A. L. Herman **A solution to the paradox of desire in Buddhism**

If one of the chief aims, if not the only aim, of Buddhism is the cessation of desire and desiring then two questions immediately arise: first, what is the nature of this desire that is to be eliminated? and, second, how does one go about the business of eliminating it? Both questions are central not only to the Buddhist and even the Hindu traditions but to any philosophy or religion that holds that desire per se is a barrier to ultimate human happiness. Furthermore, all of these traditions face the same paradox in their endeavors to explain the process of the elimination of desire, namely, the paradox of desire.

If I desire to cease desiring then I have not ceased all desire after all; I have merely replaced one species of desiring by another. The paradox of desire points to the practical contradiction or frustration involved in the desire to stop all desiring and states simply that those who desire to stop all desiring will never be successful.

"Desire" can be taken to mean any lusting or craving after that which one does not now possess. Desiring generally entails wanting any object or condition that is absent at the time of the wanting. But desiring may also entail any wanting, needing, or wishing for what one already has, for example, wanting the present object or condition to continue into the future. One of the strong emotions that fuels desire, therefore, is the fear of not attaining what is presently absent or the fear of losing what is honestly at hand. In either case it is the fear of the absence or the threatened absence of an object or condition that produces desire, and the greater the fear of not achieving or not retaining the object or condition, the more intense is the desire. Thus anxiety and fear play a major role in defining the nature and intensity of desire.

Intense desires are called "lusts" while weaker desires are called "needs." Desires for sex and property may be called "lusts" while desires for food, shelter, and clothing may be called "needs." But these categories can change with the circumstances. For example, if I regularly enjoy the sexual attentions of my four wives, my lusts may shrivel to near zero. In fact satisfying my lusts as well as satisfying my desires, in general, are surely bona fide ways of eliminating desire, at least temporarily. For example, the hedonist has found a way to attaining the control and cessation of desire; he simply gives in to all of them—and this method works as long as his body and mind remain active and healthy. Further, if I am starving and naked, my desire for food and clothing ceases to be merely a need and may in fact become a lust. The Marxists and the other contemporary economic levelers have found ways to attain the cessation of desire by redistributing the economic goods of our society; and this method, too, works as long as there are sufficient goods to be leveled.

The Buddhists have discovered, however, that neither hedonism nor leveling gets at the root cause of desiring. The satisfaction of desire does not prevent

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desire for other absent objects or conditions from arising in the future. The Buddhist solution does not lie in manipulating external objects, but rather it lies in manipulating internal states of consciousness by cutting off the fuel of desire and by blowing out the flame of desire, once and for all. But such manipulation of internal and subjective states of consciousness brings us back once again to the paradox of desire.

To solve the paradox of desire, we must turn our attention to the nature of desire itself, and to the several kinds of desire involved in desiring and to its cessation.

Let me begin by distinguishing between three types of desire to which the paradox of desire seems to be pointing. First, there is the most important desire, namely, the desire for desirelessness, ("desire$_1$"). Second, there is the desire in desirelessness, namely, the desire we are trying to eliminate ("desire$_2$"). Finally, there is the desire that is the result of desiring desirelessness, that is, the type of desire that the desire$_1$ for desire$_2$-lessness produces ("desire$_3$"). Thus, the first of four premises of the paradox of desire states:

1. Desire$_1$ for desire$_2$-lessness leads to desire$_3$.

Desire$_1$ may be intense (a lust), or it may be weak (a need), depending on the perseverence, passion, and history of the devotee. Desire$_2$ is the desire that we have been speaking of above, namely, the lusts, cravings, and needs of ordinary existence that lead to the suffering and misery that the Buddha spoke to so eloquently. The condition that desire$_1$ attempts to achieve, of course, is the eradication of this desire$_2$. But this desire$_1$ for desire$_2$-lessness leads in turn to desire$_3$, a species of desire that is merely the result of the juxtaposition of the two previous desires. The question that remains to be answered now, of course, is: what is the nature of desire$_3$?

The paradox of desire would lead us to believe that desire$_1$ is not ultimately different from desire$_2$ and that the resultant desire, desire$_3$, is also not ultimately different from desire$_2$. Hence, the paradox of desire assumes that no matter what I do I can never completely eliminate some species or other of desire$_2$, that is, the desire that we wanted to eliminate in the first place. Of course, one way out of the paradox would be to argue strenuously that desire$_1$ and desire$_3$ are ultimately different from desire$_2$; or, more to the point, that desire$_1$ or desire$_3$ are not desires at all, or not really bad desires, but rather good and useful desires. But we reject this, primarily because the Buddhists themselves seem to reject it: desire, by whatever subscripts it happens to be disguised, is still desire.

Another way out is simply to accept the paradox of desire and then see what happens. And what happens involves us with two other premises necessary to the paradox:

2. Desire$_1$ is a species of desire$_2$.

That is to say, desire$_1$ for the condition of desirelessness is really a desire$_2$, pure and simple.

3. Desire$_3$ is a species of desire$_2$.

That is to say, ultimate desire$_3$ that results from desire$_1$ for desire$_2$-lessness is also just another desire$_2$, pure and simple. But then the paradox is shown fully and completely by this fourth and final step in the argument:

4. But if desire$_1$ and desire$_3$ are merely species of desire$_2$ then desire$_2$-lessness is impossible.

Thus the paradox of desire which says that it is impossible to eliminate desire$_2$ since it would continue to exist as either desire$_1$ or desire$_3$. The "impossibility" spoken of here may be a logical impossibility, that is, it may be self-contradictory to desire a condition of desirelessness, or it may be a practical impossibility, that is, it may be self-frustrating to desire a condition of desirelessness. In what follows I want to focus on this practical impossibility or practical contradiction entailed by the paradox of desire and show that, for Buddhism, this is a very salutary contradiction, indeed.

Realizing the practical contradiction that desirelessness can never be attained, because desiring desirelessness produces desire, leads to two consequences: in the first place realizing the contradiction produces frustration in the devotee. Lusting after or needing that which is practically (that is, in practice) impossible to attain produces frustration and with it misery and suffering. The devotee has backed himself into a corner from which there is no practical way out.

If there is no practical way out, and if the frustration that results is a sign of there being no way out, then of course it makes no sense to advise devotees to stop desiring or to remove the objects of desire in order to stop the desiring. What then can a devotee do? And what is the use of Buddhism if it merely points out the contradictions, logical and practical, in the paradox of desire and then leaves one in the paradox? In other words, even if we grant the contradictions in the paradox of desire, what is to be done? The answer is: nothing is to be done; there is nothing one can do because nothing can be done, and that is precisely what Mādhyamika Mahāyāna Buddhism has been saying all along.

In the second place, realizing the practical contradiction (that is, truly understanding the import of 4, herein, namely, that there is no solution to the paradox of desire) leads to *nirvāṇa*. Stated as a fifth and final stage this conclusion would look like this:

5. Realizing the truth of 4 is tantamount to achieving *nirvāṇa*.

That is to say, seeing that there is no way out of the paradox of desire, understanding that, as Mādhyamika Buddhism puts it, there is no way to *nirvāṇa*,

no goal to be desired or achieved, then one "lets go" of the way and the goal. And that "letting go" leads to, or is, *nirvāṇa*: For once the devotee realizes that there is nothing that he can do then there is nothing left to be done.

Thus a philosophical argument leads to rational insight and that insight leads to, or is, *nirvāṇa*. "Letting go," after all, is the condition of desirelessness, and it is achieved following the frustration of knowing that it cannot be achieved, that is, it cannot be regarded as a goal to be striven for, worked for, sought after—in a word, desired. Hence it is not a question of "damned if you do and damned if you don't" but rather 'damned if you do but saved if you don't.' And that 'don't-ing' is not the result of conscious lusting or needing. It is the result of giving up altogether.

The impatient critic might ask at this juncture: what is the point of all the Buddhist texts, philosophies, theories, and injunctions, if at the end we are told merely, 'Let it all go'? The point, of course, is that these were all necessary to bring one to the realization that they are not at all necessary to *nirvāṇa*—something the devotee could not know until he had been through all the texts, philosophies, theories, and injunctions. As a child and before I could walk I had to toddle (if that is what toddlers do), and before I could toddle I had to crawl. I do not cry out with impatience, "Why did I have to crawl and toddle? Why could not I have walked to begin with?" More to the point, the texts, philosophies, and theories all helped to back me into the corner that I found myself in; in other words, the paradox had to be experienced before escape from it was possible. The philosophic realization was necessary before the rational insight was possible, and that rational insight, namely, that there is no way out, was necessary before "letting go" could occur, and "letting go" was necessary before *nirvāṇa* was possible. This is not to suggest, of course, that this is the only way to *nirvāṇa*; the Mahāyāna Buddhists have other "techniques" as well for the attainment of *nirvāṇa*: Just as a child might not go through the crawling and toddling stages but suddenly one day rise up from the cradle and spontaneously walk, or, with the help of a parent a child might walk without going through the crawling and toddling stages. But this philosophic realization as a solution to the paradox of desire is the method that ultimately passes through China in the first or second centuries A.D. as a heritage from Mādhyamika or Śūnyavāda Buddhism and finds its home eventually in Japan, somewhat altered and improved, where it becomes known as Zen Buddhism.