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Tasks Ahead: Presidential Address Given on the Occasion of the Third Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Winnipeg, Canada, August 1980

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The term religion is one of the many popular words which are assumed to be intelligible in common parlance, but which on closer inspection fail to convey an unambiguous meaning, and then become a source of constant altercation and frustration. Attempts at defining what the word is thought to stand for have either been too narrow or too broad; they also have been either vague or a medley of mistaken notions, all of which defeated the very purpose of defintion. The failure has been due mostly to the fact that one did not distinguish between defining and relational characteristics and that one also overlooked the fact that it is we as living beings who give meaning to the words we use, enough to suit our practical purposes, and sometimes hardly even that, because otherwise words would be mere noises or pen-marks. Thus, in using a word, we actually do two things:

(i) we stipulate a meaning in the context of concrete circumstances—"this is how I am going to use the word and this is what I am going to mean by it";
(ii) we report what those who use a language already mean by a word in this language.

But because of the open texture of language and because of the accompanying vagueness of most of the words coined and used to suit the occasion, which itself varies from moment to moment, we are constantly engaged in stipulation, even if most of the time we do not notice it. What we are doing is that we constantly break an old rigidity and let new structuration emerge. The emphasis therefore is on a dynamic "how" and not on a static "what." Maybe religion refers to such a dynamic "how" and therefore defies any attempt at reducing it to a static "what." It is only most recently that the nature of natural dynamics, the logical supremacy of process over structure, has been recognized. But this does not mean that reductionism is a matter of the past. It still reigns supreme, particularly in the humanities.

The aim of reductionism is to reduce all and everything to *one* level of explanation—the rational one or the mechanistic one. It may be seen as moving "downward" into materialism—note how in this proposition the term downward is used pejoratively—or as moving "upward" into a life of the spirit (whatever that word may mean) which remains without consequences—note how here the term upward is used approvingly and extollingly. But let it be stated right away that the presuppositions of any reductionism are obsolete, even if the thought models that evolved from it have been and still are useful in restricted areas. These presuppositions are the Cartesian dichotomy of *res extensa* and *res cogitans,* absolutized in a dualism which separates body and mind, and Newtonian mechanism which, jointly with the speculations of Bacon and Locke, demands that all phenomena, including the mental, are to be studied and evaluated in quantitative terms. This attitude was summed up in Lord Rutherford's words, which are no longer valid even in the hard sciences, that "quality is poor quantification."

Mechanism, as one form of reductionism, represents a static view which is primarily interested in rigid structures which can easily be disassembled into their separate parts and pieces and which then also can easily be reassembled. And while mechanism allows for quantification, it does not allow for change, which implies quality. A mechanistic system is assumed to act in analogy to a Skinner-box, which determines the behaviour of its inmate(s) in every detail—perhaps the ultimate caricature of man's living reality, matched only by that intellectual bankruptcy which goes by the name of logical positivism. Mechanism is easily recognizable in the transfer method, misleadingly called translation, and in the amusing pastime of recon-

structing lost Sanskrit texts from their Tibetan translations. The dismal failure of such enterprises—the reconstructed text has little or no resemblance to the original text when it has eventually been found—does not deter the reductionist.[1] He can always take refuge in the slogan of objective scholarship, which has an almost unbelievable magical effect on the audience.[2]

Here we touch upon another feature of reductionism—the rational and, in the narrower sense, the logical. This feature focuses on an impersonal "it" which is supposed to be assessed objectively without the involvement of an outside observer. However, there is never an object without a subject. As a matter of fact, subject and object are co-constituted and, quite generally, an object becomes observable and assessable only through its interaction with the subject. With every action and every thought, with every observation and theory, we interfere with the object of our study and are ourselves changed. When a young man falls in love with a young girl, both are changed, as is the whole milieu in which they find themselves. The very fact that a person dealing with a text chooses from the various entries under a given term in a dictionary, reveals that person's subjectivism.[3] Of course, the objectivist does not like to be reminded of his subjectivism. Such a reminder is a blow to his presumed rationality and logicality. It exposes the fact that that person's neocortex, which is involved in the higher intellectual operations, is really not very much in control, that he is caught in the trap of the palaeomammalian brain, or limbic system, which decides which notion it is going to support emotionally (in his case the notion of objectivity) and in the trap of the R-complex, or reptilian brain, which allows only a single *idée fixe* (the notion of objectivity).[4] To clinch matters, the delight the objectivist takes in his alleged objectivism is not rational and logical either.

I have dealt somewhat at length with the thought-shrinking operation of reductionism because it determined the direction in which the study of such a phenomenon as Buddhism was to move, regardless of whether the material that was studied was in the Pali or Sanskrit language or whether it belonged to one or the other of the two major developments within the tradition: the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna. The relative simplicity of the statements in the Pāli Canon as well as the insistence on the thoroughly human character of that person who by virtue of a self-transcending experience became known as the "Awakened One" (*buddha*), led to the reduction of what

Buddhism—this term itself, like any other "ism," is a case of excessive abstraction, reflecting the mistaken notion that something which affects man can be considered in isolation from the attendant concrete circumstances in which man is a participant—wanted to convey, to a set of ratio-ethical maxims which, in the wake of a more or less unconscious muddle-headedness, were equated with laws and, by implication, with commands. The basic term *dharma* in its multi-leveled usage points to an order which excludes law, and with all its ethical overtones is a term for an evolutionary process, not for a static entity.[5] It was the orderliness of the process of growth —in terms of experience, the waking up from the nightmare of shrinking—that was pointed out, but not decreed. It is out of such a process-oriented view that, to give an example, Buddhism formulated its concern of being-with others in a world as a region of engagements, as "I take it upon myself to learn more about how to refrain from taking another living being's life." Here, ethics is a manifestation of awareness, an acceptance of responsibility through which there is participation in the growing complexity of life. The very words "I take it upon myself" already suggest a whole new way of looking at the world; they announce personal spontaneous existence and, since the world in which we as human beings live is a humanly-constituted world, these words make us experience our humanity over again so that in this experience we create ourselves. By contrast, commandments, even if they are claimed to have been revealed and to be valid in an absolutistic sense, prescind from man's humanity; they remain opportunistic in merely allowing adaptation to a presumably pre-ordainted structure (a gigantic Skinner-box) and killing the creativity of the process we call life.

Turning to the relatively few Sanskrit texts that have survived the waves of destruction which swept the Indian sub-continent, it can easily be noted how reductionism followed two directions. First, inasmuch as the majority of these texts were of a nature which aroused association with topics seemingly belonging to that realm of human activity which is termed philosophy, the content of these texts was quickly forced into the mould of thought which was so enwrapped in itself that it could hardly notice anything but itself. Yet, condescendingly taking cognizance of the fact that there was something, this something was labelled and dismissed—every labelling is a dismissal from direct experiencing—as either pluralism or monism or idealism. This kind of conceptual-restrictive thinking gave an account of how

Western philosophical thinking has developed, but it did not help to understand Buddhist thinking, which implies a perceiving and understanding in a very specific, non-conceptual sense as a lighting-up, a consummate luminating-illuminating. Buddhist thought, therefore, cannot be dealt with in terms of the idealism developed by Kant or Hegel, who ended up with a universal concept generated by a universal consciousness. Needless to say, the other categories, such as pluralism and monism, have little significance either. They refer to static constructs, not to a dynamic process. Buddhist thought has always been process-oriented thinking—is it not stated over and over again in the original texts that Buddhism is a way, a going?[6]

The other direction in which reductionism went was the philological analysis of the propositions and the words that made up the propositions. It served a certain useful purpose in that it made a person learn a foreign language properly—not always, but most of the time—and in that it clarified the evolution of that particular language. What was not always realized was that in the Sanskrit language, substantives (nouns) have a verbal meaning—the dynamic coming-into-presence of what there seems to be statically given is the primary feature. The overall inadequacy of the linguistic, philological reductionism, however, lay in the fact that it failed to take into account that there are different realms and levels of discourse which determine the usage and, by implication, the meaning of words. In every moment of discourse, the concrete circumstance into which words are spoken,[7] a word initiates something—one gives the other person something to think about which is made possible by what the German philosopher Hans Lipps (1938) had called the "circle of the unexpressed" which surrounds every word. This feature the Indians had long, long ago recognized and was elaborated by Ānandavardhana (between 840 and 870) in his *dhvani* theory. If everything has already been said, there would be no point in saying anything anymore, and if all that is going to be said it but a repetition or duplication of something "definitive"—the "pure and authentic teaching" as decreed by the dogmatist—it would have nothing, absolutely nothing, to say and it would be a waste of time to engage in further quantification. The real horror comes when this philological reductionism is confused with or mistaken as a philosophical or religious meaning in the manner of a denotable thing,[8] for the result is dogmatism, the abrogation of intelligence and the repudiation of the quest for learning and understanding. Dogmatism is not concerned with carefully

weighing the inner meaning of word in a given context, but only with the perpetuation of obsolete notions.

Reductionism, which has ruled undisputedly in the Western world and still rules, though less undisputedly now, in the sciences and humanities, is not unknown in the Eastern and Buddhist traditions. I am not thinking so much of those representatives of these traditions who have chosen the Western medium for expression and believe they are doing their own tradition a service by repeating the notions which evolved in the Western world. Rather, I am thinking of the Mādhyamika presentation, to give only one example, with respect to one of the key terms, if not *the* key term, in Mahāyāna thought—*śūnyatā*. This term names an openness that cannot be limited by an unvarying and exhaustively specifiable mode of being. It imparts to each and every complex individual an openness and profundity inasmuch as, figuratively speaking, it is (dynamically, not statically) the concentration, though nowhere localized, of the infinitely rich potential of possible structures (*sarvākāravaropeta*), of qualities which will be transformed and deformed into quantities during the unfolding of this *śūnyatā*. This openness, misleadingly translated as emptiness or the Void, has been reduced to "pure negation," and it was this reduction that was insisted upon by the dGe lugs pa in Tibet, who present(ed) only one aspect of Buddhism. The proponent of this reductionist presentation, Tsong kha pa, has been severely criticized by most of the other representatives of Buddhism in Tibet.[9]

It is not without irony that the reinstatement of the human element, which is tantamount to a break with reductionism, was performed by the "hard sciences"—the famous Heisenberg principle (indeterminacy relation) was formulated at the microscopic level, the very small, on which the traditional Western reductionism was based. From this break soon followed a new understanding of the dynamics of natural systems, with the emphasis on becoming, the coming-into-presence, which means that even that which is, is an aspect of becoming, an occurrence of being.[10] This recognition of the human element has now been formulated at the level of the very large, as the anthropic principle,[11] which is widely accepted by cosmologists. This principle runs as follows: the fact that we observe the universe as it is is simply a reflection of our existence. All the different physical forces, electromagnetic, gravitational, nuclear, have played their part in our evolution. If gravitation had been slightly different, stars like the sun and planets like the earth would not have formed and we

would not be here. However, the very fact that we observe and are cognizant of the universe, implies that the universe of which we are an inseparable part, is intelligent—what we so far have called mind is not above or outside the universe, it is the self-organizing principle of the universe, ever active in the preparation for autopoietic and dissipative structures so that all organization in and of the universe is physical and psychic simultaneously.[12] This new vision, which finally has overcome the traditional dualism of body and mind and its attendant reductionism, is not so very new. In the *Saṃyuttanikāya*[13] it is already stated: *yo kho dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati, yo maṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati,* "He who sees *dhamma* sees me; he who sees me sees *dhamma.*" Here, *maṃ* (me) stands for the most profound and all-encompassing experience (the awakening) and *dhamma* stands for, as we would say, the content of the experience, as unlimited as the experience itself. But if one wants to have a comprehensible picture, one requires a conception of form—in the image of man the universe is then pictured and, if man is wise, he sees this picture male-female—*Kun tu bzang po yab yum,* as the Tibetan texts assert. So, the old Buddhist vision is not so very old as not to have any significance anymore in the modern world.

It can now safely be asserted that the prevailing reductionism in the field of Buddhist studies has done little to facilitate or even make possible an appropriate understanding of that which goes by the name of Buddhism, of the vital role it has played in man's shaping his existence as an opening-up, an awakening. Equally safely it can be asserted that a continued pursuance of reductionism in the study of Buddhism will also be of no avail. The reason is that reductionism disengages itself from experience, prescinds from the experiencer's existentiality, is oblivious of the source and ground from which the notions which organize experience have sprung, and becomes ever more engrossed in its constructs, which it fails to recognize as constructs. The time, therefore, has come to break this stranglehold and to allow Buddhism to speak of and for itself, to show its meaning by disclosing a world perspective in which the experiencer understands himself as well as the world in which he is lodged. Such an approach is hermeneutical in the best sense of the word. It does not mean to interpret a text in the light of some fashionable slogan, be this "objectivity," "relevance" or "authenticness"—such slogans merely highlight a regression into and the dominance of the R-complex or reptilian brain. Rather, it means to become aware of one's own

presence in all one's dealings with one's life-world and to enter into a genuine dialogue with whatever one encounters. A dialogue is not so much an oscillation between two poles nor is it an occasion in which the one uses the other as a sparring partner for self-aggrandisement. Rather it is a simultaneous vibrating of many levels; it is a creative process, so aptly expressed by the poet Hölderlin: ". . . poetically man dwells . . . ."[14] On the other hand, this becoming aware of one's presence is a first step in the direction of religion, which as a process, as *re-ligio*, implies a linking backward to the origin from which one's subjectivity is a first break-away. Such linking backwards to the origin is a "holomovement"[15] (a term coined by the physicist David Bohm, not by a person in the humanities) and as such is as much religion as it is philosophy and therapy in an ascending and yet mutually pervasive order. It is a reaching out beyond boundaries which is, admittedly, not an easy task. But as such a challenge Buddhism and its study make life worth living.

> *ato yāvad ete [vaktāraḥ pratipattāraś ca] sthāsyanti tāvad saddharma iti veditavyaṃ*
> Therefore let it be known that as long as these two [those who talk and those who realize] exist, Buddhism will continue.[16]

NOTES

1. See for instance the difference between the restored and the original versions of the *Nairātmyaparipṛcchā*, edited by Sujitkumar Mukhopadhyaya, Viśva-Bhārati Studies, Nr 4, 1931.

2. Or, he can blame the translator for misunderstanding the text, thus concealing his subjective feeling of superiority under the cloak of objectivity.

3. This is to put it very charitably. Too often, a person does not read beyond the first entry in a dictionary. If he or she did, the unpleasant task of making a decision would have to be tackled. This would then also reveal how much thought has gone into the possible solution of the problem posed by the text.

4. The idea of a "triune brain" has been developed by the American neurophysicist Paul D. Maclean. See his "A triune concept of the brain and behaviour" in T. Boag and D. Campbell, eds., *The Hincks Memorial Lectures*, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1973. For the wider implication of this useful concept see Erich Jantsch, *The Self-Organizing Universe: Scientific and Human Implications of the Emerging Paradigm of Evolution*, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980, pp. 165–169, 177–180.

5. The attempt to reduce what is intrinsically dynamic to something static is easily recognizable when people start talking about The Dharma—the definite article indicating a "something" and the first letter of the word *dharma* becoming a capital in order to warn everyone that the enquiry must not be carried any further. Contrary to

this Western-style reductionism, the Buddhist knew that the word *dharma* has many applications ("meanings"). Vasubandhu in his *Vyākhyayukti* (the Sanskrit original is lost and the Tibetan translation is obviously not studied) lists ten different usages! Vasubandhu's work is frequently quoted by Tibetan authors.

6. The emphasis has always been on the process of *going*. Thus, for instance, Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa, in his *Zab mo yang tig*, vol. 2, p. 436, defines *lam* (Skt. *mārga*, "way") by *bgrod par byed pa*, "to go" and by *'bras bu'i sar bgrod pa'i thabs* which in the psychological context in which it is used, signifies the organizing dynamics (*thabs*) in the evolutionary process moving in the direction of the level of values (*'bras bu'i sa*). Values are not strait-jackets; they are open-ended and multi-level intensities. The highly technical term *thabs* (Skt. *upāya*) deserves detailed investigation. The traditional rendering by "(skillful) means" merely reflects antiquated mechanistic thinking.

7. This phrase is taken from David E. Linge's Introductions (p. XXXII) to Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

8. As an example the rendering of the technical term *tathāgatagarbha* may serve. P. Oltramare and G. Tucci rendered this term as "embryo of Tathāgata"—a rendering which still has its followers; D. T. Suzuki and S. Levi rendered it by "womb of Tathāgata"—a rendering recently revived by D. Paul. Unless it is a mere matter of copying one's predecessors' mistaken notions, one is forced to assume that some powerful Freudian complex was and is at work, preventing the researchers from becoming alert to the fact that *garbha* at the end of a compound means "containing (within itself)." L. de la Vallée Poussin certainly deserves high praise for leaving this technical term untranslated, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of "bad" philology.

9. This reductionism, which extends to such other key-terms as *chos-nyid* (*dharmatā*), *bden gnyis* (*satyadvaya*), and *dbyer med* (*abhinna*), has been severely criticized by Kaḥthog-pa bSod nams rgyal mtshan, in his *Theg pa thams cad kyi shan 'byed nyi 'od rab gsal*, vol. 2, pp. 33 ff. Closest to the Buddhist conception of *śūnyatā* is the modern notion of a vacuum fluctuation or quantum field which is nowhere and everywhere and always bubbling with activity.

10. See Ilya Prigogine, *From Being to Becoming: Time and Complexity in the Physical Sciences*, San Francisco, W. H. Freeman and Company, 1980, pp. 73 ff.

11. See specifically Paul Davies, *Other Worlds: A Portrait of Nature in Rebellion, Space, Superspace and the Quantum Universe*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1980, pp. 142–161.

12. The term *autopoiesis* was coined by the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela and the notion was further developed in cooperation with Ricardo Uribe. See "Autopoiesis: the organization of living systems, its characterization and a model," *Biosystems*, *5*, pp. 187–196. The term *dissipative structure* was coined and developed by the Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine and his co-workers. See also Erich Jantsch, *Design for Evolution: Self-Organization and Planning in the Life of Human Systems*, New York: George Braziller, 1975, pp. 37 f.

13. *Saṃyuttnikāya* (Pali Text Society edition), III, 120.

14. See Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Alfred Hofstadter, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1971, pp. 211 ff.

15. See David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, pp. 150–157, 178–179.

16. *Bhāṣya* ad *Abhidharmakośa*, VIII, 39.