

Encounter of Mercy and Justice

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The present article was offered to us in the form of a letter, intended as a follow-up to the one contributed by Abu Bakr Siraj ed-Din to our Spring Number; because of its length it was thought better not to publish it in the correspondence column.

The Editor.

SURELY Professor Donald H. Bishop will have cause for satisfaction at the response elicited by his article on "Forgiveness in Religious Thought" that appeared in the Winter issue of this journal. In this connection, the letter from a Muslim author of high standing was especially welcome inasmuch as he was able to counter certain all-too-common prejudices concerning the respective part played by "justice" and "mercy" in Islamic tradition. If one pauses to think about it, the Koran itself leaves one in no doubt on that score with its opening invocation of "the Merciful and "the Compassionate" as the first two names of God. Nevertheless, mercy requires justice for its background; the two interests are in fact inseparable, each being intelligible in the light of the other, and not apart. This is true of Buddhism as well as Islam, as I shall endeavour to show.

To start with, it is well to point out that the word "forgiveness", so familiar to us, corresponds to a somewhat special aspect of mercy, much emphasised in Christian teaching but less so in Buddhism or Hinduism: the virtue of *ahimsa*, central in both these traditions, is primarily characterised by an attitude of non-retaliation and non-resentment for injuries suffered, which may or may not indicate the idea of forgiving in the sense of a deliberate ignoring of guilt and its consequences. Where a human being is concerned, he can at best renounce any explicit or implicit claim to exact a sanction or compensation for the wrongs inflicted on him while praying that God, who alone is able to forgive in an absolute sense, may will to do so. Human forgiveness can only retrace the Divine forgiveness symbolically, within the limits imposed by existence in the world. In this way, as Professor Bishop showed by means of many striking examples, the injured party may both turn the injury he has suffered to his own sacrificial benefit and he may also, by force of example, help to awaken in the perpetrator of the injury an awareness of what is at stake, thus leading to an effective contrition with all the beneficial consequences this will bring in its train. If however the offending party fails to respond to the spiritual opportunity thus created for him, then as far as he is concerned retributive justice must needs take its course: this holds good for the Christian scheme of things as elsewhere.

Passing now to the Buddhist way of seeing things, we find here that the idea of "ineluctable *karma*", the law of immanent justice affecting good and evil deeds alike, is so expressed that the idea of "pardon" does not necessarily arise; rather will a Buddhist think in terms of a karmic compensation, through the gaining of an overriding merit whereby the preceding sin is neutralised, but not abolished as such. Hence the remark of a Ceylonese *bhikku* who, when

referring to Christianity, spoke of "the detestable doctrine of the forgiveness of sins." Plainly the venerable *bhikku* was baffled by an anthropomorphic phraseology which, for the Semitic mind, presents no difficulties; the idea of a "divine forgiveness" seemed too like an arbitrary interference with the law of causality for him to be able to stomach it. It is indeed no exaggeration to say that, in comparison with Islam and Christianity, the Buddhist doctrine is not less, but more, closely linked with the idea of inexorable justice, at least in its formal expressions. Despite the pre-eminent place accorded to compassion in Buddhist thought and practice, no Buddhist spokesman ever has or could have expressed himself in terms suggestive of the possibility of a mitigation of the law of *karma* on its own level. That is why the terminology of "forgiveness" hardly has a place in current Buddhist parlance: for instance in the Tibetan language the word *söpa* (spelt *bzod-pa*) whereby our own word "to forgive" is commonly rendered really confines itself to the idea of "forbearance". People trying to translate Christian texts have therefore had to resort to periphrases such as an expression meaning "to cancel a debt". The above example will give some idea of the difference between the two mentalities in question.

This difference in outlook has to be borne in mind when trying to assess the obvious factors of agreement between Christian "charity" and the Buddhist "compassion," otherwise one may be led too far in assimilation: each of the two attitudes includes the other implicitly, yet there are certain distinctions between them which should not be overlooked if one wishes to arrive at an accurate result. Where Buddhism is concerned, the chief thing to remember is that the compassion it inculcates is inseparably linked with the conviction that the law of *karma* is inescapable for all beings alike; given this common fatality that will enfold them so long as Enlightenment has not been attained, what sense can there be in harbouring resentment for particular evils while the cause behind those evils remains operative despite any occasional measures we may take to counter this or that? How futile any attempt at retaliation seems when all it does is to renew and perpetuate the very process which rendered such and such an injury possible and, in given circumstances, inevitable. Thus the whole teaching about *ahimsa*, for Buddhists as for Hindus, is bound up with the idea of a justice to which all creatures are rigorously subject thanks to their very existence.

Within this general awareness, pity for the sufferings of others and action to relieve them makes sense as a spiritual instrument from which all stand to benefit in some degree or other; but this incidentally does not altogether exclude the possibility that in certain cases an infliction of punishment might, after all, be more merciful in terms of motive and consequence than its summary remission; here considerations of function, as in the case of a ruler, will enter in: the Muslim writer previously cited was right to draw attention to this point. To take another example, Bodhisattvas who, by definition, are beings selflessly dedicated to the salvation of creatures "down to the last blade of grass" are sometimes iconographically portrayed in terrifying form; given certain circumstances, it is their merciful office itself that imposes the need to show themselves in the guise of severity. Inasmuch as Buddhas and Bodhisattvas provide the "divine models" for all normative attitudes and activities at the human level, it would be presumptuous, as well as sentimental, were one to try and blind oneself to this possibility altogether.

In the field of compassion and its exercise there is one important distinction to be made between the Buddhist and Hindu religions on the one hand and the Christian on the other—a distinction more of practice than principle perhaps, but one which nonetheless makes a simple classing together of these three traditions on the score of this common attitude to compassion somewhat questionable. Whereas the Indian traditions speak of *ahimsa* they never fail to include,

side by side with mankind, all other animate creatures great and small. The idea of a one-sided pity confined to one species of suffering being (be it even the "central" being of our world) and excluding all the others more or less is, for Hindus and Buddhists alike, an unthinkable proposition: this is true not only of saints but also of ordinary folk at all levels of society. When I was in Tibet it was a constant source of delight, and what is more of illumination, to notice how un-shy the wild animals and birds remained when in the presence of man. Not even the roughest people such as muleteers ever thought of striking or swearing at their beasts in the way that is all too common in parts of Europe. Likewise it was a thing unknown for a child to crush a moth (from the cradle it was taught otherwise) or to throw stones at small birds. Cases of human inconsistency can occur of course in the Buddhist world as elsewhere, but by and large the principle is accepted that Compassion is one and indivisible and should as far as possible be extended to all beings entangled in the web of birth and death and for selfsame reasons.

Alas, how different has been the Christian record when viewed as a whole and that, despite the shining example of many saints; the latter are often held up to admiration in this respect, but far more rarely proposed as models for imitation. Here it has not been merely a matter of average human fallibility, but often of quasi-deliberate attempts to bolster up a wholly irresponsible attitude toward's man's non-human fellow-creatures by means of pseudo-theological sophistries that are an insult to the Creator as well as to human intelligence. From a Buddhist point of view this all takes a lot of explaining. When Buddhists read about the life of Jesus Christ they readily recognise there the same order of compassion as the Buddha showed by precept and practice; but when they listen to what many Christians have had to say about the absence of any real obligation on the part of man to consider the interests of other living things he shares the world with, they hardly know what to think: for them, nothing here seems to add up to sense.

In this respect Islam makes a better showing, with its strong emphasis on the signs (*ayat*) of Nature as primary proofs of God; the Red Indians of America make of this same principle the cornerstone of their wisdom and their ethics. The well-known sayings of the Prophet about the woman who was condemned to Hell for letting her cat starve and about the prostitute who earned Heaven by giving water to a thirsty dog need no corroboration for a Buddhist; in both these cases it was the attitude behind the act that counted and this agrees with the Buddhist view of justice according to which the eventual karmic consequences are the exact reflection of the state of knowledge or ignorance of the agent concerned, whereof virtue and vice are the outer garments, made perceptible through the respective action or inaction.

To conclude, a few words should be said about the key-term *dharma*, common to Hinduism and Buddhism, whereby is meant firstly the intrinsic nature of a being and secondly, by extension, the vocation for which that being is fitted and, by further extension, the law regulating that vocation positively and negatively through the appropriate precepts and prohibitions. From this it will be apparent that *dharma* corresponds very closely to the Old Testament notion of "righteousness," namely the particular form justice will assume in respect of each individual as also of the traditional collectivity as a whole. Moreover it is not for nothing that the religion founded by the Buddha became known as the *Dhamma* (Pali form of the same word), which again goes to show that Buddhism is intellectually rooted in justice first of all, with Compassion arising within its framework as the logical concomitant of justice.

The conclusion to be drawn from all the above is surely that if justice and mercy belong together *in divinis* they must perforce so belong *in humanis*: one may on occasion have cause to distinguish one divine aspect from another for reasons of spiritual method, but one cannot in

principle *prefer* one aspect to another as such. If one does so, one is asking for that kind of karmic reversal whereby a would-be merciful action turns to violence or even cruelty (we have seen many such cases in recent years) simply because this is a crude way of getting an equilibrium restored that should not have been tampered with in the first place. A compassion which is out of balance can never remain true to its own intention.

Buddhism, which is the religion of the Mean or Middle Way, requires of us that our mercy part not company from justice (or intelligence) and vice versa. Personal preferences count for nothing in this sphere.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

We need hardly say that from the traditional point of view there could hardly be found a stronger condemnation of the present social order than in the fact that the man at work is no longer doing what he likes best, but rather what he must, and in the general belief that a man can only be really happy when he "gets away" and is at play. For even if we mean by "happy" to enjoy the "higher things of life," it is a cruel error to pretend that this can be done at leisure if it has not been done at work. For "the man devoted to his own vocation finds perfection... That man whose prayer and praise of God are in the doing of his own work perfects himself" (Bhagavad Gita). It is this way of life that our civilization denies to the vast majority of men, and in this respect that it is notably inferior to even the most primitive or savage societies with which it can be contrasted.

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