

BUDDHISM

This essay is not meant to convert anyone : just to outline the main characteristics of Buddhism.

Around 1,000 B.C. in India, some people were already opposed to those Hindu concepts that were prevalent at the time, such as polytheism, the caste system and the place of women in society. All this led Shakyamuni to say : “I am not the first one”.

Buddhism remained confined to Northern India from its origins to the 12th century, i.e. until the Muslim invasion. Muslims underwent the systematic annihilation of Buddhism : genocide plus destruction of temples and their libraries. Buddhist libraries were as rich in historical, cultural and scientific documents as had been the great library of Alexandria. Genocide survivors fled to Tibet, then China and Japan, thus initiating the spread of

Buddhism throughout the world. From the end of the 12th century to the end of the 19th century, there were no Buddhists left in India.

In line with their non-violent beliefs, Buddhists had not fought back and were slaughtered like cattle. Muslims also turned against Hindus, of course, but the latter fought back militarily. Nevertheless, they had to abandon vast swathes of India to Muslim forces. Enmity between Hindus and Muslims is still going on today. Even Ghandi failed at the task of bringing them together.

The human and cultural disaster brought about by the Muslim invasion led some Chinese Buddhists to revise their non-violent attitude. One of their monastic orders, Zen Shaolin, set up a self-defense system called Kung-Fu. The basic concept was that of self-defense without hatred.

Has there been a Hindu influence on Buddhism ? Undoubtedly, in the sense that Hindus have always liked to debate great philosophical problems. Every preoccupation of Socrates or Plato on the origins and nature of knowledge, or on the reality of the outside world, had been discussed passionately or

written down by Hindus, hundreds of years before the advent of Buddhism. These philosophical discussions are still relevant today among Buddhists as well as Hindus.

Yoga, which precedes Hinduism, also exerted a powerful influence on Buddhism. When we line up these cultural milestones : yoga, philosophy, mathematics and Buddhism, it is easy to see why most of what we are nowadays originated in India. We could also add the invention of soap that even the Romans did not have, and which was only rediscovered in Gaul around 450a.d. As for mathematics, the Egyptians had been using a very clever form of geometry, but abstract mathematical calculations came from India with the invention of the number zero. It is sometimes said that the Arabs had invented the zero, but they only imported it from India.

Around 760 B.C., Prince Siddhartha Gautama, the son of a maharajah, and heir to the throne of Shakya, a small kingdom that no longer exists, left his palace and his estate. Saint Francis of Assisi also forsook wealth and chose poverty in the 12th century. Had he been in contact with Buddhism ?

Siddhartha's way of thinking was that if 99% of the population live in poverty, then poverty represents the essence of the human condition. Another unsettling parallel : Francis of Assisi adopted other Buddhist concepts, such as the interaction between all living (and even non-living) things (My brother the wolf, my sister the Moon). These holistic ideas were seen as dangerous by the Catholic Church, and Francis came very close to being burned at the stake.

The legends surrounding Shakyamuni's life were written two or three hundred years after his death. They talk of his growing up in a magnificent palace. Older texts, as well as recent archaeological finds, paint a more modest picture. The "kingdom" was, in fact, a vast estate of the kind we associate nowadays with landed gentry.

More unsettling is the story of his birth ; not unsettling in itself, but simply because of what Christians have made of it.

765 B.C. Maya decides to abstain from sex.

765 years later, Maria is a virgin.

In her dream, Maya meets Ganesh, the

Hindu elephant god who, while announcing that she will bear an exceptional son, delicately (one hopes) introduces the tip of a tusk in her vagina.

In her dream, Maria meets the archangel Gabriel. We don't know what he introduced, but he predicts that she will bear a "great and unique" son.

Maya sets out on a long trip. We don't know why.

Maria sets out on a trip necessitated by a census. That census took place in 6a.d. Why this discrepancy ? Was is just convenient for evangelists to alter the date ? The way the Gregorian calendar altered the Cesarean calendar in 1582 could also be to blame.

Maya can't find a place to spend the night.

Maria can't find a place to spend the night.

Maya gives birth to a son in a forest.

Maria gives birth to a son in a cave or a stable.

Spurred on by a mysterious intuition, the area's leading citizens come and pay their respect to the new-born child.

Guided by a mysterious star, the magi come and pay their respect to the new-born child.

One would have to be particularly hypocritical not to see that we are looking at a shameless copy-and-paste exercise. The characteristics and the importance that Christians bestow on Mary are simply grotesque. It probably derives from a deep sociological and psychological need to seek protection and solace from a maternal deity. We've all heard of grown men who, driven mad by torture, were calling their mothers. However, in Israel, where could the story of Maya and the birth of an exceptional child have originated, if not from Jesus himself ?

Nowadays, it is generally conceded that Christ did try to adapt Buddhism to his country and to the mentality of his time.

The most likely scenario is that he spent some time in India between his adolescence

and what is traditionally called his public life. When he says : “Sell all you have, give the money to the poor, and follow me” he repeats word for word what Shakyamuni had said. In the gospel, when the rich man hears this, he can't bring himself to follow Jesus's advice. In the Lotus, the rich man does : he sells his estate, gives the money to the poor and becomes a disciple of Shakyamuni.

After turning down the throne of Shakyamuni, prince Sidharta was offered the throne of another kingdom by a childless maharajah. He refused. Not everyone gets to turn down two kingdoms. For a few weeks, Shakyamuni retired to a secluded spot in order to reflect on how much good he could do as a maharajah. He came to the conclusion that he could do even more good by preaching what he had to say. Impossible not to make the connection with Christ's temptation in the desert : a 40-day retreat during which Satan offers him... a kingdom ! Did Jesus consciously wish to become the new Shakyamuni ? The apostles who heard him tell these beautiful stories (including that of Buddha's birth), may have assumed that he was talking about himself. More likely, the evangelists borrowed all these folk tales and

made them fit in with Jesus' life. There are many more parallels.

Siddhartha's innate leadership ability and his remarkable stage presence earned him the nickname of Shakyamuni, i.e. the wise man from Shakya. Nowadays, he is simply called Buddha, but strictly speaking, it shouldn't be : Buddha means enlightenment. What is correct, however, is that he founded a religion.

A frequently asked question is whether Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy. Well, it is neither a religion in the traditional meaning of the term, nor a philosophy : it's a revolution. In fact, Buddhism cannot be categorized. It hovers somewhere beyond religion. There is no word to describe it. This semantic vacuum allows some Christians to pour out all their contempt on Buddhism. A cardinal was saying recently on French television: "It's not a religion : it's a philosophy. Besides, it won't last : it's just a temporary fashion." One can immediately spot the sort of tactic used by Catholics throughout History : contempt and calumnies towards "dissidents" leading, in the past, to persecutions, tortures and public burnings at

the stake. Fortunately, there are exceptions. Father Seneca, a Jesuit who teaches History of Religions at Seoul University, was saying on the same television channel : “Buddhism is the yeast that will instill new life in western civilisation.”

Shakyamuni lived through troubled times. Most of the Indus Valley scientific advances had been forgotten by then.

Illiteracy was widespread. People learned the Lotus by heart. It was only written down some 200 years after Shakyamuni's death. Reading the Lotus is not an easy task for a western mind. Indians can talk for hours or write hundreds of pages to say very little. One can't deny that, compared to the Lotus, the gospels are masterpieces of clarity and concision : a Greek and Roman influence, no doubt. For instance, in the Lotus, we are not spared the descriptions of the menial jobs that the Prodigal Son had to perform : the way he had to clean latrines and empty cesspits when he fell on hard times. The story is told twice : once in prose and again in verses meant to be sung.

Talking of parables : in the Lotus as in the

gospels, they usually start with the turn of phrase “And it came to pass...”. For evangelists to be so familiar with this expression means that they were equally familiar with the Lotus. “And it came to pass...” is not to be found in the Old Testament.

In the end, it would be better to rely on what great thinkers such as Nichiren Daishonin have taken out of the Lotus. To use a modern comparison, Nichiren has, to a certain extent, done for the Lotus what Jean-Paul Sartre did for Kierkegaard’s publications when he streamlined the text, and popularized existentialism. It would be foolish to deny that a clearer, more approachable apprehension of Buddhism is now emerging in the West, especially in France and the United State. Buddhism does not shy away from logical analysis. No other religion will accept it : you have to have faith !

All too often, westerners fall in the trap that Buddhists call : “Supermarket mentality”, or “Spiritual materialism”. In other words, they think that whoever becomes a Buddhist will be happy, and will have conquered and resolved the problems of suffering. With the

publication of so many self-help books every year, this is not surprising. Some people adopt Buddhism as they would adopt a recipe or a medicine. They make the fundamental mistake of looking for happiness outside their own selves, whereas it resides within. It just needs to be awakened. Our civilization is used to quick solutions, like buying frozen dinners instead of learning how to cook. To see Buddhism as an element of the consumer society, is often heading for failure ; and yet, many who have approached Buddhism in this simplistic frame of mind have been faced with concepts that altered their way of thinking, and ultimately have been of great comfort to them.

What then are these main concepts ?

When Descartes was looking for an underlying principle for his work, he came out with the phrase : "I think, therefore I am." Shakyamuni's basic principle is : "I am part of the universe." All fundamental principles sound like "stating the bloody obvious", but on second thought it's very deep. Indeed, you cannot position yourself on one side, and see the universe on the other side. Traditional religions are essentially dualist :

body Vs soul, man Vs God, males Vs females, material world Vs spiritual world, etc. Buddhism is essentially holistic, i.e. unifying. If I exist, it is thanks to the universe. Then, drifting towards smaller and smaller points of reference, it is thanks to a star, then a planet, then the chemical components of this planet which have led to the emergence of life, which, in turn, is responsible for my birth. The universe surrounds us, protects us (or destroys us), feeds us, and gives us, for a few decades, the power of conceptualisation, i.e. the power of learning from the past and planning for the future. A flower already exists potentially in its bud, the bud in its branch, the branch in its tree, and the tree in a seed. The soil in which the seed grows and the chemicals that feed the seed, are already part of a potential tree. In one way or another, this tree has always existed and will always exist. It is the same for us. The earth on which we walk, such as lava flowing from volcanoes and all the apparently material world is a potential bearer of life, including human life. All is in all (some can't help adding : "And vice versa") it means that there is no beginning and no end. When, in four billion years, our planet is absorbed by the Sun which, by then, will have become a red

giant, all the Earth's atoms will continue to exist within the Sun. The Sun's atoms will then disperse in the universe, but will not disappear. If, as Buddhists suggest, the universe expands, then contracts, only to expand again, nothing will have disappeared. What gives credence to this intuition, is the fact that other Buddhist guesses have turned out to be true, and were confirmed by science : the nature of atoms, for instance, or the importance of intestinal flora in the formation and evolution of our personalities. Along with the whole pubic area, this flora is now seen as our second brain.

The fundamental principle : "I am part of the universe" implies that there are no gods, or rather that God and the universe are at one. If a god had created the universe, he would have had to create himself... unless he had been created by another god.

In primitive Indonesian tribes, they say that the Earth was created by a giant tortoise. It makes us laugh, and we immediately ask : "And who created the tortoise ?" Yet, monotheistic religions have all fallen in the same trap. The Jewish, Christian and Muslim God is, of course, more abstract, more

sophisticated. Yet, like the giant tortoise, he is a pure invention. Who created God ? He is arbitrarily said to possess all sorts of qualities such as ubiquity, immortality, omniscience, omnipotence, goodness... or not ! (In the Quran, it is stated repeatedly that God hates all non-Muslims.)

Because the question “Who created God?” cannot be answered, the only conclusion remains : what is, is. To seek answers closer to reality would be as unproductive as for a fly walking on a musical score, the possibility of understanding Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony.

We can’t help seeking answers. It’s part of our power of conceptualisation. Unfortunately, when there is no answer, we indulge in the nasty habit of inventing answers. To say “I don’t know” requires both courage and humility, two qualities sadly lacking in religions, especially monotheistic religions. They have been cornered into making up a god who reveals the “truth” to men. Inevitably, some clever opportunists have decided that they share God’s secrets, and therefore can become the intermediaries between God and men : they are called

priests, ministers, pastors, etc.

There are no Buddhist priests. There are monks and teachers. These teachers are called *Gurus* in Hindi, and *Sensei* in Japanese. Sadly, the term “guru” has been corrupted by crooks, opportunists and control freaks. A real guru will accept alms, but will never ask for money, or mention a fee.

Shakyamuni knew that part of human nature needs the existence of superior entities. In all of us, there is still a child who craves parental guidance. Mono- and polytheistic religions provide an array of mother and father figures.

Monotheistic religions are, in fact, crypto-polytheistic. Over the centuries Catholics, for instance, have elaborated a whole mythology : trinity, virgin Mary, angels, demons and saints. Catholics claim to be strictly monotheistic, but they frequently turn to mystical entities, asking them to intercede on their behalf. Sanctuaries are built, pilgrimages organized. One can even hear absurdities such as : “I have a particular affection for Our Lady of Fatima.” Is she then better than Our Lady of Lourdes ?

Judaism and Islam have angels and demons. Islam also has Marabouts, or holy men (never women, of course) on whose tombs one comes to pray and ask for good luck, money or fertility.

Shakyamuni clearly saw the danger. He tried to prevent it.

First, by reminding his disciples that gods did not exist.

Second, by saying that good and bad gods were no more, in fact, than our good or bad inner drives and urges. Some protecting entities, such as the Shoten Zenjins, derived from Hindu or Japanese mythology, represent our positive links with the Lotus. As for Celestial Kings, they embody Nature's mysterious forces. Unfortunately, the terms Shoten Zenjin and Celestial Kings are usually translated in the West by the term "deity". There are no deities in Buddhism. These so-called deities are nothing more than allegories, on the same level as those appearing in great statues or classical paintings : cardinal virtues or mortal sins in the Catholic church ; Peace, Freedom or

Victory in regal propaganda.

In their vast majority, Buddhists do not adhere to the idea of deities ; nor have they ever turned Shakyamuni into a god, thus the label of “atheist religion” often attached to Buddhism. The various schools of Buddhism (Hinayana, Mahayana, Tibetan, Zen, Forest or Nichiren) all share a common ground : compassion, tolerance, respect for others and trust in Shakyamuni’s teachings. It’s important to point out that if some Buddhists have kept a few former deities, it never resulted in the rise of contempt, condemnations, or of course, persecutions on the part of others. When scuffles have erupted (as in Viet-Nam among Bonzes) they were triggered by a few mistaken individuals, never by institutionalized religious directives.

Shakyamuni urged his followers not to turn him into a god after his death. As we know, it didn’t always work like that. For a minority of disciples, he soon became THE Buddha. Statues were erected, often showing him as a jolly, plump little man, when in fact he was very lean. Some people turned to him, asking for favors, such as wealth, success, etc. Old habits die hard.

There is worse : in countries like Viet-Nam, Burma, Cambodia and isolated Himalayan valleys, a minority of inhabitants have kept their old gods as well. Hedging their bets, I suppose...

In Tibet, less than a hundred years ago, the Dalai-Lama was seen as a living god, to the point that people wanted to drink his urine.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of Buddhists do not see Shakyamuni as a god.

There are many different schools of Buddhism, each one shaped by pre-existing geographical or cultural differences. The core of Buddhist teaching remains the same from one school to the next, and there has never been hatred between different schools. Sadly, some heads of state did not see it that way, and especially in Japan, tried (unsuccessfully) to unify their provinces by imposing Buddhism on the population.

Buddhist tolerance applies to non-Buddhist religious or political groups. When Chinese soldiers shoot Tibetans, the latter, at great cost to themselves, rush towards the

soldiers, take their rifles and break them. They never return fire.

By contrast, members of monotheistic religions, who are convinced that God himself has “enlightened” them, feel justified in condemning others, which opens the doors to all the excesses and horrors we’ve witnessed throughout History. Catholic persecutions of Protestants, Albigenses, Jews, or simply so-called witches, have sometimes been justified by the mentality of the times. Protestant persecutions of Catholics (and “witches”, also) were just as bad. Yet, Christ’s directives, uttered many centuries previously, and at a time when the mentality was no better, are clear : do not kill, and “let he who is without sin throw the first stone”. Never, whether in Roman times, or before, or after, has Buddhism engaged in a “holy” war.

Christianity is based on a dichotomy, i.e. the co-habitation of two contradictory concepts. Christ is both man and God. Mary is both a virgin and a mother. The main drawback of this approach resides in the fact that it allows casuists to wriggle out of many objections by saying : “Yes, but Christ was also a man” or “Yes, but he was also God.”

The advantages are that, for men of good will, a measure of flexibility is possible in the interpretation of the gospels. By constantly switching from one concept to its opposite, our minds get used to the idea of debate. We also get used to looking at opinions that are not necessarily ours, and analyzing them rather than rejecting them out of hand. Dichotomy becomes a fertile ground for artistic, musical, literary and architectural creations. Christian dichotomy is one of the engines driving western civilisation. The benefits of dichotomy, in spite of frequent episodes of persecution of scientists by the Vatican, are also evident in the realm of science, as long as we do not confuse science and technology.

By contrast, Islam is neither holistic nor dichotomist : it is monolithic. It makes no effort to unite all men in a common set of values. In the first few pages of the Quran, it is said repeatedly that Allah hates all infidels. Muslims believe that Allah dictated the Coran to Mohammed through the good offices of Archangel Gabriel. Questioning any line of the Coran is therefore blasphemous and punishable by death. There is no room for

tolerance in Islam.

In China, Buddhism became, at some point, rather elitist, to the extent of becoming Zen Buddhism, a form of Buddhism that was in danger of drifting away from the concerns of everyday life, and therefore reserved for those who dedicate themselves to monastic life. This is no longer the case

Zen Buddhism does not reject the Lotus, but is based mainly on the Sutra of the Cloth which was written by Shakyamuni's contemporaries. Why a cloth, or a tissue, or a material ? Because it can be washed. Its surface can be soiled but its inside can remain clean. If you can find a way of bringing that cleanliness from the inside to the outside, the cloth is purified. We can be soiled by avidity (which includes a desire for dichotomy), jealousy, vanity and arrogance, but this dirt can be washed away if we really want to.

The four foundations of Zen Buddhism are :

- Benevolence : a positive attitude towards others.
- Compassion : awareness of other people's sufferings.

- Empathy : ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Often, when tempted to criticize, we can dive deep into ourselves, and come to the conclusion that if we had been the person we criticize, we would have done exactly the same thing. Dale Carnegie capitalized on this concept in his seminal book : "How to make Friends and Influence People."
- Equanimity : acceptance of good and evil. This fourth foundation could have inspired the Greek school of Stoicism : Zeno of Citium, Epictetus and, in Rome, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, etc.

Zen's ethics are entirely a matter of intention.

Shakyamuni distanced himself clearly from Hinduism. However, in the early years of his spiritual search, he was influenced by a type of ascetic behavior that led him to embrace Jainism, but after a few years, during which he came close to dying of hunger, he gave up. Life, he concluded, is not a fight, an inner contradiction between good and evil : life is harmony. No need to deny the existence of evil, but it can be the soil in which good things will grow. The wonderful lotus flowers

can bloom on the surface of stinking swamps. That's why his thoughts are called The Lotus Sutra. It is possible to reach inner harmony and happiness in a world governed by poverty, sadism and greed.

To seek goodness is also to avoid the consequences of evil. Shakyamuni underwent this transformation when he turned thirty. He then started to preach the Law. Here, the word *Law* is not to be seen as directives to be followed under threat of judgment, condemnation and punishment, but in the way we talk about the laws of physics. Christ also started preaching at the age of thirty. Coincidence ?

By contrast, Christianity (whether Catholic or Protestant) is obsessed by the ideas of sex and the feeling of culpability. The anti-sexual attitudes of these two religions have prepared an ideal terrain for the development of inhibitions, neurosis, intolerance and violence.

Christians look forward to an eternity of reward or punishment in the afterlife, whereas Buddhists think that time does not exist (see explanation further on). For a

Buddhist, the consequences of evil-doing are both inevitable and instantaneous. Seeking perfection must be conducted without harshness, flagellation or guilt. If we choose Evil, we submit ourselves to mental torture. Therefore, to do the right thing is no longer an inner fight : it is the normal accomplishment of our identification with the universe.

For a Christian, to choose Evil triggers a feeling of culpability. Christian churches are so fond of spreading this feeling that they have come up with all sorts of “sins” that have nothing to do with the fundamental principle consisting in not doing any harm to others. This is what we often call victimless crimes, or taboos. The more taboos there are on clothing, food, but mostly on sex, the more the leaders of a given religion can control a population. It often works : Western civilisation was for centuries under the implacable grasp of the Catholic church. We were governed by anti-sex maniacs. Protestant churches, which should normally have rebelled against this attitude fare no better. In fact, they became, and remain to this day, somewhat hysterical about it. In America, an impressive section of the

population still behave as hypocritically as if they had no sexual organs or needs. Their motto could be : “We don’t talk about these things”.

Of course, through innate viciousness, selfishness and irresponsibility, it is possible to harm others in sexual situations, as it can indeed be done in financial, social, familial or working environments. The nature of Evil is not in sex but in the way we handle it (pun fully intended). Evil in any circumstance or environment can only be measured by the level of harm that is inflicted on other human beings and animals. Nowadays, Islam is the main culprit, controlling populations through taboos and threats.

For a Buddhist, doing something bad triggers a feeling of failure and even the conclusion that one has behaved like an idiot. Life is depicted as a structure made of good and bad wooden cubes. We are the result of everything good and bad we have ever done in our lives.

Buddhism does not present us with a list of forbidden actions or attitudes, a list which, in other religions, incites their clergy to drift into

all the horrors mentioned earlier. Buddhism gives us only one commandment, identical to that of the hippocratic oath : “Do no harm”.

Polytheism, then monotheism spring from a double need :

First, a need for explanation. Be it in response to thunder, echo, earthquakes, tides, the apparent movements of stars, but also birth, old age, pain and pleasure followed by death, primitive men did not understand what was going on, and in order to seek moral comfort, made up an entity (or entities) of a superior order.

Second, a need to feel secure, and also a need to follow a leader, a need that humans share with all social animals, be they wolves or cattle. It comes from some deep-seated evolutionary transmission. Someone must lead us, and tell us what to do. If things go wrong, that someone is also very handy : we can then turn against the leader. Most of the time, flesh and blood leaders are not very satisfactory, and so we adopt one of two favorite tactics : we either turn human leaders into gods (Pharaohs, Cesar, Stalin) or we make up leaders who hover beyond

our human condition, i.e. gods. They look and act like us ; they are male or female, good or bad, they take pity on us, become angry, and even, like Jehovah on the seventh day, they need a rest. We turn to these powerful gods, and ask them for all sorts of things. That's when con artists will claim that they enjoy a special relationship with the gods, and that they will help us get in touch with the heavens : religions are the greatest frauds ever perpetrated on the human race.

*

For Buddhism, as indeed for Jainism, we are all equal in terms of personal value : young, old, male, female, rich, poor, heads of state or slaves. Our true worth has nothing to do with our standing in society : it is measured by our actions. Christ redefined this notion by saying : “You judge a tree by its fruit.”

Taoism represents another influence on Buddhism, particularly the belief that there is neither difference nor incompatibility between the physical and mental worlds, an idea derived from yoga, with the result that Ayurveda and Taoist medicines, as well as reiki, were adopted by Buddhism.

Shakyamuni had hoped that one of his successors would streamline his teachings and make it easier to understand and adopt. He used to say that it would take about 2,000 years. That is what happened in the fifteenth century A.D. in Japan with Nichiren Daishonin. He “democratized” Buddhism and answered the question that many Buddhist sympathizers were asking : is it necessary to be a monk in order to be a good Buddhist ? The answer is obviously : no.

Not so long ago, the various forms of Buddhism were called sects. By itself, the term is perfectly honorable, but like the word *guru*, it was hijacked in the twentieth century by sinister individuals. For a long time, the French government classified Nichiren Buddhism as a sect. Those well-intentioned elected officials who expected to discover financial extortion, kidnappings, brainwashing and mass suicides must have been very disappointed. Parliament abolished this absurd directive in 1998. Nowadays, to avoid this sort of misunderstanding, we talk about *schools*. Tibetan Buddhists use the term “way”. Shakyamuni used to say : I am the way. So

did Christ : I am the way, I am the truth and I am life.

After dealing with the problems of monotheism and polytheism, Shakyamuni tackled the issue of rites and rituals. He realized that they are a necessity for (and of) human nature. And indeed, each Buddhist school has its own set of rituals. As Matthieu Ricard used to say : “Blowing into a 5-meter long wooden horn does not turn you into a Buddhist, but there is no harm in it.”

Rituals act both as a repellent and a cement. They act as a repellent because the rituals of any given religion are considered profoundly ridiculous by adepts of other religions, or by those without a religion at all. Who can honestly say that he hasn't felt a mixture of pity and amusement at the sight of some religious rituals ? Thinking back to my childhood, I can clearly remember the catholic guffaws tinged with contempt (and indeed hatred) at the Buddhist idea of a prayer wheel or a prayer flag ; also at the sight of rain dances by Amerindians.

Rituals, however, can also act as a cement. A human being feels the need to observe

that he is not the only one to think or act in a certain way. Unfortunately, rituals can easily turn into taboos.

Rituals act as confirmation to our identity. A Catholic who is attending mass is confirmed in his catholic identity. For a Protestant, belonging to a particular church, whatever it may be, often provides great comfort. Nichiren Buddhism asks followers to read one or two passages from the Lotus (passages chosen by Nichiren himself) every day in front of an inscription: *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo*. They are written in Chinese ideograms, and pronounced in Japanese*. For Nichiren Buddhism, written Chinese was a sort of lingua franca allowing followers to meditate together, regardless of their native language. It works to this day.

*Chinese and Japanese share the same ideograms, but not the same vocabulary. It is as if a single ideogram meant *chien* in French, *hunt* in German, *perro* in Spanish and *dog* in English. At some point in History, Chinese could have become an international written language. Lately however, Chinese and Japanese ideograms have drifted apart under pressure from westernization.

Unlike other spiritual movements, Buddhism never clashed with science. Because it seeks to understand what's going on, science is a form of awakening. Through very recent research on brain functions, we now know that rituals of any religion create a feeling of peace by way of a light secretion of alkaloids in the neurons. Buddhism does not have a problem with that, or with the theories of evolution, or again with the possibility of intelligent life on other planets ; something that would send Christians into a panic. Jesuits would discourse beautifully about it, but would never manage to convince anyone that the creator of the unimaginably vast universe would have decided, at some point, to materialise and be tortured on a microscopic spec of a planet in order to "save" men without taking into account those born beforehand or those from the planet Zog. The standard answer is that God does anything he wants ; which, once again would imply that we know the intimate nature and intentions of a purely hypothetical entity. Some people, of course, claim that they are privy to these things. We are back to the pack of lies spread by so-called "revelations". If, one day, it should be

discovered that there are parallel universes, we would have total acceptance from Buddhism and total disarray in other religions.

This does not imply that there is no God. The mysterious energy that, over a few million years, changes lava into composers, scientists and writers could be seen as something that permeates the universe, keeping in mind, however, that nearly all lives, animal and human, end in distressing pain. In fact, we just don't know. We must have the courage, the honesty and the humility to say : "I don't know" ; courage, humility and honesty that monotheistic, "revealed" religions do not possess. Their unyielding attitude has never stopped them from accusing science of being arrogant. Of course, it should not be too hard to find arrogant scientists here and there, but arrogance as a characteristic is not on the side of science.

By erasing differences between the physical and mental worlds, and by erasing also the idea of creation, Buddhism initiated a mystic revolution. "When we can no longer talk about adoration, we are left with what is"

wrote the Greco-Egyptian philosopher Plotinus around the year 300a.d.; and he went on : “By contemplating what is divine in myself, I contemplate what is divine in the universe.” Who inspired these thoughts ? Shakyamuni could not have said it better. In 1600, Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake by the Vatican after publishing similar theories. Galileo came very close, and avoided the pyre only by “admitting” the error of his ways. “Eppur si muove !” he muttered after he was “pardoned” .

Buddhism also started a sociological revolution on two levels :

First, as I said, by looking at poverty and equality in a new light. In all societies preceding Shakyamuni, poverty had been despised and considered an evil condition that had to be avoided at all cost. This point of view is still widespread.

According to Shakyamuni, poverty is the normal condition of mankind. Unconsciously many people are drawn towards poverty with a sort of unhealthy, masochistic fascination. They are financially allright to start with, but get into debts until they effectively become

poor. As Dickens also pointed out, they forget that it is less stressful to have little than to be in debt. Epicurus and Diogenes used to say the same thing. Epicurus (circa 300 b.c.) : “Do not spoil what you have by yearning for what you have not.”

In China, around 550a.d. Chih-i, the founder of the Tien T'ai school of Buddhism, used to say : “When you don't have what you like, you must like what you have”. This saying is often misunderstood in the West. It is taken as meaning : “When you don't have what you like, you must put up with what you have.” In fact, what Chih-i meant was : “When you don't have what you like, you must love deeply, and fully appreciate what you already have.” “I was angry because I didn't have shoes,” said Shakyamuni “and then I met a man who had no feet.” More recently, a man who had belonged to the French Resistance, was about to be shot by a German firing squad at the end of WW2 when Patton's tanks roared into his village. The Germans fled. The man went to live in a small house in the middle of nowhere and became self-sufficient among his pigeons, chickens, rabbits and vegetable garden. His visitors would often ask : “Don't you get bored here,

all by yourself ?” and he would answer “How can you get bored with being alive ?”

Wealthy people, i.e. those who never need to borrow money, become poor in other ways : loneliness, selfishness, paranoia, boredom, conflicts, etc. As in a sauna, when we go from cold to hot and back to cold, the rich alternate between two contradictory environments.

On the one hand, they lose themselves in what they see as pleasures : shopping sprees, night clubs, cocktail parties where they mix with people like themselves, and seek the acquaintance of celebrities or members of royal families.

On the other hand, they look for idyllic places such as tropical beaches, palm trees, peaceful mountain slopes overlooking a lake... but they keep getting bored.

These people have forgotten – or rather never realized – that you can move about, in a geographic sense, but you can never move out of yourself. Princess Margaret was a good example. Her face was hard and prematurely old. Like all spoiled children, she was eaten up from the inside by the **cancer of permanent dissatisfaction**. As Ibsen

used to say : “The rich know how to have fun, but they don’t know how to be happy.”

As for equality, Shakyamuni and his successors truly revolutionized the mentality of at least part of the population. Before his times, it was taken for granted that the rich were more important than the poor, men more important than women, and adults more important than children. This mentality is still widespread. Shakyamuni used to say that we must see the Buddha (i.e. the capacity for awakening) in everyone, a concept also preached by the Catholic Church (but so rarely applied over the centuries !) consisting in seeing Christ in every person. Hilaire Belloc was mocked and criticized for speaking to children as if they had been adults ; but children adored him.

Despite some people’s scandalized reaction, Shakyamuni asked his aunt to join his disciples. The great Vietnamese pagoda in Paris is run by a woman. Behind this social revolution lies another, even deeper revolution : the importance of compassion. The feeling was well known, but only in relation to friends, family and loved ones. For all others, the main guidelines were those of

domination and submission. These guidelines are still the norm in politics, international diplomacy, all the way down to workplace conflicts. Yet, in our contemporary societies, compassion plays a part that was unknown in antiquity. We rally, for instance, to help those who fall victim to natural catastrophes or war.

Indeed, if we are all part of the universe, it follows that we are all part of each other. Wishing others well is almost selfish : it bounces back towards us. In his 1930's ground-breaking book : "How to make friends and influence people", Dale Carnegie gives example after concrete example of failing businesses that have been turned around and become successful when the boss expressed compassion and respect for the workforce. In spite of its ridiculous title (it seriously damaged its reputation), Carnegie's book was the first of its kind ever published, and even though bookshops now display shelf after shelf of self-help books, it is still the best.

Jesus developed Shakyamuni's concept of compassion, stressing that expressing love for one's family and friends is not very

original, and so he encouraged his followers to express love and respect for all human beings, even those who are evil. Shakyamuni had included animals.

The idea of universal compassion was as incongruous, revolutionary, and even scandalous in 30a.d. Israel as it had been in 730b.c. India. It was in direct opposition to the insensitive and domineering attitude of the Romans.

To do harm to others is to do harm to oneself. Our human nature's need for a leader – a need that instigated polytheism and monotheism – means that some of us want to become our leaders and oppressors. This tendency permeates everyday life : malicious gossips, tailgating drivers, louts who mock passers-by in public, school bullies, etc. It soon escalates to domestic violence, kidnapping, robberies and murder. In our times, Islam wants to conquer and dominate the whole world (they call it Oumma).

Lowlifes, crooks, religious fanatics, ne'er do well and criminals think that they have no conscience and no remorse. They are quite

wrong : they are devoured from the inside. They don't laugh : they can only jeer, snigger or utter loud, inane, raucous, hyena-like sounds. As for their lack of compassion for others, they compensate by feeling sorry for themselves. They see themselves as victims, and can't understand why they shouldn't be allowed to steal, aggress, bully, dominate, control and rob. Society, they feel, is most unfair towards them. They have, in the end, manufactured their own hell on earth.

Christ developed this revolutionary and essentially Buddhist notion : "What you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do for me".

In short, do not do to others what you would not like others to do to you. Christ added : Do to others what you would like them to do to you. Those with a twisted mind, like myself, cannot help thinking : "When I see a pretty girl going down the street, if I did to her what I'd like her to do to me, I would probably end up in jail."

The Catholic Church put forward the concept of trinity, and made it an article of faith. For Buddhists, it is only a symbol. Shakyamuni's

successors used to say that he had been at the same time :

1. A king. Spiritually speaking, king of his disciples, but realistically a potential king, since he had twice been asked to become Maharaja.

Christ, the Catholic trinity's "son", is sometimes called "Christ, the King", with a special day of celebration on the last Sunday in November. Many among Christ's contemporaries wanted him to become king of Israel.

2. A father. Again, father of his disciples. For Catholics : father in the Trinity.

3. A teacher. For Catholics : the holy spirit.

Shakyamuni had specifically asked not to be deified. Christ never asked to be, but then neither did he say "I am God". His deification was decided by a majority vote of bishops at the Nicaea Council of 325 on specific orders from Emperor Constantine. The early

councils also reduced the 30 or so gospels available at the time to only four, after slashing passages that didn't suit the bishops. Council after council, the Catholic Church kept inventing, building and organizing its canons : sacraments, mortal and venial sins, grace, a week by week liturgy, an impressive collection of vestments, missals, catechism, processions, litanies, rosary, pilgrimages, relics, condemnation of heretics, persecution of dissidents, priests' celibacy, church hierarchy, indulgences, Mary's virginity, immaculate conception and assumption, all the way to the decree of papal infallibility at the 1870 Vatican Council : a huge, elaborate body of rules, interdictions and beliefs that is now crumbling under its own weight.

Towards the end of his life, Shakyamuni gathered his disciples. He exuded such inner peace and happiness that this ecstasy became contagious. Witnesses said that it was as if a column of fire had ascended among them. In the gospels, this episode became the transfiguration. When telling the story of Shakyamuni's death, was Christ ever aware that it would eventually apply to him ?

And now what about the contentious idea of reincarnation ?

There are indeed Buddhists who firmly believe in metempsychosis. However, if we consider that the world population has more than doubled over the last fifty years, reincarnation is mathematically absurd. Example : the population of a country like France went from 12 million at the end of the Roman empire to 80 million nowadays. If reincarnation was a fact, it would imply that every person who was alive in 450 was reincarnated into 20 different bodies over the last 2,000 years.

What is far less fanciful is that every atom of our bodies has always existed, and will always exist in one form or another. During our lifetime, atoms in our bodies are constantly renewed and replaced ; every six weeks for some soft tissues ; every fourteen years for lungs and bones. We have a tendency to think of ourselves as well-defined entities, whereas we are as unstable, elusive, undefinable and temporary as dust devils. With the help or hostility of billions of bacteria, we are the food we eat,

but we are also the food that other organisms will eat. Some of these organisms don't even wait for our death. We are made out of billions of heterogeneous elements which, when we die, go their own ways : we literally de-compose.

Besides : what is an atom ? Not for the first time, science came to the rescue of some Buddhist intuitions. In their attitude towards science, Buddhists never considered its condemnation. As they go deeper and deeper into the nature of atoms, scientists find that they are made of unsubstantial particles of energy. The word "energy" is a catch-all term which shows how powerless we are at giving it an acceptable definition. The same could be said about understanding who we are and what the universe is made of. We are so totally integrated in the universe that Sigmund Freud's "ego" does not exist. We are like a drop of water : it cannot be differentiated from the river in which it flows.

Talking of energy, Taoists had long observed that a mysterious force seeps out of some people's hands. It's the famous Reiki which, at times, can cure illnesses by the laying of

hands, but without touching the patient. Christ's miracles remind us of Reiki, and are yet another element reinforcing the influence of Buddhism on him.

Some cultural habits were also inherited from Buddhism. Hard to say how or when. Tibetan lamas, for instance, are amazed to observe that the Carthusian monks' daily routine is exactly the same as theirs.

Another unconscious cultural influence is the legend of the overcoat. A Lama will wear half a dark red or yellow coat that covers the left shoulder, but leaves the right shoulder bare. According to legend, Shakyamuni and his brother Amana, while dressed only in rags, met a soldier clad in a big, red coat. The soldier took his sword, cut his coat through in two halves, and gave one half to each of the vagrants. In the Catholic Church, Saint Martin (also the worst vandal of prehistoric and Roman sites imaginable) divided his coat into halves to share it with two beggars. Still a coincidence ?

As they say in the Police : when there are too many coincidences, that's no coincidence.

We are everything that came before us, and everything that will come after us. Hard not to reach the conclusion that time does not exist, a highly abstract and arduous concept. Astrophysicists agree : according to them, only movement exists. Time is but an abstract, convenient, mathematical concept.

“The future is already here. Past, present and future have always been here, linked together in a non-temporal reality meaning that the universe has no actual history. We invent its history. Time is only in our minds. As we move, and feel that time is real for ourselves, we think that time exists also for the universe”. (Etienne Klein’s “The Quest for Unity”, Oxford University Press, 1999).

This is undoubtedly a very abstract approach, but also one that can be linked to the idea of reincarnation. It is, one must admit, a very western-style view.

Who and what are we, then ? We are a wave in the ocean. Every drop of that wave was already in the ocean before the wave was formed, and will go back to the ocean when the wave disappears. The wave is a fleeting happening unconsciously belonging to a

whole.

Happiness and unhappiness derive from a choice : doing harm to others influences everything else. Evil is like a boomerang, coming back to hurt us.

There is a chasm between :

- a) On the one hand the Christian notion of “resisting temptation”, i.e. fighting against oneself, applying torture onto oneself, leading to neurosis and despair, and...
- b) On the other hand, choosing good over evil, in order to be in harmony with the universe.

There is another chasm between :

- a) On the one hand calling on external deities for help or forgiveness, and...
- b) On the other hand, meditating in order to find out within ourselves why we should behave properly towards other people, and therefore remain in harmony with the universe.

That's why one must discard the fairly popular notion saying that you can be both a Christian and a Buddhist. You cannot feel that you are part of the universe, and at the same time feel that you are separate from the universe.

You cannot, as a Christian, think of yourself as a superior and unique being for whom your God, also separate from his creation, had decided to suffer, while, at the same time, seeing yourself as existing in harmony with the universe.

One can, of course, seek refuge in the teachings of Christ that are so often inspired by those of Shakyamuni. Christ was immersed in Shakyamuni's thought, but let's not forget that Saint Paul, the other major figure in the birth of the Catholic Church, was immersed in Roman, Greek and Egyptian cultures. Indeed, he WAS a Roman citizen. Paul wanted the new converts to think of Christ as the new Osiris. According to Egyptian mythology, Osiris was born of a virgin (Isis) whom he later married. He was then killed by his brother Seti (like Abel by Cain), and finally resuscitated. Born of a virgin, killed by his brother and resuscitated :

rings a few bells, doesn't it ?

The myth of Osiris was so powerful and so well-known in the Egyptian-Greco-Roman world of the first century AD, that seeing Jesus as the second Osiris gave him some respectability, continuity and authenticity. Converting Gentiles (i.e. non Jews) was Saint Paul's main concern. Let's not forget that the last Pharaoh, Ptolemy XV, had died only in 30 b.c. The wonderful Egyptian temples were still intact. The great library of Alexandria will disappear only at the fall of the Roman Empire, with arson in 272 and a second (more "successful") attempt later.

Reinforcing the parallel with Osiris, is an episode in the life of Rameses II, who saw himself as the reincarnation of Osiris. When he thought he was about to lose the battle of Kadesh, Rameses addressed Ra, the sun : "You are my father. I am your son. Why did you forsake me ?" After winning the battle or, as historians point out, not losing it, Rameses had his prayer engraved on the frieze illustrating the battle. On the cross, Christ is supposed to have said : "Father, father, why did you forsake me?" Inspired by Rameses II, the bible had already used that

sentence in Psalm 22.

For Jesus suddenly to identify with Osiris, makes no sense. It is far more likely that his chroniclers used that sentence to influence the gentiles into thinking that Jesus was of divine lineage. After all, his contemporaries had never heard of Shakyamuni but were well acquainted with Osiris.

Meditation : Nam Myoho Renge Kyo.

I am like a wave that did not exist, that exists now, and that will no longer exist, but the drops of water in that wave had always been part of the ocean, and always will be.

I am the result of all the good I've done, but also of all the bad.

I don't understand the universe, but I am conscious that I am part of it. I am both infinitesimal and universal. I don't understand the notion of time, but I know that I am part of it. I am both an impermanent structure and a collection of permanent elements.

Parables :

The prodigal son :

The son of a rich man decided to leave his family and roam the countryside. (There could have been an autobiographical element here, since that is precisely what Shakyamuni had done.) Anyway, a few years later, emaciated and in rags, the son stumbled upon a new property his father had bought. The father had aged considerably, and the son did not recognize him, but the father recognized his son. He employed him for a series of menial tasks, such as cleaning toilets and emptying cesspits. Little by little, father and son became closer, and the prodigal son inherited the family's wealth and estates.

Shakyamuni said that even if you reject Buddhism, the love that Buddhists feel for other human beings can still help you.

The rain. When rain falls, it's the same for all plants, big and small. Buddhism is the same for everyone : it helps all human beings according to their capacity for acceptance and understanding. In the gospels, this concept becomes the parable of the cups : the important thing being to fill the cup, not to have a big or a small cup. Unfortunately, this symbolism generated the controversy about

grace, which in turn resulted in endless rivalries between Jesuits and Jansenists.

The hidden diamond : A wealthy man took pity on a vagrant. He inserted a diamond in his coat lining. A few years later, the rich man came across the same vagrant, still desperately poor, and still with the same coat. He enquired about the diamond, and realized that the vagrant had never found it. Shakyamuni said that Buddhism is hidden in all of us. Up to us to find it.

Gospel : the parable of the three talents.

Parable of the arrow : He who fights for a cause, stops thinking about the cause when hit by an arrow. All he wants to do is remove the arrow. Shakyamuni said that we must concentrate on what is essential. Gospels : the parable of a donkey that fell into a well.

Parable of the 5 blind people : Five blind people are made to touch different parts of an elephant without being told what it is. They are then asked to describe what they touched. Results : we've got a brush, a

sponge, a wall, a column and a wing. Shakyamuni said that our five senses are not enough to apprehend reality. Only those minds touched by Buddhism can accept their own ignorance. Three hundred years later, Socrates used to say : “The only thing I know for certain, is that I don’t know anything”.
Gospels : The blind leading the blind.

Parable of the humble man : In his village, Shuddhi Panthaka was considered a simpleton. Yet, by the time he was old, he was revered in the whole province as a wise man. Devadatta, by contrast, was brilliant. He boasted that he could learn 60,000 lines by heart ; and yet, he started to associate with shady characters, and ended up as a murderer. Gospels : The Pharisee and the Publican. Also, in the Sermon on the Mount : “Blessed are the poor in spirit : for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” and (Matthew 20/16) “The first shall be last”.

A frequent remark on the part of those who reject the influence of Buddhism out of hand, is that all religions have a lot in common. This is partly true of Hinduism, which precedes Buddhism but absolutely not true of religions

that came after. Someone even suggested to me that Buddhism had been inspired by Christianity ! With Christ preaching 700 years after Shakyamuni, that would be quite a feat !

One last thought from Shakyamuni : “As a drop of dew eventually returns to the ocean, so should you welcome death.”