



Buddhism and the Mode of Having vs. Being

Erich Fromm
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Originally entitled "Buddhism," "Buddhism and the Mode of Having vs. Being" is a piece included in Fromm's literary estate. A first draft, also entitled "Buddhism," is also included in the estate. Both were written in connection with "To Have Or to Be?" in 1975. Parts of the draft that were not included in the final (unpublished) paper are presented in footnote 1. – First published in: *Fromm Forum* (English version) No. 13 (2009), Tuebingen (Selbstverlag) 2009, pp. 31-34.

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Still more explicit and fundamental than in Judaism and Christianity is the emphasis on the being structure as against the having structure in Buddhism. In order to recognize this, however, one must shed the distorted and misleading picture of Buddhism, as it is shared not only by the average but also by many learned persons.¹ Buddhism is often

¹ The following paragraphs of the first draft present those parts that differ from the final paper: While the meaning and the goals of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are relatively well known to Western readers, the great Eastern religions, and particularly Buddhism, are little known and what is worse, as far as they are known, in only such a corrupted form that what is known is virtually the opposite of Buddhist thought. *What is this distorted picture?*

1. That Buddhism is a teaching and practice to bring life to an end, except by suicide.
2. That its spirit is one of extreme skepticism, nihilism, asceticism and negation of joy.
3. That its basic teaching of life as suffering is the expression of this life-escaping, tragic outlook.
4. That Buddha is a God whose commands must be accepted without question.
5. That the teaching of rebirth is the center of Buddhist thinking.
6. That Buddhism is opposed to rational thinking.
7. All or part of these elements are supposed to constitute Buddhism.

In contrast to these distortions we must have in mind some general facts.

1. Buddhism was a radical atheistic thought system, opposed to the teachings of the ruling Hindu religion. For this reason it was persecuted for generations by the ruling Hindu priesthood with the accusation of being atheistic, an enemy of religion and dangerous. Buddhism constituted the most radical enlightenment.
2. Buddhism was indeed atheistic; it rejects the concept of a god and the idea that man should submit to a leader and obey. It constantly emphasizes man's autonomy, and his duty to make his own decisions. Buddha is not a God, but a great teacher, who tries to convince.
3. Buddhism is a completely rational system, which demands no intellectual sacrifices, but which starts with the analysis of human experience as the basis for its teaching.
4. Buddhism is actually a philosophical, anthropological system, based on observation of facts and their rational explanation. For the Western observer, this constituted an obstacle to understanding of this religion without a God. Can atheism be an element of religion? Is religion not necessarily bound up with the belief in a superior being? Furthermore, Buddhist thought is much more radical than that of the vast majority today, who find it difficult to understand its radicalism and prefer to believe that it is an irrational system, far inferior to our rationality.



understood to be a teaching of an ascetic life, denying joy, and nihilistic; aiming at ending life except by suicide; that Buddha is a kind of God, whose commands must be obeyed; that the dogma of rebirth and how it can be prevented is the essence of Buddhism; that Buddhism is opposed to rational thought.

While it is true that Buddhism in its existence during two and a half millennia has been distorted in practice to an extent that all the aforementioned traits can be found singly or together in various corrupted branches of Buddhism, it is equally true that the original teachings of the Buddha are in complete contradiction to these ideas.²

The understanding of Buddhism is made difficult in the first place because it is an “atheistic religion.” Since the Western religions are all centered around God (as is Hinduism), a “godless religion” is for Western culture an unthinkable and senseless paradox. “Logic” demands that if a system is a religion, then it must have some kind of supreme being; if it does not live up to this requirement, it is no religion. Is then Buddhism simply a philosophy? This cannot be said either, because its aim is the achievement of well-being for all human beings and it offers a system of rules and disciplines, the practice of which is meant to help men and women to achieve well-being, contentment and inner peace. Being an “atheistic religion,” Buddhism retains an element of unreality to the Western mind.

The difficulty in understanding Buddhism is further enhanced by the fact that much too little—if any—attention is paid to the revolutionary and radical character of Buddhist teaching. Buddhism was a revolutionary movement (in the intellectual, though not in the political, sense) directed against Hinduism, its belief in Gods, and its powerful priesthood. For this reason, Buddhism was persecuted by the Hindu bureaucracy as atheistic, materialistic, disruptive, and indeed these accusations were correct. (In fact, they were not so different from those leveled against another revolutionary movement, early Christianity).

Buddhism was strictly antiauthoritarian; the Buddha was a great teacher, whose teachings should be studied and accepted if one is convinced of their value; they must not be obeyed or accepted as commands. For the same reason Buddhism does not know the concept of sin, which can exist only where you accept a supreme authority; it knows only the concept of error which is the cause of “ill-being.” Buddhism is a system for achievement of human well-being, a system which is not based on any dogma or on

5. The only irrational and dogmatic element in Buddhism is the belief in rebirth, that is the idea that as long as human beings are craving for life, they will be reborn—and that this consequence will end only with the cessation of all thirst for life, when Nirvana is reached. It is to be considered however, that the Buddhist idea of rebirth and the cessation of rebirth by the cessation of craving, was the form in which the Buddha expressed his opposition to the Hindu concept of the transmigration of souls, a concept which says that the wheel of transformation never stops. The Buddhist negation took the form of the assertion that it can stop, provided craving ends. The Buddha living in a culture in which the belief in transmigration of souls was common sense, could not simply negate common sense by saying the unthinkable: “after death there is nothing.” He had, as has happened often in history, to express the negation by a revision of the older theory. It must be recognized that while rebirth is still a valid dogma for the orthodox Buddhist, it is actually a historically conditioned piece of baggage which has nothing to do with the central teaching of Buddhism.

² They are preserved in Theravada Buddhism and presented in English and German by the group of Buddhist scholars and monks in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) through the medium of the Buddhist Publication Society.



metaphysical speculations. It is based on the study of the conditions of human existence and how they can be improved; it is essentially an anthropological-psychological examination of human existence that uses the result of this study as the basis for a non-authoritarian ethics, not based on tradition, revelation, or God's commands.³

Trying to explain the difficulty in understanding Buddhism, one might go even one step further. Buddhist teaching is considerably more radical than the average “progressive” reader is today. To eliminate God, to make man the individual entirely responsible for his actions, to deprive him of all illusions, to transcend all allegiance to class and nation and to arrive at the shared allegiance to truth—only few of the most radical thinkers today can be said to have reached this point of radicalism.

The only dogmatic element in Buddhism is the belief in rebirth, that is the idea that as long as human beings are craving for life, they will be reborn—and that this consequence will end only with the cessation of all thirst for life, when Nirvana is reached. It is to be considered however, that the Buddhist idea of rebirth and the cessation of rebirth by the cessation of craving, was the form in which the Buddha expressed his opposition to the Hindu concept of the transmigration of souls, a concept which says that the wheel of transformation never stops. The Buddhist negation took the form of the assertion that it can stop—provided craving ends. The Buddha living in a culture in which the belief in transmigration of souls was common sense, could not simply negate common sense by thinking the unthinkable: “after death there is nothing.” He had, as has happened often in history, to express the negation by a revision of the older theory. It must be recognized that while rebirth is still a valid dogma for the orthodox Buddhist, it is actually a historically conditioned piece of baggage which has nothing to do with the central teaching of Buddhism.

I dare to say this because the Four Noble Truths and the eightfold path of right conduct do not require the assumption of rebirth; they retain their truth regardless of the validity of the dogma.

What are the central teachings of the Buddha? They are expressed in the “four noble truths.” (1) To exist means suffering; (2) Suffering is the result of craving (3) Craving can be overcome; (4) The way to overcome craving is to follow the 8-fold path: right understanding, right thinking, right speaking, right acting, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. It is easy to recognize that the *aim* of Buddhism—liberation from suffering—is achieved by a certain practice of life; in other words, that not a dogma but the *practice of life* constitutes the essential factor in Buddhist liberation.

But it has caused many difficulties to understand what is meant by suffering and the liberation from it. The word “suffering” denotes something like pain, sorrow, unhappiness, i.e. certain affects and emotions which are experienced occasionally, by extraordinary circumstances such as illness, death of a loved person, imprisonment; it is also assumed that this suffering is conscious.

What is meant by suffering and liberation in Buddhist teaching is, however, something quite different. It can be expressed in this way: if a person is predominantly moti-

³ We find in Buddhist literature, for instance, the analysis of the spreading of rumors which equals the best work contemporary psychologists have done in this field.



vated by greed and avarice, if he or she is driven by cupidity and the lust for even more pleasure (in our language: if his dominant mode of existence is the having mode), he will necessarily be unhappy. He will be driven by ever-increasing greed, never be satisfied, be the slave of his desires. If, however, he can rid himself - even if only to some extent - of his greed, if he can overcome not only greed but also hate and illusions, he will achieve well-being, peace and freedom. A certain practice of life helps him to attain this state of well-being. “Suffering” in Buddhist thought means ill-being.

In contrast to a widespread misunderstanding, the aim of Buddhism is well-being (just as it was the aim of Aristotle and Thomas), peace and joy—but not pleasure in the sense of radical hedonism. Even Nirvana has to be understood in this sense. It is a joyful, peaceful state of liberation. (Both Dr. D. T. Suzuki, an authority on Zen Buddhism (Mahajana Buddhism), as well as Nyanaponika Mahathera, one of the greatest authorities of classic, Mahajana Buddhism, have stressed this very point in conversations and their writings: the joyful character of Nirvana, as a famous Zen drawing shows, is a joy in which all living beings—humans and animals—take part.) As one of the old Buddhist commentaries states: “Nirvana has peace as its characteristic; its function is not to die; or its function is the comfort; it is manifested as the sign-less (i.e. without the signs, or marks of greed, hatred, and illusion) or it is manifested in no-diversification.”⁴

It is now time to take a closer look at the *central concept of Buddhism*, the sins—or better, errors—of greed, illusion and hate. That greed and hate are to be overcome in order to attain well-being, is a common feature which Judaism and Christianity share with Buddhism (and we have dealt with these norms already). What is new in Buddhism is the idea that liberation from illusion is just as important as the two other goals; or to put it more properly, that without liberation of illusion neither greed nor hate can be overcome.

What is meant by liberation from illusions? By illusions, Buddhist teaching does not refer to some rare and extraordinary self-deceptions. On the contrary, it is assumed that most of us live in illusions: that we have a biased, distorted, untrue picture of ourselves, and of those around us; that our common sense image of the world and of ourselves is mostly “common nonsense”; that we repress the insight into reality (within and outside of ourselves) and take a fictitious picture as the expression of truth. We act upon this illusory picture and hence act wrongly.

For Buddhism, the penetration of the deceptive appearance of the phenomena and the recognition of reality is a central factor in the attempt to achieve well-being, and that is liberation from the suffering which self-deception (together with greed and hate) creates. To know the truth about one’s inner reality as against living with rationalizations about oneself and one’s motives, brings Buddhism, especially the path of mindfulness, close to psychoanalysis, of the unconscious, without the distorting factor of identifying the unconscious with sexual instinct. Buddhist meditation is essentially self-analysis without the presence of the Freudian instinct theory. As Douglas H. Burns, a British psychiatrist with a profound knowledge of Buddhism, writes: “Thus the realization of Nirvana requires the maximum possible goal of psychoanalysis—a complete laying bare of

⁴ Vissuddi Ma-magga, quoted by Nyanaponika, in *Anatha and Nibbana*, in Nyanaponika (Ed.) *The Pathways of Buddhist Thought*, G. Allen & Unwin Ltd. London 1971, p.155.



the subconscious, the total removal of repression, rationalization and all other defense mechanisms.”⁵

The Buddha and Buddhist teachers were too wise not to recognize that the *total liberation* from greed, hate and illusion is exceedingly difficult to attain; in addition to not being concerned with social problems, they had no visions of a radically different society, as the prophets had. As a consequence, they were not insisting that there is only one goal worth trying for, but they formulated two goals: the radical goal of reaching Nirvana, and the limited goal of achieving well-being by optimal, though not total, liberation from greed, hate and illusion. Nothing could show more clearly that Buddhism is not a system of nihilism, pessimism and joylessness than this broader concept of the Buddhist goal.

This goal is for human beings to achieve the highest possible degree of inner activity, of becoming what they can be.

If one discards dogmatic and historically accidental elements such as rebirth, it seems to me that Buddhism is by far the most rational system which can liberate man from unnecessary ill-being from the having mode of existence to well-being, the being mode of existence. Of course, also Judaism and Christianity, if one discards the historically conditioned concept of God, could have the same function; but with greater difficulty because the whole system is more pervaded by the spirit of authority and by many particular rituals and myths, while Buddhism speaks in the universal language of human beings, and of life.

It is worthwhile to point to the conclusions to which Dr. Burns has arrived and which I share, referring to the difference between the Buddhist aim of total or partial enlightenment and Zen Satori. The Buddhist aim is change of character achieved by insight and constant practice. Zen Buddhism does not essentially aim at character change but at a sudden experience which breaks through the perceptions of concepts and ideas and produces a pre-perceptual experience which can be achieved in a similar way by some drugs or prolonged concentration on an object.

In spite of their common Buddhist root, they have developed in different directions. This is not surprising if we consider that in Japan, Zen Buddhism was the religion of the warrior class and furthermore, that classic Buddhism has been almost completely covered in historical practice by impenetrable underbrush of superstition and irrationality, that it is so difficult to find it in its original, pure form.

⁵ Douglas H. Burns, l. v., p. 221. - When I made the same suggestion to Nyanaponika Mahathera several years ago in a conversation, he agreed.