Chapter 10
Questions Arising from the Kalama Sutta

We are all Kalamas now

The *Kalama Sutta* is rather piquantly appropriate to the situation in which western Buddhists find themselves. Teachers have come among us from various lands and traditions, often carrying a deal of cultural baggage, not all of it essential to an understanding of the Dharma. It may help transplanted bhikkhus, roshis, and lamas to feel at home in foreign parts, but may also be an obstruction to our getting a clear view of the Way. We are somewhat in the position of the Kalamas in respect of the numerous schools of Buddhism, though it must be said that, unlike those who came to Kesaputta, our teachers do not as a rule disparage and dismember each other's versions of the Dharma. Applying the message of the sutta, perhaps the best thing we can do is to endeavor to get an overview of the various teachings, then to select what is best and adapt it to our needs, leaving the rest. In time we will add our own inessentials.

The Kalamas were advised not to believe things simply because they were sanctified by tradition; which might seem to indicate that the Buddha cared little for it. This would be a mistaken conclusion. Elsewhere in the Pali Canon he urges other tribesmen to maintain tradition as a support for social cohesion and as a defence against aggression. What he seems to be saying in this sutta is that tradition should not always have the last word. The individual, singly or in association with other individuals, must be able to step aside from the mass and to make decisions for himself; which implies no disrespect for tradition, but affirms a different priority.

Tradition is good, then, but not necessarily in every respect. Along with selecting from the variety of teachings brought hither by our various teachers we, as individual western Buddhists, are also called upon to select from our own tradition the things we value most. They may not be things that are lacking to Buddhism, but ones which seem to receive less emphasis there than we, with our Judaeo-Christian and Greek background, may think they merit. In purely Christian terms the greatest of these is love. With so much emphasis on

coolness and detachment, Buddhism sometimes seems to undervalue this great virtue, even to see it as representing a questionable force in the world. How true is this? One way of approaching the problem is to take some of the things said about love that are found in the New Testament, and see if they throw light on some dim corners of the Dharma, and if in turn the Dharma throws any light on them.

The Question of Love

First, there is the supreme injunction: to love God with all one's heart and mind, and one's neighbour as oneself. The first part is difficult to put into Buddhist terms, even if the Buddha is considered divine, as in some parts of the tradition. It is not just that a 'nirvanate' being would not need such love, but that such a one would not desire it. This may seem a presumptuous remark as the information about nirvana in the texts is so slight, but there would seem to be nothing in the life and words of the Buddha as we know them to suggest it. Neither do the gods mentioned in the Canon – Brahma, Sakra, Indra – demand it. Of course none of these had the status that the One Supreme God has had in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Ancient India was not monotheistic. Buddhism accepted the gods of the contemporary pantheon – Vishnu, Shiva and Kali were not yet major figures – as objects of worship to believers, and in the more colorful parts of the Canon some of them appear as living beings. It is not denied that there may be gods, but none of them is absolutely supreme. Just as Zeus and the Olympians were subject to the Fates, so they are subject to time and karma; not free, as a truly supreme being must be. But whatever their condition they do not require love. Thus, even a variant on the great injunction such as, 'Thou shalt love the *gods*', does not accord with the Buddhist way of thinking.

Then there is the statement in the first epistle of St John: God is love. This is the supreme accolade, albeit a problem for theodicy, for why would such a God permit so many evils to run wild in the world, and the good to suffer and the wicked to prosper? St John would surely have asked the same question, yet wrote: 'he who does not love does not know God; for God is love'. If any words could be said to express the heart of western spirituality, these are they; and a Christian might allege that the reason Buddhists make so little of the idea of God is that they make so little of love, and vice versa.

The statement 'God is love' is problematical to a Buddhist for several reasons. First, it is a definition, and definitions are suspect to anyone influenced by the *anatta* idea. But the statement is not just a definition like other obvious ones such as 'God is power' or 'God is righteousness'; it is a proclamation, a *kerygma,* signifying a new way of relating to God. If, however, any relationship with God is questionable, because the existence of God is questionable, as well

as being a matter of indifference, then the defining term is of little importance except to reveal the nature of the theology which prefers it. A Buddhist cannot say 'The Buddha is wisdom' or 'The Buddha is compassion'. The complementing terms do not, singly or together, quite match the subject. A Buddhist cannot say 'God is love', or for that matter 'Love is God', but there is nothing in the teaching to prevent us saying 'Love is divine'.

In the original Greek of the New Testament the word is *agape,* and both its meaning and its tone are found in the expression 'to hold dear'. St Jerome in the Vulgate translated it as *caritas*, whence our word 'charity', denoting a free, friendly, open-hearted giving. It seems to me that the Buddhist terms *metta* and *karuna* cover *agape* well, denoting as they do friendliness, compassion, helpfulness and, where power is involved, mercy. If any virtues deserve to be called divine it is they, and thus we may understand the expression, 'God is love'.

Freud is said to have believed it impossible to love one's neighbour as oneself. It can be argued, however, that it is not only possible but actually in the nature of things. Certainly if I hate myself I shall hardly love anyone else; the likelihood is that I shall hate them as I hate myself. But if I can turn from seeing only badness in myself, surely I shall begin to see proportionately the good in them. This is not, of course, to say that self-love and other-love will always be in balance. If I esteem myself beyond my worth, I may treat others below theirs, be it at home, at work, or in some other sphere. For a Buddhist, it may be helpful to think of love in terms of *suññata,* that is, as openness, otherness. With its emphasis on *dukkha*, Buddhism can sometimes seem to value escape from hurt rather more than accords with the western heritage, with its emphasis on self-sacrifice. I may never live in any way remotely approaching the 'fullness of *suññata*', but if my nature is at all open I can love. By the same token I can be hurt. If *suññata* is openness the approach to it can hardly be unshadowed. The Buddha lived in the fullness of *suññata*; he lived also in the fullness of compassion which is, in the first place, openness to the hurt of others. Thus the tone of love in Buddhism is compassionate, which leads us to the idea of otherness, meaning that it is a love in accordance with the nature, needs and wishes of the other more than one's own, and in this there will be self-abnegation. Further, it is not just a love one gives, much less a love one insists on giving, whether it be desired or not, but a love which accepts that the other has the right to reject what is offered. To be rejected is hard, and acceptance of it may be harder still. But to press unwanted love on others can be cruel, and as such contrary to the First Precept of the Dharma, which cannot be restricted to physical violence, but must cover every other sort, whether emotional, psychological or spiritual.

On the other hand, what if there are people whom, with the best will in the world, one simply cannot love? A Christian may aspire to go beyond the

personal, and try to love them not for themselves but for the love of God, believed in all theologies to be supremely lovable. But there will always be individual theists who, for whatever reason, do not find God lovable. Short of weaving a web of virtuous delusion about themselves and acting the hypocrite, it is surely better for them to be guided by another great virtue, honesty, and, putting aside religious correctness, admit there are people whom they cannot love, or like, or even endure. As said earlier, if there are people not only beyond the scope of affection, but who may have to be considered as enemies, perhaps one will do better towards them with respect rather than love, if respect is merited. Perfect love casts out fear, as St John says, but one may simply be incapable of it in some cases. Between love and fear is respect, a virtue having at least the merit of rationality. One may love or fear without reason, but one cannot respect without it. There are times, of course, when neither love nor respect is possible. If Jesus himself found some of his contemporaries beyond his measure of either virtue, how is the ordinary person to succeed where he failed? The Buddha commended to the Kalamas the practice of the Sublime States – the directing of goodwill to all living beings; which, of logical necessity, must include enemies. In addition, one can transfer merit to them; they may need it more than our friends. This at least can be done without pretence. It is not quite the same as loving one's enemies; but it is in keeping with the phrase that follows in the Sermon on the Mount, the injunction to pray for one's persecutors.

The Bodhisattva Ideal

So greatly did the virtues of *metta* and *karuna* come to be valued as Buddhism developed and expanded that a distinct type of being was conceived to embody them: the *bodhisattva*. The concept is central to the Mahayana, but is found in the conservative tradition too, the disparagingly-titled Hinayana.[1] It goes back, of course, to the life of Gautama before his Enlightenment and to his 'prehistoric' lives, as man or animal, in the course of which he was believed to have performed innumerable acts of helpfulness and self-sacrifice. However, the ideal of the conservative tradition was the arahant, the devotee, usually a monk, who achieves the selfless state through his own efforts; a fine ideal at its best, but for a growing number of believers an unsatisfactory one. It seemed more restricted than was exemplified by the life of Gautama who, after winning *sambodhi*, set out upon the long road from Gaya to Isipatana to share what he had found with his former companions, and thereafter lived a life characterized by accessibility and helpfulness. The bodhisattva ideal derives from both parts of his life, combining the effort of the first with the wisdom of the second. The

[1] See Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development,* Bruno Cassirer, 1974, p. 125f for a 'fine description of the mentality of a Bodhisattva', taken from the *Abhidharmakosa* of the Sarvastivadins, a Hinayana sect.

difference is that whereas it was necessary that the Buddha achieve Enlightenment, else the Dharma would not have been rediscovered, and the world would have continued in its own benighted ways, no later bodhisattva has to rediscover anything, and can devote his energies to the welfare of all living beings, even as the Kalamas were taught to do by means of the Sublime States.

The rediscovery of the Dharma by Gautama released a flood of spiritual energy which went beyond the bounds of the arahant ideal. This seemed to exclude too much that was good from its perspective, from its understanding of Right View, the first element of the Eightfold Path. Most of all perhaps it allowed little scope to the imagination. The Mahayana converted this great though wayward faculty into an ally of truth, one which has served the Dharma well down the ages in literature and art.

In a famous reversal of the biblical phrase, usually attributed to Voltaire, it has been said that man created God in his own image. The Mahayanins went beyond image and created spiritual beings to their ideal. And a very high ideal it was. The great Bodhisattvas – Avalokita, Manjushri, Samantabhadra and others – personify great virtues and are believed to be inexhaustible sources of them to all who seek their aid. In our rightly sceptical age it is inevitable that such beings will be regarded as pious fictions devised to bring color to the dull routines of morality. But what if there is more than just a rueful cleverness to Voltaire's remark – something more than even that clever man knew? What if there is a faculty with the power to give spiritual form and life to what is best in us, a power arising from minds purified in a spiritual discipline and operating in a higher sphere?

I use the vague word 'higher' with reluctance, but the alternatives are even less satisfactory. 'Supernatural' is so because in the monistically inclined Mahayana all the levels of existence are of a kind, and a grain of sand 'full of Buddhas' is at once both a natural and a numinous object, presenting one aspect to sight and the other to 'vision'. 'Supersensible' is not quite right, referring as it does to the five senses recognized in western thinking, and to a sphere beyond their range; whereas Buddhism recognizes a sixth sense capable of operating naturally in that sphere. This sense, called '*mano*', comprehends the visionary faculty by which forms opaque to the other senses are apprehended. A word of caution is in order here. It would be a mistake, I believe, to apply the terms of conventional psychology to this faculty, and to assume that it operates by means of the subconscious or unconscious, and a greater mistake to consider it a sign of abnormality. Much of what we take for granted in psychology is based on nineteenth-century thinking, which took a materialistic world-view for granted and had a narrow idea of what was or was not normal. Even so comparatively sympathetic a psychology as Jung's fails to do justice to the spiritual order. He posits various levels of unconsciousness, working upward, rather in the manner of the Schopenhauerian Will, to influence if not determine

the conscious mind. We need a psychology that would do justice to psychic levels *above* ordinary consciousness to complete the picture of the human mind. At least the term 'higher' has the merit of indicating the direction of such a development.

The faculty which I have postulated may be called 'spiritualized imagination' to distinguish it from the imagination which produces works of art, even the *Paradiso* of Dante or the Olympian portions of the *Iliad*. The Christian poet wrote in accordance with an established theology; the Greek poet inherited a body of stories about Zeus, Apollo and the other gods and adapted them to deepen the story of the Trojan War, and to throw a light upon human affairs in general. Out of the Homeric poems a theology arose which did service to the Greek world for about a thousand years; but Homer did not create the Olympians. He found them as objects of belief and worship and, for all we know, they were actual entities generated by the belief and worship, with a future assured as long as these should last.

Conze reminds us that 'the creative power of ethically relevant actions' is axiomatic to Buddhists. The hells, he says, 'are *produced* by the deeds' of those reborn in them, and 'the world of things is really nothing more than a kind of reflex of people's deeds.'[2] This is consonant with the idea that spiritual powers, perceived as living beings, are produced by the purified imagination of believers. But Avalokita, Manjushri and the other bodhisattvas are strangers to us in the West. Even in these days when angels and Olympian gods have become unfamiliar and Buddhism is well-established, the names of Apollo and Gabriel resonate more than theirs. The great bodhisattvas are simply not part of our heritage. We may be intrigued by the devotion to them of some Eastern believers among us but, however we explain the presence of bodhisattvas in the history of Buddhism, they belong with an aspect of belief which four centuries of science and scepticism have made well-nigh impossible for us. Not absolutely impossible perhaps: a time may come when the spiritual energies of western Buddhists will generate spiritual forms – visionary beings endowed with a life seemingly their own, and capable of requiting the power that generated them with spiritual gifts. In the meantime, however, we remain our hereditary selves, with Voltaire and Hume and Freud and Russell, acknowledged or not, among the builders of the structure where the western spirit lives. If we must have iconic figures from the Buddhist tradition they will have to be historical individuals, rather than beings formed by the breath of even the most sublime imagination. If, as seems to me, the West's greatest contribution to the world has been the ideal of service, the sort of iconic figure most desirable for western Buddhism may be one that will personify this ideal for us. If we can find someone close to the Buddha to personify it, so much the better. Let us look then at the early history once more.

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[2] *op cit*. p. 156.