

# RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN BUDDHISM

By MICHAEL A. BARNES

**T**HERE IS A story, no doubt apocryphal but nonetheless instructive, about the missionary who was sent off to a distant far-eastern land to convert the pagans. Being a zealous man, he decided he ought to get to know the local religion and duly set off in search of suitable natives. Eventually he came across a buddhist monk, clothed in his saffron robe, meditating quietly in the shade of a tree. 'Tell me, my good man', said the missionary, 'who are you praying to?' 'I am praying to no-one', said the Buddhist after a short pause. 'Well, what is the name of your God?', asked the missionary. 'There is no God', came the reply. 'Then what is your prayer about?', pleaded the missionary. 'There is no prayer', said the monk. The missionary was by this stage becoming somewhat bewildered and turned to go away. As he retreated, the Buddhist called after him, 'Oh, and by the way, there is no one praying either'.

Many people on their first acquaintance with Buddhism will probably share the missionary's exasperation. Just what *is* Buddhism? For some it seems like pure nihilism, for others a sort of spiritual atheism: a philosophical or psychological system rather than a religious faith. Is it really a religion at all, or a system of personal discipline aiming at self-induced 'mystical' attainments? Might we not call it a religious atheism or, at any rate, a non-theistic religion? Naturally there is some element of truth in all these descriptions, however much they seem to contradict one another. But the real difficulty is not our definition of religion or religious experience. What school of Buddhism are we talking about? What is the particular emphasis and direction of that school? These are the questions which should first confront us; and, while it would by no means be a waste of time to discuss the vexed question of the religious element in Buddhism, that is not to be our purpose here. We intend only to have a brief look at the teaching of the Buddha about *Moksa*, the sanskrit word which expresses one of the most fundamental of religious concepts: salvation or deliverance

from this sad and wearisome existence. And the school we have chosen to consider is the old, conservative *Theravāda*, the 'doctrine of the elders', which flourishes today mainly in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand.

Its scriptures, the *Pāli* Canon, give us the clearest and most consistent information about the history of the earliest Buddhism; and modern scholars have traced certain texts as far back as to within a hundred years of the death of its founder. *Theravāda* is the only surviving remnant of the so-called *Hinayāna* Buddhism, the 'lesser vehicle', as it is somewhat derogatively called by its counterpart, the *Mahāyāna*, or 'great vehicle'. The latter consists of a vast and complicated amalgam of schools, ranging from the tantric *Vajrayāna* of Tibet to the austere *Zen* of Japan. But however much they may differ in practice and belief, all these schools do find a certain common ground in the *Pāli* Canon, which gives us the most ancient record of what the Buddha said and of what the first company of monks preached about discipline, morality, meditation, release, enlightenment and *Nirvāna*.

Everybody knows that the supreme experience of Buddhism is the experience of *Nirvāna*. But the Buddha resolutely refused to define *Nirvāna*; to have tried to do so would have been to reduce it to the world of *Samsāra*, the eternal round of rebirth and becoming. What the Buddha promised, first and foremost, was to lead those who trustfully followed his guidance, to show them the way to understand the doctrine he preached through their own experience. Thus he kept strictly to the principle not to proclaim anything superfluous; not, as he insisted, because he did not know the answers, but because he considered them useless for the attainment of the real goal. Rather than indulge in empty speculation on the hereafter, the Buddha's teaching was essentially practical. He turned to the *Four Noble Truths* which he expounded in the famous first sermon to the five ascetics in the deer park at *Isipatāna*: the Noble Truth of Suffering, the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering, the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering and the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering. The idea of a path or a way of deliverance is fundamental to Buddhism. Unlike Christianity, which is anchored in the ancient hebrew tradition of an utterly holy, transcendent God who has acted in the past to save his people and which looks to him to fulfil his promises, indian religion in general lacks the idea of a beneficent deity who takes the initiative to save man. The individual must work out his own

salvation. He must be forever seeking an assurance that he has reached a state of permanent happiness through some mystical or other-worldly experience. This is particularly true of Buddhism, and therefore any consideration of religious experience in Buddhism must focus its attention on the Way.

The Way is the Fourth Noble Truth, and in the Buddha's First Sermon it is also called the Noble Eightfold Path, the elements of which are right view, right thinking, right speech, right action, right living, right striving, right vigilance and right meditation. In another *sutta* or discourse of the Buddha we find a graphic description of the life of a recluse. We will examine this shortly. There is, however, one more classification of the Way. This is the summary known as the threefold discipline or training – *Sīla* or Morality, *Samādhi* or Concentration, and *Paññā* or Wisdom. The Fourth Noble Truth, the Way of Deliverance, the Noble Eightfold Path and the Threefold Training are all talking about the same thing.

This account of the threefold training introduces us to one of the most important themes which runs through all Indian spirituality; the relationship between gnosis and 'mystical experience', between the intuitive insight into reality and the experience of that reality gained through actual meditation. The modern *Theravāda* tradition notes that there are two kinds of meditation, *Samathayāna*, the way of calm or tranquillity, and *Vipassanāyāna*, the way of insight. The distinction between the two is based on that between concentration, *samādhi*, and wisdom, *paññā*. In *Theravādin* countries, it is possible to find separate meditation centres devoted to the one or the other; but in practice both are viewed as necessary, the differences being partly a matter of emphasis and partly a question of the order of development. Those who adhere to the tranquillity meditation thus insist that, since the mind is in a constant state of flux, it is necessary as the first stage of the meditation process to overcome all mental 'impurities', all agitation and distraction. One must therefore eradicate all stimuli, both external and internal, from consciousness. One can then go on to the second stage, that of insight meditation. On the other hand, adherents of the *Vipassanā* method often insist that the way of *Samatha* can be discarded. In a recently published guide, the Venerable Dhiravamsa says:

The only work to be done is to develop full attention towards ourselves, towards what is going on. We act, we feel, we think, we do many things in life, but there is a vital factor in all this which is essential: *clear awareness* . . . Awareness is not conditioned by anything.

It is purely subjective perception, without the interference of the subject, of the self, the ego. Consciousness is the ego-trip, but awareness is selfless – an objective process of seeing, hearing, experiencing, understanding.<sup>1</sup>

But how does one gain an insight into 'objective reality' without first having controlled and mastered the faculties of the mind? If the mind is constantly distracted and characterized by wandering and restlessness, how can one hope to gain the saving knowledge, to be enlightened? The problem is not a modern one. There is plenty of material in the *Pāli* Canon which shows that the earliest Buddhism attempted to combine two distinct theories of salvation: that which makes *Moksa* or release primarily a matter of intellectual understanding, and that which is based on ascetical and ecstatic disciplines. The problem is put most clearly in a *sutta* from the *Anguttara Nikāya*.<sup>2</sup> We hear that a dispute has arisen between those who call themselves *dhamma-yogins*, or those devoted to the doctrine, and the meditators. Each group complains about the activities of the other: the one insisting that the other's activities are of no use nor benefit to anyone. The *dhamma-yogins* blame the meditators for meditating about nothing, while the meditators blame the *dhamma-yogins* for lacking self-composure and discipline of purpose. The Buddha criticizes them both for being prepared to praise only their own kind, and insists that each should praise the other. *Dhamma-yogins* should praise meditators, for 'these wondrous persons are hardly found in the world – they who live with their whole being in tune with the deathless'. Similarly meditators should praise *dhamma-yogins*: for 'these wondrous persons are hardly found in the world – they who with insight penetrate and see the deep way of the goal'. Both ways lead to the goal of *Paññā*, but the Way is difficult; and there are few who either gain the insight into reality or experience *Nirvāna* through meditation. It seems clear that here are described two distinct methods which are equally valuable. They are supposed to be complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

But it is not as if one can attain the goal by following the path of either the *dhamma-yogins* or of the meditators alone. In a *sutta* from the *Samyutta Nikāya*,<sup>3</sup> one monk, Musila, is asked by another monk, Savittha, whether 'apart from belief, apart from inclination,

<sup>1</sup> Dhiravamsa, *the Way of non-attachment: the Practice of Insight Meditation* (London, 1675), p 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Anguttara Nikaya*, vol iii, p 355.

<sup>3</sup> *Samyutta Nikaya*, vol ii, p 115.

hearsay, argument as to method, from reflection on and approval of opinion, the venerable Musīla has as his very own the knowledge that the ceasing of becoming is *Nirvāna*?' Musīla replies that he has indeed experienced the truth of *Nirvāna*. Another monk, Nārada, then asks Savittha to interrogate him in the same way. He does, and declares Nārada also to be fully enlightened. But Nārada demurs. He has *seen* the truth and understood it, but he is not enlightened because he has not made bodily contact with *Nirvāna*. 'It is just as if, friend, there were in the jungle-path a well, and neither rope nor drawer of water. And a man should come by, far-gone with heat, weary, trembling, athirst. He should look down into the well. Verily in him would be the knowledge – Water – yet would he not be in a position to touch it'. There is a distinction to be drawn between knowing the truth, the purely intellectual view or understanding of what the Buddha taught, and the experiencing of the truth in which all the hindrances have been eradicated.

The Buddha himself had to deal with the same problem. He is approached by a perplexed layman, Tapussa, who says that although he and ordinary folk like him see that the *dhamma* or the teaching of the Buddha is the source of all peace, yet he finds it difficult to assent to it fully and give up everything for its sake. The Buddha admits that before his enlightenment he too could see what was good and beneficial, but could not work up much enthusiasm for it. He asked himself what the reason might be, and came to this conclusion:

The peril of pleasures is not seen by me, is not made much of by me; the advantage of that giving up is not won, is not enjoyed by me . . . And I thought: if, seeing the peril of pleasures, I were to make much of it; if, winning the advantages of giving up, I were to enjoy it, it would surely happen that my mind would leap up, become steadfast, calm and inclined to this giving up on seeing it to be the peace.<sup>4</sup>

And so the Buddha describes his own practice of meditation, in which he gradually overcomes sensuous distractions and moves on to the higher planes of consciousness, where he actually experiences the truth of *Nirvāna*.

The Buddha thus had his own understanding of the nature of *Moksa*, but no amount of theoretical knowledge of his teaching was enough to achieve *Nirvāna*. For what he taught his followers was a

<sup>4</sup> *Anguttara Nikaya*, vol iv, pp 438ff.

Way of Deliverance, a practical method for gaining their own salvation. Buddhism begins and ends with the experience of the individual. The only thing necessary is for the individual to follow the Way of Deliverance taught by the Buddha without distraction and without irrelevant diversions. The goal of the disciple is not to accept his teaching on faith, but to realize it by an inner conviction or intuition. And in this the adept is echoing the experience of the Buddha himself. According to the tradition, after leaving the ancestral home in Kapilavasthu, the future Buddha, Gotama, searched restlessly for truth and wisdom. From two teachers, Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka the son of Rāma, he learnt various stages of yogic achievement, but these turned out to be only an artificial stopping of consciousness and not the *Nirvāna* which he sought. There came a point when he had to go beyond the teaching of guides and friends, however well-respected, and seek his own enlightenment. The Way of Deliverance starts, therefore, with the individual who hears the word of the enlightened One putting his trust in the Way and 'leaving home for the homeless state'. This is the first stage of the Noble Eightfold Path, right view and right thinking. But an initial confidence in the Buddha has to give way to the other elements of the Path: right speech, right action, right living, right striving, right vigilance and right meditation.

These eight factors represent the whole of Buddhism and are at the very heart of the *Theravāda* tradition. They are described in a more detailed way in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, the second of the collection called the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the long discourses.<sup>5</sup> *Sāmaññaphala* means 'the fruit of being a recluse', and the *sutta* is concerned with the advantages that are to be gained from the ascetical life. King Ajātasattu of Magadha visits the Buddha, and points out that all types and classes of men follow their own lives and occupations and gain the requisite 'fruit': happiness with the possibility of rebirth in heaven. But what sort of comparable fruit can the Buddha show for the life of an ascetic? The answer given by the Buddha is a list of the advantages which can be expected by an ascetic who follows the Buddha's Way. He begins by emphasizing the respect shown by ordinary folk to an ascetic: even a man who had previously been a slave would be greeted with reverence. The same goes for a man who had cultivated the land, or a householder who pays his taxes to the king: if they give up their property for

<sup>5</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya*, vol i, pp 49ff.

the sake of the ascetic's life, the immediate fruit and advantage they gain is the respect of the community. But the real fruit of being an ascetic comes from the description of the stages of the Way of Deliverance, each of which is said to be 'an immediate fruit of the life of a recluse, and higher and sweeter than the last'.

The main stages of progress on the Way may be summarized:

1. The hearing of the doctrine by a person who resolves to put his trust in the Buddha.
2. The moral way, rules for life and general maxims of conduct.
3. The guarding of the senses and the keeping away from evil influences.
4. The practice of wakefulness and mindfulness.
5. The actual practice of meditation, consisting of preparation, the removal of certain hindrances, such as doubt and worry, and the attainment of the four stages of contemplation.
6. The achieving of the Knowledge that leads to Release.

This pattern of achievement in meditation is repeated in many places in the *Pāli* Canon and is clearly a fundamental part of the buddhist way of life. It lacks detail and explanation, and the description of the meditation itself is particularly brief. It is expressed in somewhat negative terms: deliverance is a freeing from the shackles of existence rather than the attaining to a condition of blessedness. Theoretical discussion of what state is actually attained by the Releasing Knowledge is studiously avoided. And this is scarcely surprising, for the Way is not a contribution to philosophical speculation. It is essentially a practical guide for the man who wishes to try to discover for himself the truth preached by the Buddha. It is by no means a comprehensive manual.

Even so, certain elements do stand out. There is one stage of the Way which is repeated so consistently and accurately in all strata of the *Pāli* Canon that it must be considered as of central importance to the buddhist experience. The text describes the mental state of the man who settles down to meditate. Having cleared his mind of all sorts of fears and worries, 'gladness springs up within him on his realizing this, and joy arises to him thus gladdened, and so rejoicing, all his frame becomes at ease, and being thus at his ease, he is filled with a sense of peace, and in that peace his heart is stayed'. When this state of mind is reached, the disciple is described as having entered on the first stage of *Jhāna*. This word is notoriously difficult to translate accurately. It corresponds to the Sanskrit *Dhyāna*, and has found its way into Chinese as *Ch'an* and

into Japanese as *Zen*. To translate it simply as meditation would be to miss many important connotations. Far better to leave the term untranslated and to consider its role in the Way. There are four *Jhānas* or 'stages of contemplation', as we put it in our summary above, which lead the meditator from the state of peace and joy, as he begins his meditation, to the threshold of his goal, the achievement of *Nirvāna*. But the four stages are part of *one* process. They are very definitely not to be seen as ends in themselves, but as a single and inseparable group which in Buddhism is the means to a higher end.

The best image which one can use to describe the function of *Jhāna* is that of a bridge. *Jhāna* takes the one-pointedness of the mind, which is the central aim of all yogic techniques, and develops it to hitherto unexperienced dimensions, where the intuitive insight into reality becomes possible. To do this, the meditator must eradicate certain emotional states which are seen as hindrances to *Nirvāna*. Thus he finds himself filled with joy and peace, but soon realizes that this is only a distraction from something much more sublime, a state of total indifference in which his former emotions have been transcended. In this way he moves from one level of mystical experience to another, 'purging' or 'purifying' his mental state as he goes. Consciousness is gradually refined, and each of the four stages is described as a 'higher and sweeter fruit than the one that has come before'.

The process can be represented schematically:

*1st Jhāna* factors present: Reasoning and Investigation/Joy/Peace/Indifference.

*2nd Jhāna* factors present: Joy/Peace/Indifference.

*3rd Jhāna* factors present: Peace/Indifference.

*4th Jhāna* factor present: Indifference.

Thus in the first stage of meditation there are five elements present in the consciousness of the meditator. In the second stage two are eliminated; in the third the first three factors disappear, and in the fourth, four; these are replaced by the concentration of complete indifference or equanimity, which is the one constant factor in the whole process. This fourth stage is described in the texts: 'then further, the monk, by the putting away alike of ease and pain, by the passing away alike of any elation, any dejection he had previously felt, enters into and abides in the fourth *Jhāna*, a state of pure self-possession and equanimity, without pain and without



ease'. The meditator is now quite free from all emotional disturbance, both good and bad, from love and hate, from joy and from pain. There is only an inner clarity of vision and unity of purpose which leaves him on the threshold of *Nirvāna*. It is not a condition of hypnotic loss of consciousness but, on the contrary, a state of heightened awareness, a raising of one's consciousness to a pure and undivided attention.

The purpose of *Jhāna* seems, therefore, to be to reduce the level of emotional distraction. But what does it tell us about the nature of the buddhist experience, the achievement of *Nirvāna*? What does the *Pāli* Canon itself say? Some light is thrown on this question by the understanding of consciousness which appears in the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, the *Theravāda* equivalent of scholastic theology. To put it very briefly, we find a distinction made between two modes of consciousness, one of which is best understood as being similar to a state of deep sleep, the other indicating the stage of full, swift and complete understanding. Thus when a person is asleep he experiences a state of consciousness which is more or less completely passive. This state of consciousness is considered similar to what one experiences at the moment of death. If we put this mode at one end of the mental or visualizing process, at the other end is the state of full intellection, when an action can be judged to be moral or not. The actual process of understanding is a complicated movement between the two modes and consciousness itself; it is, perhaps best viewed as a process or spectrum. Now, of its very nature, the state of full understanding is very rarely reached; normal consciousness is somewhere in the middle, hovering between a vague sleepiness and a growing awareness. Sometimes we do get very clear perceptions, and the whole focus of the spectrum shifts. Our attention is literally concentrated. On the other hand, we can shift our attention in the opposite direction: our understanding can become more akin to a dream-state when we are not fully attending to what we are doing.

Normal consciousness is somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, but when the meditator moves up the scale of *Jhāna* he is cultivating only one mode of awareness by concentrating and focussing his attention. Thus, paradoxically, by narrowing down one's attention to one point, one is actually expanding it, raising its level of awareness. And this indicates, as pointed out above, that the state of mind acquired by the meditator at the different stages of *Jhāna* is not trance or coma, is not even an ordinary state of consciousness,

but is a state of super-consciousness, in which the mind is much more conscious than normally. Each *Jhāna* is itself a progress, in which the mind succeeds in breaking through a possible loss or arresting of consciousness to become more aware, until in the fourth *Jhāna* a state of pure awareness, unaffected by passions and thoughts, is achieved.

*Jhāna* is, therefore, a method of purification which develops a certain state of mind: the strengthening of consciousness. It is central to the mystical experience of the buddhist meditator, whose aim is to achieve one-pointedness of mind, characterized by complete awareness and equanimity. Are we any nearer understanding the Buddhist experience? It would seem that we are not dealing with an unconscious state or trance. On the other hand, our meditator, the practiser of *Jhāna*, is not open to stimulation from outside influences, nor is he able to give it outward expression. After the first stage of *Jhāna*, the mind does not perceive through the senses in the ordinary way, nor is it capable of speech. After the fourth stage, all bodily activities have ceased, and we seem to be reaching a state of catalepsy of the body. At the same time, we find references, even in the older texts, to mystic powers and phenomena which accompany the state of trance. They are the consequence of the state of heightened awareness, and are to be found in a number of different forms of visionary consciousness in most religious traditions the world over. But it would give a false impression of the purpose of the Way if we were to pay too much attention to the states of super-knowledge or psychic power which occur frequently in the *Pāli* Canon. The Buddha's attitude is straightforward and sensible: such things do occur and may be useful as indications of progress, but they can be positively misleading and harmful. *Moksa*, Release or Salvation, would certainly in some forms of yogic mysticism be identified with the acquisition of such powers. Not so for the Buddha: it is a mistake to consider physical or psychical powers as anything more than a further stage on the Way. They are useful only in so far as they lead to a discriminating understanding of the phenomenal world, consisting of a detached objectivity.

But for the Buddha, *Moksa* or *Nirvāna* is achieved only when a certain state of mind has been developed, a purified and heightened consciousness in which the mind has become freed from its dependence on sensory objects. So what does *Jhāna* do? It 'improves' the normal state of consciousness until insight is possible, and the nature of reality can be known directly and intuitively. It is a matter

of raising the ordinary processes to a level where the true nature of reality, which can be recognized by ordinary, undeveloped consciousness only to an imperfect degree, becomes more and more clear and distinct. Meditation thus leads, in the Way of Deliverance, to a state of consciousness in which the characteristics of reality, which can be known by reason and discernment, are understood with intellectual clarity and emotional equanimity.

Therefore what the Buddha is saying is this: there is a certain interpretation of Reality, disclosed by the Four Noble Truths, which can be understood by reason alone. But reason is weak and open to distraction. It needs to be strengthened – to be shifted up the spectrum of consciousness and made more aware of the Truth about Reality. And thus he introduces the method of *Jhāna*. Through meditation, consciousness is purified and made ready to see the Truth with great clarity of vision. Hence the tension between gnosis and mystical experience. Wisdom (*Paññā*), or insight (*Vipassanā*), is essential for salvation. One must *know* something of what one is looking for; one needs to trust the Buddha in order to begin on the Way. But an initial trust has to give way to personal experience, which is to be achieved through *Samādhi* (concentration) or *Samatha* (calming down), an experimental knowledge gained through *Jhāna*.

We are dealing with two interdependent sides of one activity: emotional distraction must be eliminated and consciousness purified. On the other hand, experience is useless without the illumination of real wisdom, the understanding of the Truth which the Buddha taught. And what of *Nirvāna*? Having expanded our consciousness thus far, we can do no better than imitate the Enlightened One himself and observe a blessed silence.