

## A Passage to America

It was my first visit to the United States. In previous years I had made several long-distance flights, but this was the first time I had crossed the Atlantic. The reason for my journey was that I had been invited by the Philosophy Department of Berkeley College, a residential college at Yale University, to give a series of lectures on Buddhist Philosophy. Although I had no academic qualifications, I had been invited on the recommendation of two very distinguished scholars, Dr Edward Conze and Professor F. N. Findlay, both of whom thought highly of *A Survey of Buddhism*, which had been published some years earlier. Thus it was that one day in the winter of 1969/1970, I found myself bidding goodbye to London (Heathrow) and heading for New York (Kennedy).

I remember little of the five or six hour flight. In some respects it was like a dream, or even a nightmare. I had a window seat in the right-hand aisle from which I had a view of the information screen which flickered and danced with the vibrations of the aircraft. From time to time we encountered an air pocket, suddenly dropping hundreds of feet before regaining height. On these occasions my heart seemed to come up into my mouth and for a few seconds I felt that I would go on falling for ever. Each time it happened I felt a little more disoriented and did not know quite where I was, and whether I was sitting or falling. Moreover, the information screen seemed to be talking to me and even sending me messages. 'Calvary,' it flashed, which I took to be an ill omen for my journey. 'Calvary,' it repeated. 'Death. Death. Death.' I was heading for Calvary, not New York. I was heading for death. In ordinary parlance, a Calvary is a period of intense mental suffering, but this was not the Calvary of which the information screen spoke. It was speaking of the Agony in the Garden, the night that Jesus spent, alone, before being crucified. He knew he was going to die a hideous death, and prayed that the cup might pass from him. As I sat with my eyes on the screen, I recalled disjointedly the words of the Gospel account, as well as recalling paintings of the Agony in the Garden that I had seen – in particular, a small one by El Greco in the National Gallery. Jesus kneels on a kind of promontory while his disciples sleep below, and an angel bends down from heaven and offers him a kind of chalice. As every Christian knows, Jesus drained the cup, thereby signifying his acceptance of God's will for him, and the next day he was crucified on a hill outside Jerusalem.

Crucifixion was a common form of execution among the Romans of the time. Jesus was not crucified alone, but between two thieves. The victim's hands would be nailed to the arms of the cross and his feet nailed to the upright with a single nail. He would die of asphyxiation, or exhaustion. It was a painful and ignominious death, and over the centuries Christian artists have depicted the sufferings of Jesus on the cross in increasingly realistic detail. It is some years since I saw the Isenheim Altarpiece, but its horrifying depiction of the crucified Jesus still haunts me. Jesus was put to death in the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, when Roman civilization was at its height, and cultured Romans who enjoyed the poetry of Virgil, Ovid, and Horace would have seen nothing shocking in the crucifixion of common criminals. Nor would they have been shocked by the fact that a generation or two earlier six thousand survivors of the revolt of the slaves under Spartacus had been crucified by a victorious Roman general, the crosses with their ghastly burden lining the Appian Way from Rome to Capua. I had not read Howard Fast's novel *Spartacus* nor seen the film that was based on it, but somehow the fate of the former gladiator and his followers had made a strong impression on me, and as I sat there in the aircraft the crucified slaves passed before my inner vision in wave after wave. Suddenly I was jolted back to the present reality by the grinding sound of the lowering of the undercarriage and by the bump by which it was immediately succeeded as

the aircraft hit the runway. Once more the information screen flashed. 'Calgary! Calgary!' it said.

I still do not know why I kept seeing 'Calvary' instead of 'Calgary'. Was it a case of hallucination? But if it was, why should I have hallucinated just then, and why should the hallucination have taken the form it did? There were several elements to it, and, hallucination or not, they must all have had some significance for me, perhaps on a level deeper than that of my conscious mind. For one thing, I was on my own and was not sure how I would get on at Berkeley College away from all my friends. Then there was Calvary and Christianity. Calvary and the Crucifixion were part of the Christian myth, as to me the story was. I was a Buddhist, not a Christian, and did not take the myth literally. Why, then, did it play such a prominent part in my hallucination, or whatever it was that I experienced? There was also Tiberius and the Roman Empire and the fact that culture was not incompatible with cruelty; there was Spartacus and the six thousand crucified slaves lining the Appian Way, as well as the horrors of the Isenheim Altarpiece. Where did it all come from? What did it all mean?

Despite my earlier misgivings, I got on well at Berkeley College. It was my first experience of university life, as well as my last, and I quite enjoyed the experience. I joined an inter-college poetry reading group, ate my first pizza, travelled up to Cape Cod to see a total solar eclipse, visited the Mongolian Lama Geshe Wangyal, and of course lectured my dozen or so students on Buddhist philosophy, basing myself on *A Survey of Buddhism*. I also led a weekly meditation class, which was attended by about eighty people. It was held in the dining hall of the college under the watchful eye of Bishop Berkeley, whose portrait hung there. In later years I visited the United States a number of times, accompanied by a friend or two, but I never saw Yale again, though Berkeley College and the friends I had made there remained a pleasant memory. On these later visits I saw the Grand Canyon, crossed the Rockies from West to East, drove through Death Valley, and spent a day and a night, with two friends, among the crazy and colourful architectures of Las Vegas. There was the Moab desert, Yellowstone Park, and Monument Valley with its striking contrast between the cathedral-like rocks and the surrounding sands. There was New Mexico and the Kiowa Ranch where D. H. Lawrence had lived for two years and where his ashes are buried in a kind of chapel surmounted by a phoenix, his symbol. In the course of these travels I always spent time at the FWBO centres that had been established by pioneering Order members in New England, San Francisco, Missoula, and Seattle.

Underlying all this were preoccupations that had manifested themselves in the hallucinations I had experienced during the first part of my journey. Of these, some became the subject of conscious reflection. Remembering those cultured Romans, I was reminded of what 'Samurai' William Adams (1564–1620) had said of the no less cultured Japanese. They were very cultured, he had observed, and also very cruel. Cultured or not, the modern Japanese often treated Allied prisoners of war with extreme cruelty, working them to death on the building of the Burma Railway. Earlier, there had been the Nanking Massacre and during the Second World War the Japanese troops had enslaved half a million Korean 'comfort women'. Remembering those cultured Romans, I also remembered how the educated and cultured Germans had, under Nazism, exterminated Jews, homosexuals, and Roma.

In recent years, my main object of reflection has been suffering, especially suffering as inflicted by human beings on one another, as well as on other animals. In particular, I have asked myself why human beings should not only deliberately inflict suffering on other human beings but also delight in so doing. Indeed, there has seemed to me to be something devilish

in the enjoyment of another being's suffering, whether or not inflicted by one's own hand. Some have attempted to explain the phenomenon as an inheritance from our animal ancestry, but though animals may kill and eat their prey, they do not, as far as we know, enjoy the infliction of pain as such. Only too often, human beings' enjoyment of the infliction of pain on other human beings is associated with a definite ideology, whether that of Nazism, nationalism, dogmatic religion, Communism, or the Hindu system of hereditary caste. Suffering can be inflicted not only by bodily action, whether direct or indirect, but also by means of speech or writing, which can be harsh, abusive or defamatory. It may pour ridicule or find expression in a supposed 'joke'.

To the extent that one deliberately inflicts suffering, and especially when one enjoys inflicting it, one is to that extent morally evil. This is not, of course, the whole story. One is also morally good and can enjoy making other people happy even to the extent of devoting one's whole life to their welfare. Though there is a great deal of suffering in the world, much of it is due not to natural evil but to the morally evil behaviour of other people, especially as supported by this or that ideology. It is not enough, therefore, that we should seek to popularize mindfulness and metta, desirable as this may be. We have also to demolish the wrong views that undergird morally evil behaviour, and I suspect that work of demolishing them will be one of Triratna's main tasks for a long time to come.

Sangharakshita

Adhithana

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