

Tapping the Potential for Wisdom Inherent in Humankind

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Third, this vision itself both suggests and limits the ends which can be used to achieve it. Christians and Buddhists may disagree among themselves and perhaps with each other about specifics, but they are usually agreed that means which are inconsistent with their goals can never lead them to those goals.

This was the central message of both Gandhi, a Hindu, and Martin Luther King, Jr., a Christian. As a Buddhist, Thich Nhat Hanh writes: "There are so many peace organizations which do not have the spirit of peace themselves, and they even find it difficult working with other peace organizations. I think that if peace workers are really peaceful and happy, they will radiate peace themselves. To educate people for peace, we have two alternatives: to use words, or to be peaceful ourselves and speak with our lives and our bodies. I think the second way is more effective."

The Sarvodaya Movement goes further in applying Buddhist precepts to its entire program. They speak, for instance, of the "Four Noble Truths of Village Awakening," drawing parallels between each of the Four Noble Truths and the process by which a village grows from decadence to enlightened development, (p.34) Along the way, their methods of interaction are portrayed in terms of the Sublime Abodes of the Buddha: loving-kindness, compassion, joy in the joy of others, and equanimity.

Finally, the attitude taken by the worker for social change can be profoundly affected by his or her religious beliefs. I'm thinking about two things in particular here. First is the attitude needed to face the enormity of the task, and the likelihood of frequent setbacks and disappointments. Second is the resource necessary to maintain a sense of humility, as a guard against being so sure of the righteousness of one's cause as to be blinded to the damage one can do; the attentiveness of a practice such as meditation can be a powerful remedy to those illusions.

Looking at all of the problems of the world, it's easy to be overwhelmed by it all, and to doubt whether the efforts of one person can make any difference. Gandhi responded, using the counsel of the Bhagavad-Gita, in counseling his followers simply to do their duty, as Krishna says in the Gita, mindless of the consequences. Even the realization of impossibility of fulfilling certain religious vows in normal human terms can help put our efforts into perspective. If I can say, truly, that "Sentient beings are numberless," and yet "I vow to save them all," I begin to forestall both the illusion of taking my own efforts too seriously and the disappointment of my daily failings. Joanna Macy draws on the Buddhist insight of the inter-relatedness of all beings. If I just address one problem, she says, I am still sustained by knowing that my efforts are multiplied by those of everyone tied to me in this web of interrelationship. And together, we do make a difference.

A Buddhist Outlook and the Future of Western Culture

Professor Bill Garrett

People who make it their business to study social trends and changes tell us that human culture, especially in the West, is undergoing an unprecedented rate of change. These changes are manifested most dramatically by the issues that so effectively grab newspaper headlines: technological wonders and terrors, political turmoil, and economic upheavals.

In addition to this ever-accelerating rush of banner headlines, a quieter and deeper change is evolving. For what is also changing in Western society is our perception of ourselves—our perception of what it is to be human.

Many people feel that reflection on the human predicament is most seriously and comprehensively engaged in by the world's religions, and for the next few minutes I want to make some speculations about how social changes are precipitating some deeper changes--changes on the religious level. In particular, I will suggest that social changes in the West have set the stage, for many Westerners, for a decisive transition to a Buddhist outlook.

The traditional Christian monotheism that has served as the spiritual and moral basis of Western development is undergoing, for many Christians, a stage of heroic self-questioning and critical reassessment. There is a misguided tendency to simply identify Christianity with Fundamentalism (of course: that's the Christianity that grabs the headlines), but to do so is to ignore the sincerity and courage of many contemporary Christian theologians.

I will focus now on three traditional Christian attitudes that have been brought into question by Christian as well as non-Christian thinkers:

1. the view that divine revelation has been pronounced with finality in the scriptures as "Absolute Truth."
2. the absolute significance of personhood: the ultimate reality (=God) is a person, and the individual human person is believed to have a career that extends indefinitely beyond death.
3. the human mandate to subdue 'Creation': humans are in Nature but not of it; we are Nature's 'overlords,' Nature is for our use and at our disposal.

I take these three attitudes to be important in that they have served as pillars of traditional Western self-understanding. I will briefly say why each of them has come to be called into question in the modern world.

(1)The idea of ABSOLUTE TRUTH has come to be seen as being conducive to the division of humanity into armed camps, each identifying itself ideologically (and even racially) in opposition to others. Not only other views, but other peoples are perceived as

competitors, heretics, and threats. The dangers of this are tragically evident in recent events in Lebanon.

(2)The significance of PERSONHOOD has been undermined by modern neuroscience, in which the person has been persuasively described as an amalgam of sensations, feelings, and thoughts integrally bound up with the function and continuity of the brain. And the exciting developments in physics, like most versions of quantum theory, convincingly argue against the ultimate reality of any 'things' whatever (be they persons or otherwise) in favor of a reality of energy in constant flux.

(3)History tells us that the mandate to SUBDUE CREATION has too often been extended to include the subjugation of other peoples. And perhaps as important, we have reached a global crisis in which we no longer can rationally hope to profit through a policy of conquering nature, but only by blending with nature, by seeing ourselves as PART of Nature and not Nature's "overlords."

The extent of Christian self-questioning on these issues is, let me use the word again, heroic. The "Process Theology" of Teilhard de Chardin and his contemporary exponents is one attempt to re-establish the Christian vision in terms of the realities of the changing world in which the Christian lives. And the so-called "Death of God Theology" of thinkers like Thomas Altizer and Mark C. Taylor represents another thoroughly honest and insightful attempt to deal in Christian terms with the changes overrunning Western culture.

Yet for all that I admire these modern attempts at re-visioning Christianity, I am at the same time struck by a sense of hopelessness at the enterprise. These efforts to thrust the Christian vision beyond the ancient Middle-Eastern and medieval European conceptions in terms of which traditional Christianity has been defined seem to me to be doomed by the essence of the Christian outlook.

Specifically, the fact remains that Christianity is inescapably a Salvationist religion: it is the salvation of the person, the ego, that is both the message and the mission of Christianity. The scriptures of Christianity, its language, its psychology, its symbolism and images: all these are oriented toward one thing and one thing only—personal salvation.

I suggest that the innovations of a Teilhard or an Altizer will no more function vitally within such a context than would the innovations of Shakyamuni Buddha within the context of traditional Hinduism. There comes a point at which we cannot fruitfully 'shake the foundations' (to use one of Tillich's favorite phrases) but must abandon the foundations.

A radical transition in outlook is not only a need, it is a development already in progress. That is: there is in Western culture an increasing sense of the naivete and dangers of (1)dogmatic TRUTH, (2) the substantial reality of the PERSON, and (3) the assumption of a dualistic and proprietary relationship between humanity and Nature.

And this brings me to why I feel that the Buddhist outlook is the one that will come to increasing prominence in the West in the coming decades: the process toward that outlook is already well underway.

The repugnance from dogma and appreciation for an experimentalist, "try it for yourself" attitude that so characterizes the contemporary Western mentality finds a sympathetic resonance in Buddhism, which promotes an emphatically non-dogmatic, even skeptical approach.

In the seventeenth century the Japanese Zen master Manzan said:

"Now this is the way to apply yourself: doubt, scrutinize... doubt, doubt, doubt. If even one conception arises, your doubt is not sufficiently strong, and you must question yourself more intensely."

And more recently, in 1964 an association of Vietnamese Buddhists adopted precepts like the following:

"Do not be idolatrous or bound to any doctrine or theory, not even Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth"

"Do not think that the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views."

Religious self-righteousness, for all that it is, is an unfortunate human tendency and is contrary to the spirit of Buddhism. "Buddhist dogma" is a contradiction in terms.

Another landmark attitude of the twentieth century Western outlook is that personality is a transient phenomenon and moreover one which tells only part of the story of life. The discovery of the Unconscious by Freud and the subsequent insights of depth-psychology have, for many, already been incorporated into the Western outlook. Moreover, there are the developments in quantum physics which, as mentioned earlier, incline us in favor of viewing reality as a dynamic arena of energy rather than as a conglomeration of substantial things in motion.

This impact of modern science on the Western mentality is entirely congenial with the basic Buddhist theories of anitya (radical impermanence) and anatta (the denial of a substance, or "thing" self).

Finally there is the Ecology movement, in both its spiritual and political dimensions. This is certainly the most visible aspect of the social changes in the West that resonate with Buddhist views. The idea that we are not the "masters" of Nature, that we live within a causal nexus in which there is no isolated event, that we live within a vital web of interconnecting and interpenetrating influences—just such ideas are the essence of the Buddhist doctrine of pratitya-samutpada, or the mutual co-dependence of all existence.

And to say it again: I suggest that this process of transition in outlooks, what might be called a "religious paradigm shift," is already underway. But why should this paradigm shift incline toward a Buddhist model rather than another Eastern outlook? There are, I believe, two central reasons why the Buddhist paradigm is a more likely candidate.

One reason is the sheer practicality of Buddhism, a practicality that will naturally appeal to the "results" oriented Westerner. Buddhism is not so much a metaphysic as a psychology; not a belief system but a METHOD—a method designed to do one thing: produce experientable results, to change the quality of the individual's life.

Another reason is stated by a prominent Western Buddhist, Jeremy Hayward:

"Whereas Taoism, Hinduism, and Confucianism have remained very much tied to particular cultural forms, Buddhism is similar to science in its universal nature. It is an analysis of universal characteristics: of the nature of mind common to all humanity....As such it cannot in its very nature be predetermined by any particular cultural forms or beliefs."

A fair question at this point is: why should it be an Eastern paradigm to which the West "shifts"? In particular: what of that most momentous challenge to the traditional Western outlook, the belief system that so powerfully contends to be "the way of the future"—Marxist socialism?

Aside from the manifestly narrow conceptions of religion held by Karl Marx himself and the legion of doctrinaire Marxists, past and present, who passively "Amen" this narrow conception; aside from the counter-charge that Marxism is itself a "closet" religion; aside from what seems to be an insurmountable hostility between Marxism and any religion, including Buddhism: aside from all this, I suggest that there is fruitful ground for dialogue between Marxists and Buddhists.

One of the fundamental insights of Marx was that our perception of ourselves as isolated individuals in competition with other isolated individuals is both (1) a denial of our true nature and (2) the source of human misery and alienation. And surely such an insight is not at odds with a Buddhist diagnosis of the human predicament.

Yet despite their common ground and the fact both Marxism and Buddhism are at least in theory compatible with many of the cultural changes emerging in the West, it seems to me unlikely that Marxism (at least in its present forms) will have the staying power that Buddhism has exhibited over the centuries. Why so?

Marx's psychology of human nature seems, in the estimate of many Marxists as well as non-Marxists, sentimental and naive. By contrast, Buddhist psychology has always maintained a gritty realism: it is an assessment of the human predicament that requires neither Utopian assumptions nor an intellectual critique of "mystification"—it is simple, direct, and immediately accessible.

The naivete of Marx's psychology is evident in his vision of human well being, which is one based largely on the accommodation of desire, on the view that material and intellectual satisfaction are intrinsic values in human life. Never mind the objection that contemporary Marxist cultures do not deliver these promised goods; a significantly large number of people in Western societies do attain them, and the results of that attainment have too often been ennui and a distracted hedonism. Again by contrast, the Buddhist view is that human well being consists not in the accommodation of desire, but in the elimination of desire--a far more penetrating assessment in light of the actual results of increased material and intellectual satisfaction.

My conclusion, then, is that the shift in outlook that is so shaking Western societies today is one that is moving steadily toward a Buddhist outlook.

Whether this will result in the establishment of Buddhism as a religious institution in the West is quite another question. And that is because, in my opinion, Buddhism is not an institution at all. It is instead an individual way of life.

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