

Tantra and Zen Buddhism

Part 2 of 6

Franklin Merrell-Wolff

June 1974

I wish to introduce at this point an interlude of discussion which is not specifically connected with our main thesis, the discussion of Tantra and of the Zen Buddhism. A point has developed in my mind connected with the more logic or philosophical aspect of Buddhism—connected especially with features that have produced, at least in the Western mind, the greater amount of difficulty.

It is characteristic of the Buddhist philosopher to say that ultimate reality is neither existence nor nonexistence, neither being nor nonbeing; and this can be carried on throughout all of the possible substantive conceptions that exist. It follows the abstract logical pattern of saying that the ultimate reality is not *a* and not *not-a*. This is especially developed by the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna in the famous statement that ultimate reality is not *being* and not *not-being*; it is not both *being* and *not-being*; and it is not neither *being* or *not-being*. The first impact, at least upon an Occidental mind, of this statement is to interpret the statement as meaning the announcement of an absolute nihilism, that there is nothing at all, that in the last analysis the real is only a blank of absolute non-consciousness, of absolute non-existence, non-being, and not the opposites of these either. It produces in the mind a sense of nothing-at-all-ness. That is its immediate impact, but some time ago in reflecting upon this, it dawned upon me that the statement was not really related to the reality *per se*, but rather was an epistemological confession. In other words, that it was a negating of conceptual representation and not a negating of the essentiality. Whereas in the first case we get the impression of a nihilism, in the second case we get the impression of a thoroughgoing intellectual suicide; but the further step that came to me just recently consists in something quite different from this.

Just last evening there came back to the foreground of my memory a philosophic conception which is quite ancient in the history of Western thought. It was the conception *tertium quid*, having the literal meaning of the “third somewhat” and in its original usage had the definition of, “Something neither mind nor matter; especially, an idea regarded as not a mere modification of the mind nor a purely external thing in itself;” and thus leading to a second meaning, which is the one that concerns us, “Something mediating between essentially opposite things.”¹ And that hit a spark in my mind. In the Buddhist statement you’ll find references to this which is regarded as ultimate reality in the form of *shunyata* and of *tathata*. *Shunyata* is usually translated by the words ‘emptiness’ and ‘voidness’, and *tathata* by the word ‘suchness’. Now, these terms ordinarily do not arouse a satisfactory meaning in the mind of the Western thinker. The term ‘emptiness’ or ‘voidness’ in the Western definition of the term really means nothing-at-all, and yet in

¹ William Dwight Whitney, ed., *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopaedia*, vol. 8 (New York, Century Co., 1911), 6249.

Buddhists works one finds a distinction made between “emptiness” as meaning nothing-at-all and “the emptiness,” which is not nothing-at-all, implying that the original term ‘*shunyata*’ is not adequately translated by these terms. And that may explain the difficulty, since we have no authorization in our language for employing terms like ‘emptiness’ and ‘voidness’ in any other sense than that of nothing-at-all-ness; and this may well point up a difficulty inherent in all translation of Oriental conceptuality into Western terms, that there’s something missed in the process, that we move in orders of conceptuality which are not commensurable with each other. Now, the term ‘*tathata*’ probably is less objectionable, but ‘suchness’ doesn’t tell one much of anything, nor is it supposed to, I would gather. Nonetheless, I think we can get down to a meaning that is simpler than this. And let us do so by an analysis of the fundamental logical dichotomy that is a part of Aristotelian logic.

This dichotomy takes the form of the statement that all things whatsoever are either *a* or *not-a*, where *a* is treated as a variable that can take any value whatsoever. You can replace it with any possible concept and our universe of discourse would make the same assertion with the substitution that it does with the original abstract entities known as *a* and *not-a*. Now, it is characteristic of Aristotelian logic to deny that there is a *tertium quid* lying between the *a* and the *not-a*, that it contains all that possibly can be, and if you prove that a certain entity is not in the class *a*, then of necessity it falls in the class *not-a*. The point which I wish to bring out here is that analyzing this form, it is easy to see that there is in fact a *tertium quid* between these two that is recognizable, and we can introduce meaningful pointer conceptions to represent it. Let us consider what our universe of discourse is. It is a pattern in our conceptual consciousness. It is not pure reality as it is in itself. It is my idea. I contain it. In fact, it includes neither the subject to consciousness nor the consciousness itself, but is only a statement concerning objects contained within consciousness and cognized by the subject. Consciousness and the subject are not contained within the two zones of the dichotomy. Therefore, both consciousness and the subject to consciousness are part and parcel of the *tertium quid*. This gives us something more definite into which we can sink our intellectual teeth, as it were, as compared to terms such as ‘suchness’ and ‘voidness’.

The universe of all possible objects, both perceptual and conceptual, constitutes a multiplicity which is contained within the unity of my cognition. In that way, we have in one sense organized a unified system of the many, but we have produced a new dichotomy or duality, namely, the duality of the many on one side and of the unity on the other, and have therefore not attained the ultimate. We can say concerning this duality the same that the Buddhists say of the duality consisting of *Sangsara* and *Nirvana*, that it is the highest duality which in turn must be transcended. That transcendence is achieved by the integration of the manyness of the object with the unification of the cognizing subject in the Pure Consciousness itself; and thus we have in the sense of this Pure Consciousness that which may very well correspond to *Paranirvana*. We have arrived at that which in the language of Shankara is called the *not-one* and the *not-many*. That which is the *not-one* and the *not-many*, I call Consciousness-without-an-object-and-without-a-subject; and this replaces functionally the conceptions of voidness and suchness that are found in traditional Buddhism. We may say that when terms perform the same logical function, they are essentially identical, and thus Consciousness-without-an-object-and-without-a-subject is identical with voidness and suchness, but has the

advantage of arousing in us a meaningfulness that is very intimate and so obvious that it is easily overlooked. This, I believe, gives us something into which we can place our intellectual teeth.

In the system produced here, the sum total of all possible objects, both perceptual and conceptual, replaces the conception of *Sangsara*; and the conception of the subject to consciousness, or the Self in an epistemological sense, corresponds to the *nirvanic* state; and that the Pure Consciousness, which is Consciousness-without-an-object-and without-a-subject, corresponds to the conception of *Paranirvana*. So we may use these conceptions as logically equivalent to the conceptions of *Sangsara*, *Nirvana*, and *Paranirvana* whether or not they are otherwise essentially identical.

Certain thoughts have come to my mind which would seem to justify another interlude. These are thoughts connected with the Buddhist doctrine of suffering. This doctrine is very fundamental, and to understand what is meant a list of the various meanings which are attributed to the conception of suffering may be of interest to us. They are the giving rise to disappointment, disillusion, discontent, longing, desire, aversion, loss, sorrow, anxiety, shame, pain, decay, illness, death, and many more. The sense of the unsatisfactoriness of life in the world reaches a point of very poignant force as one advances in the *sadhana*, so that there is ultimately a strong *vairagya* or disgust for all things in the *Sangsara*, or the world of all objects, or the domain of the evolution. I'm well familiar with this experience. The objectionableness of life here is one of the factors that leads to the quest. We might call it the negative factor, the whip; the positive factor being the aspiration for Enlightenment. But I recently made a re-analysis of my own experience with respect to this that is called suffering. I do not find that it applies to the whole of the experience in the world here, at least in my own case. To be sure, there is all of this negative quality to be found in the life in the world. But long ago, even at the age of adolescence, the world of thought awakened to me, and in going over that world, which has proven to be the dominant one in my own consciousness, it has persisted up to this day, and I cannot say that this domain is characterized by suffering. What is characterized by suffering is the vital-physical domain, the domain of outer life, which does fit in my own experience the pattern defined by the Buddhists. But the domain of conceptual thought has not been colored by suffering at all, even before the breakthrough on August 7, 1936. It has been a domain of adventure, of discovery, of a sense of victory. And when there has been failure in achieving advance, that has proven to be only a postponement and not a cause for suffering. It has been a well-nigh uniformly happy experience even, as I said, in the movement before the breakthrough. This would tend to cause me to modify the theory of suffering to the effect that it is a description of the vital-physical life, not of the conceptual processes that belong to the domain of conceptual cognition, which is one of uniform, or variable even, interest.

If one fails to solve a problem now, I have found that in time it is ultimately resolved, so that the experience is one of victory placed upon victory and productive of essential happiness uncolored by suffering in any significant degree. One may have the experience of pain, even, produced by overly intense concentration, but that is a matter of essentially trivial importance—nothing sufficient to force one to seek a release. On the contrary, I have found that the prospect which lies before the conceptual consciousness as it faces the adventure here even in this world is one of fundamental optimism and not of

pessimism. I am indeed fully pessimistic with respect to the vital-physical zone with its irrational contradictions, its heavings, and losses. I fully grant that the satisfactions in the vital-physical are small compared to the disillusionments connected with it, but I cannot say the same of the life of mind. In my own experience, it has been a happy experience. It doesn't reach to the altitudes that are attained by the breakthrough that is truly transcendent, but the journey is not a painful one from the standpoint of the thought search. It is a delightful adventure. These considerations are indicating to me that a modification of the theory of suffering is indicated.

This may be an appropriate time to produce a preliminary statement concerning a final objective in this discourse, namely, that of the relationship of type psychology with respect to yogic method or orientation. We know today that not all men have the same kind of personal psychology and that valuations, or orientations, or modes of approach towards different objectives are quite variable in connection with the individual psychology. What we know as a result of the research in this field is virtually this, that there are very few statements that are universally valid for all men, and that on the contrary, beside our common base of something which is common with respect to every human being whatsoever, is generally of relative unimportance when we are concerned with the movement of the individual consciousness. No doubt, there is an anatomy and functional characteristics that are true of all entities that can be called human; but beyond that, we have a vast variation in the individual psychologies, and these are important in all directions. Thus, for instance, a totally adequate governmental system would have to take into account differences of individual psychology really to be just. There would have to be recognized a different system of freedoms and responsibilities for the different types for a governmental system to be truly just. The same thing applies in the fields of therapy, as another example. In general, the food of one man may be the poison of another. The treatment that is valid with respect to one man with respect to a given therapeutic problem may be quite different from the treatment that is valid with respect to another type of individual. And so on through the whole system of social valuations and attitudes. A system of society emphasizing the collective principle, for instance, may open the door to expansive self-fulfillment with respect to one or one group of types and be constrictive with respect to another group of types. Failure to take into account considerations of this sort leads to a tendency of revolution, even. A organization that may be currently existing is favorable to a certain type and they prosper in it, while other types or type groups have the experience of being repressed and denied an opportunity for fulfillment. This builds up, then, an urge to overthrow the established order on the part of those who feel repressed; whereas, if this principle were borne in mind in the organization of a society, there could be a more stable type of organization.

Well, this has a bearing also upon the problem of yogic method, and a standpoint which is perfectly valid with respect to a given psychological type or type group may be oppressive and ineffective with respect to another type group. Now, when I made my report concerning the experience in the domain of conceptual thought, I'm almost certain that I have made a report that's valid with respect to a type group but not with respect to certain other type groups. It is relative, therefore. There is a temptation, which I find all though the literature, to regard that particular form of yogic practice which is valid for myself and my type group, a tendency to universalize this particular form and say that it is the practice and attitude that must be attained by all men. I suspect there is a bit of ego

in this, but fundamentally it reveals a lack of adequate psychological understanding, and this fault I would like to see corrected. Thus, for instance, while I am critical of certain forms of yoga, it is not because I regard those forms as having no validity, they may indeed be highly valid for the appropriate type group, and yet not valid for other type groups; and very often I find myself belonging in the other type groups. My objection is to the universalization of a limited position, an only partially valid position; and bear in mind, I admit the same principle with respect to the yogic forms which I have found valid. I find them valid for a type group of which I am a member. Now, this has a bearing upon the relative position of conceptuality and sensuality in the organization of man, and this I will enter into more fully later.

We have now reached the point where I think we may enter into a discussion of points brought out in the quotation made earlier from *The Tantric Mysticism of Tibet* by John Blofeld. One will note this fact, that the two forms of yoga recognized in that quotation, and apparently the only forms entertained in this volume, are Zen and Tantra—and Tantra in this case in the form of Tibetan Buddhistic Tantra. Yoga in other senses apparently are not discussed in this book; in particular, we do not find the approach which is evident in the *Bhagavad Gita*, and also in the yogic theories of Sri Aurobindo, or again in the treatment of Shankara in his commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gita*.² These are the *Trimarga* consisting of *jnana yoga*, *karma yoga*, and *bhakti yoga* referred to earlier. Here only do we find the forms known as Zen and Tantra, and there is quite a different approach to the whole subject of yoga implied in this. Both take a negative position towards the conceptual mind, as for instance, in calling it monkey mind, and in viewing the use of concepts for the purpose of destroying conceptuality, as would be implied in the quotation from the thought of Nagarjuna. The attitude towards the rational side of man here is negative, in a sense in which it is not negative with respect to the perceptual, sensuous, or aesthetic side of man. We will discuss this more fully later. It claims to ascend above conceptuality. Now, if yoga is successful, it most certain does ascend above conceptuality, but also as I have found it even more emphatically ascends above perceptuality, or the sensual side of man; and here is a point of major importance which will also be discussed later. The implication is that a denigration that falls upon conceptuality does not likewise fall upon the aesthetic aspect of man. That seems to be regarded more sympathetically. And there's a large question brought forth here, and in this connection I would refer you to Northrop's book *The Meeting of East and West* where an analysis of this problem has been made; and while I have considered this matter on other tapes, I will reconsider it here for the purposes of our present discussion.³

Northrop produced a very competent and sympathetic analysis of the orientation of the Oriental mind especially as represented in the Far Eastern mind. The point made in the book, in simple terms, is this: that the emphasis of the Eastern mind is placed upon the aesthetic component, whereas the Western mind places its emphasis upon what he calls the theoretic component. I would prefer to call this the logico component. Now, while I find that in the Tantra there is not a complete rejection of the logico component,

² Wolff may have meant to say, “. . . in his *Commentaries on the Brahma Sutras*.”

³ See the audio recordings “Mathematics, Philosophy, and Yoga,” part 5, and “General Discourse on the Subject of My Philosophy.”

but there is a subordination of the logic component to methods that are sympathetic with the aesthetic component. Now, there is no objection in principle to this because here we have a use of method that fits a certain type of human being. The only possible objection is in the form of saying that other types of human being whose consciousness is not so oriented are kept outside the magic circle—a position which I regard as most emphatically false and unjust. That would be the point.

Now, what is meant by the aesthetic component? It is that side which we identify as oriented to that which is sensual in man, or sensuous, it may be a better term, that which I experience through the senses. An orientation to drama, which manifests as in the use of ritual and ceremony, the employment of art forms in the sense of plastic art and of musical art, and perhaps even the use of other sense forms is emphasized here. We can see how that would logically follow if the orientation is to the sensuous component in man. And in the case of Zen Buddhism, we have another method for implementing this accentuation. It is in the form of the use of certain conundrums which cannot be analyzed and resolved by rational means. It tends toward an arousal of what we might call “aesthetic intuition.” I make this distinction because intuition is not restricted to an aesthetic form. There are other forms of intuition which might be called “rational intuition.” The mathematician and Western philosopher is familiar with this, a form of intuition that leads to a logical development; whereas, aesthetic intuition would lead to a non-logical development.

Now, there’s no doubt that this accentuation is valid for certain types of men. The objection is to any claim that such types have an exclusive monopoly of the yogic possibilities. That I have definitely proven is not so, and that implies that Western man does not have to deny and repudiate his own peculiar development in order to enter in. I want to emphasize this point. I am representing here the essential genius of Occidental man and affirming he does not have to deny that and try to make himself over into the pattern of Eastern man if he is to know yogic Realization. Although one runs into many who maintain he must repudiate his roots, that is simply not true.