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CONTENTS

I. ARTICLES

1. The Buddhist Path to Liberation: An Analysis of the Listing of Stages, by *Rod Bucknell* 7
2. Temporary Ordination in Sri Lanka, by *Richard Gombrich* 41
3. The Symbolism of the Early Stūpa, by *Peter Harvey* 67
4. Reason as the Prime Principle in Tsong kha pa's Delineation of Deity Yoga as the Demarcation Between Sūtra and Tantra, by *Jeffrey Hopkins* 95
5. Buddhism and Belief in Ātma, by *Y. Krishan* 117
6. Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1984), by *Luciano Petech* 137
7. Kokan Shiren and Musō Soseki: "Chineseness" vs. "Japaneseness" in Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Japan, by *David Pollack* 143
8. The *Rasāvahinī* and the *Sahassavatthu*: A Comparison, by *Telwatte Rahula* 169
9. A Study of the Theories of *Yāvad-bhāvikatā* and *Yathāvad-bhāvikatā* in the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, by *Ah-yueh Yeh* 185

II. BOOK REVIEWS

1. *Alone With Others: An Existential Approach to Buddhism*, by Stephen Batchelor; *The Way of Siddhartha: A Life of the Buddha*, by David J. and Indrani Kalupahana (reviewed by Roger Jackson) 208
2. *The Buddha*, by Michael Carrithers (reviewed by Paul Griffiths) 216

3. *Buddhist and Western Psychology*, edited by Nathan Katz
(reviewed by Paul Griffiths) 219
4. *A Lamp for the Path and Commentary*, by Atiśa, trans-
lated and annotated by Richard Sherburne
(reviewed by José Cabezón) 224
5. *Religious Festivals in South India and Sri Lanka*, edited
and prefaced by Guy R. Welbon and Glenn E.
Yocum (reviewed by Peter Claus) 226

III. NOTES AND NEWS

1. 7th Conference of the International Association of
Buddhist Studies 230
 2. L.M. Joshi: A Brief Communication 232
 3. I.A.B.S., Inc. Treasurer's Report 233
- OBITUARY
- John Brough (1917–1984) 236
- Contributors 239

Book Reviews

Alone with Others: An Existential Approach to Buddhism, by Stephen Batchelor; Foreword by John Blofeld. New York: Grove Press, 1983. 143 pages. Bibliography, Glossary.

The Way of Siddhartha: A Life of the Buddha, by David J. and Indrani Kalupahana. Boulder & London: Shambhala, 1982. 238 pages.

Like the inheritors of other religious traditions, contemporary Buddhists have been forced to rethink deeply-rooted metaphysical and mythological assumptions in the light of the naturalistic conclusions that seem to emerge from the investigations of the dominant world-view of the modern world, that of science. Buddhist metaphysical assumptions, such as the reality of past and future lives, the existence of a universal moral principle such as karma and the possibility of a human being's eliminating all negative mental states, are at considerable variance with the conclusions of many modern people, who—for reasons well or ill-considered—tend to be skeptical or agnostic on such matters (not to mention on the very viability of metaphysics). Buddhist mythology, with its largely hagiographical approach to human lives and its cosmological vision of countless and variously populated worlds and realms, tends—to generations raised on form-and-redaction-criticism, psychobiography and the cold eye of the telescope—to seem, quite often, like an exercise in science fiction.

Faced with their tradition's incongruence with "modernity" at a number of (though not all) crucial points, Buddhists, both Asian and Western, have adopted a variety of different strategies. These have ranged from a reassertion of tradition, metaphysics and mythology intact, on the grounds that Buddhism actually has a subtler and more penetrating view of reality than science ever can provide; to claims that Buddhism—especially in its "original" form—actually is the scientific world-view and method (or democracy, or humanistic psychology, or any other modern shibboleth) in religious disguise. It is *between* the claim that Buddhism utterly transcends the problems posed by modernity and the claim that it is simply pre-modern modernity that most thoughtful contemporary Buddhists try to find their

ground. The ground, however, is a difficult one to locate, for the question of how to view traditional religious metaphysics and mythology in the light of modernity is not easily answered: the extremes of dogmatic assertion or explicit or implicit rejection are hard to avoid. (The last century of Christian theology, I think, bears the most eloquent witness to this fact, and Buddhists thinking through their own faith would do well to consider the various strategies adopted by Christians, who have been facing the problems posed by modernity longer, and with greater collective seriousness, than have Buddhists.)

The two books under review, one an "existential approach to Buddhism" and the other a "de-mythologized" novelization of the Buddha's life, are written by eminently "modern" Buddhists: the former by an Englishman who has become a bhikṣu in the Tibetan tradition, the latter by a Sri Lankan scholar (collaborating with his wife) who is conversant with Western thought and teaches at an American University. Both works are re-presentations of aspects of the Buddhist tradition at least partially in the light of "modern" perspectives, and each points up both the promise and some of the problems inherent in such an enterprise.

Stephen Batchelor is not the first to apply to Buddhism the language and concepts of existentialism—he explicitly acknowledges Herbert V. Guenther as a forerunner—but he is the first, to my mind, to have done so in a really clear and compelling manner. The basic premise of *Alone with Others* is that "The survival of Buddhism depends upon the experiential rediscovery of its inmost spark, and the articulation of that experience in a language that speaks directly to the hopes and fears of present-day man" (p. 129). For Batchelor, the language that must be used is not that of one or the other of the Buddhist traditions, nor that of the detached scholar, but that derived from existentialism: "Today religious answers need to be freshly formulated *from below*, i.e., in the light of the present existential situation; they can no longer be imposed *from above* as though they were self-sufficient universal truths in themselves" (p. 43). Existentialism, for Batchelor, is not simply one among many Western philosophies, but a way of analyzing the human condition that goes to the very foundations of that condition, and thereby cuts across cultural boundaries. It is not just another theory *about* existence, but, rather, the analysis of existence that helps to formulate the categories in which theories about existence must be couched.

In his application of existentialism to Buddhism, Batchelor draws freely from Marcel and Heidegger, as well as from such existentially-oriented theologians as Tillich and Macquarrie. He begins his analysis by delineating "the two most fundamental dimensions of our existence: those of having and being . . . In terms of having, life is experienced as a horizontal expanse precipitating towards ever receding horizons; in terms of being, life is felt in its vertical depths as awesome, foreboding and silently mysterious" (p. 25). Nowadays, Batchelor claims, secular and material values are dominant, so "the urge to *have* creates an ever widening gulf from the awareness of who and what we *are*" (ibid.). Therefore, "The primary purpose of Dharma is to re-establish a consciousness of being" (ibid.). Batchelor reviews the legend of the Buddha's life and finds in it a paradigm of the necessary human shift from the having-mode to the being-mode, "a direct challenge to each one of us to respond to the deepest questions of our existence in fully actualizing the potentials of our innermost being" (p. 38).

After discussing the historically conditioned nature of Buddhism, the inadequacy of any one Buddhist school to the task of "rediscovering" the essential Buddhist message, and the likelihood that existentialism provides perhaps the only "point of encounter where Buddhism and modern man can authentically encounter one another while still retaining their individual distinctness" (p. 53). Batchelor resumes his existential analysis, presenting the two basic categories that guide his main discussion, being-alone and being-with: "These fundamental elements are revealed in the paradoxical characteristic of existence of always finding ourselves inescapably *alone* and at the same time inescapably together in a world *with* others" (p. 58). Being-alone and being-with simply describe the way we, as human beings, *are*; the way in which we respond to our individual and social natures will vary, but two basic options are open, inauthenticity and authenticity: "In inauthentic being-alone we flee from facing the totality of our existence [and from the facts of impermanence and death] through absorption in the particular entities of the world; in inauthentic being-with we ignore our essential relatedness to others through indulging in self-concern" (p. 91).

"In both these cases," Batchelor says, "the turning point from inauthenticity to authenticity is comprised of an experiential recognition and acceptance of the fundamental character of our being which we have been evading and distorting" (ibid.), i.e., impermanence and death, our responsibility to others and,

most broadly, our potential authentically to “be” fully human. In the realm of being-alone, the turning point comes when one recognizes one’s own evasions and distortions of one’s actual individual situation and takes upon oneself responsibility for achieving the “optimum mode of being.” In Buddhism, especially in the Mahāyāna idiom out of which Batchelor is working, the optimum mode is Buddhahood, and the turn toward Buddhahood and the responsibilities it entails is, of course, taking refuge. In the realm of being-with, the turning point comes when one rejects selfishness and takes upon oneself responsibility for assisting others in *their* conscious or unconscious quests for authenticity. In Buddhist terms, one develops equanimity, active concern (love and compassion) and active commitment (*bodhicitta*) toward others, based on the abandonment of self-concern. (Sanskrit *ātmagraha*, Tibetan *bdag ’dzin*.)

Batchelor next analyzes the primary ways of effecting authentic being-alone and being-with. Authentic being-alone is effected primarily through wisdom, based on the recognition that “psychological disturbance increases in direct proportion to conceptual distortion” (p. 100). The three primary conceptual distortions are three of the traditional *viparyāsas*: “the apprehension of what is impermanent to be permanent; the apprehension of what is unsatisfactory to be satisfactory; and the apprehension of what is without self-identity to have a self-identity” (p. 101). The latter is the most fundamental, and it is only when we realize that our instinctive, anxiety-producing view of the world as divided into enclosed, independent entities is false that we engender wisdom, and thus the beginning of the end of anxiety.

Authentic being-with entails “ethics,” what is usually described as the *upāya* side of the Buddhist path, especially the perfections of giving, moral discipline, patience and enthusiasm, which serve, respectively, to alter our attitude from “centripetal” miserliness to “centrifugal” generosity, to restrain ourselves and act in an appropriate fashion, to combat anger, and to pursue zealously what is wholesome. Batchelor emphasizes that, since being-alone and being-with are absolutely fundamental to our being, the Mahāyāna is quite appropriate in its insistence that both *prajña* and *upāya* be developed, for it is only if we “perfect” ourselves both individually and in relation to others that we may be said to have attained the optimum mode of being.

The optimum mode of being for the Buddhist tradition, as noted above, is Buddhahood, which, in Mahāyāna formulations, is considered to represent both the fulfilment of one’s own aims

(*svārtha*) and the fulfilment of the aims of others (*anyārtha*). The symbols of this fulfilment are the “bodies” of the Buddha, the dharma-body and the form-body. When the latter is divided into sambhogakāya and nirmāṇakāya, one can analyse the bodies existentially as follows: “The silent depths of personal experience (dharma-body) find progressive expression through ideas and words (enjoyment-body) and are finally embodied in actions (emanation-body)” (p.119). Batchelor is quite emphatic in his insistence that “The true spirit of Buddhism is that of a humanized religion” (p. 124), and, thus, that the Buddha must be seen not as an ideal being with powers so far beyond the human as to be unapproachable, but, quite simply, as a man who attained and expressed the optimal mode of being of which humans are capable.

Overall, I find Batchelor’s analysis clear and compelling, particularly within the limits he has set to his discussion. His analysis of the way in which Buddhism both poses and answers existential questions is convincing, and his plea for a return to Buddhism’s experiential foundations is eloquent. *Alone With Others* is, simply, one of the best discussions of the existential import of Buddhism that I have read; it bears reading by both Buddhists and interested non-Buddhists alike, especially those who grapple with existential problems in existential terms.

I do have some reservations, though. In the first place, Batchelor has—deliberately—left out of his discussion a number of central Buddhist doctrines, including karma and rebirth, and he has consistently downplayed the metaphysical implications of the doctrines he *has* discussed. Granted, Buddhism will be utterly hollow if its existential implications are ignored, but the fact that it has important existential implications does not mean that its metaphysics are not vital to it, too. Indeed, its metaphysics, including the doctrines of karma and rebirth, as well as the ideal of a total elimination of all negative mental states, have been central to most Buddhists at most times, and have helped to provide much of the context of Buddhism’s “existential” significance. Articulation or vindication of Buddhist metaphysical and cosmological doctrines may be philosophically problematic, but it need not be seen as a hopeless task, to be abandoned with a shrug and the contention that the existential aspect is vital and the rest superfluous. I do not think that Batchelor is claiming this, but it is an implication that might be drawn from his work by the unwary or the metaphysically weary.

Second, I wonder sometimes why Buddhists so often feel compelled to frame their discussions *primarily* in terms derived

from one or the other Western perspective, i.e., by beginning with the Western perspective and then showing how Buddhism "fits" with it. The sounder approach, it seems to me, is for Buddhists to explore their own tradition as it has come down to them, drawing insights and lessons (and criticisms) from the West where possible. I realize that this often is difficult for those whose very cultural background is "modernism," but the extra effort required to meet traditional Buddhism at least halfway seems worthwhile, given that (a) Western viewpoints—including existentialism—entail their own metaphysical presuppositions, and (b) aspects of the modern worldview are at least as philosophically problematic as those of traditional Buddhism. Again, I think Batchelor is less guilty on this score than many (indeed, he actually derives some of his existential categories from Buddhism), but one hopes that he and other Buddhists will continue seriously to attempt to interpret the world primarily through Buddhist categories, and only secondarily through non-Buddhist categories that may help them to understand Buddhism.

David J. and Indrani Kalupahana's *The Way of Siddhartha* is an attempt to present in novel form a "demythologized" life of the Buddha, one derived entirely from the early *nikāya/āgama* literature, without any reliance on such later, more hagiographical sources as the *Jātakas*, *Mahāvastu* and *Lalitavistara*. The scholarly pioneer of this sort of approach is Edward J. Thomas, in *The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History* (followed more recently by André Bareau), but the Kalupahanas make explicit acknowledgement of two more recent influences: Martin Wickremasinghe's Sinhala novel, *Bavataranaya*, and Bhikku Nāṇamoli's chronological presentation of translations of relevant biographical material from the *nikāyas*, *The Life of the Buddha. Bavatarayana* contained a number of "inaccuracies" and "glaring misinterpretations," however, so the Kalupahanas have attempted to combine Wickremasinghe's imaginative format with Nāṇamoli's accuracy.

The result is a book that is both entertaining and informative. Synthesizing a vast amount of canonical material, the Kalupahanas present a version of the Buddha's life whose chronology is at least as convincing as that of any other. The chronology, of course, is most problematic for the years of the Buddha's "ministry," and the Kalupahanas frankly admit that no sequence can ever be established with certainty; they merely have presented a sequence that is plausible and representative of the geographical area covered by the Buddha.

The Buddha presented by the Kalupahanas is earnest and

thoughtful, growing dissatisfied with the world of his day for a combination of social and philosophical reasons. He agonizes over his decision to renounce society, even discussing it with his wife. Finally, after years of travail, he overcomes ignorance and various temptations, and gains insight into the nature of reality. After his enlightenment, he launches a forty-five-year career of itinerant teaching, proclaiming throughout northeast India a Dharma that is clear, coherent, comprehensive and—perhaps most uniquely and importantly—empirically verifiable. The Kalupahanas' Buddha is an attractive figure: reasonable, kind, skillful, acute. This is not surprising; this is the view of the Buddha we get in virtually all texts that describe him. Since the outlines of the Buddha's character and life are well known, and the Kalupahanas generally adhere to them, I will not rehearse them here, but simply indicate what I think the book's strong and weak points to be.

The book's single greatest strength is its integration into a novelistic format of a considerable amount of philosophical material. The Kalupahanas have skillfully woven in with their account of the Buddha's wanderings and meetings most of the important philosophical points made in the *suttas*, from such obvious items as the four noble truths, the three marks of existence and the twelve links of dependent origination, to more specialized matters, such as the question of the Buddha's omniscience, the various types of knowledge, and Buddhist theories of truth, as well as the Buddha's views on social classes, private property and the proper conduct of government. In their choice of material for inclusion, the Kalupahanas follow closely in the tradition inaugurated by the late K.N. Jayatilleke, who portrayed the Buddha as a proto-empiricist, as concerned with the problem of verification as a modern logical positivist, and differing from the logical positivist only in his admission of E.S.P. as a legitimate source of knowledge (which, in turn, revealed the reality of karma, rebirth and *nirvāṇa*). This view of the Buddha's philosophical approach is not uncontested, but it is at least as compelling as alternative explanations, and certainly is a version of the Buddha to which Westerners are likely to respond easily.

My criticisms concern two matters: the Kalupahanas' version of the Buddha's attitude toward women and their expurgation from their life of the Buddha of virtually all mythological references. The Kalupahanas generally are careful in their endnotes to indicate the textual sources from which they have derived a particular account, yet very little of their version of the

Buddha's encounters with women (especially his wife) is thus well-documented. Their Buddha, quite simply, is a feminist; affectionate and considerate toward his independent wife, Yasodhara, to the point of discussing with her his wish to renounce the world; motivated, in his renunciation, by a concern for the long-term benefit of his wife and child; and reluctant to institute a *bhikkunī* sangha only because he fears the social disruption such a move might entail. That the Buddha had some egalitarian attitudes can be documented; that he specifically and self-consciously extended that attitude toward women is, I think, questionable. One would like to think that the Buddha saw through the sexism of his day as acutely as he saw through philosophical confusions, but there simply is too little evidence: the best we can probably conclude from the texts is that he was ambivalent toward women, ambivalence itself marking a considerable advance over the attitudes of most of his contemporaries. I respect the Kalupahanas' concern with excising "later" Buddhist elements from the Buddha's story; I wish they had been as careful to keep out of their account 20th-century values that it would be reassuring to believe the Buddha held, but that we have no evidence he actually did hold.

Further, while I *do* understand and appreciate the Kalupahanas' attempts at demythologization, I am not entirely comfortable with them. What is most striking, I think, is the elimination of virtually all mythological patterns from the Buddha's thought. No Māra attempts to tempt or terrify the Buddha on the eve of his enlightenment, no Brahmā Sahampati dissuades him from remaining in the bliss of nirvāṇa. It is true that there is no canonical evidence for the story of Māra's assault under the bodhi tree (although *Sutta-nipata* iii, 2 is suggestive), but Māra is a factor in many canonical texts, while Brahmā Sahampati clearly has a role in canonical accounts of the Buddha's decision to teach. What is important here is not so much particular incidents as the more general problem raised by attempts at de-mythologization: *we* may live in a religiously de-mythologized world, but that does not mean that the Buddha—for all his clarity and rationality—did. Indeed, to the degree that such beings as Māra and Brahmā were accepted parts of the ancient Indian landscape, there is no reason to think that the Buddha might not, in fact, have experienced his conflicts and resolutions in part through "encounters" with them. Again, it is one thing to eliminate "mythological" elements added by later traditions of Buddhist hagiography; it is another to eliminate mythological elements that even the earliest texts indicate may have formed part

of the mental furniture of the Buddha and his contemporaries. Not only is there no reason to think that the Buddha had totally dispensed with the mythology of his day, but there is no reason why he *should* have: mythology is an appropriate way of both experiencing and symbolizing complex human dramas of the sort undergone by the Buddha.

These objections aside, *The Way of Siddhartha* is an engaging and rich exposition of the Buddha's life, one that might, with a few caveats, profitably be used as an introduction to early Buddhism. Indeed, though I think that *Alone With Others* and *The Way of Siddhartha* raise—without answering—important questions about how contemporary Buddhists do or might interpret their metaphysical and mythological assumptions, they are clear and articulate works, whose authors deserve our thanks—both for enriching our understanding of the Buddhist tradition and for forcing us to think seriously about how the tradition best can be understood by people living in the midst of that land of no-land, “Modernity.”

Roger Jackson

The Buddha, by Michael Carrithers. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983. pp. x + 102. Map, Bibliography & Index. Softcover \$3.95.

Michael Carrithers' short study of the Buddha's life and thought is one of the recent volumes in Oxford University Press's generally well received *Past Masters* series. The series aims to make available to the general reader brief non-technical introductions to the life and thought of significant individuals in humanity's past. It is an important series in two respects: first because it is less culturally blinkered than other such efforts, taking some account of the contributions of non-Western thinkers to the intellectual development of mankind, and second because it finds a place in the intellectual mainstream for those who have generally been considered “religious” thinkers and therefore banished to the intellectual borderlands. The series already has volumes on Jesus, Muhammad and Confucius and this volume on the Buddha is a welcome addition.

Dr. Carrithers says that he intends to try and show what the Buddha has to offer to contemporary Western thought and cul-