

Buddha: The Perpetual Iconoclast

by Dr. Alfred Bloom, Professor Emeritus, University of Hawaii

Introduction

There are many facets of Buddhism. However, the essence of Buddhism which distinguishes it in some ways from other religions or religious philosophies may be called iconoclasm.

Iconoclasm means to break down and break through fixed images and conceptions projected by our minds. This condition is evidenced in our attachment to ideas and views, giving rise to dogmatism and fanaticism.

Buddhism presently exists as a religious tradition in several Asian countries and is gradually spreading in the West. It has been a major tradition among the Asian immigrant communities in Hawaii where numerous groups have brought their traditional faiths and cultures. It combines religious beliefs, metaphysics, rituals and folk beliefs and practices in a grand complex. It is institutionalized in diverse forms.

The history of Buddhism and the development of its institutions is not particularly exceptional in the history of religion. All major world religions have evolved in ways beyond their founders. However, there is usually something which represents a unifying thread, as the essence of that religion which gives it its distinctive character. It is common for people to criticize the gap between the origins and the later developments in a religion, but it is much less common to see the unity that binds a tradition together.

On the background of these considerations, I am focusing on *Buddha: The Perpetual Iconoclast* because, despite the many forms Buddhism has taken through the centuries, its essence is not to be attached to any of these forms.

It is probable that Buddha never intended to start a religion. Rather, he initially developed a philosophy which later transformed to a religion in order to meet the spiritual needs of the masses. However, the essential principles of Buddhism, while non-religious, allow room for the expression of religious faith and devotion. Buddhism affirms religious activity if it helps the person to a deeper understanding of the nature of life and the resolution of the basic problem of egoism which Buddhism addresses.

I am presenting Buddha as an *Iconoclast*, because, in the manner of iconoclasm, he overthrew conventional ways of thinking which are self-serving to society or individuals. His analysis of experiential reality as possessing no inherent, substantial core or essence, represented in the teaching of non-soul and theory of skhandas (the elements that make up a being), held implications not only for issues of metaphysical reality, but for self-understanding and social relations. He shifted the meaning of the ascriptive or inherited title of Brahmin from birth to virtue and altered traditional views of caste. In the West, perhaps Socrates was the most outstanding *Iconoclast*.

Buddhist Iconoclasm is not merely throwing down or breaking down the material images revered by others. Rather, it is a deconstructing of the way we look at things, perceive, pursue, and possess things, which then become a source of our ego-bondage. Buddhism is an approach to knowledge and understanding which raises doubt about our most prized, most certain perceptions and concepts, those things about which we may argue and fight with each other. It questions our grasp of reality, the world and ourselves.

Buddha's Essential Teaching

Without going into the detail of Gautama's life, much of which is legend, he set out to solve the problem of human suffering by seeking the truth of life. He observed deeply the

fundamental condition of impermanence and the passage of life through birth, sickness, old age and death. In this process he realized the truth of the law of cause and effect and its implications for the understanding of the nature of things in the world in the interdependence of all things.

While people everywhere may have some sense of the relation of cause and effect, Buddha applied it to the very nature of human existence and the world, in order to transform human attitudes and relationships to that world. Basically, he recognized that everything that exists is a result of interacting causes and effects. There is nothing self-existing. Everything is interdependent, constantly changing, without a fixed nature or essence -- and in humans at least -- an eternal soul. Things mutually arise and mutually decay. It is the nature of constituted things to decay and pass away.

According to Buddha, the problem of suffering arises from the fact that we seek permanence for ourselves, reflected in our strong efforts for self-preservation. We persist in the belief in a permanent essence or soul in ourselves and things as the basis of value. We wish to possess them and through possessing, establish the stability and permanence of our own being and world. Many people define themselves and their value by what they possess. From the standpoint of Buddhism, it is a question of attributing inherent value to things which are passing and whose value is delusory. It is a problem of *I, my, mine*.

Buddha's *Iconoclasm* was not aimed at overthrowing the ancient religion or belief in gods. For true enlightenment and the resolution of personal suffering, the gods are merely useless. That answer can only come from within oneself, through one's own understanding. Rather, one must overthrow the conventional, habitual view of ego as the permanent center of the world.

In the first stage of Buddhist thought the concept of the independent self-existence of things was broken down through analysis of the process of cause and effect and interdependence. Our perceptions of things as real in themselves was seen as delusion. A favorite illustration was the chariot or today, the automobile. It can be broken down into its various parts. These component parts may be further broken down to elemental units from which they have been constructed. Eventually we come to the basic constituents of things which are beyond perception and possession. The issue is that the names which we give to things and the value we ascribe them are imposed by our deluded minds on the configuration of elements. What we perceive is not reality as it is. There is no chariot or auto existing in and of itself apart from the constituent elements and our perceptions and desire for it. We give it a name and ascribe value.

This approach is not totally unknown in the west. In Democritus' theory of atoms in early Greece we have a somewhat similar approach. The difference here is how it is turned to shape attitudes and relations to things as a means of resolving problems of suffering rooted in our passions.

From Non-Soul to Voidness

In the following centuries, Buddhist reflection on the issue of attachment and the nature of the self deepened, evolving into the Mahayana tradition which is the dominant form of Buddhism in North and East Asia. Two philosophical approaches developed. On the one hand, there is the Middle Path School of the philosopher Nagarjuna of the second century of the Christian Era and on the other, the Consciousness Only school of the teacher Vasubandhu in the fourth century.

In these schools not only is issue taken with our understanding of things as they exist, but also with the concepts by which we believe we understand things and know reality. They propose two or three levels or dimensions of truth. These dimensions reveal the limits of our

ability to know reality or truth in our ordinary way of living. They point the way to the ultimate truth which is spiritual liberation and described only by the term 'Voidness.'

The Middle Path school maintained that our concepts have no necessary relation to reality, since they are only constructed relative to each other. Motion is defined in terms of rest and rest in terms of motion. Being is only contrasted with non-being. Reality itself lies beyond these terms and relations. It is essentially Void or Empty, without mark or definability. Our words are at best only pointers and means of communication on the relative level to speak among ourselves. They tell us nothing about reality as such. This was an approach to reality in terms of logic which compares with the Eleatic paradoxes in Greek philosophy. They agree in showing the inner contradictions of thought itself.

The second tradition is called Consciousness-Only. It teaches that essentially the world is the product of mind and is a more psychological approach to reality. It establishes that there are three levels of truth, the delusory, the provisional and the real or ultimate truth. A major illustration for this teaching describes a man walking on a road at dusk. Suddenly he spots an object in the road that looks like a snake. He grabs a stick to fend off the snake and discovers that it is only a piece of rope. The snake is the delusory level of truth. It is not there at all. The rope is the provisional level. It is there but from the ultimate standpoint it is not the highest reality. Only when we go beyond the appearances to the fundamental basis of experience do we come to know reality. Ultimate truth is beyond all relative perceptions.

These philosophical teachings underly all the major schools of Mahayana Buddhism as a religious system and have aided in the evolution of a vast body of mythology and symbols. Words, symbols and beliefs are all seen to be instrumental in attaining higher spiritual purpose, depending on the level of insight and understanding a person may have. Buddhism recognizes individual differences. Everyone is at a different stage in life and it is compassionate and tolerant in accepting a variety of paths suitable to different people.

Buddhism does not try to overthrow belief itself, but to guide the person to a deeper understanding of oneself and reality so that one will become free from the bondage of egoism created by our addiction to speech and concepts.

Zen Iconoclasm

The *Iconoclasm* of belief in things and concepts reached its zenith in the development of Zen Buddhism in China. Zen attempts to guide people in breaking through their habitual patterns of thinking and perceiving and allowing spontaneity and creativity to flow out as they find their true nature in harmony with reality. The freedom attained through Zen offers the ability to cope with the turbulent suffering of life from a point of stillness -- or Emptiness -- within oneself. It is the old question of being in the world but not of it. Being liberated from the world and its delusions means that one can work among the delusions, assisting others, without one's self being trapped or bound by them.

In recognizing the relativity of one's ego, one's concepts, one's perceptions, one becomes free -- not in detached isolation, but in detached involvement. One may interact with people, but not, say, take it personally, when problems arise. Zen masters attempt to inspire their students to break through the shell of prejudices and misunderstandings that make up the way we perceive reality. One becomes self-aware of one's true nature as defined by no-definition and not self-conscious, by being defined by the outside world and others.

The ultimate of Buddhist *Iconoclasm* is expressed in several Zen principles gleaned from many stories and illustrations. It is expressed in the declaration of Zen master Dogen that Buddhism means to transcend Buddhism. A Buddhist should not even be attached to

Buddhism as some fixed system opposed to all other systems. I shall briefly summarize the principles which underlay the philosophical basis of Zen.

The First Principle is inexpressible. This principle means simply that whatever reality or truth may be, it lies beyond our words, logic, and intellectual formulations. It is what I call a healthy agnosticism in recognizing the inability of the human mind to encompass the truth of things as they are. There is always something beyond; the horizon keeps moving ahead of us as we attempt to approach it.

The Second Principle is paradoxical. It states that "spiritual cultivation cannot be cultivated." Conscious effort in trying to reach a goal already divides reality between myself and what I aim at. With this type of discriminating mind the goal of union with reality or the experience of enlightenment cannot be reached, just as we spoke of the problem of approaching the horizon. The conscious purpose we hold places the I-ego at the center and lends itself to all forms of comparisons and judgments in terms of others.

This is difficult to grasp, perhaps, yet it is a common experience in many areas. We may start out with the purpose to become enlightened, but it must transform at some point in the cultivation where the goal disappears as goal and one is just what one is. The closest ordinary experience is learning to play an instrument, drive or to type. We start out with very concrete practices, but in the course of learning, what was conscious behaviour becomes unconscious, and without deliberation. Accomplished artists do not play their instruments because they think about it, but because they are their activity.

If we apply this to spiritual and religious endeavor, it is not a matter of trying to be religious or in attaining some goal in religion. It is, rather, that whatever spirituality one develops is what one is in even the most unconscious moments. Thus, spontaneity becomes a key. If a lover asks the partner: "Do you love me?" and the partner hesitates and has to think about it, you know already there is a problem. Thus for Buddhism, to be religious is not a matter of conscious thought and practice, but at its deepest level being what one is. This places religion beyond formalism and external requirements. In the Western tradition, Augustine put it, love God and do as you please.

The Third Principle is: "In the last resort nothing is gained." Here we confront the resistance of Zen to the objectification of reality, religion and Zen itself. It is not merely that one moves from ignorance to enlightenment or somehow religious people are essentially different from non-religious people. There is an old Zen saying that when I saw the mountain, it was merely the mountain. When I learned Zen, the mountain was no longer the mountain. But when I really knew Zen the mountain was the mountain. Here we have three different levels of spiritual perception. There is the ordinary, perhaps insensitive, perception that takes the world for granted. Mountains are just mountains. However, dualistic religious perception sometimes destroys the world in order to highlight and stress the spiritual. The world is rejected in order to reach the spiritual. In the third stage of true insight, we realize the world as it is is spiritual reality.

Religion, faith, enlightenment, whatever term we may wish to use, is realized within the very context and life of the world. Thus when the monk Tozan was asked: "What is Buddha?" he answered, "Three pounds of Flax."

The Fourth Principle is: "There is nothing much in the Buddhist teaching." Here we see the *Iconoclasm* of Buddhism at work in breaking through all the terminologies, ideas and theories that are used to express or communicate Buddhism on any level. These efforts can never displace or replace the fact that fundamentally Buddhism, as perhaps any other religious faith, must be one of inner experience and one's own reality. It is the finger pointing to the moon with which you may be familiar. We need fingers and pointers to guide us to reality or truth, but ultimately it is the sight of the moon that is important. The finger is incidental; it is the sight of the moon that is important.

The Fifth Principle is: "In carrying water and chopping wood, therein lies the wonderful Tao." The issue of life for Buddhism is not a matter of dogmas, doctrines or rituals and organization, though there is plenty of that in Buddhist history. The issue is the mind and the awareness one has concerning oneself and the things of the world. The enlightened mind becomes aware of the truth in all actions and things and that all things and actions are manifestations of the truth. In the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* by Hui Neng (638-713), there is a phrase which asks: "Do you turn the *Lotus Sutra* or does the *Lotus Sutra* turn you?"

The famous Lin-chi I-hsuan (d. 867) Rinzai monk in China declared:

"Seekers of the Way. If you want to achieve the understanding according to the Law, don't be deceived by others and turn to (your thought) internally... I merely put on clothing and eat meals as usual and pass my time without doing anything. You people, coming from the various directions have all made up your minds to seek the Buddha, seek the Law... Crazy people! If you want to leave the Three Worlds, where can you go? 'Buddha' and 'Patriarchs' are terms of praise and also bondage. Do you want to know where the Three Worlds are? They are right in your mind which is now listening to the Law."

For me the most important phrase in this passage is the declaration that the terms of Buddha and Patriarch are terms of praise and also bondage. The problem of authority in religion acts frequently to deprive the person of his/her own self development because they always appear inferior to the so-called master. The structures of religion, while claiming to offer salvation, entrap the person in a web of ideas and concepts which they take for the reality itself. That reality only lies within the person. It is not something external to be pursued outside. The spiritual freedom that results from becoming truly self-aware, that the meaning lies within and not in external structures and associations, is regarded as dangerous in traditional religions which build their social power by getting the individual to trade their freedom for security in many ways. Though Buddhism itself has been guilty of this, it is important to recognize that in the deepest levels of Buddhist experience and insight, such attempts are rejected.

Conclusion

Buddhism in its various modes has carried on the spirit of Buddha's effort to bring people to confront how they are used by their concepts and views, shaped by the many social and cultural forces that screen reality for us. It offers a corrective to a society and culture and to people who think that seeing is believing, who believe in telling it like it is or who believe they have a monopoly on the truth and see things only in black and white. It is a corrective to the intolerance and dogmatism that expresses itself in so many areas of our culture.

From the Buddhist understanding, the assertion that I have the truth means that one has already obscured it. Even Buddhists make such assertions and have to be constantly reminded that there is no truth in what they say. Assertions only have functional value to open the way for the seeker to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of the self and of the world in whatever way they can. While at some point one may become enlightened, to claim to be enlightened or have true faith is to be yet unenlightened. Enlightenment is not for one to see in oneself, but for others to become aware of as that person embodies egoless wisdom.

Buddhism, at its deepest, is an open path of spiritual development. It works to break down all barriers of concepts, views, and attitudes which delude, divert and deter the person in his/her spiritual progress. In this sense Buddha, through the tradition he initiated, may be seen as the perpetual *Iconoclast* for every age, culture and creed.