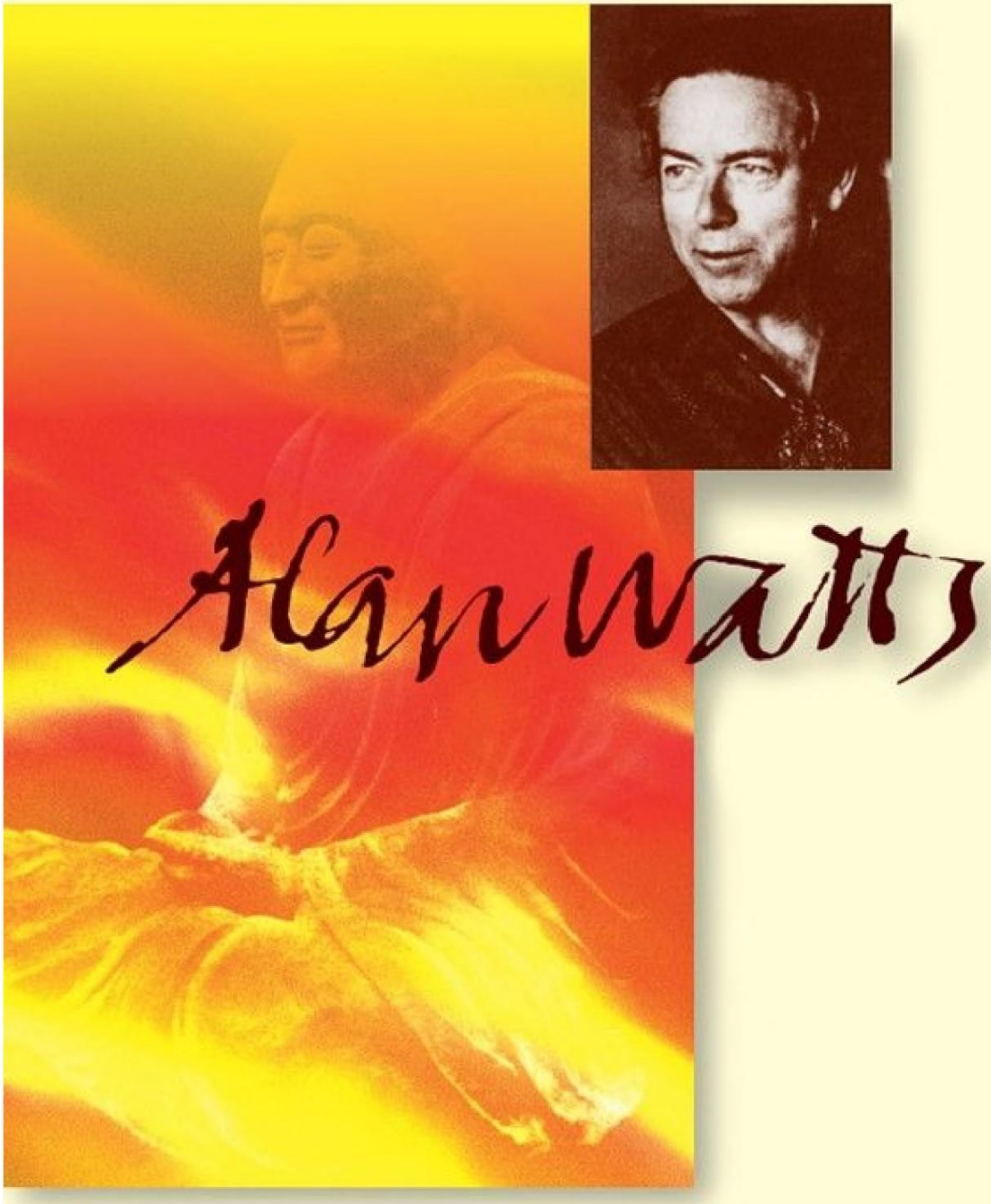
BUDDHISM
THE RELIGION OF NO-RELIGION



Alan Watts

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Introduction

The widespread influence of Buddhism is due in part to the skill with which a way of liberation, first taught in ancient India, was refined by its teachers and became accessible to people of diverse cultures. For, as Alan Watts commented during a seminar aboard his ferryboat home in Sausalito, California, in the late sixties:

> The Hindus, the Buddhists, and many other ancient peoples do not, as we do, make a division between religion and everything else. Religion is not a department of life; it is something that enters into the whole of it. But when a religion and a culture are inseparable, it is very difficult to export a religion, because it comes into conflict with the established traditions, manners, and customs of other people.
>
> So the question arises, what are the essentials of Hinduism that could be exported? And when you answer that question, you will find Buddhism. As I explained, the essence of Hinduism, the real deep root, is not a kind of doctrine or even a special kind of discipline, although of course disciplines are involved. The center of Hinduism is an experience of liberation called *moksha,* in which, through the dissipation of the illusion that each man and woman is a separate thing in a world consisting of nothing but a collection of separate things, you discover that you are, in a way, on one level an illusion, but on another level you are what they call the self, the one self, which is all that there is.

Alan Watts's interest in Eastern thought can be followed back to his childhood, where he was surrounded by Oriental art. His mother was a teacher for the children of missionaries who traveled abroad, and often on their return from China the missionaries would give her gifts of embroideries and landscape paintings in the style of the

great classical Asian artists. Years later, while on tour in Japan with a small group of students, Watts recounted the origins of his interest in the arts and philosophies of the Far East:

> I had an absolute fascination for Chinese and Japanese secular painting—the landscapes, the treatment of flowers and grasses and bamboo. There was something about that treatment that struck me as astonishing, even though the subject matter was extremely ordinary. Even as a child I had to find out what that strange element in those bamboo and grasses was. I was, of course, being taught by those painters to see grass, but there was something else in their paintings I could never put my finger on. That "something else" was the thing I will call the religion of no-religion. It is the supreme attainment of a buddha: it cannot be detected; it leaves no trace.

As a young man growing up in Kent, England, Alan Watts's curiosity about the philosophies of Asia led him to explore the bookstores around Cambridge and eventually to the Buddhist Lodge in London. He attended lodge meetings with Christmas Humphreys and soon met the Zen Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki. Watts's formative articles on Buddhism are found in his collected early writings, and they reflect an understanding of Buddhist thought quite advanced for his time. His two subsequent books on Zen Buddhism enjoyed widespread popularity, and by the early sixties Alan Watts was living in California, writing extensively on Eastern thought, and conducting regular speaking tours across the country and in Europe. During this period Alan Watts traveled to Japan twice—once in 1963 and again in 1965. It was on the second Japan tour that he recorded himself in a series of talks that have come to be known as the Japan Seminars. Today these sessions offer one of the most readily comprehensible introductions to Buddhism available in the English language. Watts presents the essential tenets of Buddhism in a concise form, rich with illustrative stories and infused with the spirit in which this great tradition has evolved. The current volume is composed of four sessions from the Japan

Seminars—*The Journey from India, The Middle Way, Religion of No-Religion,* and *Buddhism* As *Dialogue*—and two sessions on Tibetan Buddhism recorded four years later in 1969 aboard his ferryboat in Sausalito, California—*Wisdom of the Mountains* and *Transcending Duality.* These selections provide an intimate overview of the development of Buddhist thought and offer an introduction to one of the world's most fascinating ways of liberation.

—Mark Watts
August 1995

The Journey from India

Chapter One

In order to introduce Buddhism, it is necessary to remember the whole background of the worldview of India and study Indian cosmology, just as you would have to study the Ptolemaic cosmology and worldview in order to understand Dante and much of medieval Christianity. The Hindu cosmology and view of the universe has come into Japanese life through Buddhism, but it antedates Buddhism. Buddhism simply adopted it as a matter of course, just as you would probably adopt the cosmology of modern astronomy if you invented a new religion today.

Human beings have had three great views of the world. One is the Western view of the world as a construct or artifact, by analogy with ceramics and carpentry. Then there is the Hindu view of the world as a drama, looked at as a play. Third is the organic Chinese view, looking on the world as an organism, a body. But the Hindu view sees it as a drama, or simply that there is what there is, and always was, and always will be, which is called the self; in Sanskrit, *atman.* Atman is also called brahman, from the root *bri*: to grow, to expand, to swell, related to our word *breath.* Brahman, the self in the Hindu worldview, plays hide-and-seek with itself forever and ever. How far out, how lost can you get? According to the Hindu idea, each one of us is the godhead, getting lost on purpose for the fun of it. And how terrible it gets at times! But won't it be nice when we wake up? That's the basic idea, and I've found that any child can understand it. It has great simplicity and elegance.

This cosmology or conception of the universe has many features, including the *kalpas,* or vast periods of time through which the universe passes. Another aspect is the six worlds, or paths of life. This idea of six worlds is very important in Buddhism, although it

comes from Hinduism, and is represented in what is called the *phava chakra. Phava* means "becoming"; *chakra* means "wheel." The wheel of becoming, or wheel of birth and death, has six divisions. The people on top are called *devas.* The people on the bottom are called *naraka.* Devas are angels, the people who are the supreme worldly successes. The naraka are tormented in hell and they are the supreme worldly failures. These are the poles: the happiest people and the saddest people. In between comes the world of the *pretas,* or hungry ghosts, next to the naraka in hell. The pretas are the frustrated spirits who have tiny mouths and enormous bellies—huge appetites but very limited means of satisfying them. Next up from the pretas are the human beings. They are supposed to hold a middle position in the six worlds. Then you go up from the human beings to the devas and then you start coming down again. The next world is called the *asura,* in which are the wrathful spirits, personifications of scorn and of all the anger and violence of nature. Next down are the animals, coming between the asura and the hells.

These needn't be taken literally; they are different modalities of the human mind. We are in the naraka world when we are frustrated and in torment. When we are merely chronically frustrated we are in the preta world. When we are in a state of equanimity or even-mindedness, we are in the human world. When we are deliriously happy we are in the deva world. When we are furious we are in the asura world. And when we are dumb we are in the animal world. These are all modalities, and it is terribly important to understand that in Buddhism, the better you get, the more you go up to the deva world, the worse you get, the more you go down to the naraka world. Everything that goes up has to come down; you can't improve yourself indefinitely. If you improve yourself beyond a certain limit you simply start to get worse, like when you make a knife too sharp and it begins to wear away. Buddhahood, liberation, or enlightenment is not on any place on the wheel, unless it might be the center. By ascending, by becoming better, you tie yourself to the wheel by golden chains. By retrogressing and becoming worse, you tie yourself to the wheel

with iron chains. But the Buddha is the one who gets rid of the chains altogether.

This explains why Buddhism, unlike Judaism and Christianity, is not frantically concerned with being good; it is concerned with being wise. It is concerned with being compassionate, which is a little different from being good, with having tremendous sympathy and understanding and respect for all the ignorant people who don't know that they're it but who are playing the very far-out game of being "you and I." This is why every Hindu greets his brother not by shaking hands but by putting his hands together and bowing. And this is basically why the Japanese bow to each other, and why the Buddhist rituals are full of the bowing gesture, because you are honoring the self playing the roles of all the people around you. All the more honor is due when the self has forgotten what it is doing and is therefore in a very far-out situation. That is the basic Hindu view of the world, and the cosmology that goes along with Buddhism.

According to taste, temperament, tradition, popular belief, and so on, there is this additional idea that when the lord, or self, pretends that it is each of us, it first of all pretends that it is an individual soul called the *jivatman.* The jivatman reincarnates through a whole series of bodies, life after life after life. According to what is called karma, literally meaning "doing" or "the law of doing," acts occur in a series and are linked with each other in an unbreakable chain. Everybody's karma is the life course that he will work out through perhaps innumerable lifetimes. I'm not going into that, because a lot of Buddhists do not believe it.

For example, Zen people are quite divided on this, and say they don't believe literally in reincarnation—that after your funeral you suddenly become somebody different, living somewhere else. They say reincarnation means that if you, sitting here now, are really convinced that you are the same person who walked in the door half an hour ago, you are being reincarnated. If you are liberated, you will understand that you are not. The past does not exist; the future does not exist. There is only the present. That is the only real you

that there is. Zen master Dogen put it this way, "Spring does not become summer. First there is spring and then there is summer. Each season stays in its own place." In the same way, the you of yesterday does not become the you of today. T. S. Eliot has the same idea in his poem *Four Quartets,* where he says that when you settle down in the train to read your newspaper, you are not the same person who, a little while before, left the platform. If you think you are, you are linking up your moments in a chain. This is what binds you to the wheel of birth and death, unlike when you know that every moment where you are is the only moment. So a Zen master will say to somebody, "Get up and walk across the room." And when they come back he asks, "Where are your footprints?" They've gone.

Where are you? Who are you? When we are asked who we are, we usually give a kind of recitation of a history. "I'm So-and-so. I was given this name by my parents. I've been to such-and-such a college. I've done these things in my profession." And we produce a little biography. The Buddhist says, "Forget it; that's not you. That is some story that's all past. I want to see the real you, the you you are now." Nobody knows who that is, because we do not know ourselves except through listening to our echoes and consulting our memories. But then the real you leads us back to this question, Who is the real you? We shall see how they play with this in Zen koans to get you to come out of your shell and find out who you really are.

In India this worldview is tied up with a whole culture involving every circumstance of everyday life, but Hinduism is not a religion in the same sense that Episcopalianism or even Roman Catholicism are. Hinduism is not a religion, it is a culture. In this respect it's more like Judaism than Christianity, because a person is still recognizable as a Jew even though they don't go to synagogue. Jewish people, coming from a line of Jewish parents and ancestors who have been practicing Jews, still continue certain cultural ways of doing things, certain mannerisms and attitudes, so they are cultural Jews instead of religious Jews. Hinduism is the same sort of thing; it is a religious culture. Being a Hindu really involves living in India. Because of the differences of climate, of arts, crafts, and

technology, you cannot be a Hindu in the full sense in Japan or in the United States.

Buddhism is Hinduism stripped for export. The Buddha was a reformer in the highest sense: someone who wants to go to the original form, or to re-form it for the needs of a certain time. The word *buddha* is a title, not a proper name, in the same way as *Christ* means "the anointed" and is not the surname of Jesus. "Buddha" is not the surname of Gautama, but means "the one who is awakened" (from the root in Sanskrit *budh,* to know); Buddha is the man who woke up, who discovered who he really was.

The crucial issue wherein Buddhism differs from Hinduism is that it doesn't say who you are; it has no idea, no concept. I emphasize the words *idea* and *concept.* It has no idea and no concept of God because Buddhism is not interested in concepts, it is interested in direct experience only. From the Buddhist standpoint all concepts are wrong, in the same way that nothing is really what you say it is. Is this a stool? When I turn it over—now it's a wastebasket. When I beat on it, it's a drum. So this thing is what it does. Anything you can use it for is what it is. If you have a rigid idea that it is a stool and you can only sit on it, you're kind of stuck. But if you see all these other things as well, then you suddenly see that anything can be everything. In the same way, Buddhism does not say that what you really are is something definable, because if you believe that, you are stuck with an idea and cling to it for spiritual security.

A lot of people say they want a religion as something to hold on to. A Buddhist would say to cut that out. As long as you hold on to something, you do not have religion. You are only really there when you let go of everything and do not depend on any fixed idea or belief for your sanity or happiness. You might think Buddhism is very destructive, because it breaks down or does not believe in God. It does not believe in an immortal soul or seek any solace in any idea of life after death. It absolutely faces the fact of the transiency of life. There is nothing you can hold on to, so let go. There is no one to hold on to anything, anyway. Buddhism is the discipline of doing

that. But if you do that, you see, you discover something much better than any belief, because you have got the real thing, only you cannot say what it is.

They say in Zen that if you are enlightened you are like a dumb man who has had a wonderful dream. When you have had a wonderful dream you want to tell everybody what it is, but you cannot if you are dumb, if you cannot speak. The real thing in Buddhism, which they call nirvana, is sort of equivalent to moksha, or liberation. Nirvana means "to blow out"—the sigh of relief—because if you hold your breath, you lose it. If you hold on to yourself, you hold on to life or the breath or spirit; you hold on to God. Then it is all dead; it becomes just a rock, just an idol. But let go, breathe out, and you get your breath back. That's nirvana.

The Buddhists' doctrine is the highest negativism. They characterize the ultimate reality as *sunyata,* which means emptiness; in Japanese this is ku, the character used for the sky or the air. When you get an airmail envelope to write home, the second character is *ku,* air, which means emptiness. They use this character to translate *sunyata,* emptiness; the fundamental nature of reality, the sky. But the sky is not negative emptiness; it contains all of us. It is full of everything that is happening, but you cannot put a nail in the sky and pin it down. In the same way, Buddhism is saying that you do not need any gizmos to be in the know. You do not need a religion. You do not need any Buddha statues, temples, Buddhist rosaries, and all that jazz. But when you get to the point that you know you do not need any of those things, you do not need a religion at all; then it is fun to have one. Then you can be trusted to use rosaries, ring bells, hit drums and clappers, and chant sutras. But those things will not help you a bit. They will just tie you up in knots if you use them as methods of catching hold of something. So every teacher of Buddhism is a debunker, not to be a smart aleck and show how clever he is, but out of compassion. Just as when a surgeon chops off a bad growth or a dentist pulls out a rotten tooth, so the Buddhist teacher is getting rid of your crazy ideas for you, which you use to cling to life and make it dead.

There are two kinds of Buddhism, the first called Mahayana; *maha* is Sanskrit for "great"; *yana* means a vehicle or conveyance. The other is Hinayana, meaning the little vehicle; *hina* in Sanskrit means "little." That term was invented by the Mahayanists for the other people, who don't like it. They call themselves Theravada, which means: *vada,* the way; *thera,* of the elders. Theravada Buddhism you find now in Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and generally South Asia. Mahayana you find in Nepal and northern India, where it originated, and in Tibet, China, Mongolia, Japan, and, to some extent, Indonesia. All the sects of Japanese Buddhism are Mahayana.

What is the great difference between these two schools? The Theravada is very strict. It is a way for monks, essentially, rather than laymen. There are many ways of living Buddhism. The Theravada Buddhists are trying to live without desires: to have no need for wives or girlfriends, husbands or boyfriends; not to kill anything at all; living the strictest vegetarian way; and even straining their water so that they do not eat any little insects with it. Also in this very strict way, they meditate all the time and eventually attain nirvana, which involves total disappearance from the manifested world.

Mahayana feels that that is a dualistic point of view. You do not need to get away from this world to experience nirvana, because nirvana is what there is. It is here; it is now. The ideal person of Mahayana is called a bodhisattva. This originally meant somebody on the way to becoming a buddha, but in Mahayana it means somebody who has become a buddha but has gone back into the world, in the spirit of compassion, in order to help all other beings to become awakened. And that is an endless task, like filling a well with snow. Putting snow into a well, it never fills up. At the Zen monastery, after they have said their homage to the Buddha, the dharma, which is the Buddha's doctrine or method, and the *sangha,* the order of followers of the Buddha, then they take four vows, and one of them is "However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to liberate them all." So there is no end to that; there never comes a

time when all sentient beings are liberated. But from the standpoint of one who is a buddha, everybody is liberated. In other words, a buddha would not say, "Look everybody, I'm a buddha. I'm more experienced than you, and I know more than you, and you owe me respect on that account." On the other hand, a buddha would see you all as being exactly right; just where you are, all of you are buddhas. Even for those of you who do not know it, it is right for you not to know it at this moment.

It is absolutely fundamental to an understanding of Buddhism to recognize that its whole method of teaching is dialectical. It consists of a dialogue between a teacher and a student. The method of this dialogue is called *upaya,* or "skillful means" used by the teacher to bring about the enlightenment of the student. Upaya implies expert pedagogy in teaching, but "deceit," when used in a political context. Since Buddhism is a dialogue, what you ordinarily understand as the teachings of Buddhism are not the teachings of Buddhism, they are simply the opening gambit or process of this dialogue. The point is that Buddhism is not a teaching. Its essence consists in a certain kind of experience, a transformation of consciousness, which is called awakening or enlightenment, that involves our seeing through or transcending the hoax of being a separate ego. A Buddhist does not have the same tendency that a Christian has to want to find out what his faith is by going back to the most original sources. There has always been a tendency in Christianity to ask, "What did Jesus really teach? What is the pure New Testament, uncorrupted by theologians and by scribes who inserted things into the mouth of the master?"

It does not occur to Buddhists to have this attitude because of this dialectic pattern. When you have an acorn, if it is a lively acorn it grows into an oak. That is the way it should be, it should develop into something. And just so Buddhism, as it has developed since the days of the Buddha, has gone a long way. It has become sometimes more complex, sometimes more simple, but it has changed radically because the seed that the Buddha planted was alive. For example, when we ask what the Buddhist scriptures are we might get two

answers. In the Southern (Theravada) school there is a set of scriptures written in the Pali language, that are divided into three sections, called the Tripitaka, which means "three baskets," because the palm-leaf manuscripts on which these sutras were eventually written down were carried around in baskets, and three baskets of these palm-leaf manuscript volumes composed the Buddhist scriptures.

However, in the evolution of these scriptures, the Buddha himself wrote nothing, nor did his immediate disciples. It is very important to remember that all Indian scriptures were, for many centuries, handed down orally. We have no clear guide as to their dates, because in handing down an oral tradition you are not always likely to preserve historical landmarks. Suppose we are talking about a certain king, and the name of this king will mark a historical point. In an oral tradition the name of the king is likely to be changed every time the story is told, to correspond to the king then reigning. Things that do change, that have a historical rhythm like a succession of kings, will be changed in handing down the oral tradition. But things that do not change, such as the essential principle of the doctrine, will not be altered at all. So remember that the Buddhist scriptures were handed down orally for some hundreds of years before they were ever committed to writing, and that accounts for their monotonous form.

Everything is numbered; there are four noble truths, eight steps of the eightfold path, ten fetters, five *skandhas,* four *brahma-viharas* or meditation states, and so on. Everything is put in numerical lists so as to be memorized easily. Formulas are constantly repeated, and this is supposed to aid the memory. It is obvious that those scriptures of the Pali canon, when you really sit down and read them, have a certain monotony because of mnemonic aids, but also that, in the course of the time before they were written down, many monks spent wet afternoons adding to them and adding things in such a style that no inspired person would ever have said them. They have made commentaries on commentaries, and lots of them had no sense of humor. I always

loved the passage where the Buddha is giving instructions on the art of meditation and he is describing a number of things on which one could concentrate. A commentator is making little notes on this and has made his list of things on which you could concentrate, like a square drawn on the ground or the tip of your nose or a leaf or a stone, and then it says, "or on anything." The commentator adds the footnote, "but not any wicked thing." That's professional clergy for you, the world over.

This sort of thing has obviously happened. But this accumulation, with attribution of one's own writings to the Buddha, is not done in a dishonest way. It would be dishonest today with our standards of literary historicity and correctness. It would be very wrong of me to forge a document and pretend that it was written by some very venerable person, say by D. T. Suzuki or by Goethe. But centuries ago, both in the West and in the East, it was considered quite immoral to publish any book of wisdom under your own name, because you, personally, were not entitled to the possession of this knowledge. That is why you always put on any book of wisdom the name of the real author, that is the person who inspired you. In this way, it is perfectly certain that Solomon never wrote the Book of The Wisdom of Solomon. But it was attributed to Solomon because Solomon was an archetype of the wise man. In the same way, over the centuries, when various Buddhist monks and scholars wrote all kinds of sutras, or scriptures, and ascribed them to the Buddha, they were being properly modest. They were saying that these doctrines are not my doctrines, they are the doctrines that proceed from the Buddha in me, and therefore they should be ascribed to Buddha. And so over and above the Pali canon, there is an enormous corpus of scriptures written originally in Sanskrit and subsequently translated into Chinese and Tibetan. We have very inadequate manuscripts of the original Sanskrit, but we have very complete Chinese and Tibetan translations.

It is primarily from Chinese and Tibetan sources that we have the Mahayana canon of scriptures, over and above the Theravada canon written in the Pali language. Pali is a softened form of

Sanskrit. Whereas in Sanskrit one says "nirvana," in Pali one says "nibbana." Sanskrit says "karma"; Pali says "kamma." Sanskrit says "dharma"; Pali says "dhamma." It is a very similar language, but it is softer in its speech and articulation. It is a general feeling among scholars of the West today that the Pali scriptures are closer to the authentic teachings of the Buddha than the Sanskrit ones. With our Christian background and approach to scriptures, the West has built up a very strong prejudice in favor of the authenticity of the Theravada tradition as against the Mahayana tradition.

The Mahayanists have a hierarchy of scriptures, the first for very simpleminded people. Next are about four grades, going progressively to the scriptures for the most insightful people. They say that the Buddha preached these to his intimate disciples first. Then slowly, as he reached out from the most intimate group to others, he came down to what is now the Pali canon, as the scriptures for the biggest dunderheads, but the ones he preached first were not revealed until long, long after his death. So the Mahayanists have no difficulty in making a consistent story about the fact that the scriptures in Sanskrit represent a level of historical evolution of Buddhist ideas that, from our point of view, could not possibly have been attained in the Buddha's lifetime. But they say that the latest revealed was actually the first taught to the inmost disciples.

We have to make allowances for these differences in points of view, and not entirely project Western standards of historical and documentary criticism onto Buddhist scriptures, because it is in the essence of Buddhism to be a developing process in dialogue. The initial steps of the dialogue are in the presumed earliest records of Buddhism. In the Four Noble Truths, it says that the problem that Buddhism faces is suffering. This word *duhkha,* which we translate as "suffering," is the opposite of *suhkha.* Suhkha means what is sweet and delightful. Duhkha means the opposite, the bitter and frustrating. Mahayanists explain that the Buddha always taught by a dialectical method. That is, when people were trying to make the goal of life the pursuit of suhkha, or the pursuit of happiness, he

counteracted this wrong view by teaching that life is essentially miserable. When people thought that there was a permanent and eternal self in each one of us, and clung to that self, in order to counteract this one-sided view, the Buddha taught the other extreme doctrine, that there is no fixed self in us, no ego. But a Mahayanist would always say that the truth is the Middle Way, neither suhkha nor duhkha, neither atman nor *anatman,* self nor nonself. This is the whole point.

Once R. H. Blyth was asked by some students, "Do you believe in God?" He answered, "If you do, I don't. If you don't, I do." In much the same way, all Buddhist pedagogy is specifically addressed not to people in general, but to the individual who brings a problem. Wherever he seems to be overemphasizing things in one way, the teacher overemphasizes in the opposite way so as to arrive at the middle way. So this emphasis on life as suffering is simply saying that the problem we are dealing with is that we hurt. We human beings feel pretty unfairly treated because we are born into a world arranged so that the price we pay for enjoying it, for having sensitive bodies, is that these bodies are capable of the most excruciating agonies. Isn't that a nasty trick to play on us? What are we going to do about it? This is the problem.

When the Buddha says, "The cause of suffering is desire," the word translated as desire might better be something like "craving," "clinging," or "grasping." He is saying, "I'm suggesting that you suffer because you desire." Then suppose you try not to desire, and see if by not desiring you can cease from suffering. You could put the same thing in another way by saying to a person, "It's all in your mind. There is nothing either good or ill, but thinking makes it so." Therefore, if you can control your mind you have nothing else that you need control. You do not need to control the rain if you can control your mind. If you get wet it is only your mind that makes you think it's uncomfortable to be wet. A person who has good mental discipline can be perfectly happy wandering around in the rain. You do not need a fire if you have good mind control. But if you have ordinary, bad mind control, when it is cold you start

shivering because you are putting up a resistance to the cold; you are fighting it. But don't fight it, relax to the cold, as a matter of mental attitude, and then you will be fine. Always control your mind. This is another way of approaching it.

As soon as the student begins to experiment with these things, he finds out that it is not so easy as it sounds. Not only is it very difficult not to desire, or to control your mind, but there is something phony about the whole business. This is exactly what you are intended to discover—that when you try to eliminate desire in order to escape from suffering, you desire to escape from suffering. You are desiring not to desire. I am not merely playing with logic but saying that a person who is escaping from reality will always feel the terror of it. It will be like the hound of heaven that pursues him. In a way he is escaping even when he tries not to escape. This is the point that this method of teaching was supposed to educate about and draw out from you. The first step is not to explain all this to you but to make the experiment not to desire, or the experiment to control your mind thoroughly. To understand this, you must go through some equivalent of that so as to come to the point where you see you are involved in a vicious circle. In trying to control your mind, the motivation is still clinging and grasping, still self-protection, lack of trust and love. When this is understood, the student returns to the teacher and says, "This is my difficulty, I cannot eliminate desire because my effort to do so is itself desire. I cannot eliminate selfishness because my reasons for wanting to be unselfish are selfish."

As one of the Chinese Buddhist classics puts it, "When the wrong man uses the right means, the right means work in the wrong way." Right means are all the traditional disciplines you use. You practice *zazen* and make yourself into a buddha. But if you are not a buddha in the first place, you cannot become one, because you will be the wrong man. You are using the right means, but because you are using them for a selfish or fearful intent, you are afraid of suffering; you do not like it and you want to escape. These motivations frustrate the right means. One is meant to find that out.

In time, as this was thoroughly explored by the Buddha's disciples, there developed a very evolved form of this whole dialectic technique, which was called *Madhyamika,* meaning the middle way. It was a form of Buddhist practice and instruction developed by Nagarjuna, who lived in approximately 200 A.D. Nagarjuna's method is simply an extension to logical conclusions of the method of dialogue that already existed, except that Nagarjuna took it to an extreme. His method is simply to undermine and cast doubts on any proposition to which his student clings, to destroy all intellectual formulations and conceptions, whatsoever, about the nature of reality or the nature of the self.

You might think this was simply a parlor game, a little intellectual exercise. But if you engaged in it you would find it was absolutely terrifying, bringing you very close to the verge of madness, because a skillful teacher in this method reduces you to a shuddering state of total insecurity. I have watched this being done among people you would consider perfectly ordinary, normal Westerners, who thought they were just getting involved in a nice, abstract intellectual discussion. Finally the teacher, as the process goes on, discovers in the course of the discussion what are the fundamental premises to which every one of his students is clinging. What is the foundation of sanity? What do you base your life on? When he has found that out for each student, he destroys it. He shows you that you cannot found a way of life on that, that it leads you into all sorts of inconsistencies and foolishness. The student turns back to the teacher and says, "It's all very well for you to pull out all carpets from under my feet; what would you propose instead?" And the teacher says, "I don't propose anything." He's no fool. He doesn't put up something to be knocked down. But here you are; if you do not put up something to be knocked down, you cannot play ball with the teacher. You may say, "I don't need to." But on the other hand, there is something nagging you inside, saying that you do. So you go play ball with him, and he keeps knocking down whatever you propose, whatever you cling to.

This exercise produces in the individual a real traumatic state.

People get acute anxiety that you would not expect if it were seen as nothing more than a very intellectual and abstract discussion. When it really gets down to it, and you find that you do not have a single concept you can really trust, it's the heebie-jeebies. But you are preserved from insanity by the discipline, by the atmosphere set up by the teacher, and by the fact that he seems perfectly happy without anything in the way of a concept to cling to. The student looks at him and says, "He seems to be all right; maybe I can be all right too." This gives a certain confidence, a certain feeling that all is not mad, because the teacher in his own way is perfectly normal.

The Middle Way

Chapter Two

I want to emphasize that the religions of the Far East—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism—do not require a belief in anything specific. They do not require obedience to commandments from above, and they do not require conformity to any specific rituals. Their objective is not ideas or doctrines, but rather a method for the transformation of consciousness, and our sensation of self.

I emphasize the word *sensation* because it is the strongest word we have for direct feeling. When you put your hand on the corner of a table you have a very definite feeling, and when you are aware of existing, you also have a definite feeling. But in the view of the methods or disciplines of the East, our ordinary feeling of who we are and how we exist is a hallucination. To feel oneself as a separate ego, a source of action and awareness entirely separate and independent from the rest of the world, locked up inside a bag of skin, is in the view of the East a hallucination. You are not a stranger on the earth who has come into this world as the result of a fluke of nature, or as a spirit from somewhere outside nature altogether. In your fundamental existence you are the total energy of this universe playing the game of being you. The fundamental game of the world is the game of hide-and-seek. The colossal reality, the unitary energy that is the universe, plays at being many: it manifests itself as all these particulars around us. This is the fundamental intuition of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

Buddhism originated in northern India close to the area that is now Nepal, shortly after 600 B.C. A young prince by the name of Gautama Siddhartha became the man we call the Buddha. "Buddha" is a title based on the Sanskrit root *budh,* which means to be awake. A buddha is an individual who has awakened from the dream of life