Chapter 12
Future Heritage

The Secular Tradition

In the *Sigalovada Sutta*, when the Buddha had dealt with the 'west' and the duties of husbands and wives, he turned to the 'north', at which he discussed friendship and its duties; then at the 'nadir', he indicated the duties of employers and employees; and finally, at the 'zenith', he told how a householder should minister to ascetics and holy men and they to him. Thus the discourse gives a large range of social duties and, by inference, of social expectations, some of which, in current terminology, may be interpreted as rights. It complements the *Kalama Sutta*, which deals with the inner life of man. Together they form a comprehensive guide for good living. But although the one introduces religious mendicants and the other tells how to practise the Sublime States, these discourses are notable for the absence of reference to any higher power. True, the mendicants 'point out the path to heaven'. But the householder is expected to get there by his own efforts. There is no suggestion that success in this direction is in any way dependent on the favor of a god, any more than the practice of virtue is pursued on a god's authority. Virtue is its own justification; it is known by the light of human nature and not by revelation from on high. Similarly, in the *Kalama Sutta*, when the Sublime States are commended there is no suggestion of worship or submission. The states are self-validating. Their Indian name, *brahmavihara*, derives from the name of a god, but one reduced to a cipher, a mere prefix with edifying overtones.

In view of this, it is tempting to use the word 'secular' of these two discourses. This is not a word which is used favorably in religious contexts as a rule, denoting as it usually does a negative attitude to the idea of transcendence, seeming to reduce humanity to body and mind, and not much else. The Sublime States and the admonitions of holy men 'pointing the way to heaven' would have little place where such an attitude prevailed. Yet there does seem to be an affinity between these 'lay' discourses and the secular spirit, provided this is not understood as a narrow materialism.

If all the streams of western thought may be traced to Greek sources, surely secularism, as the philosopher F.C.S. Schiller claimed, originates with the great Sophist, Protagoras, and his dictum that 'Man is the measure of all things'. Although this would seem to establish him as the first anthropocentric thinker, it does not necessarily follow that he denied the existence of a transcendent sphere. He seems to have been an agnostic rather, to judge by another famous saying: 'As to the gods, I cannot say whether they exist or not. Many things prevent my knowing, such as the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life.' This may well be the sort of remark that led to his books being burnt by the Athenians. It has the virtue of honesty, a dangerous virtue in the Athens of that time.

The Sophists were the practical thinkers of the classical period. They taught the management of worldly affairs, both personal and public. It seems to have gone beyond mere 'management skills' as understood today and to have comprehended an intellectual grasp of things. The great historian Thucydides may have studied under them; there could hardly be a higher tribute to their influence. Protagoras' description of man has always been found disturbing by religious thinkers, from Plato onwards. Conventional religion is theocentric. In the monotheisms especially, God is the *measurer* of all things: the heavens and the earth, the burdens placed on individual lives, the duration of the universe and the scope of evil.

Not being a conventional religion, Buddhism might be expected to be closer to Protagoras than the monotheisms are. And surely it is, with its belief that to be human is the most fortunate of all forms of existence for the purpose of attaining nirvana. But Protagoras said, 'the measure of all *things*' and this is not quite the Buddhist position, which at the closest would be, I think, 'man is the measure of all *beings*', meaning the form most apt for beings in the quest after the goal of life. The Buddha, as said earlier, is recorded to have described human nature in terms of gold, and gold has been the standard by which other metals are valued. This may seem not only a flattering view of man but an implicitly depreciative view of other life-forms. It would be, no doubt, if, as in monotheistic religions, man stood absolutely separate from them. In Buddhism, however, as in Indian religion generally, this absolute separation is not found. Life is seen as an intergeneric continuum, based on both karma and biology, a moral as well as a physical process in which all living beings participate. Man may be seen as the salvific life-form, the form in which other beings may find the best opportunity for salvation. In this sense Buddhism may claim affinity with the anthropocentric tradition of western thought, and look to the benefits of secularism.

Future Positive

By this I mean that Buddhism may find help in changing its outlook on the future. From very early in its history, as evidenced by the prophecy attributed to the Buddha himself – wrongly as I believe – it has seen the future as the time of decay and evanescence. In this it is not alone among the religions. The early Christians believed the world would end in the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries. But when it proved groundless, the faith did not die; the vitality of its message sustained it. Similarly when, after the foretold five hundred years, the Dharma had not died out, no one felt obliged to reject it on the grounds of unfulfilled prophecy. The message sustained it. But religions by their nature are bound to give peculiar honor to the past, the portion of time in which their founding events occurred. Nothing in the future can outweigh the Enlightenment for Buddhists, the last week of Jesus' life for Christians, or the reception of the Koran for Muslims. For Buddhists, however, the future has been especially difficult, it being the portion of time in which the Law of Impermanence most inescapably operates. We can forget this law in the past, ignore it in the present, but it is almost a synonym for the future, and if it is understood unvaryingly as signifying decay then the future will assuredly not be the best of times.

The secular tradition rejects this outlook. It sees the future as the time of progress, improvement, discovery, adventure in every sense, and it has four or five hundred years of solid achievement behind it. If equated with humanism, its modern history may be traced back to the Renaissance and the revival of learning in the West. Then the West expanded with the 'discovery' and colonization of America. It contended against bigotry and obscurantism with the Enlightenment, and finally turned towards the future impelled by the dynamic of evolutionary theory. Perhaps the nineteenth century did so with too much self-assurance, and devalued the past, turning it into a mere preparatory period, the time before progress. There was surely a deal of hybris in this. If so, the twentieth century paid for it. There is no going back, however, and for better or worse the West has become a forward-looking culture. Blaise Pascal, a great figure in both religion and science, could yet, at the beginning of the modern period, feel terror in contemplating space; the contrast with our age could not be greater. We may feel that man is not morally equipped to colonize other planets in view of his unsatisfactory record on earth. But we do not doubt our ability to do so if the conditions are right; and meanwhile we investigate the universe to its limits in space and time. The West has a future-positive mentality, and the western Buddhist cannot deny it any more than the most zealous secularist would wish to.

But there is no need to deny it. We do not have to see the future as the time of decay. We surely would not be doing full justice to the Law of

Impermanence if we insist on permanently interpreting it in only one way. Change is not the same as decay. History is not just a record of decline, whether of the West or anywhere else. Even Buddhism, beset by hostile religions and ideologies down the centuries, can show occasional evidence of recovery. In Sri Lanka it was brought close to extinction by the Portuguese in the eighteenth century, the Sangha being so reduced that bhikkhus had to be brought in from Thailand to revive it; which they did to such effect that it survived not only Portuguese but Dutch and then British rule and continuous Christian proselytizing until national independence restored a measure of normality to the island. By virtue of this local success alone, the traditional assumption that impermanence has only bad meanings and the future must mean decline was challenged and shown to be wrong.

The Individual Citizen

In coming to the West, Buddhism has to take on the burden of the future with something of the western spirit. Ours is the first age to feel the pressure of the future as much as that of the past. It is as if time has become impatient and is crowding challenges and problems upon the present. In other ages, people felt that the future would be much the same as the present and the past; brighter, faster, healthier perhaps, but essentially the same because human nature would be the same. Now we can no longer be sure about this most basic of all assumptions. Clever as we are, we have no convincing idea of where we are headed, nor do we know what we shall see in the mirror when we get there. It may be something which, if we could see it now, we might flinch from. On the other hand, the mirror of the future may reflect an improvement in basic human nature. We may protest that nothing has the right to make us worse persons than we are; but ought we to protest that nothing has the right to make us better? What right have we to stand out against a general improvement of humanity?

In Buddhist terms, this may be taken to mean, what right have I to deny my karmic successor advantages in the moral sphere that I did not enjoy? Should I claim the freedom to deny my 'own other' the grace of a better genetic constitution in a better ordered society, which may even be one where something like Buddhist values prevail?

A system of governance based on Buddhist principles would be a great benefit to humankind and indeed to the non-human constituency, for its duties would extend to animals and the environment. Such a thing happened a few centuries after the Buddha's death, when the warrior-king Asoka was converted and set about governing his realm, which covered most of the Indian subcontinent, on Buddhist principles. His achievement has filled succeeding ages with admiration and given Buddhist societies an ideal not only of kingship

but of the relations that should subsist between government and the Sangha. Dedicated as he was to the Dharma, however, there is nothing to suggest that Asoka went beyond giving example in his propagation of it. He did not make it obligatory nor punish those who could not meet his standard of Right Living. He was wise enough to know that true virtue cannot be imposed on society. In our day we have seen it attempted in a number of countries. Much misery has resulted, but how much true virtue? If virtue requires something more than living by rule, then one must look askance at any imposition of the good life, even one imposed by a Buddhist government. When we read in the Scriptures that no one can save another, we are free to interpret it as placing a limit on the rights of the powers that be to dictate how the individual should live.

According to tradition, the Bodhisattva Gautama had the choice of becoming a *chakravartin*, a world-ruler, or a Buddha who would penetrate to the deepest meaning of things. He rejected earthly power and chose the seeker's life. He placed individual striving above a career which, by word, example and legislation would have diffused virtue throughout the world. The message of the story is that the highest benefits are not to be looked for from the seats of power, however exalted, but that it is the spiritually striving individual who keeps the wheel of virtue in motion. If we add to this the message of the *Kalama* and *Sigalovada Suttas*, we come to the questing and dutiful citizen as the one who really matters in the business of keeping society in decent order. 'Princes and lords may flourish or may fade' – absolutism, benevolent despotism, republicanism come and go; philosophers from Plato to Heidegger have lauded the most dubious systems; and all the while it is private citizens with their labor, their taxes and their self-sacrifice in times of crisis who keep the body politic alive. The poet wrote of 'a bold peasantry, their country's pride'; a modern country's pride is, or should be, a thinking citizenry. We have the beginnings of it in the secular suttas of the Pali Canon.

But that was long ago in Jambudvipa. Now we are talking about the West, the land of the people whom Indians called the 'keen-eyed Yavanas' – that is, Ionians, Greeks – and their descendants in Europe, America, Australia and a hundred smaller places all over the world. How are we to set about establishing a thinking Buddhist citizenry here, an enhancement to society and faithful to the personal and domestic values set out in the secular suttas?

An Idea of Buddhist Education

It will be remembered that no fewer than three 'directions' of the *Sigalovada Sutta* touch upon learning. First, parents teach their children to avoid evil ways, encourage them to be good and train them for an occupation. This is a salutary reminder that education is not the same as schooling, but begins with moral

teaching at home and culminates in spiritual discourse later in life. Instruction in the arts and sciences by professionals is only a part of a lifelong process. And of course the learner becomes in time a parent and as such a teacher in turn. Implicit in the *Sigalovada Sutta* is an affirmation of the future which could not arise from a system which denied it, whatever an occasional text may say. All education looks to development in the future; this is as true for palaeontologists as for astronauts. Is it possible to derive an idea of Buddhist education from the *Sigalovada Sutta?*

In the ancient world, and perhaps most straitly in caste-bound India, children followed their parents' occupation. It is still the way today in many parts of the world, even in parts of the western world. In other parts it has changed, and indeed has had to change, as some occupations decline or even become obsolescent. Similarly, in the West, the idea of the arranged marriage has lost the prevalence it once enjoyed. But the other duty in the first part of the sutta remains: that parents shall teach their children to avoid what is bad and to do what is good. Grounding in morality is the duty of parents before their children are entrusted to the care of others. By this time the child has observed the parents intimately and begun to model itself on them, sensing their attitudes and absorbing their values, without yet having the ability to discriminate what is good, bad, or indifferent. It has taken them on trust as the standard and embodiment of what is right and instinctively accepted them as life-authorities. Socrates said that no one sets out deliberately to do wrong, for doing wrong is a form of self-injury, which no sane person would wish. The proposition has been strongly disputed. But it may surely be averred that no child ever set out to go wrong; if it went so, it was because it understood the wrong ways of its parents as right, and followed them. Parents, then, have not only a basic duty of care but also a duty of example. It is not sufficient just to tell the child that this is right and that is wrong; the child must be confident that if the parents themselves had to choose between the two, they would choose the right. A child soon knows if its parents are only paying lip-service to standards; unfortunately it may take this as the lesson, the young mind shaping itself accordingly.

The *Pañcasila* is a simple yet comprehensive code that should be of help, not only to Buddhist parents, but to other parents as well. All that we do is an enactment of values. If their doings are free of violence, greed, lies, sensuality and stupor, then parents are doing well, both for themselves and for their children. The *Pañcasila* is also a good ground on which to base a Buddhist schooling. First, there would be no violence. This is obligatory now in many, if not most, western countries. But physical violence is not the only sort. The child should be free of fear, however generated, whether by the personality or attitude of a teacher or by bullying contemporaries. Second, there would be no theft, by which principally I mean no theft of the child's precious time; stolen goods may be replaced but not that. Adulthood is long, and what is missed in one decade may be lived in another. Not so with childhood; it is very brief and

should not be stolen even in what may be estimated the interest of the child's future. Third, there should be no lies: that is, the teacher should be mortally honest as to his or her suitability for the work. There is no room for the salaried time-server in a good school. Fourth, it goes without saying that there should be no sexual contact between teacher and child. Sex lessons should be given, so to say, under the aspect of integrity: sex should be taught as involving the whole person – body, feelings, mind, and activities that have consequences. Fifth, with regard to substances which dull the mind, certainly drugs should not be permitted; but the danger of dulling the mind is not confined to drugs: lazy teaching and dead routines should not be permitted either.

Schooling is a purposive process, founded on change, growth and development in the child, though also hopefully in the teacher. Health, happiness, and usefulness should characterize it as far as possible, and no one should emerge from it damaged in body, emotions, or intelligence. All too often, however, schooling is geared – a mechanical metaphor is not inappropriate – to a narrow idea of success; and the clever child is turned into the ambitious teenager who does well out of university and goes on to a lucrative, unquestioning career. Such success may be bought at a very high price, the years of wonder being sacrificed to the years of gain. Then the successful ones, as parents themselves, not knowing what has been lost, repeat the process with their own children, and education is found to be a synonym not for learning but careerism.

What would a Buddhist education have to offer that is missing here? I do not mean, how are Buddhist children educated in the East and how much better are they for it because, as Sangharakshita in his *Survey of Buddhism*[1] has indicated, much of the teaching of these children is now in Christian hands, even in so-called Buddhist countries. The question is, what would a western Buddhist education seek to provide?

The first element in the Noble Eightfold Path is Right View. Here it means the Buddhist idea of man as mentioned above: body, feelings, mind, activities and consequences. At all times, whether as adult or child, the human being is to be viewed as a whole – an integrity – with equal respect accorded to body, feelings and mind. This should be so even when an individual's bent leads to a greater concentration on one element more than the others, the result hopefully being that the athletic person would not grow to despise things of the mind, nor the intellectual to neglect the body, and neither to be ashamed of true sentiment. This idea of man leads naturally to a view of education as the means by which it may be realized. A Buddhist education, lovingly begun in the home, would aspire to produce healthy, happy, useful, independent-minded and open-minded individuals who, when the time comes to leave home, would be

[1] Windhorse, 1993.

thinking less of self than of service. In the medium term its hope would be that they would in turn become good parents and, as such, good teachers of their own children in the first phase of education. In the long term it would look to the transformation of society, as such people came to form an ever greater part of it.

We have come to think of revolution and evolution as being the only ways to effect such a transformation. The first is usually violent and bloody; the second is slow, and may be excessively conditioned by what is there already. A third way is the gradual and continuous improvement brought about in any society by the conscious and also the innovative efforts of its members. This is one of the great benefits of democracy, and it arises from its imperfection. There has been no shortage of intendedly perfect – that is, perfectly ordered – societies in history; the last century alone saw perfectly ordered fascist and communist societies, and the Taliban continued the high endeavor in Afghanistan. But it seems to be in the nature of human institutions that the more perfect they are the more deficient they will be in what gives human life its value. The difference between a perfect and an imperfect society is that in the former, by definition, there is no room for improvement. Democracy, with all its faults (and Socrates was probably not the first to point them out) is a humbler system, and at its best is not only healthily imperfect but healthily welcomes improvement. Based on the decisions of ordinary men and women alone in the privacy of the polling booth, it affirms at once both the value of freedom and the importance of the individual.

Freedom, Rights and Duties

Freedom is not only the end of Buddhist endeavor; it is also, I would suggest, the beginning of Buddhist morality. The First Principle of the *Pañcasila* is non-violence, conventionally related to gentleness and compassion. It may naturally be related also to respect for freedom, on the grounds that any person, institution, or country not under threat of violence is self-evidently freer than one under threat. Earlier I described freedom as a reflex of nirvana in the world. In striving to attain or to maintain it we are being as true as lay folk may possibly be to the message of the Buddha. But it is freedom in the world, not from it, confronting problems that lead to further problems rather than to clean, satisfying solutions. Freedom of thought, of speech and of action are ideals which are not always compatible. The first verse of the *Dhammapada* proclaims the primacy of thought: everything else arises therefrom. Thinking is not morally null. But so long as it means ‘those thoughts men think in the mind alone’ there is no problem beyond the sphere of inner responsibility. I may feel shame, even guilt, at some of the things that pass through my mind; but if not translated into wicked words or deeds they are a matter for my personal

conscience and the impersonal process of karma to deal with. The problem arises with the translation of thought into expression in words or deeds.

Freedom of speech cannot be an absolute if the principle of non-injuriousness applies to anything beyond physical violence. The debatable area is not that of truth and lies, but of the truth that hurts. It extends from the justifiable exposure of corruption in high places to the wanton revelation of something far in the past that may destroy a living person's reputation or the peace of an unsuspecting family. In between are the regions of racial and religious sensitivities, where good manners ought to govern and all too often do not. But even where they most prevail there must be latitude for plain speaking. It is asking a great deal of human nature to find all people equally lovable and all observances admirable. There are practices in even the major religions which one may find abhorrent, just as there may be moments in their histories which fall far short of their ideals; and sometimes it may be found necessary to refer critically to them even if it gives offence. Right Speech is an element of the Noble Eightfold Path, and it has its rights, as well as the obligation of courtesy. The concept of Right Speech would have precious little meaning if freedom of speech were seriously reduced. Organized religion has been its dedicated enemy in the past, and may be so again in the future. Whatever one may think of *The Satanic Verses* as a novel, the campaign against Salman Rushdie did not reflect an open-minded belief system. The author fortunately escaped, but others died at the hands of assassins, from Holland to Japan. Such intolerance, however, was not without precedent in the West. When the Nazis burnt the books of disapproved writers the Church was silent. In the days of its power it burnt writers along with their books. The tradition of silencing opponents goes right back to St Paul who, in the First Epistle to Titus, having set out the qualities of the model bishop, inveighs against his opponents – 'insubordinate men; empty talkers and deceivers' – and says that because they teach what they have no right to teach 'they must be silenced'. At this time the Roman Empire, of which Paul called himself a citizen, was intellectually a liberal institution. As Christianity took hold it ceased to be such, until eventually every non-Christian establishment, including Plato's Academy, was suppressed. More than a thousand years would pass before anything approaching the old Roman tolerance would be found again in the West. The decisive moment occurred not in Europe but in America with the founding of the United States, where Church and State were kept from the beginning in healthy separation.

Freedom of action raises the most problems, of course. There can be few areas of life that are without them. Something unexceptionable in thought or word becomes something else when it is translated into action and impinges on the lives of others. The question of freedom turns into the question of rights: that of one party to act out an intention or desire, and that of another not to be disadvantaged thereby. From a Buddhist viewpoint such problems can be

considered with a fair degree of coherence. The Buddha said that he taught two things, *dukkha* and its ending. This would seem to indicate that where a conflict arises from freedom of action, the interest of the potential victim should have first claim to consideration. A freedom which adds to the *dukkha* of the world must, in a Buddhist perspective, be questionable even though apparent benefits may be expected to arise from it. Second, it is a striking fact that the *Sigalovada Sutta* in setting out social relations concentrates only on duties and says nothing about rights. It assumes that people should, can, and will do the right thing by each other. It has been argued that the discourse affirms by implication a series of rights to fair treatment. Though this is surely correct, there is another implication to be noted: that is, the right to perform one's duties, to discharge one's obligations. In a system based on intentionality and aspiring to freedom this means a great deal. The *Sigalovada Sutta* throughout is concerned with giving and with gratitude. The right I see implicit in it is the right to give of our means, our time, our energy, and our goodwill to others without interference: in other words, right as responsibility.

Future Challenges

The duties set out in the *Sigalovada Sutta* are comprehensive. They are also interestingly limited: not a word about public affairs, or the duties between householder and ruler. The limitation suggests that such matters are not considered to be of the first importance. Those who might expect to find kings and queens at the 'zenith' of social relations find holy men and ascetics instead. Those who might have expected to find masters and slaves at the 'nadir', the point at which relations based on power are discussed, find an enlightened employer and a willing workforce. It is not that the early Buddhists ignored these questions; other texts deal with the duties of kingship and related social problems. Not this one, however, with its ostensible aim of clarifying the householder's priorities. Sigala, to whom the discourse is addressed, does not exist in a political vacuum. We are told he lived near Rajagaha, so he would have been a subject of the king of Magadha; but of his duties to the king and the king's to him there is not a word. Personal relations are paramount, and we are free to consider them as having a certain independence from the domain where those other duties obtain, what in Christian terms may be called the domain of the 'things that are Caesar's'. But the kings of Magadha did not interfere with their subjects' religious practices or deprecate their beliefs. The Buddha and Sigala lived in a society which, for all its agitation, was tolerant of all forms of belief, and of unbelief as well. No one was called to take a principled stand against a sectarian ruler, or an ideologically bigoted state. Ancient India had at least that much in common with the modern liberal West. Buddhists here are not likely in the foreseeable future to be called upon to face the trials of, say, the Fa Lun Gong in China. It would be, then, to use a word much favored by the

early translators of Buddhist texts, *unskilful* to anticipate possible difficulties here. This does not mean, however, that we should not anticipate difficulties which our co-religionists elsewhere may be called upon to face. A few years ago the Pope visited the Philippines. He told his followers that Asia is to be the next great object of Christian missionary endeavor. He made condescending references to the Buddha such that, when he came to Sri Lanka, the leaders of the Sangha felt justified in declining to attend a reception in his honor. How different was his attitude when he went to Jerusalem and visited the holy places not only of Christianity but of Jews and Muslims as well. He spoke respectfully of those two other monotheistic faiths which trace their origins to Abraham, and looked forward to a time of co-operation instead of conflict. This indicates that the proposed evangelization of Asia will be directed at believers in the non-Abrahamic faiths, Hindus, Sikhs, Taoists, Shintoists, but especially at believers in the Buddhadharma, the most widespread of these faiths. It promises to be a testing time for Buddhism in the East, coming so soon after the devastation wrought on it by communism.

One of the major tasks facing western Buddhists may be to help our eastern brothers and sisters in dealing with such a campaign. How to do so will hopefully become clear as time passes. Buddhism has neither the organizational drive of Christianity nor the urge to power of Islam. It has sustained itself with other qualities, its origin being in the quest for enlightenment, not in sacrifice or revelation. Enlightenment is continuous with knowledge, the knowledge which is the product of education in the intellectual sense as well as that imparted by 'spiritual friends'. The field of education will surely provide an ever-enlarging meeting place for the old and the new extensions of Buddhism, one in which we can repay something of the debt we owe the countries that have sent so many teachers to the West and be of service to people coping not only with a campaign of evangelization but with the challenges of exotic sciences which, though global in their effects, are still largely western in provenance.