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Buddhism as an Ethics-centered Worldview

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BUDDHISM today appeals not only to its adherents or to its scholars; it has become a universal phenomenon and, consequently, an object of universal interest. It is one of the greatest spiritual traditions, and as such is drawn in a complex interaction with other traditions, a combination that forms the cultural make-up of the contemporary globalizing world. Therefore, knowledge of Buddhism that presupposes an understanding attitude toward Buddhism and a respectful attitude toward its practitioners is necessary for anyone wishing to correspond to the requirements of the times and be attuned to the spirit of the 21st century. I would say that Buddhism is an intrinsic part of the humanitarian standard of contemporary man. Hence, it is appropriate, or even essential to bring up for discussion a question of Buddhism's peculiarity in comparison with other intellectual and spiritual traditions, specifically those in Europe.

The uniqueness of Buddhism as an integral worldview and as a particular spiritual universe consists, in my opinion,¹ in its ethical centrality.

The quest for the true path to Enlightenment that impelled Prince Shakyamuni to abandon the artificial paradise of the kingly palace for the homelessness of the larger world, became the dominant force in Buddhism. The central of the four noble truths comprising the revelation of the Buddha, the one that holds everything together is the fourth truth about the correct middle path, the eight-unit path of the Aryans. In Buddhism, ethics as an individual path toward liberation, a personally responsible mode of existence in the world is not a sequent of metaphysics or gnoseology, but their prerequisite and basis.

Highly indicative of the specifics of Buddhism is a teaching of the difference between moral, scientific and philosophical statements (as it is set forth in *Cula-Malunkiyovada Sutta*, and in *The Questions of King Milinda*, book III, chapter II, question 2).

According to the Buddha, there are four kinds of questions that differ in the nature of answers they call for. Some questions are answered unambiguously; others are answered with reservations; still others call for counter questions; and answers to the fourth ones are denied. Calling for straightforward answers are questions of the type “Is image-bearing transient?”, “Is sensation transient?”, “Is recognition transient?”, “Are components transient?”, “Is consciousness transient?” (one speaks here about epistemological forms of the five attachments to the world, which transform in the behavioral aspect to the five vices: greed, hatred, stupidity and false views). Answers with reservations are given to questions of the following type: “Is transient image-bearing?”, “Is transient a sensation?” A reservation is necessary in such an instance in order to stress the partial verity of the answer. For instance, the answer to the question “Is transient a sensation?” would be, yes, but not only a sensation. A counter-question is used in answering questions “Does (a being) perceive everything by sight?” In this case, the question itself needs to be defined more precisely—what is implied by ‘everything’? Questions that are replied by ignoring them are of the following type: «Is the world eternal or not?», «Is the world infinite or not?», «Are soul and body one and the same?» «Does Tathagata exist after death?»

The first group of questions can be designated as the meaning-of-life questions. In effect, they decode the answer to one general question of what meaning is enclosed in worldly existence, and what goal man should aspire to in his conscious activities. The second and third groups of questions encompass specific knowledge of the world. The fourth group comprises questions that, in terms of European culture, could be defined as philosophical proper, or metaphysical.

The question of the meaning or goal, and the direction of human existence calls for an unambiguous answer, for without it existence is impossible. Man has no alibi in being, as Mikhail M. Bakhtin once said. Because man consciously controls his acts and deeds and commits actions in accordance to his own decisions he always acts for some purpose, in order to achieve something. Just as a man cannot make one step without moving in a definite direction so he cannot accomplish an action without imparting a specific meaning to his behavior. Man is obliged to answer—in a positive manner—to questions of the kind “Is sensation transient?” He cannot eschew such questions. He only needs to find right answers to these questions and then assign a true meaning to his life. The Buddha believed that he could do that. Hence, he is considered a Buddha.

Knowledge of the world is perennially incomplete and imprecise, and

constantly in need of additional knowledge and greater concreteness. Knowledge is relative in nature and has no direct effect on man's position with regard to the meaning of his life; to the contrary, knowledge itself depends to a substantial extent on the practical attitude of man toward the world, that is, on answers he gives to questions of the first kind.

Metaphysical questions remain questions for all times. They are eternal in the sense that they are inexhaustible and can be dealt with for ever. There can be no definite answer of indubitable verity to such a question. "There are no reasons or grounds to answer them, therefore they are declined (BM, 164). To decline them (that is to leave them unanswered) is all the more easier since they are not directly linked to the first question of the meaning of life. This may well be the most essential aspect of the Buddhist worldview, one that points to its ethical orientation and substance.

The Buddha's ethics depends neither upon his metaphysics nor, for that matter, upon his epistemology. It needs not, nor does it seek a substantiation in these bases. Rather, ethics itself is a key to both the former and the latter. What concerns the Buddha and is the goal of all his efforts—his ethics, or what we would call his ethics, and which is in the striving to break away from darkness and attain light, to break away from ignorance and attain wisdom, to break away from earthly existence and attain the irreproachable Nirvana—all this is the beginning of his ontology and his gnoseology. The Buddha is not interested in the deep structures of the world as such; he is primarily concerned with them to the extent to which they are present in his self and depend upon his self. Being to him is his own individual-responsible existence. In this way, ontology becomes ethics and is confined by ethics. Further, to possess knowledge of the world means to the Buddha the same as having knowledge of how to live properly. Therefore, true knowledge exists only in the form of truth of one's own being, of the proper meaning of life.

The monk Malunkyaputta asked the Buddha to speak up on questions of the fourth kind (the metaphysical questions): is the Universe eternal or not; is it limited or not, and so on, adding that he would give up his life as a monk and the pursuit of the righteous path under the Buddha if he does not receive clear answers to these questions. To this, the Buddha replied that he had never promised he would teach anyone how to answer such questions, and that he had never meant to use them in his teaching. He went on to say that if someone earnestly says that he would not practice Dharma until he knows whether the Universe is eternal or not, whether it is finite or infinite, he would die before he gets any

answer. Such a man would be like a man wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison who says he would not call a surgeon to pull out the arrow until he knows the name and the clan of the man who wounded him; what the arrow that wounded him was made from, and which feathers were used on it, etc.

In summing up, the Buddha says: “Life in accordance with Dharma, O Malunkyaputta, does not depend on whether the world is not eternal. Although an opinion exists that the world is eternal and another one that it is the world is not eternal, but there undoubtedly do exist birth and old age, death, illness sorrow, discontent, grief and despair, the overcoming of which I make known.”

Thus, the knowledge of the meaning of life is absolute. The knowledge of the world is relative and conventional. Metaphysical questions as such have no answers; they are eternal in that they are questions. Moreover, they mark the limits of rational perception and, in effect, refer one to the first group of questions. Ultimate questions stop being trivial when the answers they require are linked to the moral quest. Practical ethics was the paramount, if not the sole, interest for the Buddha, his whole teaching being a search for the imperishable meaning of life, and ways of liberation.

The Buddha’s four kinds of questions proceed from and shape different types of man’s attitude to truth. In the case of ethical questions, the subject matter is truth, the attitude to which may be predominantly pragmatic. The ethic or moral truth is created by an individual, is revealed by an individual in his behavior, and may not even exist outside of or before this behavior. Questions of the second and third kind are concerned with truths that are perceptible. Finally, the metaphysical questions (the fourth kind) deal with truths that are invented and established in an ideal manner—stated and established, first and foremost, depending on the initial moral position of the individual.

In conclusion, I would like to introduce a somewhat indirect historical-philosophical argument in support of the proposition that Buddhism is a worldview centered on ethics. The argument is related to the evaluation of the views of Leo Tolstoy. It is well-known that Tolstoy created an integrated religious and moral teaching that equated the rationality of human existence with man’s righteousness, while the rational perception of the world was made contingent on sensible behavior. In striving to discover the indestructible meaning of life, and, most importantly, a mode of action that might fully express this meaning while being fully under the control of the acting individual, Tolstoy came up with the notion of non-violent resistance to evil. He used the principle of non-

resistance, an unconditionally moral principle, as a limit to all other forms of activity by man, and he transferred man's struggle against moral evil in the world to the inner world of man himself. In founding his view of man and the world, Tolstoy proceeded from Jesus Christ's Sermon on the Mount. Furthermore, he believed his teaching to be the most precise interpretation of Christianity. He set off the Sermon on the Mount against the symbol of faith, and, while denying his divine nature, considered Jesus Christ a great reformer.

Some critics of Tolstoy, in particular N. F. Fedorov, N. A. Berdiayeff, and others, would conclude that in terms of his worldview, Tolstoy is more of a Buddhist than a Christian. Coming from his critics, this conclusion was more than a mere categorization of Tolstoy's teaching and, in fact, amounted to an indictment against him. This, however, is a different matter altogether. It is important that those critiques caught the very meaning of the fact that a worldview rooted in morals tends to assert the priority of morals over cognition, ethics, and gnoseology, and as such does not fall in the main line of European philosophical thinking. In type as well as in spirit, it is indeed closer to Buddhism. And together with Buddhism it might be closer to the truth.

Notes

¹ This reservation is excessive in a philosophical text, because a philosopher always expounds his own views, unless he states the opposite. I decided to make this reservation after the following comment by Professor V. G. Lysenko, a well-known expert on Buddhist philosophy, who kindly agreed to read my text: "This is a view of Buddhism of the early 20th century. The view was typically shared by Buddhist scholars of the Protestant faith (for example, the C. and T. Rhys-Davids. Subsequently, this view came to be considered an unjustifiable simplification. Thus, Stcherbatsky is known for his witty criticism of this view. In Russia, it was voiced by V. N. Toporov in his translation of *Dhammapada* (1961), but he did that for the simple reason that no one was allowed to speak up on religion at the time.

Buddhism is centered on the liberation from *samsara*; this is soteriology, not ethics (that is unless one extends the meaning of ethics). Ethics, which in Buddhism is interpreted as a correspondence to the norms of generally valid human morality (*pancha shila* — 'thou shall not kill,' etc.), is assigned in the Buddhist doctrine a mere instrumentalist part in the very beginning of the Path (the path of *shravakas*). It is a preliminary condition one has to accept in order to qualify for the Buddhist path, a path of inner work on one's consciousness. Not surprisingly, the subsequent forms of Buddhism (tantrism, in particular) regarded the negative energy of vices and passions as an important source of energy for the spiritual path.

The early 20th century Protestants (incidentally, Leo Tolstoy adhered to the same view) were right in their evaluation of early Buddhism, the doctrine of the Buddha himself, who was indeed ethics-centered. It is true that in this context the notion of ethics is indeed given an extended significance (and Professor V. G. Lysenko is right in saying

so.). That is, ethics is interpreted not only as an ethical part of Buddhism (pancha shila), but also as the ethical (or moral) spirit of Buddhism as a whole. Not only the rung that denotes actions proper, but the entire eight-unit path leading to the liberation from suffering. In the rich and complex history of Buddhism, there have been many attempts to interpret it as a philosophical, or religious, or religious-philosophical doctrine. But I do not think that this is what constitutes the specifics of Buddhism. Buddhism proposes a definite program of spiritual and moral realization of man. A path to salvation.

That “soteriology is not ethics” is a perfectly justifiable observation of Professor V. G. Lysenko. But the Buddha’s soteriology coincides with his ethics to the extent that is not to be found in any other religion; in Buddhism man’s own effort is his only and sufficient path to salvation—long though as it may be. It goes without saying that man’s own efforts may be more than merely ethical in the narrow and normative sense of the term, yet they do belong to the field of morals, and we refer to them as ethical because a) they are practical, and b) because they aim at a goal that is given an absolutely ethical meaning.

One more observation in this connection: the Buddha eschewed giving positive definitions to the essence of nirvana. Could it be that he shunned doing this because he was primarily interested in the Path?!

Translator’s notes

1. Упомянутого в абзаце *«Для понимания специфики буддизма весьма показательным, на мой взгляд, является учение о различии эпистемологического статуса морали, научного знания и философии (оно изложено в «Малой сутре о Малункье», а также в «Вопросах Миллинды», кн.третья, вопрос 12-й)»* «вопроса 12» в двух вариантах просмотренных «Вопросов Миллинды» не обнаружено.

2. Для возможных ссылок прилагаю одну из цитируемых сутр.