

# Reflections on Buddhism

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It is a well known fact that the earliest effect of the impact of the Buddhistic *sutras* upon the minds of Western scholars led to the interpretation that the end of the Buddhistic discipline was simple annihilation. This grows in part out of the fact that the etymological meaning of the word 'Nirvana' is blown out or extinguished. And furthermore, the emphasis of the conception of *Shunyata* or *Shunya*, which means emptiness philosophy or the voidness conception, also tended to confirm this; and typically, since every conception upon which we can have a conceptual grasp was denied, this fact also tended to confirm that the objective was simple annihilation. If both being and non-being are denied, it does seem as though we have nothing left upon which to hold; however, one who has delved in deeply into the substance of the *sutras* and has grasped something of the inner meaning of the teachings of the Great Buddha, and of those Arhats who followed him and continued in the same channel of thought and effort, leads to the conclusion that this is a misinterpretation, that annihilation in the sense of a something or somewhat becoming pure nothingness or nothing at all is not the true meaning. As a matter of fact, this would be an impossibility. The idea of that which was distinguishable as in some sense something becoming nothing at all is a notion containing an impossibility. It is as meaningless as the notion of a barren woman's son; something cannot become nothing at all.

Nonetheless, there is fundamental to the meaning of Buddhism something that does involve the notion of extinction. To determine what this is will call for a certain subtlety of analysis. Buddhism characteristically denies the permanency of the notions of self. It denies not only that there is a permanent ego; it denies even that there is such a thing as a permanent *Atman*, or *Paramatman*. It denies that there is such a thing as a permanent entityhood. It denies that there is at the root of all something that we could call an individual or a person. It is, therefore, godless and selfless.

Now, the self carries not alone the implications of self-interest, of my being distinct from other entities and that I have interests that are at variance with the interests of other selves—the sense of selfness that is correlated with selfishness. Buddhism, in the last analysis, involves a deeper interpretation of the self which is denied than this. Ultimately, it aims at selflessness, which is a negation of both selfishness and its dualistic opposite, altruism. The self, in the epistemological sense, which is the most important meaning of the notion, stands as the subject to consciousness in our ordinary modes of cognition. As a matter of fact, we cannot imagine ordinarily of how it is possible to be conscious without there being a center that is conscious. This center, in the philosophical sense, is what we mean by the self or the subject to consciousness. It's fundamental. In fact, the most fundament part of subject-object consciousness, the consciousness which is relative and is the one consciousness or kind of consciousness with which we are ordinarily familiar. All of our relationships in the *sangsaric* field, which is the universe of objects or the evolution, is organized on this principle of a self or subject aware of a

world about, of a field of objects, and so on. This is the essence of what is known as dualistic consciousness. The denial of the self in Buddhism includes the denial of the subject to consciousness and along with it the denial of the phenomenal universe that corresponds as the opposite of this subject to consciousness. If our only understanding of consciousness is of this sort, then the extinction of the subject to consciousness and the world about, which is the object of consciousness, is equivalent to annihilation.

But now, let us pierce into this subject more deeply. There are three elements in the pattern of the subject to consciousness, and the object of consciousness, and the consciousness itself. Buddhism does not deny the existence of Pure Consciousness. This is the important point and probably the most difficult to grasp by those who are familiar with the analysis of our ordinary relative consciousness. One must now conceive not of entities in any sense, either conceived of as selves, or individuals, or personalities, divine or mundane, one must not conceive of these as primary and original, but rather as existing only in a derivative sense. In a derivative sense there are creatures. In a primary sense there is no such thing as a god, a self, individuals or an individual, personalities, or creatures. There is only the universal, primordial, uncreated, unmade, Consciousness which is eternally pure, unsullied, and unsulliable. From this consciousness are derived the entities. But entities are born, and by the law, that which becomes or is born is subject to death, to the passing away, to the ceasing to be. Only that which is unborn is eternal, and that which is unborn is what we mean by Consciousness-without-an-object-and-without-a-subject, that which in Tibetan terminology is known as *Rig-pa*.

Now, he who has attained to the state of *Nirvana* has ceased to be a self. He has reached to a point where he has had the relative consciousness blown out. He's not conscious in the sense of a self aware of any phenomena whatsoever, but he has become fused with Universal Consciousness, Universal, Primordial, Pure, Eternal Consciousness from which not only the universe of objects, but even space and time and law are derived. This Universal Consciousness, which is the Great Container of all that is, may be symbolized by the notion of a Great Space because it is the container of all. It is something that is not conditioned by anything whatsoever. It is not an object and it is not a subject, but objectivity and subjectivity are potential in it; but both of these are subject to the law of becoming which also implies the law of decay.

Now, in an enlightening Realization one may find his individuated consciousness dropping away and himself flowing into the Universal. In this he is facing the experience of what is an essential death or annihilation of a former kind of consciousness, and in that sense something has been blown out or annihilated. But this annihilation is not that of something finite becoming zero—an impossibility—but, on the contrary, it is the condition in which the mask of finitude drops away and one finds himself identical with the Infinite or the Eternal. Only a restriction or imprisonment was annihilated, and consciousness flowed forth into the immeasurable depths of the Infinite. There is an annihilation here to be sure, but it is an annihilation of a restriction, not a finite becoming zero, but an awakening to the Eternal, both in the sense that includes the past and the future. And this gives to us an added meaning in connection with the Great Renunciation.

I cannot conceive of any individual who is brought face to face with this experience who would not regard it as the most precious of all values. The Great Renunciation, therefore, is a requirement that one should forego this great richness where

he drops the burden of selfhood, of individuality, of personality to flow forth into the unrestricted Eternal. The Renunciation is a forgoing of this and a holding on to that which we call selfhood, individuality, and personality. The reason for doing this given in *The Voice of the Silence* is that thereby it is possible to work towards the redemption of all creatures. But the notion of redemption involves the notion of some great error that needs correcting. I think we may see that there is a purpose that is deeper than this, that the retaining of selfhood, individuality, and personality serves an end in the evolution apart from any correction of an error. Individuation can be maintained by an act of will for a far greater time than would be possible through the action of the law. Individuation has an office to perform. But the essential metaphysical meaning of Buddhism is that however much entityhood may be produced and maintained, ultimately it is all dissolved into the Universal, and the Universal is the only thing that is original, uncreated, unmade, and eternal. What is involved in the annihilation of *Nirvana* is the annihilation of finiteness and the flowing forth into the re-cognition of the Eternal. It is not a something becoming nothing at all. It is a prisoner surrounded by the walls of his prison losing those walls.

Now, the difficulty, practically, in spreading the message of Buddhism to mankind is that humanity has become attached to the walls of a restricted consciousness. Restriction is loved for its own sake; that is the meaning of attachment. He who loses the walls has lost only a bondage and attained Realization of the Infinite.

Within the body of the literature produced by those who list themselves as Buddhists, there are statements which to the casual purview appear to be incompatible. This presents to us a problem of very considerable importance. If we start with the assumption that two or more statements of this sort are authentic, then instead of seeking to prove that one position is false while the other is true, we proceed to find in what way the two statements can be reconciled, then it would appear that we then would have the key to a deeper understanding. An instance of this which has come forcibly before my attention lies in a certain quotation extracted from *The Mahatma Letters* and written by the one known as Koot Hoomi and a contrasting statement in the *sutra* produced by Padma Sambhava. I shall now proceed to a consideration of the problem here presented. I shall read a paragraph from p. 56 of *The Mahatma Letters* which is as follows:

We do not bow our heads in the dust before the mystery of mind—for we *have solved it ages ago*. Rejecting with contempt the theistic theory we reject as much the automaton theory, teaching that states of consciousness are produced by the marshalling of the molecules of the brain; and we feel as little respect for that other hypothesis—the production of molecular motion by consciousness. Then what do we believe in? Well, we believe in the much laughed at *phlogiston*, and in what some natural philosophers would call *nisus*, the incessant though perfectly imperceptible (to the ordinary senses) motion or [effects] efforts one body is making on another—the pulsations of inert matter—its life. The bodies of the Planetary spirits are formed of that which Priestley and others called Phlogiston and for which we have another name—this essence in its highest seventh state forming that matter of which the organisms of the highest and purest Dhyanas are composed, and in its lowest or densest form

(so impalpable yet that science calls it energy and force) serving as a cover to the Planetaries of the 1st or lowest degree. In other words, we believe in MATTER alone, in matter as visible nature and matter in its invisibility as the invisible omnipresent omnipotent Proteus with its unceasing motion which is its life, and which nature draws from herself since she is the great whole outside of which nothing can exist. For as Bilfinger truly asserts, “motion is a manner of existence that flows necessarily out of the essence of matter; that matter moves by its own peculiar energies; that its motion is due to the force which is inherent in itself; that the variety of motion and the phenomena that result proceed from the diversity of the properties of the qualities and of the combinations which are originally found in the primitive matter” of which nature is the assemblage and of which your science knows less than one of our Tibetan Yak-drivers of Kant’s metaphysics.<sup>1</sup>

If we consider by themselves the words in the above quotation, namely, “. . . we believe in MATTER alone . . .” this would seem to be a statement from a rank, thoroughgoing materialist; yet, in the context of other statements, this is evidently not the case. But something here needs to be explained. Let us consider the reference to phlogiston. Phlogiston is defined as the matter of fire. It is an old conception belonging to some of the earliest efforts of Western man to evolve a science, and it was supposed that when a material object was burned, that this matter of fire was released, that something was taken out of the original matter. Our present view is different, for we regard fire, in the ordinary chemical sense, as a process of oxidation which involves a combining of oxygen with the substance of the burning object. However, is phlogiston the word which Koot Hoomi would have used if he were writing in our present day? It must be remembered that this letter was written around 1881; and then we must take into account the state of our Western science as of that date. Some fifteen or sixteen years were yet to pass before the discovery of the Roentgen or x-rays, and even a little longer before the development of atomic energy, the conceptions that led to intra-atomic physics; and, as we know today, it is possible to reduce matter to energy, and even certain experiments have been produced which result in the materialization of electromagnetic energy or light into matter which has mass. We, thus, conceive of matter and energy as in a sense interchangeable, that they belong to a larger more comprehensive conception, and our term today of that which is invariant, as between a state of matter and a state of energy, is ‘energy-momentum’. When matter is destroyed as matter, as in an atomic explosion, there is a production of intense heat and light. The two manifest aspects of fire. This is fire in a different sense from that of chemical combustion, but nonetheless is quite properly called fire. I therefore would put the question, does not Koot Hoomi mean something more akin to that which we now understand in subatomic physics than the old conception of phlogiston? No doubt in his day that was the only available conception that was indigenous to our Western science.

Now, what do we mean by ‘matter’? In that day of the early ’80s, the conceptions of science were quite crude. There was the conception of the persistence or conservation

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<sup>1</sup> A. T. Barker, ed., *The Mahatma Letters* (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1923), 56.

of matter and the conception of the conservation of force, these two being regarded as two separate orders, whereas today we would speak of the conservation of matter-force, taken as a complex unity. Thus, matter means something different to our consciousness today, at least to the scientific consciousness today, as compared to what it meant back in the early '80s. But if we go into the general conception of matter that is present in *The Mahatma Letters* as we peruse it as a whole, though it is very difficult to come to a clear understanding of what is there meant, no doubt because there were not Western concepts to contain it, nonetheless, the matter of Koot Hoomi is obviously not the matter of the then modern Western materialists.<sup>2</sup>

Before we go any further along this line, let us consider the contrasting quotation from the *sutra* written by Padma Sambhava. The quotation is on page 203 of *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, and it is one simple line: “All hail to the One Mind that embraces the whole *Sangsara* and *Nirvana*.”<sup>3</sup> And, again, take this quotation on page 207: “The whole *Sangsara* and *Nirvana*, as an inseparable unity, are one’s mind.”<sup>4</sup> And in the footnote connected with this it is stated: “This aphorism expounds most succinctly the ultimate teaching of the Mahayana.”<sup>5</sup>

Here, too, a clarification is needed. One thing which is very clear is that the ‘One Mind’ as here presented does not have the same meaning as the word ‘mind’ has in modern psychological usage, a point which was developed at considerable length by Dr. Carl G. Jung in his “Psychological Commentary” in the first part of this book. And he pointed out there that the modern psychologist views the mind as simply a psychic function which is not competent beyond the field of ordinary human experience. He there, however, points out that the One Mind of the text does correspond more truly to our psychological conception of the collective unconscious, and we may, therefore, translate the One Mind as consciousness, as is done by Evans-Wentz himself. It is, therefore, a different use of a term, and is one of the reasons why I avoid the word ‘mind’ as much as possible because of the ambiguity of its reference. If we translate the One Mind as Pure Consciousness, in the sense of *Rig-pa*, as it is defined on page 96 of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, we have, then, the conception of a primordial, uncreated, unmade, ultimately pure, unsullied, and unsulliable principle which is the root of all that is. The consciousness in the ordinary sense, which is there called *Shes-rig*, namely, the consciousness which is aware of phenomena—which is not the case in the sense of *Rig-pa* that is a purely spiritual consciousness not aware of phenomena, not consisting of a purely cognitive function—in that case the One Mind becomes a Root Consciousness, the *Alaya Vijnana* of other Buddhists texts.

Here, then, we have matter, in one case, viewed as the all in all, and consciousness in a pure form, in the other case, as the all in all. From the standpoint of matter as the all in all, which here should be regarded as *Svabhavat* or *Mulaprakriti* or

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<sup>2</sup> Bear in mind this audio recording was made in 1971 and Wolff is here referring to the 1880s.

<sup>3</sup> W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 203.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

*Akasha*, from that point of view consciousness appears as derivative. From the other point of view where we have the one, pure, original Consciousness conceived as without an object and without a self from which a subordinate consciousness is derived which is relative and represents a relationship between a subject, or self, cognizing a world, or phenomena, which in its turn is viewed as derivative. Here there is a problem of reconciliation, and for this the following quotation from *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, in the “Proem” and in the third edition, p. 43, consider the following:

Parabrahman, the One Reality, the Absolute, is the field of Absolute Consciousness, *i.e.*, that Essence which is out of all relation to conditioned existence, and of which conscious existence is a conditioned symbol. But once that we pass in thought from this (to us) Absolute Negation, duality supervenes in the contrast of Spirit (or Consciousness) and Matter, Subject and Object.

Spirit (or Consciousness) and Matter are, however, to be regarded not as independent realities, but as the two symbols or aspects of the Absolute, Parabrahman, which constitute the basis of conditioned Being whether subjective or objective.<sup>6</sup>

Now, it is entirely possible that these words were written by the same Koot Hoomi that wrote the paragraph in *The Mahatma Letters* quoted earlier, since he and his brother along with H. P. Blavatsky were the writers of this volume. This, then, must be taken in conjunction with the quotation from *The Mahatma Letters*, and it here suggests that there are two ways of approaching the Ultimate and one of the ways is through Substance and the other through Consciousness; and, therefore, there would be an enormous difference between *sutras* written from the one point of view or from the other point of view. For myself, I much prefer the psychological approach through Consciousness, and that is implied here in the *sutra* of Padma Sambhava. Turn to page 214 and consider the section under the “Yoga of Introspection.”

The One Mind being verily of the Voidness and without any foundation, one’s mind is, likewise, as vacuous as the sky. To know whether this be so or not, look within thine own mind.

Being of the Voidness, and thus not to be conceived as having beginning or ending, Self-Born Wisdom has in reality been shining forever, like the Sun’s essentiality, itself unborn. To know whether this be so or not, look within thine own mind.

Divine Wisdom is undoubtedly indestructible, unbreakable, like the ever-flowing current of a river. To know whether this be so or not, look within thine own mind.

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<sup>6</sup> H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* (Wheaton, Ill.: The Theosophical Press, Wheaton, 1893), 43.

Being merely a flux of instability like the air of the firmament, objective appearances are without power to fascinate and fetter. To know whether this be so or not, look within thine own mind.

All appearances are verily one's own concepts, self-conceived in the mind, like reflections seen in a mirror. To know whether this be so or not, look within thine own mind.

Arising of themselves and being naturally free like the clouds in the sky, all external appearances verily fade away into their own respective places. To know whether this be so or not, look within thine own mind.<sup>7</sup>

This approach is known as the psychological approach and is the one which is natural to myself for it is a search based upon self-analysis; and the validity of such an approach rests upon the fundamental assumption that the macrocosm is reproduced in the microcosm and, therefore, by a search in the microcosm one may discover a macrocosmic truth. The Ultimate, thus, would appear to be Consciousness-Substance, and the approach to it can be on either side.

Another point to keep in mind in contrasting the position presented in *The Mahatma Letters* from that which is presented in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*<sup>8</sup> is this, that in *The Mahatma Letters* the interest is primarily focused in the evolution, in the process of *Sangsara*, in the processes of the world about; whereas, the orientation in *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* is a focusing on the escape from the *Sangsara* and an entering into the *nirvanic* state as a release from suffering. In general, in so far as I am familiar with them, the Buddhistic *sutras* emphasize the escape from suffering by the attainment of *Nirvana*, either in the purely individualistic sense of the Hinayana or of the wider world-sense of the Mahayana. There would then be the question, does this position contain all the truth? The standpoint presented in *The Mahatma Letters* and in *The Secret Doctrine* is that the evolution does have a value and that escape from suffering is not the whole of the Buddhistic story.

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<sup>7</sup> Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, 214-216.

<sup>8</sup> Wolff apparently meant to say "The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation."