

## THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM IN BUDDHISM

(The present paper is limited to an analytical survey of the original teachings of Buddhism as related to the concept of freedom. The complicated scholastic contributions of the latter Buddhist thinkers of Mahayana and other sects have not been taken into account. The definition of freedom, to serve as basic frame of reference is Herbert J. Muller's—the ability to make choices and to carry out purposes. These choices and purposes include the mundane like the economic and the socio-political, and the exalted like the aesthetic, the ethical, and the spiritual.)

According to the Truth that the Buddha found, freedom was the end of life not only in the physical sense but in the ultimate mystical sense. Buddhism preached a gospel of freedom from craving for the goods of this life, which craving was the cause of all pain, misery, trouble, suffering and unhappiness of this world. But there was no promise that this freedom from craving would bring happiness, comfort or peace in this world or any other world, or in a rebirth. It would come in “not-being.”

Essentially Buddhist ideal of freedom is freedom from the cycle of becoming. It is the freedom of “the living”<sup>1</sup> from the prison of being. The being is, if not the cause of misery and suffering, at least the provider and perpetuator of the conditions responsible for unhappiness, suffering and bondage. This world and this life, to the Buddha, was an evil world and an evil life; and both nature and man himself conspired to create conditions for his arrest in the whirlpool of craving—the cause of his suffering—and the Wheel of Being—the manifestation of his unhappy lot.

Like most higher religions, the primary concern of Buddhism is not this world but “the other world.” And this other world, according to the original teachings of the Buddha, is “no world”. For a student of freedom, then, the Buddhist concept of freedom will be restricted mainly to spiritual, moral and intellectual freedom rather than freedom in the physical sense.

Intellectual freedom is not an explicit part of the higher, doctrinal religions. The first human activity, they would suppress and discourage under the banner of divine inspiration, would be the spirit of free inquiry. But Buddhism among higher religions is a partial exception. Perhaps, because the Buddha did not claim to be a prophet or an immortal himself, he did not think free inquiry was a heresy. In fact the Middle Way, the path to Nirvana assumes constant individual searching. Each person must explore and experiment.<sup>2</sup>

The spirit of exploration and experiment brought to the Buddha himself "the enlightenment." Confined to a life of princely luxury and aristocratic lethargy for twenty-nine years of his early life, he was kept safe from the realities of life. But sensitive Gautama, when once exposed to the excruciatingly painful realities of the world-sickness, death, torture, and grief—could no longer keep himself within the confines of his palace. He freed himself not only from the bonds of worldly ties but in time from the constraints of traditional Hindu religion.

This emancipation, however, came neither immediately nor thoroughly. Immediately the Buddha became an ascetic. Like the Jainists or Brahmin ascetics he submitted to self-torture. Experience and exploration at the end brought to him the second freedom—the freedom from the second extreme. The "enlightenment" under the famous Bo-tree signified to him emancipation from extremes.

When at long last emancipation came, it did not come thoroughly. Rather the Buddha came up with a long range plan of freedom from suffering in this world. "To be" was not the question ; "no to be" was the goal. For finding complete freedom one should get rid of the wheel of Being and pass into the state of nihilation, nothingness. Freedom from the suffering and the ills of this life was not to be attained 'in' this world but 'from' this world. This is what Albert Schweitzer calls the doctrine of world and life negation.<sup>3</sup> Moreover the Buddha's teaching of the Middle way did not give free reign to inquiry. Ross and Hill say, "To find the Middle way to

harmonious living, the Buddha declared each person must search thoughtfully. . . . Each person must explore and experiment. 'Happiness, he who seeks may win, if he practices the seeking,' said the Buddha." But the Buddha did not fail to admonish against the uselessness of spending time in wordy arguments.

Nirvana, the ultimate and absolute freedom, was a nebulous concept. It fulfilled mystical longing but did not answer philosophical questions. In fact, as Moore says, "Buddha steadfastly declined to be drawn into philosophy: Whether the world be finite or infinite, eternal or non-eternal . . . . However, such questions be answered or whether they be left unanswered, the necessity of salvation remains the same, and the way the same."<sup>5</sup>

Inquiry into the central question of Nirvana was, in fact, held to be heresy, by correct Buddhists.<sup>6</sup> But agnosticism of the Buddha, or his fear of pitfalls of speculation for the ordinary men, could not provide a permanent resting place for thoughtful minds. Even in the life of the Buddha such questions were raised by his disciples but religious earnestness rather than good answers quieted the questioners. One wonders if there is not one patent answer in doctrinal systems, to fundamental questions. God's evasive answer<sup>7</sup> to the anguished inquiry of Job and Buddha's agnostic replies to questions about Nirvana seem to fall into a similar pattern.

With the passage of time, however, questions were raised and "the defenders of Buddhism, in controversy with rival religions and religious philosophies, were constrained to face problems which the founder blinked."<sup>8</sup> And mainly it was this defensive attitude of the later Buddhist teachers that gave rise to the Buddhist cult of worship in place of Buddhist way of independent salvation. But one thing must be noted here—that Buddhism did not produce any Grand Inquisitors to order the execution of heretics, or kings like some of the Moslem rulers to wage wars for the defence of the True Religion. The problem of salvation still is the problem of the individual.

To talk of Buddhism in a political context seems to be an outright heresy.

Whereas the Athenian Plato "thought out" a philosophic political system the God of Israel felt concerned about the establishment of kingship, and Prophet Muhammad made his religion a composite of the spiritual and the political, the Buddha, unlike Jesus, did not even talk of a Kingdom of Nirvana (Heaven?). What he struggled against was not chaos, neither injustice and poverty, nor the distribution of the goods of this life. So political philosophy remained essentially alien to his thought. Escape from suffering was not in the establishment of a Republic in this world: he cared not about producing order out of chaos, nor promised emancipation in a Utopian Nirvana. The ideal was not living a better life (or, for the same reason a better 'after life') but to pass into a state of nothingness. Buddha offered no hope of happiness here or in the hereafter.<sup>9</sup>

In its original form, Buddhism, is an ethical movement for salvation. And "Its salvation is a solely personal act of the single individual. There is no recourse to a deity or savior."<sup>10</sup> This emphasis on individual's right conduct and individual efforts at salvation made political and social relationships unimportant. In fact all relationships are to be avoided because they give pain both when you want to make relationships but fail, and when you want to break them. Political and social organization, therefore, was an obstacle to Nirvana. "Ancient Buddhism represents in almost all practically decisive points the characteristic polar opposite of Confucianism as well as of Islam. It is specifically unpolitical and anti-political status religion, more precisely, a religious "technology" of wandering and of intellectually schooled mendicant monks."<sup>11</sup>

But Buddhism could not keep itself totally aloof from organizing itself. The freedom enjoyed by the laity and the monks from the pursuit of unhappiness soon was to become restricted by organized "pursuit of happiness" in ceasing to exist. It must be remembered, however, that although organization entered into Buddhism quite early, the "establishment" remained unpolitical for quite sometime. The early history of Buddhism like Christianity and Islam, "shows, religions often spread without any political support. . . ."<sup>12</sup>

Despite the fact that the Buddha did not promise political freedom and

made no contribution to political theory, Buddhism did not lack political support of an unusual nature, some time later in its history. Asoka the Magnificent became a Buddhist as a result of his shock at the mass slaughter of armies in a war fought in Southern India. Penitent, he instituted one of the greatest adventures in the history of religion in the spread of prince's faith by the use of peaceful means. No war has ever been fought in the name of Buddhism. And this is symbolic of Buddhism's strength as well as weakness. Himself "The Prince of Peace," Asoka failed to institute political tradition to perpetuate the eastern version of "pax romana." Short lived was the glorious period of peace because it was the work of one good king, not the manifestation of any political ideas of the founder.

Conze is very eloquent on placing a premium on the survival values of Buddhism. "We are all of us nowadays unconscious Darwinians, and the survival value of an unworldly doctrine seems to be fearfully small. . . . mighty empires built on greed, hatred and delusion, lasted just a few centuries, the impulse of self-denial carried the Buddhist community through 2,500 years."<sup>13</sup> Whereas the importance of long period of survival cannot be denied, the question must also considered—survival at what cost? Dejection, poverty, stagnation have marked most of this long survival of Buddhist community. On the ruins of "those mighty empires" mentioned by Conze, were built other mighty empires: every fall was a prelude to a new rise; every failure anticipated a more thrilling success. Buddhism has behind it not only survival of 2,500 years but a continuous "drift," to use Toynbee's phrase, a mark of disintegration, also lasting 25 centuries. Detachment from the life on this earth did not let the Buddha incorporate the idea of progress into his thought or ethics. But more of it later.

One great ideal of primitive Buddhism was the abolition of the caste system. The idea of four castes which in ancient Hinduism started, perhaps, with the necessity of division of labour had put the majority of Indian population in two lowest classes and for these classes the places of worship were out of bounds. The Buddha, like Mahavira, did not apparently make birth in a higher social class a condition for the attainment of Nirvana.

Although there is evidence, as Max Weber points out, that originally Buddhism had firm conviction that only the two higher classes could qualify for full gnosis,<sup>14</sup> the fact remains that the ethics of Buddha, with its emphasis on right conduct, appealed to every one and salvation was not limited against, and nor was admittance into the fold denied to, the lower classes. For a short period, then, Buddhism provided for the trodden masses a hope of freedom from their self-concept of worthlessness, nay, the degraded acceptance of themselves as animals rather than human beings.

But complete repudiation of social differences had never before been achieved and has never since been accomplished. The Buddha's reforms were no exception. Both its origin and its philosophy provided conditions for Buddhism to be a high ethical movement as well as a hierarchical system. Whereas, as Nietzsche points out, "The things necessary to Buddhism are a very mild climate, customs of great gentleness and liberality, and no militarism. . . . ." another condition is that "it must get its start among the higher and better educated classes. . . . ." <sup>15</sup>

Buddhistic teaching originated in a region in which there was relatively considerable development of nobility and bourgeoisie. It was the product of urban development, of urban kingship and the city nobles.<sup>16</sup> Its ethics taught the simple Middle Way but the rationale of its ethics was founded in mystic experience which not many are capable of sustaining or understanding.

This difficulty with the mystic experience, for the achievement of Nirvana generally and for speeding up of the achievement particularly, gave rise to a different kind of selectivity. Again to quote Max Weber, Buddhism's ". . . inner consequence, and thereby also its external weakness, lay in the fact that in practice it confined salvation to those who actually followed the path to the end and became monks, and that at bottom it hardly bothered about the others, the laity,"<sup>17</sup> And yet it is questionable that the Buddha himself conceived his teaching as a monk's prerogative. In his life time he admitted many laymen into his order. It was sometime later that the fellowship of disciples changed into "established church" type of thing with monks as landlords and the laity as serfs.

Whatever the case may be, it is hard to make a categorical statement about the contributions of the Buddha's teachings to freeing men from the unholy bondage of caste system. But it can be certainly said that within its own fold it cast off the traditional caste differentiation and at the same time gave rise to a different distinction between the order and the laity. And this originally meant more freedom for the downcast and the outcast because the distinction between the order and the laity was "otherworldly" rather than "this worldly."

Both Buddhism and Jainism, "the earliest known revolts against caste. . . ." failed to "captivate" the Indic World, or other-wise "caste might have been got rid of."<sup>18</sup> The failure might be attributed to the fact that the spirit of revolt was not internalized by the low caste masses ; it remained mainly as an idealized ethics.

Like many other modern scholars, Moore sees in Buddha's thought both positive and negative aspects. "The Dhammapada, with its emphasis upon sorrow, desire, and escape from existence, is more concerned with the negative side. On the positive side, knowledge, self-control, and love are prominent."<sup>19</sup> Indeed great was the emphasis put upon free thought, but on an a priori basis, the true thought was that which led to the realization of Nirvana and hence to the rationalization of the right conduct already coded in the form of Holy Eight-fold Path. One feature of this Eight-fold Path is "right mindfulness" or "right thinking" as translated by various translators. The mind of man according to the Buddha is full of disastrous potential for leading man astray. The mind, left alone, is prone to idealize, to indulge in imaginative wandering. A traveller once asked a Buddhist monk, "Tell me, have you seen a woman walking this way ?" The monk's characteristic answer was that he did not know whether it was a man or a woman ; all he saw was a set of bones.<sup>20</sup> The knowledge gained by right-mindfulness or right contemplation (the eighth feature) was not empirically ascertained or objectively contemplated but instead was gotten by insight or intuition.<sup>21</sup> It is mystical experience which is at once the source and the means of knowledge and in this respect it is different from the spirit of Greek thought,

which depended on reason and logic, and from Judeo-Christian-Islamic thought in which basically, the source of knowledge is God and the means to get that knowledge is revelation. But in spite of all the differences the fact remains that like all religious thought Buddhist thinking, too, was restricted. It did not give free reign to imagination.

Buddhist conception of love, on the surface appears to be paradoxical. Desire is the cause of suffering, love causes desire, and so logically love must be a taboo in the Buddha's teachings. But love is preached by the Buddha. According to the fifth verse of Dhammapada "...hatred does not cease by hatred at any time: hatred ceases by love, this is an old rule...." This ideal of love looks like Christ's gospel of love. But inherent in them is a fundamental difference. Ideally Christian love is selfless love of one individual for another individual, active, outgoing, limitless. The Buddha's call of love is that which would seek the welfare of all mankind. It is disinterested, passive, self-conscious. Self-conscious because a free, intense love in human relationships will lead to unhappiness first in the quest of the object of love and then when one has to give it up. Love, too, then is not significantly, a positive condition or symbol of freedom.

Self-control may be discussed as a positive attribute of Buddhist thought because it gives an ideal of self-imposed limit on the unrestricted, instinctive freedom of man. But it should be remembered that self-control is not exercised for the good of the others, or the concern for the rights of others, but the goal of one's own salvation, the attainment of Nirvana.

Nietzsche, in repudiating the idealism of Christianity, went so far as to say that "Buddhism is a hundred times as realistic as Christianity—it is part of its living heritage that it is able to face problems as objectively and coolly... Buddhism is the only genuinely positive religion." It is not hard to see that Nietzsche was too optimistic about the objectivity and positiveness of Buddhist thought. But still one may agree with Nietzsche without any qualms of conscience when he says that Buddhist epistemology is positivistic in the sense that "It does not speak of a 'struggle with sin' but yielding to reality, of the 'struggle with suffering'."<sup>22</sup>



If Buddha had no worldly aspirations for man, if his Middle Way ethics "naturally bred an indifference not only to ideas of political freedom but to energetic efforts to social reform,"<sup>23</sup> his ethic was not entirely indifferent or absolutely nihilistic. Ethics, whoever may propose it, assumes "the taking of interest in the welfare of the beings that belong to this world."<sup>24</sup> The Buddha was concerned with the welfare of man in this world or else why so much emphasis on right conduct? If annihilation was goal why not strict asceticism, why not suicide? His concept of Nirvana was essentially based on the concept of "life negation", to use Schwietzer's phrase. The regard for terrestrial affairs (good conduct) and the belief in life negation are ideally contradictory. And so appear the Buddha's thought and ethics. But on close examination, they are nothing more than a paradox. To the extent that ethics enters in his teaching, his thought to the same extent loses its nihilism. "Then, in the ethic of compassion, his divergence from world and life negation becomes completely manifest."<sup>25</sup> In his ethics, he recognized the inevitable necessity of good life in this world, in spite of himself. And that he did so, makes him still greater.

Because of this paradox, he clearly manifests himself as a humanist. He gave a new meaning to ethics. He gave to India something it did not yet possess: an ethic derived from thought. The chain of traditional Hindu virtues and moralities, capable of only a limited development, was broken. And it was due to this contribution that although Buddhism was exiled from India not long afterwards, traditional Hinduism suffered a visible change and readjustment.

And yet in spite of the Buddha's ethical premises of the life on this earth, the essence of his thought remained Nirvana. His ethic remained essentially an ethic of thought rather than an ethic of action. That he made "man only occupied with his own redemption not that of all living creatures," shows the predominant nihilistic belief. Unlike Jesus, the Buddha did not demand active love. Although for the laity he commanded "loving care for relation," he draws the ideal of monastic perfection with hard lines in the saying: "He who cares not for others, who has no relations, who controls

himself. . . . him I call a Brahmin."<sup>26</sup>

Recognizing the Buddha as a man of genius, Turcik notes that, " . . . . . by renouncing outward freedom . . . . . the man of genius acquires inner freedom . . . . . "<sup>27</sup> The lofty spiritual freedom, then, was the prerogative of the Buddha (Buddhistavas) and the order of the Holy Monks. Like the Grand Inquisitor,<sup>28</sup> the Buddha believed in throwing crumbs of ethics to the screaming stupid masses. The laity observing "loving care for relation" would delay the attainment of Nirvana ; only the Buddha knew for how long.

Critics attribute the failure of "the higher religions" to make significant contributions to Man's over-all freedom to their fundamental belief in absolute Truth which is immutable. The permanence of the first cause governed the ethics of these religions and this belief on filtering down to the masses of people damped their spirits and crippled their minds. Belief in change and progress never grew out of the faith in eternal, absolute Truth. If progress was made by the Western world, it was out of a secular belief in the positive value of change rather than the inspiration of religious dogma.

The Buddha's case presents a clear contrast to this analysis. Whereas Judaism, Christianity and Islam look up to God or the Savior for the change in man's (evil) nature, the Buddha put his faith in the individual himself. Not believing in the sinful nature of man but keeping in mind the evil of this world, Buddha pointed out the way man could change his nature.

" . . . . . to that favourite Western saying: "You can't change human nature." . . . . . the Buddhist answer is of course you *can* if you learn how. That knowledge of the possibility and method of changing human nature in its essential aspect constitutes the third and fourth Truths. The first and second Truths reveal the nature of the situation which requires to be changed . . . . . "<sup>29</sup> This hope for the reward of effort to change gave freedom to the individual to seek his own salvation and to be responsible to himself rather than to "powers that be."

And then this idea of change was not limited to the sphere of ethics

of salvation. The Buddha, like his contemporary Heraclitus had belief in the perpetual flux of all things. "All the individual existence all the world of phenomena are subject to change ; nothing is abiding in its nature. The universe itself is a ceaseless ever-becoming. . . . ."<sup>30</sup> The Buddha explained the nature of existence by the use of very sophisticated logic. Nothing remained the same thing from one moment to another. There was always change and progress, positive or negative, depending on whether one made efforts in which case the progress would be positive and if he left himself at the mercy of instinctive cravings, his progress would be negative.

But strangely enough, in spite of this visible difference of the Buddha's teachings with the proponents of other "higher religions," the former failed to bring change in the earthly lot of the human beings as completely as the latter. He failed because of his fallacious assumption of what is "good" for man. If he freed man from the yoke of God's burden, he did not put any positive value to life on this earth. If man did not make efforts for his salvation, he would be changed into an animal existence ; and if he did make effort, he would be heading toward complete extinction. By basing "his gospel on the evil of life in the natural world, unrelieved by flattering hopes of a benevolent creator or by any promise of heavenly rewards in a life to come. . . . ." he pointed out that, ". . . . .the way to escape this was to suppress all natural desire. . . . ."<sup>31</sup>

The belief in change and the principles of high morality, divorced from an ethic of action, and the belief in the evil of this life failed to make any contribution to the "worldly" freedom of man.

The conclusion of this analysis of the Buddha's teaching for its contribution to the freedom of mankind must remain inconclusive. There is no question that his thought was a break with tradition and hence in itself a symbol of freedom. Then also he freed his thought from the authority of the deities and the tyranny of dogma. Basing his thought of salvation on the premise of world's evil, he pointed out the way for salvation, Every individual was free to make his own effort and to set his own pace. "The final end to be sought and attained when all the "fettters" had been cast off

(e.g. the delusion of a permanent self, the tyranny of the senses, ill-will towards one's fellow-men) was emancipation from Karma. . . . ."<sup>32</sup>

The Buddha's mysticism set the stage for spiritual freedom, though he believed not in spirits. Freedom in this world was not his goal, it was Freedom from this world. So his philosophy did little to emancipate thought. Thought remained subjected to mystic experience. Inquiry was suspended. His ethics was based on life negation but was also compounded with love and compassion. His interest in life was only perpetuation of life till death so that more and more credit could be accumulated. Very little of this credit would come from "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness."

The Buddha freed religion from the fetters of the caste system but the reform did not remain effective for a significant length of time. His religion itself was effectively ousted from the stronghold of caste system. Still his heresy gave the superior Brahmins something new to think. The urbanity of his religion failed to seep into the life blood of all men, high or low, rich or poor. Actually it gave rise to a new class system, the order and the laity. And the humble order of monks in time became tyrant landlords and high priests of religious establishment.

Again the emphasis on mystic experinece and the evil of this life failed to produce any political theory or even political principles in his elaborate system of ethics. Later, Buddhism had kings but they did not harbor any political freedom.

Whatever was contributed to this world was not the direct product of the Buddha's teaching or inspiration. The inspiration for art came from the system of theology and demonology developed later by the Order. Along with other eastern civilizations and societies, Buddhism, too, was fated to provide an atmosphere of detachment not conclusive to technological development.

If two of the necessary conditions of freedom are a large number of choices and a large number of opportunities available for making choices and carrying out purposes, then, to provide both these conditions was not

the gospel of the Buddha. Alternatives to free life were limited but opportunity to carry out the purpose of salvation was great. Every individual was responsible for his own destiny. In achieving the lone goal of "not being" the individual attained the infinite freedom.

One may eulogize the Buddha for one thing if for nothing else : He did not create conditions of freedom for the enjoyment of the good of this life but he did provide conditions for escape from the evil of this world and emancipation from the perpetual round of suffering and misery.

1. The use of the word soul is avoided here because Buddha did not talk of soul as such. "The living" is an individual entity.
2. Ross and Hill, *The Great Religions*, p. 53.
3. Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*.
4. Ross and Hill, *op. cit.*, quoted, p. 53.
5. Moore, George, F. *History of Religions*, p. 26
6. Weber, Max, *The Religion of India : The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, p. 209.
7. Rather a battery of questions, "knowest thou?" to which Job in humble submission replied, "have I uttered that I understood not ; thing, too wonderful for me, which I knew not": Job 38-42.
8. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 306.
9. Burrow, *Founders of Great Religions*, p. 99
10. Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 206.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
12. Friedrich, C.W., *Man and His Government*, p. 117
13. Conze, Edward, *Buddhism : Its Essence and Development*, pp. 25-26.
14. Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 226.
15. Nietzsche, *Antichrist*. pp. 71-72.
16. Weber, *op. cit.*, pp. 204-205.
17. Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 233.
18. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, p. 302.
19. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
20. Ross and Hill, *op. cit.*, p. 63.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Nietzsche, F.W. *Antichrist*, p. 69.
23. Muller, Herbert J., *Freedom in the Ancient World*, p. 110.
24. Schwietzer, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
26. Schwietzer, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
27. Tunck, Hermann, *The Man of Genius*, p. 252.

28. Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*.
29. M. O'C Walshe, *Buddhism for Today*, p. 34.
30. Hentzler, J. O., *The Social Thought of the Ancient Civilizations*, p. 199.
31. Muller, Herbert J., *Freedom in the Ancient World*, p. 110.
32. James, E.O., *History of Religions*, p. 84.

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