

## IS THE BUDDHIST SELFISH?

One of the objections, most frequently met with, when presenting Buddhism, is this:

“The Buddhist criticizes the Christian for living a moral life only because of his hope of eternal life with God. To do good for this reason is selfishness. But the Buddhist himself acts just as selfishly when he does what is right in order to secure a good rebirth. That is to say, he acts rightly not for the sake of the good, but for the sake of self.”

At first sight, this objection seems justifiable; and for one who is only half-informed about Buddhism, it is sufficient to reject Buddhism altogether. But actually this objection is quite unjustified, and only shows a complete misunderstanding of the nature of Buddhism.

Selfishness means, of course, what the word itself suggest: it is a craving, longing, planning and grasping in the service of self in the service of self-preservation. Selfishness is necessarily bound up with the idea of self-preservation. But good action in the Buddhist sense, is not meant for preserving the self, but for getting free from the self. The Buddhist is not concerned with a self that has been purified and ennobled, but with a self that has to be worked off, worn away, and got rid of. Selfishness is here, not a property that man has, a sort of taint, a stain on the splendour of a shining “self”, but from the point of view of Buddhist insight, man is selfishness itself. And to get rid of selfishness, does not mean in Buddhism that a self should get cured of selfishness and arrive at an “ego” pure and free from selfishness; but it means in the most serious and strictest sense: *to rid oneself of one’s self, to be free of self.*

Doing good is an external symptom. Every symptom has aspects of different significance. It is quite a different thing whether one does good, as in the case of the Christian, in order to become a purified self (a blessed soul), or with the object of doing away with self as does the Buddhist. To speak of the latter attitude as selfishness has no sense.

Besides, if one has understood Buddhism correctly, one will understand that there is no room for an external purpose, for any “in order to”. The Buddhist does not act rightly in order to gain something better, to recover himself in an everlasting form, but something better, to recover himself in an everlasting form, but he discards self because he knows that “to be rid of self” is a definite possibility and hence it becomes a necessity. He knows that this “Rid of Self”

is the fulfilment of the innermost conditions of man's existence, the fulfilment of his ultimate possibilities. Existence is such that it does not allow for the attainment of any (worldly) goal for the sake of which one feels that one exists. Existence is such that it, if rightly understood it tends towards the ending, the ceasing of existence. Hence an "in order to" would be as much out of place here as in the case of a dying flame. The flame does not burn in order to go out; but it becomes extinct because this, too, is included in the condition of existence. For a soul as assumed by the faith religions being-in-existence is natural because it is a necessity; and to live so as to reach a higher level of life is a logical consequence. In the case of a flame, or in the case of life pictured as a flame, existence is not natural because it is not necessary. Here existence is something artificial and it is maintained artificially: and ceasing of existence is the ultimate and highest the deepest and innermost fulfilment of the conditions of existence. The Buddhist does not give up "In order to" give up. By doing so he would forge for himself a new chain that is more subtle than any other. To give up for the sake of giving up, would mean non-willing for the sake of non-willing, whereby one would succumb to 'willing' worse than before. For 'willing' is of such a nature that non-willing is also a form of willing. Willing has no opposite: either it is present or it is not.

The Buddhist does not practise non-willing because he does not WISH to will (or to desire), but because he no longer CAN will (or sense of reality make any willing (as a desire) impossible for him, whether in the form of willing or of non-willing.

Thereby it becomes likewise impossible for him to take up an optimistic attitude towards actuality. The Buddhist is neither an optimist nor a pessimist; he is an 'actualist' a realist. That is to say, he himself is actuality, and by intuitively responding to it, that is to himself, he exhausts the ultimate possibility inherent in actuality, the possibility of cessation; and this, not because he deliberately wills it, but because he has recognized it as the ultimate possibility.

What is true of the goal is also true of the way leading to it. If the Buddhist readily is a Buddhist, he will act rightly not for the sake of a favourable rebirth-ever and again does the Buddha warn against this – but simply because his new insight COMPELS him to act rightly; and the favourable rebirth follows as a natural consequence just as blue sky will appear when the clouds disperse, or like the feeling of comfort after a satisfying meal. Just as one is complying to natural conditions of life, so also the right action of a Buddhist is not means to bring about future comfort, but it is in pursuance of the natural conditions of existence, which, of course, demands a good measure of keen insight to be recognized as such.

Thus the right action of the Buddhist is of a nature that serves, not for the AFFIRMATION OF SELF, but for the giving up of self. For the Buddhist who does not rely on belief but on experience and for whom in his experience all possibility of belief in an external soul has disappeared, there is neither truth IN ITSELF, nor goodness in ITSELF, as absolutes. TRUTH is, for him, nothing but the relinquishing of evil. And that relinquishment of evil is nothing but the relinquishment of self, bit by bit, thread by thread, until finally all is unravelled, crumbling away, extinguished.

If one has one understood thus the right action of a Buddhist and his motive for it, there is no further room, no possibility, for selfishness.

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