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The Cross and the Bodhi Tree

By Herbert G. Grether

At the conclusion of the first chapter of his book, *Christianity Among the Religions of the World*, Arnold Toynbee writes:

"So perhaps the attitude towards suffering, even more than the attitude towards evil, does provide a criterion for comparing different higher religions with one another. [1] Dr. Toynbee's concern in this book is to find a basis for *rapprochement* between Christians and the adherents of other religions, in order that they may join hands in opposing "man's self-centered worship of himself" as found in Communism and Nationalism. He comes to the conclusion quoted above following a brief discussion of Buddhist and Christian views of suffering. He finds something hopeful for his purpose in an attitude toward suffering which the two religions share: namely, an attitude of willingness to suffer for other persons. While he deems such an attitude of sell-sacrificing love to be "essential" to Christianity (p. 106), lie admits that, though present in Buddhism, it is "illogical" and "inconsequent" to the premises on which that religion is based. Thus *rapprochement* between the two religions at this point would require Buddhism to compromise what is, in the view of a great many Buddhists, its essential nature. The Christian, in another place in the book, is called upon to compromise a belief held to be intrinsic to his religion, namely, the belief that Christianity is unique (p. 95).

Thoughtful Christians are grateful to Dr. Toynbee when he pleads with them to be true to an essential element of their faith. At the same time they may think it fair to ask whether the kind of compromise he calls for could result in the dynamic resistance to ma-
…centered pseudo-religions which he desires. It seems that a better approach, for those working on the Christian side of the problem, is to seek the answer not in compromise but in communication. How can we best communicate the Christian faith to the non-Christian? For sensitive communication one must take serious and full account not only of similarity, but of difference, in religious

1 Arnold Toynbee, *Christianity Among the Religions of the World*, New York, Scribner's 1957, P. 28.

attitude. We may illustrate the importance of this by applying the criterion for the comparison of religions suggested by Dr. Toynbee in the above quotation to the two religions from which he drew the criterion.

Surely it makes a difference that in the case of Buddhism the founder's crucial contest with suffering is regarded to have taken place as he sat in meditation under a tree, while

in that of Christianity the founder's victory was won in an act of obedient suffering upon " the tree." Each of the events referred to here has provided a great symbol that points us to characteristic attitudes of adherents of each religion toward suffering. What happens when a man lives his life in captivity to the ideal of the Bodhi Tree? What difference does it make if he chooses the Cross instead? In the following comparison of Christian and Buddhist views of suffering and consequent attitudes the writer is drawing, for the treatment of Buddhism, on his encounter with that great faith in Thailand. Unless otherwise qualified, references to Buddhism in this essay will mean the Theravada Buddhism of Southeast Asia, as typified by Thai Buddhism. 2

I

Let us begin with the event that is less familiar to Christians. From the very beginning *the* human problem for the Buddhist has been the question, how shall a man find release from the suffering which mankind experiences. Preoccupation with this problem, a heritage from Hinduism, 3 has been the central motivation of the religion from its beginning. Buddhism was born as a fresh solution to the problem of suffering.

Siddhattlia Gotama was born a Hindu prince of the Warrior Caste in a small kingdom in what is now part of Nepal and northern India. At the time of his birth court astrologers predicted that he would become either a great emperor or a Buddha. Siddhattha's father was concerned to encourage the former eventuality and did all he could to protect his son from contact with the sorrows of the world. It was not, so the account goes, until he was a young man, already married to a beautiful princess, that he left the palace and encountered human suffering for the first time, in the representative forms

2 Proper names and Buddhist technical terms are transliterated from Pali forms current in Thailand, though Sanskrit equivalents are more familiar in Western lands. 3 See Kenneth W. Morgan (ed.), *The Path of the Buddha*, New York, Ronald Press Co., 1956 , p. 153.

of a sick man, all aged mail, and a dead man. Before returning to the palace he also saw a wandering holy man. This experience led him to resolve to forsake all that had been dear to him in order to discover the truth about suffering and the way of release from it. So with one last look at his sleeping wife and newborn son, he slipped away from the palace, exchanged his princely garments for the rags of a holy man and set about his quest.

For six years Gotama was a seeker. He went first to Hindu sages for instruction, but he did not find with them the wisdom he sought. He then attached himself to five hermits whose specialty was ascetic practice. He outdid them all, to their great admiration; yet he found that torturing oneself was not the way to the answer. In the end, rejecting both the self-indulgence of court life and the self-torture of ascetic practice, he settled upon the Middle Path as the true way. He once again accepted normal fare and with renewed strength sat down under a tree, determined to remain there until the answer came. In meditation under the tree there dawned upon him insight into the Truth. This was the experience which earned for him the title "Buddha" ("Enlightened One"), and provided

the basic insights on which he established what proved to be a new religion.

The insights of this experience, formulated as the Four Noble Truths in the first sermon the Buddha preached following the enlightenment, are often referred to as the heart of Buddhist doctrine. They may be listed as follows:

1. Life is suffering.2. Suffering has a cause.3. There is release from suffering.4. The way of release.

This formula needs explanation.

When the Buddha stated that life is suffering, he did not mean merely that life in this world involves man in suffering. He meant rather that the very nature of existence is such that to live is to suffer. Our existence, whether on earth, in heaven, or in hell, is marked by three things: impermanence, non-substance, 4 and suffering. There, is no such thing as life redeemed from tears and pain. While we live, we suffer.

4 This means that there is no permanent underlying principle of individuality, i.e, no "soul" in any individual or entity.

The basic cause of suffering is desire, or lust for life. It is because we crave life and all the illusory "blessings" which go with it that we live on. Behind our craving is ignorance-ignorance of the true nature of our existence.

As surely, however, as there is a cause of suffering, there is also release from it. This is the "good news" of Buddhism. It is good news, at least, for those who radically and really accept the premise of the first Noble Truth. Release from suffering, which involves escape from existence, is not, however, an easy thing. Because of our blindness to the Truth and our consequent longing to enjoy life, we find it very difficult to accept the Truth. Every deed we do while in this darkened state of mind binds us all the more firmly to life. We must live on to be punished or rewarded, as the case may be, in accord with the operation of the Law of Kamma (Pali form of Sanskrit *Karma*). This involves us in a cycle of rebirths almost without end. Rare and fortunate is the man who can escape the wheel of life in a short time-though there is hope that in the end all men will escape, after countless eons.

The way of release or escape, often characterized as the Middle Way, is formulated as the Eightfold Path, thus: right understanding, right mindedness; right speech, right actions, right livelihood; right efforts, right mindfulness, right concentration.

"Right" in this formulation implies in each instance a peculiarly Buddhist way of looking at things. For example, right understanding means that one must understand life to be what the Buddha concluded it was-namely, impermanent, without "substance," and in essence suffering. One must understand the Four Noble Truths. One must understand the Laws of Kamma and Dependent Origination. 5

It is significant that the Eightfold Path begins with right understanding and right mindedness. For the Buddhist, knowledge is supremely important. In the end, for him the only hope of total ease from suffering is in what he calls Higher Wisdom.

But the Path is long, and there are other steps in it. The next three items represent what the Buddhist calls ethical discipline. Right speech, right action, and right livelihood involve living in

5 The Law of Dependent Origination is a list of twelve phenomena linked together to explain the origin of life and suffering. The vulnerable links of the chain are *ignorance* and *desire*, which thus provide the points at which the Buddhist hopes to break the chain and so end suffering.

accord with the precepts which guide Buddhists in their everyday relationships with their fellow men-the avoidance of harming others, as well as oneself, through refraining from taking life, from taking property without the owner's consent, from indulging in sexual license, sins of speech, and the use of narcotics and intoxicants. Further, one must not engage in making a living by work which involves dispensing the means of wrong-doing to others. All this, while it cannot in itself result in ultimate release from suffering, does help to improve the human situation and is indispensable for the pursuit of the Mental Disciplines, which are referred to as right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. This last grouping points us to the stress which the Buddhist places on discipline of the mind. Indicative of this is the great popularity of books and lectures on psychology in Thailand and other Buddhist countries. Once again, however, though mental discipline is regarded as beneficial to some degree for itself, by providing peace of mind and mental clarity, it is not of itself the final key to release from life and suffering. It is pursued with the purpose of making it possible for the individual to "realize" the Truth (as over against mere intellectual understanding, with which the seeker may have begun) which sets him free. He must come to have an intuitive grasp of the Truth. This Truth is so far beyond and above the common life of man with its relationships that the ethical distinctions of man's life are lost. To know good and evil-and the one may not be known without the other-is to suffer. Such a grasp of ultimate Truth the Buddhist attains in the last, highest degree of concentration, for which all the other steps of the Path are but preparation. In Higher Wisdom is the ultimate answer. 6

Such, then, is the normative view of Theravada Buddhism on the cause and cure of suffering. But there is another way in which a Buddhist may react to suffering, a way that is not consistent with the received doctrine, and yet which has support in no less authority than the example of the Buddha himself. The traditions of the life of the Buddha tell us that upon his enlightenment he was tempted by Mara (the Devil) to go at once to Parinibbliana 7 But he chose to stay in the world and teach the doctrine to all who would receive it. Thus he gave up his rightful bliss for forty-five years for the sake of his fellow beings. A similar interpretation is placed upon his leav-

6 For a fuller treatment of the Eightfold Path see Morgan, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-32.[7] "Complete" Nibbhana, that is, Nibbhana immediately following death.

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ing palace and family. This was no irresponsible forsaking, but rather it was done deliberately, at cost to himself, not only for his own sake but for the sake of all mankind-his family, of course, included. In this we have a motivation which Christians can understand and admire. Indeed, one suspects that much of the power and attractiveness of Buddhism for people has been due to what he did for them!

One should pause to note that Buddhists have, in the interest of consistency with the normative view, sometimes interpreted the post-enlightenment sufferings of the Buddha as being due to deeds done in previous existences. For example, the mortal sufferings of the Buddha at the end of his long life-of which the immediate cause was the eating of spoiled food-are explained as due to the fact that as a physician in a former existence the Buddha had given a patient an overdose of laxatives, thus causing a bloody discharge. For this lie suffered his death pangs-with equanimity, of course. 8

Nevertheless, the motif of self-sacrifice recurs persistently in Buddhist teaching and tradition. It is the theme, for example, of many of the Jataka Tales, which recount in popular form previous existences of the Buddha, In the telling, many a Buddhist precept is pleasantly communicated. A long sermon based on one of these stories is very popular today. The Shell Oil Company, Ltd., in need of a suitable theme for a calendar commemorating the year 2500 Buddhist Era (A.D. 1957), chose to illustrate this sermon. It is the story of Prince Vessantara who, in his zeal for charity, gives away to Brahmans of a neighboring city the royal elephant on which he has been riding. The elephant is associated in the minds of the people with the welfare of the city. Displeased with the prince's deed, they request the king to send him away. This the king does. With the prince go his wife and two small sons. The prince, continuing his almsgiving and his quest for truth, gives away in succession his horses and chariot, his sons, and finally even his wife. But there is a happy ending. The prince's wife and children are restored to him, and when the facts about his self-effacing charity reach the ears of the king, he sets up Prince Vessantara and his consort as rulers over another city.9

8 *The Life of the Buddha According to Thai Temple Paintings*, United States Information Service, Bangkok, 1957, p. 140.[9] For other examples of birth stories illustrating the(pp. Buddha's willingness to suffer-and even to die-for others, see "Banyan the Golden Deer pp. 56-59), "The Hare" (pp. 37-40), and "The Great-Hearted Monkey" (pp. 67-70) in *Jataka Tales*, retold by Ethel Beswick, London, John Murray Ltd., 1956.

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Stories such as this are regarded in Thailand as having practical value for inculcating a spirit of compassion and selflessness among those who are less advanced in the religious quest. But they are also regarded as having no value for the religiously advanced-indeed, they are distortions of the pure Truth which alone can lead to ultimate release. They have temporary value as a step toward the goal, but the goal remains the same, and forever out

of reach to one who does not move on to Higher Wisdom.

A similar and highly significant departure from the normative position of Buddhism on suffering may be seen in the shift in ideal from the Arahant of Theravada Buddhism to the Bodhisattva of Mahayana Buddhism. The Arahant is the sage who has "arrived." He is essentially a solitary, self-contained, and self-dependent figure. He journeys "lonely as a rhinoceros" upon the religious quest. The Bodhisattva, on the other hand, is one who has attained the insight necessary for release from suffering, but who chooses to remain with his fellow beings, helping them until every living creature is at last set free. This ideal has tremendous appeal! But note once again that the end of all and for all remains release from life and suffering.

In summary one must say: suffering on behalf of one's fellow beings may be admired by Theravada Buddhists. Yet the true goal of every man remains release from his own sufferings. In quest of this, ethical striving and mental discipline have value in lessening bodily and mental ills among men. But in the end total release can come only through intuitive knowledge of a highly special set of facts relating to the nature of existence. For this view the Bodhi Tree (i.e., "Enlightenment Tree") seems a fitting symbol.

II

For Christians the human problem *involves* suffering, but we may not say that it is suffering. The problem is, how can the broken relationship between God and man be restored. We can understand the Christian view of suffering only in the light of that relationship and its restoration. This means that we must also take account of the character of God and the purposes he has for the world which he created. God made us for himself, and it is his sure purpose that we should return to him.

God reveals himself to men as sovereign personality. Since this is so, as man's motives may be mixed, so God's purposes may be

multiple. Further, they may be only partly revealed to men, as God chooses. Thus, when the Christian searches to discover the Creator's purpose in allowing for suffering in a world which God made good, the Christian finds it better to speak of *purposes*.

With this in mind, we may note that the Bible suggests a variety of purposes for suffering:

1. Suffering is punishment for sin-most particularly the sins of pride and disobedience before God. This idea is so prominent that it does not need illustration.

2. Yet, for God's people, the suffering which they experience need never be taken as punishment for the sake of punishment. Punishment has its purpose: to teach, to correct, to move to repentance. We find this idea behind words of Jesus who, pointing to contemporary sufferers (Luke 13: 1-5), called men to repentance. Jesus himself is regarded by the writer of Hebrews as so much one with men that even lie "learned

obedience through what he suffered!" Paul is sensitive to the corrective aspect of suffering rightly accepted when he writes to the Corinthians: "Godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation" (11 Corinthians 7:10).

3. Sometimes the suffering that a good man suffers seems all out of proportion to his sins or his need for discipline. It seems impossible to explain it either in terms of punishment or discipline. For the Biblical man there is no recourse to the explanation provided for the Buddhist by his doctrines of Kamma and Rebirth. In the end the sufferer may, like job, bow before the mystery of God's purposes and the majesty of his person. Suffering, even though not fully explained, may have a part in the unveiling of God's glory (Compare John 9: 3). If it can do this, it need not be counted as loss, even though one cannot fathom the mystery.

4. But there is to the mind of the Christian an experience of suffering in life which is different from the above meanings, and which for him reveals the highest and holiest purpose of suffering. This is vicarious suffering. For the Buddhist philosopher vicarious suffering does not enter in; it is excluded by his Law of Kamma. For him, what appears to the Christian to be vicarious suffering is the sufferer's own doing. But for the Christian, who accepts the fact that we men are all bound together in the bundle of life, and that God meant it to be so, *vicarious suffering is the God-appointed*

means by which the broken relationship between God and man is restored. It thus provides the Christian answer to the human problem.

Although the idea of vicarious suffering is present in the Old Testament, it took die event of the Gross Lo release it and send it out into the world with power to draw men to God. The great Old Testament passage for the concept is, of course, Isaiah 52: 13-53: 12. Here a person (or a people) suffers for the healing of the nations. He can bear their pains and sickness because, though innocent, he makes himself one with them in their guilt and distress. This is the antithesis of the separation and rejection of responsibility expressed in Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

In his ministry Jesus had already begun to fulfill this great passage. We have only to recall how he touched the leper and healed the sick (note the quotation of Isaiah 53: 4 in Matthew 8: 17), how he grieved over the hardness of men's hearts, wept with the bereaved, agonized over temptation. But it was the event of the Cross which opened the disciples eyes at last and, together with the resurrection, brought to life and power the ancient poem.

The Cross is thus the fitting symbol of the Christian attitude toward suffering, subsuming as it does the characteristic meanings attached to suffering in the Bible: punishment, discipline, mystery, and sacrificial, redeeming love.

It may be asked whether the characteristic Buddhist explanations of suffering have any place in the Christian view. Do desire and ignorance figure as causes of suffering? If one understands these terms only as the Buddhist does, the answer must be no. If taken in the

Biblical way, they do point to proximate causes of suffering. It is clear, for example, that *wrong* desires lead to suffering. Suffering entered the world subsequent to an act motivated by wrong desire on the part of man-the desire to "become like God" (see also I Timothy 6: 10, Proverbs 21: 25). Yet it is wordly of note that according to the Bible it is God who judges what is wrong and who executes judgment, with a view not only to punishment but to reclaiming the sinner. Suffering does not enter the human scene as the result of the inevitable working of an impersonal law of nature.

Again, ignorance may bring men to grief (compare Proverbs 1:

20-33). But it is not ignorance of the nature of existence, [10] but rather ignorance of God and his purposes-an ignorance which arises from refusal to fear God, who is the beginning of wisdom. In the Biblical perspective, we can see nothing clearly apart from God.

To sum the matter up, the Christian faith is concerned With the restoration of the broken relationship between God and men. The suffering of Jesus Christ for men has power to transform selfcentered, death-producing grief into the repentance which turns men toward God. They are won by an act of love. As his reconciled ones follow after him, they too take up the Cross and share in the ministry of reconciliation. God, who loves the world and does not desire that anyone should perish, makes his appeal through them, insofar as they are in Christ.

III

Fair comparisons are difficult in a situation as complicated as that produced by the great religions of the world. There is a wide range in the way each religion is understood and practiced, and all degrees of devotion to each way of understanding. Thus it is hard to compare the effects of the Christian and Buddhist ideas about suffering on their adherents. Exceptions abound; yet this need not blur for us the real differences that exist. Some generalizations are possible and helpful.

The Cross and the Bodhi Tree both produce men who accept suffering with courage. One may go on to say that devotion to the ideal symbolized by the Bodhi Tree can provide men with a considerable measure of calm resignation in the hour of pain. We may say they accept suffering "philosophically." Closely akin to this reaction, however, is one which makes Christians less happy: Buddhism produces men who accept suffering *fatalistically*. When misfortune falls in Thailand, the almost invariable reaction is to shrug it off with the words, "Dtam boon, dtam kam."[11] This means, in effect, that everything happens according to one's merit or demerit, so there's no use getting upset about it or trying to do anything to remedy the situation. The Buddhist thinker does, indeed, attempt to employ the saying to encourage people so to act now as to guard

10 The word used for "wisdom" in Buddhist terminology is explained to mean "looking at things as they are."[11] That is, "According to merit, according to karma."

against future suffering-but, it seems to the writer, with notable lack of success.

For the Christian, courage in the face of suffering is based on a sense of purpose and hope, as well as justice. Though a man suffer, God is God, and the life he has given each of us is redeemable. One can be redeemed from suffering, and even through it. This is the opposite of fatalism.

Both the Cross and the Bodhi Tree produce men of compassion, men who are concerned to alleviate the sufferings of fellow creatures. In Thailand there are Buddhist priests and laymen who have demonstrated their compassion for the leper, for the victims of flood and fire, for the ignorant, the poor, and the sick. Yet, when we speak of Buddhist "compassion," the very use of the word may be misleading. The Buddhist ideal is one that involves detachment. It is one of exercising compassion without passion! Whenever concern for the plight of one's neighbor moves one to full involvement in suffering, including emotional involvement or sorrow, one is moving away from the ideal. Thus normative Buddhism tends to produce persons whose goal (and practice, where possible) is to be above and beyond the sufferings of their fellow men, essentially untouched by them. This attitude is illustrated in the following quotations 12 from the Dhammapada, which is part of the Pali canon of Buddhist Scripture:

"When the wise one puts off sloth for zeal, ascending the high Lower of wisdom, he gazes sorrowless upon the sorrowing crowd below. Wise himself, he looks upon the fools as one upon a mountain peak gazing upon the dwellers in the valley" (No. 28)."Even for great benefit to another let no man imperil his own benefit. When he has realized what is for his own good, let him pursue that earnestly" (No. 160).

It is not hard to see why it is generally believed among Buddhists in Thailand that one cannot attain ultimate release from suffering as a householder. One must be an monk, living apart with leisure for the practice of the mental disciplines which lead to the goal. I recall the complaint of a Buddhist leader in good works that his monastery was too close to town. Troubled lay folk found it too convenient to disturb the meditations of the monks. The further one goes in the Buddhist quest, the more lie is inclined to walk alone.

12 Quoted here as found in Paul A. Eakin, *Buddhism and the Christian Approach to Buddhists in Thailand*, Bangkok, 1956.

The further one goes in the way of the Cross, on the other hand, the more closely one is drawn to his brother. The Cross moves men to suffer willingly, even with joy, for other men. One recalls Paul's bold, moving words to the Colossians: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (1: 24). The history of the Church is filled with other examples.

It is interesting to note here how the ideal of the Christian pastor stands in contrast to that of the Buddhist monk. The pastor is ever ready to spend himself for God's people. He is close to them in their suffering. He is all things to all people. When they weep, he weeps. The pastor's sympathizing tear does not mean, however, that he should become emotionally involved in the destructive passions of his parishioner, reacting in unjust or unseemly anger toward the parishioner's "persecutors." This would be a perversion of the Cross of him who said, "Father, forgive them." There is here a point of contact with the Buddhist idea of "compassion without passion." The difference lies in the fact that for the Buddhist all anger is wrong. He does not see that God gives us some wrath to spend in the cause of compassion and justice.

Finally, both Buddhism and Christianity are ethical religions of a high order. But it seems to the writer that the spending of much time under the Bodhi Tree unnerves men for the contest with wrong, especially at those times when it becomes clear that a morally right action will involve the doer in suffering.13 The writer recalls a conversation between a Buddhist lecturer and a Christian missionary. The Buddhist asked the Christian whether he would be willing, if he believed it was God's will for him, to go work in a Communist country. Upon receiving an affirmative answer, the questioner expressed admiration, while a number of Buddhist priests who were listening betrayed incredulity. Buddhist thought leads one to the place where meditation is more important than acting, where peace of mind is more to be desired than service, and where it is perfect bliss to be beyond and above all relationship and relatedness. For the Christian, it is more important to obey God.

In summary, the man who follows the Buddha to the Bodhi Tree and beyond may face suffering with courage and equanimity. He is

13 One says this, well aware that a perverted apprehension of the grace of God in the Cross can do the same thing for Christians!

may. be moved to serve fellow sufferers, as did the Buddha, with compassion and selflessness. But a profound experience of the Bodhi Tree presents him with a temptation often irresistible: namely, to remain upon the mountain, gazing sorrowless upon the Sorrowing crowd below. It is not so with him who chooses to take up the Cross and follow Jesus.

Here we have an answer not only to the problem of suffering, but also to the problem of communicating the Christian faith to non…Christians. It has been well put by a Thai Christian doctor who is spending his life now ministering to lepers for Christ's sake: "Only love in action can win our people. Buddhism teaches principles; Christianity is a way of life. Buddha teaches how to avoid pain; Christ gives comfort, hope and teaches dedication and Service, regardless of pain." 14

14 *We Have Otte Future*, published by the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations, United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., p. 13.