

Adapting Buddhism to the West: Problems in Communication

by Arnold McKinley

Just as the Yangtze and the Ganges Rivers have flowed their separate ways on either side of the Himalayas for millenia, so did the Chinese and Indian civilizations evolve separately before the first century A.D. Supported by the fertile valleys of these two great rivers, and although the waters never mingled, the world views of these peoples eventually blended freely to produce some of the greatest religious literature of human history.

Buddhist monks originally came to China from India along trading routes through the arid Takla Markan desert of Central Asia, supporting caravans and wealthy merchants in religious and worldly ways. The first monks were "chaplains" to the traders, eating and sleeping in the quarters prepared for them. The Chinese who saw them were shocked; the monks shaved their heads, were unmarried, and carried relics of the dead—behavior contrary to the most fundamental and sacred of Chinese beliefs and ritual practices.

In 148 A.D., a Parthian monk, An Shih-kao, opened a translation bureau in Lo-yang, the capital city, with the goal of introducing Buddhist sūtras to the Chinese elite. The problems facing him were enormous. Sanskrit, the language of the sūtras, is a highly inflective language from the same family as Greek and Latin, with instrumental endings and conjugated verbs. Chinese is a compounded-character language in which any character can be a subject, object, noun, or verb, each carrying several possible meanings depending upon context and placement. And, of course, An Shih-kao had no dictionaries or word lists.

An Shih-kao spoke a form of Turkish but had some working knowledge of Sanskrit and vernac-

ular Chinese. His manuscripts were on palm leaves. One can imagine the process of translation: He would read a line of Sanskrit and in conversation with someone, describe what it meant in central Asian Turkish vernacular. That person would then tell the person next to him what it meant in everyday Chinese. This person would then communicate the meaning of the passage to an educated Chinese scholar who in turn would write down five or six characters which, he decided, conveyed the meaning adequately. The process would then be reversed until An Shih-kao heard the descriptive meaning of the Chinese characters in his native Turkish and would decide if that, indeed, was what the original Sanskrit intended to say. The process must have been tedious.

By the fourth century, Buddhists were using many Taoist words and phrases in their translations. The method was called "*kê-yi*" and was used mostly for the *prajñā* sūtras. But the confusions it introduced were great. Take for example the use of the Taoist *shou-i* (Eng: guarding the one) for the equivalent of the Sanskrit *smṛti* (Eng: mindfulness). The latter refers to a practice of keeping the consciousness in a receptive rather than responsive state. It keeps one fully in the present, without expectation, censoring skillfully the ongoing flow of thoughts so that one cannot be defiled by greed, hatred and the like. The former term refers to a meditational practice of guarding and caring for the most important god of the body who governs and controls the lesser gods of the bodily organs. One can imagine the confusion that arose in the minds of the Chinese who were attempting to understand the practice of *smṛti*.

The *kē-yi* method fell into disuse once the great translator Kumārajīva arrived in 401 A.D. to present the authoritative interpretation of Buddhist thought and to translate the Sanskrit more correctly than did An Shih-kao.¹ In time there emerged, for the Chinese, a clearer understanding of the fundamentals of Indian Buddhism. But the Chinese interpretations could never be entirely free of the Chinese spirit. Indeed, by 550 A.D., in the flowering of the T'ang Dynasty, the Chinese had a form of Buddhism which was radically different from its old Indian counterpart in many ways, and uniquely Chinese in character.

Such contact between radically different cultures seems to be repeating itself today. Initial contacts with the West over the silk trade routes were formed slowly during the 1400s and 1500s, but speeded up as water routes opened in the next centuries. In the 1600s, Jesuit and Franciscan monks set to translating Chinese and Japanese texts under the same sort of difficulties which had earlier faced An Shih-kao. A thorough recycling of translations continued under the efficient auspices of the British and French over the next two centuries and the Americans have joined the effort, principally in this century. Western study of Eastern culture has therefore proceeded on an even keel for over 400 years, about as long as it took the Chinese to create a base from which they could begin a thorough-going review of the Indian sūtras. Detailed studies at Western academic centers over the last 100 years have begun to clarify many of the nuances and subtleties of Buddhist thought for Western culture, an activity which begins to parallel the intense studies performed by the Hua-yen and T'ien-tai schools in sixth century China.

It might be said that the West has come to a point where its own interpretation and development of Buddhist ideas is beginning to occur. The Shinshū school of Pure Land Buddhism is ordaining American born, non-Japanese ministers. The Zen schools have established firm American and European bases. The American public is giving one of the newest schools of Buddhism, Nichiren, a Western appearance, and the Theravāda

texts which were first translated during the last two centuries. Books such as the *Tao of Physics* are appearing which seek similarities between Buddhist teachings and new scientific theories, especially theories in physics. If history is repeating itself, it will be useful to examine the problems of communication which the contact is bound to raise and to see how they once again will influence the development of new forms of Buddhism.

AN EXAMPLE WHICH EMBODIES THE PROBLEMS

One way of getting to know another culture is to compare and contrast some elemental teaching of two, well respected, native teachers. One expects to see some seed idea from which both began their development of a similar thought. Then a point of bifurcation, and finally some enhancements or extensions which resulted in different conclusions, can be examined. This is, of course, a simplistic way of looking at things. Nevertheless it can be effective in developing a comparison.

There exists in human culture the tendency to categorize and identify objects as if there were something naturally *essential* about them; something which distinguishes one object from another, something which gives them their character. By their language, for example, human beings grant separate rights of existence to dogs, birds, pencils and other ordinary objects. They also experience within themselves certain unique, "personal" processes which they take as belonging to themselves individually and as defining their "selfhood." One intent in the scientific observations of Western culture is to identify carefully the characteristics which distinguish a newly discovered object from others already known.

Buddhists also categorize and distinguish objects, but they make the point that these categories are completely artificial and arbitrary with no underlying *essences* implied; that is, they categorize for convenience. The Buddhist teaching is called *anātman* and, on the face of it, *anātman* seems to conflict with Western *practice*

or perception.

The root of this tendency to believe in *essences* in the West lies in Greek philosophy, particularly in Aristotle's *Physics*. Buddhist thought lies principally in the early Buddhist sūtras, composed by the Buddha and passed down orally to generations of followers. The teachings of both the Buddha and Aristotle belie them as eminently practical thinkers. Although their conclusions were ultimately different, both used thoroughly logical, experimentally based processes in their studies of reality and of the relationship between reality and the mind. Both rooted their ideas in experience, and both taught that *change* is the most fundamental property of real objects; both believed in "cause-effect" principles.

The technical term for *change*, in Buddha's teachings, is *sarva-saṃskāra anityatā* (all composed things have no permanence) and the cause-effect principle behind it is called *pratītyasamutpāda*, or dependent origination. According to the teachings, one can find nothing in reality which is not composed of parts and which is not conditioned by other things around it, either in space or in time, even though the pattern of that conditioning may not be clearly evident. The coming into existence of the various configurations of composite things occurs uninterruptedly. It is a sort of creation and destruction in which these configurations rise and pass out of existence instant by instant. That which may appear to be the same from moment to moment is really a series of many configurations, coming into existence and moving out of existence like the picture frames of a motion picture, causing each other and in turn being caused.

The sūtras indicate, too, that Buddha taught no "first cause," in the sense of an intelligence or a god who began motion long ago, or who sustains present processes of reality. Indeed, Buddha indicated that it is impossible to point out such a first cause since the cause-effect network which *pratītyasamutpāda* describes is not a sequential one. All things cause or are caused together in a complicated, gear-like meshing. Just as one gear

in such a network affects the motion of, and is affected by the motion of, other gears in a non-sequential way, so do all elements of reality affect and are affected by all others instantaneously. All gears change together through time, rather than one affecting another through a sequentially described chain of cause and effect.

In Aristotle's *Physics*, the principle of change is *Potency and Act*. An object which presently exists *potentially* existed within an antecedent object and was brought into *act* when the conditions were right for its appearance. An object cannot appear unless it existed, potentially, within an antecedent. For example, a presently existing oak tree existed potentially within an acorn. An adult existed potentially within the baby and came into active existence during growth. The antecedent must already *possess* the consequent in some way. The inner structure of the antecedent must be such as to be able to produce the consequent, otherwise the consequent cannot generally come into being. Since Aristotle's principle acts sequentially through time, one finds in his writings a "first cause" from which all change begins. This first cause moves everything else, yet is itself unmoved. Moreover, it does not exist potentially in anything else prior to itself; it is entirely *act*.

Aristotle identified two sorts of change: changes accruing to "accidental" characteristics, such as color and shape (as a white dog and a black dog differ in their accidental colors), and changes accruing to a unique characteristic *essence* of an object (as a dog and a horse differ in some essential characteristics which make the dog a dog and the horse a horse). It is as if Aristotle suggested that a list of unambiguous qualities could be drawn up which one could use to distinguish the dog from the horse, and that such could always be done if two things differ in their essentials. That list of qualities refers to an underlying, unique substratum belonging to the thing-as-it-is in itself, and called this a "substantial form."

In some of these ways, the Buddha's teachings agree. Early Buddhist sūtras say that a certain

oneness or *ekatā* about an object persists from moment to moment even though the object changes. However, this *ekatā* is not an underlying, long persisting *substratum* consisting of characteristics which can be listed. Nor is the *ekatā* of one object shared with "similar" objects to give them all some identical character. The *ekatā* is counter-balanced by *nānatā*, or the diversity in an object which appears moment to moment. Further, it is taught that conditions must be right for the emergence of an object, so that an oak tree comes only from an acorn, while a pine tree cannot.

Several arguments support Buddha's case against a substratum called *self*. As an example, suppose the person of King Menander were to be searched scrupulously to find the "personal" identity behind it. The search is not for *ekatā* but for an underlying, substratum that would never change throughout the life of Menander, and possibly continue after his life. A superficial look finds arms, legs, trunk and inner bodily organs. A second finds feelings, emotions, perceptions and the like characterizing the processes of these parts. These, and nothing more, create the "chariot" of which "King Menander" is the practical designation.

Continue the search, however. Cut off the arms and the legs. King Menander, the person, would still remain. But chop off the head and he is gone, even though all the parts exist otherwise intact. Indeed, removal of the heart alone would suffice to cause the King's demise, or removal of the lungs, or spleen, or liver. "King Menander" must possess several rather important, *functioning* organs in order for him to be designated "King Menander." Each organ in particular may be examined for the "self"; yet his supposed essence will not be found. Where is King Menander?

One may also attempt to isolate King Menander in *space*. Add organs: first the heart, then the lungs, then the skeleton, add the head, etc. Then add, layer by layer, the blood vessels, the fatty tissue, the skin. When will King Menander appear? He won't, of course, if this procedure is followed, because King Menander must *grow* into space

organismically, all organs together. Perhaps King Menander *interpenetrates* these organs. But why should the interpenetration stop with the skin layer? Is this the boundary of King Menander? Does not air go in and out? Should not the layer of air around him be considered a part of him too? And his food as well? Since both food and air transform internally into flesh, why should they not be considered part of King Menander? Buddha found boundaries and categories such as these quite arbitrary.

Again, try to isolate King Menander, *in time*. From one instant to another, something about him is always changing to some degree, perhaps a feeling or a perception, perhaps some skin tissue. Of these changing configurations of aspects, which is King Menander himself? Aristotle says that these are accidental changes and that King Menander is still quite the same King Menander from moment to moment; the substantial form is the thread which holds Menander together throughout. It is not subjected to change as Menander grows from youth to old age, his essence is the same.

But Buddha, unable to find the *Self* among an object's composite parts, or to identify the *Self* as a unity in space at the present moment, reasoned that it was impossible also to isolate the *Self anywhere in time*, past or future. In his view, King Menander would change, instant by instant as the composite parts of him changed; a new being arising moment by moment, instant by instant, like waves on a stormy sea.

Aristotle taught that such a substantial form as King Menander always requires a critical amount of matter for its existence and, indeed, the substantial form cannot be found no matter how much scrutiny such as this occurs because the "substantial form" is *immaterial*. He argued, however, that even though one cannot see it, substantial form *must* exist and he used an analogy to support its defense. The analogy goes like this: Every form which *can* be seen has a material substance which carries a form, just as a wax statue of an animal carries the likeness of an

animal on a base of wax. Aristotle called this substance "secondary matter" and the likeness "secondary form." The wax may be remolded to take on the likeness of one animal or another, but what is to be said about the wax when it is burned away and becomes smoke?

Aristotle suggested that the essential characteristics which made the wax what it was changed to the essential characteristics of smoke just as the likeness of the wax was changed from the likeness of one animal to that of another. Therefore, the analogy suggests that the essence of the wax should be called "primary" or "substantial" form and there must exist a "primary matter" which supports this form, which is itself *unchanging*, cannot be seen, and is shared by all objects. Just as the figures of animals molded into wax are diverse because each has a different "substantial form," yet each shares "primary matter" and therefore has a certain identity in common.

The crux of the bifurcation between these two philosophers seems to rest upon two issues: the decisions of whether or not to accept an *infinitely divisible* space and time, and whether or not to accept something as eternally unchanging. If one accepts, for example, that all elements of reality consist of parts such that no matter how much one wishes to subdivide an element it can still be subdivided further, and if one accepts that all moments consist of other shorter moments, then one can only end up with empty hands when one tries to grasp some fundamental constituent part of an object as its *essence*, because the subdividing can go on indefinitely. If, moreover, nothing is to be admitted as unchanging, then no one of these parts can be admitted as *essence* either. Therefore, Buddha concluded that objects of reality are without essences.

On the other hand, if one does not accept such an infinitely divisible space and time and does admit something which can never change, then *essences* can exist. As one subdivides an object, one will come either to the edges of a fundamental constituent part which cannot be further divided or one will find a part, which, even though decom-

posable, will itself not change. Either could be called its *essence*. This is, for example, the idea behind the notion of fundamental particles such as quarks in modern day physics.

In this latter case, then, categorical boundaries can be drawn around the objects of reality. This was indeed Aristotle's position on the matter. Two things, he said, are "continuous" if their extremities are the same, are "in contact" if their extremities touch, and are "in succession" if there is no thing of the same kind between them. The phrases "instants of *time*" and "points in *space*" imply infinitely divisible space and time. "Instants" and "points" are not continuous, are not in contact, and are not in succession, yet there are evident properties of objects.

Such might be a discussion between Aristotle and Buddha. In summary, they would start with *change* and end with radically different conclusions on the identity of the *Self*. Bifurcation would occur in a discussion over the nature of the divisibility of *space* and *time* and the possibility of an unchanging part.

PROBLEMS OF COMMUNICATION

It is an easy task, comparatively speaking, to read a philosopher, whether in his original language or in English translation, to interpret his words linguistically and literally, and to draw conclusions as to the content of this thought. This was the approach used in developing the above example. But it is an uneven process because it takes the philosopher out of his historical context, thus failing to acknowledge the contributions of the philosophical tradition. These later interpreters spent many years attempting to understand the subtleties and nuances involved in the seed ideas.

If one wants to understand the teachings of the source philosopher, in this case Buddha or Aristotle, one must not only understand the contemporary philosophical context in which the teacher lived but the line of philosophical tradition as well. One can always find apparent gaps

and inconsistencies in the source writings because of new discoveries, or because of a new approach required by changing cultural times. The philosopher provides the child with his "shorts," so to speak, and leaves to others the "tailoring of the breeches" as Einstein had so colorfully said.

Therefore, it is to the tradition to which one turns in order to validate the argument in the example given above, to "find the thought behind the words." But here lies the first problem: Buddha was "the Buddha" and Aristotle was a learned mortal. Should one therefore be prejudiced in favor of Buddha's views? If not, does his premiere status have any bearing on the comparison at all? Could the later tradition, for example, have improved on Aristotle's work, but not on Buddha's? One must be symmetric here in answering the questions. Should a comparison of Jesus Christ's thoughts with those of some great Eastern teacher, such as Confucius, be prejudiced in favor of Jesus Christ because he is/was God? Would a comparison between the Christ's and the Buddha's views be more substantial?

The second problem is close by: Buddha himself never put pen to palm leaf; his teachings were orally transmitted and not written down until several generations after his death. But Buddhists have added texts to their canons for centuries. Which, of all these texts, should the scholar consider to be Buddha's own words? And, of all the later Theravādin and Mahāyānist interpretations, which should be considered the "proper" tradition? Theravādins, for example, consider Mahāyāna views heretical, while the Mahāyānists consider Theravādin views "elementary."

Even in the case of our example, however, a study of the tradition may be rewarding. In the Aristotelian tradition one finds compelling evidence to suggest that the Greeks found the identity principle of "primary matter," which underlies all beings, very shocking since it conflicted so unabashedly with everyday experience. The important point here is that this *identity* was not seen as something to which *diversity* (the "substantial form") is added, but that identity and

diversity are inextricably woven together; that is, *relational*. This means that neither "substantial form" nor "primary matter" exists separately. This draws Aristotle much closer to the Buddhist principles of *ekatā* and *nānatā* than the example above could ever suggest. Moreover, one discovers in the same tradition a consideration that neither identity nor diversity could have come into existence of their own accord. There must have been a more fundamental principle from which these two sprang, which was itself not only "the first cause" and immovable, as the example said, but also the principle which *chose* the differences on which the diversity was to appear. Such *choice* implies intelligence and free will.² This principle was to eventually characterize the Christian God.

If one now searches the Buddhist tradition similarly, one discovers that a single principle is used here also to characterize the fundamental nature of reality: *śūnyatā*. Although the stress is not put on *ekatā* and *nānatā* in Buddhism as strongly as it is on "primary matter" and "substantial form" in the Aristotelian tradition, they do characterize the changing nature of reality and thus are tied closely with *śūnyatā*. For Theravādins, *śūnyatā* catches the three principles of *anātman*, *pratītyasamutpāda*, and *duḥkha* (or suffering, which is the First Noble Truth), the last of which is not found in Aristotle's work. For Mahāyānists, *śūnyatā* implies additionally a strong notion of *emptiness* or *void*, an expression of the contentlessness of all changing, composed things. Thus, a major difference between Buddhism and the West appears in these two fundamental characterizations of the nature of things and, in particular, in what the differences mean in terms of religious belief in God and in mystical experiences of the void.

A third problem arises in regard to translations. The story of An Shih-kao's activities mentioned earlier captures much of the flavor of translation problems between radically different cultures. They are just as acute today for English translators from the Sanskrit and Chinese. And, to some degree, problems exist even with respect to Greek, though less so because of the centuries of

support which the Greek civilization has given Western culture.

Non-integrating cultural images form a fourth kind of problem. Take, for example, the notion of the "mind." This English term translates both the Sanskrit term "*citta*" and the Chinese character "*hsin*." In the *Madhupinḍika-sūtra* the Buddha says that the human person consists of five "sheaths" or *skandha*: *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saṃjñā*, *saṃskāra*, and *vijñāna*. "*Rūpa*" means "form" but the English term "body" is sometimes used. The other five, together with *vitarka-vicāra*, are referred to as "*citta*" and carry a very complicated psychological theory with them. In China, prior to the appearance of Buddhism, the *hsin* was the human faculty responsible for moral approbation. It did not exhibit the detailed psychology of the Indian *citta*, yet it was used to translate *citta* in later centuries. The two formed a complex notion of mental activities.

No English word exists which captures the full meaning contained in this synthetic notion of the *citta/hsin* and this makes comparisons between Buddhism and the West on issues of the mind extremely difficult. It is technically true that "mind" refers to centers of process (and to the processes themselves) in an individual which feel, perceive, think, will and, most especially, reason. Intentions, desires, dispositions, emotions and the organized conscious and unconscious activity are included. But practically, "mind" means "thinking"; the logical process which connects ideas together. When asked where the "mind" is located, most English speakers will point to their brain. They will point to the "heart" when asked about the center of "emotions," particularly of love, and to the whole body when asked about the center of "feelings." When asked about the *hsin*, Chinese and Japanese speakers will point to the brain and to the heart, indicating that "*hsin*" means thinking, emotions and feelings.

Not only is the "net" which interrelates the internal processes of the Western "mind" described in a very different way from the *citta/hsin* net, but the contextual history of its development

was also radically different, so that to use the English words as if they captured the full meaning of the technicalities of Buddhist thought is a dubious and confusing practice. An author should provide adjacent contextual explanations of the nuances involved. For example, words such as "*smṛti*," "*an-hsin*," "*wu-hsin*" and the like, when translated as "mindfulness," "pacifying the mind," and "no-mind" respectively, contain relatively little meaning for the English speaker. Similarly, the ideas of "no-Self" for *anātman* and "emptiness" for *śūnyatā* are utterly foreign and vacuous in meaning. Ideas commensurate with the *citta/hsin* notion do not exist in Western culture, let alone in the English language. With no common, referent bases, the Westerner flails in mystery.

CONCLUSIONS

In the context of these barriers to the communication of Buddhist teachings, Buddhism will likely find itself molded to fit Western culture in much the same way as it was molded to fit Chinese culture many centuries ago. Few Western scholars have the strong backgrounds in both Eastern and Western philosophical history necessary to effect a wholesale transfer of Buddhist knowledge. That could not be done in China and should not be expected to occur now. Nor will Westerners, being more economically and politically powerful, change their basic images to conform to imported images. Instead, Buddhist concepts will be excised from their context, translated using Western perceptions and images, and applied in a way which will accommodate and benefit Western needs. The results will evolve slowly as they did in China, and Buddhism in the West will not doubt have a form as unrecognizable in the East as Zen Buddhism is unrecognizable in India.

Yet, Buddhism will remain Buddhism. Westerners today respond to it in the same way that the Chinese of the Han Dynasty must have responded: with a certain apprehension over the strange customs and beliefs, some curiosity about the ritual practices, and, as they learn more of it, a fascination with the core teachings—a desire to

know those teachings exactly. Buddhism has been accepted wherever it has gone or has been taken. The secret of this success seems to lie in the fact that the core teachings present solutions to the timeless problems of human existence and personal growth. The outward appearances of these problems may look different across the centuries, but their inner character remains the same. Buddhism, therefore, is as alive and meaningful today as it was in the sixth century B.C. Still, every culture narcissistically considers itself somewhat superior to other cultures, as was China's attitude towards Buddhism, and that is the way the West will feel about Buddhism until it too assimilates and transforms this stranger.³

FOOTNOTES:

1. Kenneth, Ch'en. *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964. pp. 43ff and 68.)
2. See an unpublished text by Fr. Kevin Wall of the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology of the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, for more details on the Aristotelian tradition.
3. The author thanks the staff of the Institute of Buddhist Studies, the Venerable Madawala Seelawimala and Dr. Alfred Bloom of the same institute, and the Reverend Father Kevin Wall of the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology and Director of the Center of Thomistic Studies for their support and encouragement.