BUDDHISM

The Buddha was not a far, remote being, a God or a mystery; religion was for him not an enigmatic abstraction from reality or a philosophy too severe for ordinary men to follow. He was a man who lived among men and women, totally concerned with people, their experiences and their problems. Wherever he went there were always men and women of all kinds crowding to see him. They brought him their questions and problems, their joys and griefs. Some came to test him, some to quarrel, and many came just to sit with him, to absorb his extraordinary calm and loving awareness.

Though he was a man, he knew men with insight like a God. He had himself stepped very close to death – once alone, in a wild and dangerous jungle, deserted by his friends, experiencing utter solitude and starvation. The Buddha knew death and found within himself resources to deal with the accompanying fear, sorrow, pain and mourning and to overcome death itself. Seeing through the change that is death he perceived loving wisdom that is wholly living and wholly peaceful, wholly self-reliant and wholly compassionate.

The man who was born in history to the family Gotama became that loving wisdom. He became Buddha – enlightened. He did not then choose to die – he lived with full devotion to the many needs of men and women until he was old. In the end, his body ceased to move. Who can say what then became of his wisdom? He left his teaching and that remains for every Buddhist to make a sincere effort to carry it out day by day in this very life. When we gain that utterly peaceful, loving and generous understanding, then we also are in the state called Buddha – an enlightened one.

Being a man his body was bound for death. This the Buddha accepted. He knew that everything that is born is undergoing a process of change and must die – father, mother, friends – all must one day die. This is the problem which the man Gotama set out to solve and in doing so attained the state of Buddha-

hood. He then worked for 45 years to show men and women how to *understand* and *live* even in the presence of death.

As children, and often as adults, we sometimes try to forget death; but at times an inner fear or dread comes like an eclipse, or suddenly we are face to face with death, in a road accident or in the sickness and passing away of a friend or loved one.

The Buddha experienced this too, even before he became enlightened. While out walking for pleasure on a bright and happy day, he turned a corner and came suddenly across a corpse on a stretcher, his own glowing young face confronting that grey still mask. He was deeply shocked. He went home, his whole mind and body protesting the claims of life and health and joy – but there was sickness, there was old age, there was death. And not only death, but the mourners – a wife weeping, a partner not knowing how to carry on with his work alone. A ring lay on one of the dead fingers, the hair was beautifully brushed . . . there was separation and loss.

Gotama, the young man who was to become the Enlightened Teacher, or Buddha, was not afraid. What he felt was a great impulse of compassion. He did not run away, he went forward wanting to teach himself and all of us to understand death and to live in the presence of death in the noblest way.

Everything that comes to be must change, that is certain. He saw that the first step in growing up about death is to understand our feelings about it. Each day dies and night is born. Summer, winter, autumn, spring – there is no plant and no creature, no thing at all in this world which does not change. It is our selfish longing for what we may lose which makes us think of death as a sudden absolute end. But really, death is an essential part of life, and death and birth are around us, are active in us, at every instant.

Look at our own bodies – if the skin and flesh and muscle did not die and fall away, we would be trapped in an infant's form. In the body, a million births and deaths take place at every moment. The body is a miracle of rebirth in which our habits, our likes and dislikes, our hunger, and our states of mind are always driving the body towards change and development. Never for an instant does the body cease to die, cease to be born. We might say that we live through life and death at every moment.

Look at the mind. Is there ever a moment of stillness there? Never without change, the mind is a restless complex stream of experiences. Watch your feelings – see how pleasure and discomfort, joy and discontent come one after the other. Memories come and go, ideas are there and vanish, likes and dislikes, plans, purposes – all like waves rising and falling on a stream. We are not only living but dying now, at this and every moment.

The Buddha taught his followers not to fear death, but to know that death and life are two phases of one process. He taught his followers, therefore, to go forward in their lives with great confidence, energy and calm. As we turn to live each moment, we can become aware of what death is and does. We can even learn to care for those in sorrow, those who feel bewilderment at separation and loss.

In a way this is mere common sense as far as the life of the body is concerned. We know very well that the body changes; that its cells die and grow; that it is a stream of energy. But there is more.

We know that those processes can be understood. We can, by good sense and wisdom, or alternatively by blind greed and foolishness, influence and control the body. The body we now possess is the direct result of the exercise, diet and sleep given to it in the preceeding years, months and days. We can by wisdom and other mental qualities control the nourishment of food, exercise and sleep. We can influence the body very much by mental calm and joyfulness, or by tension and desire.

Therefore, if we wish to influence the body to develop as a healthy, skilful, joyful basis for life, then we must be able to control our minds. The mind also grows by what it feeds on; its inclinations cannot be altered easily or suddenly. We contain deep rooted habits, difficult to work on and control with our mind so erratic and self-willed. And yet through good sense and our understanding, we can give the mind correct nourishment to grow in a positive direction.

The Buddha developed a gradual path of self-training, in which he taught the way to come to terms with the deep rooted tendencies and mental habits with which we have to live at the moment of life and also at the moment of death. The path of training begins by developing the confidence and strong ambi-

tion to make our speech and actions and thoughts more loving, more compassionate, more *aware*. It begins by not going to extremes; by not indulging to the point of intoxication or addiction; by not rejecting all the good things which enable us to protect our families and create a good society.

In particular, the Buddha saw that our minds are never empty. If we don't *live* – if we don't put ourselves to work, at each moment exercising some care, living fully and caringly – then greed and hatred and lazy doubt rush in. This is the real death. The old must die if the new is to grow. Death after death is birth after birth. As the body dies, at that moment there is birth.

However, the mind does not change in the same way as does the body. Today someone can remember, can see clearly now in his mind's eye, his own home, dear to him as it was forty years ago. The body that saw that house is utterly perished – the skin flakes off, the cells reconstitute, the food is transformed or ejected and the hair and nails wear away. Another body lives now. But still his mind can visit that memory. Can longing and attachment grow from life to life? The mind is urging us to live, to live on. It is the very source of our bodily life – this mind urges us to eat, to learn, to feel, to touch, to see, to die – and to be born. As long as this deep longing goes on, so long are we definitely bound to life and death again and again.

Now we can see that when a Buddhist hears that someone has died, he sees it as being natural and as something that has happened according to the way things happen. He may be as grieved as anyone else to see that person has gone, but his grief is just a longing for the departed person, really a selfish feeling. It is better, the Buddhist believes, to think of that departed person as a traveller. From the death of one life another rises, and we travel together.

The Buddhist sees a world where everything gives rise to a result. Therefore, Buddhists seek to create always a state of mind which is a little purer, a little wiser, a little more loving. That force of goodness which is the well-developed mind will not die, will live on in new forms, ever developing, like all the forms of life we know.

If a Buddhist wishes to bury the departed with some ceremony, he is free to do that, as an expression, perhaps, of his

feeling of love towards the departed. He may invite monks to attend the ceremony and a monk will preach a sermon and recite some of the Buddha's teachings on death. But to the Buddhist, that dead body is an empty thing. The Buddhist turns from the dead matter of the body to attend to life, to develop life to the highest, to strive to assist all other beings, his fellow travellers in the process of death and birth.

The Buddhist, in attending to life, is aspiring to walk the road that leads to complete freedom from the fear of death. When, having attained the state of absolute emancipation in this life, on the occurrence of death no further life arises, then we have made an end with noble peace of mind.

Essentially freedom from the fear of death comes from right understanding and giving, leading us to develop the moral conduct, awareness and wisdom that encourage highest service both to ourselves and to others.

In the end, men can achieve an absolute freedom and joy which can be influenced by neither good nor evil, a loving wisdom which is infinite, unaffected by need or longing and free from both life and death.

If we are to understand the attitude of Buddhists to death, we need to enter, at least for a while, a very different world from that in which we are accustomed to live.

In our western, Christian-based culture, we take it for granted, explicitly or implicitly, that we each have a soul, created at some time between conception and birth, which exists independently of other souls, and which is destined for an eternity of happiness or misery as a result of this brief life on earth. No such idea exists in Buddhism.

Buddhists believe that we consist of five constituents, all of which are in a state of flux, and which continually change as a result of several factors. These constitutents are: (1) body or form, *rupa*; (2) sensation or feeling, *vedana*; (3) perception or personal experience of feelings, *sanjna*; (4) impulses or tendencies developed as a result, *sanskara*; (5) consciousness, *vijnana*.

An examination of these components, known as the *skandhas*, reveals that none of them is permanent or unchanging, hence the Buddhist doctrine of *anatma*, or no permanent

'soul'. This is not, as erroneously put about by some earlier and less well-instructed Buddhists, a suggestion of 'soullessness', but a clear indication that our 'souls' are neither separate from those of all other people, nor permanent possessions of our own. They are, like everything else in the realm of birth and death (*sangsara*), changing and impermanent.

So there is no question of 'saving' our individual soul from a world such as this one and having it booked, so to speak, for a permanent realm of happiness or misery hereafter. We are developing, or perhaps allowing ourselves to become retrograde, all the time.

Connected with this belief is that of a continuation of our life of birth and death (*sangsara*) in accordance with our behaviour, so that we accept the idea of rebirth in this plane. We do this because we also understand that the law of action and reaction (*karma*) operates here, and what a man sows that shall he also reap, now or in a later life. But a finite cause can only have a finite result, and to us it would be monstrously unjust, and not in accordance with the discernable pattern of things, if we were to be precipitated into an eternity of happiness or suffering as a result of one short life on earth, where very unequal opportunities determine the lives of everybody.

We feel that Justice would be outraged if a person born here in miserable circumstances, and with limited or indeed damaged faculties, were to be judged solely on one unfortunate lifetime, just as it would be monstrously unjust that any being should be thrown into a short life of suffering at the arbitrary whim of a god. What sort of a supernatural being would deliberately inflict a life of pain and suffering on anyone without any previous cause? In other words how could a person be born deformed, with a damaged brain or body, condemned to a life of pain or deprived of opportunity to lead a full life for any reason, just at the pleasure of a god, and without any previous life which could explain or cause such a happening?

To Buddhists, therefore, we live many lives, and the causes built up in one carry over to the next, which explains the very evident inequalities of physical body and talents which obtain all over this world. We do not suppose these are handed out by a god, since such a being would be more deserving of censure than worship, but are the result of *karma*.