



Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith

BY DANIEL CONNER

ALMOST 2500 years ago a gentle man walked with his disciples and taught in a small state named Magadha in what is now Nepal. The story of the enlightenment of the young prince Siddhārtha Gautama is well-known throughout the Western world, but few outside Asia have a passable knowledge, much less an understanding, of the religion founded by the Buddha.

The sixth and fifth centuries B.C. witnessed intellectual and spiritual activity unprecedented in the history of the world. During this time the ethical systems that influence Chinese thought today were systematized by the strangely diverse personalities of Confucius and the half-mythical Lao-tze. In India Mahāvīra (Great Spirit)

preached nonviolence and a novel conception of the soul and founded the Jain religion. Stirred by the teachings of Zoroaster, the Persian empire attained its greatest extent and challenged the Greek world. Greek philosophy was flowering with the thought of Pythagoras and Plato. The Hebrew prophets were laying the foundations of a nation based on strict monotheism. In this world the Buddha lived.

Although miraculous tales and legends abound, little is known about the historical Buddha, and many of the texts attributed to him are undoubtedly of more recent origin. Some current scholarship maintains that Buddhism was initially little more than a reaction against Brāhmanism (out of which

Hinduism evolved). It appears that early Buddhists were more egalitarian in their beliefs than most of their countrymen:

No brāhman is such by birth.
 No outcaste is such by birth.
 An outcaste is such by his deeds.
 A brāhman is such by his deeds.

(*Sutta Nipāta*, 136)¹

They welcomed men and women of all classes as disciples, a practice which aroused the ire of orthodox brahmins. Like his contemporary Mahāvīra, the Buddha stressed the doctrine of *ahiṃsā* (nonviolence: doing harm to no living thing), while animal sacrifice still lingered on from the Vedic age of Brāhmanism.

Due in part to a popular reaction against the social rigidity of Brāhmanism, Buddhism rapidly gained a wide following, spreading throughout India and the Central Asian steppes. The great emperor Aśoka (c. 268-233 B.C.) was dramatically converted to Buddhism after witnessing the carnage in an aggressive war of his own instigation. The Faith frequently enjoyed royal patronage and continued to grow until the fifth century A.D., when it still flourished among the educated and noble classes. Eight hundred years later, however, following the Muslim conquest of northern India, Buddhism had virtually disappeared from the land of its birth. Now Buddhists number only a tiny fraction of the population of India.

The reasons for the virtual disappearance of Buddhism from India are several. One is the ferocity of the Muslim conquest. By and large, the invading Muslims of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries left the indigenous population to itself, but they were unrestrained in their destruction of priests, temples, and monasteries. The Buddhists were most susceptible because they were organized. The monks tended to congregate in centralized monasteries, while the Hindu chaplains were scattered throughout the

countryside.

A more important reason is the remarkable assimilative power of Hinduism. Historically, Hinduism has been the most absorptive of the world's religions; with time it has successfully assimilated extremely heterodox elements. Even the ethnocentric Muslim conquerors found themselves in danger of being assimilated during the time of the Mughal empire (1526-c. 1800). When the Muslims invaded, Buddhism and Hinduism had almost merged, and the Buddha was relegated to a place in the Hindu pantheon as the ninth incarnation of Viṣṇu.

Still more important is the fact that Buddhism suffered the fate of almost every other religion and split into numerous sects. Early in its career Buddhism had split in two: *Theravāda* (the way of the elders) or *Hīnayāna* (the lesser vehicle), and *Mahāyāna* (the greater vehicle). *Theravāda* retained to a greater extent the original teachings of the Buddha, while *Mahāyāna* claimed to have access to esoteric teachings of the Buddha that were denied to any but his closest disciples. In their cultural function *Mahāyāna* compares to *Theravāda* much as medieval Catholicism compares to early Christianity. The *Mahāyāna* school regards the individual search for enlightenment as a selfish ideal and replaces it with the concept of the *bodhisattva*—the savior who achieves enlightenment but rejects *nirvāṇa* so that he might help the less fortunate on the path to salvation. The development of *Mahāyāna* has been greatly influenced by local animistic cults, and it has incorporated foreign deities into its pantheon, while *Theravāda* has survived relatively less changed in Ceylon and Southeast Asia. Until recently *Mahāyāna* flourished chiefly in Tibet, Central and Eastern Asia, and Vietnam, and also in China and Japan in the form of *Ch'an* (or Zen), a synthesis of *Mahāyāna* and Taoism.

The sacred scriptures of Buddhism are more numerous than those of any other religion—so extensive that no single scholar could hope to encompass them in a lifetime.

1. William DeBary et al, eds., *Sources of Indian Tradition* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958), I, 140.

Among the most important *Theravāda* texts are the *Dhammapāda* and *The Questions of King Menander*. The latter is in the form of a Platonic dialogue between a Buddhist disciple and a Greek satrap left behind in Bactria by Alexander the Great. The most important *Mahāyāna* text is the *Saddharma-Puṇḍarīka* or *The Lotus of the True Law*.

Mahāyāna is the form more familiar to Westerners, since it has had the more successful publicists, and it offers a great variety of wondrous tales. This form has recently enjoyed adoption by certain segments of American society, especially in its Tibetan or Japanese (Zen) forms. Anyone who has read a little about Buddhism will recognize the names of its foremost exponents and explainers to the West: D. T. Suzuki, the late Zen patriarch, and Alan Watts, the American philosopher and student of comparative religion.

EASTERN RELIGIONS, particularly Buddhism, have long held a spell of fascination for the Western world. From Voltaire through Schopenhauer and Hermann Hesse, European literature is full of speculation about the nature of Eastern thought. American poets such as Emerson and Thoreau have dabbled in Oriental mysticism, and the Western world has produced a number of first-class Oriental scholars. But it is only recently that popular interest, especially among young people, has been aroused. The trend has yet to gain the proportions of a mass movement, but it is evident that Oriental philosophy is being adopted uncritically by certain segments of our society.

Why? Partly because Oriental philosophy has a great deal to teach us. But some psychologists see other reasons in the lure of the East, not only among so-called hippies or beatniks, but also among serious scholars and theologians. The phenomenal popularity during the late Sixties of transcendental meditation and mysticism—and of individuals such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Ravi Shankar—is symptomatic of a rejection of the Judeo-

Christian values upon which much of our culture is based, yet which have notably failed to achieve their goals. Eastern religions, so the rationale goes, offer individual salvation through self-improvement and lack the emphasis on social values that is found in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The failure of the Judeo-Christian ethical system to bring about its ideal of lasting social justice and peace is regarded as being inherent in the system itself, whereas if the Oriental fails to achieve the goal of enlightenment, it is his fault alone.

Doubtless many young people are embracing Oriental religions because these represent to them the opposite end of the spectrum from the ethical system in which they were raised. Is this polarity real or only apparent? If real, then are Western and Eastern religions reconcilable? In what ways does a new religion, the Bahá'í Faith, reconcile them?

A study of the genealogy of religions shows that the so-called Eastern and Western religions have for the most part developed independently. Just as Christianity grew out of Judaism, the Bahá'í Faith grew out of *Shí'ih Islám* through the Bábí religion, and Buddhism grew out of Brāhmanism. This in no way implies that the above-mentioned faiths are not independent or revealed religions; the intent is only to point out their historical connections. The historical roots of the Bahá'í Faith lie among the Western religions, just as those of Buddhism lie among the Eastern, but this does not mean that the Bahá'í Faith *in itself* is Western or Eastern in outlook. Indeed, the Bahá'í Faith claims universality, spanning or even transcending the traditional division of East and West. In order to investigate this claim, let us first determine whether the differences between the Eastern and Western religions are real or apparent.

At first glance it might seem that Western and Eastern religions have little in common, other than the obvious features which are common to all religions. This is especially true in the realm of metaphysics. The Western religions are rather closely related, with

great mutual influence. The religions born in India and China, on the other hand, are not only for the most part historically separate from the Western religions but also from each other. The distance between Confucianism² and Buddhism is greater than that between Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Moreover, the Western religions are scattered through the time dimension, whereas the great Eastern religions were born mostly between 600 and 500 B.C.

Oswald Spengler wrote, "Buddhism, which only a mere dabbler in religious research would compare with Christianity, is hardly reproducible in the words of the Western Languages."³ The statement contains some truth but is greatly exaggerated. There are significant similarities between Buddhism and Christianity. Buddhism, however, has been judged by some scholars to be more a system of psychology than a religion. Much of this argument is based on the fact that there is no trace in the Buddha's teachings of a "God"—at least not a personal, transcendent god in the Christian sense. This argument can be reduced to a matter of semantics: the Buddha taught the existence of *dharma* (divine law) which governs all creation. His teachings all point to an eternal reality, which, although it lacks the anthropomorphic aspects of Western theism, is a creative force that is easily identified with God.

BUDDHISM TEACHES that everything in the universe is in a constant state of flux. Craving and clinging to permanence is the inevitable cause of sorrow. Salvation is found by the gradual loss of self-concern, until it

results in *nirvāṇa* (the "blowing-out" of the self). Fundamental is the doctrine of the four noble truths: 1) life is inevitably sorrowful, 2) sorrow is due to craving, 3) sorrow can be stopped only by cessation of desire, and 4) this can be accomplished only by disciplined conduct and meditation.

Not even the Soul has abiding personality; it too is transient. The station of the Soul is altered according to its *karma* (accumulation of good or bad deeds) and is eternally reborn in a station that befits its past lives. The cycle of rebirth can be stopped only by attaining *nirvāṇa* or extinction. This is done first by adopting right views about the nature of existence, then by careful moral discipline, and finally by prolonged meditation.

Nirvāṇa is the total annihilation of the Self, but it is not thought of in negative terms. Rather *nirvāṇa* is a transcendent state beyond comprehension in which the illusion of individuality is apparent. This state is not fundamentally different from the supreme bliss described by Hindu saints, Muslim *ṣūfīs*, or Christian mystics. The state is inexpressible, however; it can only be experienced, never communicated—or, as Bahá'u'lláh said, there are regions into which the pen will not move.

The later *Mahāyāna* schools, in attempting to describe reality, postulate that *śūnyatā* (the Void or emptiness) is all that exists. The Void, again, is not negative in the sense of an absence of something, but rather it is the only abiding reality and being—it is one with truth, *nirvāṇa*, and the Buddha Himself. The qualities of the Void which are manifest in existence are called *tathatā* (translatable only as "suchness"). The Void is essentially identical with the emptiness that so troubles Western existentialist philosophers. The difference, of course, lies in the fact that Buddhists look on the Void with joy, the existentialists with despair.

One apparent difference between Eastern and Western religions is their relative emphasis on ethics and metaphysics. Almost without exception, Western religions place

2. Confucianism is the most "Western" of the Eastern religions. Indeed, some scholars think it is not a religion at all, but rather just a system of ethics. Although it lacks the metaphysical aspect of religion (at least in its initial stages), it fulfills the social function of a religion. Since it theoretically allows exceptions to its laws, and since it was born in China, I include it among the Eastern religions.
3. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Modern Library, 1962), p. 184.

the primary emphasis on ethics, i.e., the individual's relation to society, while metaphysics, the individual's relationship to God or the Cosmos, is of secondary importance. The essence of Judaism, for example, is found in the Ten Commandments; the essence of Christianity in the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount. Metaphysics has little place in the original teachings of either Faith. Eastern religions, with the exception of Confucianism, tend to place a higher value on metaphysics. It may be argued that the Buddha Himself rejected metaphysical speculation; nevertheless, Buddhism—and especially Mahāyāna—abounds in it.

A second difference lies in the degree of social control demanded by the religion. Western religions are notably more authoritarian than their Eastern counterparts, a fact which has usually given rise to a greater degree of tolerance among the latter. Although the Buddhist monk is subject to the discipline of his superior, the follower who has attained *nirvāṇa* is subject to no authority other than internal authority. He is free of concern for transgression; not even the teachings of the Buddha bind him any longer. In medieval Roman Catholicism, on the other hand, every Christian, saint or sinner, was subject to the authority of the Pope. In medieval Islām the *ṣūfis*, no matter how great their state of enlightenment, were still bound by the law of the *Sharī'ah*. At their greatest St. Francis and al-Ghazālī were still lesser men than Christ or Muḥammad. But there is nothing to stop a Buddhist saint from equaling or even surpassing the Buddha Himself.

Let us tentatively define a Western religion as one which emphasizes ethics above metaphysics and allows no exceptions to its laws. A Western religion, moreover, usually conceives of God as remote, unapproachable,

"wholly other," while Eastern religions tend to look for the Deity within the human Soul.

According to this definition, does the Bahá'í Faith qualify as a Western or an Eastern religion, or is it a meeting ground for the two traditions? Its historical roots lie among the Western religions, but this, in itself, does not answer the question. Speaking of unchanging religious truth, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

... each of the divine religions is separable into two divisions. One concerns the world of morality and the ethical training of human nature. It is directed to the advancement of the world of humanity in general; it reveals and inculcates the knowledge of God and makes possible the discovery of the verities of life. This is ideal and spiritual teaching, the essential quality of divine religion and not subject to change or transformation. . . . The second classification or division comprises social laws and regulations applicable to human conduct. This is not the essential spiritual quality of religion. It is subject to change and transformation according to the exigencies and requirements of time and place.⁴

It is instructive to compare 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assertion with the following selection from a Tibetan Buddhist text:

If the empty nature of the mind be realized, no longer is it necessary to listen to or to meditate upon religious teachings. If the unsulliable nature of the intellect be realized, no longer is it necessary to seek absolution of one's sins. Nor is absolution necessary for one who abideth in the State of Mental Quiescence.⁵

Buddhism and Hinduism share a belief in reincarnation as part of their doctrine. This doctrine of metempsychosis is one of the major stumbling blocks to their reconciliation with Western religions. Regarding the doctrine of reincarnation, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

Therefore reincarnation, which is the re-

4. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1966), p. 274.

5. W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines* (New York: Galaxy Books, 1967), p. 88.

peated appearance of the same spirit with its former essence and condition in this same world of appearance, is impossible and unrealisable.⁶

Is reincarnation a basic doctrine of the two greatest Eastern religions—one on which there can be no compromise? The Buddhist scholar, Alan Watts, thinks not:

Many Buddhists understand the Round of birth-and-death quite literally as a process of reincarnation, wherein the *karma* which shapes the individual does so again and again in life after life until, through insight and awakening, it is laid to rest. But in Zen, and in other schools of the Mahayana, it is often taken in a more figurative way, as that the process of rebirth is from moment to moment, so that one is being reborn so long as one identifies himself with a continuing ego which reincarnates itself afresh at each moment of time. Thus the validity and interest of the doctrine does not require acceptance of a special theory of survival.⁷

This view is supported by the *Theravāda* scriptures:

"Reverend Nāgasena," said the King, "is it true that nothing transmigrates, and yet there is rebirth?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"How can this be? . . . Give me an illustration."

"Suppose, your Majesty, a man lights one lamp from another—does the one lamp transmigrate to the other?"

"No, your Reverence."

"So there is rebirth without anything

transmigrating!"⁸

(*The Questions of King Menander*)

The apparent differences between Eastern and Western religions can be summed up by comparing the purported last instructions of the Buddha with one of the Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh:

The Buddha:

So, Ānanda, you must be your own lamps, be your own refuges. Take refuge in nothing outside yourselves. Hold firm to the truth as a lamp and a refuge, and do not look for refuge to anything besides yourselves. A monk becomes his own lamp and refuge by continually looking on his body, feelings, perceptions, moods, and ideas in such a manner that he conquers the cravings and depressions of ordinary men and is always strenuous, self-possessed, and collected in mind. Whoever among my monks does this, either now or when I am dead, if he is anxious to learn, will reach the summit.⁹

(*Dīgha Nikāya*)

Bahá'u'lláh:

O SON OF SPIRIT! There is no peace for thee save by renouncing thyself and turning unto Me, for it behoveth thee to glory in My name, not in thine own; to put thy trust in Me and not in thyself, since I desire to be loved alone and above all that is.¹⁰

Can these be reconciled? Yes. The Buddha directs his disciples to look within for guidance, while Bahá'u'lláh counsels us to renounce ourselves and cling to the Absolute. In reality their advice is the same. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*Thou art My stronghold; enter therein that thou mayest abide in safety. My love is in thee, know it, that thou mayest find Me near unto thee. . . . Thou art My lamp and My light is in thee. Get thou from it thy radiance and seek none other than Me.*¹¹

Thus we are to approach the Absolute by means of a paradox, renouncing the ego ("the cravings and depressions of ordinary

6. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1964), p. 326.

7. Alan W. Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage, 1957), p. 49.

8. DeBary, p. 106.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

10. *Bahá'í World Faith*, pp. 156-57.

11. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1954), p. 6.



men") while obtaining our light from the lamp of Truth within us. *Nirvāṇa*, the extinction of self which may occur in life, is also the goal of the follower of Bahá'u'lláh: ". . . *that thou mayest die in Me and I may eternally live in thee.*"¹²

Here we may dispose of one of the crucial differences—the internal versus the external Truth. The dichotomy is false; they are one. What about the difference in emphasis on ethics and metaphysics? Again, it is only a semantical difficulty. Only in theory do the Eastern religions assign ethics a lesser degree of importance. In reality, the saint or the enlightened man cannot help behaving with compassion toward his fellow creatures. His motivation is internal, but it is binding. Hence, the Buddhist scriptures stress the moral qualities that a monk must possess—moral qualities which are usually more demanding than those required by the Western religions. Although enlightenment is of primary importance, and ethics secondary, they go hand in hand and are actually inseparable. The dichotomy between ethics and metaphysics, then, is also false—they are one. We must not conclude from this that those with no interest in metaphysics cannot be ethical—atheists, for instance. All ethical systems are internally, therefore metaphysically, motivated, whether or not one chooses to call the motivation God.

One crucial difference remains—the question of social control. This is a more difficult question to resolve, and here the difference between the Eastern outlook and the Western appears to be more real than apparent. As we have seen, in Western religions every believer, without exception, is subject to the law of the prophet, but this is not true of Eastern religions. The reason lies in the Western view of the prophet as qualitatively different from the rest of mankind—a Being especially favored by God and hence unapproachable, or, in Christianity, one with God Himself. But to the Oriental the prophet is

only quantitatively different from other men; hence all men are potentially divine. To the Buddhist, the Buddha is not the infallible incarnation of God's Truth, but rather only the most illustrious of a long line of enlightened men. In Islām, Judaism, and Catholic Christianity, the individual conscience must submit to the law of the prophet or the will of the Church; in the Eastern religions the ultimate authority is internal.

The only way to resolve this difference is to consider the society in which a religion is born. The societies which gave birth to Buddhism and Hinduism were extremely heterogeneous, even more so than they are today. If a religion had arisen which demanded submission to a single religious authority, it would almost certainly have failed. Hinduism, to be sure, demanded submission to the brahmin caste, but mobility and heterodoxy were allowed to a far greater extent in ancient India than most people suppose. The ancient Jews, or the Arabs of the seventh century A.D. for that matter, were a far more homogeneous society; therefore it was possible (and indeed advantageous) for them to submit to a single religious authority—Moses or Muḥammad.

Societies were relatively isolated from each other in the ancient world; hence some could allow themselves the luxury of having no external religious authority. Today our world is so tightly knit, however, that the smallest social shock reverberates throughout the globe. The need for unity is urgent, and unity of Faith is not possible without spiritual authority. The luxury of an autonomous conscience can no longer be afforded.

AN ORIENTAL, then, *can* accept the Bahá'í Faith without rejecting the essential philosophy behind his own religious tradition. Bahá'u'lláh places more emphasis on social teachings than did the Buddha, but there is no evidence of any contradiction between the essential teachings of the Buddha and those of Bahá'u'lláh. Western religions have not been notably successful in the East, since they

12. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

usually demand a rejection of tradition from the convert. The Bahá'í Faith, however, offers to the Oriental more freedom than the Western religions. Except for the few laws binding upon all Bahá'ís, the Oriental is free, even encouraged, to revere his own culture and follow his own customs. The validity of his former religion is not denied. In this sense the Bahá'í Faith is neither a Western nor an Eastern religion but rather a point of convergence.

Moreover, the Buddhist is able to turn to the Bahá'í Faith as the fulfillment of his beliefs. Buddhism, like many other religions, has an apocalyptic tradition and expects the return of its Founder, although there is evidence that this concept arose much later than the Buddha's lifetime and is not attributable to him. The *Mahāyāna* scriptures abound in references to the *Maitreya*, the Buddha of the Future, the Expected One. Some *Mahāyāna* sects regard this return as only of the spirit of the Buddha, not the actual physical presence of *Śākyamuni*, the Historical Buddha, since he attained *nirvāṇa* and is therefore lost to us. This makes it easier for many Buddhists to accept the appearance of the *Maitreya* in circumstances other than those which are traditional.

Bahá'ís are familiar with the claims of Bahá'u'lláh to be the return of the spirit of Christ and Muḥammad. But few Bahá'ís in the Western world understand in what sense Bahá'u'lláh may also be seen as the *Maitreya*. The Buddhist canon yields no specific predictions that might be interpreted as referring to Bahá'u'lláh, as do Biblical references or Muslim traditions. Some of the references to the *Maitreya* are obviously allegorical, even fantastic. Witness the following scripture in which the *Maitreya* is expected some thirty thousand years after the death of the historical Buddha:

His body is eighty cubits high, and twenty cubits broad. He will have a retinue of 84,000 persons, whom he will instruct in the mantras . . . For 60,000 years Maitreya, the best of men, will preach the true Dharma, which is compassionate towards all living beings. And when he has disciplined in his true Dharma hundreds and hundreds of millions of living beings, then that leader will at last enter Nirvana. And after the great sage has entered Nirvana, his true Dharma still endures for another ten thousand years.¹³

I have, however, found one Buddhist tradition that suggests that the age in which we live will be the beginning of a regeneration of the human spirit. The Japanese Buddhist monk Nichiren (1222-1282) preached apocalyptic ideas based on historical cycles drawn from Chinese Buddhism. According to Chinese chronology, the death of the Buddha occurred in 947 B.C. His death was followed, according to Nichiren, by the millennium of the "true law." About the time of the rise of Christianity, the second millennium of the "image" law began. Historically this corresponds with the rise of *Mahāyāna*, which places great emphasis on approaching Buddhahood through the Buddha's images, the *bodhisattvas*. According to Nichiren the last phase, the "destruction of the law," began about 1000 A.D. with the rise of Tantrism, the form of Buddhism concerned with magic and spells. This cycle, too, lasts a thousand years, and so a new era is at hand—an era characterized by Nichiren as a return to the "true law." Nichiren saw this era as a time when a holy shrine will become the center of the world, and a *maṇḍala* (a religious symbol) will regenerate the human spirit. Nichiren's apocalypse survives in the teachings of Soka Gokkai, a religion which is currently growing rapidly in Japan.¹⁴

Bahá'u'lláh, then, may be accepted as the *Maitreya* awaited by the Buddhists, in that He is the "Bringer of a New Law," "One who Brings Peace," and "One who Enlightens and Unites the World."

13. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures* (New York: Penguin, 1959), pp. 240-41.

14. Harry Thomsen, *The New Religions of Japan* (Rutland, Vt.: Chas. E. Tuttle Co., 1963), p. 92.