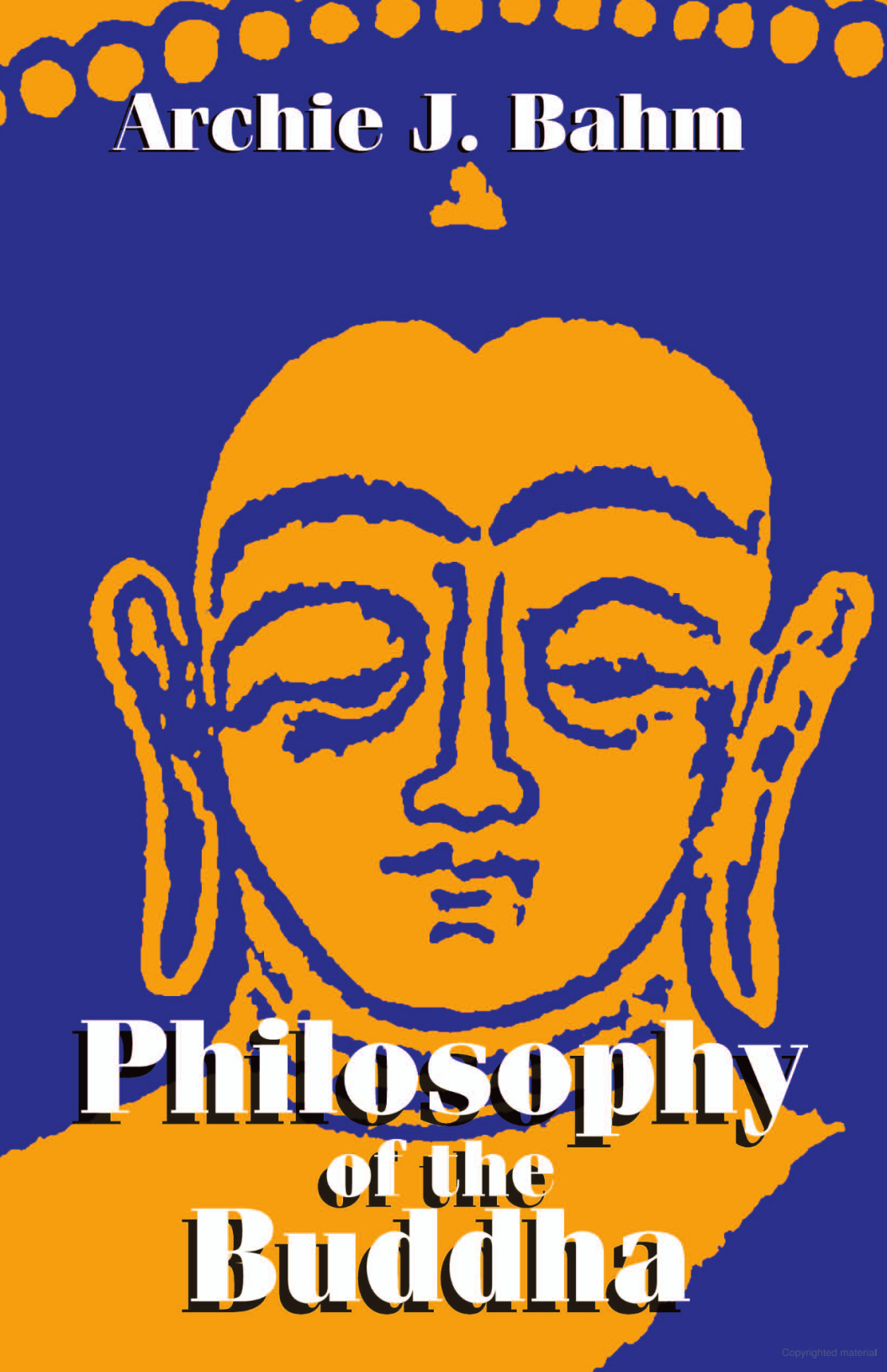
Archie J. Bahm



Philosophy of the Buddha

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Archie J. Bahm

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PREFACE

Gotama, The Buddha, is one of the world's most influential thinkers. What he taught has been interpreted and reinterpreted many times. That he is widely misunderstood is obvious to every scholar, especially to those Buddhists who differ with each other regarding his teachings. The problem, 'What did he really believe?', which interests so many, has intrigued the writer especially as a responsible teacher of comparative philosophies. The need for clearer understanding of the real, and humanly significant, roots, and permanent values of many aspects of Buddhist thought, grows as the peoples of the world become more interdependent.

Everyone is a Buddhist! At least this startling conclusion was forced upon the writer as a result of his studies in the Sutta and Vinaya Pitakas, the two earliest collections of Buddhist records. This assertion does not claim that all subscribe to everything called Buddhist, but only that the teachings of Gotama contain principles which everyone accepts, once he stops to think about them. The purpose of this book is to state the philosophy of Gotama, the man himself, by means of quotations from the Pitakas themselves. This book does not concern itself with the various other Buddhist philosophies constituting the long, devious, profound, and fascinating history of Buddhism, except to challenge their conclusions as attributable to Gotama. It

aims also to stimulate further study of the ancient Pitakas by minds uncommitted to traditional interpretations.

The study resulting in this book had many origins. Opportunity for pursuing it was made possible by joint receipt of a grant as Fulbright Research Scholar in Buddhist Philosophy in the University of Rangoon and sabbatical leave as Professor of Philosophy in the University of New Mexico. The writer's long-standing interest in comparative philosophy, expressed recently through nine years of teaching courses in oriental philosophy, generated deepening respect for Buddhist philosophies. Apparent inconsistencies pervading interpretations of what otherwise seemed an intuitively obvious doctrine, aroused growing suspicion that those interpretations which appear artificial or unintelligible were not authentic. Efforts to expound Buddhist ideals sympathetically yielded coherent wholes of valuable insight which, when not completely corroborated by available literature, led to the belief that there must be more vitality, genuine humanity, and universality in the original insights than are disclosed in some accounts.

These doubts were then stimulated by Mohan Singh and supported by Howard J. Parsons. Singh's *New Light on Buddha's First Sermon* (a paper read at the All-India Oriental Conference, Bombay, and published by the Academy of Spiritual Culture, Elephanta, Dera Dun, 1949) presented results of digging about in Sanskrit evidence and maintained, for example, that 'By the rendition of *Arya* as noble, *dukha* as suffering, *sam* as right, the grandest sublimest transcendental teachings of the *Abhisambuddha* have been made un-Arya-like; active *Dhyani* Buddhism has been reduced to stoical pessimistic ethics; and the path of transcendence of the pairs of opposites, expounded in the Gita under *Buddhiyoga*, the path of balance has been made to lose

itself in the medieval forests of rightness and virtuousness.' (P. 8.) Parson's article, 'Buddha and Buddhism: A New Appraisal' (*Philosophy East and West*, Vol. I, No. 3, October, 1951, pp. 8–37), claimed that 'His "middle way" escapes the painful and uncertainly oscillating dualisms of his times: the Absolutistic Brahmins and the annihilationists; being and non-being; the desire for existence and the desire for non-existence; the universal principle (*Brahman*) and the individual principle (*atman*); the self and the non-self; permanence and impermanence; theism and atheism; the world's eternality and the world's temporality; immortality and mortality; life and death; the identity of body and soul, the separation of body and soul. The directing control of the ego is the middle way between the expansive and contracting tendencies of life, between indulgence and mortification. Gotama follows the middle course through these dualisms, by not responding to either extreme. . . .' (P. 18.)

Interest in Gotama's philosophy was sustained by continuing curiosity concerning in how far the writer's own philosophy, 'Organicism' (Cf. his *Philosophy, An Introduction*, Ch. 20. John Wiley and Sons, N.Y., 1953), which also idealizes a middle way as central to philosophy, has antecedents in Buddhism.

The sources used in pursuing the study itself, in the University of Rangoon from July, 1955, to March, 1956, consisted primarily in twenty-six volumes of the Vinaya and Sutta Pitakas in English translations, supplemented by portions of seventeen volumes of secondary materials (*see* Bibliography).

Numerous persons and institutions contributed to success of the study. Acknowledgement of indebtedness is due (1) the United States Educational Foundation in Burma,

especially U Cho, its Executive Officer, and U Htun Myaing, its Administrative Assistant, for their part in providing comfortable and convenient living and study accommodations in Rangoon, (2) the University of Rangoon, especially Dr. Hla Bu, Head of the Department of Philosophy and Psychology, and U Aung Than, Head of the Department of Pali and Abhidhamma, for permission to study in their Departments, (3) Professors K. N. Kar, U Pe Maung Tin, and R. P. Chaudhuri for their critical examination of the completed manuscript, (4) Dr. Devaprasad Guha, Daw Khin Win Kyi, U Tin Lwin, U Lay Myint, and David Maurice for assistance in obtaining books and references used in research, and (5) U Thittila for instruction in the concurrently studied contrasting Abhidhamma (Theravada) philosophy.

Indebtedness is expressed also to I. B. Horner, Honorary Secretary of the Pali Text Society, for detailed critical suggestions regarding the manuscript, to the Pali Text Society, the Oxford University Press, and Luzac and Co., Ltd., for permission to use extensive quotations from their publications, to the other publishers granting permission to quote, and to my wife for many valuable improvements in the manuscript.

1

GOTAMA'S PHILOSOPHY

GOTAMA'S philosophy may be summed up in a simple, clear and obvious principle, which immediately compels belief once it is understood. The principle: Desire for what will not be attained ends in frustration; therefore, to avoid frustration, avoid desiring what will not be attained.

Although immediately obvious, the principle entails certain practical difficulties. First, it is natural to want more —at least a little more—than one gets. The frustration entailed in this unattained more is ever-present. Hence, 'all is suffering'. Secondly, one cannot always anticipate precisely what will be attained. When uncertain regarding the alternative, more or less, one prefers and hopes for the better, the more desirable; but to the extent that this more desirable is more than will be attained, frustration is in prospect. When, further, discomfort regarding uncertainty of predictions arouses interest in improving one's predictive ability, this too adds to frustration to the extent that one then desires to achieve more such ability than he will attain. Thirdly, since effort of will or strength of desire itself often influences the outcome, one ought to desire strongly enough to assure adequate effort; yet since desires do not come with their intensities fitted with automatic stopping devices correlated with what is actually attainable, it is to be expected that desires commonly overshoot their mark.

These practical difficulties do not invalidate the principle. They merely indicate its universality, the subtlety with which it operates, the reason why it is commonly neglected, and need for special effort to bring it into effective operation. The principle explains unhappiness as universal, present in all times and places, because inherent in the nature of desiring. It works subtly, not merely because desires are emotively imprecise, but especially because the desire to prevent desiring more than will be attained is itself unconsciously desired too much. The principle is neglected, not wilfully, but unwittingly, first because people mistakenly search for the causes of unhappiness in the objects of desires, and then, when desire itself is discovered to be the culprit, because the locus of its application undergoes a sleight-of-hand shift, so that whenever a person tackles the problem in one place, it reappears, unawares, in another. Hence this ever-slippery problem requires special effort—a persistent alertness to its perpetual recurrence at each dialectically deeper level of desiring. For whenever one desires to stop 'desiring more than will be attained', this additional, deeper desire also becomes a desire for more stopping than will be attained. Thus this additional, deeper desire requires its own additional, still deeper desire to stop desiring more stopping than will be attained. The problem of unhappiness is an ever-deepening one which can be grasped and solved only dialectically. (Those for whom dialectic is beyond comprehension, hence mysterious, may find here evidence of miraculousness which then blooms as a belief in divinity.) But, as we shall see, dialectical problems solve themselves, if only we will let them. One who finally gives up trying to solve the problem of frustration, thereby becoming willing to accept his desires and frustrations for what they are, finds the problem solved.

The goal of life is neither more favourable rebirth nor extinction of self or of desire, as some have maintained, but 'dwelling, here and now, beyond appetites, consummate, unfevered, in bliss, in (wholesomeness)'. (*Further Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. I, p. 247. Tr. Lord Chalmers, Oxford University Press, London, 1926.) Then '. . . to whatever place you go, you shall go in comfort; wherever you stand, you shall stand in comfort; wherever you sit, you shall sit in comfort; and wherever you make your bed, you shall lie down in comfort.' (*The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, Vol. IV, p. 200. Tr. E. M. Hare, Luzac and Co., Ltd., London, 1955.)

How the foregoing succinct summary expresses Gotama's philosophy will become clear only through a review of his own personal struggle, near-defeat, and final victory. Gotama arrived at his conclusion, not by a few moments of reflection, but the hard way: first by staking his kingdom (he was a prince due to inherit his father's realm) and his life (he almost died from starvation after seven years of ascetic practices) in earnest experiments to find life's goal. Abundant pleasures of the princely life he knew first hand. But no matter how lavishly he was supplied, he always wished for more than could be had. Finally, when about thirty years of age, he listened to the counsel of the wise men of his time: the root of life's troubles lies not in insufficiency of objects desired but in desiring. Surrendering his royal robes for ascetic rags and his palace for a begging bowl, he went in search of *nirvana*, the peace that knows no frustration. Trances, mortification, fasts, and the like, although pursued diligently under able teachers, brought him nowhere. Hence he learned that not only did excessive desire end in defeat, but excessive desire for freedom from desire also ended in frustration. His discovery of this fact,

while sitting under a tree recuperating from exhausting fasts, constituted his 'Enlightenment', and from it stems his epithet, 'The Buddha', and the name of the long history of interpretations, 'Buddhism'.

His historical (sixth century B.C.) insight, that happiness can be found only in the middle way, appears to agree with other (mostly later) Golden Mean philosophies in advising avoidance of extremes. The awesome example of Gotama's own struggle, first against princely dissipation and then against asceticism, may easily be interpreted as setting the stage for a plea to avoid the extremes of debauchery and mortification. And, since his way is universal, one is tempted to list all pairs of opposites and advise wariness of each extreme and conformity to each mean. However, Gotama's insight focused upon one kind of mean, one which, if achieved, would automatically resolve the difficulties relative to all other pairs of extremes: his middle way is a way between desiring too much and desiring too much stopping of such desiring.

This way involves a double willingness. In order to avoid frustration, one must desire to stop desiring what will not be attained. But to stop desiring what will not be attained requires a desire to stop such desiring. In so far as this additional desire is also a desire for what will not be attained, it, too, ends in frustration. Hence, to stop this additional frustration, one must stop desiring more stopping of desire than will be attained. Here a predicament arises. In seeking to avoid frustration, one finds that he must be willing to be frustrated as much as he will be frustrated; and also be willing to be frustrated relative to his desire to stop desiring as he will be frustrated. This double willingness is the middle way.

The middle way turns out to be the way things are (i.e.,

in all tenses of 'are'), for it is the way between wanting things (including desires) to be more than they are or less than they are with respect to any way that they are. So long as one considers 'seek the middle way' and 'accept things as they are' as two different principles, he has not yet found the middle way. But despite the subtlety required for comprehension and skill demanded for deliberate achievement, the principle, that happiness is to be found in accepting things as they are, is very simple, even if dialectical. Only when one no longer struggles with the problem of frustration does it cease to be a problem; or only when one is willing to be as unhappy as he is can he be as happy as he can be.

If, as the writer contends, Gotama's philosophy consists in a single psychological principle, what about the numerous claims that he held such-and-such views relative to various metaphysical problems? Regarding each question put to him, he replied, typically, as follows. Is there, for example, a next life? That, he would say, is not an important issue. Consider the possibilities: If you desire a next life and there is a next life, you have no problem. If you desire a next life and there is no next life, you will be frustrated. If you desire no next life and there is no next life, you have no problem. If you desire no next life and there is a next life, you will be frustrated. In either case, whether there is or is not a next life, you will be frustrated if you want what will not be. Hence, so far as happiness is concerned, the important issue is not whether there is or is not a next life, but whether or not you are willing to accept things as they will be, however they will be.

To all such questions as 'Is there a soul?', 'Is the soul the same as the body or different?' he gave the same kind of answer: 'That, Potthapada, is a matter on which I have

expressed no opinion.' 'But why . . .?' 'This question is not calculated to profit, is not concerned with the *dhamma*, it does not redound even to the elements of right conduct, nor to detachment, nor to purification from lusts, nor to quietude, nor to tranquillization of heart, nor to real knowledge, nor to insight, nor to *nirvana*. Therefore is it that I express no opinion upon it.' 'Then what is it that the Exalted One *has* determined?' 'I have expounded what pain (i.e., unhappiness, frustration, or anxiety) is; . . . the origin of pain; . . . the cessation of pain; . . . what is the method by which one may reach the cessation of pain?' 'And why . . .?' 'Because that . . . is calculated to profit. . . .' (*Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, pp. 254–5. Tr. T. W. Rhys Davids, Oxford University Press, London, 1899, 1923.)

Here we have a statement of the 'Four Truths' which are not four principles, but merely one principle, with four statements asserted about it. The principle: desire for what will not be attained ends in frustration; therefore to avoid frustration, avoid desiring what will not be attained. The four statements: (1) Unhappiness consists in frustration (dissatisfaction, anxiety). (2) It originates in desiring what will not be attained. (3) It ceases when one ceases to desire what will not be attained. (4) The method is to seek the middle way between wanting things to be more than they are or less than they are with respect to any way that they are. If this be Gotama's doctrine, surely we are all followers of Gotama, assenting to the truth of his principle, even if, unhappily, we fail to practise it to perfection.

Unfortunately for doctrinal simplicity, the 'Four Truths' have received other formulations, even in the Pitakas themselves. Consider the now-common formula: 'All is suffering, because all is impermanent. The cause of suffering is desire. The way to remove suffering is to

remove desire. The way to remove desire is to follow the Eight-Fold Path.'

Although it is clear that Gotama intended his principle to be a universal solution to a universal problem ('All is suffering' meaning that people normally always desire more than they will attain, at least in some degree), the explanation, 'because all is impermanent', appears to be the work of other minds. The importance of the role which this doctrine has played in Buddhist history does not permit it to be lightly cast aside. Yet certain persisting inconsistencies continue to call for more suitable explanation. If all is impermanent, is impermanence impermanent, is the doctrine of impermanence impermanent, is *dhamma* (Gotama's doctrine) impermanent? If attachment to the permanent is evil, should one seek permanent non-attachment? If self is impermanent, what is it that reaps karmic rewards, that is reborn, that continues through the eight steps, through the *jhanas*, or in *nirvana*?

Such inconsistencies disappear when the doctrine of impermanence is treated as an example of 'greed for views' (*see* Ch. 9), and subordinated to Gotama's principle of the middle way: desire neither more permanence nor impermanence than you are going to get. Gotama's view is not that all is suffering because all is impermanent. Rather it is that all is suffering (i.e., all are frustrated because they desire more than will be attained), and this holds true regardless of whether all is permanent, all is impermanent, or both, or neither. Although the doctrine of impermanence, together with the no-soul doctrine, is profusely expressed in the Pitakas, especially in the third or Abhidhamma Pitaka, and accepted as orthodox by Theravadins, it not only is inconsistent with Gotama's central principle but is explicitly denied in other quotations from Gotama. His answer to the

question 'Is all impermanent?' is the same as to the question 'Is the world eternal (permanent)?' cited above. To it he would give no definite answer because doing so would be not only seeking, but claiming to have achieved, more certainty than could be attained. Hence the commonly-accepted statement of the first of the 'Four Truths' was rejected by Gotama, not in the sense that he claims that all, or anything, is permanent, but in the sense that he refused to assert either that anything is or is not impermanent.

Did Gotama deny the existence of the metaphysical? No. 'These things do exist and there are those who can see them; and consequently he would be wrong in saying they were non-existent merely because he could not see them.' (*Further Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. II, p. 115. Tr. Lord Chalmers, Oxford University Press, London, 1927.) Did he deny that metaphysical problems could ever be solved? No. To deny the possibility of solution would itself involve drawing inferences about the metaphysical and desiring more certainty regarding the truth of such denial than can reasonably be attained. Did he himself discuss such metaphysical problems? Yes, for when such problems were presented to him by people in anguish about them, he sometimes tried to relieve their anguish by examining the problems with them, partly to gain their confidence that he had a sympathetic grasp of their predicament and partly as a means of showing that their trouble lay really not in having failed to settle a metaphysical puzzle but in having failed to realize that over-desirousness must yield frustration in this area also.

Dogmatists, men 'fixed in their theories' (*Woven Cadences of Early Buddhists*, p. 130. Tr. E. M. Hare, Oxford University Press, London, 1945, 1947), and those who would be dogmatists, as evidenced by the tenacity of

their search, are possessed of 'greed for views'. To the extent that anyone, in the absence of evidence, is dogmatic, his claiming to have attained more certainty than has actually been attained is an invitation to anguish. Even the desire for more certainty than will be attained, by one who does not yet claim to have attained, is also conducive to anguish. Thus whoever would avoid such anguish must remain in doubt. He must be a sceptic. Only by being sceptical regarding solution to problems which he will not solve (or to the extent that he will not solve them), will one be freed from anguish. However, if the avid seeker, accepting this advice to doubt, then doubts with equal avidity, he becomes, in turn, a dogmatic sceptic, 'doubt completely', or an agnostic, 'no solution is possible'. Going from one extreme to the other, from dogmatism to agnosticism, he has then to be recautioned about agnosticism as greed for no view. Since agnosticism is itself a view, one can as easily be frustrated by over-zealous attachment to it as to its opposite. The middle way, believing neither that one will attain more certainty than he will attain nor that he will attain less certainty than he will attain, again needs to be sought. But again too avid seeking for the middle way embodies a more subtle greed which must be rooted out by more subtle efforts, without pursuing such uprooting greedily, but my means of a still more subtle middle way. The problem of stopping anguish is sufficiently difficult, complex, and attention-demanding that anyone who pursues it with diligence will have little time left over for indulging unhappily in metaphysical pursuits.

The second and third of the 'Four Truths' also tend to be misinterpreted when stated as: 'The cause of suffering is desire, and the way to remove suffering is to remove desire.' It is true that Gotama located the seat of unhappiness in

desire, and it is true that removal of desire removes frustration of desire. But the view that Gotama advocated removal of all desire is false. When one has satisfied desires, because he had desired what he was going to get, no unhappiness, no suffering, no problem, exists. (And Gotama did not seek to make a problem where there is none.) Furthermore, in so far as there is an attainable way out of unhappiness, one should desire and seek that way. Misinterpretation arose, doubtless, because of the subtle difference between desire and desirousness, or between *chanda* (desiring what, and no more than, will be attained) and *tanha* (desiring more than will be attained). It arose also because many of his fellow-wayfarers, already accustomed to thinking of desire as evil and extinction as the goal, were not wholly converted. Some transmitters of his sayings continued to interpret them as more akin to the negativism which he rejected than appears warranted.

The fourth of the 'Four Truths' pertains to the way to end unhappiness—the middle way. Why tradition first added, and then substituted, the 'Eight-Fold Path', summarized as 'right belief, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right thought, and right concentration', needs to be explained. Despite the fact that the Theravada interpretation of Gotama's teaching given by some of his early followers won out and came to occupy a major place in the Pitakas, enough of Gotama's own view also remains to provide refutation. Although a casual scholar or a believing Theravadin can, by citing the scriptures, easily 'prove' that Gotama was a Theravadin, these same scriptures contain also enough of Gotama's own protests against Theravada as well as other misinterpretations to force the careful scholar to a different conclusion.

Disagreement with those who claim that Theravada,

Sunyavada, Shin, Zen or any other of the varieties of Buddhist philosophy was taught by Gotama himself is not intended to minimize the significance of their own insights into human nature or the importance of their additional contributions to human culture. Each of the Buddhist philosophies has a positive contribution to make. But a more careful examination of the evidence should convince us that Gotama's philosophy, although it inspired them and receives partial expression through them, is still different from any of them.

In what follows, we shall turn first to the problem of misunderstanding and to Gotama's complaints about being misunderstood (Ch. 2), then to an exposition of his philosophy and reasons why it came to be subordinated (Chs. 3–11), and finally to some criticisms (Ch. 12).

2

MISUNDERSTANDINGS

THAT Gotama was misunderstood should be clear to everyone. But the ways in which he was misunderstood, the magnitude of such misunderstanding, and the significance of such misunderstanding in contributing to the long history of doctrines mistakenly attributed to him, and the depth and complicatedness of the problem of extricating ourselves, even partially, from further misunderstanding today, are far from clear. The purpose of examining such misunderstanding here is to show that any interpretation of Gotama's philosophy must retain an element of doubt, and that some criterion other than literal interpretation is required in any attempt to reformulate it. The Pali texts exist, but they embody such a profusion of contradictions that the problem of seeking a criterion faces even one who limits himself to the texts alone. Since many spirits were at work behind the letters of the texts, the scholar must decide whether Gotama himself was a confused thinker (yet remaining quite consistent in his types of confusion) or select some one of the views expressed in the texts, or even, as some Mahayanists have done, not in the texts, as his own. Since misunderstandings in and of the texts make inference necessary, some readers will wish to consider them. Others may proceed directly to the exposition beginning in Chapter 3.

The present chapter is so arranged as to treat the various

types of misunderstanding as due to: (1) failure of communication generally, (2) lack of comprehension by those who heard him, (3) difficulties of memorizers, (4) later inventors, (5) compilers, and (6) inferences of later thinkers. Mistakes due to translation and historical changes in language, and the attribution of miraculous power and wisdom by worshippers,[1] are omitted as too obvious for discussion here.

Failure in communication generally is a fact bemoaned by writers, celebrated and forgotten, from Lao Tzu to Bergson, or from Socrates to the semanticists, which everyone surely has experienced for himself. Indeed, it is quite central to the nature of the philosophical enterprise to seek to discover not only the nature of reality and of knowledge but to grasp what is ultimate regarding the ability and inability of men to understand each other. Gotama did not wholly understand reality, and it may be something to his credit, not that he did not try, but that he recognized, after trying, that expecting more understanding than we will get leads to unhappiness. (*See* Ch. 9.) Likewise regarding communication, Gotama is reported to have felt his enlightenment so incommunicable that he required three urgings by Brahma Sahampati before he became willing to try: 'This too were a difficult matter to see, that is to say the calming of all habitual tendencies, the renunciation of all attachment, the destruction of craving, dispassion, stopping, *nirvana*. And so if I were to teach *dhamma* and others were not to

[1] 'We must admit, however reluctantly, that the masses of Asia, who have seen in the Buddha the Light of the World, have not done so because of his rationalist doctrines, his chain of causation, which they have understood as little as we do, or even his wise advice to still passion. They have adored him, because they have regarded him as the God of Gods, and believed that by devotion to him they shall attain eternal salvation, consisting of perpetual bliss. . . . the simple humanity of the wise teacher has been overlaid by a divinity not his own, one moreover which on his own theory he would have treated as absurd.' A. Berriedale Keith, *Buddhist Philosophy in India and Ceylon*, pp. 14–15. Oxford University Press, London, 1923.

understand me, this would be a weariness to me, this would be a vexation to me.' (*The Book of the Discipline*, Part IV, p. 7. Tr. I. B. Horner, Luzac and Co., Ltd., London, 1951.) 'Thinking of useless fatigue, I have not preached, Brahma, the sublime and excellent *dhamma* to men.' (*Ibid.*, p. 9.)

Gotama is reported to have stated the proverbial parable of the blind men and the elephant as evidence of his concern about the general tendency to disagreement. Once a king commanded all who had been born blind to be brought together to examine an elephant. 'To one man he presented the head of the elephant, to another its ear, to another a tusk, to another the trunk, the foot, back, tail and tuft of the tail.' Consequently descriptions varied. 'Those who had been presented with the head answered, 'An elephant is like a pot.' And those who had felt an ear only replied, 'An elephant is like a winnowing-basket.' Those who had been presented with a tusk said it was a ploughshare. Those who knew only the trunk said it was a plough; they said the body was a granary; the foot, a pillar; the back, a mortar; the tail, a pestle; the tuft of the tail, just a besom. Then they began to quarrel, shouting: 'Yes, it is!' 'No, it is not!' (*The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon*, Vol. II, pp. 82, 83. Tr. F. L. Woodward, Oxford University Press, London, 1935, 1948.)

Lack of comprehension by those who heard him is evidenced profusely:

(1) Apparently he made too many converts too quickly, reported as a thousand in a single day (*see* account of the conversion of the Kassapa brothers and their followers. *The Book of the Discipline*, Part IV, pp. 32–44), to have made clear to all of them, or even more than a few of them, the import of his teaching. Conversion must have meant only a willingness to hear him further or a consent to become his

pupil, as even today wearers of yellow robes enter the ranks as probationary novices. His followers were seekers, not necessarily understanders, of his insights.

(2) The congregations of mendicants surrounding Gotama were, both early and late, more fellowships of seekers than disciplined bodies of converts to a rigid doctrine. Hence they were under no pressure to understand him precisely. At times there was considerable doubt as to whether he or other mendicants among his supposed converts were leaders: 'Then it occurred to those . . . brahmans and householders: "Now, does the great recluse (Gotama) fare the Brahma-faring under Kassapa of Uruvela or does Kassapa of Uruvela fare the Brahma-faring under the great recluse?" ' (*The Book of the Discipline*, Part IV, p. 47.)

(3) His disciples did not always even pretend to understand him, as in the case of Assaji, one of the first disciples, who replied to the inquiring Sariputta: 'I indeed, friend, am new, not long gone forth, fresh to this *dhamma* and discipline. I am not able to teach you *dhamma* in full, but I will tell you its purport briefly.' (*The Book of the Discipline*, Vol. IV, p. 53.) The record says that 'a number of highly distinguished young' monks requested: 'All our ideas are derived from the Lord, guided by Him and fortified by Him. We pray that the Lord may be pleased to explain what He has said.' (*Further Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. I, p. 330.) Sometimes disciples, after hearing Gotama, went away and asked other advanced disciples the meaning of what he had said; the record testifies again and again to their failure to understand. (Cf. *Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. I, pp. 141–8. Tr. I. B. Horner, Luzac and Co., Ltd., London, 1954.)

(4) Even Gotama was aware that sometimes his universal doctrine was mistaken as having merely particular import: 'Now I am aware that when I am teaching *dhamma* to

companies consisting of many hundreds, each person thinks thus about me: "The recluse Gotama is teaching *dhamma* especially for me." But this should not be understood thus. For when a Tathagata is teaching *dhamma* to others it is for the sake of general instruction.' (*Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. I, p. 303.)

(5) On the other hand, often when he addressed himself to the problems of specific individuals in particular situations, listeners interpreted his sayings as universal commands (e.g., as regards many rules for monks).

(6) He spoke in similes, and apparently called up a rich variety of figures to drive home his central point: 'Sense-pleasures are likened by me to a skeleton . . . to a lump of meat . . . to a torch of dry grass . . . to a pit of glowing embers . . . to a dream . . . to something borrowed . . . to the fruits of a tree . . . to a slaughter-house . . . to an impaling stake.' (*Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. I, p. 170.) Such a plethora of examples must have confounded the duller wits who were so overwhelmed by the task of remembering not wholly clear figurative examples that the main general principle escaped them. The remembered examples then served as a basis upon which later scholars speculatively generalized new principles or new versions of the old principle.

(7) At other times, when he used traditional language to express a new idea, the familiar traditional language stuck in the minds of his hearers, with the old rather than the new idea attached to them. 'The Buddha could not disregard the ordinary terminology of his time; his teaching had to be expressed in the terms of his day, and accommodated for practical purposes to ordinary intelligence; the new wine had to be poured into old bottles.' (A. Berriedale Keith, *Buddhist Philosophy in India and Ceylon*, p. 14.) As the new

wine itself became old, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between the ageing wine and the aged bottles.

(8) Disputes among his hearers arose repeatedly. Occasionally he cried out about misrepresentation: 'There are some recluses and brahmans who misrepresent me untruly, vainly, falsely, not in accordance with fact, saying: "The recluse Gotama is a nihilist, he lays down the cutting off, the destruction, the disappearance of existent entity." But this, monks, is just what I am not, this is just what I do not say, therefore these worthy recluses and brahmans misrepresent me untruly. . . .' (*Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. I, p. 180.) He begged: 'In case you do not understand the meaning of what I have said, I should be questioned about it by you.' (*Ibid.*, p. 172.)

(9) Each monk was free to promote his own philosophy or, at least, his own version of it. Except for advising timid novices, the group was not authoritarian, but like a brotherhood of fellow-seekers. Even the monks close to Gotama, when called upon to describe their ideal teacher, expressed divergent preferences. Ananda: 'a monk who has heard much, who masters what he has heard, who stores what he has heard', etc. (*Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. I, pp. 264–5.) Revata: 'a monk who delights in solitary meditation . . . , a cultivator of empty places'. (*Ibid.*, p. 265.) Anuruddha: 'a monk surveys the thousand worlds with purified *deva*-vision surpassing that of men'. (*Ibid.*) Kassapa: a monk who both is himself and praises: forest-dwelling, almsman, rag-robe wearer, few wishes, contented, aloof, ungregarious, of stirred-up energy, moral habit, possesses concentration, possesses intuitive wisdom, freedom, knowledge and vision. (Cf. *ibid.*, p. 266.) Moggallana: 'intelligent conversationalists'. (Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 266–7.) Sariputta: 'a monk has rule over

mind, he is not under mind's rule; whatever attainment of abiding he wishes . . . he attains at will'. (*Ibid.*, p. 267.) How did Gotama's principle fare when filtered through minds of disciples stressing such different ideals?

The record then quotes Gotama, quizzed as to which had spoken best, as saying: 'It was well spoken by all of you in turn. But now hear me. . . .' (*Ibid.*, p. 271.) Then followed a portrayal of his ideal as one persisting in effort until wholly freed from anxiety. Gotama expected a certain amount of disagreement and misunderstanding, and he would have been inconsistent with his principle if he had complained too much about it. His middle way required him not to be attached to either too much or too little communication or to either too much or too little being understood. Each man had his own right to his own ideals and Gotama could hardly object when his own many-sided life was reflected with varying emphases in the ideals of his fellows. Yet, when his ideal became submerged repeatedly, he appears to have been unhappy about it.

Difficulties of memorizers must be added to those of initial comprehension. First, not only were the memories of those who heard him selective, sifting, consciously or unconsciously, those parts of his message which were most suited to their particular needs, curiosity, or pride, but also the language and ideas used to re-express what they remembered were slanted and often distorted in the re-telling. Secondly, difficulties of second-, third- and fourth-hand memorizers, which increasingly remembered words at expense of meanings, centred on mnemonic devices and shortened formulas which had to be refilled to restore the full meaning. The refilling was sometimes partly forgotten and needed to be reconstructed; occasionally a similar-sounding word with a different meaning was drawn out

possession, unguardedness as to the sense-doors, lack of moderation in eating, deceit and mealy-mouthedness.'

Section 4: (Positively stated) 'delights in *Dhamma*, in growth, in renunciation, in solitude, in being free of ill-will and in non-diffuseness.'

Section 5: 'Unskilled in entering, in leaving, in approach, has no wish to attain unattained skill in *Dhamma*, preserves not his skill attained, nor stirs to persevere.'

Section 6: 'Has clear sight in much, application in much, zest in much, dissatisfaction in much, shirks not the burden of right things, and drives across to the beyond.'

Section 7: 'Takes life, takes what is not given, lives carnally, lies, has evil desires and wrong views.'

Section 8: 'Lies, is slanderous, harsh, a babbler, greedy, reckless.'

Section 9: 'Is without faith, modesty or fear of blame, is indolent, lacks insight and hankers after action and life.'

Section 10: 'Desires much, is fretful, discontented with this and that requisite, robe, alms, lodging, medicaments—is without faith or virtue, is indolent, forgetful in mindfulness and lacks insight.'

Chapter IX. Section 1: 'Checks not the mind when it ought to be checked; exerts not the mind when it ought to be exerted; gladdens not the mind when it ought to be gladdened; gives no heed to the mind when it ought to be given heed to; is bent on low things and finds delight in life's bundle.'

Section 2: 'Cumbered by the stop of action, the stop of vice, the stop of (action's) ripening, he is an unbeliever, lacks urge and lacks insight.'

Section 3: '(By him) his mother's life has been taken, his father's, an arahant's, the Tathagata's blood has been

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THE FOUR TRUTHS

LIFE's basic problem, why and how to live, is conceived by Gotama in a common-sense manner. Why live? To enjoy life: 'seek . . . for the self an abiding ease here and now.' (*Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. I, p. 30. *See ibid.*, p. 52.) How live? Freed from frustration: 'having overcome both hankering and dejection common in the world.' (*Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part II, p. 101. Tr. T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, Luzac and Co., Ltd., London, 1910, 1951.) What is the means for achieving such freedom? 'And to that I should reply: "Why this very personality that you see before you is what I mean." ' (*Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, p. 261.) Does this require withdrawal from the world? No. 'Certain recluses and brahmans have falsely, emptily, mendaciously and unfairly accused me, saying: Gotama, the recluse . . . has said: Whenever one has attained to the stage of deliverance, entitled the Beautiful, one then considers all things as repulsive. But this, Bhagava, I have not said. What I do say is this: Whenever one attains to the stage of deliverance, entitled the Beautiful, one is then aware " 'Tis lovely." ' (*Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part III, pp. 31–2. Tr. T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, Oxford University Press, London, 1921.) The goal to be sought is not momentary elation, but an enduring, universal, omnipresent enjoyment: '. . . unshakeable freedom of mind, this

is the goal. . . .' (*The Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. I, p. 253.) When achieved, then 'to whatever place you go, you shall go in comfort; wherever you stand, you shall stand in comfort; wherever you sit, you shall sit in comfort; and wherever you make your bed, you shall lie down in comfort.' (*The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, Vol. IV, p. 200. *See ibid.*, Vol. V, p. 83.)

The problem, which presents itself in life and in the Pali record in multifarious ways, may be stated thus: 'For the most part, monks, beings wish like this: "O may pleasant, enjoyable, agreeable things grow much." Monks, unpleasant, unenjoyable, disagreeable things grow much in those beings of such wishes. . . . Why is this? or What do you take to be the cause?' (*The Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. I, p. 372.) Gotama's answer is commonly summarized as the 'Four Truths' or the 'Four Certainties'.

These are not four different principles, but a single principle, the factors or strands of which may be analysed and numbered in as many ways as suits one's fancy. It seems better to believe that Gotama did not, like a numerologist, attach special significance to numbers, but that the prominence they play in the formulas grew naturally out of the interests of memorizers needing convenient fingerable numbers to assist them in mental bookkeeping. As internal evidence, one may appeal to the spirit of the principle itself as it inspires any life lived in accordance with it. Concern for freedom from anxiety involves a deep and earnest yearning pervading one's whole being in such a way that mnemonic numbering seems highly artificial by contrast. Following this principle dialectically, however, one would neither be greatly attached to nor greatly abhor enumerations. Yet enumeration of, elaboration of, devoted attention to, each of the four, and especially the eight steps of the fourth,

from anxiety, involving avoidance of attachment to either desire or stopping of desire, gave way to the ideal of abstinence, abstemiousness, extinction of all desire, and extinction even of the desirer and of his life. This negativistic, nihilistic spirit, expressed aptly in English word-play, avoid all but the void, was explicitly repudiated by Gotama: 'There are recluses and brahmans who misrepresent me untruly, vainly, falsely, not in accordance with fact, saying: "The recluse Gotama is a nihilist, he lays down the cutting off, the destruction, the disappearance of existent entity." But as this, monks, is just what I am not, as this is just what I do not say, therefore these worthy recluses and brahmans misrepresent me untruly. . . .' (*The Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. I, p. 180.)

Nevertheless, this negativistic spirit took over and pervaded Buddhist thought if not in his own time, at least at times centuries later. Unsympathetic critics pounce with glee upon such negativism as demonstrating Buddhism's inferiority to more positive, life-affirming philosophies and religions. But, not only in the thought of Gotama, but in most branches of Buddhist philosophy, there are saving features which must be given their due. And, in practical religion, not only does life itself so necessarily reject self-annihilation that nihilism cannot be practised without modification, but also Buddhism, judging by the multitudes of compromises it has made in the various cultures it has penetrated, even dominated, has proved itself to be one of the world's most adaptable religions. Granted that a negative element is present, it does not follow that nihilism is essential to Buddhism. Granted that stopping of desire and stopping of the desire to stop desire tend to result in an indifference to life which is difficult to distinguish from negation of life, one can appreciate Buddhism adequately

step into desirelessness, but by neither desiring nor desiring to stop desiring to progress more than he will progress up the eight-step path. That is, only by becoming indifferent to the step-wise character of the path can one achieve its goal, its transcendental goal (which is, at the same time, its intrinsic goal). (*b*) Each of the eight steps may itself be middle-wayed, or transcended dialectically on its own account. Introduced by *sam*, meaning 'middle-wayed', each may be interpreted, not as an ordinary step, but as another transcendental step, mentioned separately not to give significance to it as separate, but to illustrate or demonstrate the all-pervasiveness of the principle. That this is true is so incomprehensible to beginners, and so unbelievable to those whose faith in the formulas has remained unshaken by penetrative reflection, that much doubt must remain on the part of many readers. This aspect of the eight-fold path is of such significance that it will receive more detailed treatment later. (*See* Ch. 7.) (*c*) Stepness can be transcended from the very beginning or, even, before the beginning, by anyone who grasps the principle intuitively and acquiesces in it immediately. This grasping and acquiescing is the ideal, but few achieve it. Unfortunately for this ideal, life is directional. All men desire more than they will get, hence all are frustrated, and all, then, must take some steps away from such desiring. But that there should be precisely eight steps is not a consequence of the principle itself. Some will require more, some less; but the fewer the better. If some are so inept as to require several rounds of rebirth, what can be done about it? Not even the teacher can wish that his pupils would speed up their process more than they will without he himself succumbing to desiring more than he will get.

The Buddhist monk is, and usually knows that he is,

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