

## Evil in Myth and in Human Experience

In the Tibetan Wheel of Life, between the human realm and the realm of the *pretas* or hungry ghosts, there lies the world of the gods and the *asuras*. They are fighting for possession of the Wish-fulfilling Tree, which grants all desires. In some modern versions of the Wheel the *asuras* are depicted as being equipped with rifles. Yet the gods and *asuras* were not always at war. According to an ancient Indian myth, they once co-operated on an enterprise of cosmic significance – nothing less than the churning of the Great Ocean of Milk. Taking Mount Sumeru for their churning stick and the cosmic serpent for their churning rope, they pulled and pulled, the *asuras* holding the cosmic serpent's head and pulling one way, the gods holding its tail and pulling the other way. Thus did they churn the Ocean of Milk. After a while, there rose like butter to the surface a series of treasures of various kinds, including the Goddess of Wealth, a Pot of Nectar, the Cow of Plenty, and various gems. Both the gods and the *asuras* were delighted with these and other treasures they had churned up. But their delight was short-lived. Suddenly there rose to the surface the Pot of Poison, a poison so powerful that it was capable of destroying everything, and at the sight of it the gods and the *asuras* alike recoiled in fear and horror.

Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, was then in attendance on the Buddha Amitābha in the latter's Pure Land, Sukhāvātī. On happening to 'look down' to the lower realm of the gods and *asuras*, he saw the Pot of Poison that had been churned up and the fear and horror that this had aroused. Instantly he descended, caught up the pot, and drank the poison it contained to the last drop. Such was the virulence of the poison that his throat turned blue, on which account he came to be known as Nilakaṇṭha or Bluethroat. (In the Hindu version of the myth it is the great god Shiva who drinks the poison and whose throat turns blue.)

Exchanging the language of myth for the language of human experience, we may say that the poison drunk by Avalokiteśvara stands for the suffering that results from evil, whether natural or moral. Natural evil is what we experience from the fact of our having a human body with a nervous system, a body that is subject to old age, disease, and death, as well as to such collective ills as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, floods, epidemics, forest fires, and tsunamis. Some of these calamities used to be called acts of God in that no human agency was responsible for them. Moral evil consists of those actions of body, speech, and mind committed by the individual under the influence of the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion. Sooner or later the fruits of those actions will be experienced in the form of suffering, whether in the present lifetime or in a future one. In terms of the Four Noble Truths, there will be freedom from suffering only when there is freedom from craving as a result of following the Noble Eightfold Path (in both its mundane and Transcendental stages). The Buddha once compared moral evil, or the defilements, to a stain on a pure white cloth. The stain is indeed a stain, but it need not be permanent. It can be removed by washing the cloth in water. Washing the cloth represents our efforts to purify the mind by means of ethics, meditation, and wisdom. It is no accident that in a famous verse of the *Dhammapada*, abstention from all evil (*pāpa*) is followed by undertaking what is skilful (*kusala*), and by the complete purification (*sacittapariyodapanam*) of one's mind.

Before the process of purification can begin, however, one has to recognise the fact that the mind is 'stained' and that one has acted in an unskilful (*akusala*) way. In a word, we have to confess the evil that we have done (*pāpa deśanā*). Confession of the unskilful actions that one has committed has been an important part of the Buddhist spiritual life from the beginning. Monks or nuns who had acted unskilfully confessed to their spiritual superiors or to one another. The practice gradually fell into desuetude, and by the time I was ordained as a bhikkhu it had degenerated into a purely formal ritual that was to be got over as quickly as possible. Readers of my memoirs will remember how disappointed I was the first time I took part in a 'confession' of this kind. When I founded the FWBO/Triratna, I was therefore determined that members of the Order should take the practice of confession seriously. Thus, confession has become an integral part of every chapter of the Order. Meetings of the chapter are held, ideally once a week, and the warmth and intimacy of the meeting makes it easier for the individual member to confess any unskilful behaviour and to receive help from their fellow members. Moreover, Order members, Mitras, and friends regularly take part in the collective recitation of what has become known as 'The Sevenfold Puja', the fourth part of which is devoted to the Confession of Evil. In the Bennett translation of verses from the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, as arranged by me for liturgical purposes, we say:

'The evil that I have heaped up  
Through my ignorance and foolishness –  
Evil in the world of everyday experience,  
As well as evil in understanding and intelligence –  
All that I acknowledge to the Protectors.'

Here we confess not to our fellow Buddhists but to the Buddha, having conjured up an image of him in our minds. It is as though we owe the Buddha an apology, so to speak, for having failed to live up to the teaching he has so generously given. Continuing, we say:

'Standing before them  
With hands raised in reverence,  
And terrified of suffering,  
I pay salutations again and again.'

In other words, the confession takes place within an overall context of devotion in which we not only stand face to face with the Buddha but also recognise the immense gulf that exists between the Buddha and ourselves. We are also keenly aware of the fact that our unskilful actions will lead to suffering. But though we stand before the Buddha, he is not a judge (that is the work of karma, or rather *karma-vipāka*), and we therefore conclude with the words:

'May the Leaders receive this kindly,  
Just as it is, with its many faults!  
What is not good, O Protectors,

I shall not do again.'

We are thereby assured that the Buddha will accept our confession and we promise him not to do evil again.

Important, even essential, though confession is, it is not the whole of the spiritual life. In the Sevenfold Puja, therefore, just as Confession is preceded by Going for Refuge, so it is followed by Rejoicing in Merit. There is a change of mood, as it were, from remorse to jubilation, and we say:

'I rejoice with delight  
In the good done by all beings,  
Through which they obtain rest  
With the end of suffering.  
May those who have suffered be happy!'

Before rejoicing in the good done by others, we have to recognize that what they have done is good. We have to be free from carping criticism, competitiveness, and jealousy. Moreover, we have positively to delight in the good that they have done. In particular, we rejoice in all manner of spiritual attainments, up to and including that of Buddhahood itself. We should also rejoice, in my view, in humanity's achievements in the fields of literature, the arts, and music, the enjoyment of which can raise us to spiritual heights, as can the contemplation of the beauty of the natural world, which human beings have done so much to destroy.

The good in which we take delight here in the fifth section of the Sevenfold Puja is moral good, and moral good is productive of merit (Pali *puñña*, Sanskrit *puṇya*). In the popular Buddhism of the East, the accumulation of merit is a major preoccupation of the serious-minded Buddhist, for it is the merit that has been accumulated by one's skilful actions of body, speech, and mind that will ensure a good rebirth in this world or in a higher heavenly world. Certain good actions are regarded as particularly meritorious. These include releasing birds and fish from captivity, offering food to monks, and building temples and stupas. Such actions can indeed be performed with a pure intention, but only too often they are a simple 'going through the motions' for the sake of social prestige. This is not to underestimate the importance of accumulating merit for all Buddhists, Eastern or Western. The merit generated by the regular performance of acts of generosity, by the observance of the precepts of morality, and by the practice of concentration-meditation, is the indispensable foundation for the development of the wisdom or insight that leads to liberation.

The traditional teaching of the four Māras is one that does justice to both the mythic and the human aspects of evil. The four Māras are Māra the son of a god (*devaputta-māra*), the Māra of death (*maccu-māra*), the Māra of the defilements (*kilesa-māra*), and the Māra of conditioned existence (*khanda-māra*). The first of these is also known as Māra the Evil One (Māra Pāpīyān). He is the Māra who, according to the Pali scriptures, constantly dogs the Buddha, seeking to find entrance into him and miserably failing. He also

troubles the Buddha's disciples in various ways, and has even been known to appear to Buddhist practitioners in modern times.

The Māra of death is part of natural evil because unless we are in extreme pain or are utterly disillusioned with life, we do not want to die. I have been close to death more than once in my life, the last time being nearly a year ago, when I was in hospital with pneumonia, the old man's friend. One night, when it was completely dark, I felt that I was very close to death. Strange to say, it was a comfortable feeling, as though death was lying down beside me in a companionable sort of way. At the same time, I knew that I was not going to die just then. Whether I shall have that comfortable feeling when I actually die, I do not know.

The Māra of the defilements is the equivalent to moral evil. Traditionally these defilements are greed, hatred, and delusion, which at the hub of the Wheel of Life are depicted by a rooster, a snake, and a pig, each of them holding in its mouth or beak the tail of the one in front. Alternatively, moral evil is represented by the formula of the five poisons of craving (Pali *taṇhā*, Sanskrit *trṣṇā*), hatred (Pali *dosa*, Sanskrit *dveṣa*), delusion (*moha*), conceit (*māna*), and envy (Sanskrit *īrṣyā*). They are rightly termed poisons, for whether in their gross or their subtle form, they affect our mental and spiritual health. For these poisons, whether three or five in number, the Buddha's teaching is the medicine, for which reason he is often described as the Great Physician.

In Buddhist thought a distinction is made between that which is conditioned (*sankhata*) and that which is unconditioned (*asankhata*), and the Buddhist life consists, in the simplest terms, in making the transition from the one to the other. This does not mean that Buddhism is a metaphysical dualism any more than that it is a metaphysical monism. The Māra of conditioned existence is all that which is marked by suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*), and insubstantiality (*anatta*). He is the grim figure that holds the Wheel of Life in his grasp. Beyond the Wheel of Life, standing on a little cloud, a saffron-robed Buddha points out the Way.

Sangharakshita

Adhisthana

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