

Tape 120 :The Ideal of Human Enlightenment (120) - Edited Version

When a Buddhist thinks about Buddhism - about what Buddhists call the Dharma - usually the first thing of which he thinks is the Buddha, 'the Enlightened One'. Strangely enough, the first thing of which the non-Buddhist too usually thinks is the Buddha. We may not know anything at all about the teachings of Buddhism, but we will at least have seen an image or picture of the Buddha, and may even be quite familiar with it, even have a definite feeling for it. What, then, does that image or picture show? It shows a man in the prime of life, well built and handsome. He is seated cross-legged beneath a tree. His eyes are half closed and there is a smile on his lips. Looking at the figure we feel that, as a whole, it conveys an impression of solidity and stability, as well as of strength. It conveys an impression of absolute calm, absolute repose. But what attracts us most of all, more even than the total figure itself, is the face, because this conveys something which it is very difficult indeed to put into words. As we look at it, perhaps even concentrate on it, we see that the face is alive, that it is alight, and in that light we see reflected an unfathomable knowledge, a boundless compassion, and an ineffable joy. This, then, is the figure, this the image or the picture, of the Buddha, the Enlightened One. Usually it represents the historical Gautama the Buddha, the 'founder' of Buddhism, represents, that is to say, the great Indian teacher who lived approximately 500 years before Christ. But the figure also possesses a wider significance. It represents the subject of this lecture. In other words, it represents The Ideal of Human Enlightenment.

Human Enlightenment is the central theme, the central preoccupation, of Buddhism. It is what Buddhism is basically concerned with, both theoretically and practically. Indeed, it is what the Buddhist himself is basically concerned with. In the course of this lecture, therefore, we shall be trying to understand what is meant by Enlightenment in general and, in particular, by 'human Enlightenment'.

Before going into this subject, however, I want to say a few words about the third item in our title. I want to examine the word 'ideal'. We speak of 'The Ideal of Human Enlightenment', but what does the word mean? I do not want to go into the dictionary definitions, much less still into what are really philosophical questions. For the purpose of our present discussion we shall confine ourselves to the ordinary, everyday usage of the word.

In the first place, the word means 'the best imaginable of its kind'. For instance, in London, every summer, there is a famous exhibition known as the Ideal Home Exhibition. Every year thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of people visit it and look around the different sections. There they see ideal kitchens, ideal bathrooms, ideal garages, ideal shaving mirrors, ideal bread knives, ideal refrigerators, ideal lawnmowers, ideal armchairs, and even ideal egg-whisks! They see hundreds of different items, each of them claiming to be 'ideal', the best imaginable of its kind (though, of course, different manufacturers may have different ideas as to what actually is the 'best'). Each of them, it is claimed, fulfils its function in the best possible way, and all of these things add up to the 'ideal home', add up, in other words, to the best imaginable home, the home that perfectly fulfils the function of a home, the home that everybody would like to live in - if only they could afford it.

In the same way we speak of various other things. We speak of the ideal wife, which is to say the wife who is a good cook and manager, who keeps the ideal home in perfect order, who drives her husband to work every morning, who never asks him for extra housekeeping money, and who laughs at all his jokes. We even speak of the ideal husband, though he is of course much rarer. Similarly we speak of the ideal couple, the ideal holiday, ideal weather, ideal arrangements, the ideal job, the ideal employer, the ideal employee, and so on. In other words we speak of something as being the best imaginable of its kind, as best fulfilling its natural function or what is believed to be its natural function. This is the first usage of the term.

In the second place, the word 'ideal' means a model or pattern: something that can be taken as an example, and imitated or copied. Nowadays this usage is less common than the first, although it overlaps it to some extent. According to this usage, we see that the ideal home is not merely the best imaginable home but also the model, or pattern, for all homes. It is what you should try to make your own home look like, at least to some extent. Thus this usage would suggest that the ideal is a model. It implies a sort of comparison between the ideal, on the one hand, and the actual on the other, in this case between the real home that we actually have and the ideal home that we would like to have if we could afford it.

There is, however, a third usage of the term. For example, suppose you ask a friend what he would like to do when he retires. He might say that what he would really like to do is to go away to some beautiful tropical island with a marvellous climate, with beautiful sunshine, beautiful beaches, beautiful sea, beautiful surf, and just live there for the rest of his life, just to get away from it all. But then perhaps he says, 'Ah well, I don't suppose I ever shall. It's just an ideal.' In this instance the word 'ideal' represents

a state of affairs that is regarded as highly desirable, which is certainly imaginable - which you can certainly conceive, even quite clearly - but which is regarded, for some reason or other, as impossible of attainment. These, then, are the three different ways in which we use the word 'ideal'.

Having gained some understanding of how we use the word 'ideal', we come on to a very important question, and with this question we start to approach the heart of our present subject. We have spoken of the ideal home, and we can all understand what that might be. We have mentioned the ideal wife, the ideal husband, the ideal job - even the ideal egg-whisk. But we have forgotten perhaps one thing. What about the person who uses all these articles, who enters into all these relationships? What about the individual human being? We seem to have lost sight of him, or of her - as so easily happens in the midst of the complexities of modern life. The question that we are really asking is, 'What is the ideal man?' We all think we know what is meant by the ideal home, the ideal wife, or the ideal husband, but have we ever considered the question, 'What is the best imaginable kind of human being?' Not just the best kind of employee, or the best kind of citizen, or the best kind of member of a particular social group, or a particular age group, but the best kind of man per se, the best kind of man as man. Because we are men, and this question very seriously concerns us. What is the ideal for our lives? The Buddhist answer to this question comes clearly, categorically, and unambiguously. The ideal man is the Enlightened man. The ideal man is the Buddha. That is to say, the ideal for humanity - the ideal for individual human beings - is Enlightenment. The ideal is Buddhahood.

Now this raises three questions, and with each question we have to deal in turn. The three questions are, firstly, 'What is Enlightenment, or Buddhahood?' Secondly, 'How do we know that this state which we call Enlightenment is the ideal for man?' Thirdly, 'Where does this ideal of Enlightenment come from? Whence do we derive it? Whence does it originate?' Once these three questions are answered we shall have, perhaps, quite a good idea - or at least a general idea - of what is meant by 'The Ideal of Human Enlightenment'.

What is Enlightenment?

Buddhist tradition, of all schools, speaks of Enlightenment as comprising mainly three things. To begin with, Enlightenment is spoken of as a state of pure, clear - even radiant - awareness. Some schools go so far as to say that in this state of awareness the subject/object duality is no longer experienced. There is no 'out there', no 'in here'. That distinction, that subject/object distinction as we usually call it, is entirely transcended. There is only one continuous, pure, clear awareness, extending as it were in all directions, pure and homogeneous. It is, moreover, an awareness of things as they really are, which is, of course, not things in the sense of objects, but things as, so to speak, transcending the duality of subject and object. Hence this pure, clear awareness is also spoken of as an awareness of Reality, and therefore also as a state of knowledge. This knowledge is not knowledge in the ordinary sense - not the knowledge which functions within the framework of the subject/object duality - but rather a state of direct, unmediated spiritual vision that sees all things directly, clearly, vividly, and truly. It is a spiritual vision - even a Transcendental vision - which is free from all delusion, all misconception, all wrong, crooked thinking, all vagueness, all obscurity, all mental conditioning, all prejudice. First of all, then, Enlightenment is this state of pure, clear awareness, this state of knowledge or vision. Secondly, and no less importantly, Enlightenment is spoken of as a state of intense, profound, overflowing love and compassion. Sometimes this love is compared to the love of a mother for her only child. This comparison occurs, for instance, in a very famous Buddhist text called the Metta Sutta, the 'Discourse of Loving Kindness'. In this discourse the Buddha says, 'Just as a mother protects her only son even at the cost of her own life, so should one develop a mind of all-embracing love towards all living beings.' This is the sort of feeling, the sort of attitude, that we must cultivate. You notice that the Buddha does not just talk about all human beings, but all living beings: all that lives, all that breathes, all that moves, all that is sentient. This is how the Enlightened mind feels. And that love and compassion consists, we are further told, in a heartfelt desire - a deep, burning desire - for their well-being, for their happiness: a desire that all beings should be set free from suffering, from all difficulties, that they should grow and develop, and that ultimately they should gain Enlightenment. Love and compassion of this kind - love infinite, overflowing, boundless, directed towards all living beings - this too is part of Enlightenment.

Thirdly, Enlightenment consists in a state, or experience, of inexhaustible mental and spiritual energy. We see this very well exemplified by an incident in the life of the Buddha himself. As you may know, he gained Enlightenment at the age of thirty-five, and he continued teaching and communicating with others until the ripe old age of eighty, although his physical body eventually became very frail. On one occasion he said, 'My body is just like an old, broken-down cart, which has been repaired many times. It has been kept going with bits of string, as it were. But my mind is as vigorous as ever. Even if I had to be carried from place to place on a litter, if anyone came to me, I would still be able to answer his questions, I would

still be able to teach him. My intellectual and spiritual vigour is undiminished, despite the enfeebled state of my body.' So energy is characteristic of the state of Enlightenment. We could say that the state of Enlightenment is one of tremendous energy, of absolute spontaneity, continually bubbling forth: a state of uninterrupted creativity. In a nutshell, we may say that the state of Enlightenment is a state of perfect, unconditioned freedom from all subjective limitations.

This, then, is what is meant by Enlightenment, as it is understood in the Buddhist tradition - so far, at least, as Enlightenment can be described, so far as its different aspects can be tabulated in this way. What really happens is that knowledge passes into love and compassion, love and compassion into energy, energy into knowledge, and so on. We cannot really split any one aspect off from the others. Nonetheless, we are traditionally given this 'tabulated' account of Enlightenment, just to convey some hint of the experience, just to give some little idea, or feeling, of what it is like. If we want to have a better idea than this, then we shall have to read, perhaps, some more extended, poetic account, preferably one found in the Buddhist scriptures; or we shall have to take up the practice of meditation, and try to get at least a glimpse of the state of Enlightenment as we meditate. So when Buddhism speaks of Enlightenment, of Buddhahood or Nirvana, this is what it means: it means a state of supreme knowledge, love and compassion, and energy.

How do we know that this state of Enlightenment is the ideal for man?

Before attempting to answer this question, we shall have to distinguish between two kinds of ideal. There are no actual terms for them in circulation, but we can call them 'natural ideals' and 'artificial ideals'. A natural ideal, we may say, is an ideal which takes into consideration the nature of the thing or the person for which it is an ideal. The artificial ideal, on the other hand, does not do this. The artificial ideal imposes itself from the outside, in an artificial manner. For instance, if we go back to our ideal home, then however beautiful, however luxurious, however convenient it may be in many ways, it would not be an ideal home for a crippled person if it contained several flights of steep stairs. In the same way the life of a Henry Ford would not be an ideal for someone who was, by temperament, an artist.

Using this distinction, we may say that Enlightenment is not an artificial ideal. It is not something imposed on man from outside, something that does not belong to him or accord with his nature. Enlightenment is a natural ideal for man, or even, we may say, the natural ideal. There is nothing artificial about it, nothing arbitrary. It is an ideal that corresponds to man's nature, and to his needs. We know this in two ways. I have spoken about the nature of Enlightenment, and obviously it has seemed, though intelligible, something very, very rarified indeed, something very remote, even, from our present experience. But the qualities that constitute Enlightenment are, in fact, already found in man, in germinal form. They are not completely foreign to him. They are, in a sense, natural to man. In every man, in every woman, and even in every child, there is some knowledge - some experience - of Reality, however remote and far removed, some feeling of love and compassion, however limited and exclusive, and some energy, however gross and unrefined - however conditioned and unspontaneous. All these qualities are already there, to some extent. It is, in fact, these qualities that distinguish man from the animal. But in the state of Enlightenment these qualities are fully and perfectly developed, to a degree that we can hardly imagine. It is for this reason - because the qualities of knowledge, love, and energy are already present within him, in however embryonic a form - that man has, as it were, a natural affinity with Enlightenment, and can respond to the ideal of Enlightenment when he encounters it. Thus even when someone speaks in terms of absolute knowledge, of the vision of Reality, or in terms of boundless, unlimited love and compassion for all living beings, it is not something completely foreign to us, it is not just so many words. We can feel something. And this is because the germ, the seed, is already there, in our own experience, and we can respond to the ideal of Enlightenment whenever and however we encounter it - even when we encounter it in comparatively weak, limited, or distorted forms.

We also know that Enlightenment is the natural ideal for man because, in the long run, man is never really satisfied by anything else. We can have all sorts of pleasures, all sorts of achievements, but eventually we still feel within ourselves something dissatisfied, something non-satisfied. This is what in Buddhism is called dukkha: unsatisfactoriness, or even suffering. Tradition speaks of three forms of dukkha, three kinds of suffering. The first is called simply, 'the suffering which is suffering'. It is obviously suffering if we cut our finger, or when someone upsets us or disappoints us, for instance. This is the kind of suffering that is, simply, suffering. Then there is what is called 'suffering by way of transformation'. We have something, we enjoy it - we get a great deal of pleasure from it - but by its very nature that thing cannot last, or our relationship with it cannot last. Eventually the thing goes, the relationship with it breaks up, and because we have enjoyed it, because we have become very attached to it, suffering results. This is the suffering that comes about as a result of transformation, of change, of time. Then there is 'the suffering of conditioned existence itself': the suffering, ultimately, of everything which is not Enlightenment. Even if we do acquire things, and even if we go on possessing them and enjoying them, there is still some corner

of our heart which is not satisfied, which wants something more, something further, something greater. And this something is what we call Enlightenment. So from this too we know that Enlightenment is the natural ideal for man, because man, the true man, the real human being, the true Individual, ultimately is not satisfied with anything less. Personifying the ideal of Enlightenment, and borrowing the somewhat theistic language of St Augustine, we may say, 'Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee.'

Where does the ideal of Enlightenment come from?

The ideal comes from human life itself; it comes from human history. It could not come from any other source. The ideal for man, we may say, can only come from man himself, can only come from a human being. And if we look back into history we can see various people who have actually achieved Enlightenment, who have closed the gap between the real and the ideal. We can see people who have fully actualized all those spiritual qualities which in most men and women are only germinal. If we look back in history we can see individuals who are living embodiments of the ideal. In particular, as we look back into the history of the East, of India, we see the figure of the Buddha. We see the figure of the young Indian patrician who, some 2500 years ago, gained Enlightenment or, as the Buddhist scriptures call it, Bodhi, which is 'knowledge', or 'awakening'. He it was who, after gaining that state of Enlightenment, inaugurated the great spiritual revolution - the great spiritual tradition - that we now call Buddhism.

At this point I would like to clear up certain misunderstandings that exist with regard to the Buddha and Buddhism. At the beginning of this lecture I said that even the non-Buddhist has at least seen an image or picture of the Buddha, and that he might even be quite familiar with it. However, although he might have seen it many times, he may not have a very clear idea of what it represents; he may not know who, or what, the Buddha is. There are, in fact, on the part of many people, some quite serious misunderstandings about him. There are in particular two major misunderstandings: firstly that the Buddha was an ordinary man, and secondly that the Buddha was God. Both of these misunderstandings are the result of thinking, consciously or unconsciously, in Christian terms, or at least in theistic terms, which is to say, in terms of a personal God, a supreme being who has created the universe, and who governs it by his providence.

For orthodox Christianity, as most of us know, God and man are entirely different beings. God is 'up there', man is 'down here', and there is a great gulf between them. God is the creator. He has called man into existence, out of the dust. Man is the created. He has been created, according to some accounts, much as a potter creates a pot. Moreover, God is pure, God is holy, God is sinless; but man is sinful, and man can never become God: such an idea would be meaningless according to orthodox Christian, theistic tradition. Not only that. With only one exception, God can never become man. The exception is, of course, Jesus Christ, who for orthodox Christianity is God incarnate. Thus the Christian has, we may say, three categories with which to operate: God, man, which is to say 'sinful man', and God incarnate, or Christ. So where does the Buddha fit in? How does the orthodox Christian apply his categories when confronted by the figure of the Buddha? Obviously for the orthodox Christian the Buddha is not God. (There is only one God anyway.) Equally obviously, he is not God incarnate, since according to orthodox Christian teaching God incarnated only once, as Jesus Christ. That leaves only man. Orthodox Christians, therefore, when confronted by the figure of the Buddha, classify him as a man - as an ordinary man, essentially just like everyone else - even as a sinful man albeit perhaps better than most people. But however much better he might be, he is still seen as immeasurably inferior to God, and immeasurably inferior to Christ.

So much then for the first misunderstanding. The second arises out of the first. It is said, even by Christian scholars working in the field of Buddhist studies, that although the Buddha was only an ordinary man his followers made him into a God. You often read in books, even now, that after his death the Buddha's followers 'deified' him. This is indicated, we are told, by the fact that Buddhists worship the Buddha, and of course worship is due only to God. If you worship someone or something, a Christian will inevitably think that you are treating it, or him, as God.

Now both these misunderstandings can be cleared up quite easily. All we have to do is to free ourselves from our Christian conditioning, a conditioning which affects - at least unconsciously - even those who no longer think of themselves as Christians. We have to stop trying to think of the Buddha in what are really non-Buddhistic terms. We have to remember that Buddhism is a non-theistic tradition - which is to say that it does not believe in the existence of a supreme being who created the universe. Buddhism, in fact, distinctly denies the existence of such a being. The Buddha even went so far as to treat the belief in a personal God, a creator figure, as a hindrance to the living of the spiritual life.

So who, or what, was the Buddha? How do Buddhists think of him? How did he think of himself? In the first place, the Buddha was a man, a human being. But he was not an ordinary man. He was an Enlightened man: a man who was the living embodiment of perfect knowledge, unbounded love and compassion, and inexhaustible energy. But he was not born an extraordinary man. He became an extraordinary man, became an Enlightened One, as a result of his own human effort to make actual what was potential in himself, to develop to the full what was only germinal in himself. So Buddhism recognizes two great categories: the category of the ordinary man, and the category of the Enlightened man. Now, although the gulf between these two is not unbridgeable, as is the gulf between God and man in Christianity, the distance between them is very, very great, and it takes a tremendous effort to traverse this gap. Many Buddhists, in fact, believe that this effort has to be maintained through a whole succession of lives, whether here on earth or in higher realms. For this reason, the Enlightened man is regarded as constituting an independent category of existence. According to Buddhism, the Enlightened man is regarded as the highest being in the universe, higher even than the gods. For this reason the Enlightened man is worshipped. He is worshipped out of gratitude for setting an example, for showing the way, for showing us what we too are capable of becoming. In other words, the Buddha is worshipped, not as God, but as Teacher, as Exemplar, as Guide.

In this connection, Gautama the Buddha is often referred to as Lokajyestha. In the West Gautama the Buddha is best known simply as the Buddha, but in the East there are quite a few well-known titles for him. He is known as Tathagata, as Bhagavan, as Arahant, and also as Lokajyestha. The term Lokajyestha means 'the elder brother of the world', or 'elder brother of mankind', and the Buddha is so called because he has been born, spiritually, first, as we are born, spiritually, afterwards. The Buddha is often represented as saying to his disciples, 'You are my own true sons, born of my mouth, born of the Teaching: the heirs to spiritual things, not heirs to worldly things.' Sometimes, as in the Vinaya Pitaka, the Buddha is compared to the first chick to emerge from a clutch of eggs. The first-born chick starts to tap on the shells of the other eggs with his little beak, helping the other chicks to emerge. And so, we are told, the Buddha is like that first chick. He is the first to emerge from the shell of ignorance, the shell of spiritual darkness and blindness, and then he taps on our shells, he wakes us up with his Teaching - he helps us to emerge.

From all this we can see that the Buddhist conception of the Enlightened man, the Buddha, represents a category for which we have no equivalent in Western thought or Western religious tradition. He is neither God nor man in the Christian sense. He is not even man-without-God - man left on his own without God, as it were. He is something in between and above.

Perhaps we can best think of Enlightened man in evolutionary terms. Man is an animal, but he is no ordinary animal. For want of a better term, he is a rational animal. He represents a new mutation, a new species, a new category: an animal but, at the same time, infinitely more than an animal. He is a human being, a man. In the same way, a Buddha is a man, but he is not an ordinary man. He is an Enlightened man. He too represents a new mutation, a new species, a new category of existence: a human being but, at the same time, infinitely more than a human being: an Enlightened human being, a Buddha.

We can now move on to the misunderstandings about Buddhism. These are, as one might expect, closely connected with the misunderstandings about the Buddha. Inasmuch as Buddhism is non-theistic, it is not really a religion in the ordinary Western sense of the term. People sometimes find this hard to understand because they have always regarded Buddhism as a religion. Perhaps they have seen it classified in this way in encyclopaedias, or on television, or of course they have a vague idea that 'religion' means belief in God anyway. They therefore think that Buddhism must teach belief in God. But this is just muddled thinking. Some people even think there must be a God in Buddhism somewhere - and do their best to find him. They even accuse Buddhists of mislaying him, or losing him, or even trying to hide him!

If Buddhism is not a religion in the Christian sense, then what is it? We can best answer this question by going back to our distinction between the real and the ideal, between the Enlightened man and the unenlightened man. Buddhism, or what is traditionally known as the Dharma, is whatever helps us transform the real into the ideal. It is whatever helps us to bridge the gap between the state of ignorance and the state of Enlightenment. In other words, Buddhism is whatever helps us to develop, whatever helps us to grow. For this reason we find the Buddha saying to his aunt and foster mother, Mahaprajapati Gautami, 'Whatsoever teachings conduce to dispassion, to detachment, to decrease of worldly gains, to frugality, to content, to solitude, to energy, to delight in good, of these teachings you can be certain that they are the Teaching of the Buddha.' The criterion is, then, not theoretical but practical. In the course of its long history, Buddhism has developed many different philosophies, as we may call them, many different methods, many different institutions, but they all have one sole purpose, and that purpose is to assist the individual human being to develop from the state of an ordinary human being to the state of an Enlightened human being, a Buddha.

Let us conclude, then, as we began: with the figure of Gautama the Buddha. He is seated under the Bodhi tree, just a few weeks after his great awakening. According to one of the oldest accounts, at that time he looked out over the world, over the whole of humanity - not with the eye of the flesh but with his spiritual vision, or what is called his 'divine eye'. And as he looked out in this way, he saw mankind as like a great bed of lotus flowers. He saw, moreover, that some of the flowers were deeply immersed in the mud, while others rose half out of the water. Some were even standing completely clear of the water. In other words, he saw all these 'flowers' - all human beings - as being at different stages of growth, different stages of development. And that, we could say, is how Buddhism has seen humanity ever since: as a bed of plants capable of producing shoots, as shoots capable of producing buds, as buds capable of opening into flowers, into lotus flowers, even into the thousand-petalled lotus itself. But in order to grow, in order to develop, human beings must have something to grow into. They cannot grow unconsciously, as the plant does: they must grow consciously. We may say, in fact, that for human beings growth means growth in consciousness, growth in awareness. This is why man needs an ideal - not just an ideal for this or that aspect of his being only, not an ideal for himself simply in terms of this or that relationship of life, but an ideal for himself as a human being. It must be an ideal, moreover, which is not artificial but natural, not imposed upon him from without but implicit in his own nature, his own being: an ideal which represents, indeed, the fulfilment of his nature in the deepest possible sense. It is this ideal, the ideal of human Enlightenment, that I have tried to communicate to you in this lecture.

Nowadays we have to recognize that many people are sceptical about ideals, and especially so, perhaps, about spiritual ideals - about the possibility of transforming the real into the ideal. Buddhism, however, is not sceptical. It has faith in the ideal - faith in the spiritual ideal, faith in the ideal of human Enlightenment - and it has faith in the ideal because it has faith in man, in the creative potential of man. Because it has faith in man, it asks man to have faith in himself. It does not ask him to 'believe', least of all to 'believe' in Buddhism. Instead, it asks him to take the ideal of human Enlightenment as a practical, working hypothesis. It asks him to make the experiment. It asks him to try.