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BUDDHIST ENCOUNTER WITH OTHER WORLD RELIGIONS

The theme of encounter of world religions is continued in this issue of the *Journal of Dharma*. This time it has to do with Buddhism's encounter with other world religions. As such it has three distinct constituent parts to be considered, which are world religions, Buddhism and encounter, but all the three in the unified context of what this issue deals with.

1. World Religions

A world religion must, of course, possess the traits of religion in general, including the primal, as described in various studies on the subject. Such traits, put very simply and in general terms, must include an established body of rites, covering both individual life and group life, possibly obligations as well as privileges, objects of worship, and a social order with rules defined by custom, all of which together define a particular religion and its place in the larger order of things.

In addition to all these, a world religion must possess certain special characteristics which entitle it to that status. Prior even to such characteristics, it must have at least an implicit universality in relation to its inner contents, although not necessarily expressed as a fact, either of its claim upon humanity or of humanity's claim upon it. Further, it must be a living religion holding sway upon a large segment of humanity, whether that segment lives contiguously in one geographical area of the world or scattered over much of the world.

Now the special characteristics which entitle it to the status of world religion are principally the following:-

1. A doctrine of ultimate reality by which ultimate reality is defined as transpersonal and universal Being like *Brahman* (in a metaphysical manner) or as a Supreme Being (in a theological manner) or as *Śūnyatā* (in a dialectical manner). Other definitions

include just Heaven (as in Confucianism) and the Unnameable Tao (as in Taoism).

2. A doctrine of the nature and destiny of all beings, especially of human beings.

3. A doctrine of the genesis of the world, either in the manner of creation, whether out of nothing or out of something, or in this manner of the world's own self-existent actuality, or in the manner of *māyā* (appearance), or in any other manner with universal implication not covered by the above.

4. A doctrine of salvation, which in its conception must be universally binding, and further, must be consistent with the first three doctrines. Besides, this doctrine must have some practical dimensions by which to orient human behaviour.

Apart from all the above, a world religion is distinguished by the possession of an authoritative sacred text or texts, which will serve as the absolute source of all the doctrines stated above as well other related ones; but 'authoritative' does not necessarily mean 'literal'.

A world religion may or may not have a founder and may or may not have a point of historical origin which is generally associated with the founder's life. Buddhism, like Christianity and Islam, refer its origin back to the founder. But Brahmanism, by design, places its origin in times which can only be grasped in mythological terms; and there are no founders (or founder) even in mythological terms, for there are only those who "saw" the Veda and transmitted it to human-kind these are the *r̥ṣi*s.

It is true that in all the world religions, founded as well as non-founded, the doctrine of salvation is either the bottom line of all, or at least has a very special place. However, it is only in the founded ones that there exists a mandate to spread it attached to it, and with it another to win adherents to the religion itself, as a rule, for spreading the doctrine of salvation as a definite path.

2. Buddhism

We will now consider the second constituent term of our present title, i.e., "Buddhism". That Buddhism had its genesis in India is well-known. But it is also well-known that in history it became

a pan-Asian religion, in fact the quintessential pan-Asian religion, having crossed the seas and the mountains which separated India from the rest of Asia.

In considering Buddhism our task is to consider it in the light of what we obviously anticipate, i.e., encounter. The task is no different than in respect of any other world religion. The question is, does the framework of anticipated encounter make the task of identifying a religion as a single entity any easier, knowing that no religion is monolithic enough to be spoken of in the singular? Actually, it is only a series of vertically graded and horizontally divergent concrete particulars nominalistically designated as it is, i.e., as a single entity. One good thing is, history undercuts the need to go any further. Otherwise, there will arise unresolvable questions like, what is the essence of a religion other than the claim to belong to and to own it made by a historically identifiable community by reason of the rites of entry and rituals of participation; and we will be confronted by problems of ideal essences – a very platonic quandary! Also, distinguishability of one entity from other entities of the same order, even though each is a block, offers another facility, which is to take the nominalistic designation a little further. And this facility is reinforced by the framework which we call encounter of entities of the same order. And we may also consider encounter itself as essentially historical in character. Distinguishability works through the principle of elimination of general attributes which do not belong to an entity, by the use of contrast. This would be an extension of the Buddhist principle of *apoha*. Thus we are able to call an animal a cow principally by ascertaining that it is not a horse or an elephant. And though cows differ from one another, they differ as species from horses and other animals, for knowing which a survey of all animals in the world is not necessary either.

Buddhism indeed is the quintessential pan-Asian religion, and also an archetypically global religion. But its Indian origin is, nevertheless, significant and it carries features that are of a piece even with Brahmanism. However, this is not said in the manner of facile theories arguing that Buddhist ideas are embedded in the Upaniṣads; nothing of the kind. For, the significance of what is Indian in the origins of Buddhism must be perceived differently. The following observations will express that difference.

First of all, let us note that there is a certain relation between Brahmanic doctrines and Buddhist ones. But what kind of relation? It is a relation which consists in Buddhism stating in a reverse way the main doctrines of Brahmanism. For instance, where-ever 'being' occurs in Brahmanism (a doctrine central to it), Buddhism replaces it with 'non-being' and in some cases with 'becoming'. Likewise, Buddhism replaces 'soul' with 'non-soul' (or 'self' with 'non-self'), 'substance' with 'process', 'permanence' with 'impermanence', and so on. Is it all due to perversity? Certainly not, for there is a very profound philosophical reason for it, namely, presenting the *other* side of what is thought of as true. And the more foundational the concept of truth, the more vigorous should be its reversal. That should be the only way even our highest categories can be used when thought is grappling with the unconditioned reality. It has also an encounter dimension - Buddhism's radical encounter with Brahmanism on a doctrinal level, which has been consistently taking place from the start. This aspect is certainly part of Buddhism's unquestionable Indian origin. However, the manifestation of it is the awesome depth to which it dived to see the *other* side of the doctrines it met with within the same philosophical world.

Secondly, let us note another relation which is very direct, one of common sharing in a common spirituality that goes beyond the dividing lines of doctrines. This is common Indian spirituality, which has many distinct features like stress on individuality and individual effort as what alone counts in the last resort, as also on the power of inward concentration and meditation. It is characterized by a profound confidence that humans are capable of achieving the state of perfection and the end goal of salvation, in other words absolute freedom. Some schools of Hinduism would invoke divine assistance and some would go half way towards meeting that condition, perhaps as a mere technical device, while Buddhism is staunch in its stand against any such thing. Indian spirituality is, therefore, of a special kind, and every Indian system which is religious in outlook shares in it. This commonality is most striking.

There is another commonality that is no less striking. It is something of a quasi-spiritual character, meaning that it is not even explicitly spiritual and not to be covered by any definition of religion. But it lives and moves and has its being underneath all Indian

religions - and regardless of religion. Nothing else covers it, but it covers everything; it determines the way reality is seen, life is valued, the relations between means and ends are estimated. Yet it is a cut above simple life-wisdom. It is an outlook that has shaped itself, yet in co-operation with, and indeed under the tutelage of, the large and abiding religious tradition, which has been called variously as Brahmanism, Hinduism and so on, though all but vaguely. This outlook that has thus shaped itself - perhaps in a timeless manner - and is quasi-spiritual in character, this ground into which all kinds of piles for building definite religious structures are driven, we will name the "Indian Sacred Cosmos". It is a cosmos all right, but the attribute "sacred" may be both redundant and unnecessary - redundant because the concept of cosmos as employed here itself implies it, and unnecessary because it is not a stipulation in opposition to something else, say for. e.g. "secular" or "profane".

This cosmos is the ground from which all typical notions, ideas and beliefs that we identify with India have arisen in the inestimable past. And these all eventually became inalienable common elements of religions of Indian origin. And the religions eventually bound them to their respective doctrines, while they (i.e., these beliefs, notions and ideas) are of themselves not doctrinal in character. The way the different religions and schools bound them to their doctrines enabled them to be advanced as theories, and no more. This cosmos also enabled typical Indian problems to arise, and to demand - inevitably via the religions - satisfactions or solutions. And it itself paved the way to redress of the problems, showing a very striking commonality too.

The problems of suffering arose in this kind of cosmos, which Sāṅkhya and Buddhism respectively made the bulwark of all subsequent thinking that projected itself towards a final resolution. Belief in *Karma* and *Samsāra* arose in this cosmos - *Karma* the law of action, and *Samsāra* the law of beings in the condition of endless passage together (*Samsaranti*). These beliefs, notions and ideas served as the bedrock of all Indian religious systems, but by themselves they were not (are not) yet definitely religious, although they demanded religions to resolve them, and indeed to house them as well.

Indian ethics, which is a block of associated ideas - under the rule of principles such as *ahimsā*, truth (*satya*) etc. undoubtedly took

its rise in this sacred cosmos; and all religious systems adopted it. Indian ethics is not an ethic of commandments but of cosmic intuition. It is pointless to analyse them by the use of so-called ethical theories. And one of the most remarkable aspects of Indian religions is that while there are powerful disagreements about doctrines – of the kind we first mentioned as characteristics of World religions – there is none about ethics. But we find endless explorations, through wisdom, of ethical principles as we find in the *Mahābhārata* and in so many other places. The ethical principles are not the discovery of any of the religions *per se*; it is only that they all incorporated them into their own systems, under different conceptions and organizations, and placed them at different points in their own schemes of perfection, and in some cases even salvation. It is true that Buddhism allows a higher role for ethics in salvation than orthodox Brahmanical systems. Thus Buddhism added some original touches, and actually, added new depths to some ethical principles such as compassion (*karuṇā*) and friendship (*maitrī*). But Buddhism, Jainism and orthodox Hinduism all agree that such things as these and so many more like *ahimsā* in actual practice when spontaneous that is, are a sign of perfection, although not necessarily an instrument of perfection and not an instrument of salvation. But then, which wise man is able to divide sign from instrument? And which wise man, perfection from salvation?

With the understanding that there is a profound philosophical predicament that is attached to having to regard any religion as a single entity, plus the very Platonic quandary of defining a religion, it is necessary to accept empirical vagueness and proceed with actualities as they are presented. Hence, back to the task of considering Buddhism in its origin in the Indian sacred cosmos.

Buddhism received its problematics as well as its ethics from that cosmos. But as it deepened the problematics, particularly suffering, into truly-existential levels – however, in the Indian sense of cosmo-existential, implied by the word *sarvam* – so it sharpened the ethical, again in the Indian sense of cosmo-ethical, and attached it to perfection and even to salvation, as we have just stated above. In this background we resume talking about Buddhism as a religion. Here the actualities as they are presented alone are of help, in as much as distinguishing one religion from another, or from several others,

becomes both possible and necessary, A rudimentary kind of encounter appears.

Buddhism's doctrinal encounters from its very inception were mentioned earlier on. The factors that we discussed pointing out Buddhism's commonality with Brahmanism, especially of spirituality, prevented the encounters from turning into fierce confrontations on the whole. But there was one other thing that had more serious consequences, and that concerns the link between pure ethics, albeit in the cosmic sense, and social ethos. Brahmanism forged that link, which had the effect of reducing *dharma* as universal (upon which both Brahmanism and Buddhism – as also Jainism – agreed) into the social ethos of *varṇāśrama-dharma*, all too specific indeed. However, it is clear that no religion can do without generating a specific social ethos. This movement had the character of putting in place legislative injunctions though not actually as irrevocable divine commandments *per se* – not without qualification at any rate, in spite of the *Dharma-śāstras*.

Now, as for Buddhism, the way it conceived ethics, which is to be of service only for perfection and salvation, left no room for generating a social ethos, which one of our contributors correctly argues was a serious weakness. At the same time, as is well known, Buddha and Buddhism never operated within *varṇāśrama-dharma*, and in fact rejected its implications for their ultimate – and in fact the only – interest i.e., salvation (*nirvāṇa*). This, however, does not mean that Buddha was a social revolutionary in our modern sense; to argue that way is nothing less than rewriting history to suit contemporary thinking. Nevertheless, on the basis of Buddha's and Buddhism's rejection of *varṇāśrama-dharma*, which had vast implications socially, although rather indirectly, there were some encounters which went beyond the level of doctrinal debates.

3. Encounter

The last of three constituents in the subject of this issue of the journal, is "Encounter". The word 'encounter', has in usage several meanings, which are not our concern. It has, however, been used in related but altered senses in religion and in existential literature, like Jacob's encounter with (and wrestling with) God, or Saul's encounter with the risen Jesus on the way to Damascus. Theologians write about "Divine-human encounter". But with the advent of "I-Thou" thinking, ushered in by Martin Buber, the modern prophet of dialogue, the word has been taken over to describe certain specific

kinds of meetings of an intensely personal kind, in fact serving as the mystery that even brings about personal existence. Spurred by the I-Thou thinking the word has acquired a new meaning, i.e., a prelude to understanding, of the reality of the *Between*. Encounter serves as the outer event, in which an inner event, namely, understanding seems to stir. Although "understanding" has been used by metaphysicians from Kant down, actually it gathers meaning only when translated back into the class of knowledge. To cut the matter short, understanding which has become a favourite concept for phenomenologists, and often used in wildly improbable ways, here it has a legitimate meaning, that is, knowledge as an event that comes to pass within; or in the fore-ground of, another concrete, event, namely, encounter.

As for the word itself, in order to be faithful to its form in as much as it means meeting face to face, it may be rendered 'encountenance', and this rendering has an advantage if we were to put it in context of Sanskrit thinking, to which original Buddhism too subscribed. 'Encountenance' is *abhimukha*, *abhimukhīkaraṇam*, which is a concrete event. This word always remains incomplete in its hidden import in that it points to an event still ahead, which is of the nature of knowledge in a special sense. Such an event indicated is *abhiñāna*, literally 'en-cognizance' which is a real equivalent of 'understanding' in our present sense, that is, knowledge coming to pass, with at least some overtones of mutuality, perhaps in the manner of a ball bouncing back and forth when hit between two walls. Such a sense is present in the celebrated play, *Abhiñāna-śākuntalam* of Kalidasa, which is an allegory in the form of *encountenance* within which stirs *encognizance*. The true meaning is spiritual, of course, but the story is that of the encounter (encountenance) and consequent encognizance (*abhiñāna*) of the loved one by the lover whose identity had been lost to his memory due to his blindness of heart. However, as genuine spiritual allegory, even with this, the story still remains incomplete, until completed transcendentally. But such an end is beyond the scope of any religious encounter or understanding. Or is it?

No doubt, religious understanding which is still hard to come by, is always worth the utmost mental and spiritual exertions that we are capable of. The kind of encounter that takes place or has taken place must be judged by what it engenders, or has engendered,

which, no doubt, should be understanding. In Buber's words, "it is the other part of the complete rational event which comes upon as in the meeting (encounter)."

Let us note, however, before we proceed, that the term 'other' in "the other part", as Buber uses it, is to be taken in its ordinary, weak sense. The word has also some strong senses. The strongest sense is obtained in what Rudolf Otto calls "the Other" in the mystical experience. In a different but related way, it is the *para* as in *para-brahman*, Transcendent, Beyond, or in *parāvidyā* (transcendent knowledge). In spiritual life it is the true end of all un-finished business. *Abhijnāna-śākuntalam* indicates that; all true allegory indicates, that. In religious encounters and dialogues, which are, no doubt, very serious transactions, and are, however, necessarily incomplete in the best of instances, it will be improper to indicate it even by silence, but it must remain as a bracketted entity by the common consent of the religions. And otherwise the entire enterprise is pointless.

Again, in respect of the strong sense of the word and concept 'other', it is a fact known today that certain writers have made otherness a big theme in philosophy. But that cannot be of interest for us here.

But there is a particular type of strong sense for the concept 'other' which is significant for the encounter of world religions as an inevitable subscript. For, it is self-evident that what a religion encounters on a lateral level with itself, as religion, is an *other* to it; and the whole lot of such religions too will be *other* to it. Here it is not a case of religious pluralism, which does not of itself imply any encounter, and much less understanding. Encounter and otherness then go together. Ordinarily, the knowledge of the self and knowledge of the other are mutually dependent. These are indicated in the Indian tradition as *sva* and *para* (in the lateral sense of relation, not in the transcendent sense). Formally, the relation between them works out as in *svataḥ-prāmāṇya* (self-evident) and *parataḥ-prāmāṇya* (extraneously evident). In terms of *dharmic* duties, the relation works out as in *sva-dharma* (own duty) and *para-dharma* (another's duty). It is true that texts such as the *Bhagavadgītā* state that the first is to be embraced and the second is to be avoided in order for a person to be what he/she is meant to be *in the world*. However, laid out in the frame of the religions'

encounter with one another, these two form an inseparable twin with vast significance. Every *sva* (self) must have some *para* (other) for it to be itself. So then in the frame of the religions' encounter with one another, we come right back to the point that was made above concerning knowledge of the self and knowledge of the other being mutually dependent. The two-pronged knowledge of this kind occurs in the event of encounter. The two-pronged knowledge is what is called understanding, *abhijñana*. Further, the encounter does not have to be some dramatic happening, although it is an event. But whether it is incipient, silent, vocal, or just part of a barely noticeable but sustained meditative apprehension or of any other kind does not matter. What is important is the resultant understanding, which, however, can be achieved only meditatively. The fact that the meditative element in the birth of understanding, does not exist in the I-Thou thinking although prodded by encounter, is a draw-back in the way it is usually constructed. The meditative tradition which Buddhism and Brahmanism share deeply can be brought to bear precisely in what we are now considering.

In respect of the encounter of the religions we must but acknowledge that its history lies out in the future, not in the past. However, now that we are talking about Buddhism, we can rightly maintain that it has in its past history brought forth some fruits for the good, both out of its origin in the Indian sacred cosmos and out of its own nature, which, as already observed, has a great deal to do with the deepening of certain existential problematics and the sharpening of the ethical principles. No doubt, it is true that it brought to its own essence as a religion its doctrines pertaining to reality, beings, salvation and all that, which all began by reversing the Brahmanic ones. Hence we get such doctrines as *śūnyatā*, which, however, most beneficially it linked with the Indian tradition of spirituality, conducing to its ultimate objective of salvation.

Buddhism as it went out of India and became the quintessential pan-Asian religion, having crossed the seas as well as the mountains, was sufficiently equipped for that vocation, having had the ability to call upon both the Indian sacred cosmos and its own nature. That vocation meant encounters with unfamiliar traditions.

One of the remarkable attributes of the Indian sacred cosmos is that it is but a system of beliefs, notions and ideas, which does not need to

be attached to what is Indian or India. Buddhism itself was adroit in making that divestiture. Rather, its own nature made it both possible and necessary. On the contrary, the Indian sacred cosmos in the hands of the Brahmanical tradition, down from the epoch of the Vedas had been ritually wedded to the land of India, in sacred Vedic utterances called *Jambūdvīpa* and *Bhāratvarṣa*, which alone was holy enough as venue for the sacred rites. This eventually turned into bizarre things like injunction against crossing the seas. The freedom from geographical bondage enabled Buddhism to be pragmatic intaking into itself the essential culture of each region in question without let and hindrance, whether it be China, Japan, Tibet, Burma, Mongolia, or Sri Lanka. In a profound sense it also accepted the most significant elements of the religions of each of these regions. The same was the case wherever there was a powerful sacred cosmos like the Indian one.

In the many encounters it quite rightly accepted the initiative of the power national tradition in changing Buddhism, short of giving up the reason it was there for, i.e., its salvational message and disciplines which went with it, although, as in India, these for the most part remained with the monks and nuns. In China the initiative belonged to the principal traditions of the land, namely Confucianism and Taoism. They took the lead in integrating Buddhism into the Chinese sacred cosmos, marked by harmony and balancer. Likewise, in Japan too the Confucian tradition played a creative part, enabling the same person, family or community to be simultaneously Buddhist and Shintoist, without causing any internal or external disharmony. One must not think, however, that all this was achieved without some difficult encounters, which mostly turned out to be not so fateful, however.

The picture varies with regions. The native religions obtained in some countries were primal, like Shamanism. What resulted was generally a composite religion with Buddhist elements and elements of these, inseparably mixed in popular practice. However, it is noteworthy that it is precisely here that some of the purer doctrines, and practices (mostly later forms like the Tantric) had been preserved. This is true of traditional Tibet, which is now under a cloud. The scenery varies. In some countries where Theravada Buddhism has prevailed, Buddhism became national religion, accompanied by all that goes with such a passage. Buddhism's encounter with other religions

took on a different character, often becoming a clash of religious nationalism with traditions which appear alien or threatening. That simply repeats the story of much of the world.

Lastly, in our present time, as is the case with all world religions, encounters take place on a global arena. And it is but a plain fact that this epoch of encounters is consciously and deliberately brought about by many factors which mark modern life, people's migration, travel and so on being the main ones. And there is also another factor, even more important in fact, i.e., the West's initiative and leadership in all that happens in the transactions between religions and cultures of the world. Without any doubt, this passage is the direct effect of the Western sacred cosmos, which is far more enduring than what used to be called Christendom. Like any sacred cosmos, it is a horizon of consciousness, an *ambaram* of *cit*; (in Sanskrit) it consists in beliefs, ideas and notions. And a dominant religion (in this case Christianity) has always had a hand in reshaping it, although, as in all cases, it essentially shapes itself. The latest element in this is technology, both in its good and bad senses. No doubt, there is in this western cosmos, which Christianity had done much to reshape, there has always been a powerful presence of scepticism. However, the way scepticism has worked in the Western cosmos, often paradoxically, deeply religious, there is a dynamic quest for what we described as "other" (in the lateral sense), i. e, other in religion and religious philosophy. The remarkable interest among some Western writers for otherness, alterity and so on are indeed symptomatic of this, and is not to be discounted.

However, Buddhism particularly has been found by many Westerners as very attractive. The reasons for this are quite diverse. Some are moved by the appeal of a religion which is more philosophy than actual religion, while some are attracted by its soaring spirituality, that has yet a compassionate quality. Among the first group we may place A. N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne; among the second, Thomas Merton. All these are instances of gentle encounters with Buddhism of the modern kind.

Buddhism's attractiveness for the religious public is also a well-known fact. All this must not be put down merely to the character of the Western cosmos with its interest in the *other*, for then it will boil down to the simply romantic, even if philosophically elevated

as in German Romanticism, which sought out the East rather without much discrimination, and brought down Hegel's wrath upon it. No, much more than all these. There is something in the nature of Buddhism which strikes the human spirit in a powerful way.

So all our modern encounters with Buddhism, under Western initiative, or otherwise, are gentle ones, with much scope for spiritual creativity, testifying to the fact that the real history of religion lies in the future. In this Buddhism has its assured role to play.