed. We begin in the field of historical interpretation.

Secondly, in order to exhibit the significance of the Nirvana paradox for Buddhism, we shall relate this expression to similar expressions of other religious ultimates in other traditions. This excursion into the field of comparative religion will raise the question of the significance of the language of paradox for the study of religion generally.

The more detailed examination of Burmese Buddhism which will concern us in the earlier chapters may seem to some a narrow and laborious approach to the larger questions which confront us in our comparative survey. But there is much to be said for such an approach to the problems presented by the study of Comparative Religion. Just as the traveller or missionary comes first into contact with some one, particular religion, so

<sup>2</sup> J. V. Langmead Casserley, *The Christian in Philosophy*, Part II, chap. 1, p. 181.

the general reader may be well advised first to range himself alongside some one, specific tradition, not avoiding the details which present the difficulties as well as the rewards of investigation. He may thus escape those distortions, confusions and misinterpretations which result from a merely surface acquaintanceship when religious beliefs are torn from their living context and discussed as abstract propositions.

## 2. *The Paradox of Nirvana*

The symbol of Nirvana is the more emphatic because it is set against the distinctive backcloth of Indian belief, including the belief that present existence does not end with death: man is reborn in this world or a similar realm, and existence with all its ills may continue through a dreaded cycle of successive rebirths. Nirvana, for the Buddhist, is the word of release from this cycle.

But what kind of release does Nirvana signify? Is it the finish, the final dissolution, or a new beginning under happier conditions? Conceptions of Nirvana as ultimate annihilation, we shall term negative. They may include the view that annihilation is postponed or preceded by a brief moment of enjoyed sanctity or intellectual illumination before the final death; but in the end, man reaches his terminus and there is nothing beyond.<sup>3</sup> "People . . . disappear for ever in Nirvāṇa by being extinct."<sup>4</sup>

Positive conceptions, on the other hand, interpret Nirvana in terms of fulfilment, survival and bliss, a continuation of life beyond the cycle of present, chequered existence. Such conceptions may be compared with the hope of immortality in other religions. They signify an ultimate consummation, even when the conception of individual survival is vague or absent. "Nirvana is none other than that ultimate, eternal, primordial Mystery, which all religious people have sought for, divined and intuited, which all religions have tried to express by means of weak and insufficient symbols, similes, concepts and images."<sup>5</sup>

Now there are terms and passages in the Buddhist literature which seem to demand a choice between these two rival conceptions. But the Buddhist system of thought implies their combination. Herein we have the paradox of Nirvana. On the one hand, Nirvana is denoted in terms which encourage a positive conception. It is the further shore, the harbour of refuge, the cool cave, the matchless island, the holy city; it is peace, rest, supreme happiness. On the other hand we appear to be confronted by curt negation. Nibbana is the Void. It is Cessation.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., as in the theories of Childers, Rhys Davids.

<sup>4</sup> Th. Stcherbatsky, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Heiler, *Die buddhistische Versenkung*, chap. 10, p. 42.

There is a further paradox. In spite of these terms which are connotative, whether positive or negative, Nirvana is also said to defy description. It is inexpressible. The state of Nirvana is unfathomable, beyond perception and beyond logic.<sup>6</sup>

There is a still further paradox. Even if this contrast of terms is resolved, the very conception of Nirvana seems to contradict the entire system of Buddhist thought.<sup>7</sup> For Buddhism, it is said, denies the soul. In the place of the soul, there is nothing but a temporary conjunction of phenomenal aggregates which dissolves at death. If we grant that Nirvana is a positive consummation, who is there to attain this goal? If, on the contrary, we interpret Nirvana as annihilation, who is there to be executed?

Nirvana, therefore, is a paradox set within a context of paradox.

### 3. *The Discovery of Buddhism*

Amongst Western expositors, an earlier disposition to interpret Nirvana in terms of annihilation has been succeeded by a more positive conception, with one or two voices crying in the wilderness to maintain the older view.<sup>8</sup> The new tendency is exemplified by Fr. Tayman d'Eypernon, whose recent work represents Nirvana as "the flowering of personality."<sup>9</sup> He draws a parallel between Buddhist implications and the terms of European scholasticism. This conclusion is the more significant because it is derived from studies pursued in Ceylon, the citadel of Southern Buddhism. Some of the earlier scholars agreed that when Buddhism travelled north to China and Japan, Nirvana became a positive conception, but the scriptures of Southern Buddhism, reflecting an earlier, more authentic tradition, implied, they believed, a negative conception.

Western scholars, however, are still groping very much in the dark, for Buddhism, so far as the West is concerned, is a recent discovery. It was only in 1855 that Fausboll published his translation of the *Dhammapada*, the first text, and a slight text at that, of the important scriptures of Southern Buddhism to be made available to the West. There is still a vast literature to be translated and examined, and the rendering of basic terms is still in debate.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Cf. P.E.D. pp. 198ff.; Rhys Davids, *Early Buddhism*, pp. 73, 74; Bimala Churn Law, *Concepts of Buddhism*, chap. XI, pp. 77 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Fr. Taymans d'Eypernon, *Les Paradoxes du Bouddhisme*, Part II, Section 2, chap. 1, p. 187.

<sup>8</sup> Notably Stcherbatsky, whose *Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa* was published in 1927.

<sup>9</sup> *Les Paradoxes du Bouddhisme*, Part II, Section 2, chap. II, pp. 212ff.

The discovery of Buddhism, and the discovery of the Pali literature, have been compared with the impact of those Greek manuscripts which, one by one, came into the hands of Renaissance scholars after the capture of Constantinople by the Turks.<sup>11</sup> It is a significant comparison. Perhaps it explains the tendency of many European readers to regard the Buddhist scriptures in much the same light as Renaissance scholars regarded their Greek manuscripts — as museum treasures, as words from the past, reminders of a bygone culture. Joined with this tendency was the fashion to represent Buddhism as primarily a philosophy or a morality — a morality in search of religion, said the Christians; a morality happily divorced from religion, said their critics.

*Ex oriente lux!* Once again it was happening, as so often before, but this time the new light from the East was a sober evangel, just the evangel needed by an 'age of science which no longer wants to believe, but to know,' a teaching presenting 'the kernel of all religions and all metaphysics . . . guaranteed in accordance with the methods of exact science.'<sup>12</sup> In the 'mountain of books' on Buddhism, written in the West in the last century, many of them based on the flimsiest evidence, would-be exponents have found in Buddhism the anticipation of their own philosophic preferences. Spinoza, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Bradley, Bergson and Bertrand Russell have all been cited, and have all been read into Buddhism, with confusing results. It was largely this emphasis on Buddhism *as a philosophy* which led at first to negative conceptions of Nirvana.

In 1912, a discerning Buddhist scholar in Burma uttered a protest. The Western scholar, he observed, "seems like one who has drawn forth from some 'chamber long to quiet vowed' a curious object all dented and covered with dust, concerning the origin and history of which he at once begins to speculate, without first enquiring if there are not some fresh, new specimens of the object to be found in everyday use around him. He treats of Buddhism as a dead and gone system and ignores the fact of its present existence as a living force in the lives of countless millions of his fellowmen, — pays little or no heed to the circumstance that, in addition to a literature belonging to the past, Buddhism possesses a living and active tradition in the present.

"The history of discussions at one time current in the West and not yet quite extinct, as to the meaning of Nibbāna,<sup>13</sup> presents a fairly charac-

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Woodward's translation of Vol. V of the Aṅguttara-Nikāya for the Pali Text Society, an important scripture, is dated only 1936.

<sup>11</sup> Rhys Davids, *American Lectures* II, 44.

<sup>12</sup> George Grimm, *Die Lehre des Buddha*, pp. 7, 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Nibbāna* is the Pali equivalent for the Sanskrit *Nirvāṇa*.

teristic specimen of the scholar's method of setting to work upon the investigation of Buddhist ideas. Ancient manuscripts, and commentaries upon them only a trifle less ancient, were racked for every slightest word that might bear upon the vexed question, and every such finding was discussed *pro* and *con* entirely with reference to its meaning as that meaning might present itself to an *occidental* mind; and it never seemed to occur to anybody that the simplest and best way to find out what Nibbāna really meant was to ask one or two of the more intelligent among the living representatives of the religion in which the word was used to express one of its leading concepts."<sup>14</sup> Written in dispraise of other Western authors, this criticism was also written in very lavish praise of a new book on Buddhism by Mrs Rhys Davids<sup>15</sup>. In that book, the authoress was far from rejecting Buddhism as a philosophy. But she also affirmed that the Buddha himself should be recognised, not only as a Sage, but as a prophet — a prophet "who had seen in a vision of universal law, not a philosophic theory only . . . but a saving Truth, a Religion, whereby he might purify his own beliefs and redeem mankind."

Once Buddhism is seen for what it is, a religion, and a living religion at that, it becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile the older Western misinterpretation of Nirvana as annihilation in such a context.

#### 4. *The Buddhist Religion*

A glance at the long history of Buddhism shows that it has been, at different times and in different settings, a dynamic religious movement. Through many veils of legend, the Founder, Gautama,<sup>16</sup> is discerned as a young noble of the Sakyan clan in Northern India, some six centuries before the Christian era, who combined a sage moral insight with deep religious conviction. This conviction has been disguised for some by the fact that Gautama avoided exaggerations, for religion, by many minds, has frequently been identified with the abnormal and the extreme. But Gautama, in his first 'sermon' at Benares, preached a Middle Way. His followers were to avoid sensuality, on the one hand, and, on the other, the extremes of asceticism which he himself had practised in vain. He seems to have shared with his contemporaries a pessimistic valuation of the ceaseless round of Ill, the grim cycle of repeated, frustrating existence in which men felt themselves to be trapped, and the pith of his teaching

<sup>14</sup> Review in *J.B.R.S.*, Vol II, Part II (December, 1912) pp. 249 ff.

<sup>15</sup> *Buddhism, a Study of the Buddhist Norm.*

<sup>16</sup> Rendered variously as Gotama, Gaudama, etc. Other names for the historic Buddha are Śākyamuni, the Tathāgata and his personal name, Siddārtha.

has often appeared as a diagnosis of cause and effect, linking the suffering of life to man's wayward passions, hot desires, and consequent illusion.

But it has been pointed out that he countenanced no pessimistic resignation. On the contrary, he challenged the human will to sustained effort, with the promise of higher good. He brought a gospel. The new discipline he enjoined 'making vision, making knowledge, would lead on to peace, to wisdom, to enlightenment, to Nirvana.'<sup>17</sup> He could announce this gospel because he himself had attained enlightenment; he had become a Buddha (an Enlightened One.)

This teaching inspires among his hearers an immediate missionary zeal. Yasa, the first layman to become a disciple, converts four of his friends, then fifty, and Yasa's mother and his wife become the first women disciples. Sixty followers are sent out by the Buddha in all directions to proclaim the new faith. A celebrated ascetic is challenged and convinced. With all his five hundred adherents, he joins the new movement. There are many personal encounters. Sāriputta rushing to tell the good news to his friend, Mogallāna, may be compared with the Christian scripture, "Philip findeth Nathanael."<sup>18</sup> There is jealousy and division among the disciples, as well as fervour. There is a Judas (Devadatta) and a Beloved Disciple (Ānanda). There is opposition: the people of Magadha accuse Gautama of breaking up family life. These tales are legendary, but they communicate the impact which Gautama made on his contemporaries and the impression of this impact retained to the fourth and the fifth and succeeding generations. "It was all like a modern revival," comments Rhys Davids. The comment is interesting. Even an age which saw Gautama primarily as an intellectual moralist, conceiving it possible that an Erasmus could be a Luther, a Buddhaghosa a Gautama, could not fail to note the signs of religious fervour.<sup>19</sup>

Missionary journeys are punctuated by times of retreat and assembly. The first monasteries are established, the Order (the *Samgha*) is formed, and through the Order, the Doctrine (the *Dhamma*) is transmitted by recital until, two or three centuries after Gautama's death, it is embodied in written scriptures.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Samyutta-Nikāya*, V, 420 (Trans. F. L. Woodward, *The Book of the Kindred Sayings* P.T.S., London, 1930, Part V, p. 357.) Cf. Mrs Rhys Davids, *Sakya*, chap. III, pp. 53 ff.

<sup>18</sup> John 1: 45.

<sup>19</sup> But the revival, adds Rhys Davids, "must have been of a strangely dignified and intellectual sort." (*Early Buddhism*, chap. III, p. 42).

<sup>20</sup> The earliest date for the Pali scriptures is B.C. 247 but Sanscrit fragments and Chinese translations suggest the possibility of other scriptures. cf. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha*, p. XIX.

By the forming of the Order, it has been said, a vital gospel for Everyman was gradually transformed into a monkish discipline and a dry scholasticism.<sup>21</sup> Others, however, may see in the monastery, not only the very genius of Buddhism, but a further sign of its essentially religious character, while a wider reference will emphasise the relation of the monastery to the life of the community in countries such as Burma and Siam, where Buddhism has remained a dominant influence.

The religious character of Buddhism may be discerned even in the discord among his followers which began in the Buddha's lifetime and divided the first great council, which was held after his death, for sectarianism is more the sign of religious zeal than of philosophic interest. Rival interpretations led eventually to the two main divisions of Buddhism which exist today — the Mahāyāna (Greater Vehicle) or Northern Buddhism, prevalent in China and Japan, and the Hīnayāna (Lesser Vehicle) or Southern Buddhism, prevalent in Ceylon, Burma and Siam.

Prior to this division, there had been a vigorous revival of missionary activity under the great king, Aśoka (circa B.C. 245). Travelling overseas, Buddhism established its citadel in Ceylon when the new faith declined in India before a resurgent Hinduism. A similar missionary vitality expressed itself in the later developments which marked the rise of the Mahāyāna tradition. "The teaching of Buddha is for the salvation of all living beings," Aśvaghoṣa, the St. Paul of Northern Buddhism, is said to have declared when he became the willing and respected captive of the conqueror, Kaniṣka. Buddhism is essentially tolerant and seldom aggressive, but time and again in its long history it has manifested this fervour and persistence. It has known occasions of decline and even decadence. It has, in places, gone underground and almost disappeared. But through all vicissitudes it has shown a remarkable tenacity, and today it is still one of the living religions of the world. Father d'Eypernon remarks its 'suppleness.' Buddhist monks at the present time, he affirms, do not hesitate to affirm that Buddhism is excluded from any Communist campaign against religion, since the Buddha was the first Communist.<sup>22</sup>

With the early expansion of Buddhism primarily in mind, Dahlmann reiterated Max Müller's objection that Nirvana, conceived as Annihilation, could never have been the goal of such a missionary faith as Buddhism. 'Nirvāṇa, die Oede des Nichts, ein "welteroberndes" Ideal!'<sup>23</sup> The exclamation arises even more irrepressibly if we consider the subsequent history of Buddhism. Nirvana, in its religious context, may not be

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Mrs. Rhys Davids, *Sakya*, and other works.

<sup>22</sup> *Les paradoxes du Bouddhisme*, Preface, p. IX.

<sup>23</sup> *Nirvāṇa, Eine Studie zur Vorgeschichte des Buddhismus*, pp. 5, 6.

a simple, straightforward affirmation, but it is not denial. No religion could so persist if it merely brought man's elemental aspirations to a sharp cliff and threw them over.

### 5. *Burmese Buddhism*

If there are good reasons for approaching the subject of religious paradox by a study of Buddhism, there are also good reasons for considering Buddhism as it appears in Burma where it is still a living and a dominant religion.

In the study of great religious traditions there is always need to maintain a balance between regard for the written texts and for the living expression. To consult one without the other is to misinterpret both. What the Christmas stories in the gospels mean to Christians cannot be fully discerned if they are isolated from Christmas observance any more than the Jātaka stories of Buddhism can be fully appreciated until they are read in the context of popular faith, with its drama and poetry. And what an entirely misleading impression of monastic Buddhism one might get from the Abhidhamma literature unless one has seen something of the life of a Buddhist monastery! This balance, as our Burmese critic observed, has not always been maintained in the study of Southern Buddhism.

Burma provides exceptional opportunities for such a study. "If anybody wants to know and see Buddhism as conceived and preached by the Buddha himself so far as the Saṃgha life goes," says a recent writer, "one can see a nearest approach to it in the monasteries of Burma. . . . Of all the Indianised lands of South-eastern Asia, Burma is indeed the only country where monastic Buddhism of the Theravāda nikāya survives to this day in its pristine purity."<sup>24</sup> And the same writer emphasises the impact of this monastic life on Burmese life and culture.

In Burma, eighty-five per cent of the inhabitants are Buddhists. Of these, one in every hundred is a Buddhist monk. Go where you will, you find the yellow robe of the Order, the pagoda gleaming white across the plain or on the hillside, the monastery in every village, intimately related to the life of the people. This has been the situation for centuries. Here one can see Buddhism in action; one can try to interpret its symbols in the light of the very real, if rustic, civilisation which it has shaped and maintained. Burma is one of the most interesting countries in the Orient. Its people are literate. There is freedom from caste, and, for that matter, scarcely any class system. In the days of the monarchy, "when you left the king, you dropped at once to the villager."<sup>25</sup> An Englishman observed,

<sup>24</sup> Nihar-Ranjan Ray, *Theravāda Buddhism in Burma*, chap. vii, p. 262.

<sup>25</sup> Fielding Hall, *The Soul of a People*, chap. ix, p. 106.

in the middle of the last century, that Burmese women not only enjoyed a much freer and higher position than elsewhere in the East but, in some matters, had attained rights that their sisters in England were still seeking to obtain.<sup>26</sup> These and similar aspects of Burmese life must be attributed in large degree to the dominant influence of Buddhism in a country which has been left for hundreds of years, shut away from the surrounding world by its seaboard and mountain barriers, to work out its own salvation with only occasional interference from outside until modern times.

It is possible that the first Buddhist monastery in Burma was established more than two thousand years ago. While we may be sceptical of the legend which attributes the conversion of the first Burmese disciples to the Buddha himself, there is perhaps less reason than formerly to question the persistent Burmese tradition that missionaries were sent from India to Burma after the Third Great Council in the time of Aśoka. We have, at any rate, shreds of reliable evidence relating to the early centuries of the Christian era. In Burma, as elsewhere, the archaeologist has been active in recent years and there are also illuminating references in Chinese and other texts. Examining the evidence now available, Mr. Nihar-Ranjan Ray has presented a substantial argument for the conclusion that Buddhism was introduced to Burma possibly in Aśoka's day, probably by the third century A.D. and certainly by the fifth century A.D.<sup>27</sup> In these earlier centuries, Burma was parcelled into small kingdoms, and all that can be said is that, at certain capitals, there were strong centres of Buddhist influence.<sup>28</sup>

It is, however, sufficient for our present purpose to be able to trace the dominating influence of Buddhism throughout the country from the eleventh century onwards. In this century, the turning point in Burmese story, the curtain of history lifts to reveal A-naw-ra-hta, the Burmese Constantine, moving southwards from his capital at Pagan to vanquish the king of Thaton and annex his dominion. According to the Burmese chroniclers, the motive for this advance was not mere lust of conquest but zeal for the true faith. King A-naw-ra-hta had been converted by a monk from the south, Shin Araham of Thaton. But 'without the scriptures there can be no study, without study there can be no intuition.' To obtain these scriptures, the Pali scriptures, A-naw-ra-hta must needs subdue his rival at Thaton who possessed them.

What is of further importance for our present inquiry is the fact that

<sup>26</sup> Forbes, *British Burma and Its People*, chap. III, p. 55.

<sup>27</sup> Ray, *op. cit.* chap. I, pp. 83ff.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. I, pp. 33ff., 81; cf. Taw Sein Kho, *Census of India Report* (Burma 1901), XII, 32.

the tradition thus established throughout Burma was the Hīnayāna tradition, not the Mahāyāna.<sup>29</sup> It will therefore be the more significant if we find in Burmese Buddhism a positive conception of Nirvana, for, in the past, scholars have frequently associated a negative conception with the Hīnayāna tradition, enlarging the distance between the two schools: Nirvana might spell paradise in China or Japan, it was argued, but for Southern Buddhists it was the Void.

There were, it is true, outposts of the Mahāyāna faith in Burma, notably at Pagan, where Mahāyāna cults survived for perhaps two centuries after A-naw-ra-hta's conversion, tolerated by the now dominating Hīnayāna tradition which absorbed some elements of the sister faith.<sup>30</sup> There is also evidence, not only of Mahāyāna rivalry, but also of Brahmanical Hinduism (as at Pagan) in Southern Burma in the earlier centuries.<sup>31</sup>

A first glance at the map may occasion surprise that Mahāyāna influence on Burmese Buddhism was not more considerable, for China, where the Mahāyāna tradition thrived for several centuries, is just across the north east border and the Burmese themselves are a Mongolian race. A second glance, however, discovers the far distances between centres of influence. There is a sweeping borderland of mountain ranges and remote valleys, and, in the earlier centuries, the buffer state of Nanchao lay in between China and the Burmese kingdoms. The sea route from India was the easier route to Southern Burma and Indian traders and adventurers were the forerunners of Indian missionaries.

When all qualifications have been made, we must conclude that the formative tradition of Buddhism in Burma was the Hīnayāna, introduced from India and nourished from Ceylon. And from the eleventh century onwards, "the stronger vitality of the Southern school completely absorbed, assimilated and obliterated the Northern school."<sup>32</sup>

The royal encouragement given by A-naw-ra-hta was frequently echoed by later rulers. Burmese kings were styled 'great Captains of the Law,' and as late as the nineteenth century good King Mindon convened the 'Fifth Buddhist Council' at Mandalay, when the scriptures were engraved on over seven hundred tablets of marble.

<sup>29</sup> The term, Hīnayāna, is sometimes regarded as disparaging. 'Southern' or 'Theravāda' Buddhism might be preferred in this connection, but it is probably less confusing to use the terms now familiar in the West.

<sup>30</sup> Ray, *Sanskrit Buddhism in Burma*, p. 93, and *Theravāda Buddhism in Burma*, pp. 150 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Ray, *Theravāda Buddhism in Burma*, pp. 86, 87; cf. Taw Sein Kho, *Census Report* (Burma, 1901), p. 32.

<sup>32</sup> Taw Sein Kho, *ibid.*, p. 32.

But Burmese kings were not always good. The monasteries which became centres of community life in village after village have to be pictured more often against a dark background of marauding armies, political feud and violent revolt. This chequered history gives point to the suggestion that Burma owes its civilisation and 'the preservation of . . . moral and mental balance' very largely to the Buddhist Order which persisted and grew apace through all vicissitudes.<sup>33</sup> Within the Order, there was a remarkable degree of discipline, upheld by a *Thāthanābaing* or Burmese Arch-Abbot. There was also a remarkable unanimity. Although there were different schools and parties, it is significant that there is little, if any, hint of doctrinal controversy. If there had been any considerable impact of Mahāyāna interpretation, we should surely have heard more about it. What, on the contrary, is much more evident, is the continued impact of Ceylon. Perhaps the most serious division was occasioned by a claim that it was necessary to resort to Ceylon to maintain the legitimate 'line of descent.'<sup>34</sup> There were, it is true, schismatics. Non-conformist Paramata sects decried the Order and taught the existence of an immanent Divine Being, the *Shwe Nyan Daw*, a belief which may reflect either Mahāyāna or Hindu influence. By and large, however the dominating religious and cultural force was Hīnayāna Buddhism for eight centuries without interruption. We have therefore good reason for beginning a study of Southern Buddhism in a country which has been so deeply impressed by its influence.

There is also a personal reason. It was in Burma, some twenty years ago, that my own acquaintance with Buddhism began. It was during discussions with monks and laymen there that I began to think that Nirvana was the ultimate religious term of their faith — the term which symbolised the consummation of their doctrine, practice and aspiration. And the mode of expression of this Nirvana symbol seemed to me significant, not only for my Buddhist friends, but for all concerned with the study of religion and life.

<sup>33</sup> J. A. Stewart, "Note on Some Authorities for the History of Burma," *J.B.R.S.*, XIII (1923), p. 75.

<sup>34</sup> M. H. Bode, *Pali Literature of Burma*, chap. II, p. 19.

## CHAPTER II

### BUDDHISM AND ANIMISM IN BURMA

#### *1. Animism or Buddhism?*

It never occurred to anybody, remarked the Burmese critic quoted in our previous chapter, that the best way to find out what Nirvana meant was to consider its significance in some present, living tradition of Buddhism. His criticism was apposite in its immediate reference. As a matter of fact, however, it was precisely this course which *did* occur to Bishop Bigandet a century ago, as his voluminous footnotes to his translation of the Burmese Legend of Gaudama show.<sup>1</sup> The same may be said of his predecessor in the field, Father Sangermano, and of several successors.<sup>2</sup> Our present purpose is to take up the task where they left it. We hope to describe Buddhism in Burma in sufficient detail to exhibit the essentially religious character of the Nirvana paradox.

Since the context is Burmese and the reference is to Hīnayāna or Southern Buddhism, Nirvana for the time being will be *Nibbāna*, which is its form in the Pali language of the Hīnayāna scriptures. In Burmese, Nibbāna is Nebban.

One reason, perhaps, why this approach to the subject has been largely disregarded by Western scholars in recent years is the prevalent impression that the popular religion in Burma is a syncretism in which the dominant element is not Buddhism, but Animism. "Hinayana," writes Dr. Bouquet, in an outline of Comparative Religion, "is still 'the little vehicle,' because it does not and cannot appeal to the masses of any population. . . . It is true that it is the Buddhism of Burma and Ceylon. But anyone who knows these countries is well aware that the real popular faith of their peoples is not Hinayana but a thinly veiled animism."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rt. Rev. P. Bigandet, Bishop of Ramatha, *The Life or Legend of Gaudama, the Buddha of the Burmese*, first published in Rangoon 1858.

<sup>2</sup> Father Vincentius Sangermano, *The Burmese Empire*, first published in 1833.

<sup>3</sup> A. C. Bouquet, *Comparative Religion*, new ed., 1945, p. 129. Dr. J. B. Pratt's balanced estimate of the Burma situation in his *The Pilgrimage of Buddhism* (1928) should have done something to correct this impression.

It is necessary, therefore, at the outset of our inquiry to correct this impression.

A writer on Comparative Religion is dependent on the experts from different fields, and Dr Bouquet is only repeating what a number of commentators on Burmese religion have been saying for the past fifty years. But if we examine their statements we find that many of them merely reflect, without further evidence or critical examination, an opinion expressed by a European official in a Census Report of 1891. This opinion was emphasised by another Census official, Mr. C. C. Lewis, ten years later:

"The Burman has added to his Animism just so much Buddhism as suits him and with infantile inconsequence draws solace from each in turn. I know of no better definition of the religion of the great bulk of the people ... than that given by Mr Eales in his 1891 Census Report, 'a thin veneer of philosophy laid over the main structure of Shamanistic belief.' The facts are here exactly expressed. Animism supplies the solid constituents that hold the faith together, Buddhism the superficial polish. Far be it from me to underrate the value of that philosophic veneer. It has done all that a polish can do to smooth, to beautify and to brighten, but to the end of time it will never be anything more than a polish. In the hour of great heart-searchings it is profitless as the Apostle's sounding brass. It is then that the Burman falls back upon his primaeval beliefs. Let but the veneer be scratched, the crude animism that lurks below must out. Let but his inmost vital depths be touched, the Burman stands forth an Animist confessed."<sup>4</sup>

Mr Lewis' opinion is based on a critical examination of the situation, and it cannot be lightly gainsaid. He also refers to the prevailing Animistic beliefs of the surrounding hill tribes who still infiltrate into the plains of Burma, a factor which encourages the survival of primitive ideas among the Burmese themselves. This survival is not to be denied. It is impossible to live in Burma without coming across evidences of Animism, sooner or later — the coconut, surmounted by a red cloth, still hung in most Burmese households as a *Nat* offering; the, 'bus driver halting his vehicle to run across the road and place a little bouquet of flowers at the foot of some tree which is the shrine of a local spirit. Most of these practices are innocent. Occasionally, however, one has a grim reminder of more fateful beliefs. Burmese students once explained to me, reluctantly, that they had desisted in their efforts to save a drowning boy because it was obvious that he had been seized by the *Nat* of the lake.

<sup>4</sup> *Census of India Report*, Vol. XII, (Burma, 1901), Part 1, by C. C. Lewis, chap. III, p. 35.

Animism in Burma is usually termed Nat-worship. *Nat* has been compared with the Indian, *Natha*, but it is probably an indigenous term.<sup>5</sup> Strictly speaking, it should be distinguished from "disembodied spirit" or ghost, for which the Burmese name is *tasē*. The Burmese also speak of the "butterfly" soul in man, the *leip-bya*, which may leave the body even in life, during dream or unconsciousness.<sup>6</sup> "A *nat* is something quite different. The word is the equivalent of our word god, in the sense in which we speak of the gods of ancient Greece and Rome."<sup>7</sup> *Nat* legends, however, express the belief that most, if not all, of these godlings were once human beings. Thus the familiar household Nat, Min Magayi, was once a blacksmith, Maung Tin Dè, a man of such prodigious strength that whenever he struck his anvil the whole city was shaken, to the great wrath of the king who caused the blacksmith's death. His spirit continued to vex the neighbourhood until a temple was built in his honour.<sup>8</sup> In later times such spirits seem to have been elevated to *Nat* status by royal degree. Burmese tradition emphasises *the Thirty Seven Nats*, but the number has no special significance. Many *Nats* not included in the thirty seven are recognised today and some of the thirty seven ignored. Any attempt to denote the *Nat* realm too narrowly misrepresents what is, in fact, a fluctuating and ill defined situation. 'All is change' applies to this realm, in Burmese estimation, as much as to any other. Nor can we point to any one origin of the cultus. The Mondaing *Nat*, for example, may reflect a primitive Nature worship, since Mondaing signifies whirlwind, but local legend suggests another origin.<sup>9</sup> Some of the *Nats* are associated with Brahmanic and Buddhist legend. Others are definitely local and even recent. Sir George Scott, who was an acute observer, said that the Burman always distinguished the Spirits of Nature from the legendary gods imported from India.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, there is a tendency to mingle Buddhist story and Nat story, and the Buddhist *peta*, as well as the *deva* is quite at home among the Burmese *Nats*.<sup>11</sup>

In earlier times, a victim was slain in order to provide a guardian spirit for a new town or building, and as late as the eleventh century a queen is said to have given her life for such a purpose. Buddhist teaching against taking life has gradually prevailed, however, against these harsher

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Bigandet, *Life of Gaudama* Vol. I, p. 17, Vol. II, p. 324 and Temple, *The Thirty Seven Nats*, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Forbes, *British Burma*, chap. IV, p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> R. Grant Brown, *The Pre-Buddhist Religion of the Burmese*, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> R. Grant Brown, *ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Temple, *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Bimala C. Law, *The Buddhist Conception of Spirits*.

customs. Grant Brown observes that, while Buddhists in the Chindwin area still sacrifice fowls to the god of the harvest, 'the thing is done somewhat surreptitiously and shamefacedly.'<sup>12</sup>

Other practices survive more openly. In many Burmese villages there is a *nat-ka-daw*, or spirit-medium, generally an elderly or middle-aged woman, who is supposed to be married to a *Nat*. She tells fortunes, and is called in sometimes in cases of sickness to discover whether the patient will recover. Mr. Spear describes an incident of this kind which took place in the main street of a large town in the presence of many spectators. "The *nat-ka-daw*, in addition to her usual clothing, wore a sash around the waist and a cloth wound around her head. She danced with a *dah*, a long and heavy Burmese knife, in her hand, until she fell exhausted." Plantains and coconuts had been placed in a shelter, opposite the house, as offerings to the *Nat*.<sup>13</sup>

In this case, apparently, the *Nat* was neither held responsible for the sickness nor expected to cure it. There are times of epidemic sickness, however, when a whole village is temporarily abandoned, and special rituals are followed to placate the *Nat*, who is considered to have caused the epidemic.

In an interesting account of the development of a modern *Nat* cultus, a Burmese writer describes a public festival in honour of the *Nat*. A play is staged during which one of the Thirty Seven *Nats*, who is personified by a villager, asks the *Nat* of the locality if he is taking due care of the villagers. Here the *Nat* is obviously regarded as benevolent. But we are told that this was not always so. Formerly the *Nat* was cruel, unreasonable, mischievous and demoniac. But "he is now believed to have taken to religion, to keep the sabbath and to lead the life of a saintly god." In spite of his own sanctity, however, he seems to favour evil-doers. "No organised theft is ever committed in Lower Burma . . . without invoking his aid." The would-be criminals cook a meal within a circle they have marked on the ground. If any of the rules of the succeeding ritual are broken, the proposed robbery is abandoned. Some Buddhist monks of this region, more orthodox than others, have tried to suppress the *Nat* cultus, but in vain.<sup>14</sup>

Such beliefs and practices are obviously bound to affect thought and conduct. The Burmese feel around them a vast, invisible *Nat* world, which is both near and remote. There are spirits in the trees, the rivers,

<sup>12</sup> *The Pre-Buddhist Religion of the Burmese*, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> R. F. Spear, unpublished MS, *The Syncretism of Animism and Buddhism in Burma* (1928) chap. 1, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> U Tha Khin, "Is U Yin Gyi a National God of the Burmans?" *J.B.R.S.*, Vol. XIV, part II (1924).

the lakes, the mountains and there are distant *Nat* realms ruled by *Nat* chieftains. All of these spirits are capricious. They encourage the view that life is a gamble. A man must bargain and wile his way through as best he can, hemmed in by a vague, immeasurable threat of evil. A religion, therefore, which points the way through the maze, indicates some order in the realm of caprice and promises deliverance from evil, may be the more welcome. On the other hand, it contains a challenge to caprice in oneself.

## 2. *Animism and Buddhism interwoven*

There is no question, therefore, of the survival of Animism in Burma, nor of its influence. The only question which arises is the *extent* of this influence. Is it so persistent and powerful that Buddhism is no more than a surface polish ?

At first sight, this indeed may seem to be the case, for not only is Animism a parallel cultus, sometimes furtive but frequently brazen; it also seems to be interwoven in the very texture of popular Buddhist expression and practice. As a boy, the Burman learns how Nats watched over the infant Buddha, how the Buddha, by his virtue, defeated the jealous *Manh Nat*, how the rest of the *Nat* world acclaimed the victory with shouts of exultation. *Nats* appear in all the subsequent events of the Buddha's history.<sup>15</sup> On pagoda platforms the boy may see scenes depicting the *Nats*. Early in his education, he may learn a poem celebrating the Buddha's victory. On the most memorable day of his life as a Buddhist, the day of his *shin-byu* or confirmation, he may *shikoh* to the *Nat* shrine. At his death, a monk may be called to his side, not to give him spiritual consolation but 'because the good influence of the monk's pious presence keeps away evil spirits.'<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, Burmese Buddhists have been criticised for their inconsistency. How, it is asked, can a belief that a human 'spirit' has been transported to the *Nat* realm be reconciled with the Buddhist denial of the soul ? If Buddhism denies the Divine, and even Buddha himself is not worshipped, how can it be right to worship and propitiate these *Nat* godlings ? How can it be legitimate to expect their assistance, if man is the arbiter of his own destiny, subject to moral law alone, as Buddhism affirms ? And Buddhism teaches: Thou shalt not kill. What, then, of fowls and oxen and even humans sacrificed to propitiate *Nats*? Toleration is

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Bigandet, *op. cit.* Vol. I, p. 37; cf. Temple, *Thirty Seven Nats*, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Purser and Saunders, *M.B.B.*, pp. 38, 97; Sir George Scott, *The Burman: His Life and Notions*, Vol. I, chap. xxii, p. 289.

doubtless a virtue enjoined by Buddhism. Carried to this extreme, however, has it not distorted Buddhism beyond recognition?

The Buddhist reply is two-fold. In the first place, it is claimed that there are *Nat* beliefs and practices which are *not* inconsistent with Buddhism. Since the normal Buddhist foresees many possible rebirths before he attains Nibbāna, there is no reason why some of these rebirths should not occur in a *Nat* realm. As to the denial of the soul, that raises difficulties, but are they so very different from the questions raised by the *Jātaka* stories in Buddhist tradition itself? The learned Buddhist has his own explanations, and the villager is inclined to regard life itself as ultimately as great a mystery as Nibbāna, while he does lip service to the *an-attā* doctrine (soul-denial). 'The Buddha accepted the Indian universe of his day ready-made' with its conception of heavens and hells and innumerable worlds.<sup>17</sup> Popular Buddhism, as popular religion everywhere, lives in narrative form, and the ordinary Burman dwells in two worlds of story, Buddhist and *Nat*, which fuse together.

As to *Nat* practices, some of these are innocent, and others have been given a Buddhist ethical content. Gratitude, for example, is both natural and good in itself. What harm, then, if a villager presents flowers at a *Nat* shrine from such a motive?<sup>18</sup> As to propitiation, even in this present life, men deem it wise to placate powerful humans. Buddhism, therefore, can wisely and tolerantly assimilate many *Nat* conceptions and practices without inconsistency. So it is argued.

Other ideas and customs, however, are admittedly incompatible with true Buddhism. These, it is claimed, have either been opposed or they have been tolerated for a time in confidence that sound religion would eventually prevail. Asked why he allowed *Nat* images in a Buddhist shrine, King A-naw-ra-htha is said to have replied, "Men will not come for the sake of the new faith. Let them come for their old gods and gradually they will be won over."<sup>19</sup> This confidence, it is held, has been justified: Buddhism has at least prevailed sufficiently to take the sting out of Animism; human sacrifice is no longer tolerated, and even animal sacrifices are furtive.

Is there then no surviving superstitious fear of the *Nats*? This is debated. Temple quotes a formidable Oath, administered in the courts of law, which invokes the *Nats*:

"I will speak the truth.... May the *Nats* who guard the sacred heavens ... the keepers and warders of countless shrines ... the *Nats*

<sup>17</sup> J. B. Pratt, *The Pilgrimage of Buddhism*, chap. v, p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> Mouno Po Me, "Animism or Agnosticism?" *Buddhism*, Vol. I, No. 1 (1903, Rangoon), p. 95.

<sup>19</sup> N. Ray, *Theravāda Buddhism in Burma*, chap. vii, p. 263.

who watch and ward the mighty rivers . . . may the nāga and the galōn, hideous dragons and cruel birds, all ogres and demons . . . may all these spirits and ill things unite to slay me and mine to the utmost limits of kinship, if I speak not the truth. . . .”<sup>20</sup>

Respectable persons have trembled at the prospect of taking this oath, says Temple, so great was their dread of the *Nats*. A British magistrate, however, writing at a later day, observed drily that the fearsome Oath did not prevent false witness.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps these later witnesses did not know its terms, since the Oath was not read out in his court, only handled. Perhaps, however, they did not fear the *Nats* as much as their sires did. We may indeed question whether men who can talk of the *Nats* reforming their ways and turning to religion can hold them in any lively dread. Smeaton, in his *Loyal Karens of Burma*, refers to some Christian converts who still propitiated the *Nats*. “We must throw some sops to the foul demons who afflict us,” they explained, “but our hearts are ever looking for God.” Their Buddhist neighbours might offer a similar explanation. They may still deem it prudent to throw some sops to the *Nats*, while their hearts are towards the Buddha. We may term such an attitude superstitious, remembering that similar superstitious practices survive on similar grounds in other religious traditions. But we may well hesitate before we describe the Burmese as *Nat*-worshippers or say that their Buddhism is only a veneer.

The Burman may claim that, while certain aspects of Animism can be tolerated without inconsistency, Buddhism has, in fact, opposed the more objectionable practices, has prevailed against them, and has altered the attitude to the *Nats*. This, in substance, is the reply contained in an article criticising the statement in the Census Report shortly after its publication. The *Nats*, says the writer, Moung Po Me, ‘are real beings to the Burman and Buddhism does not deny their existence.’ But they are certainly not bogeys. It is only when the Burman deviates from Buddhist ethics that Buddhism becomes a veneer.<sup>22</sup>

His verdict is confirmed by other observers who may be considered more impartial. “The nats were the gods of Burma before the Buddha arrived,” says Professor Pratt. “But as soon as he came they learned their place as merely subordinate spirits, and they have kept their place very well ever since.”<sup>23</sup> “Were spirit worship twice as prominent as it is,” observes a Christian missionary, “I should still call Buddhism the religion

<sup>20</sup> Temple, *The Thirty Seven Nats*, p. 4; cf. Scott, *The Burman*, Vol. II, chap. xxvi, p. 250.

<sup>21</sup> C. J. Richards, *The Burman*, p. 50.

<sup>22</sup> Article in *Buddhism*, cited supra.

<sup>23</sup> *The Pilgrimage of Buddhism*, chap. vii, p. 127.

of the Burman.”<sup>24</sup> The most adequate inquiry on the subject to-date is the unpublished thesis by Mr. Spear which I have been privileged to quote. “It must be said,” concludes Mr. Spear, “that Buddhism in Burma has kept itself remarkably free from the practice of taking ideas and customs associated with primitive religion in general and Nat worship in particular, and making them its own.... It is Buddhism which is the real religion of the people. It is what they practise in their best moments; it is what they want their children taught.... To be a Burman is to be a Buddhist.”<sup>25</sup>

We arrive, then, at the opposite conclusion to that stated by Mr. Lowis in his Census Report. Instead of saying that ‘the Burman has added to his animism just so much Buddhism as suits him,’ it is nearer the truth to say that he has added to his Buddhism just so much animism as suits his Buddhism.

Those who judge otherwise generally pay full attention to the strength and vitality of Animism, but they give less than due attention to the greater strength and vitality of organised Buddhism. They fail to note the intimate relation of the Buddhist Monastic Order to the life of the community. To this subject we must now turn, not only to accentuate the fact that Burma is Buddhist Burma, but to observe in sufficient detail the essentially religious context of the hope of Nibbāna.

### 3. *Monastery and Community*

A monastery suggests to many minds a cloistered company, shut away behind high walls, or secluded on some remote hillside, as frequently in China. In a sense, the Burmese monks are similarly secluded. The monastic building, with its seven-tiered roof denoting sanctity, is generally found just outside a village, set in a bamboo grove or flanked by shady mango trees. Rising to a tapering umbrella point (*hti*) above the trees, there is a *tsedi* or pagoda,<sup>26</sup> which may be painted white or gold. Smaller pagodas are grouped around. Generally within the monastery building, but sometimes outside, there is an image of the Buddha, and probably several others — but always the same Buddha, Gautama, and

<sup>24</sup> Rev. G. Whitehead, *M.B.B.*, p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> *The Syncretism of Animism and Buddhism in Burma*, p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Zedi* or *tsedi*, from the Pali, means the offering place or place of prayer. *Paya*, which has also the latter connotation, is more frequently used for larger *zedis* and other shrines. The *zedi* contains relics. Hence it is nowadays often termed a pagoda (from the Singhalese *dhagoba* — relic (*dhātu*) shrine. But *pagoda* is not a Burmese term. Cf. Scott, *The Burman*, Vol. 1, chap. xv, p. 186; Pratt, *The Pilgrimage of Buddhism*, chap. vii, pp. 128 ff.

invariably in the same posture, seated, with one arm across his lap. The whole atmosphere is one of ordered, unhurried peace, whether within the timbered buildings, or within the surrounding compound.

But the monastery is seldom far away from the village, and this is of set purpose. The Buddhist *Samgha* in Burma might well be described as a teaching Order. "Of all charities, charity of learning is the noblest," observes a Buddhist layman,<sup>27</sup> and the monastery dispenses this charity freely. It provides the village school. There the boys learn to read and write. There, moreover, they are tutored in Buddhist lore, with a firm emphasis on ethical requirements. They learn the 'three Jewels' which enjoin reverence for the Buddha, the Law (*Dhamma*), and the Order, and the five precepts — not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to commit adultery, not to drink intoxicants. In the *Mingalā Thot* or "Song of Great Blessing," which they recite by heart<sup>28</sup>, they learn that a wise and good man will seek to store up merit by fulfilling his domestic duties, by giving ample alms, by seeking 'self-knowledge' and by learning from holy men 'as chance affords.' The monastic ideal of utter renunciation, 'from all attachment free', is also indicated and 'Nirvana here' is said to be 'true happiness' leading to the Highest Bliss.<sup>29</sup> They will also learn stories of the Buddha's previous birth from the *Jātakas*, and, above all, the story of the historic Buddha.

But attendance at the day school is not their only initiation in the faith. Every Burman boy, at the age of puberty or earlier, is expected to leave home and become a boarder at the monastery for a period which may vary from weeks to years. "A Buddhist who has not been a *koyin* (novice) or donned the yellow robe," remarks a Burmese writer, "is looked upon as one who has missed the most essential (part) of his experience in this world." The village school often appears to be a merry jumble to the outsider, but during this time as a novice "each boy gets individual attention.... There is a wholesome atmosphere of intimacy and understanding between the teacher and the taught." Most of the novices return to secular life, but some remain to become fully ordained monks.<sup>30</sup>

The *shin-byu* ceremony, or rite of confirmation, which is another essential in the Burmese boy's initiation, generally precedes his entry to

<sup>27</sup> U Set, "Life in a *Phongyi Kyaung*," *Rangoon Times*, (May 13, 1931).

<sup>28</sup> See Appendix for fuller account of this Song and other Monastic instruction.

<sup>29</sup> "To understand the literature, 'serious' or popular, of Burma we cannot know the Pali *Jātaka* too well," M. H. Bode, *The Pali Literature of Burma*, chap. v, pp. 81, 82.

<sup>30</sup> U Set, *op. cit.*; cf. Scott, *The Burman*, Vol. I, chaps. II, III, and IV.

the monastery. It is a day of excited celebration. Recalling the Great Renunciation, when Gautama left the royal court in his quest for truth, the boy, attired in princely robes, is feasted by his family and friends until the moment when he casts his finery aside to don the yellow robe of the Order.<sup>31</sup>

Girls experience a similar ceremonial initiation, when (to the accompaniment of vigorous music) their ears are pierced to take the ear-rings which are the sign of womanhood. They cannot attend the monastic schools with the boys, but other means are found for their education, and they certainly do not lag behind their brothers in intelligence, character or Buddhist zeal. Mrs Hla Oung recounts the story of a little maid taken to the monastery to be reminded of the five precepts, after some childish misdemeanour. (The monk was benign. "There was the faintest suspicion of a smile on his calm face, to show, I suppose, that her backsliding was not to be taken as a defection from the faith.") The 'charity of learning' seems, then, to be shared by girls as well as boys. The status, freedom and privileges of Burmese women have already been remarked and Mrs Hla Oung affirms vigorously that "the life of the Burmese woman is bound up in her religion. Buddhism has formed the character of the Burmese woman. . . . There are few Burmese women, even in the villages, who are unable to read and write," and the Buddhist scriptures form the ground work of their studies.<sup>32</sup>

Not only are the monks numerous, but they are dispersed throughout the country. Every village has at least one monastery, and sometimes more. The educational influence of the Order has been, therefore, both organised and ubiquitous. In more recent times this influence has been challenged by new conditions. Government and mission schools have intervened, and the modern Burmese boy may only remain in the monastery as a novice for a brief, token period. But during the centuries which shaped the Burmese character and outlook, the monks as educators had no serious rivals.

Nor has their ministry to the community been confined to education. Herbs and potions from the monastery are held in high esteem, especially in Upper Burma.<sup>33</sup> The monastery also serves as alms-house and asylum.

<sup>31</sup> For a good description of this ceremony v. Ananda Metteya, quoted by G. Appleton, *Buddhism in Burma*, pp. 22–23.

<sup>32</sup> Ma M. Hla Oung, "The Women of Burma," *Buddhism*, Vol. I, No. 1, p. 61 (September, 1903, Rangoon); cf. a later series by Daw Mya Sein, "Kin Sein Hla," *Burma Today*, published by the Burma Government in India, 1944, in which the influence of the Monastery is not so strongly emphasised.

<sup>33</sup> "Theirs is faith cure rather than medicine," writes a Burmese correspondent, who cites cures from snake-bite, leprosy and hydrophobia.

Old men will retire to the monastery to end their days there, and younger men, in poverty or other distress, will flee the world for a time. The hospitality of the monks has sometimes been more charitable than discriminate, a circumstance which has brought some monasteries into disrepute, for these temporary inhabitants are allowed to wear the yellow robe, and some are criminals, sheltering from justice. Father Sangermano reports the rescue of prisoners condemned to death. "In thus saving the lives of criminals, (the monks) believe that, as their law forbids them to kill, it must be meritorious to preserve the lives of others."<sup>34</sup>

The monastery is the social centre of the village. Buddhism in Burma is gaily attired, a religion of festival. Frequently there will be an open-air performance in the moonlight, when a birth-story of the Buddha is dramatized. All this spirited, colourful life gathers around the monastery.

But perhaps the Order's most valuable service to the community is the function fulfilled by the monk as *counsellor*. A group of villagers may gather for a special instruction, others may attend when the monks assemble for devotions, but the monastery is not regarded as a preaching centre or as a place of public worship. In modern times, crowds have flocked to hear the Monyin Sayadaw. Generally, however, the approach in this respect is individual. It is as the individual adviser of each villager that the monk's influence is most strongly felt.

In many and tangible ways, therefore, the monastery serves the community, but it is probable that the villager himself reveres the monk more for services which are intangible and may not appear so valuable to sceptical observers. Early in the morning, the monk, attended by *koyins*, will go the round of the faithful, receiving their offerings of rice in his begging bowl.<sup>35</sup> For the monk himself it is an exercise in humility, for the villager it is one of the chief means of increasing that *kutho* or worthiness which ensures him happiness in this life and the next.<sup>36</sup>

Most of all, however, it is those very aspects of the monk's vocation which distinguish him from the rest of the community, setting him apart, for which the monk is chiefly esteemed. It is because the greater part of his life is spent in spiritual exercises which the villagers do *not* share, that they value him most. The monastery stands for a Way of utter renun-

<sup>34</sup> *The Burmese Empire*, 3d. Edition, ed. J. Jardine, (London, 1895), chap. xv, p. 122.

<sup>35</sup> Thus *bhikku* or *bhikṣu*, usually translated monk, means, literally, mendicant. Strictly speaking, a *bhikku* is not a monk; cf. Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part II (S.B.B.), p. 81, footnote.

<sup>36</sup> *Kutho* is frequently translated 'merit.' But 'worthiness' is more accurate.

ciation which the villagers themselves have not undertaken. In a sense, it rebukes their lesser zeal. But it also inspires that zeal. It encourages their faith. It is the poetry in their life, symbolising the Great Peace, the Nibbāna, which is often out of their mind, a remote expectation, but nevertheless, their ultimate goal.

To this cloistered Buddhism of Burma we must now turn, for the full relation of the monk to the community can only be estimated in the light of the life he lives apart from the community.

#### 4. *Within the Monastery*

To some extent, the life of the monk within the monastery is corporate. He joins with his brethren in a daily Act of Adoration —

“In order that I may escape the consequences of commissions and omissions, should I have done any in the course of the day or night, either physically or verbally or mentally, I hereby humbly adore and worship, physically, verbally and mentally, the Three Jewels — the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha.

“Because of this my adoration, may I escape the horrors of the four hells, the three *kappas* comprising famine, disease endemic and epidemic, the tragedies of war, the eight unpleasant places, the five enemies, the four wants, the five kinds of ruinations, the ten kinds of punishments, the twenty five kinds of dangers, the sixteen pitfalls in life, and the thirty two kinds of bad luck, but attain Nibbāna very quickly.”<sup>37</sup>

In spite of the fact that this Act is said together, its very individual reference will be noted. The same applies to another collective act, when the monks assemble for the *Uposatha* or fortnightly chapter. The rules of the Order are recited, and each monk must confess any infringement. Sangermano notes among the offences to be admitted, “Giving scandal to laymen by small faults.”<sup>38</sup> The monk may therefore be said to be concerned with the reputation of the Order and the good of the laity, but he is also very obviously concerned with his own progress in the discipline.

It is often said, in fact, that the Buddhist monk is entirely self-regarding. As he states in the prayer we have quoted, he wants “to attain Nibbana very quickly.” He is not content with the more leisurely progress of the layman who expects to see many rebirths before he comes near the goal. The monk has chosen a shorter Path. He has cut adrift from domestic obligations and left the world. He is selfishly concerned

<sup>37</sup> I am indebted to U Lu Pe Win of Mandalay for this example of a typical ‘prayer’; cf. Kenneth E. Wells, *Thai Buddhism: its rites and activities*, chap. III, p. 39.

<sup>38</sup> *Op. cit.*, chap. xiv, p. 120.

with his own emancipation alone. This criticism is not entirely just. It ignores his service to the community, even if it is allowed that this service is not his primary aim. It also ignores certain emphases in the Buddhist scriptures, and at least one passage where the monk is enjoined to include in his meditations 'radiant thoughts of love' to all mankind.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, the greater part of his activity is individual. In some respects, he may be compared with the scholar whose researches may ultimately benefit mankind though meantime they involve seclusion to the neglect of more obvious duties. The monk's value to the villagers is dependent on his own sanctity (as the villagers would readily agree).

Comparison with the scholar is apt in another sense, for the spiritual exercises which should occupy the monk's solitude seem, at first glance, to be severely and solely intellectual. Burmese monastic studies have been largely guided by the *Abhidhammatthasamgaha*,<sup>40</sup> a commentary which is nothing if not analytic. Its purpose is to guide the student to realise existence as the Buddhist estimates it, a flux of component elements. He is to persevere in meditations which will yield an utter detachment from all alluring vanities. In this manual "we see a philosophy which starts with an analysis of (1) what we find (a) within us, (b) around us, and of (2) what we aspire to find. Mind is analysed and catalogued," says Mrs. Rhys Davids. "We cannot but be struck . . . . by the relatively strong microscopic power of the introspection employed" – <sup>41</sup> so struck, indeed, that some have concluded that such a monk must live in a world far apart from the villagers he is supposed to instruct. *His* Buddhism is not *their* Buddhism. So it is argued. The monk is too much the scholar.

Thus we have another theory of two religions in Burma, but this time it is not Buddhism and Animism, it is two Buddhisms: popular and monastic. The distinction is inescapable. We may question, however, whether the distance between scholar and peasant is any greater than in other religious traditions.

There are two qualifications which should prevent exaggeration. The first is the fact that the meditations by which the monk hopes to progress in the eightfold Path to Nibbāna are not so entirely intellectual as they appear to be at first glance. All through there is an equally strong emphasis on moral purity which the *Upasatha* recitals enforce. It is a persistent ethical reference which belongs to scholar and peasant alike.

Secondly, there are, as we have seen, different grades of monks. Not

<sup>39</sup> *M.1.* 123ff. (*Kakucūpama Sutta*), cf. *D.1.* 4; cf. Yamakami Sōgen: *Systems of Buddhist Thought*, chap. II, p. 56.

<sup>40</sup> Trans. by Shwe Zan Aung as *Compendium of Philosophy*, P.T.S., London, 1929.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* Preface, pp. xviii, xix.

every man in a yellow robe is fully ordained, and not every ordained monk is a scholar. There are Brother Junipers who have little more learning than the average farmer. On the other hand, there are laymen who have advanced a considerable way in higher studies and disciplines. The Lēdī Sayādaw's manual on the Exercises, for example, is written for laymen.<sup>42</sup> Thus between the scholar and the simple villager there is a mediating world, composed both of monks and laymen.

Through this mediating world, the moderating influence of scholarly orthodoxy filters down to the realm of popular Buddhism where imagination roves more freely.

Here, however, we are met by another objection which, if true, cancels the first. There are so few scholars, it is said, so few really learned *monks* that their influence is negligible. The ordinary monk is not scholarly enough. He is just as much swayed by primitive superstitions as the people he instructs or fails to instruct. He is idle, ignorant and often dissolute. The last criticism need not detain us. Nearly every book on Burma debates the character of the monks. Few fail to acknowledge that, in general, the monks live up to their ideal of chastity. Father Sangermano, who was certainly no indulgent critic, even goes further and suggests that in this respect they might serve as an example to the religious of his own Church. He adds that an offender is expelled by indignant villagers, 'even driving him away with stones' — an observation which reminds us that the most vigilant critics of the monks may be the Burmese people themselves.<sup>43</sup> The Burmese name for monk, *pōn-gyī*, means 'great glory.' Since there is no suggestion of priestly or Brahmanical power, since the value of the monks depends on their *kutho* and their *kutho* on their character, it is difficult to believe that they could have retained this title and the esteem in which they are generally held, if they had been as unworthy as some of their harsher critics suggest.<sup>44</sup> As to their knowledge, whilst nobody would claim that every wearer of the yellow robe is a scholar, we have only to glance at such a survey as Bode's *Pali Literature* to realise that there has been a persistent tradition of Pali learning in Burma since the eleventh century which tends to orthodoxy and could not have failed to impress itself, in some degree, on the mind of the people.

<sup>42</sup> *The Vipassanā Dīpanī, or The Manual of Insight*, trans. by U Nyāna (Mandalay: no date).

<sup>43</sup> Op. cit., chaps. xiv, pp. 115–16.

<sup>44</sup> On the character of the monks, cf. *M.B.B.*, pp. 20, 21, 62; Bigandet, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 260, 270 ff.; Fielding Hall, *The Soul of a People*, chap. x, pp. 134 ff.; Nisbet, *Burma under British Rule*, p. 147; Richards, *The Burman*, p. 34.

The Buddhism of Burma, then, lies in between two levels. On the one level, there is the scholarly tradition of the monasteries, frequently in touch with Ceylon, watchful against heresies, pondering the scriptures, upholding the essential emphases of the Hīnayāna tradition, steadily prevailing against more primitive ideas. On the other level, there is the survival of Animism, linked to the conservatism of human nature, infiltrating the popular Buddhism. We can, therefore, accept Burmese Buddhism as a valid and typical expression of the Hīnayāna tradition. At the same time, we can expect to find certain distinctive, Burmese features.

### 5. *Characteristics of Burmese Buddhism*

a. The characteristic of Burmese Buddhism which has been most frequently remarked is its buoyancy. "The Buddhist faith may be as dreary . . . as many say it is, but no one would imagine it who looks on the gaily = dressed laughing crowd of men and maidens who throng to the pagoda feasts."<sup>45</sup> Only a Chaucer could do justice to these festivals, remarks a modern writer,<sup>46</sup> and an earlier observer concluded that "the Burmese do not fully believe the first of the Four Noble Truths that life is suffering."<sup>47</sup>

Climate and circumstance affect religious interpretation. In India, where Buddhism was begotten, "India, with its hot climate, its poverty and suffering, the pessimistic mood which looks upon life as a great evil rather than an achievable good, seems natural."<sup>48</sup> This may be. And in the subtropical climate of Burma, where people live in ephemeral bamboo houses and vegetation grows quickly and as quickly passes away, it is natural to believe that "All is change." But in Southern Burma at least, where a little labour wins a sufficient sustenance from the fruitful earth, and moonlight nights are soft and friendly, it is not so natural to add that "All is suffering."

Some observers insist that we must look beneath the surface of this Burmese gaiety. "Delightful as this sunny temperament is, it does not go deep enough to be called optimism."<sup>49</sup> Nobody, however, can question the Burmese vivacity — a vivacity which expresses itself in a lively, rhythmic music, and a delight in colour. "The secret of our happiness lies in our devotion to our beautiful religion," writes Mrs. Hla Oung, and the

<sup>45</sup> Scott, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, chap. XIX, p. 257.

<sup>46</sup> G. Appleton, *Buddhism in Burma*, p. 46.

<sup>47</sup> *M.B.B.*, p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> A. K. Reischauer, *Studies in Japanese Buddhism*, chap. I, p. 49.

<sup>49</sup> *M.B.B.*, p. 53.

term 'beautiful' is here significant.<sup>50</sup> A Burmese *pwè* or open-air variety performance will begin at dusk and sustain a frolic of wit and dance until the morning, and the same vivacity informs the frequent religious pageants and dramas. If the underlying Buddhism is indeed pessimism, it is at least 'touched with hope and mysticism.'<sup>51</sup>

Fielding Hall has suggested that there is an element of Nature-mysticism in the Burman's outlook. Both his Animism and his Buddhism encourage him to believe that he is intimately related to all Nature: Buddhism because it will allow no separate souls but sees all Life as one; Animism because "legends and tales, the spirits of hills and rivers, of the trees and flowers" express the fact that "Life is a great whole."<sup>52</sup>

A Nature poem by a fifteenth century Burmese Buddhist may be regarded as some corroboration of this estimate. The writer conceives all Nature doing homage to the Buddha:

"A clamour of colour fills the vernal woods.

Tender fruits peep from the budded quicks.

Mellow clusters, luscious as ambrosia, sway in the air. . . .

The acid lime, the delicious custard-apple, the juicy mango, the restless *petthet* and the riotous *grewia*

Rush to render their homage to the thrice-adored Sage."<sup>53</sup>

In his later work,<sup>54</sup> Fielding Hall seems to equate Burmese Buddhism with a vague and woolly pantheism in which all tigers are lambs and all roads lead to truth, but at least he sees the poetry of Burmese life and religion. Later reflection led him to correct the view contained in his *Soul of a People* that the Burmese feeling for Nature was separate from their Buddhism.<sup>55</sup> Instead, he now discerned a fusion giving colour and buoyancy to their faith. "Here was the world the Greeks had lived in. All the gods yet lived to those who still had ears to hear their voices in the forest sounds, eyes to see them flitting through the darkened woods or bathing in the mountain pools. . . . Were the trees alive? Surely they were. They had their life, they were not dead unlovely things, but living." Comparison with Greek ideas has occurred to others. Greek gods and Burmese *Nats* are similarly very human and capricious, it is suggested.

The Greek comparison recurs to mind when we consider a further aspect of Burmese Buddhism — its social, with which may be joined

<sup>50</sup> "The Women of Burma." *Buddhism*, Vol. I, No. 1, (Rangoon).

<sup>51</sup> *M.B.B.*, p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> H. Fielding Hall, *The Inward Light*, chap. III, p. 24.

<sup>53</sup> "The 'Tawla' of Shin Uttamagyaw," ed. by U. Po Byu, free trans. by Maung Ba Han. *J.B.R.S.*, Vol. VII, pt. II, (1917).

<sup>54</sup> *The Inward Light*.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 7, 24; cf. *The Soul of a People*, chap. XX, pp. 269 ff.

its national, character. The frequent festivals not only enliven, they express and stabilise the community life. They are often local, but certain shrines, such as the Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Rangoon, have become centres of pilgrimage. In a country which has had a strong tendency to de-centralization — the king's authority was often very weak — the Buddhist Order has made for cohesion, and, in modern times, Buddhist monks have been active in the movement for national independence.

In spite, however, of this social expression, Buddhism in Burma, as elsewhere, is very much a matter of *individual* concern. We have seen this individualism within the monastery. It is equally marked outside the monastery. One of the most popular *zats* is the story of Wethandaya, who, in order to gain his own salvation, gives away his wife and family to a rapacious Brahmin.<sup>56</sup> "Each must bear his own burden," is a favourite quotation.<sup>57</sup> Its primary reference may be to moral responsibility.

This brings us to the decidedly *ethical* character of Burmese Buddhism. *Kutho* (worthiness) is the central concept here, and "it is clear that the Burmese Buddhists have a more *mathematical* conception of Merit than other folk." "The ordinary belief is very concrete — so many good deeds mean so much to one's credit in another world."<sup>58</sup> Sometimes very material rewards are indicated. "The reward for building a monastery is a palace in a *Nat* heaven with seven towers, and in this palace dwell seven hundred *Nat* wives. . . . For a gift of sticks for use in a bath room, the donor will be reborn with perfumed body."<sup>59</sup>

Almsgiving is a sure means of 'heaping up *Kutho*.' Since the benefit accruing to the donor partly depends on the worthiness of the object, the maintenance of religion is a valued means of self-help. Hence the many pagodas. Hence the gifts to the monasteries. There is no more coveted title than 'Builder of Monasteries.' Hence, too, the welcome to the monk as he comes in the early morning with his begging bowl. The monk may *seem* to be the chief recipient. But in the things which matter, he is the donor.

Though others may thus provide the opportunity, essentially the activity is self-help. Emphasis is laid on individual responsibility. It is something a man must do for himself.

It is something he *can* do. Thus the conception of *Kutho* challenges any animistic idea that man is altogether at the mercy of capricious spirits.

<sup>56</sup> *M.B.B.*, pp. 44, 103.

<sup>57</sup> *M.B.B.*, p. 45.

<sup>58</sup> *M.B.B.*, p. 51, p. 76. The usual, though inadequate translation of *Kutho*, as already observed, is Merit.

<sup>59</sup> *M.B.B.*, p. 51.

It also modifies the sense of fatalism which might be derived from another conception, this time a Buddhist conception — the idea that a man's present character and situation are largely determined, according to inexorable moral law, by what he has done, and not done, in previous births. "As the wheel follows the draught ox, punishment follows sin."<sup>60</sup> Yet man is no fettered slave. Like other people the world over, the Burman vacillates between fatalism and the sense of his own power to help himself, between *Kan* and *Kutho*. On the whole, *Kutho* wins. "Merit weighs heavy, demerit light," says the Burmese proverb hopefully.

Pessimism, then, 'touched, strongly touched, with hope' — such is the Burmese religion. But what of the further qualification, 'touched with mysticism.'? We have seen that there may be an element of Nature mysticism. Can we go further and discern any sense of the sacred, any sense of religious dependence on higher power? In spite of the Nature mysticism and an occasional side glance in the direction of benevolent *Nats*, Burmese religion seems to be a religion of self-reliance, self-assurance and self-responsibility. A man 'must work out his own salvation.' Does this mean that there is nothing at all which corresponds to the Christian addition to the text — "with fear and trembling, for it is God which worketh in you?"<sup>61</sup>

Various efforts have been made to locate such a recognition. It is remarked that a pagoda in Prome is named "the image or pagoda where, if you pray, you will receive."<sup>62</sup> But the term, prayer, is used rather loosely by some present-day Buddhists. The monastery 'prayers' which we have cited could scarcely be termed prayers in any strict sense. Instances have been reported of simple villagers petitioning the Buddha for mercies, such as a child's recovery from sickness,<sup>63</sup> and I have myself seen women in attitudes of prayer, with clasped hands and suppliant faces, before Gautama's image. Peasants recite the 'Song of Victory', celebrating the Buddha's triumphs over foes and tempters, as a 'mantra' to ward off evil.<sup>64</sup> Since a man may pray that his own *Kutho* may avail to help others, a natural sequence of thought may lead him to consider that the Buddha's *Kutho* may also avail, though some would say that the Buddha is lost in Nibbāna, far beyond this present existence. It is very questionable, however, if there is any sense of Divine Grace or prayer in the sense of communion with a Divine Being.

The Buddha is certainly venerated. No account of Burmese Buddhism would be adequate without emphasising very definitely the central place he holds in the life and thought of the people. Popular Buddhism, as we

<sup>60</sup> *M.B.B.*, p. 45.

<sup>61</sup> *2 Philippians* 2: 12, 13.

<sup>62</sup> *M.B.B.*, p. 70.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>64</sup> *M.B.B.*, p. 97.

have seen, is a religion of story, and it is essentially the Buddha story, the life of Gautama, rehearsed, recited, pictured, dramatised, told and told again.

"To hear of the Buddha from living lips in this country, which is full of his influence, where the spire of his monastery marks every village, and where every man has at one time or another been his monk, is quite a different thing to reading of him in far off countries.... To hear the yellow-robed monk tell of that life ... is a thing never to be forgotten. A sympathy comes to you from the circle of believers and you believe too.... And as they tell you the story of that great life, they bring it home to you with reflection and comment ... till you forget that he of whom they speak lived so long ago."<sup>65</sup>

Yet Burmese laymen, villagers or craftsmen, let alone monks, will flatly reject any suggestion that the Buddha was divine. Many of them, moreover, will explain their devotion very intelligently. They will make it abundantly clear that Gautama is venerated as a Socrates or a Moses might be venerated. No more. No less. His life was human, and in that very fact they see encouragement for others.

It is not, then, to the conception of the Buddha that we must look for the religious ultimate of Southern Buddhism. Nor is it to the conception of the *Dhamma*, as some have suggested. A highly sophisticated intellectual might conceivably worship the 'Law within' but the Burmese Buddhist is seldom highly sophisticated, nor does he think of the *Dhamma* as the Law within: it is the Law without, expounded by the *Samgha*.

It is elsewhere we must look for the recognition of the Divine. It may perhaps be contained in that looking forward to Nibbāna, which is the goal of all Buddhist aspiration. From what has thus far been remarked of the character of Burmese Buddhism, we can at least expect to find a positive, not a negative, conception of Nibbāna in this context.

Perhaps, too, Buddhism in Burma illustrates, in some degree, what may have been the original emphasis of the Buddha's teaching and the secret of his appeal. Perhaps it has retained or recovered something of that original vitality.

Mrs Rhys Davids has suggested that the Buddha aroused response because he preached a gospel of hopeful Wayfaring from Good to Better, a caravan journey through the worlds, "a pilgrim's progress ... not so much with a load of sin to be discarded, as with an ever growing force of *artha* — the good, the needed, the better."<sup>66</sup> He believed, with the seers of his time, that the Divine was immanent in man,<sup>67</sup> but he saw this

<sup>65</sup> Fielding Hall, *The Soul of a People*, chap. II, p. 18.

<sup>66</sup> *Sakya*, chap. VI, pp. 104 ff.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. IV, pp. 69 ff.

Divine not as static Being, but as dynamic Becoming (Werden).<sup>68</sup> Hence he appealed to man's conscience, the 'inner monitor' and he challenged man's will to respond to this inward monitor.<sup>69</sup> He was not so much concerned with "the end of ill" (*dukkhass' antam*), but rather with its positive equivalent, 'das Wohl,' — with the possibility 'that man has it in his nature to become utterly well.'<sup>70</sup> While Gautama rejected ascetic austerities, he believed with the Jains that a man could alter the consequences of his past deeds by deliberate deeds in the present, by his energy, will-power and concentration.<sup>71</sup>

She deprecates undue emphasis on the term, Suffering. It was not 'the noble truth of suffering' which the Buddha stressed, but the diagnosis of spiritual illness with a view to health.<sup>72</sup> Indian teachers put their chief idea first, and she considers it significant that in the text which is generally accepted as the Buddha's first utterance, the Buddha began, not with Noble Truths of Suffering, but with the proclamation of the Middle Way of progress. "I am telling you of the better way in which a man should walk."<sup>73</sup>

Without presuming to accept or reject Mrs Rhys Davids' bold reconstruction of original Buddhism, since it is based on historical, textual and philological interpretations not yet fully examined by others, it is interesting to compare some of the emphases which she attributes to the Buddha's first teaching with the emphases we may discern in Burmese Buddhism. The Burmese cannot be said to affirm any Divinity within.<sup>74</sup> Nor would they agree with her view that monkish interpretation emasculated the original 'Mandate,' nor that Nirvana merely signified, in the Buddha's mind, a 'cathartic training in moral growth.'<sup>75</sup>

But there is the same ethical emphasis which Mrs Rhys Davids finds in the first Mandate, the same appeal to individual responsibility, the same challenge to the will, the same soft-pedalling of the note of Suffering, the same note of hopefulness. Burmese Buddhism is essentially positive in its outlook, not turning away from life, but welcoming its possibilities.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. vi, pp. 93 ff.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. iv, pp. 58 ff.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. i, p. 17.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. ii, p. 31.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. iii, p. 55.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. iii, p. 62.

<sup>74</sup> Except the heretical *Paramat* sects.

<sup>75</sup> Mrs. Rhys Davids, *Indian Religion and Survival*, pp. 9, 92.

## CHAPTER III

### NIBBĀNA IN BURMESE BUDDHISM

#### *1. A Positive Concept*

It is still widely believed that the Buddha's teaching was fundamentally pessimistic, a philosophy of world and life negation culminating in a conception of Nibbāna as extinction or annihilation. It is also believed that while the Northern or Mahāyāna school developed more positive tendencies, picturing the goal as a Paradise of joy, the original pessimism is faithfully reflected and even emphasised in the southern, Hīnayāna school.

Thus Schweitzer concludes that the Buddha conceived deliverance from transmigration "as a complete cessation of life which is attained by direct renunciation of the will-to-live" and that Hīnayāna Buddhism continues this original doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Although he qualifies this conclusion by a preliminary distinction between 'thought' and 'religious belief,' and also by a passing reference to more recent interpretations of original Buddhism, he remains convinced that the Buddha's thinking was "dominated by world and life negation."<sup>2</sup>

But if the analysis of Burmese Buddhism presented in our two previous chapters is accepted, there would appear to be reason for challenging this generally accepted opinion, both in regard to the Buddha's original teaching and the Hīnayāna reflection of that teaching. For here in the heart of this southern school is a people who certainly manifest a very lively will to live, yet a people indoctrinated by the Hīnayāna faith. This faith, as it is found in Burma, cannot be summarily dismissed as world-denying. It has shaped and maintained a very definite civilisation. It expresses itself in a closely-knit community life. It is still vigorous.

In such a context, we should expect, not a negative, but a positive concept of Nibbāna.

It is the purpose of this present chapter to show that this expectation is realised. Not only among the laity, in the 'popular religion,' but among the monks, there is an essentially positive concept of Nibbāna. Popular

<sup>1</sup> *Indian Thought and Its Development*, chap. vi, pp. 97, 122.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 116.

belief is encouraged by 'scholastic' interpretation to a greater extent than might be expected.

It is perhaps relevant, and not without significance, to state that this was not the conclusion I anticipated when I began this inquiry. It seemed to me, as to others, that the general emphasis of the Hīnayāna Saṃgha, and of the Pali Canon, was towards a negative interpretation of Nibbāna. Therefore I expected to find a divergence between popular belief and monastic exposition, a latent, if not explicit, conflict. It was part of my original hypothesis to show how affirmative emphases in religion are maintained in the face of philosophical, credal definitions which might deny or discourage these emphases. Burma seemed to present a striking illustration of such a situation. Here, obviously, was a buoyant, life-affirming popular faith which claimed to be Hīnayāna Buddhism; here, too, was a long established monastic Order, firm in its allegiance to the Pali Canon. Such an allegiance, I thought, implied a negative interpretation of Buddhism and a negative conception of Nibbāna; therefore the popular faith must have persisted in disregard of this 'official' interpretation.

Further inquiry, however, has led me to doubt whether the facts substantiate this hypothesis of conflict. The initial fact, it is true, still stands. There can be little doubt about the *popular* view of Nibbāna. As Jardine remarks in a footnote to Sangermano's account, 'for a long period the masses have revolted at the conclusion (that Nibbāna means annihilation), and, in some way, which they cannot very intelligibly explain, believe that the individual soul survives death and is found in new conditions of existence.'<sup>3</sup> Except perhaps for the use of the term, soul, this remark, written sixty years ago, is still a fair summary of the popular attitude. What is ambiguous, what has now to be questioned in the light of the evidence which will be stated in this chapter, is the reference of the term, revolt. If it is conceived as a revolt against the teaching of the Burma Saṃgha, then the question arises whether there was, in fact, any ground or cause for such a revolt so far as a negative or positive emphasis is concerned. Monastic conceptions doubtless differed from popular conceptions. Nevertheless it would now appear that monastic interpretations in Burma left the way open to some kind of belief in personal survival in Nibbāna. In this respect, scholar and peasant were not so far apart. And if we go behind the Burmese Saṃgha and consult the Pali Canon, as it is being interpreted today in many quarters, there, too, we find ground for revised opinion: if there are passages of apparently negative import, expressed in negative terms, there are also other expositions of very different import.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, chap. xiv, p. 106, footnote.

Nihilistic interpreters there may have been, especially perhaps in the Sinhalese schools. But such interpreters do not seem to have figured largely among the members of the Burma Saṃgha. The idea, therefore, of a popular, buoyant faith persisting against the discouragement of ecclesiastical or philosophical interpretation has at least to be modified, if not abandoned, in regard to Burma.

Not that scholar and peasant thought alike. For the one pursued a difficult psychological analysis, and the other clung to pictures; the one conceived Nibbāna as a heavenly *condition*, the other thought of a heavenly *place*. This, if any, is the pertinent distinction. But it is not a distinction which breeds a conflict between a negative and positive outlook. In neither case is Nibbāna annihilation.

## *2. Conclusions of previous investigators*

It is illuminating to glance at the conclusions arrived at by previous Western observers in this field, for such a review shows a gradual retreat from the first unqualified impression that Nibbāna, even in the popular view, signified annihilation. There may, of course, have been a change in the Burmese outlook itself, as missionaries of other faiths, especially the Christian faith, entered the country and the people became more subject to the influence, direct and indirect, of Western thought. I doubt, however, if this is the explanation, for Bishop Bigandet, as will be seen, was convinced that the popular view, at least, was not nihilistic and Bigandet made his inquiries long before the country was penetrated by missionaries. It is much more probable that growing knowledge and opportunity gave Western observers a better understanding of what had, in fact, been the true situation all along.

One of the first reports ever recorded for the information of the West was penned by a cultured and observant American woman who arrived in the port of Rangoon early in July, 1813 and immediately began the study of the Burmese language. This was Ann Judson, the wife of the famous Baptist missionary. In a letter written to a friend in England some years later, Mrs Judson gives a brief summary of the Buddhist faith as she discerned it. She had no doubt in her mind that Nibbāna signified annihilation.

“The Burmans are Boodhists or a nation of atheists. They believe that existence involves in itself the principles of misery and destruction; consequently, there is no Eternal God. The whole universe, they say, is only destruction and re-production. It therefore becomes a wise man to raise his desires above all things that exist, and aspire to *Nigban*, the *state* in which there is no existence. Rewards and punishments follow

meritorious and sinful acts, agreeably to the *nature* of things. Gaudama, their last Boodh, or deity, in consequence of meritorious acts, arrived at that state of perfection, which made him deserving of annihilation, — the *supreme good*.”<sup>4</sup>

While Mrs Judson was beginning her Burmese studies in Rangoon, another missionary, Father Vincentius Sangermano, now returned to Italy, was writing his description of the Burmese people and their religion. Although this work was not published until ten years after the publication of Mrs Judson’s letters, his observations refer to an earlier period; he had first reached Burma in 1783 and had left the country five or six years before the arrival of the Judsons. “From this reverend father,” says Symes, “I received much useful information”<sup>5</sup> and it is evident that Sangermano spared no pains to understand the people and their beliefs; he studied Burmese annals, obtained an account of Burmese cosmography written by a tutor at the royal court, and he had the assistance of an ex-monk well versed in Pali.

Like Mrs Judson, he concluded that Nibbāna signified annihilation. Yet there is some ambiguity in his statement.

“Through this successive series of dissolutions and regenerations all beings go on for the duration of one or more worlds till at length they have performed such works as render them worthy of the state of Niban (Nirvana, Neibban) which is the most perfect of all states. This consists in an almost perpetual ecstasy, in which those who attain it are not only free from the troubles and miseries of life, from death, illness and old age, but are abstracted from all sensation; they have no longer either a thought or a desire.”<sup>6</sup> Here, surely, is no nihilism, but a positive conception, especially if one considers the context in which it appears, — a context portraying the series of attractive *Nat* heavens to which the virtuous man can aspire in his journey through the worlds invisible. And similar terms are used to describe the condition of the Buddha ‘transported to the Niban,’ a condition in which he will ‘remain for eternity.’<sup>7</sup>

Still more illuminating, since it is a direct quotation of Burmese opinion, and still essentially positive in its emphasis, is the following passage which Sangermano translates from a catechism “which a celebrated Talapoin (monk), the tutor of the king, drew up at the request of one of our Bishops in the year 1763.”

<sup>4</sup> Ann H. Judson, *An Account of the American Baptist Mission to the Burman Empire*, Letter 1, pp. 3, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Symes, *An Account of an Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava* (1800), chap. vi, p. 206.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, chap. iii, pp. 8–9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. xiv, pp. 108–109.

“When we say that Godama obtained the Niban, this is to be understood of a state exempt from the four following evils: conception, old age, sickness and death. Nothing in this world nor any place can give us an idea of the Niban: but the exemption from the above-mentioned evils, and the possession of perfect safety, are the only things in which it consists. For example, a person is seized with a violent complaint, but by using the best remedies is cured; we say that such a one has recovered his health: but if it be asked how he recovered his health, the only answer we can give is, that to be free from infirmities is to recover one’s health; and it is thus we say that a person has acquired the Niban.”<sup>8</sup>

There follows in the catechism a refutation of errors attributed to “false Gods” which continues the same essential emphasis:

“A third denied the Niban; and asserted that all living creatures have their origin in the womb of their mother, and that with death of the body they return to nothing; and that in this alone the Niban consists. Another affirmed that living beings have no beginning, and will have no end in acquiring the Niban.”<sup>9</sup>

We can agree that these interpretations contain an element of agnosticism, but it is difficult to see that they approach or encourage a nihilistic view. It is therefore surprising to find Sangermano, concluding that Nibbāna, after all, signified Annihilation! “Niban . . . cannot be said to have any specific seat; for it is a perfectly incorporeal and spiritual state of being, and deserves the name of annihilation rather than of existence.”<sup>10</sup>

This, at least, he conceives to be the orthodox interpretation, the view of the Saṃgha, for this official teaching is what he is trying to set forth in his discussion of the Burmese religion. “I have not followed the tales and reports of the common people, but have carefully consulted the classical writings of the Burmese, known by the name of *Kiam*.”<sup>11</sup> He could have no delusions about the outlook of the common people. To them Nibbāna was a final heaven, and a heaven a long way off: the *Nat* heavens were much nearer, and possibly more attractive. But Sangermano is not explicit about this. It is left to his editor to emphasise that the masses revolted against any idea of annihilation.

Sangermano, however, discerned one important distinction. At least to instructed Buddhists, Nibbāna was not a place; it was ‘a spiritual state of being.’

When we come to the work of Bishop Bigandet, pursued half a century later, we have a much more explicit statement of the *popular* conception, and it is one which very definitely eschews any suggestion of nihilism. So

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. XIV, pp. 102, 103.      <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. XIV, pp. 103, 104.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. IV, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Cardinal Wiseman’s Preface to the First Edition, p. xxxix.

far as the interpretation of *popular* belief is concerned, the idea that Nibbāna signified annihilation, is now firmly and sufficiently repudiated. Nevertheless, Bishop Bigandet's elucidation, like Sangermano's, is not without ambiguity.

The Bishop's conclusions are scattered in various footnotes to his translation of the Burmese Legend of the Buddha and a treatise on "The Seven Ways to Neibban," the latter rendered into Burmese from a work written in Siam.<sup>12</sup> He evidently made exhaustive inquiries to discover what the Burmese really thought about Nibbāna, and his work is still quoted, even by Buddhists. Like many a later inquirer, he often found the answers to his questions vague and elusive. "Buddhists do not agree among themselves in explaining the nature of the state of Neibban," he says.<sup>13</sup> Abstractions puzzled and defeated them.

The best interpretation they could offer was a simile:

"Talking one evening with a well-informed Burman on Neibban, the light of a lamp that was burning on the writer's table happened to die away for want of oil. The Buddhist, with an exulting tone of voice, exclaimed, "Do not ask any more what Neibban is; what has happened to the lamp just now, tells you what Neibban is. The lamp is extinct because there is no more oil in the glass. A man is in Neibban at the very moment that the principle or cause of existence is at an end or entirely exhausted.

How far such an answer can satisfy a superficial mind like that of a half-civilised Burman, it is difficult to say; but it appears certain that he does not carry his researches nor pursue his inquiries beyond these narrow boundaries. Any further attempt to penetrate deeper into the darkness of Neibban is, in his opinion, presumptuous and rash."<sup>14</sup>

Further inquiry and reflection, however, brought the Bishop to two definite conclusions. The first was the conclusion that Nibbāna, properly understood, means annihilation. "The logical inferences to be deduced from the principles of genuine Buddhism inevitably lead to the dark, cold, and horrifying abyss of annihilation."<sup>15</sup> He states that he only reached this conclusion unwillingly, after considerable hesitation. But he was apparently ultimately convinced after pondering the teaching of "the Buddhist doctors of the three kinds of Neibban respecting the person of Gaudama — the Neibban of *Kiletha*, or passions; the Neibban of *Khandas*, or supports of the existence of a living being; and the Neibban of *Datou*, or of the relics. . . . The idea suggested to us by the application of the word Neibban to these three objects is that of a cessation of action, cessation of existence, and cessation of being. Indeed

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 191.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 70.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 71, footnote.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 73, footnote.

it is impossible not to see in the meaning of this word the horrifying idea of absolute annihilation.”<sup>16</sup>

In part, the Bishop’s reluctance to admit this conclusion was due to his profound admiration for the Buddha’s insight as an ethical teacher. The Bishop exclaimed against the “inexplicable and deplorable eccentricity” which combined a message of Deliverance with a doctrine of ultimate annihilation.<sup>17</sup>

A further ground for hesitation lay in his second definite conclusion — a conclusion, indeed, prior in point of time. This was the fact that he had observed that “the masses of Buddhists”, the Burmese in general and the “portion of southern Buddhists who are not so well acquainted with the more philosophical part of their creed” did *NOT* believe that Nibbāna betokened annihilation. On the contrary, “they assert that a perfected being, after having reached Neibban, or having arrived at the end of his last existence, retains his individuality, but they utterly fail in their attempts at explaining the situation and condition of a being in Neibban.”<sup>18</sup> Though they know that the Buddha himself is no more,<sup>19</sup> they also “had recourse to several comparisons intended to convey to the mind that they believed Neibban to be a state of undisturbed calm and a never-ending cessation of existence, at least such as we have an idea of in this world. When questioned on the situation of Buddha in Neibban, they answer that they believe him to be in boundless space or vacuum beyond the boundaries ever reached by other beings, alone, by himself, enjoying, if the expression be correct, a perfect rest, unconcerned about this world, having no further relation with all existing beings. They assert that he is to remain for ever a stranger to all sensations of either pain or pleasure. But it must be borne in mind that this is the popular opinion rather than the philosophical one.”<sup>20</sup>

What is not clear is whether Bishop Bigandet’s distinction between ‘genuine’ or ‘philosophical’ Buddhism, on the one hand, and the Buddhism ‘of the masses,’ on the other hand, refers to a distinction between Saṃgha and laity. Does he mean that the monks conceived Nibbāna as annihilation while the people thought otherwise? Or does he infer the

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 98, 99; cf. note on *Parinibbāna* in Pali-English Dictionary, P.T.S., p. 50; also for corresponding Pali terms: *Kilesa*, vices, passions (*ibid.*, p. 44 (5); *Khandha*, constituent elements of sensory existence, usually enumerated as five; *ibid.*, p. 61 B; *Dhātu*, final physical substratum, hence sometimes, remains of the body after cremation (*ibid.*, p. 176).

<sup>17</sup> Bigandet, *op. cit.*, Preface, p. x.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 70, footnote.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 56, footnotes.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 70, 71, footnotes.

doctrine of annihilation from his own reading of the Buddhist literature available to him and the exposition of a few, more instructed Buddhists? The latter would seem to be the case, for he speaks of 'Buddhist doctors' rather than 'Burmese doctors,' he refers specifically to a treatise he has translated and says that the monks in general "have no ardour for study." "I have met with a great number of laymen who were incomparably better informed."<sup>21</sup>

Yet the existence of many lax and ignorant monks — a circumstance which Bigandet attributes to the relaxation of that centralised discipline which had hitherto sustained the Order — does not mean that there were no devoted and zealous scholars at the same time. From other records we know that there were, and the Bishop himself refers to them. It is possible that they assisted him in his studies. He mentions visits to dignitaries. But it is also possible that some of these more able monks were amongst those who told him that a 'perfected being . . . retains his individuality in Neibban' though unable to explain this condition further.

Later observers confirm Bishop Bigandet's conclusion that, in popular opinion, Nibbāna did not mean annihilation. It is a mystery, observes Sir George Scott, but it is not a "nothing." "Matter-of-fact Western heretics are mistaken when they conclude that the common illustration of the dying flame means annihilation." He cites an interesting funeral dirge, sung in Mandalay:

Gone, gone art thou, sweet wife; gone far away . . .  
And yet again, in yet another birth,  
I'll claim thee; when mayhap a happier *kan*,  
A fairer sum of merit, hardly won,  
Will lead us on, linked-armed, to linked death,  
That so progressing, joyful we may run  
Through all life's changes, and with single breath,  
Through heavens and *zahn* and *rupa*, we may bound  
To neh'ban, blissful home of rest.<sup>22</sup>

In his popular, but well-informed accounts of Burmese life, Fielding Hall also emphasises this positive belief. "It is a hard teaching, this of the Buddha . . . that when life goes out, this thing which we call "I" goes out with it. . . . To the Burmese villager that is not so. He cannot grasp, he cannot endure that it should be so."<sup>23</sup> In a later book, Fielding Hall suggests that there is, indeed, no reason why the Burmese villager should

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, footnote, p. 98, p. 252, p. 315.

<sup>22</sup> *The Burman, His Life and Notions* (1882), Vol. I, chap. XI, p. 125ff.; Vol. II, chap. XXXV, pp. 351, 352.

<sup>23</sup> *The Soul of a People*, chap. XXI, pp. 288, 289; chap. XXII, pp. 290, 291.

think otherwise. Orthodoxy does not require it. The Buddha's teaching has been misunderstood. "They thought his ideal was Death, yet it was Life.... Only in Burma did the faith survive in somewhat of its early form."<sup>24</sup>

In a report published in 1914, replies to a questionnaire from some thirty correspondents indicate, according to the editors, "that there are inconsistencies in the current views." Buddhists in the Shan States, the Burmese borderland "hold a two-fold conception of Nirvana, conceptions that are absolutely contradictory, and are admitted to be so. They may all say that Nirvana is complete extinction of being ... and that the place or state is mysterious and inexplicable, and with the same breath they may, and do, call Nirvana the City of Gold, the Country of Happiness and Peace, a Home unutterably surpassing any earthly home." Their Burmese cousins are in similar case. "Agnosticism is the only orthodox attitude" but few are satisfied with this attitude. Thus, while some correspondents report that in popular opinion Nirvana signifies extinction of all being, others agree with Mr Charles Duroiselle that the great mass of the people 'believe in a life to come after the Arhat's death.' Mr Duroiselle adds that some of the monks, too, share this view, though others state that Nirvana is complete extinction and most of them say that it is a mystery: no one knows what it really is.<sup>25</sup>

We have, then, a series of reports, covering a century, by Western residents in Burma who made a serious attempt to discover what their Burmese neighbours really thought about Nibbāna. They begin with the report that Nibbāna signifies annihilation. But it is interesting to note that as time goes on this impression is qualified; positive as well as negative conceptions are discovered; and it is emphasised that Nibbāna spells mystery. Finally, we have a statement which is described as contradictory, but which, perhaps, might be better described as paradoxical.

### *3. Popular ideas of Nibbāna*

We have now to consider the question introduced at the beginning of this chapter: the relation between the popular conception of Nibbāna and the teaching of the Saṃgha. The observations we have been considering may seem to indicate a considerable divergence between the two. On the one hand we have a popular conception which is said to flout orthodoxy; on the other hand, there is the teaching of the monks which may be supposed to exalt orthodoxy.

<sup>24</sup> *The Inward Light*, chap. xx, pp. 196, 198; cf. chap. xxii, pp. 219, 220.

<sup>25</sup> W. C. B. Purser and K. J. Saunders (editors), *Modern Buddhism in Burma*, pp. 48—50.

Several consequent questions arise. How, for example, can we account for the persistence of this popular heresy, if indeed it be heresy, in view of the fact that the monastic Order is so influential? Heresies, it is true, flourish underground in every religion. But this 'heresy' is very much above ground. Are the monks themselves heretical, or the laity less heretical than they may appear to be?

Partial explanations will at once come to mind. Appeal may be made to the Buddhist emphasis on toleration, and further appeal may be made to the recognised distinction between what is expected of the layman and what is expected of the monk: the layman cannot be required to understand the truth which is only attained through monkish disciplines. These explanations are pertinent. But they are not sufficient.

The further explanation is to be found in certain undertones, certain basic tendencies, certain similarities of approach which influence monks and laity alike. These may be summed up and defined as the Agnostic Emphasis and the Ethical Emphasis. Making these emphases, though in different ways, learned bhikkus and simple villagers are in deeper, more effective sympathy than might be supposed if we merely isolate and regard their more explicit and divergent conceptions. In both cases, the resultant outlook is positive rather than negative. Hence the persistence of a lively popular faith which may seem at times to contradict its own basic dogmas.

In the following paragraphs, I shall select those results of my own inquiries which may elucidate this situation. I shall attempt to show how, in Burmese Buddhism, a fundamental agnosticism is derived in part from ethical considerations, and, secondly, how this agnosticism is associated with a positive faith, differently expressed but jointly affirmed by monk and layman, scholar and peasant.

The popular conception of Nibbāna will concern us first. But here there is need for discrimination. Whom have we in mind when we speak of this popular opinion? Burma is a country of villages, and we may conceive some very primitive peasant whose only concern is his rice field, his plough and his oxen. Over against such a simple peasant we may set the scholarly monk. But we must also bear in mind that large, intermediate class, already noted, which includes the more instructed layman and the less instructed monk.

Nor should we exaggerate the simplicity of the Burmese villager. The Burmese may be a rural community, but they are also a civilised community, schooled and intelligent, very conscious of the difference between their conditions and the conditions of the surrounding, more primitive hill tribes. On the other hand, in seeking to estimate the popular opinion, we must be equally alert against the temptation to

identify the majority of the people with the comparatively few sophisticated Burmans to be found in the larger towns.

With this qualification in mind, we can agree with those observers who represent the popular conception of Nibbāna as a picture of some super-heaven, some final sphere of complete happiness. We can also agree that they are right in distinguishing this conception from the ideas of the learned bhikkus. This is what must be said if the issue is pressed to the point of definition. But who exerts this pressure, who requires this definition, who is it that is bold to be explicit? Not the villager himself! It is the outside observer, the scholar impatient to complete his analysis. The villager himself is reserved and hesitant. He is far from attempting any explication. He is much too aware of the fact that for him Nibbāna is a distant prospect, wrapt in mystery. In a vague way he sees Nibbāna as the end of a chequered existence, the beginning of an entirely different and better life, in a vague way he may picture Nibbāna as he pictures the legendary heavens, but always in a vague way. He is never as explicit as the inquisitive inquirer wants him to be.

Nor is this hesitation solely characteristic of the more simple, more inarticulate villager. I recall a conversation with a Buddhist journalist. He was very clear and prompt in most of his answers to my questions. He distinguished lucidly, for example, between prayer and Buddhist meditation. He was convinced that Buddhism allowed no place for belief in God. He emphasised that Buddhists could not be said to believe in 'transmigration' since they rejected any 'soul' theory. But when it came to the question of Nibbāna, he paused. Nibbāna was not annihilation. On that he was clear. What *did* it mean then? Well, it might mean Life — life in contrast, perhaps, to 'mere existence' — but he added quickly that it was impossible to define. Nibbāna was a *mystery*.

This conversation was typical of many others I held with laymen. Typical, too, was the hesitation concerning Nibbāna. In one or two cases I was reminded that the Buddha himself did not consider the subject profitable. The scripture was maybe recalled: the complaint, for example, of the dissatisfied monk that the Buddha had left many questions unsettled, and the Buddha's reply: "Anyone who should say, 'I will not lead the religious life under Buddha until Buddha explains all these points' that man would die before Buddha had ever explained these points to him."<sup>26</sup>

The blind men and the elephant have often been quoted to me. Each blind man touched a different part of the elephant, and each one naturally came to a different conclusion. The man who felt the trunk said it

<sup>26</sup> *M.I.* 426.; cf. De La Vallée Poussin, *The Way to Nirvana*, pp. 128, 129.

was a plough handle. He who felt the body was sure it was a granary. They wrangled about it and came to blows. In the scriptures, Buddha is said to have told the story to expose foolish teachers who argue beyond their knowledge.<sup>27</sup> My Burmese friends told the story to emphasise their own blindness. There are things beyond the ken of ordinary men, and a wise man recognises the fact.

Some ventured a simile, generally the simile of the dying flame, extinguished when the oil was exhausted in the lamp. It signified, they said, the end of *tanhā* — the lusts and greed which distracted life now. (I do not recall that the translation 'Desire' was much used: there was greater emphasis on the heats and passions of life). Therefore life as we knew it now ceased to be. As to the life, the Nibbāna life which would follow, who could say? Comparisons from this present life were obviously misleading. Nibbāna was a mystery.

But it was never 'nothing.' I cannot recall a single Burmese friend who interpreted Nibbāna as annihilation.

To the simple villager, it has been said, Nibbāna is a super-heaven.<sup>28</sup> An ultimate heaven, a further Beyond, would perhaps be a better description, for it is doubtful whether many actually picture Nibbāna as *similar* to the heavens of imagination or legend. Sir George Scott's cautionary words bring us nearer the truth: "Buddhists have in their six heavens and twenty superior seats a choice of every kind of bliss, suited to every liking.... Yet all these ideal realms of phantasy ... have nothing to do with the state of Neh'ban.... The Buddhist system is much too logical to trouble itself with such incomprehensible problems, and in order to create no false impressions, the teachers surround the last state with the utmost possible uncertainty of expression."<sup>29</sup> By and large, the people follow this lead.

The agnostic emphasis in regard to Nibbāna, has, I am persuaded, penetrated the Burmese mind much more deeply than is sometimes supposed. And with it, closely joined, the ethical emphasis.

To supplement and confirm my own impressions, I have sought the aid of several correspondents. The reply of one of these, a widely travelled Hindu medical doctor, whose philanthropic work in the villages of Upper Burma has given him an intimate knowledge of village mentality, is illuminating: "About Neikban, ... though the Pali scriptural idea is the

<sup>27</sup> Udāna (v. Woodward, *The Minor Anthologus of the Buddhist Canon*, chap. VI, section 68).

<sup>28</sup> Prof. J. A. Stewart has drawn my attention to the significance of the Burmese proverb, *Hnit thet ya awza, pyaw ya Neikban*: What you like is ambrosia, where you are happy is Nibbāna.

<sup>29</sup> *The Burman*, Vol. I, chap. XI, p. 127.

extinction of the 'ego', the people understand it differently . . . . The popular idea is that every successive birth is either better or worse according to one's actions in this present one, till finally, when one has led a 'perfect' life according to Buddhist precepts, one is not reborn more. When one attains Nibbāna, one's rebirth ceases, and one remains permanently in an exalted state." At first reading, this statement may seem neither more nor less illuminating than many similar summaries. But if it is closely examined it will be seen that it includes an *ethical reference* which is often missing in other summaries. It is the 'perfect life' which qualifies for Nibbāna — the quest for the perfect life through successive rebirths, through all the realms and all the intermediate heavens. Instead, then, of saying that Nibbāna is patterned after the imagery of these intermediate heavens, is it not a more discerning interpretation to say that the way through these heavens is patterned after the accepted Way to Nibbāna? The heavens of primitive belief and traditional legend remain. Buddhism has not displaced them. What Buddhism has done is to challenge more primitive conceptions of the way of life which spells progress through these heavens. It has brought into the heart of earlier imaginations an ethical reference.

Now the average Burman is honest enough to admit that there is still a wide gulf between his accepted ethical ideal and his ethical practice. Not only is he still very far from perfection, but he is not as strongly disposed to seek it as he might be. Cynics, indeed, have remarked that many Burmans seem in no great hurry to attain Nibbāna. Few, perhaps, are as frank about it as the lively Queen Caw of Pagan who expressed her very qualified aspirations in the following dedicatory inscription:

"Meantime, *before I reach Nirvāṇa* by virtue of this great work of merit I have done, may I prosper as a man. . . . More especially I would have a long life, freedom from disease, a lovely complexion, a pleasant voice and a beautiful figure. I would be the loved and honoured darling of every man and spirit. Gold, silver, rubies, corals, pearls and other lifeless treasure, elephants, horses and other living treasure — may I have lots of them. . . . Wherever I am born, may I be fulfilled with noble graces, charity, faith, piety, wisdom, etc., and not know one speck of misery; *and after I have tasted and enjoyed the happiness of men and the happiness of spirits*, when the noble law of deliverance called the fruit of Sanctity blossoms, may I at last attain the peaceful bliss of Nirvāṇa."<sup>30</sup>

The Burman is human, — as human as those Christians who have prayed, after the manner of the hesitant Augustine, "Give me chastity

<sup>30</sup> A.S. Burma, List of Inscriptions, no. 334; quoted Ray, *Theravāda Buddhism in Burma* chap. II, p. 165.

and self-control — but not yet!”<sup>31</sup> The average Burman has not renounced the world, he has not accepted the monastic discipline; and he knows it. Therefore he also knows that he cannot expect to share the greater understanding of those who *have* renounced the world.

Theoretically, maybe, even a layman may attain enlightenment.<sup>32</sup> But a wise instructor has likened the situation of the layman, exposed to the temptations of the world, to that of the traveller who was confronted by a tiger; the distractions and assaults of the world are tigerish.<sup>33</sup> The man who is in earnest will flee them. Even the monk, it is true, is not immune from these assaults. But the monk has a better chance. It is, then, the common view that if you really mean business, really mean to expedite progress towards Nibbāna, the obvious, sensible course is to join the Order. Those who have done so, those especially who have made some progress in the monastic life, the learned bhikkus, pursuing the hard disciplines of meditation, such may discern the distant shore of Nibbāna, such may hope to reach that shore, earlier than later: but not the householder, the man occupied by field or plough, wife or child. ‘Undoubtedly every orthodox Buddhist hopes to obtain Nibbāna one day; but the monastic life is generally considered an essential condition for entry on the path to Nibbāna.’<sup>34</sup> It is only when one has followed this path some way that one can expect to know whither the path leads — if then. For the layman it is necessarily a distant prospect and a vague, mysterious concept. He is not worthy. He has not entered on the path which leads to ‘the state of him who is worthy.’ Therefore the layman is not presumptuous. This is a subject to be left to the learned bhikkus, partly because they are learned, partly because they are bhikkus. The two recognitions are associated, recognition of the expert, recognition of the better man, for the Burman knows that the monastic discipline is a mental discipline, enjoining study and meditation, but he also knows that the necessary, prior condition is moral.

He knows, too, that the learned bhikkus themselves are hesitant on this subject. Not even they, notwithstanding their qualifications, can pretend to full knowledge. To them also, Nibbāna is ultimately a mystery.

The *very* learned bhikkus perhaps, the most devoted, can just discern

<sup>31</sup> St Augustine, *Confessions* VIII. 7.

<sup>32</sup> A. III, 451 mentions twenty one laymen-Arahats; cf. Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, p. 63, footnote.

<sup>33</sup> Bigandet, “The Seven Ways to Neibban,” *op. cit.* Vol. 2, p. 236.

<sup>34</sup> de la Vallée Poussin, *Nirvana*, chap. I, p. 3: “Sans doute tout bouddhiste orthodoxe espère obtenir un jour le Nirvana; mais la vie monastique est généralement considérée une condition essentielle de l’entrée dans le chemin du Nirvana.”

the Shore in the far, far distance, but whatever they may see, the little they see, defies communication. They cannot be expected to translate their vision into the language of everyday. All that the monk can do is to encourage you, by his example, to take the path yourself. That is what the Buddha himself did. Thus the village elder, as death approaches, will sometimes bethink himself and end his days in the monastery. A tardy beginning is better than none. It will not mean Nibbāna tomorrow, but it will mean a more definite step in the Way.

Here, perhaps, we have a further significance of the concept, a reminder that Nibbāna imports a challenge as well as a promise — a challenge to that better, nobler, more sensible Way which a man may have disregarded for the greater part of his life. Since the Goal is never to be separated from the Way, Nibbāna is the reminder of Dhamma. While it holds the promise of deliverance and peace, it rebukes all that postpones that deliverance and denies that peace.

Nibbāna, then, is Mystery, but it is nevertheless the concept which completes faith and inspires conduct. Agnosticism is here, but it belongs to faith, not to doubt; it is joined with affirmation, not with negation. Every invocation, every blessing, every devotion ends with Nibbāna, as does life itself. No gaudy heaven, however attractive, can take the place of the Great Peace.

#### 4. *'The Learned Monks'*

We turn now to the ideas of the monks about Nibbāna, so far as they affect the popular view. This last qualification is necessary, for any attempt at a full examination of their ideas would take us beyond our province and beyond present possibilities.

The evidence here, must, therefore, be regarded as inconclusive, but it is perhaps sufficient to indicate further what has been suggested in the previous paragraphs: a basic agreement in approach and emphasis between monk and layman. For the learned bhikku, as well as for the villager, the final word is Mystery and the initial word an ethical emphasis, though for somewhat different reasons.

The monk has been more speculative. Duroiselle has suggested that, whilst the broader emphasis is agnostic, there has been a trend towards nihilistic interpretation.<sup>35</sup> But this may be doubted. It depends largely on how we regard such apparently negative terms as 'extinction' and 'cessation of existence.' Professor Pe Maung Tin and others have shown that these are not incompatible with a positive faith and an essential affirmation.

<sup>35</sup> *M.B.B.*, p. 48.

The learned bhikku is, of course, well aware that some of the questions raised are listed in the scriptures among those unprofitable questions, beyond determination, to which the Buddha himself deigned no answer.<sup>36</sup> Yet it is humanly impossible to pursue a discipline without pondering the goal of that discipline, and the monk is human enough at times to anticipate, from scripture and from his own present experience, what may lie ahead.

'Nirvana,' said a Burmese abbot to Professor Platt, 'is like a distant house of which we can see only the outside. What it is like within we cannot even guess; yet we know that it is real.'<sup>37</sup>

This sounds to me more like a layman's simile! Or perhaps the simile of a less instructed monk — not a learned bhikku! Unless I am much mistaken, the learned bhikku conceives of Nibbāna more in terms of the *life* to be realised than of the house in which it will be lived — a new quality of life rather than a place, a realm, a sphere, a heaven. His whole present discipline encourages such a direction of his thought. "The Buddhist ideal," wrote Rhys Davids, "is a subjective state, to be realised in this world."<sup>38</sup> It is, he added, the ideal to be attained by following the eight-fold Path, and whenever the Buddha was questioned about the aim of the zealous disciple's way of life, he replied by indicating the condition of the Arahāt, the man who is worthy, and the Path which leads to this condition. Such a monk has attained the *sambodhi* — the Insight, wisdom, awakening which is essential to the higher stages of his progress. Whilst still in the Path, seeking this fulfilment, he is said to be *sambodhi-parayāno*.<sup>39</sup> When he has attained this condition, 'higher and sweeter, for the sake of which the brethren lead the religious life,' he is said, in the scriptures, to have destroyed the seven bonds which hinder such progress;<sup>40</sup> he has attained emancipation of heart and of mind;<sup>41</sup> he has a complete understanding of the nature and causes of sorrow (ill);<sup>42</sup> he wears the last body and has acquired perfect enlightenment;<sup>43</sup> thus set free he has the assurance: 'Rebirth has been destroyed. The higher life

<sup>36</sup> Such questions belong to the 'jungle, the desert, the puppet show' of vain speculation: cf. E. J. Thomas, *History of Buddhist Thought*, chap. x, p. 124.

<sup>37</sup> *The Pilgrimage of Buddhism*, chap. VII, p. 136.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, p. 190.

<sup>39</sup> D. 156 (cf. Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, p. 192).

<sup>40</sup> A. iv 7 (cf. E. M. Hare *The Book of the Gradual, Sayings*, Vol. IV, p. 5).

<sup>41</sup> D. 156 (cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 201.)

<sup>42</sup> S. iv 51 (cf. Woodward, *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, Part IV, pp. 26, 27).

<sup>43</sup> S. N. 478.

has been fulfilled. What had to be done has been accomplished. After this present life there will be no beyond';<sup>44</sup> he has, indeed, attained the full Vision of Deliverance and can cheer and exhort others along the Path.<sup>45</sup> His condition is summed up as a state of self-possession, investigation into the truth, energy, calm, joy, concentration and magnanimity.<sup>46</sup> And this condition, nothing more and nothing less, this, contends Rhys Davids, is Nibbāna. "It is not too much to say that Arahatship is Buddhism"<sup>47</sup> — a philosophy of life which aimed its keenest shafts at all forms of the supernatural and the mysterious and set before men an ideal of self-conquest, a 'final salvation . . . obtainable in this world and in this world alone.'<sup>48</sup>

Now there is much in the apparent attitude of the Burmese Saṃgha to support Rhys David's interpretation. The devout bhikku certainly seems to hold before him the attainment of the Nibbāna-condition, the qualities of life which signify the Arahats. His conception of Nibbāna is very closely joined with this ideal. His immediate aim is to excel in the discipline which brings the ideal nearer, subduing the passions and employing the mind in those exercises which belong to the Path.

But two questions arise. The first is the question whether he really expects to realise this ideal and obtain this final salvation in this present life. Theoretically, no doubt, it is possible. In a reference to the *Abhiññā*, the supernormal insight which is attained by the Arahats, the Lēdī Sayādaw insists that in the Buddhist Scriptures we find, clearly shown, the means towards attaining the five supernatural faculties. That we do not see any person endowed with these today, "is due to the lack of strenuous physical and mental exertion towards their attainment."<sup>49</sup> A zealous missionary, held in the highest esteem throughout Burma,<sup>50</sup> few have done more in modern times than the Lēdī Sayādaw himself to encourage his compatriots, whether monks or laymen, to seek the Path. Yet it may be questioned whether he ever really expected any of his followers to attain the supernatural faculties in this present life. In another treatise he warns against false confidence.

"It is . . . very difficult to become aware of the attainment of the Paths and of the Fruits. In fact even the Ariyan (saint) who has attained

<sup>44</sup> D. 158 (cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, part I, p. 204).

<sup>45</sup> M. i. 146 (cf. Chalmers, *Further Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. I, p. 103.)

<sup>46</sup> Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>47</sup> *American Lectures*, chap. iv, p. 151.

<sup>48</sup> *Dialogues of the Buddha*, pp. 141 ff.

<sup>49</sup> *Questions on Karma*; cf. comment in *M.B.B.*, p. 46.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Thirkell-White, *A Civil Servant in Burma* (1913), chap. xi., p. 197.

the First Path hardly knows that he has become an attainer of the Path-of-the-Stream. Why? Because of the unfathomableness of the latent period of the Defilements. Those Yogis or meditators who do not know the unfathomableness of the latent period of the Defilements, sometimes think themselves to be attainers of Path-of-the-Stream, while as yet their erroneous views and perplexity are only partially, but not completely, put away...."

While, therefore, he enjoins that the exercises which lead to insight and sanctity must be steadfastly practised 'for the whole time of life' he does not promise that the goal will be attained before death.

"If meditators practise these exercises for the whole term of life, their knowledge will be developed till they pass beyond the Puthujjana-bhūmi (the state of the ordinary, unenlightened man) and arrive at the Ariya-bhūmi either before death or at the time of death, *either in this life or the life following*, in which latter they will be reborn as Devas."<sup>51</sup>

Vainglory is forbidden the Buddhist monk. He must not claim for himself any superior sanctity or perfection, and there is certainly no record in modern times of any bhikku claiming Arahatsip. Nor does he seem to expect the 'full Vision of Deliverance' in this present life. At best it will come in the life following. If Nibbāna is not for him quite such a distant view as it is for the layman, it is, nevertheless, no immediate prospect. And for the same fundamental, ethical reason. He is not worthy. But rebirth will give him another chance, a further opportunity: the partial progress he has made in this present life is not in vain. We may compare him with the Christian who hopes for heaven, but not at death; some further, intermediate, purgatorial stage, he conceives, must come in between.

The question arises whether this deliverance is conceived in terms of death or in terms of future, fuller life. Nibbāna clearly means extinction — extinction, certainly, of those cravings and false allurements which chain man to his present fevered existence. Until the Defilements are underfoot there is no prospect of any *ariyabhūmi*. Every bhikku believes that. No man is emancipated until base passions and befooling hallucinations are conquered. But what then? Is the Nibbāna condition but the brief enjoyment of this experience of emancipation until death terminates the short spell of life in which the emancipation is attained? Is it, as some have said, merely the conquest of the fear of death and the lust of immortality, a conquest achieved in this Nibbāna-condition? Or is it the conquest of death itself, the extinction of death together with existence, introducing a new quality of Life beyond destructive change as

<sup>51</sup> *The Vipassanā Dīpanī*, pp. 69, 70. italics mine.

it is beyond our present knowledge? For the Burmese bhikku, is Nibbāna annihilation or Eternal Life?

With these questions in my mind, I set out in Christmas week, 1933, to interview a Sayādaw in a small Burmese town on the Irrawaddy river. The interview had been arranged by a young Buddhist layman, who held this Sayādaw in great esteem for his character and learning. There followed a full afternoon's discussion, which is quoted here as typical of others, and, for me at least, more illuminating than most — a discussion in which honest comparison was attempted. On the one hand, there was the Christian ideal of an Eternal quality of life, a heavenly life fore-tasted here and now; on the other hand, there was 'the complex ideal of Arahatsip, or Nibbāna-under-present-conditions, a super-normal evolution of faculties combined with, not to say resulting from, ethical purity.'<sup>52</sup>

There were some interesting points of contact. In both Ways a progress was conceived. In both cases it might be said that earlier experience included some anticipation, some present, partial realisation of the ultimate, higher condition which was the goal. In both, the goal was described but could not be described. In both, there were similar distinctions. Eternal, heavenly Life could be distinguished from 'mere existence'; the life with the Nibbāna aim, could be distinguished from the life which made no effort to break from the fetters and chain of existence. There were also approximate ethical comparisons: the Christian 'fruits of the Spirit,' could be compared with the Buddhist conception of ethical advance.

From time to time, the Sayādaw emphasised that the basic, essential condition, from his point of view, was the conquest of craving. In so far as any man extinguished *taṇhā*, he said tolerantly, he was bound to realise some higher stage, whatever his religious beliefs. It passed through my mind that this was an indication, not only of his attitude to myself, but to the simple villagers arranged around us. In his view, we were in similar case: people still much clouded by hallucinations and still concerned with irrelevant religious beliefs. But in so far as these religious beliefs encouraged ethical effort there was some hope for us: Christian ideas of heaven and popular conceptions of Nebban were in the same category. And this attitude probably reflected the attitude of the learned bhikkus generally to 'popular Buddhism.'

More illuminating, perhaps, than our points of contact, were our points of disagreement and our failures to make such contact.

There was nothing in the Sayādaw's conception which corresponded to the Christian belief in communion with Christ as the condition of

<sup>52</sup> Mrs. Rhys Davids, Preface to *Compendium of Philosophy*, p. xx.

Eternal Life — no conception of any 'communicated Eternity.' There was no *communion* with the Buddha. On the contrary, it was written in the Book of the Great Decease: 'Therefore, O Ānanda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp. Hold fast as a refuge to the Truth. Look not for refuge to any one besides yourselves.'<sup>53</sup>

There was one stage in the discussion when we both struggled to understand each other better and found it extremely difficult. This was when I described the Pauline conception of the higher, spiritual life developing within the decaying, bodily tent.<sup>54</sup> Like other occidentals I was puzzled to relate the Sayādaw's positive conception of Nibbāna, his declared conviction that Nibbāna somehow meant continuance, fulfilment of Life, with his equally emphatic rejection of any 'soul theory.' What, then, was there to go forward? Accepting, for the moment, the *An-attā* doctrine, I suggested a faint analogy with this Pauline conception. Granted the extinction of the aggregates which constitute this present existence, the extinction of the Five-Khandha-process (*khandha-pariṇibāna*), granted the discipline undertaken to extinguish the fuel, the clinging to mere existence which sustains this process, was it not possible to conceive a second object of this discipline, the nurture and development of some Nibbāna-khandha, some higher aggregate which would be there and go forward when the lower aggregates perished? The Sayādaw agreed that such a theory could be conceived. It was not an objectionable 'soul theory.' But why conceive it? For what cause? What was there under 'existence' conditions to cause such a gradual evolution?

As he discussed this theory, I detected two basic attitudes which determined his approach. The first concerned his valuation of life here and now. As distinguished from the popular view, there was a much more thorough-going appraisal of present existence and environment as altogether Ill. The second was the fact that he thought in terms of succession, not of Good developing while Evil declined, but of Good supervening when Evil was extinguished. Nibbāna, which betokened the Good, would only be realised *after* the Five-Khandha-process of Existence, which betokened Evil, was extinguished. The knowledge of Nibbāna, the insight giving this knowledge, was a sequel, a definite next-stage, separated from previous stages; not a gradual growth in understanding, a slow discerning, but a sudden illumination. Mental disciplines prepared the way for this illumination, but they were not to be confused with it. In a sense, these prior mental exercises were negative in purpose, designed to

<sup>53</sup> D. II 100, (translated Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part II, p. 108).

<sup>54</sup> 2 Cor. 4: 16 ff.; 5: 1 ff.

dispel false perceptions, wrong thoughts, wrong views. The knowledge thus achieved through logic was the knowledge of WHAT IS NOT. The Nibbāna illumination alone was positive: KNOWLEDGE of WHAT IS. Nibbāna was the one, great affirmation. And it would be made, the insight would come, in sharp, distinct sequel to previous effort, when the seeker was worthy. Until that great moment, all speculation of what thus lay beyond was vain. But Nibbāna did lie beyond and it pointed Beyond. Nibbāna was a Mystery. But it was not annihilation. Of that the Sayādaw was convinced.<sup>55</sup>

Here, then, in the mind of this venerable abbot was the same mingling of hesitation and faith which informed the mind of the simple villager at his feet. Scholar and peasant were brought together as each, in his different way, conceived a remote Nibbāna. The monk was not picturing any long pilgrimage through future worlds. In his view were the arduous, interwoven disciplines of the eight-fold Path — those initial wrestlings in right understanding (*sammā-ditṭhi*) by which the Path is discerned; all the searching analysis which distinguishes the twenty-eight material qualities, the fifty-four kinds of mental phenomena, the many classes of consciousness and those three most important features of phenomena, so easily mentioned but so easily ignored — the mark of impermanence (*anicca-lakkhaṇa*), the mark of Ill (*dukkha-lakkhaṇa*), the mark of unsubstantiality (*anattā-lakkhaṇa*);<sup>56</sup> then, besides this subtle, difficult analysis, the equally difficult disciplines which free the aspirant from the bondage of the fetters, the intoxicants, the defilements, liberating him from self-illusion, scepticism, shallow conformity, lust and ill-will; and, through all these disciplines, the renewed zeal to direct the mind aright, control speech and regulate conduct and livelihood; and, informing all these disciplines, the vigilance enjoined in the Sixth Step, the renewed effort to avoid all cause of evil, to overcome and dispel it, to incite the will and mind to further attainment, to maintain and mature what has been attained; then, still further, those exercises in contemplation which may take him to the cemetery in steady vigil which looks upon death and decay, pondering Impermanence; and, yet further in the Path, right concentration, singleness of mind, supernormal knowledge, the trance raptures of *jhāna*, the final insight, the Eye of perfect intuition (*paññā-cakkhu*), the final severance from all that hinders (*Samucchedapahāna*), “the utter escaping from the ties of existences for ever and ever.”<sup>57</sup> All this he had in mind, and much more besides. He knew how little progress

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Pe Maung Tin: “Burmese monks... maintain that Nibbāna does not mean annihilation” *J.B.R.S.*, Vol. VII, Part II, p. 193.

<sup>56</sup> Lit. -- mark of No-soul.

<sup>57</sup> Lēdī Sayādaw, *ibid.*, p. 67.

he had made, how much more had to be done, before he could hope for that ultimate vision of "things hard to understand, tranquilising, sweet, not to be grasped by mere logic."<sup>58</sup> Because he had not yet attained, Nibbāna was still a Mystery. But because he had attained thus far, he *knew* that it must be a Mystery. Nevertheless it was his goal, his Ziel, inspiring all his present purpose.

"Nibbāna," repeated the Sayādaw, "is not annihilation. Not that. It is — — —"

He paused.

"How can I say?"

### 5. A Dialogue on Nibbāna

It is interesting to compare the Sayādaw's attitude in this interview, with the more speculative attitude illustrated by the Burmese scholar Shwe Zan Aung, in his *Dialogue on Nibbāna*.<sup>59</sup> In this Dialogue the nihilistic view that Nibbāna is "pure nothing" is mentioned briefly in the Dialogue, then dismissed. No doubt it existed in the past. This much is suggested, it is remarked, by the fact that every recent writer has gone out of his way to insist that Nibbāna is 'something.' But the view that Nibbāna is annihilation is said to have been exploded by Buddhist writers generally from the twelfth century onwards.

"We are all agreed that Nibbāna is something" remarks Tissa in the Dialogue, "though we differ as to the nature of that."

"The Burmese Buddhist world of philosophy," it is further explained, "is divided into three camps, so to speak. There is the Shwegyin school which holds that Nibbāna is spiritual mind, while the Okpo school advances the view that it is unique mind and body. The Ledi school, however, teaches that it is neither mind nor body but purely calm." This third view, says one of the characters in the Dialogue, the view that Nibbāna is nothing but calm, tranquility or peace, has been accepted throughout the length and breadth of Burma.

In the Dialogue, this popular third view is more or less assumed as the background. It is represented in the questions and dissents of Sumana, 'a pupil of Dr. Ledi,' who visits a venerable exponent of the Shwegyin school, U Agga, to ascertain his interpretation. The exposition of the

<sup>58</sup> D. i. 17 ff. (*Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part 1, pp. 30 ff.).

<sup>59</sup> J.B.R.S. Vol. VIII, Part III, 1918. Deeply versed himself in Abhidhamma studies, translator of texts for the Pali Text Society, pupil of one of Burma's most learned bhikkus, Shwe Zan Aung had both special opportunity and special qualifications for the estimate he essayed in this Dialogue.

Shwegyin view therefore takes the foreground — a view which is said to be ‘hallowed by antiquity.’

Nibbāna, it is agreed, is the reality of realities. But what is reality? U Agga insists that all reality, including Nibbāna, is (a) existing (b) in continual flux. Concepts alone can be called constant. Since Nibbāna is more than a concept, more than ‘book-mind or lip-Nibbāna,’ it, too, must be subject to change.

Sumana at once objects — and this is the first main point of difference between the two disputants — that Nibbāna cannot possibly be included in the flux; Nibbāna is permanent, abiding, enduring; it is unconditioned, radically different from all conditioned reality. He quotes the ‘clear dictum of the Buddha’ in the *Aṅguttara-Nikāya*: “There are two elements, conditioned and unconditioned. The marks of conditioned are three. Which three? Genesis is apparent; dissolution is apparent; a state of duration other than genesis or dissolution is also apparent. Similarly, the three marks of unconditioned are: genesis, dissolution and duration are not apparent.”

U Agga defends his thesis by claiming that these ‘marks’ are mere appearances to the mind. The crux of the passage is the word, apparent, which, in the Pali (*paññayāti*) signifies “to know in different aspects.”<sup>60</sup> Thus the passage indicates, not two radically different kinds of reality, but *one* reality seen from two radically different view-points, the view-point of intellect and the view-point of intuition, poles asunder. “What is relative and conditioned to intellect becomes absolute and unconditioned to intuition.”

Later in the argument, Samana opines that this monist interpretation implies that the world would be Nibbāna. In reply, U Agga quotes the *Milindapañha*: ‘A well-trained practitioner having a good view of the waxing and waning of conditioned things directly faces Nibbāna.’ This means that those who see the reality from within, by intuition, are in direct contact with Nibbāna. “The Buddha said: ‘Even in this sentient, conscious body which is but a fathom in measure, I declare this world, its cause, its cessation and the path thereto.’” It is therefore plain, argues U Agga, that ‘you should not look for Nibbāna outside your own system. It is not something already existing before you attain it. Neither is it a locality which awaits your arrival.... (The) locus for Nibbāna is no other than our own personality purged from corruptions.’

The development of this part of U Agga’s thesis is of particular interest to Western readers, for it provides at least one conceivable answer to a question which is often asked: How can the Buddhist conception of

<sup>60</sup> From prefix *pa*, which is explained by *pakārena* — ‘in different aspects’ and root *nā*, ‘to know’.

Nibbāna be reconciled with the Buddhist denial of the soul? If there is no subject, if the apparent subject is analysed away, as seems to be the case in Buddhist psychology, what is there left to realise or attain Nibbāna? Thus Rhys Davids and others have held that the *An-attā* doctrine leaves no logical loophole for any conception of immortality.<sup>61</sup> In this Dialogue, however, U Agga's interpretation of Nibbāna certainly implies a conception of immortality. It is the more interesting because it is based on the definitely Buddhist theory that the individual is, in reality, an aggregate of the *khandhas*.<sup>62</sup> Nor is it suggested by his interrogators in the Dialogue that his view implies any soul-theory — that *bête noir* of Buddhism.<sup>63</sup>

The essential feature of U Agga's interpretation is a distinction between bad, unhealthy *khandhas* and good, healthy *khandhas*.<sup>64</sup> Condemnation of all *khandhas*, good or bad, he remarks to Sumana, recalls "those erring *rishis* of old who detested body and mortified it or who detested mind and stifled it." To deny the persistence of good *khandhas* in Nibbāna implies annihilation.

He leads up to this theory by discussing Sāriputta's statement that Nibbāna is the extinction of lust, ill-will and ignorance. Mere extinction is not Nibbāna, he argues, quoting Buddhaghosa and Dhammapāla. Extinction of corruptions implies ensuing health, and health, to be real, must be "bound up with sound body." Otherwise, health is merely an idea, a notion, a concept. "When a sick child who dreads medicine tells his mother that he is well, his health is (just) lip-health.... So any Nibbānic quality, ... to be real, must be bound up with sound *khandhas*." For confirmation, he quotes a Buddhist writer: "Indeed, because Nibbāna is conceived in dependence upon *khandhas*, it is made known even through our body." After all corruptions are purged, the Nibbāna life is expressed through sound *khandhas*.

This conclusion leads the disputants back to their rival conceptions of the nature of reality. Sumana objects that even sound *khandhas*, 'your

<sup>61</sup> *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, pp. 187 ff.

<sup>62</sup> Sentient being is said to be constituted of five *khandhas*, each *khandha* an aggregate of ultimate elements of bodily form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. Thus 'Form' (*Rūpa*) is analysed into 28 attributes. "The 'I' is nothing but a changing combination of physical and psychical phenomena;" cf. Nyanatiloka, *The Word of the Buddha*, p. 4; Tilbe, *Pali Buddhism*, pp. 24, 25.

<sup>63</sup> As the author of this Dialogue describes it elsewhere, "A Reply to Dr. Ross" *J.B.R.S.*, Vol. VIII, Part II, p. 168.

<sup>64</sup> Essentially this was the theory I attempted to elaborate to the Sayādaw in my interview.

sane mind in sound body', would still be subject to change. But what is changeable is bad, and therefore a thing to be got rid of. U Agga's reply is interesting, in view of what has previously been remarked about the Burmese: their tendency to regard change more optimistically than Buddhists elsewhere. Change in itself, he insists, is not bad. It is, indeed, the characteristic of all reality. The only change which is ill is the change due to *taṇhā* (corrupt desire).

But the distinction he has made between Nibbāna and the rest of reality still dominates Sumana's approach to the subject. He is willing to make a concession, but even this concession emphasises the prior distinction.

"I admit that what you have said about Nibbāna being our personality relates to the *Sa-upādisesa* Nibbāna. But I still maintain that there is no becoming whatsoever in the *An-upādisesa* Nibbāna."

Now the *Sa-upādisesa* is that Nibbānic condition which can be realised by the Arahāt in this present life, before he has passed altogether from the round of re-birth; it is the exaltation attained when corruptions are extinguished and the mind is purified. As, however, the Arahāt is still seen in the world, still living in the body, still observed in his present 'personality', there is reason enough for the view that this kind of Nibbānic condition is related to his personality. Here Sumana has no difficulty. But the full conception of Nibbāna implies a further development, he insists, beyond the final bodily dissolution 'where no residual stuff of life is said to remain' and 'in this Nibbāna both mind and matter cease without a residuum,' as the Buddha himself said. Where, then, is there any room for surviving personality in this ultimate Nibbāna? In this ultimate Nibbāna there can be no residuum of any *khandha* stuff; nothing signifying 'personality' as we know it now.

U Agga, however, maintains his thesis. Nibbāna, to be real, must have a locus; this locus is personality; and this persisting personality implies, at least, mental *khandhas*, persisting minds.<sup>65</sup>

"Then you mean," says Sumana, "that the fruitional consciousness of an Arahant survives after finally passing away from this world? . . . that individuals exist in Nibbāna?"

"It all depends on what you mean by 'individual,'" U Agga replies. "If you mean a soul in the sense in which it is generally understood in the West, I would reply No, because the ego idea is but a concept. But if you use the word as a mere label for realities, I would say Yes. Sāriputta was a distinct individual from Moggallāna on this side of the veil. Why should not their continuations be individually distinct on the other side? Each

<sup>65</sup> For a fuller statement of this argument, see Appendix, Note C.

lives his own Nibbāna.... The Nibbāna of a being is his own mind purged from corruptions. It forms no exception to the law of reality. That is, it is a continuous flowing existence." A Nibbānic being consists of the fruitional consciousness of the highest Ariyanship solely occupied with its own tranquility, calm or peace as its object.

A minor spokesman in the Dialogue briefly indicates a school of thought which goes even further, postulating not only individual mind in Nibbāna, but beings with a "unique body as well", beings, moreover, still concerned with what is happening in the world they have left behind.

As previously stated, however, the interpretation which is said in the Dialogue to be generally accepted throughout Burma today is not that voiced by U Agga or this minor spokesman, but the interpretation of the Lēdī Sayādaw, who is represented here by Sumana. This has already been partly indicated in Sumana's criticism of U Agga.

In general, the Lēdī's view may be described as more 'agnostic.' Nibbāna, it is agreed, signifies calm, tranquility, peace. But it is denied that this implies individual consciousness or survival. Negative terms are emphasised. Nibbāna is radically different from the rest of reality. Nibbāna can only be said to be 'bound up with *khandhas*' in the sense that it 'is spoken of in connection with *khandhas*,' "because we say that 'Nibbāna is a cessation of *Khandhas*.' A Nibbānic being is altogether freed from mind and body. The Nibbāna calm means freedom from trouble or evil. It is unchanging, not subject to change like the rest of reality. Nibbāna is altogether unconditioned. "Did not the Buddha say in the *Udāna* that there is no earth, no water, no fire, no air, no sun, no moon etc in Nibbāna?"

Thus the Lēdī spokesman, taking cover among more orthodox negations, declines to follow U Agga in his bolder speculations, and in this refusal he has the support of Professor Pe Maung Tin, whose Essay on Nibbāna, based on a study of Burmese commentaries, accompanies the Dialogue.<sup>66</sup>

The Essay cites a Burmese preceptor of the twelfth century: the nature of dhammas or states goes by opposites: "As where there is Ill there is ease, so where there is existence, there the escape from existence should be looked for. And, as where there is heat, there is its opposite: cold, so where there is the three-fold fire of lust, hate and dulness, there Nibbāna should be looked for." Nibbāna is unconditioned reality, which, by the law of opposites, is not related to causes (*a-paccaya*). It is absolute, and is the escape from genesis, decay and dissolution. Cessation (*nirodha* i.e., *ni*, non-being (*abhāva*) of *rodha*, the Ceaseless round of Ill) is the term

<sup>66</sup> *J.B.R.S.*, Vol. VIII, Part III (1918), pp. 223 ff.

employed for this escape, but “the commentators take pains to show that the non-being in *nirodha* is not the mere passing away . . . of the corruptions and the aggregates.” It is the non-birth, non-origination of further Ill. Nibbāna has therefore a very positive significance. As one commentator insists, if Nibbāna merely denoted the extinction of lust, hate and dulness, then every stupid animal, every bear, leopard, deer, monkey when its lust subsided would experience Nibbāna, and there would be fifteen hundred Nibbānas as each various hindrance in the Path was overcome. Extinction of the corruptions is the condition, sanctity the result, *nirodha* the locus and the reality (*paramattha*) of Nibbāna.

But this reality can only be explained in negative terms. No concept will convey the true meaning, no analysis will reveal the true nature of the Reality. It is by intuition or penetration that it is attained. “Being intent, one realises the ultimate fact of cessation by the body and sees it by intuition through *paññā*.<sup>67</sup>” . . . “Repeated contemplation by worldly knowledge brings about penetration or intuition by means of transcendental knowledge.”

#### 6. ‘No intuition, no salvation’

Threading the Dialogue and the Essay there is a similar insistence. Both U Agga and Sumana emphasise that Intuition alone gives full understanding, and U Agga, who is the more speculative of the two, does so the more emphatically. “In my view intellect and intuition are held to be radically different as poles asunder. . . . For us, who can only observe from without, Nibbāna must be present in time. And yet Ariyans intuit as out of time (*kālavimutta*) because they simply abide in their own intuition (*pativijjha viharati*) without reference to time concepts.”

Those who can only observe from without, those who have not entered the Path-of-the-Stream and attained this necessary insight, may seek to understand what has not yet been made clear to them personally, they may analyse here and inquire there, but ultimately they are dependent upon what the Ariyans have made known, from their penetrating vision, especially the greatest Ariyan of all, the Buddha. Hence they acknowledge, “I take refuge in the Buddha.” Hence, too, in the speculations of the schoolmen, a recurrent appeal to scripture, as in this Dialogue, and, with this appeal, concern for what the earlier, great commentators have discerned, that the letter of scripture may be better understood. Much of the subsequent discussion takes the form of deductions from accepted dogma. In this reference, Buddhism may be described as a religion of

<sup>67</sup> *paññā* = constructive imagination; comprehension; insight.

Revelation. No Buddhist prophets, it is true, have declared: 'Thus saith the Lord.' But the place of the prophets has been taken by the Ariyans, the saints, the enlightened ones who can declare: 'Thus have I seen.' And what they have seen is authoritative.

It is therefore misleading to represent Buddhism as entirely a religion of free inquiry and self-reliant rationalism. Buddhism, whether it be the Buddhism of the peasant or the Buddhism of the schoolman, is further removed from the occidental rationalism of the nineteenth century than some Western rationalists have realised. There are, it is true, passages in the Pali Canon in which the Buddha affirmed that each disciple must discover the truth for himself, without slavish dependence on authority. It is also true that 'the whole (Buddhist) system is based on intellectual activity.'<sup>68</sup> But this intellectual activity is never regarded as a means sufficient in itself. It is joined with an equal regard for moral purification, and it is always a means to an end — to that Ariyan *intuition* which is indispensable to Nibbānic fulfilment. It makes little difference whether this ultimate intuition is distinguished from intellect as a difference in degree or as a difference in kind — a point of dispute in the Dialogue. In either case, the distinction is emphatic. "No true knowledge is complete without intuition," observes the author of the Dialogue, in another context. "The Buddhist maxim is: 'No intuition, no salvation.... Arahants may lack knowledge, or may be excelled by others, or may have doubts, in ordinary, worldly, practical matters, though they possess the intuition of the real in common with the Buddha.'<sup>69</sup>

In the Dialogue, and in his comparison between Bergsonian intuition and the Buddhist conception, Shwe Zan Aung suggests that this penetrating insight may be realised, at least partially and fitfully, in those intellectual exercises and analyses which lead to the Ariyan vision. But his general emphasis is upon the belief that full salvation, and, with it, full understanding, is only attained with full vision — in Nibbāna.

It follows, therefore, that all prior speculation is admittedly relative and limited. It is limited by reference to what the Ariyans have made known. It is limited by the inquirer's recognition of his own present inadequacy. Until he is purified from corruption, until he achieves the Nibbānic intuition, he can only hazard from outside.

It is further limited by the fences which surround Nibbāna, placing it 'out of time,' a separate category of reality, without parts or distinctions, a transcendental object.<sup>70</sup> Since it is thus distinguished from present,

<sup>68</sup> Rhys Davids, *American Lectures*, chap. v, p. 181.

<sup>69</sup> "The Buddhist Philosophy of the Real," *J.B.R.S.*, Vol. VII, Part III, (1917), p. 230.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Aung, *Compendium of Philosophy*, pp. 6, 81 ff.

conditioned existence, none of the terms which belong to normal experience can properly apply. All the similes employed the — other shore, the island of refuge, the highest blessing — are but dim anticipations.

Speculation, indeed, advances at times to the utmost limit and may seem to venture beyond. The 'Compendium of Philosophy' indicates the exercises which should be followed in the quest for super-normal knowledge and seems, in places, to delineate what, one would suppose, can scarcely be known to inquisitive intellect. The final stages of the saint's progress are minutely analysed. This tendency to speculation is seen, maybe in the fact that the Abhidhamma Piṭaka elaborates a fivefold classification of *jhāna*, where the Sutta Piṭaka is content with a fourfold.<sup>71</sup> Philosophy is not to be gainsaid. Intellect strains at the leash. The Buddhist schoolman is as persevering as the Christian. He does not despise intellect and he works it hard. Thus Shwe Zan Aung is compelled to reject the suggestion of Martineau that 'the name (intuition) prepares us to meet some mode of apprehension at a glance, in which all process is dispensed with, and the end is struck by a flash.' For Buddhists have not dispensed with all process. On the contrary, they 'have to resort to a very peculiar and complicated process to win a momentary flash of *abhiññā*.'<sup>72</sup> The Compendium, for example, mentions forty stations of exercise in the exposition of 'Calm', with recommendations for different types of aspirants — some for a passionate habit of mind, some for muddle-heads. Prior to these, there is a schooling in minute analysis, logical and psychological, which, one might suppose, would either defeat or cure any muddle-head!

The relation between this intellectual approach and the resultant insight is, as we have seen, debated by scholars. We might say that some of them are more rationalistic than others; they would not make too sharp a division between intellect and intuition; they are not so patiently agnostic as their fellows. Like other schoolmen, they cannot resist the temptation to define the Infinite. Philosophy must have its day, in Buddhism as elsewhere, and there is certainly ground for the criticism that philosophers — or dogmatists? — or both? — by their subtle discriminations and sharp determinations have turned poetry into prose and religion into metaphysics. Not, however, without resistance. And the point to be observed is, that this resistance arises *within* the Order, *among* the doctors. It is maintained by those who are mindful of the ultimate mystery of Nibbāna, those who mark the gulf between stumbling intellect and emancipating vision. The real, they insist, is finally inexpressible. It is beyond the capacities of intellect. Intellect is a useful

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58, footnote.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

servant, but the servant must not be presumptuous. In this divergence we have part of the answer to the question raised at the outset of this chapter: the relationship between popular conceptions and the ideas of the learned bhikkus. If there are two Buddhisms in Burma (and I doubt it), the division is not to be drawn between monk and layman. It is between mystic and rationalist. And it cuts into the heart of the Saṃgha itself. There, among the learned bhikkus themselves, are scholars who would set a limit to speculation and narrowing definition. To them, as to the villager, Nibbāna, though differently apprehended, is remote, and for essentially the same reason: only the saint can experience Nibbāna, only the saint can know. Since all language is meantime inadequate, there is room enough for toleration.

If the point is pressed, the Burmese Buddhist is better described as a mystic than as a rationalist. His mysticism, however, is a sober, commonsense mysticism. Raptures, it is true, are mentioned in the scriptures and associated with *jhāna* (trance). But mystical raptures are not necessary to salvation.<sup>73</sup> There are 'dry-visioned' Arahats who attain emancipation without them. Greater emphasis is placed on will and concentration than on any emotional excitement which may make the Path more interesting. Serenity, not rapture, is the mark of the Buddhist saint.

Dry or rapturous, however, the Arahāt must achieve vision — a *power* of insight beyond normal intellect.<sup>74</sup> Intellectualism stands at the portal of mysticism, the scholar doing homage to the seer.

Consequently, until this vision is attained, piety and commonsense dictate a reverent agnosticism. Nibbāna, 'the question of questions', remains a question. Such is the attitude maintained by the Burmese Buddhist in general. Scriptural similes are quoted, but many realise their inadequacy. The final word is that Nibbāna is inexpressible. One can indicate it best by saying what it is *not* not conditioned, not in time, not birth, not death. As a concept, it belongs to that class of religious apprehensions which defeats language, leaving us to do our best with negative terms.

Nevertheless it is a very positive apprehension, with positive, definite and religious impacts on Buddhist thought and life. It has certain features which recall other major terms in the history of religion.

It is dominating. In spite of its vagueness — 'that apex of vacuity,' Mrs Rhys Davids calls it — it is a persistent term. For the Buddhist it denotes an aspect of reality which will not let him go. There was Nibbāna before Buddhism, but, without Nibbāna, there could be no Buddhism.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 220.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

Yet it is a term which vexes understanding. If non-Buddhists are at a loss to define it, if they disagree concerning it, they can scarcely be blamed, for Buddhists themselves are at a similar loss. This reality of realities leaves them confounded.

Nevertheless, it is a consolidating, consummating term. "Nirvana is the *non plus ultra* of the *dhamma* expounded by the Buddha, the *summum bonum* of Buddhism, the ultimate of all that a Buddha taught or would teach. Thus Buddhism is in essence a proclamation of the truth of nirvana . . . a tried path leading to Nirvana."<sup>75</sup>

Nibbāna is the *gospel* of Buddhism, the term which signifies emancipation, salvation. The greatest assurance which can encourage the devout disciple is the assurance that he is indeed in the Path-of-the-Stream and will now, without doubt, attain Nibbāna. It is the term which turns pessimism into optimism and makes it absurd to describe Buddhism as a pessimistic religion. At the same time, it is the term which makes it true to say that Buddhism *IS* a religion — not merely an ethic or a philosophy.<sup>76</sup>

Yet it is not without ethical reference, for Nibbāna is linked with the thought of necessary moral purification. While the persevering bhikku may seem to emphasise intellectual exercises, he knows that these exercises are vain unless, at the same time, there is a sustained moral discipline. He must go beyond 'mere morality' but he cannot desert it. The villager may approach Nibbāna at a leisurely pace, but every thought of Nibbāna is a challenge to that pace.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Bimala Churn Law, *Concepts of Buddhism*, chap. XI, p. 76.

<sup>76</sup> For this reason, *Nibbāna* rather than *Dhamma* is the consummating, central term of Buddhism — though much depends on the connotation assigned to *Dhamma*.

<sup>77</sup> Dr. W. Stede (in a Note sent me by the late Professor J. A. Stewart) observes: "We must never forget that two aspects are always interlinked in Indian (and therefore also in Buddhist) philosophy: the physical and the ethical. When the physical world is said to be non-spirit (or non-self) and unapproachable by man (*Prakṛti* is *anātmā*), this is counterposed by the reality of the self, the *attā*, which is its own master and ruler in the sphere of responsibility and the maker of its own fate. Here rules the commandment: *attadīpā viharatha* i. e. take your stand on the island of your self, and *Amata*, immortality will be your reward. And that is why complete cessation of craving, complete detachment from the working of physical nature, is equal to *Nirvāṇa* and *Amata*. He who is emancipated from his attachments is mentally released and spiritually happy. Where he is physically after the breaking up of the constituents, we do not know and cannot express; he must be somewhere but words are insufficient to describe his condition."

There is therefore much to be said for the suggestion made by Dr. E .J. Thomas that it is to this Nibbāna aspiration we must look, if anywhere, to find in Buddhism a recognition which corresponds to the recognition of the Divine in other religions. "Nirvāṇa . . . is not stated in such a way that it can be identified with God, but it may be said to be feeling after an expression of the same truth."<sup>78</sup> Nibbāna is the religious ultimate of Buddhism, and, just as men have failed to express all that God IS, so they have failed to express all that Nibbāna is. Like all such terms which reflect, however dimly, the 'reality of realities' it eludes philosophy while it inspires life.

<sup>78</sup> *The Life of Buddha*, chap. XIV, p. 208.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PARADOX OF BUDDHISM

#### 1. "At the End of the World"

A certain monk indulged in philosophical speculations, though this was against the teaching of the Buddha. The monk wanted to know where the world ended. He therefore left the Buddha and set out on a journey through the skies, questioning the gods of the different heavens, one after another. He questioned the gods who are called the Servants of the Four Kings. "Where does the world end?" But they replied, "Ask the Four Kings." When he came to the Four Kings, however, they replied, "Ask the Thirty Three Gods."

Finally the monk came to the gods who are called the Servants of Brahmā.

"No," they replied to his question, "we ourselves do not know where the world ends. But ask Brahmā — the Great Brahmā, The Supreme One, the Mighty One, the All-seeing One, the Creator, the Father of all that are and are to be. He will know."

As they spoke, Brahmā himself appeared.

The monk put his question.

"I am the Great Brahmā," he answered, "the Supreme One, the Mighty One, the Father of all that are and are to be."

"I do not ask you, friend," said the monk, "whether you are indeed all that you now say. What I want to find out is where the world ends, where the four great elements cease, leaving no trace behind."

The great Brahmā hastily took the monk by the arm, and led him aside.

"Monk," he confessed, "I do not myself know where the world ends. But I did not want these gods who are my servants to hear me say so. Therefore I gave no answer in their presence. They think I know everything. But I do not know where the world ends. You had better go back to Buddha and ask him. Accept whatever answer he may give."<sup>1</sup>

We venture to extend this parable from the scriptures. We can imagine the monk explaining that the Buddha will not discuss such questions; he does not speak plainly enough about Nibbāna.

<sup>1</sup> D. i, 215ff. (cf Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, pp. 280 ff.; cf. Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*, p. 308).

"If you, Brahmā, cannot tell me, I must continue my journey and find out for myself."

As he turned away, Brahmā called after him.

"There is one other thing I may tell you, monk. I am not really the Great Brahmā, though I did not say so in the presence of my servants. They think that I am."

"Then I must find the Great Brahmā," said the monk.

"You will have to find first where the world ends," came the reply. "For only there will you find the Great Brahmā."

The monk resumed his journey. Three days later, he met two other pilgrims, one a Hindu, the other a Jew. They told him that they also were seeking to find where the world ended. The Hindu added that he hoped to find Brahman there, and the Jew said he hoped to find God there.

"Then," thought the monk, "perhaps I may find Nibbāna there."

Encouraged by this new hope, he travelled bravely. At the end of seven days, the three pilgrims came at last to the place where the world ends. They stood at the edge of a cliff and looked down into the mists of the Abyss. There the Jew saw God, the Hindu saw Brahman and the monk saw Nibbāna. But none saw plainly. Neither could any one of them tell the others what he saw. Nor could they go any further. To each it was revealed that they must return to the world and come thither again by another path.

The monk returned to the Buddha.

"Tell me," said Buddha, "what you saw."

"I cannot," said the monk quietly. "You yourself know that I cannot. And I know now why you do not speak plainly of these things."

But from that day onwards the monk strove more earnestly than ever before to free himself from all impurities, all deceptions and all selfish attachments. He was steadfastly set towards Nibbāna.

Our additions to this story are intended to emphasise a threefold conclusion that (*a*) the Buddha knew all that was to be known; (*b*) he could not, however, tell plainly all that he knew; (*c*) yet that which he could not tell plainly was the most important of all: it concerned the very goal of life: Nibbāna.

And this goal was a religious goal. It was in order to emphasise this denotation of Nibbāna that we added to the original tale, alongside the Buddhist pilgrim, those two other pilgrims, each in quest of his own religious goal. If we would understand the Nibbāna language we must set the term in the context of faith, not in the context of philosophy or dogma. It is what we may call an ultimate religious term.

Further grounds for this conclusion should appear as we proceed with this present chapter, which marks a transition to a wider field of reference.

In the previous chapters we have tried to discern what Nibbāna means to the Burmese. We now begin to consider its wider significance. We have seen Nibbāna as a consummating, ultimate term in a religion which shapes Burmese life and culture. Yet it is a term which vexes Burmese understanding, a term struggling for expression in a mingling of apparently conflicting affirmations and negations. But it is this very struggle for expression which gives Nibbāna its significance for the study of religion in general. Rightly understood, the problem of Nibbāna is no isolated problem. Its solution concerns the nature of religious expression everywhere. Religion is primarily an affirmation. Why, then, after bold announcement, not only in Buddhism but in other religions too, must the ultimate affirmation be shrouded in mystifying negation? What is the fundamental reference of this negation? To these and similar questions our further study will lead.

It is a study which moves now towards a comparative survey. We shall begin with a reference to the general context of Hīnayāna (Southern) Buddhism. To complete our account of Buddhism, this will be followed by a reference to the Mahāyāna (Northern) context in which Nibbāna as a religious goal is merged with other terms, a development which gives us a stepping stone to the comparative survey of Hindu, Christian and kindred traditions where Nibbāna is no longer the goal.

What we must emphasise at the outset is that the comparison is not between concepts. Neither here, nor in our story of the monk, for example, is it suggested that the *idea* of Nibbāna corresponds to the idea of God or to the idea of Brahman. Our concern throughout is with terms presented by a religious situation, not with philosophical concepts, though the impact of philosophy upon this religious situation cannot, of course, be denied. It is the nature of religious expression which is now our primary interest. All that we have said in the previous chapters concerning the fundamentally religious character of Burmese Buddhism points to this definition of the grounds for comparison.

We turn, then, to a further consideration of the hope of Nibbāna, as it is expressed in the context of Hīnayāna Buddhism, first in the affirmative terms of analogy, secondly in terms of negation.

## 2. *The Buddhist Affirmation*

As the Goal of religious and moral effort, Nibbāna is clearly an affirmation. Like all religious affirmations, it is the announcement of truth believed to be revealed or discovered. The proclamation of Nibbāna is joined with the proclamation of the Buddha's enlightenment. The Buddha discerned both the Way and the End of the Way.

Mrs. Rhys Davids has suggested that the Buddha did not, in fact, use the name Nibbāna; the original aim was *attha*, signifying wholeness, health, man developed in religion to full stature; Nibbāna was but 'a cathartic discipline made in quest of the Aim.'<sup>2</sup> Even if this is conceded, Nibbāna became the name for the Buddhist goal at an early date.

In one of the most recent translations of the Pali text,<sup>3</sup> the term has been translated by the word, 'Cool.' "Consider some person who abides, seeing ill in all compounded things . . . seeing happiness in the Cool, conscious of it, aware of it . . . fathoming it by wisdom . . . he enters in the canker-less mind emancipation."<sup>4</sup> "An Ariyan disciple, aloof from sense desires, aloof from evil ideas, enters and abides in the first musing . . . for his own well-being and for faring to the Cool." (lit., descending (or entering) into Nibbāna).<sup>5</sup>

But this translation raises the question whether, after all, Nibbāna may not have signified, even to the first hearers, the Buddhist goal, the Buddha's gospel. Granted a narrower reference to the extinction of the hot lusts, the cankers of life, what better term could meet the yearning for release which filled the Indian mind — release from the dread cycle of recurrent rebirth under conditions of existence which were often grievous? It has frequently been emphasised that the Buddhist gospel must be seen against this background of belief in 'transmigration' and also against the background of climate and circumstance which shape religious aspiration. We are reminded of sultry summers in dry, parched country. But the modern West, so free from physical fever itself, needs to be reminded, perhaps, of another circumstance — the depressive influence of recurrent malaria which afflicts the mass of the Indian people — the violent heats of fever, lowering of vitality and consequent dejection. Men so troubled may well think first of escape, release, emancipation, seeking the Word which will spell this release, not in any mild debate, but with fevered eagerness.

The Buddha has sometimes been pictured as one among several cool-headed intellectuals, all of them dispassionately weighing the pros and cons of alternative disciplines. That is not the way the legendary accounts portray him. He is solitary in his coolness. He is shown as seated there beneath the peepul tree, the only calm, possessed figure, whilst the whole agitated world awaits the moment of his Enlightenment, the announcement of his gospel of release.

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, Preface to Vol. V, p. viii; cf. her *Sakya* 112, 167 f.; *Indian Religion* 8, 91.

<sup>3</sup> E. M. Hare, *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, Vol. iv, Translator's Preface, pp. xv f.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74, and footnote.

'The night fell. The fig tree showered red petals on the yellow robe of the future Buddha seated at its feet. Lost in meditation, knowing that the hour of his enlightenment was approaching, Gotama remained immobile. In the first watch of the night he acquired the knowledge of previous existence. Then he attained the divine outlook; finally, before the dawn, he penetrated the secret of Dependent Origination. And at that moment the universe was shaken to its very depths.'<sup>6</sup>

Then the Buddha, surrounded by glory and homage, spake these words:

Through birth and rebirth's endless round,  
Seeking in vain, I hastened on,  
To find who framed this edifice.  
What misery! — birth incessantly!

O builder! I've discovered thee!  
This fabric thou shalt ne'er rebuild!  
Thy rafters all are broken now,  
And pointed roof demolished lies!  
This mind has demolition reached,  
And seen the last of all desire!<sup>7</sup>

Whatever else this famous enigmatic verse may mean, at least it is an exclamation of relief and triumph. The Truth now is known, the Way discovered.

The consequent gospel is proclaimed at Benares, and historians agree that the text of this 'sermon' enshrines an authentic, original utterance.

It is the proclamation of a Middle Way avoiding two extremes — the extreme of sensuality and the extreme of self-mortification. But it is also the proclamation of a Goal, the promise of release, emancipation, deliverance. There would have been no gospel in announcing a new discipline unless this new discipline held the assurance of something better and different as its goal. And this goal is in fact twice emphasised in the short passage. "Now this very midway course, well understood by man so gone, making vision, making knowledge, leads on to peace, to wisdom, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna."<sup>8</sup>

Without a Nibbana, Buddhism would not be a gospel — a point emphasised in the *Udāna*: "There is, bhikkus, that wherein is no birth, which is not the result of becoming, which is unmade, unconditioned.

<sup>6</sup> d'Eypernon, *Les paradoxes du Bouddhisme*, Part I, chap. II, p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> Translation: H. C. Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*, 6<sup>th</sup> issue, chap. I, section 8, p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Mrs. Rhys Davids, *Sakya*, p. 55.

Where there is not such a thing, bhikkus, there would not be in this world the escape of what is born . . . . But because there is such a thing as Nibbāna . . . . therefore there is the escape.”<sup>9</sup> The point is further emphasised in a parallel passage in the *Itivuttaka*, in a verse which may be a later comment: Present existence is a ‘nest of sickness’ but

The escape therefrom, ’tis real, beyond the sphere  
Of reason, lasting, unborn, unproduced,  
The sorrowless, the stainless path that ends  
The things of woe, the peace from worries — bliss!<sup>10</sup>

“As where there is Ill there is ease, so where there is existence, there the escape from existence should be looked for.”<sup>11</sup>

It is, then, a gospel which is announced — a way of escape. And Nibbāna may be said to begin with the assurance that this deliverance is no longer an aspiration but a fact. In the enlightened bhikku “thus set free, there arises the knowledge of his emancipation, *and he knows*: Rebirth has been destroyed . . . .”<sup>12</sup> There is, indeed, challenge as well as assurance in the proclamation, as we have remarked earlier in the context of Burmese Buddhism, and it is necessary to keep this fact in mind for a due estimate of the import of Nibbāna. Nothing is promised to those who eschew the Middle Way or can be satisfied with present existence.

It is, however, the mode of the proclamation which concerns us, rather than its content, except in so far as that content is related to the mode. The Enlightened One speaks with absolute certitude. “Give ear then, for the Immortal is found. I reveal, I set forth the truth. As I reveal it to you, so act.”<sup>13</sup> Instructions concerning the Way are precise. Yet, so far as the Goal is concerned, there is little more than an assertion that such a goal is there.

In the passages from the minor anthologies quoted above, Nibbāna is indicated in negative terms — “not the result of becoming, . . . unmade, unconditioned.”

In other passages, many other passages, the terms are positive. “One might fill columns with the praises . . . lavished on . . . the condition of

<sup>9</sup> U. 80 (cf. trans. by F. L. Woodward, *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon* (P.T.S., London, 1935), Part II, p. 98; cf. Pe Maung Tin, “Essay on Nibbāna,” *J.B.R.S.*, Vol. VII, Part III, p. 225.)

<sup>10</sup> “The escape is apparent.” — It. 37 (cf. trans. F. L. Woodward, *op. cit.*, p. 142.)

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Pe Maung Tin, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> D. 158 (translation: Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, Part I, p. 204).

<sup>13</sup> M. 1. 172 and context. Chalmers (*Further Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, p. 122) translates: ‘Hearken to me, Almsmen. The Deathless has been won; I teach it; I preach the Doctrine. Live up to what I enjoin.’

the man made perfect according to the Buddhist faith. Many are the pet names, the poetic epithets . . . the harbour of refuge, the cool cave, the island amidst the floods, the place of bliss . . . the home of ease . . . the further shore."<sup>14</sup> Such terms may seem descriptive enough. Yet, when one considers them, is there not the suggestion of distance, remoteness, something which can only be glimpsed from afar — the harbour of refuge, by one who is still bound by the storm; the further shore, seen from afar by one who is still *en voyage*?

The same summary, it is true, gives other terms which may seem to bring Nibbāna nearer, psychological terms indicating a 'condition of mind' — the calm, the unshaken, the bliss of effort. To these others could be added. In the *Sutta Nipāta*, for example, Nibbāna is the place where one does not grieve, the tranquil state, the goal attained beyond 'the darkness of the stream,' the exceedingly pure, the imperishable, the condition of security, the firm ground and freedom from all doubt.<sup>15</sup> It is also described as the extinction of craving,<sup>16</sup> a term which will be considered more specifically in our next section.

But do these terms, in fact, bring Nibbāna nearer? A little, perhaps. Men can know, even in ordinary existence, a fitful tranquility, a partial security, a partial freedom from doubt. And two further terms are added, still more important, which may seem to bring Nibbāna yet nearer. The Arahant is described as 'him who is worthy' and Nibbāna is identified with this condition. It would seem therefore that as a man grows in moral character his approximate worth should give him approximate experience of what it means to be perfectly 'worthy' and there are scriptural passages which have this broad implication. A second term may be thought to point even further in the same direction. In text after text, Nibbāna is associated with perfect knowledge, with mental freedom, discipline and power. Nibbāna is realized 'when noble wisdom is realized'.<sup>17</sup> Asked by the King of Magadha if he could show any 'immediate fruit, in this world, of the life of a recluse,' the Buddha, after elaborating prior rewards and attainments, compared the emancipated saint to a man standing on the bank of a pool of clear, translucent water, seeing everything in the pool, oysters, shells, sand, with clear vision. "And there is no fruit of the life of a recluse . . . that is higher and sweeter than this."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Rhys Davids, *Early Buddhism*, pp. 72, 73; cf. *P.E.D.* on Nibbāna, p. 198f.

<sup>15</sup> *S.N.*, translated Fausboll, *S.B.E.*, Vol. X: Part II, pp. 13, 24, 92, 125, 141, 150, 171, 202.

<sup>16</sup> e.g. *ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>17</sup> *D. II.* 123. (cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, Part II, p. 131).

<sup>18</sup> *D. I.* 84, 85. (translation: Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, Part I, pp. 93, 4.

"Him I call indeed a Brahmana who . . . penetrates to the real, whether in earth, hell or heaven . . . a sage, perfected in knowledge."<sup>19</sup> It might seem therefore that growth in science and intellectual acumen would anticipate this experience of perfect knowledge, and there are various descriptions of the bhikku's discipline which indeed suggest a gradual growth towards full realization as life becomes more worthy and intellect more discerning. There are also texts which appear to suggest this more directly. "If lust be abandoned . . . to that extent, brahmin, Nibbāna is seen in this life. It is to be realised for themselves by the wise."<sup>20</sup> In the *Dhammapada*, the learned man who drives away vanity by earnestness is described as 'climbing the terraced heights of wisdom' and the bhikku who delights in reflection is close upon Nibbāna.<sup>21</sup> There are passages in which progress seems to be indicated, step by step, including progress from first discernments to higher knowledge and at last to final enlightenment in Nibbāna.

Surely at last we have brought Nibbāna nearer, in this capacity of the trained, persevering intellect? Not only, it would seem, is Nibbāna proclaimed as the goal but some glimpse of the goal itself is vouchsafed to those who are intelligent.

But here we come to the very core of the Buddhist paradox. At the summit of affirmation we are plunged into negation. For Nibbāna is not attained *through* enlightenment. Nibbāna *is* enlightenment. Nibbāna *is* Vision. Only by Vision can it be known and only to Vision can it be fully described. All power short of this Vision is inadequate. Intellect falls short. It is not despised, but neither is it exalted.

We have now to examine the nature and the reference of this negation.

### 3. *The Buddhist Negation*

Intellect is the busy apprentice of Vision. No one who has studied the exercises in concentration and meditation which form so large a part of the monk's discipline can doubt this function. It is not, indeed, a purely rationalistic function. The zealous Buddhist may be said to seek Nibbāna with all his heart, with all his mind and with all his strength. It is a discipline of the will and the emotions as much as a discipline of the mind. But the schooled, searching intellect certainly figures largely in this approach. There is a minute analysis, an elaborate classification, a sort

<sup>19</sup> *Dhp.* 423. for translation cf. *S.B.E.* X, 1, p. 96 and d'Eypernon, *ibid.*, 175.

<sup>20</sup> *A.* I. 156ff. (*The Book of Gradual Sayings*, Part I, p. 141).

<sup>21</sup> *Dhp.* 28ff. (cf. translation by Mrs. Rhys Davids, *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon*, Part I, p. 13).

of vivisection of phenomena, tearing existence asunder, piece by piece, until at last no fluttering thread is left to suggest delusive substance or present permanence. The flux is steadily discerned, the complex of intertwining relations displayed, that, through the flux, the mind may see Nibbāna. It is small wonder that Buddhists have claimed that their sages anticipated the methods and objectivity of modern science.

All this preliminary process, however, is negative. In itself it is not Vision. It is the clearing away of confusions to make Vision possible. One is reminded of the relation between patient research and the flash of intuition which has marked the progress of scientific discovery. Buddhists themselves have discussed, as we have seen, whether the resultant Vision should be regarded as enhanced intellectual discernment or distinguished as something radically different.

A glance at one of the mental exercises detailed in the Pali scriptures will illustrate the problem. The object of this exercise, called the Stages of Deliverance,<sup>22</sup> seems to be to deliver the aspirant from any illusion of substantiality in the phenomena around him; to train him to look Beyond. First he is to contemplate the form of his own body, then, unconscious of his own body, he is to contemplate forms exterior to himself. There follows a stage of intentness, dwelling on the thought, "It is fair." The fourth stage is attained "by passing wholly beyond all consciousness of material qualities (or forms), by the dying out of the awareness of sensory reaction, by the unheeding of any awareness of difference." Thus "he enters into that rapt ecstasy which is a consciousness of infinite space." "The idea of the infinity of space is the only idea that is present." Then he leaves space behind and thinks only of the infinity of reason or intellect (*viññānānañca*).<sup>23</sup> Next he dwells on the thought, "Nothing at all exists." Then he "remains in the state of mind to which neither ideas nor the absence of ideas are specifically present, and finally he reaches the stage of mind in which both sensations and ideas have ceased to be." Other exercises focus the mind on particular objects in order to realise their impermanence. The discipline involves a resolute effort to look away from and beyond all conditioned existence.

Since Nibbāna Vision is the vision of *unconditioned* reality, it might be considered that such a resolute detachment from conditioned reality as that indicated in the exercises would resolve into Vision, or that Vision might be construed as right direction and enhanced power of intellect. The Lēdī Sayādaw seems to give a qualified support to such an interpretation. "For those whose knowledge has been abundantly trained in the doctrines of the intuitively wise Ariyan philosophers, even their inferential

<sup>22</sup> *D.* II, 112f.; *D.* III, 262f.;

<sup>23</sup> *A.* IV, 306. cf. Keith, *Buddhist Philosophy*, chap. VI, p. 124.

knowledge may be said to partake of the nature of intuitive knowledge, since it invariably leads to the latter kind. By persistent cultivation that inferential knowledge is changed into intuitive knowledge."<sup>24</sup> And Shwe Zan Aung speaks of 'resort to a very peculiar and complicated process to win a momentary flash of abhiññā' (intuition, super-intellection).<sup>25</sup> Apprentice intellect, then, may have glimpses, perchance, of Nibbāna.

But a fleeting glimpse is a very different thing from the steady vision, the perfect understanding which betokens Nibbāna. Nor does it greatly affect the issue whether the full Nibbāna Vision is regarded as a difference in kind or a difference in degree from probing intellect. What is emphasised in Buddhist thought and practice is the fact that the difference is there, however it may be conceived.

Between the knowledge which belongs to enlightenment and the knowledge which precedes this enlightenment there is a wide gulf fixed. For this latter knowledge is still clouded by ignorance, hindered by corruptions not yet destroyed. Hence the Buddha's rebuke to his questioner: "It is possible, brethren, that some senseless fellow, sunk in ignorance and led astray by craving, may think to go beyond the Master's teaching!"<sup>26</sup> Hence the fact that he speaks, indeed, as Master. Hence the Buddha's authority. "The Buddha," it has been said, "speaks from experience"<sup>27</sup> — but, in the view of his followers, it is from super-normal experience. Therefore it is the Buddha's word upon which his followers base their teaching; the grain of that teaching they gather from the granary he has provided.<sup>28</sup> And the Buddha, for his part, distinguishes himself from other teachers who are still groping in blindness.<sup>29</sup>

It is this gulf in experience which partly explains his silence on questions which have since been classed by his followers as the Great Indeterminates, questions which the Buddha left open, answering neither Yea nor Nay.<sup>30</sup> Various reasons have been given for this silence.

It has been suggested that the Buddha himself did not know the answers or that he had reached no clear conclusion.<sup>31</sup> Or that he was not interested in philosophy, indeed, distrusted philosophy, and these ques-

<sup>24</sup> "Some Points in Buddhist Doctrine," *J.P.T.S.* 1913—14, p. 115; cf. also Mrs Rhys Davids, *The Birth of Indian Psychology*, chap. xx, pp. 425, 426.

<sup>25</sup> *Compendium of Philosophy*, p. 225.

<sup>26</sup> *A.* III. 104.

<sup>27</sup> Reischauer, *Studies in Japanese Buddhism*, chap. I, p. 30.

<sup>28</sup> *A.* IV. 163.

<sup>29</sup> *Ud.* 68.

<sup>30</sup> *D.* I. 17ff.; *D.* I. 187 etc.

<sup>31</sup> Keith, *Buddhist Philosophy*, chap. II, p. 45.

tions were speculative. For this last explanation, there is some support in the Pali scriptures. "The jungle, the desert, the puppet show, the writhing, the entanglement of speculation . . . conduce neither to wisdom, nor to insight. . . ." <sup>32</sup> There is still stronger support for the suggestion that his silence was dictated by pastoral motives; "This question is not calculated to profit," the Buddha tells Potthapāda, "it is not concerned with the Dhamma." <sup>33</sup> Rhys Davids suggests that the speculations were eschewed because they were based on insufficient evidence. <sup>34</sup> But insufficient evidence for whom? For the Buddha himself, it might be said from the standpoint of the critical historian. We are considering the question, however, from the standpoint of his followers, from the standpoint of the Buddhist faith. From such a point of view there can be no question of insufficient evidence: the Buddha knew all that was to be known; he was the Enlightened One. But the Buddha himself might well consider that there was insufficient evidence for the disputants and for his followers who had not yet attained the Nibbāna vision. That, in fact, is the attitude indicated. Professor Keith, it is true, argues the contrary: the Buddha's agnosticism is "not based on any reasoned conviction of the limits of knowledge." <sup>35</sup> But against the evidence which Dr. Keith emphasises — the Buddha's admission that he did not reveal the past, even when true, if it did not tend to edification — there are the Buddha's answers which imply that what he had in mind was the flimsy basis of the views disputed, the vain arguments, as much as the views themselves. "In this case, brethren, some recluse or Brahman is addicted to logic and reasoning. He gives utterance to the following conclusion of his own, beaten out by his argumentations." <sup>36</sup> "In this case, brethren, some . . . Brahman . . . resorts to wriggling like an eel." <sup>37</sup> The Buddha contrasts his own omniscience with the limited knowledge of these stumbling metaphysicians. *He knows. They only surmise.*

Apart, however, from any 'proof text,' such an attitude is the consequence of the gulf envisaged between an experience informed by Vision and an experience deprived of this Vision. The ten questions specifically listed as Indeterminates all refer to what might be regarded as 'unconditioned reality' — the ultimate nature of the world, the ultimate nature of man, the nature of Nibbāna. <sup>38</sup> Since Vision alone penetrates to this

<sup>32</sup> Eg. *M.* i. 455, trans. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.* Part I, p. 254).

<sup>33</sup> *D.* i. 188.

<sup>34</sup> *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, p. 188.

<sup>35</sup> Keith, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>36</sup> *D.* i. 21, (trans. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, Part I, p. 34).

<sup>37</sup> *D.* i. 27, (trans. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, Part I, p. 39).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, p. 187.

hidden realm, there is an iron curtain between those who stand without and those who stand within. In the case of Nibbāna, regarded as a symbol, the reference differs in each case. For the initiate the reference is an experience realized, for the uninitiate the reference is the anticipation of this experience and the surmises which may accompany this anticipation. What language can fitly represent the soaring, ice-bound Himalayan peaks to a tropical islander who has known neither altitude, cold, snow nor distance of landscape? Herein was the Buddha's difficulty, dictated by the very logic of the situation. Of that which was known to him only, he could not speak plainly. He could, indeed, speak plainly about the Way, since the Way began in an experience known to his hearers. He could connote that Way. But he could only *denote* Nibbāna. The difficulty was appreciated by his disciples. "If, sir, the Lord were to explain absolute Nibbāna as purity of life or as any other of the purities you name, then he would make it contingent and not absolute." Progress in purity is likened to a monarch's progress in relays of seven carriages, one after the other. Those who have only known the first stages of the journey cannot understand terms which derive from the seventh stage, and they may be misled by terms which only refer to the earlier stages.<sup>39</sup>

"The Buddhists were fully aware that for philosophic purposes ordinary language was highly misleading."<sup>40</sup> Kitta is told that the names for the three modes of personality "are merely names, expressions, turns of speech." A Tathāgata may, on occasion, employ these "designations in common use in the world . . . but (he) is not led astray by them."<sup>41</sup> Nor would he lead his hearers astray.

Hence the Buddhist negation. Similes of Nibbāna, the unconditioned reality, are recognised as approximate and possibly misleading. In the final resort, the language of negation is preferred. Nibbāna is Cessation, Extinction. It is also to be sharply distinguished from present existence. It is the opposite of life's chiefest ills.<sup>42</sup> "Verily, there is a realm where there is neither the solid, nor the fluid, neither heat nor motion, neither this world nor any other world, neither sun nor moon. This I call neither arising nor passing away, neither standing still, nor being born, nor dying . . . This is the end of Ill."<sup>43</sup> "Now Nibbāna, which is reckoned as beyond these worlds . . . is threefold, namely Void, Signless (*animitta*), Not hankered after."<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *M.* i. 148, 149 (trans. Chalmers, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 105).

<sup>40</sup> Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, p. 59.

<sup>41</sup> *D.* i. 202 (cf. trans. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, Part I, p. 263).

<sup>42</sup> *Dhp.* 203.

<sup>43</sup> *Ud.* 80 (cf. trans. by Woodward, *op. cit.*, p. 99).

<sup>44</sup> *Compendium of Philosophy*, Part VI, p. 168.

Distrust of conventional terms, recognition of logic's incapacity implies, however, no disparagement of intellect, for rightly used, intellect may prepare the way for Vision. It is often emphasised by Buddhists that the Buddha, indeed, encouraged this use. Whilst they respect his authority — one might say, his 'revelation' — they claim that he demanded no blind faith or lip-assent. The Doctrine "is open to all, a guide Onwards to be mastered for himself by every intelligent man" and the disciples are commended because they affirm 'only what they of themselves have known, seen and discerned.'<sup>45</sup>

#### 4. *The Reference of the Negation*

What is indicated, therefore, is not the total incapacity of intellect but its limitation in the presence of an ultimate religious situation. It is this limitation which is the reference of the Buddhist Negation. It relates to the goal of a religious pilgrimage, and it denies the possibility of discerning this goal by intellectual inquiry alone. If we accept this conclusion, we may dismiss two other denials which frequently confuse the interpretation of Buddhism: the apparent denial of a life after death, and the apparent denial of the soul.

The denial of continuance after death is involved in nihilistic interpretations which suggest that Nibbāna means the extinction of any conceivable life, here or hereafter. Etymologically, Nibbāna signifies dying out, cessation, extinction. The prevailing Buddhist metaphor is the extinction of fire.<sup>46</sup> Earlier interpreters in the West too easily concluded that these terms signified the extinction of the flame of life itself. They supposed that the Nibbāna negation could only refer to the dying out of a soul, and, as Rhys Davids remarked, there were endless discussions as to whether this meant eternal trance, or absolute annihilation, of the soul.<sup>47</sup> To-day, perhaps, it is more generally recognised that the 'dying out' refers, not to life itself, but to the three-fold fire which corrupts life — the fire of lust, the fire of ill-will and the fire of stupidity.<sup>48</sup> Thus it is not the possibility of life which is negated, but the destructive fires which hinder this possibility. Indeed, in this reference, we have rather an affirmation than an ultimate negation, an affirmation clothed in negative terms. In its early meaning, it has been said, Nibbāna was a "negative

<sup>45</sup> *M.* i. 265.

<sup>46</sup> *P.E.D.*, pp. 198ff., where it is pointed out that Pali usage indicates fire extinguished by other means than by 'blowing out.'

<sup>47</sup> *Early Buddhism*, p. 73.

<sup>48</sup> *raga, dosa, moha.*

term for health," a term which announced an inviting possibility.<sup>49</sup> And Professor Pe Maung Tin has pointed out that some Buddhist commentators explain that the term, *nirodha* (cessation) means not only the removal of present hindrance but the removal of any cause of future hindrance.<sup>50</sup>

Nihilistic theories have also been supported by reference to certain texts, most of which are susceptible of a rival interpretation. In the *Sutta Nipāta*, for example, the Muni who sees the end of birth and destruction (i. e. Nibbāna) is said not to enter the number (of living beings) but in the next verse he is also said to have reached the other shore.<sup>51</sup> Again, the enlightened man is said to recognise that continuing existence is dogged by decay and death — but this may only refer to existence under present conditions, not continuance in Nibbāna.<sup>52</sup>

Rhys Davids himself, arguing that the Buddhist goal is sanctity in this present life, only postpones the moment of annihilation until after death. The denial of the soul, he affirms, leaves no loophole for any conception of survival.

All these arguments, however, are beside the point if, for intellect, there is no knowing, and if it is accepted that the Buddha did not speak plainly.

Secondly, our interpretation of Nibbāna as a term which by its very nature as a religious ultimate sets limits to intellectual curiosity, should throw some light on a question which vexes all Western expositors of Buddhism. I refer to the difficulty of reconciling the belief in Nibbāna with the apparent Buddhist denial of belief in the soul. Here, it might be said, we have the supreme paradox of Buddhism, or (some would say) the supreme inconsistency. Reconciliation of positive and negative statements concerning Nibbāna is comparatively easy, it has been observed, beside 'the much more difficult and more important task of showing that the very conception of Nibbāna does not contradict the entire system' of Buddhism.<sup>53</sup> For this system, by its An-attā doctrine, seems to negate the possibility of individual personality. Therefore, whether we say that Nibbāna signifies extinction of life or continuance of life, we are faced, in either case, by awkward questions: who is there to die, or who is there to

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Mrs. Rhys Davids: *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon*, Part I, p. 71, footnote.

<sup>50</sup> 'Buddhist Nibbāna: an Essay,' *J.B.R.S.*, Vol. VIII, Part III, p. 223.

<sup>51</sup> *S.N.* 208, 209 (*S.B.E.*, Vol. x).

<sup>52</sup> *M.* i. 6.

<sup>53</sup> "tâche plus difficile et beaucoup plus importante, de montrer que la conception même du Nirvāna ne rend pas contradictoire le système tout entier." — d'Eypernon, *Les paradoxes du Bouddhisme*, Part II, chap. i, p. 187.

survive? Accepting the positive interpretation of Nibbāna, we seem to be left with the contradiction of a Great Peace to be enjoyed for ever — and nobody to enjoy it!

Various efforts have been made to resolve the conflict, including, as we have seen, attempts by Buddhist thinkers themselves to prove that the An-attā doctrine does not imply the impossibility of personal survival: there may be a new formation of sound aggregates to constitute the kind of life which *can* survive.

The most recent argument by a European writer in favour of a 'survival theory' consistent with Buddhist premises has been advanced by Father Taymans d'Eypernon, formerly professor at the Pontifical Seminary, Kandy, Ceylon.<sup>54</sup> He cites passages from the Pali Canon which picture an ideal condition of perfect mental detachment in which the emancipated monk has snapped all ties which bind him to the temporal sequence of cause and effect.<sup>55</sup> There is the conception of a *new* life of perfect felicity, the conception of liberation from previous slavery.<sup>56</sup> It is, he thinks, significant that Buddhist monks have sought this goal for centuries, cultivating the interior life, undisturbed by the apparent contradiction between this idea of Nibbāna and the denial of the soul, though their literature reflects many discussions without any clear resolution of the problem.

He sees the key to the solution in the conception of three kinds of activity: bad action with bad results, good action producing temporal happiness, and, thirdly, *perfect* action, when the will is detached from all instability and the action is 'indifférente ou stérile.' A further distinction has to be made between the act itself and the determinations of the act. These determinations are manifold, but they do not constitute the essence of the act. The conception of 'l'action indifférente' in the condition of perfect detachment proves this. It is a fundamental distinction in Buddhist philosophy and ascetic practice.

"We ourselves conceive existence (l'être) firstly as a thing in which we then discover activity.... For a Buddhist, to conceive existence as *a thing* . . . is to identify the essence of existence with . . . immobility. He must therefore resolutely abandon this point of view and identify existence with activity."

For the notion of substance we must substitute the idea of cause. To be is to produce. Permanent reality is this causal activity. Everything which exists, including man, is, at any one moment, both cause and effect: *être cause; être causé*.

<sup>54</sup> *Les Paradoxes du Bouddhisme*, Part II, chap. 2, p. 201 ff.

<sup>55</sup> *A.* IV 421, 426, 428; *M.* II 264—265.

<sup>56</sup> *D.* I. 72.

"Suppose that this chain of causality develops in Space (a reality admitted by primitive Buddhism as eternal and immutable . . . .) while, beyond space, there is Nirvāna, a reality also eternal and immutable, the state where all relative causality ceases. Suppose, finally, that a method has been discovered which permits that moment of causality called 'man,' to break the chain, to break away from the series of causal antecedents and consequents in Space, does it follow that that moment called 'man' is thereby annihilated? He would cease to be the product of another, cease to pass into another, but, for that very reason, he would cease to be relative and changeable; il serait pour soi et à soi; il serait *nirvané*."<sup>57</sup> In terms of the classical Buddhist illustration of the tree and its fruit, the fruit eaten and its stone dropped to the ground to become a new tree, the 'moment called man,' would cease to be the causal kernel of consequents; he would subsist in himself and for himself.

Primitive Buddhism, essentially a philosophy of action, did not deny the existent being (l'être); it only denied the Hindu conception of the immutable Ātman. Buddhist premises, Father d'Eyepnon concludes, do not involve the denial of "l'être spirituel;" they involve the necessity of recognising such being as pure activity 'sans cesse en travail.' If, therefore, one seeks in Buddhism for a description of true personality, one must not look to the conditions of present *Samṣāra* existence, where personality is but a mewling babe in the cradle of impermanence; one must consider man in the condition of Nibbāna, all the germs of perfection purified and ripened.

Hīnayāna Buddhism has been described as a radical pluralism, and the Karma-systems derived from concurring elements of the universe might be described as monads if that term did not exclude, in its classical connotation, all transitive activity. Nor is the Buddhist monad shaped and determined from the beginning. Its destiny is determined in the play of activities, and amongst the factors influencing this activity, Buddhism, from the beginning, distinguished between the sense order based on *Rūpa*, and the intellectual order grouped around *Viññāṇa* or consciousness in the widest sense of the word.<sup>58</sup>

It therefore admits various tendencies in human activity, and personality is thus discerned, if only in germ or embryo, under present, *Samṣāra* conditions. Doubtless there is no clear distinction between the soul and its faculties — a lack due to the exclusive attention paid to activity. But it can be said in justification of this point of view that personality appears in experience as something incessantly made and remade, and at

<sup>57</sup> d'Eyepnon, *ibid.*, Part II, p. 208.

<sup>58</sup> "L'ordre intellectuel gravitant autour de la Viññāṇa ou conscience au sens le plus large du mot," d'Eyepnon, *ibid.*, Part II, p. 211.

no one point in this line of development is it possible to find one stable expression of the personality. The totality of expressions is bound up in activity itself, but this totality, under *Samsāra* conditions, never comes to a point: after each life another commences. Personality is only acquired when the germinal flowers in the Unchangeable.

Nibbāna is the flowering of personality.<sup>59</sup> In self-supporting activity, pure activity, detached from any temporal determination, the Nibbāna personality results from the Buddhist discipline which may be said to have as its object this very achievement of personality. Primitive Buddhism was not so far removed from the conception of a soul as is sometimes supposed — a conception which Father d'Eypernon compares with the definition of personality given in Scholastic Philosophy. He suggests that it is partly the failure to note the scholastic definition of the soul which has prevented full recognition of the implications of the Buddhist approach. Buddhism, he concludes, is not inconsistent; it is incomplete — incomplete because it provides no principle of unity.

In favour of Father d'Eypernon's exposition is the fact that he links his solution not only to Buddhist theory, but to Buddhist life, especially to the cultivation of the interior life as pursued in the monastery. There is, however, in such an emphasis some danger of reviving the caricature of the Hīnayāna monk which represents him as entirely and selfishly concerned with his own salvation. Against such an exaggeration, we have to set all that has been previously said about the relation of the monastery to the life of the community. We have also to set the kind of ethical teaching contained in the Parable of the Saw where the monks are bidden 'to enfold the whole world in their radiant thoughts of love.'<sup>60</sup>

Incidentally, it is only part of the truth that the Buddhist objection to 'soul theory' was primarily a reaction against 'the fixation of the Hindu theory of the Ātman.'<sup>61</sup> There is ground for the view that the Buddhist objection is partly ethical. The Buddhist denies the soul, not only as a false core of permanence but as a false core of separation, detaching man from the rest of Nature. As against Monism, Hīnayāna Buddhism may be described as a pluralism, but it is a pluralism in which the whole of Nature seeps into every part of it.<sup>62</sup>

The basic Buddhist objection to soul theories, however, is just the fact that they *are* theories. It is remembered that two questions of the kind are listed among the unprofitable questions to which the Buddha gave

<sup>59</sup> "Le Nirvāna est l'épanouissement de la personne," d'Eypernon, *ibid.*, S. 212.

<sup>60</sup> *M.* I. 127 (trans. Chalmers, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 88).

<sup>61</sup> d'Eypernon, *ibid.*, Part. II, Section 2, chap. 2, p. 201.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. A. N. Whitehead, *Nature and Life*, p. 31.

no answer: Is the soul the same as the body? Is the soul one thing, and the body another?<sup>63</sup> In popular Buddhism, not only Nibbāna, but Life itself, is often considered an ultimate mystery, and there is more than a hint of the same attitude among the scholars. They know that the clouded intellect is confronted by the great Negation.

"I am at a loss and bewildered," exclaims Vaccha.

"You ought to be at a loss," replies the Buddha. "For this Doctrine is profound, recondite, hard to comprehend . . . beyond dialectic . . . only to be understood of the wise. What think you, Vaccha? If there were a fire blazing in front of you, would you know it?"

"Yes."

"If the fire went out and you were asked in what direction it had gone, whether to east, west, north or south, could you give an answer?"

The Buddha does not wait for an answer. The question, he remarks, does not apply.

"Profound, measureless, unfathomable, is the Truth Finder", he observes, "even as the ocean. Reborn does not apply to him, nor not-reborn, nor any combination of such terms."<sup>64</sup>

'The question does not apply.' May we not say that the reason why it does not apply is because it is an alien? It does not belong to this soil; it derives from a different realm of discourse. Nibbāna is contained in a Credo sprung from the ground of religious experience and aspiration. But theories concerning the soul belong to the realm of philosophy. They have their home in the kingdom where intellect can rule. In the kingdom of religion this rule is challenged. Philosophy, no doubt, is the small brother of Religion, though partly nurtured on alien soil. Buddhism does not entirely dismiss this small brother, or deny the kinship. It allows him to run alongside, asking questions. He may even be useful to prepare the ground for Religion's occupation. But Orthodoxy never allows him to take possession. Heretics, within the fold, and critics without, have not always been so perceptive: they have not realised the small brother's thievish nature; they would allow him to build his theories on Religion's territory and even pull down the temple of Nibbāna to make room for them. A Negation used by the Buddha to ward off disturbing speculation has been used in the very interests of speculation.

We conclude, then, that the reference of the Nibbāna negation is determined by an essentially religious situation. It results from the paradoxical tension of that situation. It belongs to the language of faith. The negative terms employed are just as much an affirmation of this faith as the associated picture-terms of analogy which are more obviously positive.

<sup>63</sup> *D.* I. 188.

<sup>64</sup> *M.* I. 487, 488.

5. *Nirvana in Mahāyāna Buddhism*

Crossing a narrow borderland, we turn now to the similar yet different context of Mahāyāna Buddhism, where the difference is marked by the fact that Nibbāna becomes Nirvana, not only in script but in concept. This difference from the Hīnayāna tradition is also marked by the fact that Nirvana can no longer be denoted, without major qualification, as the ultimate religious term: it is joined with, or supplanted by, the term, *Dharmakāya*: the Cosmic Buddha, the ultimate reality. We have therefore begun our comparative survey.

The distinction between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna Buddhism can be, and has been, drawn too sharply. Fundamental affinities are more important than the obvious differences. But it is these differences which emphasise the Nirvana paradox. Philosophically, the general trend is away from pluralism towards monism; religiously, the movement is towards theism or pantheism. To move northward in the Buddhist world, from Burma to China, is to move into a realm of greater variety and richer symbolism, and the journey has been compared with a journey from a Protestant to a Catholic country. Because of this variety, however, any general statement concerning Mahāyāna Buddhism is always subject to qualification, and we need to remember that among the different schools of Buddhist thought to be found in China and Japan there are some which bear a closer resemblance to Hīnayāna schools than others.

If it had been our purpose to compare one concept of Nirvana with another, then it would be necessary to explore these different schools, exhibiting and remarking changes in concept. Our concern, however, is with the mode of expression, and our immediate purpose is to show that the paradoxical expression of Nirvana is not confined to Southern Buddhism: it extends throughout the Buddhist world. It is therefore sufficient to select examples which will indicate this ground of comparison.

The Mahāyāna tradition is generally regarded as more speculative than the Hīnayāna tradition. It may, perhaps, be allowed that in this Northern realm the restless brother, Philosophy, makes a bolder attempt to take possession. At the same time, the religious affirmation is, if anything, more decided. Nirvana, whilst it is the subject of philosophical speculation, is still a religious goal. Its association with the concept of *Dharmakāya* leads both to new adventures in thought and new heights of religious aspiration.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>65</sup> "For the mystic, the ultimately real of his experience was *tathatā*, 'suchness.' As the goal of his attainment it was Nirvāṇa, and as the object of his thought it was Buddha as the *dharmakāya*." E. J. Thomas *The History of Buddhist Thought*: chap. xvii, pp. 225ff.

Buddha is deified. He is no longer simply a human voice announcing the Way to the Beyond, but the Beyond itself — the Absolute, the eternal Buddha Essence, Dharmakāya, the noumenal, abiding Reality underlying all phenomenal existence, transcending all apparent distinctions. Enlightenment signifies the recognition of this noumenal substratum, Nirvana the consummation which follows when man awakens to the knowledge that he is, in his very nature, one with Buddha. In Hīnayāna Buddhism we have noted some ground for a similar identification in the comparison between the Arahāt's sanctity and the experience of Nibbāna. In the Mahāyāna tradition, the identification is more cosmological. "Buddha and Nirvāṇa are different names for the same thing."<sup>66</sup> Nirvana is an Abraham's Bosom, with the Buddha as an Eternal Abraham.<sup>67</sup>

Nirvana, therefore, is still the goal, still the symbol of assurance, joining the older conceptions with the new. What is significant for our present inquiry is the fact that the language of paradox is, if anything, emphasised even more strongly by these new associations. Both affirmation and negation are more pronounced.

In popular thought, affirmation is so vigorous that it frequently pictures a Paradise offering every conceivable allurements, including those sensuous enjoyments which earlier Buddhism deprecated.<sup>68</sup> "In the land of Highest Happiness there are waters in eight lakes; the water in every lake consists of seven jewels which are soft and yielding. . . . From the King of Jewels that fulfils every wish, stream forth the golden-coloured rays excessively beautiful, the radiance of which transforms itself into birds possessing the colours of a hundred jewels. . . ."<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, this Nirvana is far, far distant. The Western Paradise of Amida Buddhism is said to be "ten trillion worlds" away.<sup>70</sup> As in Southern Buddhism, this idea of remoteness corresponds, in popular religion, to the negative terms of abstract thought. Distance is further emphasised in the Mahāyāna tradition by the Bodhisattva conception which represents the Buddha-Beings postponing their own consummation in order to succour humanity — a conception of Divine grace which implies man's need of that grace to reach the far goal and even to discern the Way.

<sup>66</sup> Th. Stcherbatsky, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa*, chap. xvi, p. 48.

<sup>67</sup> This brief summary does not, of course, represent all the modifications of different schools of Mahāyāna exposition.

<sup>68</sup> Reischauer, *Studies in Japanese Buddhism*, chap. II, p. 59.

<sup>69</sup> Amitāyur-Dhyāna-sūtra, sec. 13, as quoted by Reischauer, *ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>70</sup> Reischauer, *ibid.*, chap. v, p. 247; cf. same author's trans. of *Genshin's Ojo Yōshū*, pp. 84, 92.

This conception of grace mingles with the more abstruse thought of the great Mahāyāna classic, *The Awakening of Faith*, attributed at one time to Aśvaghoṣa, the sage whose missionary activity helped to establish the faith in Northern India and Kasmir. Here, too, we find a vigorous affirmation of the goal, for the book is written that all sentient beings may "become acquainted with the final aim of their efforts." Indeed, throughout the book, in spite of its abstract terms, there is a sustained glow of evangelical fervour. The author wants his readers to share the joy of believing. He wants them to know the truth which will set them free from hesitation and give them an 'immovable faith.' "I write this Discourse," he says, "in order that all beings may rid themselves of doubt, become free from evil attachment, and, by the awakening of faith, inherit Buddha-seeds."<sup>71</sup>

The truth is there, persuasive throughout the universe, if they would but recognise it. They are on the very threshold of bliss, if they did but know it, for "Buddha teaches that all beings are from all eternity ever abiding in Nirvana."<sup>72</sup> They must learn to see this eternal Nirvana in and through and beyond this world of appearances. For Nirvana is but another name for the basic Reality, the essential Unity which embraces all things. The aggregates of personality have only relative existence. Therefore the thought of death should bring no terror.

Appearances are illusory. They suggest particularity, separation, individuality. But man, by enlightened intuition, can see through this world of appearances to the basic Reality, which is Buddha, which is Nirvana, which is Man himself. Philosophically, this ultimate Reality is named Suchness (*Bhūtatathatā*).<sup>73</sup> All beings embody this Suchness, but Bodhisattvas and Buddhas do so in higher degree.

In religious terms, the author sets before his readers the belief that every man can become a Buddha and by doing so attain the bliss which is Nirvana. And he is encouraged to do so by the belief that those who have already attained are compassionately concerned to inspire and assist others to follow in their path. "The inherent tendency of each mind to seek Suchness is supported by the love and compassion of Bodhisattvas and Buddhas, who are higher embodiments of Suchness."<sup>74</sup> "All Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the ten quarters having great, unimpeded super-

<sup>71</sup> *The Awakening of Faith*: translated by Teitaro Suzuki, pp. 47 ff.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>73</sup> Timothy Richard, in the Introduction to his translation of *The Awakening of Faith*, translates differently. For our present purpose, however, the point is immaterial, since we are concerned with the mode of expression, not its meaning.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Keith, *Buddhist philosophy*, chap. xv, p. 255.

natural powers (*abhiññā*), are able to emancipate all suffering beings by means of various expediences that are good and excellent." Thus encouraged, novices should seek to perfect faith, by practising charity, morality, patience, energy, cessation (tranquility) and intellectual insight, until, free from all doubts, they know that "they will assuredly be able to be born in the Buddha-country beyond, when they pass away from this present life."<sup>75</sup>

In philosophical terms, this belief in divine grace is expressed by the conclusion that Suchness *perfumes* or impresses intelligence. Thus It dissipates the ignorance which hinders progress; It induces first the aspiration for release from the round of birth and death, and next the conviction that we must look beyond the world of illusory appearances to realise our nature and our destiny.

The same awakening of faith, however, brings us to the agnosticism of faith. The great affirmation must now express itself in terms of negation.

For how can we describe this Suchness? Not by words suggested by this world of appearances where, because of our "confused subjectivity," we distinguish this from that, under the forms of individuation. It is true that the Buddha himself used such words, but he only did so provisionally and he emphasised their inadequacy. He knew their deceptive character. He knew that the true nature of Reality cannot be expressed by symbols suggested by the contingent world. He wanted his followers to abandon such symbolism. "Because, if they indulge themselves in reasonings, attach themselves to sophistry, and thus foster their subjective particularisation, how could they have the true wisdom (*tattvajñāna*) and attain to Nirvana?"<sup>76</sup>

All that can be expressed in language is the term, Suchness. Using this term we can say that once we understand that subjectivity is empty and unreal, then "we perceive the pure Soul manifesting itself as eternal, permanent, immutable and completely comprising all things that are." But to emphasise the full reality of the situation, the author prefaces this very qualified affirmation by a comprehensive Negation: "Suchness is neither that which is existence, nor that which is non-existence; nor that which is not at once existence and non-existence. It is neither that which is unity, nor that which is plurality, nor that which is at once unity and plurality, nor that which is not at once unity and plurality."<sup>77</sup>

In short, language fails us. It fails us because it bespeaks our confused intelligence under present conditions. It enables us to *denote* the Eternal Reality which is in the very marrow of our life, both its foundation and its goal, but it does not enable us to connote that Reality. Suchness (or

<sup>75</sup> *The Awakening of Faith* (trans. Suzuki) pp. 128, 145-47.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Nirvana) can be grasped only by *insight*.<sup>78</sup> It is a conclusion which recalls the word of our Burmese expositor: No intuition, no salvation. The Mahāyāna sage believes that here and now we can develop an intuition which discerns the Way more clearly and the goal from afar; but what we can thus discern cannot be adequately expressed, still less the saving knowledge which derives from perfect insight.

We have, then, in this Mahāyāna context, the same paradox of affirmation and negation, of sustaining faith and halting language, which we found in the Hīnayāna tradition — a paradox of faith manifest, indeed, throughout the Buddhist world, and, not only there, but throughout the world denoted by other great religious traditions, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish and Christian. In the next chapter we shall indicate this ubiquity.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

## CHAPTER V

### THE REALM OF PARADOX

#### *1. The Ground of Comparison*

It is the purpose of this present chapter to show that the mode of paradox exemplified in Buddhism is not confined to Buddhism. It is also manifest in Hinduism and Christianity — in fact, in all the great religious traditions, strikingly evident at a certain stage of culture and reflection.

The fact that such a comparison is possible is significant, not only for the study of Buddhism, as an index of its essentially religious character, but also for the study of religion generally. This significance will be discussed in the next chapter. Meantime, it is necessary to define terms and make certain distinctions which should elucidate the ground of comparison and prevent misunderstanding.

In the history of the study of religion we may observe a gradual shifting of the basis of comparison, an excavation digging down from surface levels to hidden foundations. A first, somewhat naive approach, concerned with similarity of *names*, is succeeded by the recognition that names are frequently misleading. The name, God, for example, may refer to concepts which are not only different but contradictory: the ethical monotheism of later Judaism excludes earlier concepts of tribal deity. On the other hand, the absence of such a name, or even its denial, does not necessarily involve the absence of theistic recognitions, implications or impulses. There may, for example, be a theistic impulse in Theravāda Buddhism, in spite of all surface appearances to the contrary.

Nor is this far-reaching distinction between name and concept confined to proper names. Oldenberg, in his classic discussion of Nirvana, quotes the passage from the *Udāna* to which we have previously referred: "There is, O disciples, an unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, unformed. Were there not, O disciples . . . there would be no possible exit from the world of the born, originated, created, formed." "These words," he observes, "seem to sound as if we heard Brahmanical philosophers talking of the Brahma, the unborn, intransient which is neither great nor small, the name of which is" No, No, "for no word can exhaust its being." Having thus remarked the similarity of the negative terms, however, he immediately

emphasises the difference of context and he suggests that the underlying concepts were different: while the Brahmanical use of the terms implied the escape *from* something *to* something, the Buddhist use merely implied escape *from* something, with no thought of a veritable 'reality' beyond.<sup>1</sup>

Significance in either case could only be ascertained by reference to the full context of thought.

Even so, such a reference would not disclose the full *religious* significance. It would indicate the public meaning of the *concept*, as determined in Hindu or Buddhist doctrine, but we need further to distinguish the many *private* interpretations which cluster around the concept, as it is related to the personal context of each individual believer, and understood in the light of such context. Inadequate analysis of the actual religious situation, related to these personal contexts, may foster the confusion between religious faith on the one hand and dogmatic statement and philosophical speculation on the other. We may only speak of Hīnayāna concepts of Nirvana as distinguished from Mahāyāna concepts, or of popular concepts as distinguished from monastic, provided we recognise the fact that, outside the text-book definitions, these concepts are rough-edged. They are not only received differently by different individuals, but they are modified by these individual interpretations.

Now, in our opinion, these individual translations are generally less intellectual than the central *concept*. They merge into vague religious *apprehensions*, primarily imaginative, if not entirely imaginative. There is consequently a quasi-imaginative element in the individual interpretation. Hence the name, interpretation, with its intellectual connotation, is somewhat misleading. We need a name which will allow for both the intellectual and the imaginative aspect of individual formulation. For this we suggest *notion*, although aware of possible objections. But *notion* is allied to concept and yet has a hint of imaginative noticing.

These notions, then, shade off into something more behind the scenes — the initial religious *apprehension*. Here again we face possible objection, since apprehension involves a reference which some might disallow, at least as an invariable concomitant. But this involves a discussion

<sup>1</sup> *Buddha, Sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde* (5th. ed.) Part II, chap. II, pp. 334 ff. "Wenn aber der Buddhist vom Nirvāna redet, so haben die Worte: 'Es gibt ein Ungeschaffenes' von bestimmtem Inhalt nur diesen, daß das Geschaffene vom Leiden des Geschaffenseins sich erlösen kann — es gibt einen Weg aus der Welt des Geschaffenen hinaus in die unergründliche Unendlichkeit."

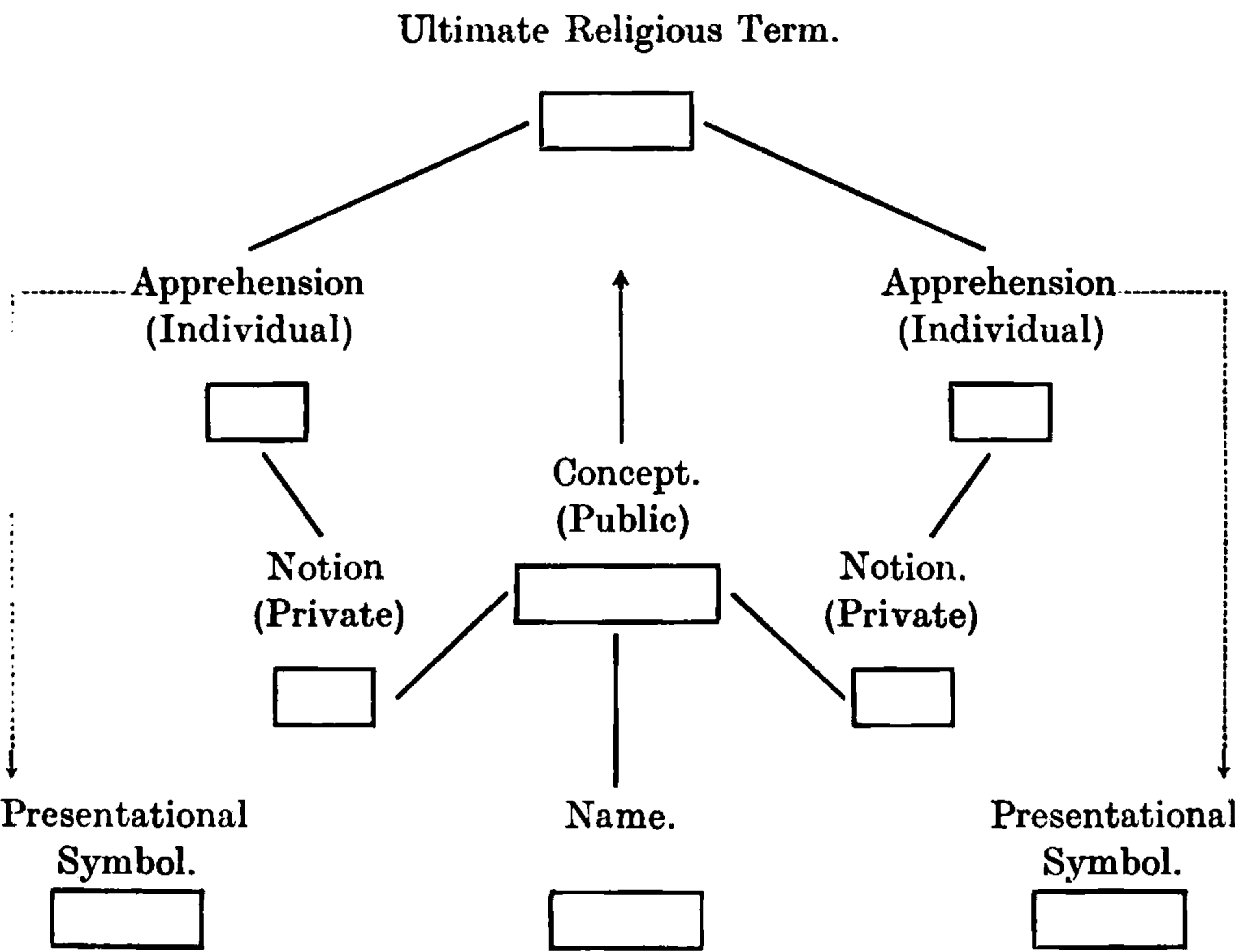
We may disagree with Oldenberg's interpretation, but that does not affect the illustrative value of his distinction.

whether religious statement is the result of individual construction, creative rather than responsive, a discussion beyond our present scope.

We consider that there is an element of initial apprehension, and this, through *notion*, may be connected with the stream of expression which centres in *concept*, but it may also, or separately, be expressed in other languages through various forms of presentational symbolism, imaginative in character — art, myth, ritual.

Religion expresses itself in more languages than one, and these languages indicate more than intellectual concepts; they express hopes, fears, frustrations, aspirations, joys, despairs, solitude, community, in the whole, wide gamut of religious formulation and response. Even if a religious symbol appears in the language of discursive thought, it symbolises more than what can be expressed in this language.

Diagram to illustrate Analysis in Chapter V



We need therefore a definition for such a name as Nirvana, a definition which will indicate these manifold associations and emphasise the fact that it belongs primarily to the realm of religion, as distinguished from the realm of philosophy. We have therefore named it a *religious term*.

(Term is preferable to 'symbol,' since symbol has, in fact, if not in intention, become somewhat narrowly associated with symbolic presentations prior to, and distinct from, discursive expressions). A religious term, as here understood, may be variously expressed, in discursive and non-discursive language, either or both; it may survive the phase of myth and kindred phases; it may never have known such phases; and it may stray into the realm of philosophy, where its religious derivation is sometimes forgotten or ignored.

This definition makes it possible to designate Nirvana as an *ultimate religious term*. By this is meant a term which is central in any religious tradition: a term which completes doctrine and is the goal of religious aspiration and discipline. The definition of the true end of man in the Scottish Catechism illustrates the unifying, focussing character of such a term: 'the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.'

Finally, such a term may be referred to a certain origin in religious experience which may be described as its *locus*.

In the parable of the monk who sought the end of the world, the *locus* of his ultimate religious term, Nibbāna, was the brink of the Abyss. It was also the locus where the Hindu discerned Brahman and the Jew discerned God. Each had a different name for his ultimate religious term. It is arguable whether their notions were altogether different or similar, in spite of the difference of names. The Buddha, in the parable, could not speak plainly about the *concept* of Nibbāna, and the monk now realised, as the result of his experience, that any attempt to speak plainly and formulate the concept in discursive language might only encourage distorting descriptions derived from a different locus. Nibbāna could only be discerned by those who had known the Abyss. It was nevertheless an ultimate religious term for the monk before he reached the Abyss, since it inspired the later stages of his journey thither.

In the comparisons which will be sketched in this chapter, we may see a suggestion that the monk's companions were in similar case: Hindu and Jew would be obliged to express their concepts and notions of Brahman and God in paradoxical language. It is not the concepts which will be compared but the nature of their expression; not the content of faith, but its formulation. What is emphasised is the fact that in each case we are dealing with a religious ultimate term — Nirvana, Brahman, God — and in each case, although related concepts may differ, the paradoxical mode of expression is similar.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The nature of an ultimate religious term is indicated by the fact that, whereas Nirvana is the ultimate for Buddhism, its Christian similar is not Eternity or Eternal Life but GOD.

The purpose of this comparison explains the highly selective and somewhat arbitrary character of the references which follow. No attempt is made, for example, to estimate the main characteristics of Hinduism or distinguish monistic from theistic contexts. To do so would involve discussions beyond our present, limited objective. All that is essential for the moment is to exemplify the fact that the language of religious paradox is not confined to Buddhism; it is found in other religious traditions. Faith everywhere manifests the same struggle for expression, the same tension, the same compulsion.

It is also necessary, perhaps, to underline the fact again that it is the language with which we are concerned, not *what* is stated, but *how* it is stated. For at times we may seem to be moving confusedly from one realm of discourse to another: the reference of the negation changes; now it seems to set a limit to what can be known, indicating a Beyond which can only be denoted because it is beyond any knowledge of acquaintance; now it seems to limit, not knowledge, but only language, thus indicating a knowledge of acquaintance, as in mystical communion, but a knowledge which defies expression. Sometimes the reference is obscure. It may be expedient on occasion to consider, in passing, the reference of a negation, but our prior and immediate concern is just the similarity of the language, the apparent ubiquity of the paradox. What it may signify will be discussed in the next chapter.

## 2. *Paradox in Hinduism*

To explore Hinduism in search of religious paradox is to explore, not one religion, but a sub-continent of religions. In this Motherland of Buddhism there is such a wealth of scripture, concept and interpretation that all general statements are questionable. The hospitality of the Hindu mind has been frequently emphasised. While the Hindu himself may claim that all has been grist to his mill, resulting in an ultimate synthesis achieved from a rich variety, the outside observer is perhaps more conscious of complexity than synthesis. He may well hesitate to conclude that there is any one religious ultimate term in Hindu thought. If it exists, then it has been variously named and expressed. This complexity, however, does not defeat our present purpose. It is sufficient to locate some ultimate term in the Hindu tradition, whether we regard it as general or not, and observe the mode of expression.

A student who begins with Buddhism, then turns to Hinduism, may feel at first a similarity of atmosphere. Here, as in Buddhism, there is the same emphasis on the way of renunciation, the same conception that human life is a very long pilgrimage involving re-birth, possibly in other

worlds, and the same conception of salvation in terms of release from this continuing cycle of chequered history. Having observed this similarity of atmosphere, however, the student next becomes aware of a difference in temper, for the Hindu, compared with the Buddhist, is much more inclined to seek his heaven by the stairway of speculative argument. In Hinduism there is a dominant metaphysical interest, manifested, not only by a few rare mortals, but by many thousands of retreatants who, from time immemorial, have found in forest glades secluded academies for a refreshment which is both religious and intellectual. The two interests, religious and intellectual, are joined together, closely knit. While it would be an exaggeration to say that these interests are disjoined in Buddhism, especially if we consider later, Mahāyāna developments, we may recall that early Buddhism was in part a revolt against the passion for speculation. In Buddhism the temper of mind is more agnostic: intellect has here been content to play a more prentice role, concerned rather with discriminating analysis than with ambitious synthesis.

This dominating intellectual interest in Hinduism raises certain questions which affect the denotation of specifically religious paradox. Some may insist that even in Hinduism we can, and should, distinguish two realms of discourse, philosophical and religious. They may consider that we should therefore be vigilant not to confuse a Negation which derives from philosophic challenge with a Negation which denotes an ultimate religious term, paradoxically affirmed. In the latter case, the Negation marks a boundary; it forms part of a final credo: it sets a limit to speculation: it voices the conclusion of one who says, "I can go no further." A philosophical Negation, however, may be transcended and left behind: it may be but a stage in a dialectical movement of thought, expressing an objection which may be overcome or a contradiction which may, or should, be resolved. The Hindu sage, it may be argued, moves freely from one context to another, now contemplating his Negations as final religious terms, now presenting them as stages in the movement of his thought, subject to logical criticism and amendment. We must therefore be alert to mark the distinction.

In some cases, it may be said, a Negation intimates no more than the camel's head of intellectual inquiry invading the tent of religion. Thus one historian quotes the Vedic hymn:

Who is it knows? Who here can tell us surely  
From what and how this universe has risen?

. . . . .

He only knows, who from the highest heaven  
Rules, the all-seeing lord — or does not He know?

Where some might read here an intimation of that reverent agnosticism which concludes in religious paradox, this historian discerns an early example of "philosophic yearning" — that is, the impulse towards further speculation rather than the mood of religious agnosticism which closes the door.<sup>3</sup>

Others, however, will be more disposed to question the possibility of any clear separation between the two realms of discourse in Hindu thought. It is more important, they will insist, to realise that in Hinduism a metaphysical proposition is invariably a religious utterance. "The dominant character of the Indian mind which has coloured all its culture and moulded all its thoughts," says Professor Radhakrishnan, "is the spiritual tendency. Spiritual experience is the foundation of India's rich cultural history."<sup>4</sup> To the Hindu, philosophy is a way of life, "an approach to spiritual realisation."<sup>5</sup> Another modern exponent of Hinduism, Sri Aurobindo, emphasises this spiritual foundation when he explicitly interprets a bewildering proposition concerning the nature of the Absolute by a reference to a spiritual experience which prompts acceptance of this proposition. He considers the statement that the Supreme Reality, ultimate Brahman, is both determined and indetermined. To a sceptic this may seem a self-contradictory proposition of an impossibility. But the Hindu sage, argues Sri Aurobindo, knows that this 'impossibility' is possible from his own experience: he knows both a spiritual freedom from exterior determination and also a determinate, creative capacity, passing "from one order of self-formulation to a higher order."

Thus the Absolute, affirmed as Brahman — the Eternal without qualities, the Silence void of activities, the Non-Being — and also affirmed as the Eternal with infinite qualities, the Lord of Creation, the Master of all works and action, this Absolute "translates itself into our consciousness." It is the paradoxical nature of mature spiritual experience which enables us to discern that the negative-affirmative affirmation of Brahman is not contradictory but paradoxical. This experience yields the recognition, not only that negative and affirmative terms are relevant, but also that they must be held together in paradoxical embrace. "To split asunder the two sides of the One Existence — even to speak of them as sides is excessive." In the last resort, Brahman is beyond definition. The language of *neti, neti* (not this, not that) is no more adequate than the language of *iti, iti* (this, that). But spiritual experience enables us to discern that both languages are inescapable, relevant and denotative.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> S. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, chap. II, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, Introd., p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, Vol. II, chaps. I, II, pp. 24 ff.

What may be noted in this argument is its mingling of psychological analysis and metaphysical statement, while the reference to religious experience and religious concern may be regarded as typical of the Hindu approach, an approach which prevents any sharp separation between religious and philosophical terms. It may therefore be held that, in Hinduism, we are justified in anticipating that Negation signals the appearance of religious paradox even when this Negation is set in the context of a metaphysical discussion.

This consideration affects our view of what many may regard as the classical paradoxical formulation in Hindu thought. I refer to the Brahman-ātman identification in the Upanishads, expressed by the sayings, "That thou art" (*Tat tvam asi*) and "I am Brahman" (*Aham Brahma asmi*). In Vedic literature, it may be recalled, we have two movements of thought which culminate in a monistic conclusion. There is first of all an objective movement of thought which seeks to explain the whole universe — nature, men and gods — and finally designates Brahman as the cosmic principle. There is, secondly, a subjective movement of thought concerned with the inner essence of man which finally designates this essence as ātman. In both cases negative statements suggest that a term to inquiry has been reached. "He is *asat*, non-being, for the being which Brahman is, is not to be understood by such being as is known to us by experience; yet he is being, for he alone is supremely real, for the universe subsists by him." "He the ātman is not this, nor this (*neti, neti*). He is inconceivable for he cannot be conceived, unchangeable, for he is not changed." Other, similar texts might be quoted which emphasise these negatives and conclude in paradox. Finally, in some passages of the Upanishads, the two movements of thought come together and the two conceptions, Brahman and ātman are joined: "That thou art" (*Tat tvam asi*).

Here, then, it might be claimed, we have, if anywhere, the religious ultimate term of Hinduism, expressed in a context marked by persistent paradox. On the other hand, it might be objected that this Brahman-ātman identification marks, not a paradoxical term to inquiry, but a new impulse to inquiry, the starting point of a philosophical quest which leaves paradox behind and produces systems of thought which are both more explicit and more prosaic. And it has been suggested that the basic intuition of the Upanishads can be reduced to the conclusion that ultimate reality, which may be termed either Brahman or ātman, is spiritual — a simple, straightforward statement far removed from paradoxical obscurity. We conceive, however, that most Hindu thinkers would protest against such a reduction of poetry to prose. They would criticise any attempt to remove this ultimate term from the religious context which

gives it meaning. "*Religious mysticism and deep piety* witness to the truth of the great saying, 'That art thou,' 'Tat tvam asi.'"<sup>7</sup> And the same fidelity to this context means fidelity to paradox.

Next to the Upanishads, many would cite the long Mahābhārata epic as the most important work in Hindu literature, and especially the Bhagavadgītā, a religious poem of eighteen cantos, which appears in this epic. This epic literature has a special interest for the student of the Buddhist Nirvana for it has been claimed that it is here that we may trace the original development of the Nirvana symbol in its earlier religious vitality, set in a warm, positive context of poetic aspiration and supporting doctrine, a vitality which is lacking in the later Buddhist context.<sup>8</sup>

Here we find the Hindu sage aspiring for union with Brahman in much the same terms as the Buddhist aspires to Nirvana. The Nirvana predicates are used to describe this condition of bliss — the state of peace and highest blessedness and utter detachment, the heaven of heavens, the state of full release, where all earthly oppositions of joy and grief, love and hate are transcended.<sup>9</sup>

In the Bhagavadgītā "the metaphysical idealism of the Upanishads is translated . . . into a theistic religion, providing room for love, faith, prayer and devotion,"<sup>10</sup> and here we find the hope of Nirvana linked with faith in God:

"He who abandons all desires and acts free from longing, without any sense of mineness or egotism, he attains to peace.

This is the divine state (brāhmīsthiti) O Pārtha (Arjuna), having attained thereto, one is (not again) bewildered; fixed in that state at the end (at the hour of death) one can attain to the bliss of God (brahma-nirvāṇa).<sup>11</sup>

And again: "He who finds his happiness within, his joy within and likewise his light only within, that yogin becomes divine and attains to the beatitude of God (brahmanirvāṇa)."<sup>12</sup>

Here, then, it has been suggested, in this Mahābhārata Bhagavadgītā tradition, we discern the origin of the Nirvana concept, and we discern it fully clothed, spiritually dynamic. Thus associated with the concept of

<sup>7</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, *Ibid.*, chap. IX, p. 170 (italics mine).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Joseph Dahmann, S.J., *Nirvāṇa, Eine Studie zur Vorgeschichte des Buddhismus*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Mahābhārata*, VI, 42, 62; III, 180, 29; XIV, 24, 17, etc.

<sup>10</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, op. cit., Vol. I, chap. IX, p. 539.

<sup>11</sup> *The Bhagavadgītā*, chap. II, 71, 72 (translated by S. Radhakrishnan, pp. 128, 129).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. V, 24, p. 184.

Supreme Brahman, and also associated with the Sāṃkhya psychology which distinguishes the true, real Self imprisoned in the temporal shell, Nirvana bespeaks a living faith and in this connection its paradoxical announcement can be understood. Transplanted, however, to the soil of Buddhism, the Nirvana concept becomes a ghost concept. All that remains is the mystifying form of its announcement without the context which accounts for that form. Divorced from God, this Nirvana, which is no longer brahmanirvāṇa, is reduced to a skeleton survival. The paradoxical language of the original faith continues, but the reason for this language is no longer evident. It ceases to be evident when we leave this Hindu home of Nirvana and the full texture of the negative-affirmative statement of the original, associated term: Supreme Brahman. In the Bhagavadgītā, these statements are concentrated in the account of the Vision vouchsafed to the hesitating warrior, Arjuna. All the wealth of poetic analogy is summoned to convey this Supreme Reality in positive, affirmative terms:

"I behold Thee, infinite in form on all sides, with numberless arms, bellies, faces and eyes . . . . I behold Thee with Thy crown, mace and discus, glowing everywhere as a mass of light, hard to discern, (dazzling) on all sides with the radiance of the flaming fire and sun, incomparable. Thou art the Imperishable, the Supreme to be realized. Thou art the ultimate resting-place of the universe . . . Thou art the father of the world of the moving and the unmoving . . ." <sup>13</sup>

But equally emphatic is the language of negation. This Manifested is also the Unmanifested, "the Imperishable, the Undefinable, the Unmanifested, the Omnipresent, the Unthinkable, the Unchanging and the Immobile, the Constant." <sup>14</sup> This Exalted One is both "the being and the non-being." <sup>15</sup>

Language indeed strains at the leash. No human eye, it is said, can discern this Supreme Reality, and even the light of a thousand suns only resembles the full splendour of the Exalted One. <sup>16</sup>

We have seen cause to reject estimates of Buddhism which minimise its religious character, and, on this and other grounds, the theory that the Buddhist Nirvana is but an attenuated survival of the Hindu Nirvana may be questioned. But the theory at least supports the view that the paradoxical announcement of Nirvana derives from its religious context, and the theory also draws attention to the similar expression of similarly significant terms in Hindu tradition. What our present inquiry

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. XI, 16, 17, 18, 43 (pp. 275, 285).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. XII, 3 (p. 292).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. XI, 37 (p. 283).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. XI, 8, 12 (pp. 271, 273).

suggests, however, is that similarity of expression is not necessarily due to similarity of concepts, or to their association. It is the character of the term as a religious ultimate which determines the mode of expression, whether the term be Nirvana or Brahman.

### *3. The Christian Background: the Paradox in Hebrew and Greek traditions*

In Christianity, the ultimate religious term is God — the God of Revelation. Christianity stands with Judaism and Islam as a religion of Revelation. Both Hinduism and Buddhism, on the other hand, may be termed religions of Enlightenment. When Sri Aurobindo remarks that 'all we have to do is to find a means of escape out of the Ignorance . . . and the vanity of cosmic existence,' when he adds that 'it is always the business of man the thinker to know,' he might be speaking for Buddhism as well as Hinduism. Though intellectual inquiry will not suffice unless it leads to saving Vision, both Buddhism and Hinduism emphasise human research. 'The whole process of man's highest intellectual knowledge is through this mental manipulation and discrimination to the point where the veil is broken and he can see.'<sup>17</sup> The omniscience of the Supreme Buddha, says Shwe Zan Aung, is 'intuition plus analysis.'<sup>18</sup>

The line between the two types of religion should not, it is true, be drawn too sharply. In Hinduism, there is a basic reference to the Vedic scriptures, and there is at least the hint of a religion of Revelation in the Bhagavadgītā. In Buddhism there is an appeal to the Word of the Master and a reference to the early scriptures. 'Buddhist exegetists never departed from the original canonical texts.'<sup>19</sup> Both Hinduism and Buddhism consequently have their orthodoxies and they designate heresies. In the Christian tradition, we can similarly recognise qualifications. An impetus derived largely from Greek speculations stimulated the movement of thought known ambiguously as humanism which tempered the appeal to authoritative Revelation and encouraged intellectual inquiry.

Nevertheless, the distinguishing feature of the Christian tradition is the belief that God has revealed Himself. It has therefore to be remarked that in spite of this distinction, the paradox of religious expression is as manifest in this religion of revelation as it is in the religions of enlightenment. God has spoken. Yet, in his ultimate Being, he is the 'stupendously

<sup>17</sup> *The Life Divine*, Vol. II, chap. vii, pp. 235, 236.

<sup>18</sup> "The Buddhist Philosophy of the Real," *J.B.R.S.* Vol. VII, Part III (1917), p. 227.

<sup>19</sup> Shwe Zan Aung, "Buddhism and Science", *J.B.R.S.*, Vol. VIII, Part II (1918), p. 99.

rich Reality' surpassing finite comprehension.<sup>20</sup> "All reports about the Highest are veiled," observes Dr. Kroner in his Gifford Lectures. "Revelation does not remove this veil; on the contrary it reveals the inaccessibility, the transcendence, the majesty of the Lord."<sup>21</sup>

It might, indeed, be said that the Paradox is sometimes affirmed, not *in spite of* the belief in Revelation, but because of it. The expectation of Revelation may be joined with the sense of human incapacity. And if what is revealed indicates the Majesty of the Highest, then man may further question his capacity to fathom that Highest. Furthermore, Revelation is concerned with what man needs to know for his salvation, not with every conceivable aspect of Divine Being. Not all is declared. This is illustrated in the context of Islam:

"The orthodox strictly prohibit the discussion of minute particulars, for, say they, just as the eye turning to the brightness of the sun finds darkness intervene to prevent all observation, so the understanding finds itself bewildered if it attempts to pry into the nature of God." All the attributes of God are declared to be beyond explanation (*bila keif*) and so cannot be understood either by reason or by analogical deduction.

The Prophet said: "We did not know the reality of the knowledge of Thee;" and to his followers he gave this advice: "Think of God's gifts, not of his nature: certainly you have no power for that."<sup>22</sup>

Belief in Revelation, then, may include a negation of knowledge beyond what is revealed. It may also be held that even the content of what is revealed is beyond full expression, since it is made known through human agency, and/or, has to be communicated by the agent to others whose receptive capacity may be limited. There are theories of Revelation which suggest a fuller explication of its Content in course of time, dependent upon growing experience, whether of the race or of the individual. Nor does belief in Revelation exclude belief in mystical intuitions which may defy expression — as Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions show. The mystic, at least, sees no opposition. "With no thought of denying Revelation as a fact of history, the mystic still conceives the source of religious knowledge and experience which bursts forth from his own heart as being of equal importance for the conception of religious truth. In other words, instead of the one act of Revelation, there is a constant repetition of this act."<sup>23</sup> But what is thus made known to the mystic himself is invariably incommunicable to others, and always in-

<sup>20</sup> Baron F. Von Hügel, *Essays and Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion: Second Series*, chap. VIII, p. 217.

<sup>21</sup> *The Primacy of Faith*, chap. I, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> E. Sell, *The Faith of Islam*, (4th ed.) chap. IV, p. 232.

<sup>23</sup> G. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Vol. I, p. 9.

communicable, except by the thin terms of denotation, if what is intuited is the Hidden God, unknowable "in the depths of His nothingness."<sup>24</sup>

Hebrew religion, it has been suggested, was pragmatic.<sup>25</sup> In later Jewish tradition, there are, of course, examples of a more contemplative approach, but the writers of the Old Testament are more concerned with the mighty acts of God in the day to day challenge of history, more concerned with what is revealed and known than with what is not known, and with response to the Divine Will; they are more concerned with active homage to God's known Majesty than with speculation about His Unknown Majesty. In the tensions of history, the paradox is expressed, but they express it without being aware of it, and affirmation overshadows negation. This is true, even in the Book of Job, where the problem of evil brings us nearer reflective thought than elsewhere. "Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?" asks Zophar, and Job who 'desires to reason with God' yet exalts the Majesty of God.<sup>26</sup> In the spiritual conflicts expressed in the Psalms it is the apparent, occasional absence of God from life that is felt, rather than the absence of God from knowledge. "Why standest thou afar off, O Lord? why hidest thou thyself in times of trouble?"<sup>27</sup> "I will say unto God my rock, why hast thou forgotten me?"<sup>28</sup> Solomon ponders: "Will God in very deed dwell on the earth? behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded."<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Solomon dedicated his Temple. And the prophet affirms: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." But in the same passage, there is the counsel: "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near."<sup>30</sup>

The latent paradox of these and similar expressions may not be recognised if paradox is confused with logical opposition.

On the other hand, when we turn to the Greek tradition, we find, as in Hindu religion, a mingling of logical contradiction with more strictly paradoxical contrast. This may obscure the religious element in the tradition of Greek philosophy. The stream of Greek influence in the Christian tradition has sometimes been too narrowly represented as merely the play of philosophical interpretation upon a content of religious faith entirely derived from Palestine. This is, at least, open to argument.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 13. ("the favourite metaphor of the thirteenth century Kabbalists" -- *ibid.*, p. 353).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Heller, *The Odyssey of a Faith*, chap. III, p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> Job 11: 7.

<sup>27</sup> Psalm 10: 1.

<sup>28</sup> Psalm 42: 9.

<sup>29</sup> *I Kings* 8: 27.

<sup>30</sup> *Isaiah* 55: 6, 8, 9.

The Platonic contribution, it might be urged, was religious as well as philosophical, for much in the thought of Plato himself was profoundly religious.

The term, contribution, however, — whether we conceive a religious or a philosophical contribution — may confuse the present issue, for we are not here attempting to trace any historical relationship of conceptual thought, we are not consulting Hebrew and Greek traditions in order to determine their influence upon the Christian tradition. There is no suggestion that the Christian statement of paradox is derived, either from Greek or Hebrew sources, though it may reflect both. On the contrary we are trying to step away from the more normal procedure which links one tradition to another by tracing *an evolution of thought*. Such a consideration, though legitimate in its own sphere, may obscure the hypothesis we are here attempting to indicate — the hypothesis that similarity of language modes may indicate similarity of basic experience.

Thus the debate whether the Christian ideas of the *via negativa* can be traced beyond Plotinus to Plato himself interests us here mainly because it directs attention to interpretations of Plato which emphasise the imaginative and religious elements in his thought.

The paradox of religion is nowhere more strikingly expressed than in the well-known passage from the *Timaeus*; “The father and maker of this Universe is past finding out, and even if we found him, to tell of him to all men would be impossible.”<sup>31</sup> Here, in a sentence, we have the two most frequent references of the paradoxical negation — the possible limitation of knowledge, and the further limitation of language even if the first incapacity is overcome. In this passage, it has been suggested, we have the clue to the diversity of Plato’s theological views.<sup>32</sup>

It is the paradox of religion which Paul Elmer More discerns when he remarks the *reverence* of Plato’s approach — “a reverence which might be described as a feeling compounded of the Socratic affirmation and the Socratic scepticism.” “Plato is as cautious in what he does not say of God as he is confident in what he does say, and he repeatedly gives warning against the assumption of knowing more than we actually know” (as the *Timaeus* passage illustrates). “Yet withal he will not utterly suppress curiosity in these high matters, or acquiesce in silence; he will even take a stand in opposition to the sham modesty which would forbid a man ‘to search into or be over curious about the Greatest God and the universe as a whole.’”<sup>33</sup> (a quotation from the well-known discussion in the *Laws*).

<sup>31</sup> *Timaeus*, 28c.

<sup>32</sup> F. Solmsen, *Plato’s Theology*, chap. VIII, p. 131.

<sup>33</sup> *The Religion of Plato*, chap. V, pp. 124 ff.

Even if we disregard the language of the *Parmenides* and agree with Cornford that 'what Parmenides offered to Socrates was a gymnastic exercise, not the disclosure of a supreme divinity'<sup>34</sup> there are many other passages in the rich variety of Plato's works which will seem to others to suggest very strongly that Plato's imagination was stimulated by the thought of this divinity. Nor will everyone agree that 'Aristotle, if anyone, must have understood the *Parmenides* correctly.'<sup>35</sup>

Some will see in the Allegory of the Cave an essentially religious feeling and a reflection of the language of paradox. The prisoner released from the shadowed knowledge of the Cave and brought to face the sun is expected to 'find his eyes so full of the sun's radiance' as to be unable to 'see a single one of the things that he was now told were real.' Although, eventually, he is able to 'look at the Sun and contemplate its nature' he will find it difficult to adjust himself to the darkness of the Cave again if he returns there — as, in fact, he must, if we apply the analogy to actual experience. He will find it difficult to persuade fellow prisoners, who have never seen the Sun, of the validity of his new point of view. And there is a hint that he may doubt his own enlightenment. "Heaven knows whether it is true." "In the world of knowledge, the last thing to be perceived, and only with great difficulty is the essential Form of Goodness."<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. *The Paradox in Christian Tradition*

It is not such a far step from the language of Plato's analogy to the words of St. Paul, "We know in part . . . for now we see in a mirror darkly," which follows the firm assurance, "Love never faileth."<sup>37</sup> St. Paul was well aware that the announcement of a crucified Christ was a challenging paradox, a stumbling block to the Jews, foolishness to the Gentiles, and he emphasises the paradox: "The weakness of God is stronger than men."<sup>38</sup> The New Testament, in general, affirms the paradox of religion more explicitly than the Old Testament. In the Epistle to the Romans, for example, "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold down the truth," a truth "which may be known," for "God manifested it unto them." His glory and power are clearly seen through His creation. Men have exchanged this truth of God for a lie. This is one aspect of the

<sup>34</sup> F. M. Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides*, p. 131.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>36</sup> *The Republic* VII, 515ff. (trans. Cornford, *The Republic of Plato*, chap. xxv, pp. 224ff.

<sup>37</sup> *I Corinthians* 13: 8ff.

<sup>38</sup> *I Corinthians* 1: 18, 25.

situation — a knowledge of God which none can gainsay. But in chapter eleven, the writer exclaims: "O the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and His ways past tracing out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord?"<sup>39</sup>

In the development of Christian theology, Clement of Alexandria provides one of the most striking early examples of negative phraseology:

"We may apprehend the way of purification by confession and that of contemplation by analysis, going forward to the first notion, beginning by analysis with the things that underlie it, removing from the body its physical qualities, depriving it of the dimension of depth, then of breadth, and then of length.... If, therefore, taking away all that pertains to bodies and to the things called incorporeal, we cast ourselves into the immensity of Christ and thence by purity go on into the void, we may come somehow or other to the understanding of the Almighty, knowing not what he is but what he is not.... The first cause therefore is not in space, but above space and time and name and understanding."<sup>40</sup> The first and acknowledged reference, the reference in Clement's own mind, was to Greek thought. But does this language not also recall those Buddhist exercises in contemplation by which the earnest bhikku hopes to reach the 'gate of emancipation'? and also the kindred Hindu disciplines?

It is significant that an Indian writer relates the supposed agnosticism of Buddha, and also the language of the Upanishads, not to Christian-Platonic exposition but to the Christian scripture: "O the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and His ways past finding out."<sup>41</sup>

The writings which have most determined the *via negativa* in Christian tradition are the fifth century treatises previously attributed to St. Paul's convert, Dionysius the Areopagite. Here, indeed, the influence of Neo-Platonism is marked. But here also there is frequent appeal to the Bible. Here, too, we are forcibly reminded of Hindu and Buddhist terminology.

In his treatise on *Mystical Theology*, pseudo-Dionysius counsels the disciple, Timothy, to "leave the senses and the activities of the intellect" and follow the way of renunciation and purity which leads 'upward to the Ray of that divine Darkness which exceedeth all existence.'<sup>42</sup> This

<sup>39</sup> Romans 1: 18ff., 2: 33, 34.

<sup>40</sup> *Stromateis* V, VI, 71.

<sup>41</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, chap. VII, p. 355; cf. chap. IV, p. 196.

<sup>42</sup> *The Mystical Theology* (trans. Rolt), chap. I, pp. 191 ff.

negative approach, which seeks to 'offer Him that transcends all things the praises of a transcendent hymnody' is achieved 'by denying or removing all things that are — — — like as men who, carving a statue out of marble, remove all the impediments that hinder the clear perceptive of the latent image . . . . in its hidden beauty.' 'We strip off all qualities in order that we may attain a naked knowledge of that Unknowing.'<sup>43</sup> The sculpture simile illustrates the basic, positive affirmation. But it is the affirmation 'of that which transcends all affirmations' and the goal is 'unity with Him Whom words cannot describe.'

A relative language of analogy is permissible, but even here negation must be employed. 'We must start by applying our negations to those qualities which differ most from the ultimate goal. Surely it is truer to affirm that God is life and goodness than that He is air or stone'<sup>44</sup> But the final statement of faith can only be in terms which express the poverty of human thought, and the two concluding chapters constitute a crescendo of such terms. 'The universal Cause transcending all things . . . does not possess outward shape or intelligible form . . . It is not soul or mind . . . It is not number, or order, or greatness, or littleness . . . nor is it personal essence, or eternity, or time . . . nor is it one, nor is It unity, nor is It Godhead or goodness<sup>45</sup> . . . nor does it belong to the category of non-existence or to that of existence . . . nor can any affirmation or negation apply to It . . . inasmuch as It is free from every limitation and beyond them all.'<sup>46</sup>

This treatise refers to a previous and longer work, on *The Divine Names*, in which Dionysius has remarked that the writers of the Bible celebrate God by every Name and yet they call Him nameless.<sup>47</sup> While thus beyond comprehension, God is known, not only through the revelation of scripture, but in His creation and in human experience. This is stated in terms which recall the 'perfuming' character of Suchness in the Buddhist classic, *The Awakening of Faith*: 'Not that the Good is wholly incommunicable to anything; nay, rather, while dwelling alone by Itself, and having there firmly fixed Its super-essential Ray, It lovingly reveals Itself by illuminations corresponding to each separate creature's powers. It thus draws holy minds upwards into such contemplation, participation and resemblance<sup>48</sup> of Itself as they can attain. — even to

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. II, pp. 194 ff.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. III, p. 198.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *The Divine Names*, chap. II, p. 7, where Godhead (deification) is regarded as a property of deified men.

<sup>46</sup> *The Mystical Theology*, chap. IV, v, pp. 199 ff.

<sup>47</sup> *The Divine Names* (trans. Rolt), chap. I, 5, p. 61.

<sup>48</sup> θεωρία κοινωνία ὁμοίωσις

them that holily and duly strive thereafter... It is unto them that fall away from It a Voice that doth recall them and a Power by which they rise... It is a sacred Grounding to them that feel the shock of unholy assault, and a Security to them that strive... a principle of Illumination to them that are being enlightened."<sup>49</sup>

"To them that duly strive." Again, we can recall the Buddhist monasteries of the Orient, and the emphasis on a disciplined, concentrated will in the performance of the exercises. "Monks, (said Gautama) if a monk should cultivate the faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration.... What could I not say of those who make much of these things?"<sup>50</sup> Or we can recall Sri Aurobindo's "supreme effort of consciousness."<sup>51</sup> Comparison must not be over-strained. We can recognise differences as well as similarities. Southern Buddhism emphasises no 'Power by which they rise.' None the less, the basic similarities of expression are notable.

John Scotus Erigena, who translated the Dionysius writings into Latin four centuries later, provides another interesting ground of comparison in his own celebrated treatise, *De divisione naturae*. "Whatever evades not merely the senses, but also understanding and reason, as God does, because of the excellency of His Nature, seems indeed not to be... and yet God is, after all, the One, who alone is true, the Being of everything, or, as Dionysius Areopagite says: 'Everything has being but only God-head has super-existence.'"<sup>52</sup> Following Dionysius, Erigena observes that, although goodness is predicated of the Divine Being, yet, strictly speaking, God is above and beyond any human knowledge or analogy of such goodness. In a sense, He is *not* goodness, but *plus quam bonitas* or *super bonus*. Similarly, He is *plus quam Veritas*, *plus quam Sapiens*.

A similar insight is expressed in more devotional language attributed to Thomas à Kempis: "Grant me, O most sweet and loving Jesu, to rest in Thee above all creatures; above all health and beauty... above all knowledge and subtlety... above all gifts and favours that Thou canst give and impart unto us... above all things visible and invisible; and *above all that Thou art not*, O my God."<sup>53</sup>

"A man ought to mount above all creatures, and perfectly go out of himself," he observes in a later chapter, "and stand in a sort of ecstasy

<sup>49</sup> *The Divine Names*, chaps I, II, p. 53, 54.

<sup>50</sup> A. I. 38ff. (*The Gradual Sayings*, p. 34).

<sup>51</sup> *The Life Divine*, Vol. II, chap. I, p. 15.

<sup>52</sup> *De divisione naturae* l. 1 (Migne, *Patrologia* CXXII, Paris, 1853, p. 443).

<sup>53</sup> *De imitatione Christi*, chap. XXI (italics mine), cf. Josiah Royce on "Negation," *E.R.E.* Vol. IX, p. 265.

of mind, and see that Thou, the Creator of all things, hast nothing among creatures like unto 'Thyself.'<sup>54</sup> We have here, surely, a close parallel to the Buddhist conception of utter detachment, and a still closer parallel to the language of the Hindu Mahābhārata in which the disciple is enjoined to transcend all earthly contrasts, including good and evil, as they are transcended in the nirvana of Brahma.

The language of negation is frequently and narrowly associated with mysticism. This identification depends on how mysticism is defined. It can scarcely be maintained if mysticism is held to imply invariable ecstatic raptures. The Buddhist differentiation of 'dry visioned' saints — saints to whom the experience of trance is foreign — might well be applied to the Christian tradition to include such sober exponents as Erigena and St. Thomas Aquinas. The question arises because the influence of Dionysius is very marked in the works of St. Thomas, although it has been questioned whether St. Thomas himself had any mystical experience.

St. Thomas' expression of the paradox is perhaps all the more significant and interesting because of its restraint. It is his mission in life to keep a balance. Observe how circumspectly he walks between the poles of exaggerated emphasis in the first part of the *Summa Theologica*, with its chapters on the knowledge of God and the Names of God. Dionysius is here, frequently quoted, but he is never allowed a solo; he must take his place in the choir and contribute to the harmony. Affirmation and negation are so precisely joined that we are almost unaware of the paradox.

Man is like God. He is made in the Divine image. And it is essential for St Thomas' argument that this truth should be fully recognised. But it is also true that man is not like God and it can in no way be admitted that God is like creatures any more than it can be said that a man is like a statue. "As Dionysius says, 'A mutual likeness may be found between things of the same order, but not between a cause and that which is caused.'<sup>55</sup>

Few have emphasised more firmly the capacity of intellect. Even faith is 'a kind of knowledge, inasmuch as the intellect is determined by faith to some knowable object.'<sup>56</sup> And even the natural reason can attain some knowledge of God 'because sensible creatures are effects of God.' But, since our natural knowledge begins from sense, and can only go as far as it can be led by sensible things, 'the whole power of God cannot be known; nor therefore can His essence be seen.' There is also a higher

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. xxxi.

<sup>55</sup> *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 4, Art. 3.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, I, Q 12, Art. 13.

knowledge 'assisted by the revelation of grace, . . . the intellect's natural light . . . strengthened by the infusion of gratuitous light.' There is prophetic vision. There is Divine Revelation. But even so, we do not know, in this life, what God is; we are only 'united to Him *as to one unknown*.'<sup>57</sup>

Again, St Thomas insists that 'affirmative propositions can be truly formed about God.' But he immediately qualifies this statement. 'Intellect knows him according to diverse conceptions because it cannot see Him as He is in Himself.'<sup>58</sup>

Again, it is true in one sense that we can name God, distinguishing Him from His creation, since we indeed know God 'from creatures as their cause, and also by way of excellence and remotion.' In this sense, our knowledge, such as it is, IS expressible. Yet, in another sense, there is a limit to expression. Our knowledge includes the recognition of something which is beyond our knowing: the Divine Essence in itself. "We can point to Him only as far as we understand Him."<sup>59</sup>

'It is impossible for the soul of man in this life to see the essence of God,'<sup>60</sup> and, even hereafter, in the state of the blessed, no created intellect, in seeing God, 'can comprehend God wholly.'<sup>61</sup>

In his exposition, St. Thomas, therefore, is compelled to qualify affirmation by negation. But the subtle question arises whether this compulsion derives from his logic or from his experience or from both. In other cases, in the case of Dionysius, to whom St. Thomas so frequently refers, the language of negation seems to indicate a struggle to express a knowledge which defies expression. No such struggle, it may be held, is indicated in the case of St. Thomas. On the contrary, all that comes within knowledge he can express with a clarity and ease seldom equalled. His negation refers not to any limit to expression, but to a limit *of knowledge*, indicated by his logic. What is known of God is known and can be expressed; what cannot be expressed is inferred from what can be expressed.

St. Thomas, it has been roundly said, was not a mystic. Although he taught a direct vision of God, such vision was only attained beyond the grave. In this present life, man must be content with indirect knowledge, attained by discursive demonstration or received by revelation. He was devout and spiritually minded, but he was not a mystic. Statements from his earlier works which may seem to indicate otherwise do not represent his mature conclusions.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, Q 12, Art. 13.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, Q 13, Art. 12.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, Q 13, Art. 1.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, Q 12, Art. 11.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, Q 12, Art. 8.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. A. C. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, Vol. II, chap. XII, pp. 268, 269, p. 278 and footnote.

Other writers, however, have claimed that there are passages in the theological *Summa* itself "where one feels the vibrations of a mystical soul," the "revelation of a pure, rich, and deep interior life." Indeed, his doctrine on the contemplative life provides principles for other mystics which "will guard them against error and guide them along safe paths."<sup>63</sup> Emphasis is laid upon the frequent references to Dionysius in his works, the influence of Albertus Magnus, himself a mystic as well as a philosopher, and the testimony of St. Thomas' companions concerning the life of prayer, even emotional prayer, which inspired his work of scholarship.

Much depends on how we define mysticism. If it is defined to mean some overt recognition of present insight which supplements intellect, or is independent of intellect, then we may doubt if the term is applicable. On the other hand, it may be held that St. Thomas did, in fact, whether he recognised it or not, rationalise from an experience which included a mystical awareness, in the broader sense. It has been suggested that the synthesis which St. Thomas sought was more than any reconciliation between philosophy and Revelation; it was a synthesis of East and West, a synthesis latent in his own personality. Father Vann and others have insisted that, while he rejected the illuminism of the Augustinians, he did in fact emphasise intuition as a higher, possible and necessary form of knowledge. It is 'tragically false' to represent him as a rationalist.<sup>64</sup>

'The place of intuition in the thomist theory of knowledge . . . has not received the attention it deserves.' 'The rational investigation of the things of faith brings us to the threshold of mysticism.'<sup>65</sup> Negation is not merely a qualification, but the very 'corner-stone of St. Thomas' teaching about God.'<sup>66</sup>

There are certainly passages in St. Thomas' works where the expression of this Negation suggests a compulsion other than the compulsion of discursive inference.

"The divine essence," he says, "by its immensity surpasses every form to which our intellect reaches. But we have some knowledge thereof by knowing what it is not. . . . The more completely we see how a thing differs from others, the more perfectly we know it."<sup>67</sup> Here, maybe, we have no more than the utterance of logic. But when St. Thomas observes

<sup>63</sup> Martin Grabmann, *Introduction to the Theological Summa of St. Thomas* (trans. Zybara) chap. II, s. IV, p. 134, chap. III, s. II, p. 166.

<sup>64</sup> Gerald Vann, O. P., *St Thomas Aquinas*, Preface, p. vii and chap. I, pp. 54ff. cf. chap. III, pp. 145ff.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. III, p. 147.

<sup>66</sup> Penido, *Le Role de l'Analogie en Theologie Dogmatique*, p. 109, as quoted by Vann, *ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>67</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles*. I 14.

elsewhere that God remains in the dark night of ignorance and it is this ignorance in which we come closest to Him, more than logical considerations seem to be implied.

A comparison with Meister Eckhart is illuminating, since it has been claimed that Eckhart's theology resembles that of St. Thomas, and in Eckhart's case there is certainly no doubt about the reference to a dominating mystical experience. The difference between the two has also been emphasised, but the resemblance is sufficiently strong to make comparison fruitful, although the difference — which may be traced to a more intense mysticism — is perhaps still more illuminating.

Like St. Thomas, Eckhart sees in all creation a manifestation of the Divine. God is being, the source of all being and the goal of all being. All Nature, then, attests God. The divine essence is 'first and foremost the principle preserving all things; in his divine essence God is in all things upholding them.'<sup>68</sup> "The wise man says, God has spread his nets and lines all over creatures, and we can find and know him in any one of them if only we will look."<sup>69</sup> Thus Eckhart agrees with St. Thomas that there is a knowledge of God to be derived from His Creation. But it is not this possibility which Eckhart emphasises. Indeed, he counsels against any undue regard for any created thing: "if thou wouldst stand with St. Augustine and in the communion of saints, then close thy heart to everything created and be open to God as he is in himself."<sup>70</sup>

The knowledge which Eckhart emphasises is a mystical knowledge of acquaintance, a knowledge realised, not by looking without, but by looking within; a knowledge of union with God; a knowledge of "the innate divine image which God has stamped in every soul by nature;"<sup>71</sup> a knowledge of the birth of Christ within the soul: "in eternity the Father is bringing forth his Son just like himself . . . I say, moreover: he has brought him forth in my soul . . . the Father gives birth to his Son in the soul in the very same way . . . Moreover I declare, not only does he beget me his Son, he begets me himself and himself me: me his essence and his nature. In his nethermost deep I come welling up in his holy Breath . . . My bodily father is not my real father except for one small portion of his nature . . . My heavenly Father is my real father."<sup>72</sup>

Besides this interior knowledge, all other possible knowledge is secondary: "what is wrought by God in the impartible light of the soul is more

<sup>68</sup> Franz Pfeiffer: *Meister Eckhart* (trans. by C. de B. Evans), Tractates II, p. 284.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, Sermons and Collations, LXIX, p. 172.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, Sermons and Collations, XIV, p. 53.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, Sermons and Collations, XIV, p. 51.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, Sermons and Collations, LXV, p. 162.

lovely and fair than the whole of his work in creatures.”<sup>73</sup> This knowledge, this awareness is not reserved for some future life — and here Eckhart departs from St. Thomas — but begins in this present life, for the kingdom is at hand and the kingdom is God himself: “yes, the kingdom of God is within us . . . . I am as certain as I live that nothing is so close to me as God. God is nearer to me than I am to my own self. . . . So is he also in a stone, a log of wood, only they do not know it. . . . Man is more happy than a log of wood in that he knows and is aware of God . . . . He is not happy because of God’s being in him and so near him or because of having God, but because he is aware of God, of his nearness to him; because he is God-knowing and God-loving.”<sup>74</sup>

No statement could be more positive and directly affirmative, yet close upon its heels comes the language of equally emphatic negation, combined with a distinction between God, thus revealed in experience and in Creation, and God in Himself (*deitas* or *Gottheit*). This interior awareness of God, this knowledge of the innate divine image stamped within the soul must not be confused with a knowledge of God in Himself; this light of the soul, is, after all, a limited light. The same God-knowing, God-loving man must confess: “No man knows what God is. Aught that a man could or would think of God, God is not at all . . . . It was said by a philosopher that who so knows of God that he is unknown, that man knows God . . . . To know him really is to know him as unknowable . . . . Nothing we can say of God is true. God’s worth and God’s perfection cannot be put into words . . . . God is such that we apprehend him better by negation than by affirmation.”<sup>75</sup> “Now mark! God is nameless: no one can know or say anything of him . . . . Wherefore, hold thy peace and prate not about God . . . . If thou wouldst be free from sin and perfect, babble not of God . . . . If thou wouldst not be brutish then, know nothing of the unuttered God.”<sup>76</sup>

In modern Protestant theology, it is perhaps in the Lutheran tradition that the significance of religious paradox is most definitely affirmed, and, with Eckhart in mind, we may note that Bishop Aulén joins the emphasis of this significance with a distinction between *Deus Revelatus* and *Deus Absconditus*, the Hidden God. He quotes the opinion that ‘every real revival in the history of the church has been connected with a consciousness of the paradoxical content of faith.’ This paradoxical element does not belong simply to a few affirmations of faith; it pervades the whole content. Faith cannot avoid the use of paradox, and theological analysis

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, Sermons and Collations, LXXIX, p. 199.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, Sermons and Collations, LXIX, p. 171.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, Sermons and Collations, XV, pp. 53, 54, 55.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, Sermons and Collations, XCIX, p. 246.

is limited and conditioned by this basic language of faith. Failure to observe this situation has, in the past, led theology astray: the nature of the paradoxical tension of faith has been misinterpreted, and the language of religious paradox has been confused with the language of logical or metaphysical contradiction.<sup>77</sup>

It is arguable that the explicit recognition of the significance of religious paradox is only a recent development in Christian thought, due largely to the influence of Kierkegaard. Therefore it may be held that a parallel recourse, now to the way of analogy, now to the way of negation, such as we have traced in this survey, does not necessarily imply any recognition of the Way of Paradox. This may be the case so far as theological exposition is concerned. But such exposition has reference to the basic language of faith. For our present purpose, it is sufficient to maintain that the two methods of theological exposition — the method of analogy and the method of negation — thus found together in Christian thought, reflect, whether consciously or not, the paradoxical character of this basic language. And the same might be said of the parallel employment of affirmation and negation in other traditions.

<sup>77</sup> *The Faith of the Christian Church* (trans. Eric H. Wahlstrom and G. Everett Arden), Part I, pp. 98 ff.

## CHAPTER VI

### IN CONCLUSION AND WITHOUT CONCLUSION

#### 1. *"Except for Buddhism"*

As the result of this inquiry, it is possible to state certain conclusions. But the inquiry also brings us into that realm where man faces questions which seem beyond answer. We may, however, decide to frame some of these questions rather differently.

Our most definite conclusions relate to the character and definition of Buddhism, especially Southern Buddhism. If these are accepted, then we may claim to have challenged the classification which sometimes sets Buddhism in a special category, virtually separated from the other great religions of the world. "Primitive Buddhism," remarks Dr. Matthews, "seem to stand alone among historical religions in having no doctrine of god and spirit."<sup>1</sup> This statement is typical of many references to Buddhism in the comparative study of religion. For one reason or another, Buddhism is isolated and quoted as an exception. There is everywhere, it is said, some recognition of the sacred — except in Hīnayāna Buddhism. Or again, it is said that the great religions are cultural, expressed in the life and institutions of some people — except for Southern Buddhism, which is monkish, cloistered and aloof from the community. Or again, the great religions have largely prevailed over more primitive ideas — except (so it is said) in Burma, where Buddhism, which "cannot appeal to the masses of any population,"<sup>2</sup> leaves the people to their Animism, with merely a lip-service to the higher faith. So the situation is sometimes represented — Southern Buddhism standing alone, so singular a religion that it is sometimes denied the name of religion and labelled a philosophy or a morality, unhappily (or happily) divorced from religion.

Questioning this misrepresentation, our first task has been to relate Southern Buddhism to the family of religions by interpreting its beliefs in the light of its cultural expression in Burma, where Hīnayāna teaching has been the dominant influence for eight centuries.

<sup>1</sup> W. R. Matthews, "The Idea of God" (*An Outline of Modern Knowledge*, p. 65).

<sup>2</sup> A. C. Bouquet, *Comparative Religion*, (new ed. 1945), chap. VII, p. 129.

We can imagine the bewilderment of some Burmese villager suddenly transported to a township in the West and told that here he will find what he has not known in his own country — a religion permeating the life of the community. How many things he would miss in this Western town! Here he would find no religious teachers making the daily round of the households, morning after morning; no system whereby every boy is not only schooled by his clergy but spends part of his youth in their establishment, sharing their life. He could scarcely be gainsaid if he insisted that his own religion, as represented in Burma, was not to be distinguished from other traditions by the fact that it was *less* in touch with the life of the community, but by the fact that it was *more* in touch with that life.

We have emphasised this relation of the organised Saṃgha to the community, because it is the clue to the solution of many of the questions discussed. It establishes the relation of Burmese Buddhism to Buddhism in general, since the monks are avowedly Hīnayāna; it establishes the true relation of Buddhism to Animism, since it exhibits the influence of Buddhism; and it establishes the relation of the monastic interpretation to the popular religion. Admittedly, a distinction can be made, as in other religions, between scholar and peasant, clergy and laity, but it is a mis-statement to disjoin them, speaking of 'two religions,' ignoring their inter-action, presenting the one phase as an arid intellectualism and the other as a superstitious travesty. Allowing for human nature and making all due qualifications, what we find, in general, is a religion which is both vital and intelligent.

Within this context, Nibbāna (to use the Pali term again) appears, not as a philosophical perplexity, but as a definitely religious aspiration. To the villager, Nibbāna may be remote, a further shore at the end of a long pilgrimage through many rebirths, but it is the ultimate fulfilment of his highest ideas of felicity — the Great Peace. The monk's conception is more allied to the moral and mental exercises by which he hopes to put an end to those confusions and those attachments to things transient which hinder his peace. In this sense, Nibbāna is Extinction, Cessation (of hindrances) — a negative concept. In another sense he makes a greater affirmation than the layman, for he prays that 'he may attain Nibbāna very quickly,' he has renounced the world in order to do so, and, from his present, imperfect achievement of inward serenity he can anticipate the end of the Path and the perfect fulfilment. But he knows that he can only do so dimly. Studying the scriptures and the *Abhidhamma* interpretations, he may speculate at times concerning this ultimate Nibbāna condition, as we have seen from Shwe Zan Aung's Dialogue. He knows, however, the limit of these speculations. "No intuition, no salvation."

Nor is the discipline by which he hopes to attain this saving vision merely intellectual. For scholar and peasant alike there is an ethical reference, which is one of the bonds which hold them together. The monk's Path is a Path of Purity — moral purification, as he is constantly reminded at the fortnightly *Upasatha* chapters. Similarly, the villager associates Nibbāna with his moral efforts to 'heap up *kutho*' (worthiness or merit). It is partly his sense of unworthiness which makes him consider Nibbāna a very distant prospect — a sense of remoteness corresponding to the more explicit negation in scholastic phraseology. Hence, for both monk and layman, there is an ethical reference, and this reference is partly responsible for the view that to those who have not yet attained, Nibbāna must necessarily be a Mystery.

In spite, however, of this element of negation, Nibbāna is fundamentally a positive concept, in keeping with that hopefulness and buoyancy which we have remarked as a characteristic of Burmese Buddhism. It is a religious aspiration — so definite that we have ventured to describe it as the religious ultimate of Southern Buddhism, in preference to *Dhamma*, and also to *Buddha*, who is indeed venerated, but is not regarded as divine: he is the Pathfinder but not the Goal.

We have suggested that it is this essentially religious character of the concept which may explain the apparent contradictions involved in its statement, the shifting from Yes to No and back to Yes, the fact that it can be affirmed as the sufficient goal of aspiration, a state of utter sanctity and bliss, yet also denoted as the Void, and finally said to be inexpressible. These conflicting terms have frequently been regarded as logical contradictions. As such they cannot be allowed to remain in the same house together. One must be expelled to make room for the other. Or they must be referred to different stages in the history of Buddhist thought.

While we consider that most of the apparently nihilistic passages in Buddhist literature are susceptible of an interpretation which escapes nihilism, we suggest that both affirmative and negative expressions should be accepted, not as terms of Buddhist philosophy, but as expressions of Buddhist religion. It is true that they have been discussed by Buddhists themselves from a philosophical standpoint, and they are often joined with philosophical concepts. Nevertheless their basic character is religious. As such they are not logical but paradoxical opposites, a distinction which is considered more fully below. Nibbāna, in the context of Burmese Buddhism, is a religious ultimate term, paradoxically expressed.

In support of this suggestion, we have attempted a cursory comparison with similar paradoxical expressions of other ultimate religious terms in

other traditions. We do not suggest that this excursion proves that Nibbāna must necessarily be a religious term, but simply that it proves there is no reason why it should not be. In making this statement, we challenge the view that the Nibbāna language indicates the arid scholasticism, non-religious thought and essentially philosophical character of Hīnayāna Buddhism. This might plausibly be argued if we were obliged to accept the opposition in the Nibbāna language as logical. It fails if we are allowed to regard it as paradoxical.

It should, perhaps, be remarked that we are not affirming that Burmese, and hence, Hīnayāna Buddhism is a religion because Nibbāna is a paradoxical religious expression. The movement of thought is the reverse. What we affirm is, first, that Burmese Buddhism is a religion, and hence that Nibbāna is a paradoxical religious expression.

The comparison with other religions has, perhaps, served a further purpose: it has indicated the fundamental character of the relationship of the Nibbāna language to Hinduism. Other comparisons, we maintain, have sometimes proved too much, and also too little: too much, in identifying Buddhism *exclusively* with this or that trend of thought in Indian tradition, in so far as such identifications have been based on interpretations of Nibbāna language, regarded as the expression of a philosophical concept; too little, in so far as they have limited the connection to some particular phase of Hinduism, or even to Hinduism alone. The reference is more basic. And it is universal. Nibbāna, as an ultimate religious term, paradoxically affirmed, relates Buddhism to all such quests of faith, similarly expressed. Its reference is to man's complex and struggling estimate of his fundamental human situation.

## 2. *The Realm of Religious Paradox*

To relate Buddhism to Hinduism, Christianity and other religious traditions does not, of course, imply identity. In order to clarify the nature of this relation it is necessary to distinguish more precisely what may be called the realm of religious paradox which our comparison has brought into view. Here we can hope for no more than tentative conclusions, since our survey was limited and the selection somewhat arbitrary, sufficient maybe to show that the paradoxical expression of an ultimate religious term was not peculiar to Hīnayāna Buddhism, but scarcely sufficient to decide the larger questions which arise from the study of religion in general. It may, however, be some contribution to emphasise that these questions exist.

Paradox, it was stated in our introductory chapter, involved an imaginative contrast, as distinct from logical opposition. This distinction

may perhaps be shown more clearly by regarding the different tendencies of the two modes of expression. Logical contradiction involves the clash of two clear-cut, separative, rival propositions. A selection must be made. One must give place to the other. If the proposition *p*. is true, then *not-p*. must be false. It is 'a negative determination of what is possible.'<sup>3</sup> The basic fact is that two rivals are discerned, so that one excludes the other.

In the logic of thesis and antithesis, the treatment is not so drastic: the rival propositions are regarded, not as necessarily exclusive, but as inadequate or germinative, as steps on the way to further formulation.

Religious paradox, however, intimates a final and necessary formulation. Logical surgery of any kind is ruled inadmissible. The full Yes and the full No of the paradox must be sustained and the resultant tension is part of the truth which must be intimated. Only thus, in spite of the apparent contradiction, can the truth which is discerned be intimated. The challenge of logic is not debated. What is debated is the conclusion to be drawn from this challenge. The claim that the logician can be judge as well as challenger is rejected. If we seek the ground of this rejection we seem to be referred to some element of compulsion derived from the religious imagination. The language of religious paradox is the language of poetry rather than the language of prose. And it is a poetry which refuses to submit to the tribunal of prose, insisting that an imaginative contrast is not a fictitious contrast but one which reflects the impact of Reality. At the same time it insists that this reflection is not to be confused with comprehension.

Thus paradoxical affirmation, in this realm of ultimate religious terms, is no crude, blind or naive assertion, ignorant of the challenge of logic. It is the language of mature, reflective faith, which understands the serious nature of the logical challenge but regards capitulation to this challenge as treason to truth. Here, it is implied, man, *qua* logician, is out of his depth, while man, *qua* poet, *qua* seer, is compelled by his knowledge to recognise the limitations of his knowledge. He is obliged to express his knowledge in apparently contradictory terms, but he is also obliged to hold these terms together in precarious synthesis by the fact that the Reality thus intimated is not itself contradictory. "Unity exists in spite of tension."<sup>4</sup>

Religious paradox therefore signifies both human insight and human incapacity, and the insight signified is both stimulated and challenged by human logic. Paradoxical expression in this connection is inescapable. It is "altogether essential to any conception and communication of those

<sup>3</sup> S. Stebbing, *A Modern Introduction to Logic*, chap. XXIV, p. 471.

<sup>4</sup> Bishop Gustaf Aulén, *op. cit.*, Part I, p. 105.

assurances which are native and original within our faith" — essential, not because Reality contradicts itself, but because we cannot express certain aspects of Reality without appearing to contradict ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

Professor Scholem, in his study of Jewish Mysticism, makes two distinctions which may also be applied to the realm of religious paradox. It is convenient here to take the second distinction first.

Mysticism, he remarks, is a definite stage in the historical development of religion, making its appearance under certain well-defined conditions. "It is connected with, and inseparable from, a certain stage of the religious consciousness," succeeding two earlier stages. "The first stage represents the world as being full of gods whom man encounters at every step and whose presence can be experienced without recourse to ecstatic meditation." In this mythical epoch there is no room for mysticism because the abyss between Man and God has not become a fact of the inner consciousness.

"The second period which knows no real mysticism is the creative epoch in which the emergence, the break-through of religion occurs. Religion's supreme function is to destroy the dream-harmony of Man, Universe and God, to isolate man from the other elements of the dream stage of his mythical and primitive consciousness. For, in its classical form, religion signifies the creation of a vast abyss, conceived as absolute, between God, the infinite and transcendental Being, and Man, the finite creature. . . . . Man becomes aware of a fundamental duality, of a vast gulf which can be crossed by nothing but the *voice*; the voice of God, directing and law-giving in His revelation and the voice of man in prayer."<sup>6</sup> We may remark that this second stage involves the employment of logical, discursive language in the statement of associated dogma. It also involves some conflict with philosophical criticism couched in logical terms. Thus it is a stage of rational reflection.

For our present purpose, Professor Scholem's definition is too narrow, as it excludes 'religions of enlightenment,' confining attention to religions of revelation. We would include both, emphasising the fact that this stage is accompanied by rational exposition in either case, in distinction from the imaginative stage of Myth. Nor should the issue be confused by this reference to mysticism. The language of paradox is frequently enclosed in the context of mysticism, as we have seen, but it is not confined to that enclosure.

The point we would make is that religious paradox, as a historical development, appears to come in between the realms of imaginative

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Roger Hazelton, "The Nature of Christian Paradox," *Theology Today*, Vol. VI, No. 3 (1949), pp. 324ff.

<sup>6</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, chap. I, p. 7.

Myth and religious logic. In the one realm we have "clear separate mythical images."<sup>7</sup> In the other we have clear propositions. Our suggestion is that religious paradox expresses a type of experience which can be distinguished from myth-formulation and also from dogmatic statement, but has affinities with both. Thus paradox is nourished by Myth and stimulated by philosophy — philosophy, both in the form of religious exposition and in the form of criticism of this exposition. When we say, 'in between' we do not mean in point of time — first Myth, then Paradox, then Philosophy. So far as religious development is concerned, it is nearer the truth to say first Myth, then Philosophy, then Paradox, for paradox is in part a response to the challenge of philosophy. It denotes not a prior, but a further stage, in religious reflection, for philosophy, whether in the form of religious dogma or freethinking criticism, tends to define. Religious paradox refuses this definition. Philosophy is fascinated by the Clear Idea. Paradox clings to the Confused Image — perhaps, also, to the Confused Idea. It discerns either that all has not been said or that all cannot be said. As against primitive Myth, it insists that the ultimate religious term is beyond familiarity; as against logic, it insists that it is beyond definition.

We may here, perhaps, remark one aspect of the relation between religion and critical philosophy. By 'critical philosophy' we here mean philosophy which starts from its own independent premises, sharply distinguished from any religious dogma. It may, indeed, be held that this is the only correct usage of the term, philosophy. Now it has sometimes been suggested that once the stage of critical philosophical capacity is attained, there is no further function for religious formulation so far as the search for truth is concerned. We hold that the phenomena of religious paradox proves the contrary. It is the expression of the reflective religious consciousness, maintaining that there is an aspect of Reality which is still unfathomed, beyond the capacity of intellect or the limitations of discursive formulation. It does not discourage further inquiry, but rather holds the door open for further research, rebuking the philosophic tendency to shut the door by premature definition or the tendency to disregard the full complexity of the data presented. Critical philosophy ignores this rebuke at its peril.

Much the same may be said of the relation of religious paradox to religious dogma, for dogma expresses a similar tendency towards definition. At the same time, religious paradox cannot be regarded as the foe of dogma any more than it can be regarded as the foe of critical philosophy.

Here we may remark the further distinction made by Professor

<sup>7</sup> E. Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. Suzanne K. Langer, chap. III, p. 37.

Scholem in his definition of mysticism. "There is no such thing," he observes, "as mysticism in the abstract, that is to say, a phenomenon or experience which has no particular relation to other religious phenomena. There is no mysticism, as such, there is only the mysticism of a particular religious system, Christian, Islamic, Jewish mysticism, and so on. That there remains a common characteristic it would be absurd to deny" but "Jewish mysticism, no less than its Greek or Christian counterparts, presents itself as a totality of concrete historical phenomena."<sup>8</sup> He indicates in the succeeding pages how the formulation of Jewish mystical experience has been affected by distinctively Jewish beliefs.

A similar fact was observed in our survey of different traditions. There was the same language of paradox, but the conceptual reference varied, sometimes within the same tradition. There was a shifting of the negative reference, for example. In some cases, the reference of the paradox was to the incapacity of intellect to know beyond a certain limit, and here it was questionable at times whether the language was, in fact, as paradoxical as it appeared to be. In other cases, the reference was to the incapacity of language to express what was known intuitively, and this might refer further either to the seer's own incapacity to express himself clearly or to his conviction that such expression could not be understood by hearers who had no equivalent experience or knowledge.

### *3. Interpretation and Experience*

The statement of paradox is therefore affected by the element of interpretation which is found in every religious tradition.

This recognition enables us to state more exactly the relation of Burmese Buddhism to Hinduism and other traditions which is indicated by the similar language of paradox. We have already remarked that this similarity does not, of itself, indicate kindred concepts. The universality of religious paradox does not mean that 'all religions come to the same thing' or express the same faith. The kinship indicated by paradox refers to some basic experience. But does this necessarily mean that the experience is, in every respect, similar? We think not. Interpretation not only expresses experience differently, but modifies that experience.

When we considered whether Burmese Buddhists could be said to *pray* to the Buddha, it was remarked that there was no manifest sense of any experience of communion with the Buddha — the consciousness of communion, for example, affirmed by mystics who believe in a Divine Being. In view of the Buddhist denial of any such Being, it is difficult to

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, chap. I, p. 6.

conceive the possibility of any such consciousness, for it depends, in part, on the believer's own faith and response.

The same sun shines for all. But there is a considerable difference between the condition of the temperate sun-bather, the intemperate sun-bather, whose scientific knowledge is insufficient to discipline his enthusiasm, and the man who is content with the darkened room because he does not know that the rays of the sun benefit his bodily health. Yet all three can name the sun. All know that the sun shines. All are aware of its presence, and, all, to this extent, share the same experience. All, at one time or another, may express this common knowledge in the same phrase.

While, therefore, similarity of expression does not exclude important differences in religious experience, it may also point to some element in religious consciousness common to all.

What is the basic agreement, the fundamental reference, indicated by the language of paradox? More specifically, what is this agreement when the language refers to some ultimate religious term, however that ultimate term may be conceived or interpreted?

We cannot, obviously, pretend to answer such a large question within the scope of this present inquiry. It is, however, legitimate to emphasise that the question arises. We may also be expected to indicate some possible approaches towards an answer.

It may be suggested, to begin with, that religious paradox indicates that, at a certain stage of development, — mature development, — man always finds the world too big for him. He is impressed by a Reality which bewilders him, and it is the most important aspect of this Reality which bewilders him most. Religious paradox reflects his consciousness of the ultimate human situation, the Life and Death situation, a situation as complex as it is both social and individual. It may include, in any one individual locus, aspiration, frustration, insecurity, isolation, community. What it frequently, if not invariably, includes is the awareness of the Abyss, though this awareness is sometimes covered up, submerged, in the flux of existence.

It may be held that this expression is not confined to paradox, nor to the stage in human history when paradox appears. It is manifest in the stage of Myth. There never was a simple savage, only a bewildered savage, and his bewilderment has mythical formulation. Professor Scholem suggests, as we have seen, that there is no consciousness of 'the abyss between Man and God' in the mythical epoch. He speaks of "the truly monistic universe of man's mythical age." Man, perhaps, felt on more familiar terms with the universe in that age, but it may be doubted whether he was ever quite so much at ease as such language suggests.

At any rate, the language of religious paradox, following the stage of conscious reflection, may be considered to indicate a more conscious acknowledgment of this Abyss, whether or no it is conceived as the Abyss between Man and God. Some may be content to leave the question there, believing that this is as far as strict science can penetrate. Whether awareness of the Abyss includes awareness of a Somewhat Beyond — God, Brahman, Nirvana — that is a question intellect persists in raising, but the language of paradox sometimes suggests that intellect will never know the answer.

In Buddhism, and not in Buddhism alone, there is the further suggestion that it is this very restlessness of intellect which prevents its purpose, a restlessness joined to a roving fancy which keeps it occupied in a world of little, transient things, uneasily aware of the immensities beyond, but too fevered to face them calmly. Until man is freed from the fret, not only of the invasive world without, but of the distracted world within, he cannot know the answer. The path to be followed is the path of purity which leads to the place of vision where, utterly detached from selfish and shallow interest, man may know the Truth.

It is the apprentice function of intellect to assist in this progress. But meantime intellect is unsteady, clouded by passion, confusing the issue as often as it discerns it. (Buddhism, too, has its version of the Fall and consequent darkening of mind.) It is only in fitful moments that intellect recognises the things which belong to Peace.

But thought of that Beyond, however fleeting the thought may be, challenges this unhealthy Present, and in the challenge there is perhaps a hint of man's relationship to that Beyond. It is a thought which halts the language of men who are always ready to speak more than they know. The calm of silence brings man nearer the Great Peace than any wind of words. Peace, Silence, Reverence — these three are joined.

Memory recalls a moonlight night and a yellow-robed monk, seated at the base of a pagoda in the quiet enclosure of a monastery. Finger to his lips, he checks the speech of his visitor, and the two remain silent. After a long interval, the monk remarks gravely, "The Buddha has said that silence is often better than speech. I am wondering whether it is right to break this silence."

The Buddha's silence, it has been said, "is not a proof either of denial or of agnosticism.... Silence is on occasions the only language of true worship."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, "The Teaching of Buddha by Speech and Silence," *Hibbert Journal*, (April, 1934).

## APPENDIX

### NOTE A

#### BURMESE NAT LEGENDS

##### I

How the Burmese regard the *Nats* is illustrated by an account of the story and cultus of U Yin Gyi, described as 'a national god of the Burmans of Lower Burma.' Written by a Burmese writer, Maung Tha Kin, this account was published in the *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Vol. XIV, Part 1, April 1924.

The writer observes that U Yin Gyi is 'quite a young god' compared with the Thirty Seven gods of Upper Burma, but 'he has pushed his way up so pluckily that in Lower Burma at least he has practically superseded these spiritual princes.'

The story goes, according to one version of the legend, that U Yin Gyi was once a young Burmese lumberman in the service of a timber merchant. He was also a very skilful player on the Burmese harp. Timber, hewn and collected in 'enchanted forests,' and formed into log rafts, was brought down the rivers to the town of Dalla. The fairies in the forests were so enchanted by the young musician that on one occasion they clung to the raft and prevented its voyage downstream. The perplexed timber merchant realised that some member of his crew was wanted by the spirit world. Lots were cast and three times the lot went to U Yin Gyi. He was therefore seized, securely bound and thrown overboard.

After this death by drowning and "his birth as a god, U Yin Gyi committed many acts of depredations in the districts... In consequence, U Yin Gyi was given a place in the pantheon of national gods by the frightened populace and regularly propitiated.... The propitiation is done by an offering of vegetarian diet."

Pictured as a cruel, capricious despot riding a ferocious tiger, this angry god was held responsible for diseases and 'accidents that no doctor could cure.' Since the beginning of the present century, however, the people have noticed a change in his behaviour. "He is now believed to have taken to religion, to keep sabbath and to lead the life of a saintly god," observes Maung Tha Kin; "but the people still entertain the belief that his council or assembly of under-gods still do continue to help or harass the people at will as of yore."

The god's new interest in religion does not, however, prevent him showing favour to evil-doers. At least, these evil-doers still expect his help, for it

is observed that no organised theft, robbery or dacoity is ever committed in Lower Burma without having made offerings to U Yin Gyi and without invoking his aid for protection from arrest and capture. Those who premeditate such a crime mark a 'circular fence' on the ground, using a stick or pouring water to mark the boundary. They remain within the fence until a meal has been cooked and an offering made to the god. "Neither spitting nor answering the call of nature within that period is permitted. Even if unintentionally any of these rules is transgressed by any one of the party, the plan hatched is abandoned." Gamblers and speculators also invoke the help of the *Nat*.

Despite the opposition of some of the monks, public festivals in honour of this *Nat* are maintained. In these festivals U Yin Gyi shares the honours with another *Nat*, Koe Myo Yin, to whom he seems to owe allegiance. The writer describes one of these festivals.

Facing each other at a cross road are two miniature palaces of bamboo and paper. In one of these palaces U Yin Gyi is pictured as a youthful musician, flanked by two ghostly lieutenants.

During the festival there is a play, when the *Nats* are represented by human actors. First they are reverently invited to attend the festival and accept the offerings of food made to them. Then the *Nat*, Koe Myo Yin, comes majestically to the front of the stage, followed by U Yin Gyi. A dialogue follows in which U Yin Gyi is enjoined by his overlord to take due care of the people and protect them from danger and epidemic. U Yin Gyi emphasises his assurances that he will do so by summoning his army of undergods. Then the two *Nats* depart, "leaving the undergods to partake of the offerings made to them to their hearts content. The undergods, with dishevelled hair, dressed uncouthly in rags, painted with hideous hues and holding divers kinds of mock weapons of warfare, would make a sudden rush from all sides into the midst of the crowd, go to the altars and literally devour the *kauk hnyin* rice and other eatables. Thereafter they would give a merry devil dance, making weird noises and sounds for some time; and depart — bringing the festival abruptly to an end."

In this account we may note the suggestion that the chief *Nats*, though still capricious, are no longer objects of dread but can be expected to be benevolent, if duly honoured. We may also note the opposition of the more zealous monks to this cultus.

It is interesting to compare this description of a modern *Nat* cultus with stories belonging to an earlier period, told in *The Chronicle of the City of Tagaung*,<sup>1</sup> stories of palace intrigues which show the mingling of legend, Buddhist piety and animistic belief. King Thambawka, it is related, "regarded not the law of truth, he heeded not nor revered the Three Gems"<sup>2</sup> . . . nor recked he aught of virtue, piety or holiness, scorned the

<sup>1</sup> *J.B.R.S.*, Vol. XI, Part I (1921), pp. 29ff. (translated by Pe Maung Tin and G. H. Luce; cf. their Introd. to *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*).

<sup>2</sup> The Three Gems, i.e., the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha.

practice of meditation, learning and love. Therefore because he forgot the law of truth, his glory and dominion waned; his queen broke faith with him, and took her pleasure with the Naga king, by whom she conceived." Her sons were born blind because "the breath of the Nagas had come upon them."<sup>3</sup>

The king soon died, and his successors only survived for brief periods. The Naga king from the spirit world is held responsible for their death. 'Twisting his way into the hollow of the palace post, the Naga prince came to the world of men and reigned seven years with the queen.'

A youth 'from a Brahmin village' resolved to end this state of affairs and seize the kingdom. He prepared himself by religious observance. 'He bathed his body and cleansed it; bowed down and did obeissance, worshipping the Three Gems, his great grandparents, grandfather, grandmother, mother and father, the spirits who keep watch over the great religion, the spirits who keep watch over cities and border villages. . . .'

On his way to the capital, halting at a village 'where of old the coming Buddhas sported and made merry,' the youth is encouraged by the god, Sakra, who 'with his fairy horse and fairy raiment went ahead with the prince in human guise.' Thus assisted, the youth invades the royal town, takes possession and is married to the Queen. Warned by Sakra to be watchful, the youth questions the Queen about the deaths of the previous kings. The Queen then confesses her intrigues with the Naga prince and helps him in a plot to seize the Naga, who is slain by the youthful and zealous conqueror.

## NOTE B

### BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN BURMA

The chief lessons taught in the monastic schools in Burma are the following:

#### I. *The Three Jewels:*

I take refuge in the Buddha,  
I take refuge in the Dhamma  
I take refuge in the Saṃgha.

#### II. *The Five Precepts:*

Not to kill  
Not to steal  
Not to lie  
Not to commit adultery  
Not to drink strong drink.

<sup>3</sup> Nagas are "fabulous creatures that sleep deep down below:" cf. Scott, *The Burman*, Vol. I, chap. xxix, p. 352.

III. *The Mingalā Thot*: The Song of Great Blessing. (*Mahāmaṅgala Sutta*: *Sutta Nipāta* II. 4).

“Thus have I heard:

Once when the Blessed One was at Jetavana in Anathapindika’s Park, as night came on, a beautiful *Nat*<sup>1</sup> drew near, lighting up the whole place with his presence. He greeted the Blessed One, and then standing on one side addressed him in this verse:

“What many men and deities  
Desiring Bliss, have sought to find – –  
Come tell me, Master, what it is  
That brings most blessing to mankind.”

To whom the Sage made answer:

“To quit the fools, to court the wise,  
This is the highest Paradise:

“To pay respect where it is due,  
So shall true blessing wait on you:

“Seek a fit place and there remain,  
And strive self-knowledge to attain:

“If in past lives you’ve stored up merit  
The fruits thereof you’ll now inherit:

“Let wisdom skill and discipline  
And gracious kindly words be thine:

“Tend parents, cherish wife and child,  
Pursue a blameless life and mild.

“Live thou devout, give ample alms,  
Protect thy kin from life’s alarms;

“Do good, shun ill and ever shrink  
From snare of spirituous drink:

“So do thou persevere in good.  
This is the true Beatitude:

“Be humble, with thy lot content,  
Grateful and ever reverent.

<sup>1</sup> I have here used the Burmese term, *Nat* instead of *deva*. Fausböll translates “deity” in S.B.E., Vol. X (*Sutta Nipāta*) p. 42.

“Study the law of righteousness,  
This is the path that leads to Bliss.

“Patience, kind speech, as chance affords,  
With holy men, religious words:

“The noble truths, austerity,  
Nirvana here, and chastity.  
This is true happiness.

“To live from all attachment free,  
From sorrow and impurity,  
This is the true security,  
This is the Highest Bliss.”

“The Mingala-thoht,” says Sir George Scott, “is one of the first books the young scholar gets into his hands after he has learnt the ordinary formulae of worship. There are few Burmans . . . who cannot repeat the Pali text from end to end.”<sup>2</sup>

“Side by side with the Pali, they learn the Burmese text.”<sup>3</sup> A Burmese version quoted by Father Sangermano begins each verse, “O Nat!” e.g., “O Nat! know that to keep far from the company of the ignorant,” etc.<sup>4</sup>

The version given above is quoted from the Appendix to *Modern Buddhism in Burma* (Purser and Saunders), pp. 95, 96. The metric form recalls the sing-song repetition of the young *koyins* as they commit the Song to memory.

See also F L Woodward's translation in *Some Sayings of the Buddha*, Oxford University Press, (“The World's Classics”) which brings out the refrain to each verse (not given above): “Theirs is the greatest blessing.”

Bishop Bigandet added the following footnote to his version: “Within a narrow compass, Buddha has condensed an abridgment of almost all moral virtues.”<sup>5</sup>

### III

#### SONG OF EIGHT VICTORIES

Stories and songs in honour of the Buddha also form part of Monastic education for the laity, especially this medieval poem, probably composed in Siam. Scenes from the poem are depicted on pagoda platforms.

<sup>2</sup> *The Burman*, Vol. II, p. 318.

<sup>3</sup> M.B.B., p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> *The Burmese Empire*, chap. XIV, p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.* Vol. I, p. 123.

The first stanza refers to the legend of Māra, King of Death and Lord of Hell, who is said to have opposed Gautama's passage to Nibbāna.

“By liberality did he  
The Sage attain to victory,  
Such was his chosen armoury!  
Māra, by all his host attended,  
With thousand flashing swords defended,  
On his war-elephant so proudly seated,  
In panoply of steel the Sage defeated.  
Be yours his glorious victory  
And yours its ample blessing be!”

The second stanza celebrates an encounter with a demon who used to devour children:

“By patience and tranquility  
(Such was his chosen panoply)  
The Sage achieved the victory.  
Alavaka, the demon dread,  
The livelong night he combated,  
With heart of brass redoubtable,  
Fiercer than Māra, lord of hell.  
Be yours his glorious victory  
And yours its ample blessing be.”

The third stanza refers to the last of the murderous attempts of Devadutta, the cousin and would-be supplanter of the Buddha. It is told that the Buddha's compassion had such an effect on the elephant Nalagiri that the brute fell before him and removed the dust from the Buddha's feet.

“By the waters of his pity  
He won the glorious victory  
O'er Elephant Nalagiri!  
As the dreadful thunder crashing,  
As the lurid lightning flashing,  
As the jungle-fire encroaching,  
He beheld the brute approaching.  
Be yours his glorious victory  
And yours its ample blessing be!”

The fourth stanza relates an encounter with a robber; the fifth concerns a victory over slander as to Gautama's chastity; the sixth recounts his triumph over a false teacher; and the seventh points a moral by describing the victory attained by Moggallāna, one of Gautama's chief followers:

“His pupil too by magic might  
Did aid him in the heroic fight . . . .”

The eighth stanza refers to the Arahat's power to assume other forms and pass through the air unseen.

The poem therefore emphasises three lessons:

1. The honor due to the Buddha.
2. The blessing brought by the Buddha.
3. A challenge to the pupil to follow the Buddha's moral example.

The stanzas here quoted are from the version given by Purser and Saunders, M.B.B., pp. 99 ff.

## V.

### THE NEMI ZAT

*Zat* is the Burmese for *Jātaka* (Buddhist Birth Story). Of these the Nemi, Temi, Zeneka and Wethandaya Zats are especially popular, and form part of the Burmese child's education.

Reference has already been made in the text to the Wethanday Zat (Story of Prince Wessantara) which commends a prince who was willing to give away a kingdom, chariot, children and even his wife in his zeal for his own salvation.

The following is an extract from the Burmese version of the Nemi Zat given by Bishop Bigandet. As will be seen, it sets out the pains of hell and the blessings of heaven. The Burmese are not the only people who have considered such stories suitable to encourage young children in the right path!

The Buddha explains how he was, in a former existence, the ruler of the country of Mitila. As such, from a tender age he "displayed the most liberal and pious dispositions in making abundant alms and fervently observing all the religious practices. All the inhabitants of that kingdom followed his example. . . . During those happy times, hell seemed to have become quite unnecessary. . . .

"On a certain day Nemi appeared to be most anxious to know which was the most excellent practice, the bestowing of alms, or the observance of the precepts." The King of the *Nat* realm himself came down from his glorious seat to give the answer, and, on his return, he eulogised King Nemi so strongly that the other *Nats* wished to see this virtuous prince. Accordingly a young *Nat*, named Matali, was commanded to escort the king to the *Nat* realm.

Stepping into the carriage sent for him, the king "abandoned himself to the guidance of his heavenly guide."

"Two roads are now opened before us," said Matali, "the one through the dismal dungeons, where the wicked are consigned to undergo punishment for their offences, and the other through the blissful seats, where the good are enjoying the rewards allotted to them for their virtues. Which of the two do you wish to follow?"

The prince said he wished to visit both places.

Matali answered in a mild tone of voice that his request should be complied with.

The celestial guide directed his rapid course through the regions of desolation, where dwells an eternal horror. The first object they met with was a broad and deep river . . . glowing like a flame . . . . On the banks of that river stand the infernal ministers . . . wounding, piercing the unfortunate wretches who try to get out of that horrible and burning water . . . .

"What are the crimes," asked the terrified prince, "that have committed the unfortunate inhabitants of this place to undergo such unheard-of sufferings?"

"They are," replied Matali, "the persecutors of the weak, the heartless oppressors of the poor etc."

At another hell, Matali explains, "These suffer for having done no good to their fellow-creatures, for preventing others to do some, and for having borne envy to their neighbours."

After visiting other hells and receiving similar explanations, "Nemi was suddenly brought over to the beautiful, smiling and blissful seats of the blessed. He soon descried the celebrated palace made of diamonds . . . . In that palace Biranee occupied a splendid apartment; she was then lying on a soft sofa, surrounded by more than a thousand beauties.

"What good works," asked Nemi, "has Biranee practised to deserve such a magnificent reward?"

Matali replied, "This daughter of *Nats* was formerly a slave in the house of a pounha. She was always very attentive to all the duties of her position, and at the same time regularly observed the precepts of the law. On a certain day her mistress, who was wont to feed eight Rahans (monks) daily, fell into a fit of anger, and said that she was unable to bear any longer the fatigue attending the maintenance of these religious. But the young slave, full of religious zeal, took upon herself the labour of feeding the Rahans. For this good and meritorious work she is enjoying the happiness of her present position."

After visiting other heavens and receiving other similar explanations, Nemi was introduced to the presence of the chief of the *Nats*.

On his return to his kigdom he told his people what he had seen "and concluded by exhorting his people to be liberal in bestowing alms, that they might hereafter be admitted to share in the enjoyment of the *Nats*' happiness.

— — — from Bishop Bigandet, *Op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 153 ff.

(From the context it seems clear that the Bishop had not himself seen any copy of the *Jatakas*. He says that he has heard that there is such a book in Ceylon and makes a conjecture about its contents.)

#### NOTE C.

#### *AN-ATTĀ DOCTRINE, NIBBĀNA AND INDIVIDUAL SURVIVAL*

The Buddhist denial of the soul or ego seems to the average non-Buddhist inconsistent with the belief in individual survival after death which belief in Nibbāna seems to imply. But intelligent Buddhists are equally bowilder-

ed by the attitude of non-Buddhists. Disputants are often at cross purposes. In frequent discussions I have therefore tried to understand how the argument appears to the Buddhist.

Humpty Dumpty, thinks the non-Buddhist, has had a great fall in Buddhist psychology. He cannot see how all the king's horses and all the king's men of Buddhism can possibly put Humpty together again, and, unless they can, he sees no ground for any view of Nibbāna which includes a prospect of individual survival. He cannot, indeed, see how the Buddhist can consistently speak of individuals at all or reconcile his theories with individual persistence, before or after death, still less with ethical individual responsibility.

The Buddhist, on the other hand, doubts if Humpty ever sat on the wall. It is evident, to his mind, that Humpty has always been what he evidently seems to be now: a mix of shell, white and yolk — and, if you analyse the mix further, something still more complex: an aggregate of aggregates. There is, he admits, an individual splash on the ground and it is convenient to give it a name. But apart from the shell, the white, the yolk, what other Humpty can there be? Why seek to put him on the wall? This, of course, is not the simile he uses. He generally quotes the chariot analogy — Nāgasena's argument to King Milinda — the word 'chariot' is but a term for pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body and banner-staff.<sup>1</sup>

But there is sometimes apparent another ground for Buddhist bewilderment. He wonders how his Western questioner can be so naive! What he has in mind is his own development from childish ideas, and the childish, animistic ideas of simple villagers who still think of the butterfly (*leip-byā*) which is thought to leave the body at death — and may even do so during deep sleep<sup>2</sup>. This presumably intelligent Westerner, talking about a soul, appears still to believe in some little mannikin, some semi-material kernel. How incredible! Does he not realise that human personality is much more complex than that?

There are, it is true, many simple Buddhists in Burma who have no such difficulty. Their allegiance to the An-attā doctrine is merely lip-allegiance. To them Maung Maung is Maung Maung. And he may be Maung Maung's grandfather come to re-birth. Expectant mother's discuss such possible re-births. One of these, a young widow, lived in hope that the child to be born would be her deceased husband. We need not attribute such ideas solely to the survival of animism. They are just as much encouraged by Jataka stories.

In the Dialogue cited in chapter III, the argument for individual survival through the persistence of sound *khandhas* in the ultimate Nibbāna condition, *Anupādisesa*, is based on the distinction drawn between *upādi* and *upadhi*. The former, *upādi*, which is the term referred to in *Anupādisesa*, is derived from *upa* and the verb *ādiyati* — 'to be grasped.' Hence it is said to refer to the five *khandhas* *grasped at* by four *upādanas*. Buddha-

<sup>1</sup> Milindapañha. 25. 1 (Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*, pp. 129 ff.).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Forbes, *British Burma*, chap. iv, p. 99.

ghosa is quoted in support of this interpretation: "The *Anupādisesa* Nibbāna is so called because of the non-becoming of the five *khandhas* which have been grasped at as effects by the *kamma* attended by desire, pride and error." U. Agga in the Dialogue concludes that it is clear that this leaves it open to believe that sound *khandhas*, the fruitional consciousness of arahantship obtains, in the *Anupādisesa* Nibbāna as in the prior condition, *Sa-upādisesa*. "The orthodox view according to the *Dhammasaṅgāṇi* is that the worldly mind and material body alone are *upādānīya* and the transcendent, spiritual consciousness which is beyond the reach of *upādānas* is *anupādānīya*."

'Yet ninety nine per cent of Burman Buddhists.. understand this word *upādi* to mean all kinds of *khandhas*.' He has previously suggested that this may be partly due to the fact that they confuse *upādi* with *upadhi*. Now *upadhi* is derived from *upa* and the root *dhā* — — — 'to bear, conduct or carry' and is thus applied to *khandhas* generally, besides corruptions, sensual desires and *kamma*. There are scriptural passages which speak of all *upadhis* being given up in Nibbāna, and a Brahmana who has attained Nibbāna is described as *nir-upadhi*.' It is argued, however, that these passages mean simply that such an arahant is released from *unsound khandhas* — — — not all.

In his accompanying Essay, Pe Maung Tin gives an interpretation which also, on the whole, favours individual survival. But he says nothing about *anupādisesa khandhas*. *An-upādisesa* means "nibbāna without any residue of *upādi*'s at the death of the saint" whose "aggregates are dissolved" — — — but only his aggregates. There is no reference, therefore, to any annihilation of ultimate personality, and the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* says: "The saint on the dissolution of the body is established in the *dhamma* (*dhammaṭṭho*) and his personality is not counted as man, god, brahma or being" and the commentary explains *dhammaṭṭho* as meaning: "established in the nature of saints as well as in nibbāna itself." Pe Maung Tin emphasises the distinction between conditioned and unconditioned reality; he also emphasises that there is but one Nibbāna (*sa-upādisesa* and *an-upādisesa* being but a difference in name, as applied to different stages). He finally emphasises that 'no analysis will reveal the true nature of the Reality.' Knowledge can only be attained by intuition, and meantime can only be indicated in negative terms.

## GLOSSARY

B = Burmese

P = Pali

S = Sanscrit

|                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| abhiññā (P)                | vision; super-intellection                                                                                                                                                                      |
| an-attā (P)                | i. e. an-attā doctrine — denial of 'soul theory'                                                                                                                                                |
| animitta (P)               | the signless                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| an-upādisesa (P)           | final Nibbāna; where no residual stuff of life is said to remain                                                                                                                                |
| arahant, arahat, arhat (P) | saint; he who is worthy                                                                                                                                                                         |
| artha (S)                  | the good, goodness                                                                                                                                                                              |
| attha (P)                  | wholeness, health                                                                                                                                                                               |
| apaccaya (P)               | not related to causes                                                                                                                                                                           |
| abhāva (P)                 | non-being                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| bhikku (P)                 | mendicant — hence, monk.                                                                                                                                                                        |
| bhikṣu (S)                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| deva (S)                   | god.                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| dhamma (P)                 | a disputed term with many shades of meaning; generally means 'Law,' or the Teaching of the Buddha (when cited in the Three Refuges)                                                             |
| dukkha (P)                 | many shades of meaning; no English word is its precise equivalent: It is often translated 'pain' but has a wider reference. Opposite of <i>well-being</i> generally. Some nowadays trans. 'ill' |
| dosa (P)                   | ill will                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| dhātu (P)                  | final physical substratum, hence sometimes bodily remains after cremation                                                                                                                       |
| galon (B)                  | evil spirit                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| jhāna (P)                  | a technical term for a stage in the progress towards the Nibbāna condition: sometimes translated 'meditation' but this is misleading. A mystical state (not necessarily implying rapture)       |
| jātaka (P)                 | Buddhist Birth story concerning some incident previous to Buddha's birth as historic Buddha. In Burmese, <i>zat</i>                                                                             |
| kan (B)                    | karma (S) effect of previous deeds                                                                                                                                                              |
| khandhas or skandhas (P)   | aggregates constituting the individual personality                                                                                                                                              |
| kutho (B)                  | frequently translated 'merit' but 'worthiness' is a better translation: the result of good deeds, leading to better condition hereafter                                                         |
| koyin (B)                  | novice (monk)                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| kyaung (B)                 | place of learning: used frequently for monastery, or more explicitly <i>pōngyī</i> (monk)- <i>kyaung</i>                                                                                        |
| kyaung-tagā (B)            | founder of a monastery                                                                                                                                                                          |

|                                                 |                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| leip-pyā (B)                                    | 'butterfly' soul                                                                                                                                  |
| Maung (B)                                       | prefix for a junior male, distinguished from U. (Mister)                                                                                          |
| moha (P)                                        | ignorance; dullness                                                                                                                               |
| nat (B)                                         | god, cf deva: see discussion ch. II                                                                                                               |
| nat-ka-daw (B)                                  | nat medium,                                                                                                                                       |
| Nebban, Niban<br>Neh'ban,<br>Neikban,<br>Nigban | transliteration used for the Burmese equivalent for Nibbāna                                                                                       |
| ni-rodha                                        |                                                                                                                                                   |
| nāga (B)                                        |                                                                                                                                                   |
| paññā (P)                                       |                                                                                                                                                   |
| paññā-cakku (P)                                 | eye of higher knowledge; insight: vision                                                                                                          |
| peta (P) (preta)                                | "a departed spirit": a suffering rather than a malevolent spirit: see Law, <i>Buddhist conception of Spirits</i> p. 90                            |
| pōn-gyī, phōn-gyī (B)                           | a monk (lit. 'great glory')                                                                                                                       |
| pa-yā (B)                                       | pagoda, shrine, sacred image: also title of honour                                                                                                |
| payā-shikoh (B)                                 | to pray                                                                                                                                           |
| pōn-gyīkyaung (B)                               | monastery                                                                                                                                         |
| rahan                                           | a term used in some of the older books for 'monk'                                                                                                 |
| raga (P)                                        | lust: passion                                                                                                                                     |
| sayā (B)                                        | teacher                                                                                                                                           |
| sayādaw,<br>sada (B)                            | senior monk; abbot                                                                                                                                |
| Samgha (P)                                      | Order of Buddhist monks: the Church                                                                                                               |
| saṃbodhi (P)                                    | the final illumination of the Eight-fold Path: arahat's insight                                                                                   |
| sa-upādisesa (P)                                | Nibbāna condition prior to the final complete stage; Nibbāna without dissolution of present 'individual' body, whether in this life or a re-birth |
| tathāgata (P)                                   | meaning obscure: title often employed for the Buddha: applied also to arahats generally; probably pre-Buddhist                                    |
| talapoin (B ?)                                  | obsolete name for monk. Used by Sangermano                                                                                                        |
| taṇhā (P)                                       | craving: thirst: attachment to present existence sometimes translated 'desire' but this is too mild a term                                        |
| tasē (B)                                        | ghost                                                                                                                                             |
| therā (P)                                       | elder. Hence 'Theravāda': school of the elders: Hīnayāna sect                                                                                     |
| thāthanābaing (B)                               | chief abbot or arch-abbot of Burmese Samgha                                                                                                       |
| Upādi and<br>upahdi (P)                         | elements of existence: for discussion on distinction between upādi and upadhi. See Note C.                                                        |
| upazin (P)                                      | fully ordained monk                                                                                                                               |
| upasin                                          |                                                                                                                                                   |
| tesdi, zedi (B)                                 | pagoda; stupa                                                                                                                                     |
| zat (B)                                         | jātaka story.                                                                                                                                     |

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Besides translating (in collaboration with Mrs Rhys Davids) the *Katthāvatthu* and the *Abhidhammattha-Saṃgaha* for the Pali Text Society, with an Introductory Essay to the latter, Shwe Zan Aung published, in instalments, in the *Journal of the Burma Research Society* (1917) a study of "The Buddhist Philosophy of the Real" and followed this up by the "Dialogue on Nibbāna," which I have quoted in chapter III. Born in 1871 at Akyab, he graduated from Rangoon College in 1892 and was later appointed a Magistrate in Henzada.

"My colleague," wrote Mrs Rhys Davids, "has been in close touch with several very learned monks, including the distinguished Doctor, Ledi Sadaw, in a country where the study of Abhidhamma, or philosophy, is cultivated more than elsewhere. Bhikkus from Ceylon come now, as in days of old, to study philosophy under the Theras of Burma, so renowned are the latter for proficiency in this subject. Mr Aung has also, through a course of study necessarily limited . . . . . assimilated a notable purview of our own philosophic tradition. He is thus better fitted than most Oriental students to translate into our vehicles of expression the living meaning, as distinguished from the *etymological* connotation, of Buddhist philosophical terms."<sup>1</sup> "I have," wrote Shwe Zan Aung himself, in his last note in the *Compendium*, "no theories of my own. . . . I am acting only as the mouth-piece of my country's teachers. At best I am but an interpreter of Burmese views based on the Ceylon Commentary and the works of Buddhaghosa. You may take my essay as medieval Buddhism presented through modern glasses."<sup>2</sup>

This may have been true enough of the essay in question — the introductory essay to the *Compendium*. But in his 'Buddhist Philosophy of the Real' he certainly presented theories of his own which aroused considerable controversy at the time. His studies in Western philosophy, to which Mrs Rhys Davids referred, led him to conclude that there were marked affinities between Buddhist thought on the one hand, and Bergson and Bertrand Russell on the other hand. Bergson and Russell — a strange alignment! as Shwe Zan Aung's critics remarked. But Aung saw a comparison between Buddhism and Bergson's concept of *durée* and also between the Bergsonian and Buddhist emphasis on intuition, while Russell's relational logic resembled, to his mind, Buddhist logic. Both Bergson and Russell are said to have been interested in these comparisons from Burma.<sup>3</sup>

Aung's principal critic was Dr. G.R.T. Ross, who accused Aung of attempting to 'force an identity between the doctrines of these modern writers and Buddhism.' Ross wrote, that passages quoted by Aung himself

<sup>1</sup> Editor's Preface, *The Compendium of Philosophy*, pp. XIII, XIV.

<sup>2</sup> *Compendium of Philosophy*: Note 'On Authority in Buddhist Belief,' p. 283.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *J.B.R.S.* Vol. VII, Part III, p. 229; Vol. VIII, part III, p. 266.

showed that the Buddhist 'criterion of reality is permanence, that of unreality is impermanence.'<sup>4</sup> Aung had quoted Buddhaghosa: "There is nothing permanent and constant like Nibbāna". (If Aung can be said to have disregarded this interpretation of Nibbāna in his essay, he certainly did not do so in his Dialogue).

The criticism aroused a spirited reply, including a confession of orthodoxy. "Dr Ross thinks that I am dissatisfied with the present attitude of traditional Buddhism. Buddhist writers are conservative.... Now and again, we may have a controversy amidst our own ranks owing to different interpretations of one and the same passage. But the more I study traditional Buddhism as it has come down to us in writings, the more I have reason to be satisfied with it."<sup>5</sup>

This reply was published in the same year as his Dialogue. It seems clear that he regarded the Dialogue as a fair presentation of Saṃgha discussions. His own view is partly reflected in U Agga's opinions, but he also suggests that these opinions have roots in the past, while Sumana, the exponent of the Ledi school, speaks for more recent opinion. At the same time Sumana voices the objection emphasised by Ross that Nibbāna cannot be conceived as flux.

In the controversy, Aung had an ally in Professor K.M. Ward who emphasised both the reliability and significance of Shwe Zan Aung as an interpreter of Burmese Buddhism. Mrs Rhys Davids, said Ward, was dissatisfied with her own translation of Buddhist psychology. She felt that she had not been able to understand the traditional terms. Hence her collaboration with Aung in the 'Compendium.' "This book revolutionised the methods of Pali research," wrote Ward, "I think it safe to say that no western scholar of repute would now attempt a translation of the all-important Abhidhamma or other technical works without collaborating with someone on the spot—in Burma or Ceylon. U Shwe Zan Aung then inaugurated the new movement. He did not as Dr Ross would have his readers suppose . . . give us dogmatically high sounding philosophical terms (whose substitution in the older translations immediately made sense of them). On the contrary he collected a number of definitions, sentences, quotations in which the disputed term appeared: he explained the traditional meanings to his English editor, . . . By this means a near modern equivalent to the Buddhist term was generally found . . . What we want is more of such work."<sup>6</sup>

Besides his close contacts with the Saṃgha scholars, Aung collaborated, too, with another distinguished Pali translator, U Pe Maung Tin. As we have seen, Lēdī Sayādaw was among the scholars he consulted, and Lēdī's own work has had a wide influence on modern Burmese thought. Aung takes note of this, but he distinguishes it from earlier schools. There are grounds, then, for the conclusion that Shwe Zan Aung is himself the more reliable interpreter of the Burmese tradition as a whole.

<sup>4</sup> *J.B.R.S.*, Vol. VIII, Part I, pp. 57 ff.

<sup>5</sup> *J.B.R.S.*, Vol. VIII, Part II, pp. 166 ff.

<sup>6</sup> *J.B.R.S.*, Vol. VIII, Part III, pp. 263 ff.

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