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Buddhism

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Buddhism is a neologism created in Europe at the half of XIX century C.E., from the Sanskrit word *buddha*, literally the *awakened one*, epithet attributed to Siddharta Gautama, born in Northern India – one of the date accepted by scholars for his life being 563-483 –, once gained the *bodhi*, or *awakening*. Far from designate a man pre-existing godhead, the term *buddha* actually defines all that beings that, even starting from the same conditions of common beings, through his own spiritual merits succed to be released from wordly pains for gain eternal bliss and omniscience.

During its history, which spans at least twentyfive centuries, *Buddhadharma* – the *spiritual law of the Buddha*, a term which is certainly to be preferred to the Western term *Buddhism* – has differentiated into a school which the Western scholars used to call the *Southern school*, because of its enduring presence today in Sri Lanka and South-East Asia, and the *Northern school*, more widespread in the Himalayan regions, Tibet, China, Mongolia, Corea, Japan and in other parts of Asia. More appropriate denotations of these two traditions, to use the Northern school terminology, are *mahayana* and *hinayana*, i.e. the *great veicle* and the *lesser veicle*. The word *veicle* is very apt in expressing the idea of a mean – religion – which become unneeded once the goal of awakening is attained, but which until that moment is an indispensable tool in transcending *samsara*, the *world of re-births*. The school which *mahayana* defines, in derogatory fashion, as *hinayana* uses other terms to indicate itself, such as *theravada*, the *followers of the elders*. Whereas for the *mahayana* school the ideal of holiness is embodied in the figure of the *bodhisattva* – the *hero of awakening* motivated by the ideal of *bodhicitta*, the altruistic *thought of awakening* – who continues to be re-incarnated untill all other beings have been saved, the *theravada* school urges its followers to emulate and devote themselves to the ideal of the *arhat* – the venerable *destroyer of the enemy* – who strives to attain awakening by progressively annulling the *dissonant emotions (klesha)* which force beings to be reborn without any possibility of choise.

Even though this is not the place to undertake an on-depht analysis of the difficult issue of the relationship between Western and Eastern philosophical terminologies, it should be at least pointed out that, while Buddhist philosophy in the East and Christian philosophy in the West both place the doctrine which seeks to define causes as the main foundation of their gnoseological methods, the outcomes of these pursuits differ. Christian philosophy requires a *uncaused cause* – a concept which originated with Greek philosophers and was given a final formalization by Aristotelian Thomism –, whereas Buddhist thought does not attempt to define a

beginning in the endless chain of causes. Causes are thus considered as being generated in turn by other causes since *a time with no beginning*. The effects generated by any cause subsequently become causes of further effects. If it were admissible to slot Buddhist thought into the categories of the history of Western philosophy, it would be classified as one of the immanentistic solutions to the gnoseological problem. In its cosmological outlook this all feeds into the consideration that no one phenomenon or event in the existential order is *ab-solutum*, independent or self-generated, and that all are composed and produced, and thus depend on causes, parts and conditions, in a word *interdependent*. Furthermore, in most cases – with few exceptions, such as space –, they are subject to becoming and are thus *impermanent*. When applied to the ought-to-be of human beings, this vision means that any behaviour at all matters greatly: every act and every thought is destined to last forever because of the *law of cause and effect (karma)* and will be reproduced on an exponential scale. *Karma* is increased by the frequency and the regularity with which a given action is performed. Once a karmic imprint is fixed within the *mental continuum (santana)* of an individual it is an hard task to mitigate its results. Buddhist goal, *nirvana*, is the ceasing of the uncontrolled and compelled embodiment of the mental principles. A life, this life, is just a link in the chain of *samsara*. Far from being a sweet hope of eternal life, *samsara* is the context which needs to be transcended since it holds no place for freedom, simply because of the compulsion it involves to continue to take on new forms of life as a result of the *karma* produced on the basis of disturbing mental factors. The reason given to explain the need to avoid re-birth is extremely straightforward and well reflects the eminently pragmatical method of Buddhadharmā: even the higher types of re-birth – including humans and wordly divinities – involve discomfort. The Buddhist spiritual path has never developed a justification of a moral type for pain: it is only an alarming symptom of the perils of relying on limited concepts and realities. In presenting himself as a model, the Buddha provides the disciple with all the indications needed to emulate him completely. This is something which occurs more through the seduction of conviction rather than through a process of a persuasion based solely on his inscrutable superiority. The community of the emulator-disciples is called *sangha*, and together with the Buddha and his *dharma* forms the so called *triple gem (triratna)*, foremost element of this tradition.

Anyone who seriously undertakes to travel the path leading to *nirvana*, realizes from the very first steps that no one else can travel this demanding path in their stead. All of the Buddha's teaching hinges on this premise and, as a result, their emphasis returns time and time again onto the central position of individual responsibility. For the Buddha is first and foremost the *master (guru)* who expounds the theoretical and practical means which can be used to achieve liberation. He does not assert he is able to take upon himself the burden of the negative actions of beings, he does not take upon himself the weight of the imperfections of the world. The Buddha only points out the way to be travelled by those individuals who are capable of fathoming the depths of such an acceptance of responsibility. Buddhist salvation – to be understood, it should be recalled, as emancipation from *samsara* – is

mainly expressed and achieved through the teaching and the application of the Buddhadharma. The substance of the Buddha's sermon, delivered at the Deer Park in Sarnath near Varanasi in Northern India to his first five disciples, concerned the *four noble truths* (*chatvari arya satya*) which mark the real beginning of his formal preaching. These truths are defined as *noble* (*arya*) both because they were taught by the Buddha, who is noble and superior to common beings, and because they are capable of making those beings who are currently subjected to the contingencies of a conditioned existence noble and superior themselves. The first of these truths is that of *true sufferings* which are the physical and mental aggregates which arise as the result of actions defiled by perturbing mental afflictions. True suffering also include all the activities of the mind, the speech and the body of each ordinary being, except for the actions generated thought pure spiritual aspiration and meditations. They can also be considered in positive terms as the effective understanding of the fact that all physical and mental phenomena are subject to change, birth, old age, death and that all conditions of worldly life are unstable and devoid of the causes of lasting bliss. The second truth is that of *true origin*. *Origin* stands for the source of suffering located in mental afflictions and the compulsive actions they cause. This truth expresses the understanding that suffering is first and foremost a condition of the mind, which unceasingly creates expectations and cravings, which are regularly disappointed by the actual reality of the world and that physical discomfort and pain do not correspond to the full dimension of suffering, for are suffering minds which produce all the unstable existential conditions – which as such are incapable of quenching the boundless thirst for bliss inside all beings – and which cause future opportunities for experiencing pain. The third truth is that of *true ceasing*, which teaches that two previous truths – suffering and, especially, the cause of suffering – can be eliminated. This is achieved essentially by understanding that suffering begins in the mind and then returns to the mind. The fourth truth is that of *true path* or the means whereby the truth of ceasing can be attained. These means are the practice of virtue by conducting one's life intelligently and bravely, taking great care not to damage other beings and being able to have insight into how the importance of each present moment can be usefully seized. It is worth here to consider the first of the practical effects of the Buddhist philosophical construction on man's morality. The first *path* comprises *right understanding* which translates into realistic assessment of suffering, its origin and the path leading to its elimination; the understanding of what is to be pursued and what is to be abandoned; the understanding of the lack of a permanent self in the person; the understanding of the mechanisms leading to re-birth, etc. This is followed by *right intentions*: being able to turn the mind to positive content, such as benevolence and kindness, and to draw it away from grasping, preconceptions and mistaken opinions. *Right speech*: shunning lies, slander and harsh or meaningless speech. *Right conduct*: refraining from taking life, stealing and improper sexual behaviour. *Right livelihood*: ensuring the right standard of living for oneself and one's loved ones, without damaging others directly or indirectly. *Right effort*: committing oneself to being aware and detached in all circumstances. *Right mindfulness*: remembering to be mindful of everything done in thought, speech and

act. *Right concentration*: freeing oneself from all the conditions which interfere with the naturally clear state of the mind, attaining the various levels of meditational absorption and thus achieving higher levels of knowledge such as clairvoyance.

The analysis of the link existing between form and mind is not only the first step towards every gnoseological definition of reality as an ontological unity, but, rather, the possibility of this analysis in itself indicates that when human beings produce *works of art* they are substantially shaping the subtle matter forming the plane sustaining the universal field of interaction. Hence the opportunity here for some glimpses on Buddhist art. Buddhist sacred art, through whatever physical medium it is expressed, refers back to a main determining reason. The paintings, sculptures, illuminations and many specific elements of the architecture – mainly the *stupa*, an impenetrable monument around which the devotee practices a circumambulating clockwise interaction –, are conceived in order to be utilized as perceptible supports for a practice informed – in relation with the body-mind compound – by a non dualistical spiritual attitude, whose complex symbolic codes – in the absence of a specific initiation to those liturgies – remain difficult to access and understand. The specific function of a Buddhist painting or sculpture is thus the one of favouring concentration of mind of a contemplator on the image of a divinity, at least during the initial stages of meditation. Gradually the devotee progresses towards various levels of awareness at the end of which the necessity of considerable material support surpasses. The Buddhist sacred art thus expresses the attempt to impress in the image a vigorous mystical valency, evoked by a practitioner for effective transmission – with minimum possible variants – to another practitioner, using complex symbologies, iconogrammetric structures, iconological codes, giving ground to the representation of extremely complex concepts. For example, the *bhavachakra* – the cosmological chart illustrating the *six worlds of rebirth* (hell, famished spirits, animals, men, titans, worldly divinities) – and the *mandala*, the *psychocosmogram* – to use the definition, by now classic, formulated by G. Tucci – that illustrates the subtle relations between the individual microcosmos and the universal macrocosmos.

Some fundamental ideas regarding, in different cultural environments, the transformation of something – a food, a metal – in something else, draw their symbolical meaning from the *process of transmutation of a man into a divinity* (*theosis*). It should be profitable in using terms like *theosis* to understand the description of some inner processes made by the *vajrayana* (the *diamond-vehicle*, i.e. the esoteric aspect of Buddhadharma) schools, but only when it is made clear that these terms are rooting in traditions formally, historically and theoretically, external to the esoteric aspect of Buddhadharma, a lore in which the ontological gap between a god-creator and the creatures simply doesn't exist. In the Buddhist Indo-Tibetan tradition, the *mahayana-vajrayana* lineages preserve till today some systems – called *tantra* – promising shortcuts towards awakening with an altruistic aim. In some rites related to those systems, the performers, in order to assure the correct execution of the rite itself, are requested to *divinize* themselves just from the beginning of the liturgy. The human body in this context is considered akin to the chrysalis from which one day the *angelic butterfly* will be released. This is certainly

not a marginal idea within the culture it has occurred in over the course of time, but rather an instrumental notion, a thirst for improvement to be made use of on the path of transformation which man travels over time in order to attain the full achievement of his natural potential. This can be done by actualising the so called *divine pride* (*devamana*), in the *periodic training of remembering the divinity* (*devanusmrtianupurvaprayoga*) admitted by the *formal practice* (*sadhana*) of the *esoteric resultant vehicle* (*phalayana*), or *tantrayana*, opposed to the *exoteric causal vehicle* (*hetuyana*) also called *vehicle of perfections* (*paramitayana*), or *sutrayana*. In the Indo-Tibetan *vajrayana* the various psychic essences constitute indeed a sort of synopsis between the physiological and visible part of the person and the intellectual, invisible one. These essences are described according to different functional valences. Also the fluids and the tissues, like blood, are not only simple objects to be mentally analysed, but sacramental substances indeed. The concept of the transformation of blood in *nectar of immortality* (Sanskrit: *amrta*; Greek: *ambrotos*) draws its symbolical validity from the process of transmutation of a man into a divinity. Eventually, this process will lead to the actual divinization of the *practitioner* (*sadhaka*) himself. The transformation of the ordinary human being in a blissful and omniscient divinity is an idea not condiscible by the Semitic theological frame shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims. Also if some particular details inside the Abrahamic revelations seem to point towards the divinization of creatures – *diis estis* (*you'll be gods*) in the Old Testament –, these aspects remain nevertheless mainly marginal by referring to the most orthodox connotation. The ritual transformation of the time and space context is widely used in Indo-Tibetan *vajrayana*, the structure of which thought hinges both on *sympathetic compassion* (*karuna*) and on *intuitive understanding* (*prajna*) of the *ultimate mode of existing* (*shunyata*). *Karuna* and *prajna* enable the adept to make full use of the workings of the liberated mind, so as to be able to overcome the cycle of unconscious re-births and become an *awakened one*, a *buddha* released from any conditioning, free from failing to identify himself with the unmeasurable order of consciousness, and thus finally able to effectively do the welfare of all transmigrating beings. It is always useful to interpret these psycho-experimental systems in light of the dual focus of sympathetic compassion and vision of the truth, in considering the effect of tantric systems both on metaphysics and on morality.

Since its historical beginning, the Buddhadharma is a doctrine which assumes a life-style characterised by challenging social renunciations. But the need to spread the practice of virtue to every and single man brought to the definition of a lay path, which does not require the integral renunciation to social activities. Furthermore, in the *vajrayana* some daily ceremonies are recommended or compulsory for everyone, not only for monks. These ceremonies or rites are today taught also in Western countries. On one hand, the greed for tangible goods pushed the modern contemporary Western man to strive hard for the satisfaction of material needs. On the other hand, the reminiscence of a blissful homeland, set in some afterlife, persists as a background sound in urbanised reality. The novelty is that the Christian Churches, even in the areas where they are deep-rooted, are not considered any

longer as holders of *all* paths to wisdom. The adaption and the rooting of the Buddhist esoteric lore in Westerner cultural milieu are still in progress, thus its practical results are still unforeseeable.

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