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# Effort and Grace in Relationship with the Transcendent in Buddhism

## Introduction

In this paper, I study not so much the nature of the Transcendent in and of itself (of course as understood by Buddhists) but rather the means of reaching the Transcendent in some schools of living Buddhism.

The great German mystic Nicholas of Cusa wrote of the coming together of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*) in God. However, I think this coming together of opposites is also true of our relationship with God or the Transcendent, for instance, by bringing together effort and grace. Different approaches regard effort and grace as well as colour to be the concept of the Transcendent or some aspects of It.

Even though Western scholars and Eastern Buddhist scholars use the term “grace” in reference to Pure Land Buddhism, which gives importance to other-power (Japanese *tariki* 他力), I am aware that the use of the word “grace” in Buddhism may be controversial.

## Reaching *Nibbāna* in Theravāda

Although Theravāda does not accept the existence of a God or Supreme Being, like every religion, it has some Absolute or Sacred which, in Theravāda, is the State of Liberation or *Nibbāna*. It is described negatively, i.e., what it is not, e.g., there is no craving, suffering, etc.; and positively, for instance, it is a state of peace, permanent bliss, the supreme state. However, in the ultimate analysis, it is indescribable. The theory of dependent co-production (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), speaks of twelve conditions. When one has managed to get rid of these conditions, one reaches the Unconditioned, i.e., *Nibbāna*. Hence, *Nibbāna* is Transcendent. As the Buddha declared in the *Udāna*:

Were there not, O monks, this unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, unformed, there would be no escape from the world of the born, originated, created.

On his deathbed the Buddha advised *attadīpā viharatha*: be islands (lamps) unto yourselves; be a refuge to yourselves (*attasaraṇā*), do not take refuge in others

(*aññasaraṇā*). In Theravāda one has to make quite a lot of effort to reach *Nibbāna*. The Pāli Scriptures use words like *padhāna*, *virīya*, *vāyāma* and *ussāha* – all refer to effort. A person needs to resort to a good deal of resolute effort (*ātāpi*) to cultivate various requisites on the way to *Nibbāna*. The term *saddhā* (‘faith’ or, rather, confidence) has completely different connotations compared to the understanding of faith in theistic religions like Christianity, and *paññā* (wisdom) is much higher. In lists of virtues required for *Nibbāna*, *saddhā* is a preliminary virtue: in fact, it is not one of the limbs of the eight-fold path and at times may prove to be an obstacle to attain liberation. On the other hand, *paññā* is the highest virtue, the grand finale: in fact, an Arahant has *paññā*, but is *assadho* (without faith). However, the effort should be balanced: neither insufficient nor excessive.

There are three grades among those who attain liberation in Theravāda: the Arahant (Worthy Person), the Paccekabuddha (Separately or Individually or Privately Enlightened One) and the Buddha (Enlightened One). All three involve a long process of rigorous striving.

## Traces of Devotion in Theravāda?

In the *Ti-saraṇa* (Three Refuges), taking refuge in the Buddha, in particular, has been interpreted by some as a tangent from the path of effort alone. Some try to refute this charge by mentioning that when Gopaka-Moggallāna asks whether Gotama has designated anyone who would take his place as refuge, after his passing away, Ānanda replies in the negative. However, this does not refute the statement that the Buddha was a refuge while he was living. To this, Buddhaghosa responds,

taking refuge (*saraṇāgamana*) consists of the arising of thought brought about by conducting oneself in accordance with the Triad, having the Triad as the goal characterized by the destruction of defilements [...].

He says there are two types of *saraṇa*: the first is transcendental (*lokuttara*), which aims at attaining *Nibbāna*; and the second is worldly (*lokiya*) which is directed towards the qualities of the Buddha (but not to the Buddha), the Dhamma and the Saṅgha. So thus far, he does not understand “refuge” as personal devotion to the person of the Buddha. However, in his list of four kinds of refuge, he includes adoration (*paṇipāta*). So one can see here some influence from the devotional tradition.

In the *Milindapañho*, a non-canonical but orthodox text, Nāgasena is asked whether a morally bad person could attain salvation if that person believed in the Buddha just before death. Nāgasena's reply is that even a very heavy stone would float if placed on a ship. In such passages there seems to be some tinge of faith, in addition to effort. Still, in spite of all the extraordinary qualities that the Buddha had, orthodox Theravāda regarded him as a human being.

However, the Pāli commentaries and some later texts tend to look on the Buddha as a superhuman being. For instance, as a Bodhisatta he descended from the Tusita heaven into his mother's womb, although she had not had sexual intercourse. Ten months later he emerged from her womb not only unblemished, but also stretching out his arms and legs. Buddhaghosa says that the bodies of Buddhas never decompose. In spite of the reference to the Buddha's wrinkled aging skin in the *Jarāsutta*, Buddhaghosa explains that there was just a single wrinkle, the width of a hair, between his shoulders, and which was seen only by Ānanda.

## Reaching *Nirvāṇa* in Mahāyāna

According to Mahāyāna, *Nirvāṇa*, as the Theravādins point out, is a state in which there is no rebirth, a state of eternal bliss. However, since Mahāyāna believes that there is only One Reality, *Nirvāṇa* consists in one's realizing that one was, is, and always will be identical with this one Reality, which is called by different names, such as Body of Essence (*Dharmakāya*), etc.

Mahāyāna claims that the Śrāvakas, their term for the Theravādins, accomplish only some of the way along the path to *Nirvāṇa*. They realize only the non-substantiality of the individual series of existence (*pudgalanairātmya*), but do not realize the non-substantiality of all things in the universe (*dharmanairātmya*), other than the Absolute Reality. In contrast, Mahāyānists are capable of acquiring both realizations.

## The *Bodhisattva* Path (*bodhisattvamārga*)

On the *bodhisattva*-path (*bodhisattvamārga*), in general, *bodhisattvas* have to go through ten stages (*bhūmis*), specializing in one virtue or perfection (*pāramitā*) in each stage. This may go on for aeons. The *bodhisattva* may also slip down to a lower stage and then struggle again to advance further. Only after entering into the eighth stage, is it smooth sailing. However, the ideal is to delay one's salvation in order to help others attain salvation. This delay is done through

the *bodhisattva*'s wisdom (*prajñā*). So the *bodhisattvamārga* is an arduous one, involving long and difficult terrain, i.e., it implies a great deal of effort.

Among other things, the *bodhisattva* spends long hours in meditation (*dhyāna*). Early Buddhism in India adopted the meditational techniques of Yoga. Some techniques of meditation were brought to China from India, e.g., breath-control and visualization. The *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* consists mainly of a dialogue between the Buddha and the *bodhisattva* Mahāmāti. Their questions and answers display irrational or illogical aspects. This may have been the precursor of the Chinese *gōng'àn* or Japanese *kōan*. With regard to attaining enlightenment, the Buddha answers, in this same *sūtra*, that sometimes it takes place immediately, sometimes gradually. The two meditation schools of China and Japan have their origin pre-shadowed in this statement.

The Indian Bodhidharma was the founder of the meditation school in China (Chán), which in Japan was called Zen. The Chinese Línjì sub-division and the corresponding Japanese Rinzai sub-division advocate sudden illumination; while the Chinese Cáodòng sub-division and the corresponding Japanese Sōtō sub-division believe in gradual illumination. Their respective techniques in China as well as in Japan need a lot of effort. On the other hand, the Japanese Ōbaku Zen School integrated into its Zen practice also the *Nembutsu* (the chanting of a “bow to the Buddha Amitābha”, a Pure Land method). In doing so, it brought together effort and grace. Similarly, the synthetic Tiāntái (Chinese) and Tendai (Japanese) schools brought together aspects of meditation, i.e., effort, and faith, i.e., grace.

## The Path of Faith (*śraddhāmārga*)

Unlike in Theravāda, faith is an all-important virtue, the rescuer from the flood of rebirths, the signpost to the secure city (of the Pure Land). Through faith in the celestial *bodhisattvas*, especially Avolokiteśvara, and in the heavenly Buddhas, especially Amitābha, who is also called Amitāyus, one is reborn in a Buddha paradise, the best one being Sukhāvati, the *buddha*-field (*Buddhakṣetra*) or Pure Land of the Buddha Amitābha (or Amitāyus). In the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra* Avolokiteśvara is glorified as the saviour, refuge and recourse.

The shorter *Sukhāvatīvyaṣūtra* asserts that beings are not born in the Pure Land of Amitāyus because of their good works. Whoever hears his name and keeps it in one's mind for one day or more will be born in Sukhāvati. In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Śāntideva prays,

I worship the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.... Of all danger the greatest is that which comes from my sins...pardon them.

In India, devotion, especially to the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara and the Buddha Amitābha, was shared by different Mahāyāna schools, but the development into an independent devotional school took place outside India. Huiyuān founded the Pure Land (Jìngtǔ) School in China; the Pure Land School was systematized by Tánluán, and Shàndǎo held that even a sinful person can be born in the Pure Land by thinking of Amitābha.

Also other traditions assimilated certain aspects of Pure Land Buddhism into their schools as an auxiliary help. The Chinese Tiāntái (Japanese Tendai) and the Sānlùn school (Japanese Sanron) adopted certain aspects of the Pure Land cult as an auxiliary help in the practice of their own traditions. Thus they blended effort and grace.

In Japan, Hōnen emphasized other-power (*tariki*) over self-power (*jiriki*). He advised people to embrace the path of the Pure Land (Jōdo-mon), by frequent repetitions of *Namu Amida Butsu* (shortened form: *Nembutsu*), corresponding to the Sanskrit *Namo Amitābhāya Buddhāya*. He did not however exclude good works. So while he emphasizes grace, he also includes a certain amount of effort.

Shinran emphasized *tariki* much more than Hōnen. He encouraged uttering Amida's name only once, unlike Hōnen. In fact, even the single recitation is itself a gift from Amida. Since faith is not so much our effort but a gift, Shinran made his paradoxical statement: "If even a good person can be born in the Pure Land, much more so an evil person." We are here reminded of Luther's famous *pecca fortiter, sed crede fortius* (sin boldly but believe more boldly).

Birth in a *Buddhakṣetra* is not yet the state of *Nirvāṇa*, but it is easier to reach *Nirvāṇa* from there. The Pure Land School has the greatest number of followers in Japan.

## Concluding Reflections

I have already pointed out that, for Theravāda, *Nibbāna* is Transcendent. It is impersonal, not personal. In the *Trikāya* (Three Bodies) doctrine of Mahāyāna it is obviously the *Dharmakāya* (the Body of Essence) that is the absolutely Transcendent Being; in fact, it is the only Reality. It is immeasurable and illimitable, free from all marks (including the 32 *Mahāpuruṣalakṣaṇas*, etc.) and, therefore indescribable. As in the case of the Hindu *Kevalādvaita Vedānta*, this Transcendent Being could be considered as personal, if we take the definition of person in

St. Thomas Aquinas. On the other hand, as in the case of *Kevalādvaita*, it could be thought of as psychologically impersonal because there is no other reality to relate to. However, it seems to me that here the *Dharmakāya* or the Ādibuddha is personal psychologically as well, since, because It cannot help others directly, It takes on the (unreal) forms of Celestial Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, who, as a group, form the *Sam̐bhogakāya* (Body of Enjoyment), the unreal manifestation of the *Dharmakāya* and the second level in the *Trikāya* doctrine, and these Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* are the ones with whom people relate in a very personal way, with deep devotion. It should be noted, however, that the celestial Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* do not, in turn, relate in any psychological way with the *Dharmakāya*, which is their basis. The third level of the *Trikāya* is the *Nirmāṇakāya* (Produced Body), the unreal manifestation of the *Sam̐bhogakāya*. In this third level form, the Buddhas appear as human beings to help Śrāvakas (Theravādins), *pratyekabuddhas* and *bodhisattvas* who have not yet reached any of the ten stages (*bhūmis*). They render this service through their teaching but not by grace, to help them on the spiritual path. There is a sort of personal reaching out to people by the *Nirmāṇakāya*, but it has no psychological relationship with the other two bodies.

Some scholars, like Winston King, try to ferret out grace in different aspects of Theravāda. In my opinion he goes too far. On the other hand, I do think that other-power, which refers not just to another ordinary being, but a much higher being than we are, can give grace, particularly because what the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* give is not merited by our own works. Of course they are not the Supreme Being, but they are the preeminent manifestations of the Supreme *Dharmakāya*, who may be said to give us grace indirectly, while the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* do so directly. They not only grant a speedy birth in a *buddha*-field, but they also forgive sins and remove the fruits of our *karman*. Our faith in them and their grace to us constitute a personal relationship, which can also prompt us to be grateful also to the *Dharmakāya*, who takes on the *Sam̐bhogakāya* form of the celestial Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* to come to our aid. This does not mean, however, that the use of the term “grace” here is exactly the same as in devotional Hinduism or in Christianity.