Indian Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. X, No. 3, April (1983)

BUDDHISM AND MARXISM ON ALIENATION AND SUFFERING

Those of us who were active in the American social upheavals of the sixties lived in terms of a contradiction which served as a creative tension motivating many of our actions and concerns. This contradiction was structured in terms of social action and personal discovery, a tension which catapulted us into such diverse arenas as anti-war activism on the one hand and the practice of meditation on the other, and the existential thrust was to seek out ways of arriving at a coherent framework which could serve as a basis for both arenas, which might be characterized as the 'inner' and 'outer' spheres of human endeavor.

Many of us found in Marxist theory a coherent explanation of such phenomena as racism, the Vietnam war, sexism, and the determining role played by large industry in the formulation of America's domestic and foreign policies. Marxism (in whatever form) appealed to a sense of justice and decency as well as provided us with a rationale for our activism.

On the other hand, we were also very well aware of contradiction within our own psyches. We realized that unless revolutionary action were coupled with sustained effort towards self-knowledge, a genuine understanding of those inner conflicts which motivated those social actions, then any such revolution would lead us to the establishment of yet another form of tyranny.

So the sixties movements innately had such a double thrust : towards social criticism and involvement and towards self-understanding.

Another important factor at that time was the so-called psychedelic (literally, "mind-manifesting") movement. Having been thrown, unpreparedly, into a kaleidoscopic sort of mysticism, we sought ways to cultivate the process of self-understanding. Many of us felt that while these drug-induced experiences had an unquestionable meaning and validity, no such artificially induced experience could be brought to bear on the issues of life without a practical framework. The so-called "spiritual supermarket" became popular: various Asian systems, gurus, philosophies and

so on beckoned as methods for integrating such praeternatural experiences with the day-to-day business of living authentically. Buddhism was perhaps the most appealing of these, as it appeared to suit our tastes for simplicity, coherency and directness.

We had established our own existential dialectic. In terms of the 'outer' realm, Marxism provided coherent analyses of the world; Buddhism and other systems were our maps of the 'inner'. And, as Hegel tells us so clearly, a dialectic cannot simply be left as such. When thesis and antithesis collide, there ensues an inexorable movement towards a synthesis. So we read more, we thought harder, we analyzed both our social involvements and our psychological dispositions. And what we came to discover was that there was something suspicious about how the problem was conceptually structured, that there were more profound implications of Marxism than simply an analysis of the 'outer', and that Buddhism could provide more than a map to the 'inner'.

In fact, one salient feature of both Buddhism and Marxism is that each of them provides analyses of both the 'inner' and the 'outer'. Both start with the problem of an estranged consciousness and both end with a resolution for this estrangement. Personally speaking, both are such compelling criticisms of the way in which we usually structure and understand our world that neither of them could be dispensed with.

And there's more. Many of us who became disenchanted with our own culture began to explore others, and this took us to India, Nepal, Burma and Sri Lanka. And what we found there was startling : the competing claims of Buddhism and Marxism loomed as large there — even larger — than they had in our own heads back home. Surely, the reasons behind this competition there were different, and the way in which these issues were articulated varied. But there they were, Buddhism and Marxism, presenting compelling pictures of reality. What was most surprising was that, by and large, these two were not seen as mutually exclusive, that friends in Asia had gone much further in harmonizing these two than we had. So we began to listen.

In the Asian context, the problem was not so much social activism against an oppressive system as finding a model for socioeconomic development. And here the tension was between

a European model, Marxism, and an indigenous one, Buddhism. And there was always the presence of China. Before we knew much about what had happened in Tibet, we saw in Chairman Mao the great synthesizer of indigenous metaphors, values and structures with Marxism, and we saw him as the champion of oppressed peoples with whom we had come to identify so closely. We saw the Indo-Chinese friendship treaty couched in the Buddhist metaphor of pancha-shila. We saw Vietnamese Buddhists struggling against our mutual enemy, the American military-industrial complex, and doing so both as Buddhists and as Marxists. And we hoped for their victory.

Where, then, are these parallels between Marxist and Buddhist thought? Certainly both are philosophies of action and/or practice, but they also share some conceptual structures.

Perhaps Karl Marx is best known for his claim that religion is the opium of the people. He writes, "Religion is the sign of the oppressed creture, the soul of a heartless world, as it is also the spirit of a spiritless condition. It is the opium of the people." It is for this reason that many Buddhists discount Marx, but I would suggest that they are missing his point. Despite the practice of religious persecution in Russia and in Tibet under China, theoretically Marx is maintaining that any comprehensive criticism must begin with the criticism of religion, and we can see that the Buddha made exactly the same point. The very starting point of Buddhism is precisely such a criticism of religion as he found it among its contemporaries in sixth century BCE India. The very first text of the Buddhist cannon is the *Brahmajāla Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, and in it the Buddha is no less thorough in his radical attack on religion than was Marx. In this text the Buddha launches essentially two criticisms of religion, one of which is identical with Marx's thrust, and one which perhaps goes beyond him. The Buddha argues that religion is used to maintain an unjust and irrational caste system, a system which ordains a certain group of people to think for the masses, who are offered a solace in notions such as self (*ātman*), as God (*Iśvara*) and as hope for a better life next time around, all of which is insiduously perpetuated by and for the interests of this brahmin caste. Religion, then, is a rationalization of class oppression. But the Buddha does say more, and in this sense he more closely resembles that other great

Jewish patriarch of modernism, Sigmund Freud, than he does Marx. Here the Buddha says, as does Freud in his *Future of an Illusion*, that religion is a projected wish-fantasy, the concretization of a life-force (eros) which psychological malaise thwarts from authentic expression. So for the Buddha, religion is both a way of re-enforcing oppressive class structures and a way of denying human responsibility for our lives. The criticism of religion, we find, is the starting point for general criticism, something which both Marx and the Buddha endeavor to propound.

Marx begins his analysis of the human condition with human life as he finds it, rooted in history and the particular. He did this in conscious opposition to the mainstream of his philosophic milieu, which was an idealistic Hegelianism, which held that human life was simply a manifestation of some universal principle (*Geiste*). Marx said that he "turned Hegel on his head" in the sense that human life could be explained on its own historical terms without recourse to such reifications as any universal principle. Similarly, the Buddha analyzed human life on its own terms. Denying the Indian tendency to see human life as a manifestation of any principles like *Brahman* or *ātman* or *purusha*, the Buddha sought to explain suffering and its cessation in an entirely humanistic manner, much as Marx did.

The issue for Marx is alienation; for the Buddha it is suffering (*dukkha*). For Marx, alienation (*Entfremdung*) means that condition in which the person finds him/herself in opposition to objects, that s/he is estranged from even the most intimate of objects, those which s/he produces. The defining characteristic of being human (*Gattungswesen*, "species being") is that we tend to manipulate our environment, that we are able to combine our labour with matter to produce new and growth-enhancing objects. However, the inhumane condition of a "labour market" in which we are forced to sell and barter this, the most precious of human characteristics in a commodity exchange situation, serves to alienate us not only from objects, but from our own true nature as free producer. Thus a cruel double movement becomes involved: alienation from objects reinforces and sustains alienation from our true nature and vice-versa. In fact, Marx goes on to demonstrate that even the notion of an "object" is a reification of experience, that this notion itself is the product of an alienated consciousness. Looking

at the "object" before me, I am inclined to call it a "typewriter". However, Marx wants us to see that the term "typewriter" is the name of a commodity, something which participates in this cruel system of capitalist exchange. What is really before me is a combination of various natural and synthetic materials and human labour. But my consciousness itself is to alienated, is so brainwashed by life in a capitalist world, that I accept this reification as though it were itself nature. By calling it a "typewriter", I de-humanize it, which is to say that I refuse to see it as the product of human effort upon nature. Such reification only serves the interest of that class of society which benefits from the world of commodities. Alienation, then, serves to reinforce and solidify the interests of a given segment of society and serves to enslave us, the workers, who actually produce "objects" but whose participation in that process is negated by the very way in which we think and perceive.

The Buddha, of course, did not provide a sustained analysis of the labor market and the conditions of the alienated worker. He couldn't have, as these structures did not exist at his time. His analysis of the human situation, however, does provide analogies to Marx's analysis. He, too, did not see the problem of human suffering as something either random or divinely preordained. Rather, suffering could be discussed in purely human terms, resting on the particularity of history (*saṁsāra*). God does not make us suffer and suffering is not simply the result of an absured world. Suffering is a human problem which has human solutions. About this much Marx could surely agree, but there is more.

This issue of reification becomes, in Buddhist parlance, the problem of *vikalpa*, or projection. Given a world in which it is convenient to refer to oneself and other by names, we abstract these 'convenient designations' and take them as referring to things or objects. As the Shunyavāda system emphasizes, these names do not refer, do not correspond to 'objects', but are merely useful designations. What we do when we take the name as a real, when our linguistic conventions become deeply-rooted convictions, is to reinforce and maintain a system in which a subject is in tension, against an object, and which is called *saṁsāra*. Thus, turns of thought, sloppy mental habits, become a pivot upon which alienation and suffering balance. This is a very precarious balance, of

course, as the practice of meditation enables us to cut through such solidifying tendencies as *vikalpa* or reification.

What I take to be important here are the ideas shared by Marx and the Buddha that : (1) consciousness as we find it is not final, that it is something predicated upon an alienated mode of being in the world; (2) that this alienation is a human problem and construction which could be overcome only by human endeavour, and (3) that the way in which we think, the process of reification and abstraction, supports and maintains oppressive structures and, therefore, any real solution to human suffering involves a radical reversal of thought as well as action.

There is also a pattern behind all of this, and that pattern is described by Marx as the historical dialectic or dialectical materialism, and by the Buddha as dependent co-origination or *pratitya samutpāda*. Things do not simply exist, but come to be in terms of an historical process. This is a process within the range of human thought once it is liberated from the gestalt of reification. For example, let us consider ego.

Ego is a socially-conditioned idea and experience. For Marx, ego could exist only when ego has objects to which it can attach itself, and this system of objects is known in capitalism as private property. Without property there is no alienated consciousness, no ego. It is precisely because of human insecurity that property is accumulated; conversely, it is the accumulation of property that conditions a sense of ego. The two are mutually interdependent and form a vicious circle which could only be overcome by that revolutionary act which entails the negation of the very notion of and conditions for private property. Similarly in Buddhism, the ego seeks to reinforce its sense of identity through the manipulation of other people, of language, and by the two-pronged process of attraction/aversion by which the ego attempts to reinforce itself by a process of self-definition in terms of objects which one likes and as distinct from objects which one does not like. These 'ojbects', according to the Buddha, may be material, psychological, or whatever. By cutting through these conditions, ego is allowed to dissolve. Once again, we find strongly parallel emphases : that ego is a product of an alienated consciousness in the first place which seeks to maintain its own suspicious existence by the manipulation of the 'external' world. It is the process by which we

de-humanize our world which is to be addressed, and this process involves such radical criticisms as we have been outlining.

Given that we live as alienated or suffering egos, how can we understand where we are heading by following either the Buddhist or a Marxist path? Once again, we find both Marx and the Buddha saying that such an alienated mind could not imagine what non-alienation is like. In fact, both give us very negative indicators : the Buddha speaks about a stopping of suffering (*nirodha*), or a 'blowing out' (*nirvāna*); Marx tells us that we are approaching a 'classless society'. It is interesting that both indicate their goals simply by negating our present condition. Of course neither intend a mere nothing as their goal, but both indicate serious problems involved with our processes of conceptualization.

A Buddhist does not simply mean a withdrawal from the world when s/he speaks about meditation. Meditation (an awkward term) means, among other things, the exercise of compassion (*karunā*) and the cultivation of certain vectoral attitudes (friendliness, empathy, compassion and equanimity) which are not mere depersonalization but conduce towards a new type of relatedness which is not predicated upon such reifications as self and other. So Buddhism, despite persistent misunderstandings, is not the 'inner' trip we once thought it was. Similarly, Marxism attempts to deal systematically with the problem of alienated consciousness, and is not merely a system for understanding the 'outer' world. I think we have to take seriously such thinkers as U. Nu of Burma, who sought to establish a socialist-Buddhist nation. We need to take seriously His Holiness the Dalai Lama when he says that he sees no contradiction between Buddhism and Marxism, and that the dialectical approaches to life of both systems bear strong resemblances. It is a trite attitude, and a stubborn one, which seeks to render Buddhism as an approach to human 'inner' problems and Marxism as a way of understanding 'outer' ones. Such a trivializing approach does justice to neither system.

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