

FREEDOM IN BUDDHIST THOUGHT

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HOW can we define Buddhism? There have been many attempts to put the concept of Buddhism in the "proverbial nutshell" but it cannot be so easily described. Buddhism engenders the ideas of social morality as a form of philosophy for the masses. But it goes far beyond such a simple statement. It reaches the farthest limits of life and existence and affects all living beings. One may not agree with all its aspects but at the same time one will not deny the truth contained in the body of the Dhamma.

Why is Buddhism so popular? How has it remained a potent force in Man's affairs for over 2,500 years? Other religions have flourished in the past but have either died out or exist today in a form that the original adherents would hardly recognise. In the beginning Buddhism gained converts because it ennobled the position of women in society, spoke out against rituals of sacrifice and against the degrading cast system. It also enjoined Man to believe in the efficacy of his own efforts, rather than in the whim of a God or Gods.

That was the beginning of logical thought in religion. No longer was it just a matter of blind faith and obedience. People still turn to the Buddha and his teachings because of the ultimate truth and logic contained therein. These truths have been classified under the following headings: the Four Noble Truths concerning the existence, arising and destroying of suffering and the way to that destruction; the Noble Eight Fold Path which is that way; the Law Of Cause and Effect which governs all beings and their behaviour; *Nibbana* or the Sublime State which is available to all who are prepared to strive for it.

Freedom to think, speak and act as one feels fit is also one of the greatest facets of this most tolerant of religions. The freedom allowed to the Buddhist shines through the teachings as the Pole star shines in the evening sky.

Frithjof Schuon says in his book *In the tracks of Buddhism* when speaking of the emancipation of women, "In quite a general way and outside any problem of the metaphysical and physiological differences of the sexes with their consequent inequalities, when people speak of "freedom" they too easily forget that freedom only has value insofar as it allows of our realising our spiritual destiny, conformity with our true nature. Freedom outside participation in that which alone is truly free remains an empty word."

What is the meaning of this word Freedom"? The Oxford Dictionary defines it as "personal liberty, independence, liberty of action, right to do, power of self-determination, frankness, outspokenness." So now we have the text book explanation of freedom. But let us go little deeper than mere words. Let us try to grasp the meaning of the spirit of freedom, for this will be nearer the idea of freedom according to the Buddhist mind. Acarya Nagarjuna in his Madhyamika has described physical freedom thus: "We desire consciously or otherwise to acquire and enjoy things. We may have the utmost liberty in desiring things, but objective conditions are not always in conscience with our desires, the so-called secular freedom of worship and freedom from want. Whether physical freedom is as important as some people say is open to: much argument. Are any of us really free? Or can any of us truly say we are entirely free agents that we do what we want, when we want, how we want? The answer is of course, "No". We all depend in some way upon others, whether it is the person responsible for making the clothes we wear, producing the food we eat or the houses we live in."

As soon as Man left behind the primitive way of life once and for all; and to use a much misused words, became civilised, he also gave up his complete freedom from that time on. The more civilised we became, the greater the degree of control that is required to maintain the standards set. It follows then, the more control there is by governments or whatever force it is that maintains this civilised standard, the less freedom the individual has. Every single one of us has to make the choice. If we wish to keep the things we now have and give up some of our much talked about, almost non-existent freedom, or are we going to return to a more primitive life where there is a much greater degree of freedom but a lot less chance of survival to enjoy it?

There is however another type of freedom opens to us with the curtailment of our physical wishes due to the necessity of living together in harmony. We are offered the advantages of education. The completely *Free Person* who lives away from society, spends his days working for enough to eat and fighting for survival. Education is denied to him, his knowledge is confined to his own experience (usually very little) and he is unable to profit from the wider experience of more knowledgeable people, through the medium of books, schools, etc.

Now what do we gain from Education? It is the other freedom called mental freedom. We are freed from the superstition and ignorance which the physically free man is chained to. We are taught to think for ourselves, to use our minds and control our thoughts as we see fit.

Through mental freedom of the mind we are able to turn our thoughts to the spiritual side of life. In Buddhism we are taught that our thoughts control our lives, for without a first thought there can be no action. It follows of course that if we can control our actions, we control our present lives, and even more wonderful, our future as well! True freedom that is spiritual freedom (Vimutti) from shackles of superstition, wrong understanding, discontentment and conflict, and that the vital principle for humans to aim for is the cessation of Karma (acts or passions). The Buddha advised the Kalamas who were visiting Him to always entertain doubt until facts were established in their own minds as being conducive to their own progress. He told them not to be misled just because the facts were presented by a very erudite scholar, or in an interesting way, or because they were passed down from very ancient traditions, or were contained in religious texts, or because they were given by the respected teachers. Instead He asked them, therefore they should give them up; when they knew themselves that certain teachings and ways and observances were good for them, leading to profit, they should follow such teachings. *So freedom in the Buddhist sense is all enveloping and comprehensive. There are no half-measures or partly formed ideas, all is contained in the one!*

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