



LAMA GOVINDA

Lama Govinda wrote the following piece shortly before he died in January, 1985. The article was originally written as a possible introduction to a proposed book on Buddhism by another author. The piece includes many of Lama's thoughts about Buddhism as he understood it at the end of his long life of study and practice of the Buddha's teachings. Lama's interest in Buddhism began when he was sixteen years old; our next issue will contain more about his life.

ON RIGHT TRANSLATION OF BUDDHIST TERMS

Religion is a form of experience, or more correctly, an expression of life (Erlebnis). Therefore a philologically objective and correct translation is not sufficient to express the essentials of a religion. Religion is a subjective experience which becomes foreign to life if we make it into an object of intellectual observation and judgment. This does not deny that religion also has its objective aspect, but any interpretation by outsiders who belong to a different cultural background is the result of a more or less subjective attitude. And this is all the more the case when they deal with word-symbols of a foreign and probably ancient language, which, like all verbal expressions, contain not only facts, but also feelings that are closely connected with other experiences and associations, which we can detect only in poetry. Therefore it requires an extraordinary degree of sensitivity to translate ancient religious literature without identifying ourselves with the contents and the tradition of a still living religious experience. Unfortunately, this sensitivity is lacking with most translators and interpreters.

Each religion is the mirror of, and the psychological condition in which, a particular part of humanity grew up. It is not a question of what is higher or lower. Important alone is what corresponds to our various states of consciousness. Before we think ourselves in a position to judge, we first should regard all forms of religious experience with respect and we should endeavour to understand them. This is the foundation of all tolerance. The Buddha in his admonition to the Kalamas has clearly outlined what he meant by tolerance. He was the first world-teacher who made this one of the main pillars of his message.

At the same time, we have to be conscious that every religion is subject to constant change, growth, and expansion, and to constant re-evaluation of all its values. When this process comes to an end, religion becomes dogma, philosophy becomes scholasticism, and scholasticism becomes mere tradition from which all life has fled. But if we recognize religion as a living organism, we must try to understand the necessary phases of its development which are the result of its growth.

The beginnings of Buddhism differ from those of all other religions because these beginnings were not based on revelation, or on an existing form of recognized religion, but on a general human experience. The Buddha was not interested in what people believed, or what they thought probable, but in what they did in order to relieve others' suffering as well as their own, and to find a path toward

peace and happiness. He was not a reformer of Vedic tradition, as scholars at one time assumed. Instead, he rejected the main pillars of the Vedic religion, which was based on animal sacrifices and caste distinctions, rather than upon the recognition of ethical values, such as the sacredness of life (ahimsa) and the dignity and self-responsibility of all men, irrespective of their caste (varna) or the color of their skin.

The roots of early Buddhism are therefore not in the Vedic-Brahmanic tradition, but, rather, in the tradition of the Sramanas who remained outside the social order and were known as wandering ascetics who sought for truth and for deliverance from the bonds of religious institutions. The Buddha was known to his contemporaries, and to the following generation, as Mahasramana (Pali: Mahasamana), which explains his reluctance to create a monastic institution with permanent dwelling places and administrative rules and regulations, places of worship and study, etc. But, as his community of followers grew, this institutionalizing became inevitable, and he finally gave in to the requests of his disciples. Just as the Jains did, he also maintained that he belonged to an ancient (pre-vedic) tradition, which continued to survive as an undercurrent, even during the overlordship of the Aryan invaders from the north who had conquered the greater part of India and had created the caste system in order to preserve their superiority.



Concepts like karma, causality, and rebirth, as well as ahimsa (non-violence), and karuna (compassion), concepts which we now think of as "Hinduism," were unknown to the Vedas and were introduced much later under the influence of Buddhism and Jainism. In fact, the word "Hindu" was coined by the Arab scholar and explorer Alberuni as a collective term for all the people beyond the river Sind (Indus). It therefore is wrong to maintain that Buddhism was derived from Hinduism. In fact, the opposite is the case! But it is difficult to overthrow this popular prejudice because previous generations of scholars regarded the Vedic religion as the foundation of all Indian tradition.

After having considered the philological foundations of the Buddhist teachings, it is time to explore the psychological and religious origins and motivations of Buddhism. The Buddha did not demand blind faith from his followers, but rather sincere effort and a selfless life for the sake of the happiness of all living beings, as well as for oneself. His teaching encouraged people "to come and see for yourself!" Open your eyes to the realities of life, be honest with yourself and do not try merely to escape suffering. Instead, try to overcome it within yourself where you will find its origins. What you believe is not important, but what you do is. You are inheritors of your deeds, thoughts, and intentions. In fact, thoughts and intentions are more important than the physical outcome of your deeds. Thoughts and intentions belong to you more than what you call your possessions.

Therefore it is said: "This six cubit body contains the origin and the dissolution of the world." The Buddha did not intend to promulgate a theory about the universe; he wanted, instead, to point out that the only world we can observe and influence is that of our own body in both its physical aspect and as a spiritual organism. He was aware that the functions of our body and our consciousness are not arbitrary phenomena, but follow universal laws, although they may be modified by our attitudes.

In the tantrism of the Vajrayana, we find this idea in an even more pronounced form when it is said that our body not only mirrors the universe, but that it is our ultimate body. Here the realm of consciousness and intuition turns into the realisation of a higher dimension in which we take part when our mind has transcended the limits of the three dimensional world.

Therefore it is said, according to the oldest Buddhist tradition: "Well proclaimed is the law (dharma) by the Enlightened One, visible to all, timeless, profound, comprehensible only to the wise." It

is a significant and characteristic feature of Buddhism that it emphasizes the value of seeing, of direct perception, as a means of intuitive knowledge. While "ditthi," in the sense of "opinions," is to be shunned, "samma ditthi," complete or perfect seeing (not merely a partial or one-sided vision) is the way to the highest realization. In the same way, "dhyana" (jhana) is not what some people explain as "trance"; in fact, it is visualization as a means of direct perception, as opposed to "thinking and reflecting" (vitarka-vicara). The Buddha is never represented with closed eyes. Meditation is not "mystic trance," or aimless speculation, or mushy thinking. Buddhism is based on clarity of mind and thought. Tantric visualization demands clear definition, but not "visionary hallucinations," as modern mystics are apt to believe.

The simplicity of the Buddha's words and of the formulations of early Buddhism confounds the overly intellectual and is comprehensible only to the wise man who has rediscovered his inner unity. However, before we have rediscovered this unity, we follow blindly the all-pervasive force of life, which in itself is neither good nor bad, but which may become one or the other according to our attitude. It is the immanent force of our consciousness which carries us beyond the limitations of our individuality or separateness.

Therefore the first link of the Pratityasamutpada is "avidya," ignorance of the conditions of our all-relatedness, in which nothing can be regarded as separate, or absolute, without relationship to everything else. This ignoring of reality has nothing to do with "stupidity" or lack of intelligence, as has often been assumed, for we are not concerned here with intellectual knowledge, but with subconscious formations (sankhara) which precede the awakening of normal human consciousness (vijñana) in which we do not yet realize our position in the world, but assume ourselves to be different, thus splitting the world into subject and object, mind and matter (nama-rupa), self and others. Out of the dualism arises the further split into the six realms of consciousness (sadayatana), on account of which contact (sparsa) of the senses with their objects becomes possible. On this basis arise feelings (vedana), craving (trnsa) (literally "thirst"), clinging or the urge to possess (upadana), which, in turn, results in the further process of becoming (bhava), birth (jati), old age and death (jara-marana).

The only link of this chain of cause and effect (or in this concatenation of events) which we are able to influence or direct is our consciousness (vijñana), and this enables us to become conscious of ourselves and of our relationship to the world in general, and

of our attitude towards all living beings. That, however, is why the Buddha stresses the importance of meditation, which is the realization of all-encompassing love, compassion, sympathy (sharing the happiness of others) and equanimity (*maitri*, *karuna*, *mudita*, and *upeksha*). The latter has been defined as the faculty of being able to define one's own suffering as unimportant, but it does not mean showing indifference towards the suffering of others. According to the Pali scriptures, *upeksha* is defined as "mental balance" (*tatramajjhata*).

Pratityasamutpada is to be understood not only as a causal nexus, but also as a simultaneously arising concatenation of events which may be conceived either as a successive development in time or as a timeless principle of interrelated conditions. The Buddha opposed neither logical thinking nor the principle of synchronicity, but recognized both ways of thinking, as we can see from the many forms in which he referred to *pratityasamutpada* in his discourses, sometimes leaving out several of the consecutive links. This also corresponds to the literal meaning of the word itself, which is "dependent" (causal) and "simultaneous arising" (*sam-utpada*). Under this latter aspect, even the term "*akaliko*" ("timeless" or "synchronic") becomes plausible, and we understand the Buddha's exhortation when Ananda thought the formula of Dependent Origination was a matter of simple understanding and mere common sense without any deeper meaning.

As long as we are on the level of human thinking, the Buddha maintains the rules of logic. But he knows that the deepest aspects of reality are timeless, and he refuses to give in to any metaphysical speculation, so that even concepts like nirvana and karma lose their metaphysical connotation and, within the structure of Buddhist psychology, are reduced to their original meaning. By popularization of these concepts, nirvana has become a purely quietistic ideal, implying one's "dissolution into the All"; but the Buddha, by contrast, gives us a clear psychological definition, namely, the absence of greed, hatred, and infatuation. Karma is not an unqualified fatalism, in which every action and every happening becomes a fetter which binds us to our past. According to Buddhist understanding, karma means "deed," "action," in the sense of an intentional act with a fully conscious resolve (*cetana*), which creates our pattern of repeating our behavior when similar circumstances arise again. The *Lankavatara Sutra* describes this tendency as "habit-energy," the force of habit, the tendency to repeat the same action automatically unless new motivation has been created, as happens when there is a complete "turning about in the deepest seat of our con-

sciousness." If such a thing were not possible, no liberation would be thinkable. Therefore, the Buddha calls conversion (or the reversal of our will due to honest conviction) the only miracle that deserves the name.

In the same way, he also freed the concept of egohood (or the "I") from being an eternal, unchangeable principle, and considered it to be, instead, a psychological point of reference of the individual consciousness which changes continually according to prevailing circumstances. This inner point of relationship is the necessary precondition for every kind of balanced consciousness and every reasonable action. However, if this so-called "I" becomes an independent and automatically acting principle of uninhibited self assertion, it turns into a cancerous growth which destroys the very organism that it intended to support.

Even if Buddhist psychology rejects the concept of a soul-monad, in the popular sense, it nevertheless emphasizes all that we understand under the word "psyche," that is, all the spiritual and psychic forces of man which make us human beings. Buddhism is not the teaching of "soullessness," but of solidarity and compassion with all living beings, as expressed in the "divine states" (brahmavihara) of meditation.



Nowadays it has become a fashion, even in Buddhist circles, to translate the word "maitri" (Pali: metta) by "friendship," in order to exclude any connection with sex. The latter seems to have become an obsession due to the overemphasizing of this quality, and the tendency of most modern religions to outlaw sexuality. Instead of it being understood that love is a matter of the heart and not of reason or of cold calculation, and that love is a matter of inner sharing and of intimate relationship which involves the whole of our being and goes far beyond a mere friendship or a mere well-wishing, the word maitri has been robbed of its original meaning and has been replaced with a colorless (morally disinfected) expression. The Buddhist definition of "maitri" is:

"Just as a mother protects her child with her own life,
in a similar way we should extend an unlimited heart to
all beings."

Just as "love" has been purged from the Buddhist vocabulary, the word "sankhara" has become the source of misunderstandings and has turned Buddhism into dark pessimism. In this connection even the Dhammapada, the most popular Buddhist scripture, which has been translated into all the major languages of the world, has frequently been quoted as saying: "All is transiency, all is sorrow, all is unreal." The text says: "Sabbe sankhara anicca, Sabbe sankhara dukkha, Sabbe dhamma anatta."

First of all, "Sabbe sankhara" is not "all," or "the whole world," but only our subconscious formations or latent tendencies (conditioned by our past), and, secondly, the original Pali text makes it clear in the third line that all that is real in the ultimate sense (dhamma) is "non-ego". So, the word "anatta" (non-ego or not-self) has simply been omitted (!) and the original meaning of the text has been supplanted by the opinion of the translator (or that of the Upanishads, which were at one time thought by some to be the origin of the opinion of the Buddha). On the basis of such "translations" the whole of Buddhism has been misinterpreted. Finally, under the influence of Schopenhauer's philosophy, to which most of the early interpreters of Buddhism succumbed, the teachings of the Buddha were made into plain pessimism.

But in the same Dhammapada which we quoted above we find verses in the "Canto of Happiness" which give quite a different picture, one which shows us that the ancient Buddhists did not feel that their attitude had anything to do with pessimism:

"Let us be free from hatred and let us live happily among
those who hate. Among men filled with hatred, let us live
free from hatred." (Dhp. 197)

Here it becomes abundantly clear that it is not impermanence which is the root cause of suffering, but greed, hatred and delusion. These three factors make us imagine that we can hold on forever to what we regard as our ego or our mortal "I." Therefore it is said in the same chapter of the Dhammapada:

"Let us live happily, we who call nothing our own. Let us be like the shining gods (abhassara), who are nourished on joy (or 'inspiration': piti)."

To make this exhortation even more justified, each of the above-mentioned root causes of our suffering is followed by the words:

"He who perceives this with a clear mind (or with 'insight') will be freed from all suffering. This is the way of purity."

But even this important statement has been spoiled by some translators who have thought fit to replace the word "nibbindati" by the notion that we should get "fed up" with suffering, instead of overcoming it as the Buddha intended.

How little we can trust even our philologically correct translations becomes evident when we consider such words as "shunyata," "Siddha," "siddhi," etc. The philological equivalent of "shunyata" is "emptiness." However, this is not identical with "nothingness," as has been frequently thought. "No-thingness" would perhaps be more adequate. Emptiness as such is unthinkable. Even what we call a vacuum does not exclude radiations of various forces like magnetism, gravity, light, etc.; it only excludes air, or any other known form of gas.

So, if we speak of emptiness, the question arises: "empty of what?" Buddhism answers: "empty of all designations or preconceived conditions and, therefore, a state of infinite potentiality or primal space." It was this idea which inspired Nagarjuna's philosophy and the subsequent growth of the movement of the Great Vehicle or Great Way (Mahayana), which freed Buddhism from a narrow orthodoxy of purely monkish institutions and opened the way for a universal fellowship comprised of men and women, monks and laymen, scholars and poets, artists and common folk. If this were not the true meaning of emptiness, how could we explain how an abstract and apparently negative term like shunyata could inspire millions of people of many races and carry Buddhism into the farthest reaches of Asia?

Something similar happened with the teachings of the Siddhas, the medieval Buddhist mystics, who lived between the sixth and the tenth centuries, who rejected any kind of orthodoxy. They were poets and

philosophers, monks and laymen, princes and commoners, workers and wandering ascetics, Brahmins and outcasts. They did not recognize social conventions and used the common language in preference to Sanskrit.

Fortunately, the tales of the Siddhas became part of the religious tradition of Tibet and have been preserved in faithful Tibetan translations. The aim of the Siddhas was a realization, which would be attainable by a religious life even under the most unfavorable conditions, thereby allowing any occupation to become the means to perfection. For this reason the Siddhas were called the "Perfect Ones." Grunwedel's first translation of the Siddha stories never seems to have reached the wider public, probably because of his misleading title, which introduced the Siddhas as the eighty-four "sorcerers." Yet he would not have called Buddha, or Christ, a sorcerer, in spite of the fact that many miracles are ascribed to the latter. It is strange that everything which does not correspond to something in a translator's or interpreter's own cultural background is usually represented by him as being from a culture of a lower order.

In the same way, the Buddhist mystery plays have consistently been represented as "Devil Dances," and even the images of Dhyani-Buddhas, which depict the Buddha as the supreme physician, are labelled as "Medicine Buddhas," which creates the impression that we are dealing with something like the "medicine men" of some primitive African tribes.

The Buddha compared himself to a physician and formulated his doctrine as a diagnosis of human suffering, in which the first of his "Noble Truths" represented a fundamental analysis of universal suffering, the second the cause of suffering, the third the remedy of our ills, and the fourth the practical way to apply the remedy. So the Buddha was not only a physician of bodily ailments, but a healer (German: "Heiland," i.e., a "savior") of all human suffering.

In the same way we have to understand that rebirth in Buddhism has a completely different meaning from what is commonly known as the "transmigration of souls." It would be more correct to speak of a continuous transformation of psychic forces, even beyond the destruction of our material body. The same forces that built up our former body, and all its mental and spiritual faculties, now create a new body, freed from all accretions and superfluous accumulations, transferring the flame of life to the germ of a new organism that now develops according to the impulse and the direction given by the character of the past incarnation.



It is like lighting a lamp from another one. The flame does not wander from one lamp to another, by disappearing here and reappearing somewhere else: it merely transfers the impetus or impulse from one source of energy to another. The only difference is that the flame does not transfer the quality of the material on which the flame feeds, but only the heat that is necessary to ignite the new material. But as no simile is perfect, and shows only one particular side of the process one wants to illuminate, we have to bear in mind that our psychic forces are complex, and, at the same time, dependent on our past experiences and our present character, so that the impetus expresses not just the initial direction of our life force, but its qualities as well.

When the wise Nagasena was asked by King Menandros whether or not the person who is reborn is the same person who died in his previous existence, Nagasena replied, "na ca so, na ca anno," "neither the same, nor another one." This is because (as Heraclitos said) "we do not enter the same river twice": not only is the river a differ-

ent one in each moment, but also we ourselves are not the same in two consecutive moments. As the river flows constantly, so do we ourselves. The newly born child is not the same as the grownup person, though the grownup person has become what he is due to his childhood. Identity is one of those abstractions on which we build our logic and all our statistical values, which are merely simplifications, without which no science can exist.

But have we ever seen two identical trees or two absolutely identical human beings or animals? The relationship between childhood and old age rests not on the identity of the person concerned, but on the dependent origination of perpetually changing conditions of life which develop in the direction of their growth.

Man may strive after the blissful state of being, but just because he is striving, he is in the process of becoming. Only when he is capable of releasing the fullness of his being can he transcend the state of becoming. Therefore, the Buddha emphasizes the process of becoming as the law of all life, and the Buddhist psychology speaks of the "bhavanga-sota," the stream of becoming.

The Lankavatara Sutra likewise declares:

"There is a constant stream of becoming, a momentary and uninterrupted change from one state of appearance to another."¹

"Things are not eternal, because the marks of individuality appear and disappear, that is, the marks of self-nature are characterized by (what we call) noneternality.

On the other hand, because things are unborn and are only mind-made, they are in a deep sense eternal."²

The overcoming of suffering was the main object of the Buddha's teaching, and the way to achieve this is the Noble Eightfold Path. But here arises the question: have we to understand this as a way of eight steps, of which each one is higher than the previous one, or as a way that is broad enough to accommodate eight individual paths side by side? Most people prefer the idea of a flight of steps. But how is one then to explain that the first step already presupposes the last and highest step? How can one, without deeper insight into the nature of the world, achieve an impartial (not ego-conditioned) "right view" (samyag drishti), in order to make the right resolve (samyak samkalpa) that leads to ethical behavior

¹Translated by D.T. Suzuki and quoted by Dwight Goddard in his *Buddhist Bible*, Thedford, Vermont, 1938, p. 296.

²*Ibid.*, p. 295.

in words, deeds and livelihood (samyak vak, s. karmanta, s. ajiva), resulting in "right effort and mindfulness" (samyak vyayama, samyak smriti) and culminates in the perfect realization of samadhi?

The word "samyak" (Pali: "samma," Tibetan: "yang-dag"), which generally is rendered as "right," has a far greater importance than that. This is because "right" and "wrong" are relative concepts, which depend merely on the view point of the observer, but have no value in themselves: what appears right to one person may be wrong to another. But "samyak" has a much deeper and wider meaning. It signifies a state of mind in which our whole being is involved and united.

Would it not be better to translate this word according to its original meaning, as it is revealed by the language which was used in the time in which the teaching of the Buddha was remembered and committed to writing? The term "Samyaksambuddha" shows us that the word "right" does not fit into the context, for the Buddha is not a "rightly" Enlightened One, but, rather, a perfectly or completely Enlightened One. This is also confirmed by the Tibetan translation of "samyak" as "yang-dag," which implies the idea of the Middle Way, avoiding all extremes, being unprejudiced and open minded.

It is this attitude of the Buddha which became the foundation of his teaching and which is represented as the highest step of the



Eightfold Path: samadhi. It is the complete unification and integration of our being. In order to achieve this we must first attain a perfect unity of all our psychic faculties. And if we have thus established harmony within ourselves, we have to course the Eightfold Path on ever ascending higher planes of experience and realization.

In order to comprehend this we have to have a clear conception of the last steps of the Eightfold Path, namely, wholehearted mindfulness and complete one-pointedness of purpose. All these qualities have concentration as their root. But "samadhi" is much more than simple concentration. Every bank clerk has to have perfect concentration, but that does not mean that he is a saint. In the same way, "samadhi" is not just a state of tranquility, hypnosis, deep sleep, or a self-induced trance.

In the West, the words "concentration," "contemplation" and "meditation" have become almost synonymous. But there is a vast difference in the terminology of Buddhism. Effort is the one-pointed exertion of the will to abstain from harming others and to promote all that which is beneficial to others and to ourselves. Contemplation is the attentive observation of our thoughts and the mental visualisation of our aims. Samadhi, however, is more than what is commonly regarded as meditation, in the sense of intellectual activity, or thinking and reflecting on a given subject. It is the integration of subject and object, the becoming one of the meditator and the object of his meditation.

However, one thing remains the common basis for all these steps: they are characterized by the word "samyak," which means that we are to employ all psychic and spiritual faculties. They consist not only of merely moral and intellectual motives, but are the expression of a well balanced mind, undisturbed by momentary intentions and expectations. They are the expression of our innermost convictions. Samyak excludes any kind of one-sidedness.

"Samyag Drishti," therefore, signifies more than what is commonly called "right views," or the acceptance of a certain set of recognized religious ideas. It means a perfectly open, unprejudiced attitude, which enables us to "see things as they are" (yatna-bhutam), i.e., not only from one side (and especially not from our own!), but from all sides, without bias, without suppressing what appears to us disagreeable. Instead of closing our eyes to all that creates suffering for ourselves and others, we have to recognize its cause. And if we realize that this cause lies also in ourselves, we shall be able to transcend it.

However, he who tries to close his eyes to this fact due to indifference, or so-called "detachment" (in the sense of cutting oneself off from all human emotions), misses the very essence of the Buddha's message. Detachment means non-possessiveness, but not callousness. The selfless but warm love which is able to share the joys and sufferings of others is what the Buddha calls "cetovimukti" and the "liberation of the heart" and the realisation of wisdom (prajna vimukti).



The illustrations for this article are drawings by Lama Govinda based on Tibetan originals.