

A Christian's perplexity in the face of Buddhist doctrine

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Should we ponder doctrinal problems?

Putting forward the idea of spiritual 'intercommunion' between Christian and Buddhist monks, between men of the spirit, between practitioners of two Paths which are different, not to say radically opposed, gives rise to problems, if not anxieties. The problem in this specific case is no different to that in the case of serious dialogue in general. It should also be noted that as far as the Buddhists are concerned in general, this does not give rise to any problems – or at least not to any fundamental problems. From the Buddhist viewpoint, it is enough if one can rely on the honesty and the straightforward intentions of the interlocutors. If, on the other hand, there are reasons to fear that this may be some new plot on the part of the Christians aimed at getting in on the inside more effectively in order to engage in proselytism by stealth, then although the monastery doors will remain open (as oriental politeness and hospitality require) and although friendly smiles will continue to be displayed, one may be sure that the entire relationship will be kept superficial as a precautionary measure. They have had their fingers sufficiently burnt by the missionary 'zeal', which in their eyes amounts to sheer dishonesty aimed at pressurising people into adhering to Christianity, yet upon which we heap praise – just as we recommend those behind it for advancement, if not canonisation. In view of this, we may be sure that suspicions will immediately be aroused, although this will not show. Moreover, due to another characteristic of people from the Orient, namely their tendency, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, to start out by giving others the benefit of the doubt and trusting them, their initial stance will be open yet cautious: in short, any outright commitment will be avoided. Time, it is felt, will reveal what lies in people's hearts, and if the interlocutor's intentions start to seem suspect and devious, as no commitment has been given it will be easy to pull back at any time.

Our psychology is very different, and this means that these long hesitations in getting down to business lead us to suspect a certain lack of frankness. If dialogue is wanted, the price has to be paid, and the time has to be invested. This is not a problem: there is always time...we will develop the right habits, we will learn the ways of Eastern wisdom, and we will prefer to be indebted to them – at the outset, for a long time afterwards, and perhaps always. We will scrupulously avoid any semblance of an attempt to make them indebted to us, for they know all too well how wealthy we are, and have seen enough examples of us investing unstintingly for the sake of a convert.

Does Buddhism have a fixed doctrine?

Suffice it to say that any problem there may be on the part of the Buddhists is not doctrinal in nature. Yet the big problem on our side is doctrinal in nature.

Why is this? Is it because doctrinal questions are unimportant to them? Is Buddhism a form of agnosticism? So it has been claimed, and it has also been claimed that Buddhism smacks of gnosticism. Indeed, we have applied no small number of contradictory -isms to it in the past: pantheism and atheism, monism and dualism, materialism and idealism and mysticism, and so on. Yet what is the Buddha if not a Master of doctrine: he 'saw' doctrine, he preached doctrine, he set the wheel of law in motion, he discovered and taught the 'four noble truths'. Doctrine, law, truth...they are all the same word, *dharma*, which has multiple meanings (like *logos*).

All we can say is that the two things are linked. This is because the word does not have the same meaning as in Buddhism, and there is nothing with a role analogous to that played for us by the received body of doctrine, the dogmatic symbol, the symbol of faith.

And yet the Buddha did teach a doctrine, and the disciples did receive and pass on that doctrine, and there were a series of councils to redefine the authentic line, and commentaries and sub-

commentaries, and this is something that continues today: doctrine is studied and taught, and there are textbooks, examinations and diplomas in doctrinal studies.

To take a comparison, when Jesus was wandering around Palestine, followed by his disciples, he was teaching. He had a doctrine and was called 'Master'. But was it not a Path that he was teaching, a spiritual doctrine, rather than a collection of dogmas, a body of systematised teachings or a codified symbol of faith? (I say this not to set up an opposition between two things, but to draw a simple distinction: I do not wish to suggest that the symbol of faith did not emerge legitimately from the living teachings of Jesus, that it was not contained within it, or that it was fundamentally different from this latter).

It was not long before a symbol of faith was derived from this – the symbol of baptism – but from the point of view of systematic elaboration, there was still a long way to go between that and the doctrine defined by the great Trinitarian and Christological councils.

The councils

This gives rise to an interesting comparison: in Buddhism, the role of councils has been to recite the scriptures and verify the scriptural tradition, not to define and fix dogmatic canons. This fact is enough to show that the main concern at these councils was with the faithful handing down of the Master's words contained in the scriptures. The various systematic elaborations of doctrine which appeared over the centuries, and were dependent on the scriptures, caused the different branches of Buddhism to emerge. This falls within the scope of disputation, of 'scholasticism': it is not surprising to find various schools appearing, referring back to the same scriptures, until such time as new schools of wisdom feel the need to place more emphasis on scriptures which have previously been ignored.

Treatment of Indian beliefs

In fact, the systematic elaborations of scholasticism, the doctrine canonised by the various doctrinal branches (for which the rather inappropriate term 'sects' is used), are fairly subordinate to the teaching attributed to the Buddha himself. What is more, neither the teaching attributed in the scriptures to the Buddha himself nor the formulations of subsequent scholasticism have the objective of presenting or defining objects of belief, things of which one is required to assert that they exist or they do not exist, or that they are this rather than that, or like this and not like that. None of the teachings of this kind is intended to relate to beings, essences or substances, objectivised, in and of themselves, any more than they are intended to relate to the causes and origins and ends of things whose existence we may empirically observe. This 'doctrine' does not feel that questions of origins or of eschatology are its concern. As far as cosmogony and anthropogony are concerned (the origins of the universe and of man), the Indian beliefs are assumed to be familiar, and the allusions which are made to it are merely literary (as is the case with allusions to ancient mythology). In addition, even if a Buddhist – and such Buddhists are found among the simple folk – were to 'believe' in the literal sense, this would not be very important. The same goes for the cosmology: the description of the universe, of the 32 spheres of existence, with inhabitants classed according to their degree of 'spiritualisation', infernos, the earth, intermediary and superior heavens, Buddhist hells and Buddhist paradises. All these things are objects of belief for those who interpret the 'wheel of rebirths' in a fairly literal sense – which is tolerable in the beginner, but which tends to become refined into a spiritual sense, as a symbolic way of describing spiritual states.

Double interpretation

All of this demonstrates that although beliefs can play a role for simple people that is analogous in

Buddhism and in other religions, the same is not true for Buddhism as the sense of spiritual things becomes more refined. That refined awareness takes all that the mythical mode of expression, in its literal interpretation, describes in worldly terms of space and time, and transposes it into the inner life, the here and now. Everyone has a choice to make. One can believe what the myth says in the literal sense, and hold firmly to it as a set of beliefs. Alternatively, one can regard such an attitude as abandoning the spirit to the letter, spirituality to religiosity, and see the beliefs themselves as a sign of the believer's enthrallment to the bewitching literality and poetry of myth, and one can liberate oneself by demythologising the myth, in other words by unlocking its spiritual meaning.

It is this subtle operation of the twofold interpretation of beliefs that the first Jesuit missionaries to the Far East had discovered. They accused the bonzes of having two doctrines: an 'outer' one, for the simple folk, whose credulity they exploited for the material benefits and honours they could derive from them, and another, 'inner', atheistic doctrine, reserved for a small group of initiates (see de Lubac's *Rencontre du Bouddhisme et de l'Occident*)

Certain missionaries correctly realised that this second doctrine was the true doctrine of Buddhism (the doctrine of emptiness)... but was its purpose not to enable those who exploited popular credulity to assuage their scruples by means of this secret profession of atheism (and hence of nihilism)? (See the thoughts on this matter of a great missionary, Alexandre de Rhodes, in de Lubac, p. 85).

From the historical study of P. de Lubac, one can see the trouble that the missionaries had in trying to gain a clear idea about Buddhism, using their Western categories, and their failure to do so. All were struck by this example of a non-Christian monasticism, and their first views on this tended to be sympathetic. It was a surprising discovery, and one which could be observed and described. But what of the doctrine? After five centuries of daily contact with Buddhism, have missionaries and the leaders of the local churches made any real progress in making this discovery? We remain far from doing so, according to the study quoted, after a hundred and fifty years of scientific investigation by specialists in oriental studies. Buddhism appears to remain just as enigmatic to Christians. 'Is it a religion? Then surely it must have a doctrine. Let us take a look at that doctrine.' The bonzes are questioned, and the conclusion is the same as that reached by Francis Xavier in Japan. He had made friends with an old bonze, whom he described as 'like their bishop' (a bishop must be familiar with the doctrine!): 'I found him to be hesitant on the point of whether the soul is immortal, or whether it dies with the body: sometimes he said yes, and sometimes no.' (p. 58)

Over centuries of Christian missionary work in this part of the world, the same conclusion has invariably been reached: there is no way of knowing exactly what they believe. Do they themselves know? Of their worship, Ricci said it was 'so complicated that even the religious are unable to explain it.' (de Lubac, p. 77)

Yet how could these bonzes, when questioned, have transposed the subtleties of their scholasticism and of the categories in which it had been conceptualised on the basis of Indian thought, into the entirely different categories of their Western listeners, who for their part were doubtless convinced of the universality of the categories of *philosophia perennis*; and how could sound rationality place any reliance on those subtleties? ('You can say what you like about differences of mentality, but there is only one logic and one rationality. These people do not know how to reason: this is the first thing that they need to be taught. When they know how to reason, they can be made to understand the proofs of the existence of God. With them, it is always "yes and no", or "neither yes nor no": they have no concept of the principle of contradiction. What can you do about that? It is not surprising that they do not really know what they believe.' – These are thoughts I have heard expressed recently). It is because of these disappointing experiences that such efforts have been made in the seminaries to train the local clergy in Western categories of thought, and in the sole rational way of employing them. And this has been supremely successful: they reason exactly like Western

scholastics – so much so that they are no better able than these latter to understand the mindset of those of their race who have remained in their old religion.

No, it is no easy matter for a Christian scholastic to achieve mutual understanding with a Buddhist. The content they assign to the same word is not equivalent, and is sometimes very different, even if only as a function of their mental and doctrinal context – or at any rate the content they assign to what they believe to be equivalent words, for in practice everyone thinks in his customary language, especially when the conversation is conducted via interpreters.

Let us return to the question of the immortality of the soul, which was discussed by Francis Xavier with his old 'bishop'. Recently, a missionary was catechising a young Buddhist with a view to her baptism and marriage to a Christian. He was astounded when the girl replied to him that each of us had a multitude of souls – it depended on the moment, and one might have now one soul, now another.

The missionaries prefer the animists to the Buddhists

Missionaries in Buddhist countries commonly say that it is more productive to engage in missionary work among the animists. At least mutual understanding is possible with them: they speak a language very similar to our own. Consider the two 'fundamental truths' to which the traditional mission, in its catechesis of the 'pagans', devotes its primary efforts, taking the greatest care to inculcate these two points into them: the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. These two articles would seem to be the indispensable foundations of any religion worthy of the name, and hence the first truths of the one true religion, of the Christian faith, and they are presented as such to the 'pagans'.

Now the animists are very similar to us on these two points; mutual understanding and the communication of one's point are very easy, as virtually the same language is spoken. They already have in their beliefs what may be regarded as not just foreshadowings but the very germs of these two Christian truths or beliefs; they reason like us; all we have to do is help them to purify the beliefs that they already have; with them, we have some correct starting-points, on which reasoning can function.

The soul: these primitive pagans already have this concept: they know, like us, that the soul is different from the body. A spirit which usually resides in the body makes the body alive, leaves the body at the time of death, and then goes to live somewhere else. It does so indefinitely, and may be happy or unhappy, depending on the case. It is relatively easy to refine such a belief a little, and fill in what is missing.

The same goes for the existence of God: as well as human souls, all primitive peoples are familiar with spirits, and even generally have the beginnings of monotheism in the concept of a supreme leader of the spirits who has made the world and men (and the other spirits...although this is a little more problematic). They find it very easy to follow the line of reasoning that the world was not created on its own, but that there must have been someone to create it: someone very great, very knowledgeable, and so on.

In short, it is easy to find out what the animists believe and to see which of those beliefs are valid. This can then be used as the starting-point for thinking things through together.

With the Buddhists, there is none of this: one never manages to find out exactly what they believe. It is impossible to find a starting-point: all the answers that can be derived about the key points, in particular the two ones mentioned above, are vague, changeable and impossible to pin down. If one asks them the big eternal questions: 'Where do we come from? Where are we going?' – they have no reply, and above all, they show no eagerness to know the answers. For them, these things are of no interest. You therefore try to guide them step by step, starting with elementary truths: 'Do you see that chair? Is it really a chair?' - Yes – 'Is it really there?' - Yes – 'Did it make itself?' - No –

'There must have been...etc'. 'Can you see the world, the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars? Can those things have made themselves?' – We don't know, sometimes... 'Yes, but what about the chair?' - The chair, yes, we know that that was made: we have seen chairs being made many times, but the world, that we haven't seen being made, so we cannot know: and if it was always like that, it need not have been created.

This is the logic these people use: they follow you for a while, and then they let you go; they have no power of abstraction, but are tied to the empirical. For the chair, the argument works; for the moon, 'We don't know, we have never seen it being made...' As for the soul or God, all such matters are left vague. This is full-blown agnosticism.

(We have not even considered the case of the Buddhist who has received a little more education, the bonze in particular. The foregoing line of reasoning would not have even reached the first step: he would not even have conceded that the chair was a chair. He would have said that there are simply various elements there which are assembled in a certain way, with a conventional name, 'chair', which we ourselves have applied. 'On the level of the ultimate truth, there is no chair. I can only say that there is a chair there if I keep to the level of the relative truth. Speaking absolutely, in absolute truth, there is no chair.' This is the doctrine of 'Emptiness' or the twofold truth: conventional truth (or empirical, or relative) and ultimate truth (or final, or absolute).

This can be compared with the distinction between 'existence' in the physical, literal, 'anthropomorphic', conventional sense of existence/becoming; and the 'unborn' (the absolute, ineffable, ultimate *esse*, which can only be designated negatively as non-conventional, unnameable, non-rationally conceptualisable, absolute non-existence/non-becoming). To all intents and purposes, here is the counterpart to the Western principle of the analogy of being. These are not idle subtleties.

Spiritual role

This is the eternal and universal situation of the human spirit: it is on a quest for truth, a quest for ultimate truth, conscious of its condition of finiteness, but illuminated by the light of the spirit, in its spiritual sensibility, its inner sense, its intuition, its vision; it perceives the meaning of this finiteness, seen as a transparent image which has become an instrument and vehicle of salvation; it becomes aware of the meaning which is imparted through that finiteness; it follows this meaning towards its signified, which is enigmatic yet 'seen' and known, as though it lies in the ultimateness both of otherness and of proximity and interiority.

Thus is the human being – at all times and in all places – alone, yet among a multitude of brethren; established in the reality of what he is and discovers himself to be; caught in the tension of living ambiguity, of short-circuiting the paradox, of travelling the distanceless distance existentially, in his fleshly and spiritual being.

Together causing that which has been 'seen' to become manifest, or together allowing it to become manifest. And, as a speaking, communicating mind, speaking of it in a word of salvation so as to express it to oneself and then repeat it among brethren who have more or less seen it for themselves: does this represent an attempt to speak the unspeakable? It is something which can only be expressed as a sign.

It is naive to think that, when the spirit covers the entire face of the earth, illuminating the whole of human nature, only a single face of the earth would be given the perspicacity to hear the cry of its finiteness towards non-finiteness.

There is an imperative and urgent need to stop denigrating or minimising the profound meaning and essential value of that which these strange, surprising disciples of the Buddha strive to put into words and above all to live. It is never too late. Moreover, this works both ways: they have seen us as indefinitely incapable of doing justice to the ultimate spiritual scope, the vision and intuition, of

what which they are trying to live, and this has inevitably confirmed them in the opinion that we have no notion of such matters. Ultimately, they have never felt truly 'recognised' by us, and this has in turn prevented them from recognising us. The authentic meaning of the Christian message has remained unknown to them in proportion to the lack of understanding we have shown for their message. Mutual recognition and openness to the profundity of that which we are living on our respective Paths can only emerge if we agree to do our share of the leg-work. The same holds true for this inter-recognition and then spiritual intercommunion as for any friendship: it can only be genuine if it is reciprocal.

The strange replies have a meaning

Those strange replies that the Buddhists give are in fact no stranger for us than our questions and the concerns they reveal are for them. Rather than being stumbling-blocks to us, a source of outrage, leading to acquiescence in the failure of attempts to understand and achieve mutual comprehension, they ought on the contrary to make us pay extra attention, listen humbly and practise tireless patience as we seek to gain some idea of what might lie concealed behind these apparently bizarre phenomena. As ever, we can start by giving the benefit of the doubt. Since nobody wishes to be taken for a fool, we can assume that the statements which seem silly to us were certainly not silly to the mind of the person who uttered them, and indeed that he may have wanted to say something very sagacious. We should also bear in mind that the vagaries of translation and transposition, added to differences of perspective, might explain many things. We should also know that there is a process which is used to try to suggest that which it is difficult to say clearly, and that the listener is expected to exercise some discernment. This process is the paradox: he who has ears to hear, let him hear!

Such is the case with the two examples mentioned earlier, relating to the subjects of immortality, and of the multiplicity and permanence of the 'soul', where the crux of the matter is quite simply an ambiguity of translation. The word 'soul' was taken by the Christian interlocutor in its usual meaning, which tends to resemble a more or less animistic representation. It so happened that the Buddhist interlocutors, in both cases, took the words which usually translate 'soul' (*vinnana* and *citta*) in their doctrinal sense, since the discussion in question was a doctrinal one; thus they were referring to the act of consciousness (not the soul) – which is impermanent and instantaneous.

Where does the focus of interest lie in Buddhism?

It is clear that, where acts or even states of consciousness are concerned – varied, multiple and ceaselessly changing as they are – one cannot say when and how they start and end. Now it is here, in the inner action of the spiritual being, in its specifically spiritual action, that the entire human drama (our whole destiny) is played out, for it is in the here and now of each option and intention, in this complex amalgam of actions and reactions, these noble or passionate conditionings, that everything of value lies for man. If, in the crisis of each inner choice, at the fundamental root of each human action, everything conforms in righteousness to the sense or meaning which must be experienced, everything is already given. It is on this precise point, in the sanctuary of consciousness, at the meeting-point between all the factors in the conditioning of the spiritual choice, at the very centre of the life and spirit, that Buddhism focuses all its attention, its interest and its practices. (The term 'practices' is used to refer to that which is rather inaccurately translated as 'meditation'.) If the spiritual orientation of every moment of the inner life is as it should be, what can be the point of a preoccupation with the soul's destiny after death? That is not where destiny plays itself out. These preoccupations, with all their associated imaginative representations, their appeal to the mythologising instinct, the ambivalent sense of curiosity and the attempt to use magical processes of salvation they encourage, are at best nothing but an evasion of the present life, of my

present task on which I should concentrate all my energy.

For this reason, it should come as no surprise to us that there is no word in Buddhist doctrinal vocabulary corresponding to the animist representation of the soul as an essence-substance which is separate from the body (a living entity with a certain mental make-up, whose vehicle is a certain form of subtle corporeality?) The popular language used by the Buddhists derives the image it presents from the old animist stock of local or Indian origin. It is not Buddhist doctrine: it lies in the realm of traditional beliefs, which those responsible for doctrinal teaching do not oppose outright in their relations with the people.

People should not have the religious crutches that they need snatched away from them abruptly. Even so, religious beliefs can only serve as impediments to following the Buddhist path... It is a matter of individual choice: cast away the crutches, or continue with them. This freedom to accept the same doctrine with varying degrees of asceticism, radicality and purity has always puzzled Christians, and especially Catholics, who are accustomed because of their linguistic habits (upheld by the style of the usual catechism and traditional piety) to think of questions of religion primarily in terms of beliefs. In this area they therefore ask questions such as, 'What are your beliefs?' Yet in strict Buddhist doctrine, this is a question to which there is no reply. One possible reply would be 'As few as possible!' If there are beliefs which are held among the Buddhists, they tend to be marginal, relativised and open to dispute.

The animist Buddhists

Conclusion: the question of Buddhist doctrine should not be phrased in terms of beliefs.

'Beliefs' is in fact a highly ambiguous term. What is also ambiguous, if not worrying, is the discovery that one is more comfortable with the animists than with the Buddhists. It is true that it is easy enough to find instances of 'animist Buddhism' – of a type of Buddhism which is more or less coloured by animist beliefs: these can be found in abundance, and all possible deviations exist everywhere. Go to Bangkok, a Buddhist city if ever there was one, with hundreds of pagodas and thousands of bonzes. Dig deep and you will find things among some Buddhists, among some bonzes, in pagodas, at workshops for so-called meditation which are far removed from the doctrine. But this does not change the essence of the doctrine. You can have the same experience in Rome: how do all the things you can find which are 'not very Catholic' and not Christian change Christianity, the doctrine of Christ? Examples of a fairly animist Christianity also exist.

One group's deviations do not excuse the other's. And in any case, one should not judge or condemn. An animist can lead a genuine spiritual life. So can a Christian or a Buddhist, while preserving beliefs and practices which are fairly animist: they are still a path to heaven.

When a Christian asks a question of a practitioner of some other religion that he considers essential in terms of belief, will this not lead the other person to suppose that the question itself betrays the conception that the Christian has of his religion, and, by extrapolation, that the essential thing in Christianity is beliefs? What is the truth of the matter? It is a very big question which, when taken to its extreme, leads one to pose the hypothesis of a 'Christianity without religion'. That question is too ambiguous when applied to Christianity, but might be useful in helping us achieve a better understanding of the essential purpose of the Buddha's teaching.

Buddhism without religion?

However, even in the case of the kind of Buddhism which is most radical in contesting beliefs as disempowering and escapist excursions in the afterlife, occult and magic, one thing must be made clear. The expression 'without religion' must not remove the essence of Buddhism: the spiritual Path which lies at the heart of the quest for the Absolute or the mystical journey. For if one removes from the final prospects of Buddhism the essence of its spiritual project – namely, leading people to the

'far shore', leading man to transcend all finiteness and non-finiteness (Nirvana, the extinction, not of everything, but of suffering, of wretchedness and of evil, and liberation from all impermanence) – all that then remains is a worldly path of tranquillisation, escapism through oblivion, absorption, an auto-hypnotic trance, a technique of 'turning the self to the self' without 'going beyond', some useful techniques for relaxation, for psychological therapy, for learning self-control, and so on. (All of these things exist: even the most curious are commonly practised, and are the kind of thing which tourists like to discover in workshops.)

Is Buddhism a religion?

Is Buddhism a religion or not? The question has been debated for a long time among Orientalists and experts on Buddhism, and is returned to periodically in the press and in the lecture rooms of Bangkok's monasteries. It was much discussed four years ago, when informed Buddhist circles became interested in the Western debate about 'death of God' theologies.

'Look,' they said, 'there are Christians 'who are starting to doubt the existence of their Almighty God up in heaven! It's taken them centuries to reach this point.' That year, at the conference of Buddhist associations, the King's speech was on the theme: 'Is Buddhism a religion?' Except that, in Pali and Thai, the word for 'religion' carries no association of 'binding' or 'joining'. The word 'yoga' would be used to convey that sense. The word used suggests doctrine, teaching. In short, it was explained that Buddhism could be called a religion if the word was used to mean doctrine or teaching relating to spiritual advancement or 'realisation', but not if it implied unverifiable revealed beliefs and obligatory rites.

Belief and faith in the Buddha

In fact, there are two things: there are 'beliefs' and there is 'belief' or faith.

The first term refers more to objects: essences or substances which one believes to exist, events whose past or future occurrence one accepts, but which are not susceptible to empirical or scientific verification. In Buddhism there is no place for such things.

The second term refers to an inner attitude of assent, of trust. The Buddhist's basic attitude is to place trust in the words of the Master. Those words teach a doctrine, but this word 'doctrine' is ambiguous in our languages, since it can designate a body of 'truths', which may include things which resemble beliefs. The Pali-Sanskrit word *dharma*, on the other hand, lacks this ambiguity: it can only refer to instructions on how to lead one's life, to practices, to guidance concerning a path to be followed and tried out, whose validity becomes apparent through practice. It is true that a certain amount of trust is placed *a priori* in the words of the Buddha, in the validity of his clear-sightedness, wisdom, spiritual intuition, inner enlightenment. But it is argued that this is not purely *a priori*, as there is testimony that the validity of the Path in question has been proved: the experience that the Buddha had of its validity (as the first to do so), and the possibility of verifying the result by practising the Path oneself. He himself put his Path to the test, and tried out the result on himself. He also said that he should not simply be taken at his word, but that the Path should be verified through personal trial. This was the sole irrefutable proof.

How Buddhism deals with the religious instinct

The true Buddhist is therefore apparently a man who is free of any belief of a religious nature – in the usual sense of the word. He is a man absolutely liberated from any of the disempowering effects of the occult, the shadowy, the unverifiable. He has radically demystified the instinct of religiosity. Under this view, the Buddha was therefore the great precursor of all the modern 'masters of suspicion'. His plan, it seems, was to resolve the complex fascination with the shadowy which lies at

the heart of man's instinctive psychology.

It will be objected that this is not human, that it mutilates man. It involves destroying a deep-lying instinct in him which plays an irreplaceable role, destroying a whole dimension – the most profound dimension, the dimension of infinity. It means cutting man down to size, flattening him in a horizontal posture, in down-to-earth pragmatism, inciting in him the irresistible temptation of materialism and nihilism, by destroying in him the reflex which resisted such a temptation through the appeal of dreams and the infinite.

How Buddhism deals with the eternal truths

In fact, if, rather than adopting the point of view of Buddhism out of a bias in its favour, one tries to gain a clearer view of the values of the Buddhist enterprise, it might be more accurate to say that it does not simply destroy the religious instinct or the old myths from the primitive traditions. To do so would indeed amount to doing violence to something which is part of the human heritage, and which definitely has a positive role to play. Nothing is ever pure negativity; but in the nature of beings there is something ambiguous: there is finiteness and incompleteness (a combination of being and nothingness).

Thus there are two possibilities:

The wrong path: two equally erroneous extremes: two forms of blindness:

Attributing absolute, unconditional status, to that which is merely finiteness:

failing to see the aspect of finiteness (the first form of ignorance)

Unconditionally annihilating that which is, after all, finiteness – in other words, not-nothingness:

Denying any value (the second form of ignorance)

The right path: the middle path, which respects both aspects:

twofold wisdom, clear-sightedness, correct, accurate knowledge;

faithfulness to the 'truth of what things are';

clear-sightedness and faithfulness to the meaning, the *logos*, the message contained in the nature of things, through the fact that things are what they are: 'being as not being';

following the meaning, the ontological *Différence* which sends a signal, to the very heart of the 'being of beings' (the pre-Socratics) and, in speech, the 'epistemological *Différence*' of the 'unsaid of the said'.

How to follow Nature and the spiritual Path, the Path of Salvation

Here is the true path: it should be expressed, made and, above all, made to become manifest.

The only path of universal validity: that which restores fully and to its correct value the entire contents of man's empirical experience in the world, life as a whole, and every last aspect of it.

Follow nature, follow the meaning, follow the message of things, follow the image (or icon), follow the omni-present *logos*, the Spirit...

This is the Path of the man who has seen, who sees, the Awakened one, the vigilant one...

It is the mystical Path of the one who goes 'as though he could see the invisible'

the path of the sign, the symbol, the 'sacrament', which is the universality of human experience: 'following the meaning right through to the end'.

This, in essence, is the route of all Paths of spiritual realisation: it is the turntable from which all Paths leave, and where all Paths meet; here lies the essential value of what they hold in common, of that which entitles them to their claim to nobility and validity as a Path of salvation.

Various accusations could be made against such a vision: of immanentism, monism, pantheism, naturalism, Pelagianism and so on. But would they be fair? When we refer to 'nature' here, it should be fairly obvious that we are talking about our real, actual nature, not some rational concept of pure

nature (as opposed to supernature) which has been found to serve functional purposes in scholastic theological expositions.

What is referred to in this case is man's concrete, real, general situation.

In this sense, nature should not be opposed to supernature or grace, and does not exclude them. It can genuinely be said that all is grace and everything is given, is received: nature is grace – wholly, inseparably and without any possible discrimination. If a man is faithful to nature's overall call, to its meaning, and in conformity and faithfulness to that total, final sense; if he follows that sense to the end, in the profound determination of his will; then, although he may not have fully realised it (and provided he has not consciously and deliberately decapitated it, aborted it and caused it to collapse by consciously and deliberately resorting to his own absolutised self), such a man is truly on the Spiritual Path, the mystical Path, the Path of salvation.

The Path of salvation outside the mediation of Christ

Is this not the radical foundation of what we call the 'salvation of the infidel', the salvation of 'well-intentioned pagans', without any need to rely on the concept of 'implicit Christianity'?

Why on earth was it thought to be necessary to resort to such a notion? It was because of our Christian certainty that salvation lies only in Christ, that there is absolutely no Path of salvation for man, for any man, outside Christ's mediation – and even that mediation does not come from Christ *qua* the person known as Jesus Christ in his separate individuality as such, without reference, but from Christ in the totality to which his personal identity refers: one – and not just any one – of the ineffable Trinity.

Conclusion: there is no Path of salvation outside Christ. However, this cannot be made explicit to those who do not profess the Christian faith, so it is implicit.

Yet 'implicit' and 'explicit' are not ontological characteristics of the reality designated by the term 'the Path of salvation in Christ': it does not derive its being from an epistemological reference – to the knowledge we have of it. Either it is or it is not, and one either knows it or does not know it. It is not the fact of having knowledge of it – whether explicit or implicit – that gives it being, which would mean that, if there were an absence of knowledge of it – both explicit and implicit – it would not exist.

Every Path of salvation is 'in Christ' – in Christ-the-Son-of-the-Father or in the divine sonship of Christ, divination in Christ, Christ's life of the Spirit – the formulation's acceptability depending on the extent to which it expresses the totality of Jesus' mediation.

Every path of salvation is 'Christlike', all the grace of salvation is Christlike, all salvation – regardless of what religious or a-religious name one has attached to its path – is Christlike.

The fact that every authentic path of salvation is Christlike is something that is only confessed, believed, recognised and known by the authentic Christian, by conscious confession of faith to Christ as the sole mediator of salvation; in fact, is it not this very act of confession that makes him a Christian? – To speak of such actions purely as human acts is not to ignore, neglect or deny the role of grace, which is not a 'part' of the human action. Compare the notion of instrumental causality.

Were the follower of another spiritual path to acknowledge this, he would by this very fact become spiritually Christian; he would no longer be the follower of another path. He can only truly be the follower of another path while he fails to acknowledge the universal mediation of Christ's salvation – even though he may know that Christians profess this. The fact is that he, as far as he is concerned, does not acknowledge it, and in fact denies it.

The true follower of another spiritual path is one who either has no knowledge of the universal mediation of Christ's salvation or, while aware that Christians are convinced of it, disputes its truth, at least as regards his own path and himself; or he may acknowledge a certain mediation that comes from Christ and that is equivalent to that from other spiritual innovators (like many promoters

of alliances between religions, very much in keeping with the tradition of Oriental tolerance).

Thus, at the same time, a person may be convinced that he has no link with the mediation of Christ's salvation, and may even explicitly deny and reject it; while next to him, the Christian is convinced that that person's salvation, in his non-Christian path, must really come through the universal mediation of Christ's salvation. The authenticity of any values of salvation which come to him through other forms of mediation is ultimately subordinate to the essential and universal salvation of Christ.

The Christian knows this. He need not conceal his Faith, his conviction, on this point – perhaps, indeed, it should even be affirmed, out of sincerity and in a spirit of witnessing. Such an affirmation should never be made in a spirit of triumphalism, and always with the utmost humility and the greatest respect for the other person's religious sensibilities and convictions; above all, his freedom should never be infringed through pressure to adopt or profess certain convictions.

The only path can one advise the Christian to take is to give as faithful a testimonial as possible in respect of his lived experience, and as regards the word, to bear witness in a manner that is always humble and respectful, and with an attitude of listening to the other person in order to discern the words which may bear fruit when they are received.

On the subject of the word, one may ask how dialogue can possibly work between the followers of different spiritual paths. A dialogue is only possible between beings of the same species.

Why do we not refer to a 'dialogue between two religions'? The reason is that there is a doubt whether Buddhism – the case of immediate concern to us – corresponds to the usual definition of 'religion'. The fact that the question is endlessly re-examined and debated indicates that the answer is not easy. We should also take notice of an answer frequently given by the Buddhists themselves: 'Buddhism is not a religion like other religions'. This amounts to saying that the definition of 'religion' is accepted only partially and reluctantly. (Some people have made the same comment about Christianity.)

The reason for this is that Buddhism does not attach the same importance as other religions to certain elements which are regarded as essential to the definition of religion. We have already seen that this is the case with beliefs, whose importance in Buddhism is subjected to all kinds of relativisation, and that, unlike what is found in all religions, 'Buddhist orthodoxy' does not concern itself with these varying forms of relativisation, but admits them and shows considerable tolerance towards them. And if the concept of orthodoxy were to be defined as conformity of beliefs to a norm or a fixed canon, one might say that Buddhism has no orthodoxy, or if there is some form of orthodoxy, its function is not to regulate beliefs. What then might its role be?

Doctrines? What doctrines?

In the view of many people, referring to an orthodoxy in Buddhism seems absurd. Ask the missionaries in Buddhist countries: 'There is no orthodoxy in Buddhism: there are numerous Buddhisms, and every Buddhist can make up his own version.' In terms of beliefs, this is true. Yet in order to identify together, the Buddhists must have some criterion other than the external features by which the simple tourist is guided: pagodas, stupas, bonzes, statues of the Buddha, etc.

In the absence of clearly defined beliefs – which it does not regard as a shortcoming, quite the reverse – Buddhism does in fact have a doctrine, or rather, Buddhism itself is a specific and recognisable doctrine. But what is unusual about this doctrine is that it does not consist uniquely, principally or even incidentally of specific religious beliefs.

And thus we return, with this meagre booty, to the starting-point of this enquiry: what is Buddhist doctrine? Doctrine means teaching, so what does Buddhism teach?

If we put the question like this, we cannot fail to find an answer, since the Buddha is awarded the title of Master precisely because he gave teachings which were received by disciples, scriptures

whose purpose was to fix the teachings' transmission authentically; and in affirmation of that authenticity, the canonical scriptures are said to be 'the Word of the Buddha'.

The Word of the Buddha, initiation, practical education

So what does this 'Word of the Buddha' teach, in the view of Buddhists?

Its sole purpose is to teach a path of salvation. This path of salvation is not described in the abstract, in itself, as though in reply to a question asked purely out of curiosity, 'What is this path of salvation like?' It is certainly not a matter of 'beliefs necessary for salvation', transmitted by a 'revealer' and received through faith. It is not a matter of the revelation of salvation, or of 'salvation history', with the history of a saviour and of a people or community of the saved.

It is certainly true that this 'Word of the Buddha', these scriptures, contain many stories: the story of the life of the Buddha, of the disciples, of the councils of the Buddha's followers. The narrative provides a framework for the teachings; in fact, this framework is more specifically a narrator who repeats the tradition, as is shown by the stereotypical formula which recurs endlessly, marking the beginnings of chapters and sections: 'It is said that, at that time, the Buddha was at such-and-such a place, and such-and-such a person came up to him, and the Master replied to him...', which amounts to saying 'It is recounted that the Master taught the following at a certain moment and in a certain place:...'

The historical element's sole function is to situate, frame and connect the teachings, which are timeless. They are not timeless in the sense that they relate to 'eternal truths', to answers to the familiar eternal questions, 'Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?' Answers to these questions form the essential content of all religions, but here again, Buddhism is distinct from other religions. Instead, the teachings are timeless in the sense that they must be valid in all times and places, valid for every human *hic et nunc*, for each and every moment in the unfolding of man's life and of human history. They are universal teachings.

Nor are they purely the knowledge of the Master which is passed on to the pupil and which the pupil must merely acquaint himself with, remember and keep faithfully, although they do include that aspect. They are something else: they are 'wisdom', if that word can be used to refer to something more than pure knowledge. Wisdom is said to be transmitted not to a pupil, but to a disciple. The disciple is one who learns what the Master knows and passes on to him; under the Master's guidance, he learns to practise the things that the Master transmits out of the experience of his own life practice in accordance with wisdom.

This is what the Buddhist doctrine, the Word of the Buddha, is intended to be: teachings which initiate the recipient into a life practice, and the transmission of the practice of a Path.

A tradition of spiritual orthopraxis

The Master is the Path's initiator. He did not invent it, but discovered it in the 'nature of things'. He did so through intuition, through his special spiritual clear-sightedness, through the fact of his inner purity, which was greater than that of any of his contemporaries. He was given a more profound vision of the ultimate meaning of human life, and hence the path down which human life must travel as 'correctly' and effectively as possible towards the accomplishment of that which is inscribed in human nature at its deepest level.

The radical truth about human life (the 'three characteristics' of all things: suffering, impermanence and non-essentiality or non-absoluteness) is finiteness. The ultimate truth of that finiteness is non-finiteness, in other words 'extinction', or, basically, going beyond. The completeness of this infiniteness, the path to bring about that completeness, or rather to allow it to become manifest of its own accord (for it is in the nature of things which is given and hence normative), consists of doing the one thing which lies within man's power and at his discretion (freedom, choice, consent). It

consists of burning all obstacles, the sum and the common root of which are refusal, resistance, self-enclosure, the refusal to let go of blind reliance on the illusory absolutisation of the superficial self, the pure and instant accretion of the everyday experiences of empirical life – for these are the things which hold us back from allowing the advent in our life of the ultimate reality of that which ‘is’, more myself than me, the ‘self of the self’, beyond the self.

The Buddha’s Doctrine is not intended to be a theoretical conceptualisation of all this – a kind of philosophical wisdom – but a teaching of the path which leads to this being concretely realised, which causes it to come into men’s everyday lives. And as man lives in society, that teaching is realised in the most radical and exemplary way possible: in the form of a monastic order which bears witness, stimulates, and serves as a resource place, a permanent centre, a school of application, a training centre, a body for the transmission and perpetuation of the Path. The Buddha regarded the presence of the order of monks (not the isolated monk, which is another characteristic feature), this exemplary witness of the Path, as essential for its permanence and vitality.

On the concrete level of the teaching of the Path, anything relating to the Path’s pursuit will constitute an integral part of it, hence all practices whose purpose is to condition, illuminate, train and perfect the practitioner in the path. The centre of interest and application of the lived Path is the *hic et nunc* in which each inner choice or decision occurs, and the focus of practice is the inner attitude and all the factors in the conditioning and correcting of that attitude. The first attitude which must be cultivated as the Path’s prerequisite and driving force is the presence of the spirit, awareness, vigilance, the safeguarding of the heart without which no discernment or clear vision is possible.

Doctrinal controversies

If it is true that enriching encounter and dialogue is only possible between like and like, it must seem obvious that there is nothing to be gained from attempts at dialogue with Buddhism, whether on the basis of our religious beliefs, or of our dogmatic canons, or of our theories of systematic theology or scholastic philosophy – for the simple reason that, from the viewpoint of the Buddhist interlocutor, these things are of little importance or interest.

This does not mean that it would be impossible to conduct discussions, debates and polemics in these areas: but there have been too many of these in the past, generally at our instigation, and always in the hope of convincing our interlocutors and getting them to assent to our reasoning, or, failing that, to get them up against the wall, caught between the dilemma of admitting defeat or taking refuge in bad faith. Having learnt from past experiences, the monks who are devoted to the spiritual life – the better ones – will immediately refuse to engage in theoretical discussion; but we can converse endlessly with them about spiritual matters if we are able to do so peacefully, simply, with an attitude of mutual listening. In view of past history, however, it may be that they will break things off for fear that we wish to draw them into polemics, when such is not our intention. We therefore need to be patient and wait for trust to be built up again. Alternatively, if one wishes to engage in lively, lengthy debate for its own sake, one can find bonzes who are prepared to do so, especially students at the upper schools of doctrine; but if there are other monks nearby, and they see the discussion becoming heated, you can be sure that they will promptly take their younger colleague by the arm and steer him away from this false step. Their instructions are not to engage in controversy with the followers of other religions! If one of them forgets this, the others set him back on the right path.

So what is it that we have such a strong desire to discuss with the Buddhists? It is in fact precisely those doctrinal questions concerning which we can find positions in ‘Buddhist doctrine’ that are diametrically opposed to our own. Assuming that the two positions are on the same plane, in the same logical context, on the same theoretical level, and assuming that the words used have the

same significance and the same content, then one would indeed be dealing with contradictory positions, one of which must be wrong if the other is true; and as the Christian position has the guarantee of the 'words of eternal life', it must be that, somehow or other, the other will eventually yield, and the sooner the better for their sake even more than for ours.

Evaluating doctrines

But hold on a moment! We affirm the existence of God; they deny it. We affirm the immortality of the soul; they deny it. Yet these two truths are not revealed truths, they fall within the scope of natural reason. The same goes for the permanence of personal identity, which they deny. Let us now proceed to the essential revealed truths of Christianity: the personhood and tri-personhood of God, the universal mediation of the salvation of Christ, the Son of God...It is in fact pointless listing all the revealed truths, because one always ends up making the same shocking finding, namely that, by contrast with other religions, where one has the joy of discovering 'foreshadowings' of the revealed truths, in Buddhism one comes up against absolute rejection. It is the religion which is 'hardest to reconcile with the Christian faith'.

On the specific point of the two revealed truths just mentioned, Christianity is in fact also irreconcilable with the two religions which are closest to it: Judaism and Islam. However, we may find this less striking because they do not reject the 'natural' truths referred to earlier.

If we are judging by such criteria of closeness, then those who are closest to us, as many missionaries claim, are the animists, and they are also converted most readily to Christianity.

Simultaneously Christian and Buddhist?

The problems we have just raised appear wholly insoluble, which explains our perplexity. And they would indeed be genuine problems for the encounter between Christianity and Buddhism, if the idea were to find an instant solution which would enable a Buddhist to become a Christian without ceasing to be a Buddhist, and would enable a Christian to become a Buddhist without ceasing to be a Christian – in short, if the idea were to find a solution which would show us how one could simultaneously be fully Buddhist and fully Christian.

This in turn is different from the problem of how one could form a functionally viable synthesis from an amalgam of elements taken from each of the two paths: in other words, by adding together all reconcilable elements and eliminating anything which could not be reconciled. Such an operation is commonly known as syncretism. It is more or less what was attempted by the promoters of the global Buddhist alliance, at least in its early days, with the common platform of beliefs and doctrinal principles set up by Colonel Olcott, which was acceptable to the entirety of both Buddhism and theosophy. (The platform was called Navayana: the 'new' vehicle, the vehicle for Western Buddhist sympathisers.) This kind of hybridism is certainly not what we are interested in!

Nor are we seeking to be simultaneously 'a Christian' and 'a Buddhist', with all the elements of sociological affiliation to the human groupings concerned, like a kind of double nationality or double religious identity that mean that we were equally comfortable with either group, and feel equally at home in the pagoda as with the priest, and vice versa.

Apparent opposition

These attempts at reconciliation in the abstract between a Christian doctrine and a Buddhist doctrine, both of them treated as abstract complexes of theoretical data, resemble the way in which one would try to produce an equation with the data in a problem, after which the problem's solution will fall into place of its own accord. But is this the true 'encounter'? Surely the true encounter is an encounter not of doctrines but of men who are really living these Paths – of 'true disciples' of the two Paths?

Where one is attempting a theoretical reconciliation of what appears to be irreconcilable, and to diminish the oppositions between formulations whose opposition is more apparent than real, one could reasonably expect a little progress to be made in breaking the deadlock in certain areas. One could certainly show that the Buddhists' non-theism is apophatism and anti-anthropomorphism rather than atheism. One could recognise that their anti-personalism is more a rejection of any absolutisation of the individual 'me' and the empirical self than a phenomenological position, and amounts to psychological atomism rather than spiritual nihilism. One could appreciate that their 'nature' is not necessarily opposed to our 'supernature'. One could point out that in the case of those of their formulations which are only intended to be understood from the empirical viewpoint of human experience, their anti-soterial stance and their 'claim' that one works out one's own salvation represent a form of Pelagianism that is more material than formal. One could come up with sound reasons for suspecting that their nihilistic pronouncements are a way of describing transcendence in negative terms. And there are plenty of other cases where reasons could be found to doubt whether our initial interpretations were correct.

The analogy of faith

'You are very indulgent towards Buddhism,' it may be said: 'It's not clear whether you're on the right track!'

Certainly, when one considers the formulations as such, in their abstract, literal sense, one may doubt whether it is legitimate to see in them anything more or less than what they appear to affirm or deny. However, even in the abstraction of the doctrinal study of written documents, one should not interpret the different formulations out of the context of the entire doctrine, or independently of other formulations which seem to moderate or even contradict them. Would it be intellectually honest to extrapolate from, isolate, and build up into a system (by straining or even modifying the terms used) an expression which might well be a paradoxical turn of phrase which relies on the exercise of subtlety and intelligence by the listener? For the language of a doctrine is naturally born within that doctrine, through and for the usage of the adherents of that doctrine, and not for external usage or in a manner that takes account of possible erroneous interpretations that those outside might form.

Obviously, this means that only the adherents are capable of interpreting their doctrine properly, and that careful attention must be paid to what they have to say about it themselves. In fact, one should even be a little wary of the explanations that they sometimes try to give to outsiders using the latter's own concepts (in the belief that they understand them sufficiently), and look out for anything which might have become attenuated or put under strain in the light of earlier polemics.

It will always be the case that the only ones who can really speak about Buddhism are the Buddhists, and only then when they are speaking among themselves; moreover, those who speak best about it are those who live it the best. Is this not the case for us, too, and indeed everywhere? The reason is quite simply that only those who have assimilated the path in their daily life really 'dwell in the analogy of faith', and can spontaneously, effortlessly and confidently interpret each element 'in the analogy of faith'; and that is the ideal and perfect interpretation.

The core of the message

A few interviews conducted in the course of a quick semi-touristic 'study trip' are insufficient to bring into being within oneself that faculty of intuition through connaturality which works spontaneously according to the analogy of faith. Such intuition must be gestated, brought to birth and perhaps even incubated if the birth was premature.

But some – many, in fact – do not accept this. In this age of mass consumerism, of surveys and opinion polls, there are many people who have been initiated into the art of statistics and who are familiar with the basic requirements for an accurate statistical survey. The first thing one needs is a

representative sample of the group one wishes to study. Accordingly, the scholar, the specialist in the history of religion or the sociology of religion, is bound to be shocked (as a rigorous and right-thinking professional) to see an amateur who is well-meaning but ignorant of the most basic principles of the field, studying Buddhism on the basis of a sample which has been selected – deliberately and knowingly – in contradiction with those principles.

Obviously, if the object of our study is to answer a question such as: ‘What do the Buddhists believe?’ or ‘What are the beliefs of the Buddhists of the Lesser Vehicle?’ or ‘What is the predominance of Buddhist and animist beliefs among the rural Buddhist populations of the banks of the Mekong?’, that is a task which can be performed in accordance with the rules of statistics.

But is our objective of that kind? We are no longer operating in terms of a scientific study of Buddhism in the sociological sense of a human group determined by the identity assumed by populations from their overall affiliation to a religion called Buddhism. Our endeavour is not scientific but spiritual: a spiritual approach to the profound meaning of the Buddha’s message. Yes, this is a ‘study of Buddhism’, but the term is used in a quite different sense from that which would be employed in a sociological study. My approach to the spiritual message involves a different choice of method, without implying any disrespect for the scientific work of the specialists in the history of religion.

If a non-Christian, or even a Christian in terms of sociological affiliation, asks us for guidance in deepening his understanding of and initiation into the spiritual message of Christ, would we recommend the statistical method to him?

What situation can be more favourable to becoming truly immersed in the ‘analogy of faith’ so as to gain an inner understanding of the full spiritual implications of the fundamental intuitions of a Path’s initiator, than to engage in companionship and spiritual intercommunion with the true disciples of that Path?

Adherents of two Paths

What situation could be more favourable than such companionship for allowing the true disciples of the one Path to gain illumination from some authentic ray of light from the other Path, as experienced in all humility and sincerity by another true disciple?

In their eyes, as we have said, as a matter of conviction and out of traditional loyalty to the intuitions and intentions of their founder, the pure, authentic Path cannot persist among the adherents and the lay disciples without the visible, close presence of a witness embodying the spiritual striving of that Path in its full intensity, in a radical choice. If the intuition at the start of the Path is the realisation of the ‘finiteness’ of the ‘worldly’ and the spiritual interpretation of its meaning (namely the appeal to/appeal of ‘non-finiteness’), the body of disciples who have generally ‘taken refuge’ in this Path must have before it an indisputable testimony from which it can replenish its strength, in order not to forget that Path.

This seems self-evident to them. By contrast, and to put it mildly, a presumption in favour of other Paths is not created when their ubiquitous propagandists use their considerable resources to hunt for converts, declare it to be their appointed role to teach the whole world, claim to be the bearers of a single recipe for morality in this world and salvation in the next world, display a flagrant lack of humility, and seem far more preoccupied with religious rites, ceremonies and regulations than with a spiritual Path. Indeed there is so little testimony of a spiritual Path among them that one might doubt whether they regard it as the most important thing.

It is true that this severe judgement may not be explicitly articulated, and the monks would be upset if we were to suppose that their view was so unkind. Yet a curious observation has to be made: among the Buddhists, there are only monks, and nothing resembling the secular clergy. Although the position of state religion gives many of the bonzes a status close to that of member of a clerical

caste, they will always abstain vigorously from such a status since it is incompatible with the definition of who they are. On the other hand, the Catholic clergy, even when they are religious, function as secular clergy, and have sought to benefit from the respect spontaneously attributed by the people to those who renounce the 'worldly' life. They tend to want to be seen as the monks' equals in the eyes of Buddhists at least, regardless of the fact that they plainly have not adopted the lifestyle which the Buddhists consider inseparable from the monastic life.

This in turn influences the Buddhist monks; it would be no exaggeration to say that the life of the regular or religious clergy, as well as that of the female religious, is in the process of secularising certain Buddhist monastic circles.

Another curious point is that now that monasticism's reputation has gone up again in Western ecclesiastical opinion, and since it is known that such a thing is greatly desired and would be very welcome in high-up circles, the local church would be delighted to be able to announce some monastic foundations to the higher authorities; these, however, are getting off to a very difficult start or have yet to get off the ground. On the other hand, the same people who openly express the desire for Christian monastic foundations – which one would suppose to mean the contemplative life, except that here too there is doubt and ambiguity – criticise the Buddhist monks for observances which keep them remote from the world, and eagerly applaud those monks who challenge their own status and start taking secular initiatives. 'At last,' they say, 'some intelligent bonzes who are willing to adapt Buddhism to modern life and the modern world!' Are these unconscious inconsistencies? When the local church professes a desire for the presence of monasticism in its midst, does it do so out of genuine conviction, which would imply an inner conversion, or is it simply going along with the latest fashion?

(This occurred at a meeting of delegates from several Asian countries who had gathered to consider pastoral questions. There was a lengthy examination of signs of renewal in Buddhism, the most positive of which was: 'The monks are starting to become involved in lay affairs' – translation: 'They are finally behaving like priests: they are assuming the responsibilities of the lay community.' Following this, it was the turn of the 'prospecting delegate' in connection with Christian monasticism to give his report. Having remained silent during the previous discussion, he started by asking whether everyone was really in favour of attempts at contemplative life, and agreed that it was necessary. There was an air of surprise at this question of principle having been asked: of course everyone agreed...except that Buddhist monasticism was clearly not fit to receive the same favour, or be weighed in the same balance.)

The testimony of the monastic orders

Can there be any doubt that what is specific to Buddhism is the 'practice' of the Path, of the spiritual life, to which all are called and in which all participate to a greater or lesser degree? Yet its privileged locus is the contemplative life of the order of disciple-monks, which remains 'apart' from the world so that the perfect life can be pursued in a radical manner, and in order to serve as a witness to the populace of 'secular' disciples (the word 'lay' is inappropriate where non-monks are concerned).

Christianity will never encounter Buddhism at the highest – or rather the deepest – level unless a counterpart can be found among the disciples of the Path of Christ to this order of 'true disciples', acting as witnesses to the populace of 'secular' disciples (laypeople, presbyters and other officiators at ministerial services) of the Path of the Gospel of Christ, lived to the full. And although it constantly needs to be reinvented to reflect the particularities of specific cultural and religious environments, an uninterrupted tradition exists. Within that tradition, the most relevant models are undoubtedly the original ones.

It is there that the true 'summit meeting' would take place, if one might be permitted to borrow the

expression, between the Path of the Buddha and the Path of Christ, or to be more precise between the disciples of the two Paths: in their most profound experiences, in maximum faithfulness to the true heritage of their traditional Path, and in abstention from both argument and the attempt to reconcile what seems irreconcilable. Is it not preferable to respect the mystery of that irreconcilability? To reduce everything to the same level and smooth out the differences would be the worst possible approach. In the frank companionship of the two Paths, free from any compromise through sentimental and facile conciliation, would there not be immense benefit merely from discovering points of closeness of experience through an attitude of humble and patient listening on both sides and allowing lengthy silences to mature? Would there not be mutual enrichment from certain aspects of profound spiritual attitude which may be more explicit in one Path than in the other? Who can say how far one might travel down such a road? And it would be done without anyone being tempted to give, ask for or hope for renunciations of convictions.

Is this mutual presence of spiritual intercommunion in the night between true disciples of the two Paths of Christ and the Buddha (even if that night does seem more impenetrable) essentially different from that experienced between separate Christian churches? However, there remains the difference that between Christians who have become separated one may cherish a hope for visible intercommunion in a more or less remote future, whereas in the other case it is impossible to see how this could be achieved during this time of earthly pilgrimage. But does this in any way negate the values of communion and shared spirituality that can be experienced? That shared experience can surmount (or, if one prefers, stop short of) the 'differentiating factor', the intervention of Christ, Son of the Divine Redeemer, in human affairs – without in any way minimising or relativising those things.

This universal mediation of the salvation of Christ, known, recognised and confessed, creates a bond and a community of affiliation to the Path of Christ which, despite divisions between churches, makes us infinitely close and, from this point of view, puts an infinite distance between us and the non-Christians. However, although this point of view is extremely important, indeed essential for the Christian, it must not be allowed to negate or make us forget the fact that everyone, even if they do not know it, even if they deny or reject it in good faith because they do not know what they are denying or rejecting, is equally subject to the universal mediation of Christ's salvation. And from that point of view, in truth there is no longer any distance.