ATHENS: INTELLECT

Seen illuminated at night from the deck of a ship, the Acropolis is a uniquely impressive sight. Lit up against the dark it conveys a sense of wholeness absent from the rubble-strewn proximity of a daytime visit; seems to achieve a sort of restoration which reminds the viewer of its origin as Athena's particular place. Shining there in the darkness it has a calm and majesty as if to say 'This is the light of the West.'

The buildings on the hill were erected in the decades following the Persian Wars, a period which saw Athens emerge as the leading city state of Greece. The position was well-merited. In the first war she had foiled the designs of the 'Great King' Darius at Marathon. The battle fought there was one of the seminal moments in western history. A decade after Marathon the new *Megas Basileus* Xerxes invaded Greece with an immense army, and considerable assistance from opportunistic Greek states. The Athenians chose to abandon their city rather than surrender, and Athens was destroyed. But at the battle of Salamis their ships led the Greek fleet to victory over the 'barbarians', and later their soldiers helped win the last battle of the war on Greek soil at Plataea. Then they were free to return and rebuild their city.

As the houses and workplaces rose below the hill, certain of the people had a vision of something grander crowning it: a hymn in stone to Athena, the city's patroness, the Virgin Goddess, Wisdom in Arms. The architect Ictinus designed the Parthenon in her honor, and Phidias made a colossal statue of her as the city's defender, Athena Promachos. When the sunlight played on it the flashing of her spearhead could be seen by sailors on ships off Cape Sounion.

Then things began to go wrong, and it was the Athenians' own fault. Their behaviour in prosperity did not match their virtues in adversity. Pride turned into arrogance, and other Greeks began to feel the Athenians were getting above themselves – that is what *hybris* means. Nemesis followed. A long war with Sparta ended in defeat. Athens never regained her earlier status as a political force.

Intellectually, however, she entered on the richest period in her history, probably the richest any city has ever known, as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and other philosophers formulated and discoursed on problems which have kept thinkers busy ever since.

Although it reached its highest development in Athens, Greek philosophy did not originate there but in Asia Minor, among the Ionians,

members of a Hellenic culture extending from Sicily to the Black Sea long before Alexander the Great took it across the continent into India. There all Greeks were called Ionians – the 'Yavanas' of the Buddhist texts. The early thinkers, Thales, Heraclitus and others, were Ionians, some of them contemporaries of the Buddha. Gradually, however, the intellectual centre of gravity moved to Athens, where Plato had established his Academy. The young northerner Aristotle came there and remained twenty years before going to Macedon as tutor to Prince Alexander. He eventually returned from that new centre of power to the now powerless capital of Attica, and set up his own school, the Lyceum. Alexander presently succeeded to the throne of Macedon, crushed a Greek rebellion, and set off on his career of conquest in Asia. After his early death there was a resurgence of anti-Macedonian sentiment in Athens, and Aristotle thought it prudent to leave. The Lyceum continued, under Theophrastus and then Strato, who gave his name to the interesting 'Stratonician Presumption'. This says that if a god external to the universe is postulated as its creator and sustainer, then adequate reason must be given for his existence and an explanation provided as to how the universe cannot of itself discharge these functions. Medieval Christian thinkers took the Presumption very seriously. The first verse of the Bible says that God created the world: deny that and you are not a Christian and cannot be saved. Further, the Bible says that God personally gave man the Ten Commandments: so, without God there is no effective morality. Buddhism, on the other hand, is not a creationist system and its moral code, the *PañcaSila*, makes no reference to any divine being. The Stratonician Presumption would seem to be congenial to it. Greek philosophy, however, contains other matter of more familiar interest.

Plato, the greatest intellect produced by Greece, or indeed the West, believed in rebirth. For whatever reason, due significance has not been given to this aspect of his thought. He attributes the belief to his master, Socrates, but his thinking was also influenced by Orphism and Pythagorism, both of which held to the doctrine of metempsychosis. There was a tradition that Pythagoras himself, he too a contemporary of the Buddha, had travelled to India and learned the doctrine there. Like the Indians he did not confine the succession of lives to humanity but included animals too. So did Plato in his 'Myth of Er' in the *Republic*. The idea of rebirth figures also in the *Phaedo*, the story of Socrates' last hours. But even with such authority and the commendation of some later thinkers it has not been nearly as important in the western tradition as among the Hindus, Jains and Buddhists.

In Pali the idea of rebirth is called *punabbhava*, and it has to do essentially with time and justice. The ancient Indians had a very modern sense of the magnitude of time. Until quite recently, in historical terms, westerners believed the world to be only a few thousand years old; many still held that a computation of Biblical life-spans told the whole story: just four thousand years before the birth of Christ, God created the heavens and

the earth. The acceptance of geological and astronomical periods was very gradual in secular matters; in matters of religion it can sometimes seem that westerners continue to apply an earlier standard.

The Indians divided time into periods of evolution and involution, expansion and contraction. In comparison with these immensities the life of man seemed very short indeed. Even the life of devas was not proof against the attrition of time, the heavens where they dwelt being but glorified and otiose extensions of human life. Sooner or later every life came to an end, but time went on. However, there was seen to be more to human life than mere time. There was activity, *karma*, and in that there was something different from and superior to time: morality, whether conceived as adherence to prescribed ritual or the free exercise of choice. Bound up with morality was the idea of justice, with recompense and retribution along the way. Only the way was not always long enough, and goodness often went unrewarded and badness unpunished. Life had somehow to be extended to allow time for the requital of good and bad deeds. One mode of extension was by renewing it.

How the system might work they explained in different ways. The popular conception was what Thomas Carlyle might have called 'The Philosophy of New Clothes', in view of the metaphor employed to illustrate the transition from one life to another. Sir Edwin Arnold gave it form in his translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

> *Lightly as when one layeth his worn-out clothes away*
> *And taking others sayeth 'These will I wear today',*
> *So layeth by the spirit lightly its robe of flesh*
> *And passeth to inherit a residence afresh.*

This is the Hindu view. The Buddhist view is different. It is based on the *Trilakshana*, the Three Signs of Existence: unsatisfactoriness impermanence, and non-self, or as they are called in Pali, *dukkha*, *anicca* and *anatta*. The three are often treated as of equal importance, but this is questionable in the light of the Buddha's oft-repeated statement, 'Two things I teach: dukkha and its ending, *dukkhanirodha*'. Which suggests that dukkha is the most important of the three; perhaps even that the other two are aspects of dukkha, such that upon its ending they too are ended, either by annulment or by transformation. The death of the Buddha, then – the *Parinirvana* – may be seen as his passing from the limitations of the earthly freedom he enjoyed after his Enlightenment to a transcendent freedom in which dukkha is transformed into what some texts call *mahasukha*, ultimate happiness, anicca into immortality, and anatta into universal selflessness, the happiness consisting in the exercise of helpfulness to all beings throughout all times.

On the way to the ending of dukkha, the ordinary Buddhist lives in a state of tension between the actual and the ideal, between the aspiration to a better life and the forces of greed, hatred and delusion that all but smother them so much of the time. Of the two, despite the disparity, the ideal is the more real, and sincere aspiration is stronger than any countervailing force.

But time is long and life is not rarely misdirected, if it is not cut short. All too often when we have won to some clarity and depth of living, it is too late to make up for what has gone before. If the benefit of the achievement is not to be lost there must be some sort of survival. But traditional ideas of survival do not allow for benefiting from experience or insight: as one dies so one remains for all eternity. The Christian idea of Purgatory, it might be said, has not fulfilled its potential. With rebirth it is different. That otherwise too late insight will not be lost, becoming part of a new life which will enter the world better equipped to deal with it.

Earlier I mentioned Diogenes, the philosopher who first called himself a world-citizen. The idea of rebirth makes everyone a world-citizen. It is a most powerful solvent of the fixations of nationalism and other attachments. Nationalism draws its strength from the apparently incontestable identification of one sole life with one sole nation. Greek or barbarian, Irish or English, Israeli or Palestinian, Russian or Chechen – nationality is believed to be the universal determinant: one life, one land, one nation, to adapt a slogan of the last century. But if I can entertain the idea that in a past or future life I was or will be a member of another nation, then the inevitability of my identification with the present one is challenged. In time of war, how could I feel the approved degree of hatred for people whom I could think of as former or future family, friends and community?

The other great fixation, the religious, is more problematic. Most believers, it seems reasonable to assume, would not offer themselves for martyrdom if they did not feel sure of ‘translation to heaven’; nor would they be so ready to kill if that might conceivably condemn them to hell. An extremely high degree of certainty is essential in each case: first, that the faith is worth dying for, but that almost goes without saying; second, that killing in its name is pleasing to the believer’s god or gods and deserving of eternal recompense. One of the most legitimate charges made against religion is its self-righteous readiness to take life. If for a moment the enthusiast could admit the possibility that the killing of a pagan or heretic or infidel might lead to rebirth in the victim’s faith-community – a fate worse than hell to some – the effect might well be liberating. Certainty can be one of the great traps of the human mind.

Another benefit of the doctrine is that it breaks the cycle of guilt between generations. The son or daughter or later descendant of someone who did evil deeds in the service of country, faith or ideology has no reason

to assume an inheritance of guilt. The doctrine allows me to see myself as the consequence of deeds good and bad done in an earlier span of my on-going existence; not as the bearer of the moral effects of deeds done by others, even my parents. Intentionally or by accident, they made it possible for me to be born, providing the agencies – sperm and ovum – and the conditions –womb and nutrient – for the new life. But the essential thing, the moral substance, they did not provide. That was the product of my own distinct past. With their beliefs, attitudes and behaviour they helped give it particular but not necessarily final form. The form of my moral being only becomes final with my acquiescence and my striving.

Because my life in its moral substance is mine and not theirs (nor, in passing, the state's), their rights over it are limited. Most importantly, they have not the right to dispose of it whether within or without the womb. The unborn child is a guest, not a property. The Buddhist attitude to these and other relationships is set out in the *Sigalovada Sutta*. I have dealt with this discourse at some length in my book *Buddhism and the Western Heritage,* and will only observe here that all the relationships in it are considered in terms of duties, not rights; of giving, not demanding. It is reported as having been spoken by the Buddha to the young man Sigala who was about to perform a ritual on behalf of his late father: to worship with joined hands the six directions, beginning with the east, and ending with the nadir and the zenith. The Buddha transformed this simple ritual into a rule of life, setting out a list of duties for each direction: parents and children, teachers and pupils, husbands and wives, friends, employers and workers, householders and spiritual mentors. As between parents and children there is no suggestion of guilt transmitted or inherited. As I understand the Dharma, it would be wrong to see people as tainted by the sins of their forbears: not only lacking in compassion but disrespectful of the capacity for integrity which is to be recognized in every human being.