Chapter 7
The Heart of the Heritage

Christianity and Western Culture

In recent years, thanks especially to the writings of Geza Vermes, Jesus' Jewishness has at last been acknowledged, and his cultural and spiritual milieu sympathetically treated. This also reminds us that in some respects he was a rather conservative Jew, as demonstrated by his retort to a Gentile woman on the only occasion he is shown as going out of his native country. The woman asked him to heal her daughter; he said he was a healer of Jews not Gentiles, taking care of God's children, not dogs. She smartly turns his words against him, saying that dogs eat the scraps dropped by children at the table. Jesus to his credit takes it well, telling her that 'for this saying' she will find her daughter healed. One would like to think their paths crossed again.

The story provides one of the rare touches of humor admitted by the evangelists into their pages. Coming back to the gospels after time spent with the Buddhist scriptures, where humor is an accepted feature, it is refreshing to find something to make one smile. Even so, there is rather too much invective against scribes and Pharisees, too much insistence on hell-fire. It may be that such words come from the evangelists themselves and not Jesus, but the sacred texts are there, and 'the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of Truth' is believed to have inspired them. If Jesus was not God, it would seem somewhat immodest on his part to say that damnation will follow non-belief in him; and if he was God it would be unmerciful. It is not easy to see a middle way.

In the end, however, it is not on words or miracles that the faith is based, but on the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. They are 'the burden and the mystery'. For the western Buddhist the question is not so much refutation as integration. They are a major part of our culture and we must come to terms with them. It is not enough to say with Vermes that Jesus died because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, even though historically it may be correct. Nor is it meaningful to say with the Muslims that not he but a phantom hung on the cross. The Crucifixion and the Resurrection are great spiritual facts for

Christians and to be respected by Buddhists for that reason; and they are great cultural facts for anyone born in the West. We may not accept their spiritual aspects but they are at the heart of our heritage and it must be better to reinterpret them, if only partially, than to reject them absolutely. To do so would be to turn away from two millennia of art, music, and literature inspired by the Christian message. It is everywhere. We can no more turn away from it than from the air we breathe. Like the air, it has its impurities, but the heritage as a whole is of value and for much of its scope it is beautiful. The spirit of Buddhism tends more to appreciation than rejection, and it is in this spirit that we should approach what Christianity has bequeathed us.

Although Jesus seems to have been reluctant to take his message into foreign parts, it was there, thanks especially to St Paul, that it most widely flourished. According to the record, both Jesus and Paul expected the end of the world to be imminent, as no doubt did their followers. These, whether disappointed or relieved at the failure of the prophecies, persisted in the faith, and very soon were being tested in it. The persecutions began under Nero, after the Great Fire of Rome, and it is believed that both Paul and Peter were martyred at this time. It was in the centuries of persecution that Christian art began, and the first representations of Jesus are found in the catacombs where the faithful sheltered from their enemies. Such are the humble beginnings. There follows a development which will include virtually all the great names in the western tradition, from Giotto through the Renaissance to the present day; and the great anonymous masters too, the unknown hands that created the Madonnas of Murano and Torcello and built the Gothic cathedrals. Not less rich is the musical heritage, from Gregorian chant to Palestrina, from Bach to John Tavener. And the literature is unsurpassed, what with Dante, Milton, St John of the Cross, and in more recent times Claudel among the poets; while the philosophical writings antedate St Augustine and continue down to the existentialist Gabriel Marcel and others. If all the works of Christian inspiration were removed from the heritage it would be almost unrecognizably poorer.

And of course it is not only a matter of high culture. We have to bear in mind the social contribution of Christianity to the West. The classical tradition had lost its vitality before the Roman Empire fell. Plato's Academy still functioned, but its great days were far in the past. Belief in the gods had declined, and the only cult offering serious opposition to Christianity was Mithraism, and its central figure was not of Greek or Roman but of Persian provenance. Its appeal was mainly to the army, whereas Christianity was established in all sections of society; so that when the Empire fell it was the Church that had to pick up the pieces. If its priests and monks had not civilized the victorious tribes the disorders of the time might well have accelerated into chaos. From Aranmore to Cappadocia the work of preservation and renewal was carried on, in beehive hut, romanesque chapel and byzantine dome. There were bad moments, such as the murder of Hypatia and the intrigues against

Pelagius, but on the whole the Church in the early centuries was of good service to the West. All too soon, of course, it became entangled in politics, from which it has never seriously wished to extricate itself; but its contribution to western civilization in the dark days after the fall of the Roman Empire is not to be underestimated, any more than its contribution to culture through patronage of the arts. And it all comes out of the events of a few days in spring during the reign of a forgotten Roman Emperor, whose agent in Jerusalem had a young man put to death. We may deny Jesus as God, even as prophet, but we live with the effects of his short career, which directly or indirectly pervade so many aspects of the world we live in.

The Cult of Suffering

From early times his death was seen as a sacrifice. As such the Crucifixion had one result at which Buddhists of all denominations can rejoice, for it helped bring about the end of animal sacrifice wherever Christianity spread. This was a major feature of both the Greco-Roman and the Jewish religion. The Temple in Jerusalem was the centre of the sacrificial cult. We do not know what Jesus' attitude to it may have been. His attack on the vendors of sacrificial animals does not necessarily mean disapproval of sacrifice. We know that he, like all observing Jews in the capital at that time, celebrated the Passover with the flesh of a lamb probably slaughtered in the Temple. It was the Church that deemed the Crucifixion to have made all other blood sacrifices unnecessary, and put the celebration of the Eucharist in their place. This has been one of the benefits of the spread of Christianity, and Buddhists will see it as a most welcome effect of Jesus' career, a real, if not directly intended, reduction in the suffering of sentient beings.

Christianity has described the world as a 'vale of tears'; which corresponds rather picturesquely with the Buddhist term *dukkha*. In the tradition the four stages of *dukkha* are birth, sickness, old age and death. Jesus is never said to have known sickness; dying young, he did not experience the troubles of age. For a Buddhist this brings his universality into question.

The tradition of dwelling upon his sufferings does not answer this. But it has given the West a unique element in its heritage. In no other culture has pain occupied so central, so honored a place. Meditation on the Passion has formed an important part of Christian devotion, leading at times to the marks of his wounds appearing on the devotee's body. The art of Christian countries has celebrated his sufferings more than the Resurrection or Ascension, sometimes, as in the ecclesiastical art of Spain and its colonies, with an almost doting concentration on bloody stripes and gashes. In the Philippines there are people who re-enact the Passion in ways that make Oberammergau seem like the

proverbial vicarage tea-party. In Seville, however, the Holy Week celebrations are a reminder that suffering was honored not only in its endurance but in its infliction, and that men revered as saints – Dominic Guzman, Charles Borromeo, Thomas More, to name but three – had no mercy for heretics. The Buddhist position is that there is more than enough suffering occurring naturally in the world without institutions and individuals adding to it, against the position that in the cause of personal sanctity and ecclesiastical authority it is justified. Some saints have gone to what can only be described as pathological extremes to prove their love of God; the Church, claiming the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has done much that is less than holy down the centuries. The cult of suffering, endured or inflicted for reasons of faith, is not a part of the western heritage of which we can be proud.

The famous Rabbi Hillel, a Pharisee, is reported to have said that the whole of Jewish law could be summed up in one statement: not to do unto others as one would not have them do to oneself. The New Testament gives it in apparently positive form. I say 'apparently' because when put into practice it has often produced consequences which were anything but positive for the recipients. Anxiety for the salvation of souls has led to drastic application of the injunction, as the soul is deemed to be of so much greater value than the body. The best thing a believer could do for another is to help save his soul, just as the best thing he could wish from another is help in saving his own. Certainly on its most enlightened interpretation the positive injunction contributes to a loving attitude. Sadly, however, love of the soul has all too often meant hurt of the body, disregard for the feelings, and disrespect for the intellectual integrity of others. In other words, the idea of soul became an enemy of freedom, the idea of eternity an enemy of time and the world. With this in mind a Buddhist would incline toward Rabbi Hillel's negative formulation, which at least has the virtue of non-interference, and this implies respect for freedom.

The Ideal of Service

Be that as it may, there is one aspect of human relations where no one, Buddhist or not, can withhold admiration from Christianity: that of service. It did not of course originate with Christianity. We find it in the Greek world with Hippocrates at the beginning of western medicine, and it is exemplified in the life of the Buddha when he and his attendant Ananda take care of a sick monk neglected by his companions. But it is probably no more than fair to say that nowhere has it had such scope and dynamism as in the Christian tradition. All over the world, men and women devote and sometimes sacrifice themselves to the welfare of others in the name of Jesus. The teaching, nursing and caring Orders offer a challenge in selflessness to the rest of humanity, but perhaps especially to Buddhists, whose ideal is selflessness. Much of the success of

Christianity worldwide is due to these dedicated people. To be sure, imperialism and colonialism have played their part, sometimes with evangelical zeal, in promoting Christianity and subverting its rivals. Now the imperial tide has ebbed; the garrisons have gone; but the work of the Christian teachers, nurses and carers continues. There has always been money behind the missionary effort, and there is probably more than ever nowadays, but the inspiration of the people in the field is the same, the life and death of Jesus and the ideal of service.

Later I will have something to say about the place of service in Buddhism. For the moment, I wish to return to Hillel and his statement, formally negative but in reality positive, of the Jewish ethos: not to do unto others as one would not have them do to oneself. This is certainly good. But can Buddhism add to it in any way without getting caught up in the sometimes officious anxiety which has characterized Christian altruism?

There is a Buddhist practice which, in my experience, receives very little notice in the West; that is, the transference of merit. When we think of merit we may have in mind a sort of spiritual accountancy, having read of some people in the East quite literally calculating the points they have earned by their charitable acts, from putting food in a bhikkhu's bowl in the morning to scattering grains of rice for the birds at eve: the more merit accumulated the better will the next life be, in this or another world. It is an attitude not entirely unknown outside of Buddhism; people do good deeds or say prayers to win grace or the remission of time in Purgatory. It accords especially ill with Buddhism, however, being based on the intention of advantage to the self, rather than its transcendence. The idea of acquiring merit may have been originally conceived as a spiritualization of the acquisitive tendency. If so, in the course of time it seems to have become part of the problem, a sort of higher selfishness. But for all that, the idea of the transfer of merit is a beautiful one, characterized by two of the Dharma's principal qualities, generosity and disinterestedness. When one transfers merit, in the proper spirit, it is not for one's own sake at all but purely for that of the recipient. There is no interference at any level, only a recognition that the recipient may benefit from a spiritual gift. Merit can be transferred to the dead as well as to the living; in Buddhism death, like life, is characterized by impermanence, and the tradition has it that the dead can usually do with a little help. Merit need not be limited to friends; people whose interests are adverse to our own may be recipients; which would seem to be in accord with the sentiment of the Sermon on the Mount, that we should do good to those who do or wish us ill.

It is not, however, quite the same as loving our enemies, though not because Buddhists should be deficient in love but rather because they should be on guard against defining anyone as an enemy. The Dharma certainly has enemies; they define themselves as such by word and deed. One's country,

one's firm, even one's family, may have self-defined enemies; but on the personal level, one to one, there is the possibility of choice.

Enemies and Neighbours: A Buddhist Approach

The person who intentionally does me wrong may be an enemy *to* me, but until I define him as *my* enemy he is not one in the full sense of the term; by definition we can be said to make our own enemies. Of course it can be very difficult not to accept ill-disposed individuals on their own definition; as Buddhists, however, with the idea of *anatta* so central to our beliefs, we should be reluctant to make or to accept a description that limits another to a part of his being, especially a discreditable part, even if he would have it so himself.

This attitude is a reflex of an ideal. But disobliging reality is ranged between, and one may be no longer able to deny another as an enemy. In that case one must hope for an enemy worthy of respect.

To the Jews of Jesus' time, their land controlled by the Romans and before them by other aliens, the term 'enemy' allowed of wide application. On the other hand they seem to have understood the term 'neighbour' rather narrowly, being reluctant to apply it even to their co-religionists, the Samaritans. Whence the immediate force of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The protagonist does not ask if the robbers' victim is a Greek or a Jew or whatever; he treats his wounds and sets him on his own beast and takes him to an inn and pays for his care. By this parable the idea of neighbour is extended to the whole human race, and those who enjoy good fortune are called upon to look after those who do not. So it has been understood in the tradition, and so it has formed a noble part of the heritage.

The question for a Buddhist is, does any advance upon it arise naturally out of the Dharma? Is it possible to extend the idea of neighbour when it already encompasses all of humankind? Certainly it is, if we extend it to the wider part of nature that is not human, but comes within the range of what Buddhism calls sentient beings and the Bible calls living souls, the same as Adam.

There is neither sentimentalism nor inter-religious opportunism in this. Buddhism has never accepted that there is an absolute division between man and animal; thus the extension of neighbourliness to other life forms is perfectly natural. Fundamental to the idea of neighbourliness, surely, is the idea that those with whom we share a space, whether divided by a party wall, a road, a river or an ocean, are entitled to considerate treatment, for their own sake rather than in our interest. This in Buddhist terms would apply to animals as well as

people, to be sure, and not only to the grand exotic forms – the tiger, the gorilla, the rhinoceros – but also to the humbler forms encountered in house and garden. Life is life, whatever the semblance it presents, and as worthy of respect in a spider or a snail as in larger, rarer forms. One of the benefits of the mindful attitude which Buddhism advocates in its discipline is that it counters the ill-effects of familiarity, and helps prevent the breeding not only of contempt but of casualness in our dealings with others, whether human or animal. Each of them is as new as one's next breath.

Of course there are problems associated with any sort of 'global' thinking, and global neighbourliness is not immune. We deplore the killing of beautiful wild animals, but to the Indian villager the proximity of a tiger is cause for alarm, not aesthetic anticipation. It has been suggested that instead of exhorting these people to a more enlightened attitude we in the West should share the burden and admit large predators to roam in our wild places. There is also the suggestion that wolves and bears should be reintroduced to places where they lived in former times. These are interesting ideas, and Buddhists should have something to contribute to the debate which they will provoke, not only among environmentalists, but more pointedly among the folk who would have the animals as neighbours.

Another challenge to the universal neigbourliness may face us in the coming years. As a result of the genetic 'revolution' – for once this overused word is justified – we may have to share the planet, or some parts of it, with beings which are part-human, part-animal. A degree of hybridization is said to have been achieved in a small way already, with human genes transplanted into a few laboratory animals. The possibilities will be horrendous to many people, not least to theologians. The first chapter of Genesis describes men and women only as made in the image of God. What of part-men and women? – humanals, theranthrops or whatever we shall call them. It will take a deal of soul-searching to fit them into the divine economy.

It may be less difficult for Buddhists, again because the Dharma erects no insurmountable barrier between man and animal. Both conform to the *skandha* model: body, feelings, intelligence, activities and consequences. At the level of folk-religion there are the *Jatakas*, the stories of the Buddha's previous lives, many of which depict him in animal form. Acknowledgement of shared nature and destiny could not go further. It is easy to dismiss those simple tales as irrelevant to Buddhism in the present. I would suggest that they may be relevant again in the future. They arise from a deep level of the Buddhist imagination, and may be apprehended as anticipatory of a crisis in the making, when we shall have to ask in the most fundamental way what it means to be human and where the boundaries of our nature shall be set. The Good Samaritan of the future will have to be prepared for anything, human-robotic

hybrids included. Some acquaintance with Buddhist doctrine will stand him in good stead.