Chapter 1
Introduction

Beginnings

This work arises directly out of my book, *Buddhism and the Natural World: Towards a Meaningful Myth*, published by Windhorse, and is an attempt to explore the meeting of some Buddhist and western ideas, a meeting which is taking place under the shadow of a profoundly problematic future.

The myth referred to in the title of that book is found in a discourse of the Buddha called the *Aggañña Sutta*. It is a creation story telling of the fortunes of the human race from elemental beginnings to the development of sexuality and the establishment of society; a fascinating tale well worthy of a place beside others better known, including the most famous of them all, the story of Adam and Eve. Here I wish to look at this, our supreme western myth, and consider it from a Buddhist viewpoint. Although found at the beginning of the Torah, it has been given far less importance in the Jewish than in the Christian tradition, where it provides background and justification for the life and death of Jesus. These also I wish to consider from a Buddhist viewpoint.

Many and diverse influences have combined to make western civilization what it is, but two are of supreme importance, the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition and the Greek philosophical inheritance. The first, handed down from generation to generation, continues to inform the lives of millions of people, and is a truly living tradition. The second is ostensibly far more of academic than of popular interest, yet it contains a moment arguably as great as any in the other, a moment of continuing inspiration and recurrent relevance. I mean the death of Socrates, who died not for the love of God or the hope of heaven but for the right to hold and utter opinions unpleasing to the Athenian state. He was charged with blasphemy and with corrupting the young by encouraging them to ask questions about the meaning of life and the nature of the gods. He was sentenced to death, and to carry out the sentence himself by drinking poison. He could have escaped from prison. His friends begged him to do so. He chose to stay and drink the hemlock, and thereby left on history a mark of enduring and universal value. His deed is not just something that

happened long ago; it is and always will be what few past events are – a challenge, one asking some of the most troubling questions the individual can be called upon to face: Is there anything for whose sake I would give my life? and, What price do I set upon freedom?

A hundred years before Socrates the Buddha, less dramatically though not less forcefully, criticized the institutions of his time, of which the Vedic religion with its ritualism and bloody sacrifices was the most important. A very important discourse, the *Kalama Sutta*, demonstrates some of the similarities in their thinking, as I have tried to show in this work. Like the well-known *Sigalovada Sutta*, which also figures here, it offers a new approach to living just as Socrates offered a new approach to thinking.

The Greeks were great voyagers on sea and on land, whether as traders or mercenaries or colonists. They may already have planted settlements at the Indian extremity of the Persian Empire in the Buddha's lifetime. But it was with the coming of Alexander the Great that real links began to be established between the Greek world and Buddhism. It has indeed been surmised that the splendor of Alexander's achievements influenced the development of the idea of the Maitreya, the future Buddha. Be that as it may, a number of Alexander's successors in India adopted Buddhism, and found it compatible with the tradition they had inherited from a leader educated by Aristotle. The story of the Greeks in India is a fascinating one, and nothing illustrates better the thesis that Buddhism, far from being an exotic transplant in the modern West, has very old affinities with western culture. There were western Buddhists before there were western Christians.

There is one famous work of Buddhist literature which reminds us of those early days, *The Questions of King Milinda.* This king was from the Greek city of Alexandria. He ruled in Bactria, north-west of the Indus, and his name was a local form of the Greek 'Menandros'. He puts his questions – on the nature of identity, karma, virtue and so on – to a monk named Nagasena. Their exchanges are reminiscent of Plato's dialogues, and the suggestion has been made that Nagasena, like Milinda, was of Greek origin.[1]

With all this it may seem strange that Buddhism did not come to Europe in the Hellenistic period and indeed remained virtually unknown here until the nineteenth century. It spread south, east and north from its homeland but not significantly westward, and the most obvious reason for this failure is that Zoroastrianism and then Islam blocked its path. However that may be, it has come west now, with both benefits and challenges, the latter, hopefully, being benefits delayed.

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[1] See G. Woodcock, *The Greeks in India*, Faber & Faber, 1966.

Solitary Seekers

There still seems to be, however, an impression of Buddhism as comprising little more than meditation, vegetarianism and a belief in reincarnation. It is seen as the creed of a minority of the benign sort – inoffensive, reclusive and rather short on ideas. As with many impressions, this one contains a certain amount of truth. Although the Buddha founded one of the earliest organizations known to history, the community of monks and nuns called the Sangha, western lay Buddhists have not been notable for organizing themselves into groups for any other purpose than to sit in meditation. And of course meditation need not be practised in groups. The Buddha was not in a group when he attained Enlightenment. It was a solitary endeavor, and solitariness, whether sought or circumstantial, is the setting of many Buddhist lives in the West today. Meditation may bring them together, but everything else is worked out in private. They have to be 'islands unto themselves' very often. The isolation of the individual, so marked a feature of modern life, is abundantly instanced among western followers of the Dharma.

It may be that in Europe the individual as a category of humankind was not to be found prior to the double shock of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Before then there was the Great Mother, by which I mean the Church, who held her children close and was reluctant to let them go their own ways, and loved them so much that on occasion she loved them to death. But in the late Middle Ages the Greek influence began to be felt again, and the Renaissance loosened the maternal bonds. Then Luther and Calvin rediscovered the Hebrew tradition, and spiritual maturity seemed the prize on earth for those brave enough to stand alone with only the Bible as their guide. In the succeeding centuries a new mentality was compounded in Europe and in America, its principal quality perhaps to be described as questioning.

Before this new mentality old certainties gave way. On the one hand this was all to the good. Tolerance, once reviled as an inspiration of the devil, came to be valued as among the supreme virtues in the eighteenth century, the Age of Reason. On the other hand a naive faith in progress created a new intolerance, one that tended to devitalize the past, denying its wisdom. For it is a simple fact that so much of the best of what has been done by human beings was done hundreds or even thousands of years ago, and this cannot but be offensive to the ideologues of progress who, when in revolutionary mode, will deny or even destroy the past. In Buddhist lands it happened most recently when Pol Pot held sway over Cambodia.

The past is not a threat or a reproach. Neither is it just material for archives and museums. It is that part of time which has come to maturity, as distinct from the inchoate present and the inexistent future. It is that part of the

landscape which refreshes when we pause on our obscure path and look around. Time also must have balance, and the glimmering vistas which science and technology have conjured up before us require the restraint of proven wisdom to help us resist a too hasty surrender to their attraction.

A New Turn of the Wheel

The Buddhist teachers who have come to the West represent that ancient wisdom, and help remind us that we need not lose the past in order to possess the future, rather than be possessed by it. They have made aspects of Buddhist living real in a way that study of the texts and appreciation of the art could by themselves not have done. But we prove ourselves unworthy pupils if at some time we do not become our own masters.

In my previous work I remarked that the Wheel of Dharma has made its first complete turn in the West, meaning that all the main traditions are now represented here, and Buddhism, albeit in a small way still, has begun to make a contribution to our public as well as private life. But with a few admirable exceptions we have not produced our own leaders, men and women who will interpret the Dharma in the light of western history and experience, insofar as these may have a bearing on the development of new forms of Buddhism. At the beginning of the second turning of the Wheel we should be thinking in terms of valid western forms to put alongside those that have served us so well up to now. We have been pupils for over a hundred years. If we fail to give the Dharma valid western forms it will continue to be seen as a bed of exotic blooms even if we have people of our own to tend them.

There has been something of a tendency among western Buddhists to cut themselves off from the roots of their own culture; which is ironical in view of the importance we attach to awareness and attention. But we tend to focus them rather narrowly on breathing and other basic physical activities. Breathing is the basis of life, and in the tradition great importance is attached to awareness of it. But awareness has other objects and wider scope. It comprises not only the present but the past and looks also to the future. The Pali word that means attention – *sati* – also means memory, and memory is not only the repository of the past but an agent in understanding it. In other words, memory is a function of intelligence and the interpretative faculty, and not simply a screen where images flicker and fade.

One of the synonyms of *sati* is recollection, which is a better word for my purpose. Memory is a subjective term, attention a rather static one. Recollection has an active and outgoing aspect as well as an inner, quiet one. We recollect things which have become lost or dispersed; we seek, find and

gather them up; then perhaps look at them in a way we never did before and even begin to understand them at last.

If the ideas of karma and rebirth mean anything, it cannot be without significance that we are born in a particular part of the world. Being born there, wherever it may be, we have to make sense of it. And we are more likely to do this by understanding it than by acting as if it were the wrong place, and by rights we should be Thais or Japanese or Tibetans. By rights we are what we are, and where we are; our situation arises from a cause and – who can say? – maybe for a purpose. But if the purpose be the healthful rooting of Buddhism in the West, we have to understand the nature of the soil and the lie of the land. This means recollecting things that we have forgotten or dismissed and looking at them in a buddhistic way and understanding them anew, or perhaps for the first time: names, events, movements that have shaped western history and so far as one can speak of such a thing, western consciousness.

Dogma and Values

Among the Buddha's gifts to mankind is that he left a religion with a minimum of dogma; which means that it is more inclined towards co-operation than conflict. Wherever it has become dominant it has sought to have friendly relations with other systems of belief and thought, provided they are compatible with its ethos of compassion and loving-kindness. This has sometimes led to syncretism, and co-operation has declined into compromise, complaisance and a blurring of values. Right Effort is one of the elements of the Noble Eightfold Path. For us in the West it ought to mean hard thinking, which is not necessarily the same as the intellectual activity of the philosopher. Its hardness may be in direct relation to our ill-equippedness for the task; but that is no reason for avoiding it. We are somewhat in the situation of those sectaries in the early days of the Reformation, who found themselves trying to understand a strange new book, the Bible, in its several vernacular translations, while basing their lives upon it. Wrong-headed as some of them may have been, they were faithful to their honestly held beliefs. Much of what contemporary Buddhists do or say or write will surely be mistaken, but something of value may come out of the turmoil. Time will tell. In the meantime we need to know what we stand for and what we want in the cultural and historical circumstances of the West today and tomorrow.

One thing that forced itself on my attention as I came to the end of writing was the question of values – not the grandly proclaimed values of those who take it on themselves to speak for the Public, the West, Democracy, Humanity, God, but the values that uphold or fail ordinary people in their daily lives. There has rarely been such confusion in people's minds as there is today. They were told that goodness and religious belief were synonymous. Their

religious belief falters, but they do not find themselves to be – apparently – any less good. Must there not however be something hollow in their goodness? Could it not be described as valueless? Without God what value can goodness have? People now seem to be at the stage that T.S. Eliot put into such troubling words:

> *The last temptation is the greatest treason:*
> *To do the right deed for the wrong reason.*

Or perhaps they are doing 'the right deed' for no reason, simply behaving as moral automata set in motion long ago by an arbitrary hand.

It may be that Buddhism can help here. No matter how 'automatous' people feel, they have some sense of being responsible for some part of their lives. On reflection, they may conclude this is only an illusion. A Buddhist, however, would say that it is no illusion, but in reality the most precious thing they have, the thing of most value. Buddhism is based on responsibility, on intentionality, on transformation. Even if it has to start with something thought to be an illusion, it will offer the means to transform this into something real, something like freedom, which I believe to be the supreme value of the Dharma.