Chapter 13
Conclusion

Doubt as Empowerment

As I said at the beginning, one of the problems facing a Buddhist writer is that of selection, the quantity of Scripture being so vast. The sacred books of other religions are slight in comparison. Different texts in the Canon will have their special appeal for different writers. Some of them will complement each other, as the *Sigalovada* and the *Kalama Suttas* do. The first is a very practical discourse, though with possibilities of elaboration not only practical but metaphorical, as I tried to show in my book, *Buddhism and the Natural World,* where the 'nadir' is interpreted in terms of the relations of man and the environment. The *Kalama Sutta* begins where the other leaves off, at the 'zenith', where householders see to the needs of ascetics and other holy men, and they 'point the path to heaven'. Both are non-sectarian, with no mention of Buddhist bhikkhus or bhikkhunis.

Sigala is presented as a conventional young man observing a ritual enjoined by his late father. The ritual is not deprecated – honoring dead parents is a duty laid down in the first 'direction' – but is made part of what the Buddha calls 'the noble discipline'. Sigala is a good listener, but no questioner. He is not troubled with doubts. The Kalamas are, and their doubts arise from hearing the very class of people who populate the 'zenith' and show the upward way. Evidently there can be too much of a good thing even at that level. The high and holy ones do not limit themselves to their positive function but indulge in a form of what today we call negative campaigning, each denigrating the others' doctrines. Far from having their hopes fixed on heaven, the Kalamas are left unedified and perplexed. The message of the sutta is, first, that they should learn to think for themselves and be discriminating in their choice of wise men to guide them; second, that they should gain insight into the fundamental vices, greed, hatred and delusion, that sway human behavior; third, that they should practise the Sublime States, and give generously of their spiritual resources; finally, that they should become open-minded and able to live with uncertainty. As said earlier, this is reminiscent of Socrates' attitude at his trial, thus

connecting with an important though still undervalued element in the western heritage, the ability to live with doubt. Plato, Aristotle and all subsequent philosophers have dealt in answers; Socrates lived with questions. He thereby gave the Athenians something the Buddha had given the Kalamas a hundred years before. He showed them the value of uncertainty. Athens did not welcome the message; neither did succeeding civilizations which instead went the way of theological dogma and infallibilism.

There is a Sufi saying that perfect freedom is absence of choice. It means that the devotee puts himself entirely in God's hands and lives under the impulsion of the Divine Will and not his own. It is a very consoling doctrine to people of a certain mentality. Absence of choice means absence of doubt, in other words, freedom from uncertainty. Much of the study and practice of religion is a quest for certainty under the supposed synonym of truth. Its attainment is, in its own way, a liberating experience; hence convert zeal. It can be an enslaving one; hence fundamentalist dogmatism. The same person can have both experiences, with zeal hardening to dogmatism, and what began as liberation ending as spiritual enslavement, but an enslavement that feels good because it dominates doubt.

Dostoyevsky said that those who do not believe in God are capable of any crime. It may be so, but there would seem to be far more evidence of the opposite, and history is darkened with the righteous wickedness of absolute believers. It is a peculiarity of human nature that many would prefer to be certain and wicked than uncertain and good. The appeal of fundamentalism is not only that it insulates the mind from uncomfortable reflections but it legitimizes the darker pleasures of our nature, enabling previously inoffensive people to kill and destroy in a sacred cause, and to expect reward in a future life for having done so. For about a thousand years Europe was a battleground of religious certainties, from the Thirty Years War in the seventeenth century back to 732 when an invading Muslim army was halted by the Christian Franks, two absolutist theologies fighting it out on the plain of Tours, even as they do today from the Sudan to Indonesia and the Philippines. Tennyson's lines, written in a spiritually troubled age, are well-known:

> *There is more faith in honest doubt,*
> *Believe me, than in half the creeds*.

The sentiment may not be acceptable in all quarters, even in this age. Be that as it may, honest doubt would certainly seem to be a more healthful thing, both for the world and the individual, than the certainties offered by almost all the creeds. As commended to the Kalamas of old it is a sign of spiritual maturity compared with the fanaticism that certainty can inspire. When it is mentioned in a religious context, however, one still finds doubt described in terms of a dark night, or of a dark valley that has to be crossed before the sunlit uplands of faith

are reached. But doubt has its own sunlit uplands, although in the ascent it changes into open-mindedness, a virtue which, since the Renaissance, has been struggling upward in the culture of the West. Historically, it has not been easy to win acceptance for a generous, disinterested attitude of mind. The few who displayed it were classed with those who in the Biblical phrase were 'neither hot nor cold', neither friends of the good nor enemies of the bad. But Montaigne had it, and he has been called the first modern man. Very gradually it has come to be accepted as the sign of the modern spirit, except where sectarian or nationalistic passions prevail. It has been among the ideals of Buddhism from the day it was commended to those troubled people in the town of Kesaputta. It is an aspect of the Middle Way.

Buddhism, a Doctrine and a Discipline

Whenever the Dharma is introduced into a new environment some adaptation has to take place, not least perhaps if the environment has itself a great religious and cultural history. The West has such a history, to say nothing of its pre-eminence in material power and scientific achievement. Western Buddhists are inheritors of all this naturally, as they are inheritors of the Dharma electively. They have chosen to follow a way which is both old and new, old in its eastern origins, new in its western environment. In so doing they have chosen to reject the religious part of the western heritage and have put something apparently very different in its place. Christianity has handed down belief in a Creator God, The Fall of Man, Redemptive Sacrifice, the idea that one life determines human destiny, and much else not found in Buddhism. In the preceding pages I have endeavored to find if there is a Buddhist approach to Christianity that will enable us to understand it in a way compatible with the Dharma, and to be more at ease with the culture which it did so much to shape. There would seem to be no good reason to alienate ourselves from the western heritage just because we reject a part of it, even so important a part as doctrinal Christianity, any more than we would think of rejecting the insights and achievements of science just because there are aspects of it which we find unacceptable. We are western Buddhists in this life, which imposes a dual task upon us: to be true to the Dharma and to understand our situation in the world. As I see it, we are called upon to be true to the Dharma by interpreting it in the light of western culture; and we shall understand our situation best if we see it in the light of the Dharma. There are no doubt many and various ways of performing this task. Here, mine has been by way of myth, legend, and history. The myth and legend are found in the early chapters of Genesis and in the *Aggañña Sutta*, the history in the lives of Jesus, Socrates and the Buddha. It is, admittedly, a very simplified version of history, but even so, I believe the approach through personalities to be justifiable: with all due allowances for social and economic factors, great spiritual and intellectual movements most often arise from the

lives of single gifted individuals without whom the transforming impulses would have no channel into our lives and thus into history.

The task of being true to the Dharma and understanding our situation is essentially one of integration, and may well be described in terms of finding a middle way between discovered belief and inherited culture. It is not an easy task. Western values are probably as much at variance with Buddhist values today as ever they were when the Church was at its most dominant. At that time the life of a heretic was worth a heap of faggots; today in many western countries the life of the unborn child is worth even less, and there are far more victims of abortion than there were of autos da fe. This violation of the First Principle of the *Pañcasila* is perhaps the most salient reversal of Buddhist values, though one could probably go through the whole of Sigala's compass and find practices which as westerners we are accustomed to accept but which as Buddhists we should question. Buddhism is both a doctrine and a discipline. One benefit of the doctrine should be to make us critical; one benefit of the discipline should be to make us sensitive. A great deal of modern life is a process of desensitization. Certainly some degree of affective insulation would seem to be necessary for survival: if one were open for a single minute to all the grief even locally around us our sanity would be sorely challenged. But so much of our culture today is at the level of mere distraction, and distraction by its nature makes for insensitivity; if we will not pay heed to what is going on in our own hearts and minds we shall hardly be conscient of the feelings and thoughts of others. In the nineteenth century, Henry David Thoreau wrote of lives lived in 'quiet desperation'. Determined distraction, and anything but quiet, is what we have today. Why popular culture should be so inimical to peace and quiet is a question beyond the scope of this book; but it is a sad fact of life that the only time some people find them is when they go on retreat to an establishment conducted on monastic principles, Buddhist or other. Distraction is a flight from the self. Retreat is a gathering of forces to attempt the transcending of it. Part of the operation should be an examination and clarification of values so that on returning to the world we shall be more clear-sighted amid the turbulence; stronger, too, in resisting the often persuasive appeal of false values and, where it seems necessary, in challenging their application. Here we may recall that the Buddha's message was not a form of quietism, a contemplative withdrawal from the stresses of living, but a criticism and a correction of the values of his time. The message was both formative and reformative. Western Buddhists live in societies which have many and serious faults, and we would not be true to the Dharma if we did not try, critically and compassionately, to put them right, in accordance with our individual talents and temperaments. As we acquire a deeper knowledge of the Dharma and of western culture we shall be better able to do justice to both.