REFLECTIONS ON HUME'S AND THE BUDDHA'S IDEAS ABOUT THE SOUL

IVAN L. LITTLE

To attempt a discussion of Humean and Buddhistic notions of the soul must appear to be the beginning of a fool's errand. We may understand, or think we do, what Hume has said but the untrained Westerner can have little hope of even fully understanding what other Westerners, after years or Oriental studies, have to say. And, unfortunately, they too may not understand very well what the Buddhists say. Hence, any comparsion between Hume and the Buddha may be in error, or what is perhaps even more discouraging, not so much in error as merely trivial. For it is easy to repeat how Hume looked into himself only to find a congeries of pains, thoughts and sensations gliding across the fictional stage of the nonexistent theatre which men call the "self" when engaged in ordinary thinking and the "soul" when thinking religiously and to compare this line of thought with the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* (no soul). We then salvage from the dissolution of *Atman* the bodily (rupa) and mental (nama) processes something that will substitute nicely for the fluctuating passions and ideas of the Humean soul. Thus we end in both cases with what can be loosely but easily referred to as "stream of consciousness" and not with any enduring spiritual substance or entity.

The Buddha as an individual has been compared with various figures in the West, especially with Jesus and Socrates as teachers and with Jesus as a man who also became a god to millions of his followers. It is probably the religious coloration of the man, Gotama Siddhartha, which makes any comparison of his thought with that of Hume (beyond the superficial one just made) somewhat questionable. For almost any claim made about what the Buddha said or believed can be supported or challenged by the Buddhist "canonical" writings. Even so there seems to be some defensible comparisons of their characteristics and thought, which are of philosophical significance.

I am struck first of all by the honesty of these men. They were not playing word games. Both tried to teach others about exactly what can be discovered in experience. If they have been dishonest in their reports this dishonesty is not readily apparent. Reference here is not to consistency which is a logical quality and something that can more or less be achieved by any bright and careful scoundrel. Intellectual honesty can often best be tested by the admission of ignorance, such as Socrates trying to ascertain the god's claim that he was Athens' wisest. Hume readily admits that others may have had experiences of their selves or souls differing from his

own encounter with a preception here or a pain there:

> If any one upon serious and unprejudic's relexion, thinks he has a different notion of *himself*, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu'd, which calls *himself*; tho' I am certain there is no such principle in me.

He also admits his lack of centainty:[1]

> Every step I take is with hesitation, and every new reflection makes me dread an error and absurdity in my reasoning.
>
> For with what confidence can I venture upon such bold enterprizes, when beside those numberless infirmities peculiar to myself, I find so many which are common to human nature? Can I be sure, that in leaving all establish'd opinions I am following truth; and by what criterion shall I distinguish her, even if fortune shou'd at last guide me on her foot-steps? After the most accurate and exact of my reasonings, I can give no reason why I shou'd assent to it; and feel nothing but a *strong* propensity to consider objects *strongly* in that view, under which they appear to me.[2]

The honesty and sincerity of the Buddha also seems to shine through the central theme of his message to a suffering mankind in spite of the fantastic number of sayings attributed to him. Among his last words to Ananda is the assertion that he has held nothing back, that he has been honest in his teaching and that others should seek the truth for themselves:

> I have taught the Dhamma without making any distinction between exoteric and esoteric doctrine; for in respect of the norm, Ananda, the Tathagata has no such thing as the closed fist of those teachers who hold back certain things . . .
>
> Be islands unto yourselves, Ananda! Be a refuge to yourselves; do not take to yourselves any other refuge. See Truth as an island, see Truth as a refuge. Do not seek refuge in anyone but yourselves.
>
> And how, Ananda, is a Bhikkhu to be an island unto himself, a refuge to himself, taking to himself no other refuge, seeing Truth as an island, seeing as a refuge Truth, not seeking refuge in anyone but himself?[3]

Here, of course puzzles do emerge and a possible charge of dishonesty can arise. For instance, we have the founder of a great religious order who had claimed the achievement of a liberating enlightenment (and yet who may have unselfishly stayed around for over forty years to help others achieve the same enlightenment) having to assure his disciples, or doing so at least, that he had held nothing back. Why was it necessary for him to do this? Throughout much of early Buddhist writings Gotama is quizzed again and again about important metaphysical matters such as the nature, origin and destiny of the soul and of the world. Again and again he refuses to answer, says yes and no at the same time or diverts their attention to what really matters: the cessation of craving–this, at least, is something that all can work on. All this in the reading may seem to be an exercise in

dialectical subtlety, a prodding of lazy minds to think for themselves, or a confession of ignorance on the part of the Enlightened One. We can insist that the Buddha was teaching men the best way that they could be taught, but we don't know. Nor do we know of what his enlightenment consisted; a vision of totality such as Arjuna achieved in the *Bhagavad-Gita*? Or, had he achieved a cessation of craving, a calming down and nothing more? If this vaunted enlightenment was nothing more than a colossal shot of Millstown, someone, perhaps the Buddha himself, should have said so.

However, the four aryan (noble) truths taught by the Buddha hardly contain any pretense at hidden or disguised metaphysical claims–on the surface at least. We are told of the prevalence, origin of, and means of elimination of suffering. But behind these practical suggestions there had to be a whole cultural framework of sanctions, or the Buddha would have met with such wide spread acceptance. For instance, why should man be released from suffering? Christ's suffering was noble; Christians should suffer for the cause without hope of reward. There doesn't seem to be anything uplifting, dashing or satisfactory of the Nietzschean ideal of nobility at all in this craving-sensation denying creed (but not life denying, we are repeatedly told by adherents and other apologists). Part of the reason for the aversion to suffering is, of course, provided by the belief in endless rebirths (even on this, as Professor Bahm shows in his *Philosophy of the Buddha*, the Enlightened One would not take a stand). Even so, with endless possibility of suffering before us, *moksha* (release) could be sought by everyone.

Given the extra-theoretical sanctions reinforcing the opinion that suffering is bad and ought to be cured, the Buddha's practical insight into the complexity and diversity–and impermanence–or the ingredients of the empincal ego was a brilliant aid to the universal program of therapy he envisioned. The truth of the impermance of the inner life is available to anyone who will introspect even a little. It is these paltry yearnings, hopes, hates, color sensations, and bodily itches that we have projected into endless reincarnations! If the maxim "divide and conquer" has any validity at all it should apply here, because the soul is seen to exist in its parts; whereas the belief in a permanent soul has arisen from the blind ignorance which has originated craving which has eventually originated consciousness on and on through the chain of dependent origination of all things.

If craving ceases, the world is the same, the skandas are still present but the mind is stilled:

> The bliss consists in the cessation of all thought,
> In the quiescence of Plurality.
> No (separate) Reality was preached at all,
> Nowhere and none by Buddha![3]

The teachings of the Buddha merely provided part of the pointing, directions, means, or vehicle by which the devotee was guided toward enlightment, Nirvana, Satori "described" above. If we have not experienced enlightment we cannot describe it; those who claim to have achieved it, do not describe it and as far as the rest of us know we may have another case of invisible clothes of a certain gullible emperor. But Buddhist's hint at more than a mere emptiness or mere bliss (bliss that you and I can understand): they hint at a state of knowledge beyond words, beyond sensation, beyond thought. Sometimes this enlightment is called "cosmic awareness" and is an awareness unlike our discrete commonsense awareness. Distinctions, apparently are voided, though the world remains the same; and undoubtedly the Buddha's dialecticism aimed at helping his disciples overcome their greed for distinctions, theories, or arguments. This may have been one of his noblest teachings; at least he slashed through the heart of the useless and endless metaphysical speculations which the sages of most of all cultures are wont to engage in.

These urgings to cultivate the Buddha-mind also, by indirection, stressed the worth of individuals—not the worth of egos—and the sanctity of life itself.

Hume, by indirection, stresses the value of human consciousness and the worthwhileness of human subjectivity, because in this subjectivity is rooted the qualities which make up the material world and all that can be ascertained about the human soul. Perhaps Hume could have learned, although there is no evidence that he does, some of the lessons that the Buddha does about the worthlessness of the human ego. He makes numerous references to his desire for fame and seems to worry about the calumny which would attach to his name because of his heretical views. Hume is as interested as the Buddha in knowing the truth about the human soul, but significantly he seeks peace and normalcy in everyday human affairs, in conversation, in walks by the river, etc. For the Buddha, on the other hand, speculation, being part of the raft or vehicle used in the research for enlightenment, could be discarded when it serves its function, and we should note that it serves its function well. His discoveries lead Hume to experience gloom and uncertainty; Buddha's discoveries, based in part on similar experential data, lead him to a prescription for the ills of human existence, not only for himself, but for all mankind.

Although Hume, a thorougly secularily oriented European thinker and scholar, neither talks about nor seeks the calm of Nirvana, one could easily say that had such been his goal, his speculations could have brought him to the brink of enlightenment. "Whatever other objects may be comprehended by the mind," he says, "they are always consider'd with a view to ourselves; otherwise they wou'd never be able either to excite these

passions, or produce the smallest encrease or diminution of them. When self enters not into the consideration, there is no room either for prode or humility." How exceedingly well the Buddha knows this!

Hume states that the passions of pride and humility always have self as their object—not as their cause—and are excited by a vast range of qualities in things, such as the mental qualities of wit, temperament; or the bodily qualities of strength, agility; or of qualities of those things I call *mine*, such as the beauty of *my* house, the speed of *my* horse, the size of military might of *my* nation, and the like. Here we have only been speaking of pride which is excited by qualities considered advantageous. Since humility is the contrary of pride it cannot exist alongside it, and since Hume believes we have a natural propensity for construing things to our advantage, he has more to say about pride than the less frequent passion, humility. Although humility is self-deprecatory, it nevertheless, is a passionate emphasis upon self and is—now speaking in the manner of the Buddha—a clinging to ego. But it never occurs to Hume to question whether or not it would be possible not to cling to ego.

Pride and humility always refer to self, that "connected succession of perceptions"[6] as Hume calls it, by a "natural" and by an "original property." By natural he means "the constancy and the steadiness of its operations" and he satisfies his use of the term "original" by speaking of a "primary impulse," of a quality "most inseperable from the soul."[7] This last phrase is curious because, as we have already indicated, the self is the object and is not the cause of pride and humility, for Hume. Apparently there is a property of the soul, a primary impulse in that "connected succession of perceptions" which takes any quality among perceptions deemed advantageous to the individual (and it must be this impulse doing the deeming) and refers this back to the self and the entire process constitutes pride. Actually you might have better luck by simply experiencing more fully your next feeling of pride.

What Hume may have seen—though we hardly should expect that he would have—is that the fleeting congeries denoted as self either has a deeper and more enduring structure, as Kant in his own way tries to establish later, or he might have guessed that the primary impulses belonging to the soul are as fleeting as any other component of the congeries. In no sense does he admit or guess that men can dispense with pride and humility. This does not mean that we are constantly in a state or pride or humility, because these states are excited by other qualities of experience, those that are esteemed in the case of pride and disesteemed in the case of humility. However, when these passions are excited and take the self as their object, the entire process is natural and is based upon a primary impulse that is inescapable. He says:

> We may, perhaps, make it a greater question, whether the *causes*, that produce the passion, be as *natural* as the object, to which it is directed, and whether all that vast variety proceeds from caprice or from the constitution of the mind. This doubt we shall soon remove, if we cast our eye upon human nature, and consider that in all nations and ages, the same objects still give rise to pride and humility; and that upon the view even of a stranger, we can know pretty nearly, what will either encrease or diminish his passions of this kind.[8]

I close with a Buddhist account, which would leave us substantially at the same place that Hume leaves us, except for enlightenment:

> Now it is asked, Upon what do old age and death depend? The answer is that it is upon the arising of birth that there is death, for death follows birth as surely as night follows day. Without birth there would be no death; and birth would not occur if there were no "becoming forces" (bhava) available to be born. In turn, the "becoming forces" depend for their existence upon grasping and clinging to life; grasping and clinging could not exist without desire; desires depend upon perception; perception follows upon sense impressions, which would not be possible without the six sense organs. The sense organs, in turn, depend upon the mind and body (nama-rupa), but the functioning of mind and body is dependent upon consciousness. And consciousness is dependent upon the impulses to action, for consciousness is clearly an activity, and without an impulse to action there could be no consciousness. All of these phases of the processes and activities constituting the life of the individual can belong to the self only upon the presence of ignorance. And ignorance, in turn, depends upon the preceding factors in the cycle.[9]

NOTES

[1] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1896, p. 252.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 265.

[3] *The Wisdom Of Buddhism*, ed., Christmas Humphreys (New York: Random House), 1961, p. 93.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 262.

[5] Hume, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 271.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 280.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 280-281.

[9] John M. Koller, *Oriental Philosophies* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 1970, p. 128.

Texas Tech University