TOYNBEE & BUDDHISM

PHILIP GRANT

IN THE FALL OF 1929, Arnold J Toynbee, the future author of the most famous historical study ever to be written and already a distinguished scholar of international repute, experienced a profound spiritual crisis while attending a conference in Kyoto. Traveling east of Turkey for the first time, he had chosen Japan as the terminus of his trip in order to survey the vast assortment of cultures and countries that lie within the heartland of Asia. What he observed was uniformly unsettling.

Everywhere he traveled seemed to furnish him with further evidence that the great cultural traditions of the Asian civilizations of the past had ceased to provide the ruling elites of the Middle East, India and China with any guidance on how to proceed into an ever darkening future. Imitation of the West and technological borrowing for industry and the military seemed everywhere the rage. Only in Japan did he sense an added dimension to this repetitive pattern. After spending a night in a mountain monastery surrounded by pines and then witnessing the glacial majesty of a Noh performance, he wrote to his father-in-law, Gilbert Murray, the respected classicist: "I can't exactly explain what I mean by traditional Japanese culture being classical, but you feel it very strongly when you go into the temples. They feel like Greek temples, retranslated into wood."

Japan's enduring spirituality challenged Toynbee's great thesis about the rise and fall of civilizations that subsequently formed the core of his twelve-volume masterpiece, *A Study of History*. All of the other evidence he had accumulated pointed to the conclusion that as civilizations decay they cease to provide from within themselves the ideas and energy needed to meet the challenges presented by history. Instead, the leaders of these dying cultures try to breathe life

John Einarsen

back into them by borrowing from the most vital civilizations of which they have any knowledge, either in time, through archaic revivals, or contemporaneously in space, which in 1929, meant from the West. As Toynbee wrote shortly after his Kyoto visit: "Was it possible that the Japanese might be successfully solving the problem of how to secure the material advantages of industrialism without suffering the spiritual impoverishment which the West suffered from it?"

In Kyoto, Toynbee's sensitivity to the powerful spiritual legacy of Japan was accompanied by a spiritual awakening of his own. At the Institute of Pacific Relations he met the beguiling medieval historian, Eileen Power, a commanding presence and the founder of what eventually became the new field of women's history. Acting the part of *The Bacchae* to Toynbee's Penteus, she unleashed within him the kind of Dionysian frenzy he had read about in his studies of Greek drama and religion but had never come close to feeling, even during his courtship of the strong-willed Rosalind Murray, whom he had married in 1913. His struggle with himself lasted several weeks and, after Power's decisive rejection, Toynbee confessed all to his wife. She, in turn, accepted his surprising declaration that what enabled him to overcome his madness, accept Eileen's rejection after traveling with her through China, and finally return to his family, was the mystical experience of a spiritual being whose unexpected appearance within himself had transformed his understanding of the scope and dimensions of the spiritual life.

The experience of this 'divine descent,' as Toynbee would later call it, into his personal life was not an isolated occurrence. It would recur as a result of his son's later suicide and other personal crises that dogged him until his death. As he began to publish the volumes that would eventually make up his unsurpassed synthesis of world history, his increasing sensitivity to the life of the spirit spilled over into his work. As early as the 1930's, the refusal of the League of Nations to stop Japan's occupation of Manchuria, and the subsequent encouragement this had provided Mussolini for his later attack on Ethiopia, had convinced Toynbee that world peace could never come about through purely political means. Over the next quarter of a century his disillusionment with the moral cowardice and political betrayals that plunged the world into conflict led him to believe that the rise and fall of civilizations were only the *maya* covering the spiritual field that was the true ground of evolution. In 1940, on the eve of the Battle of Britain, he wrote: "If religion is a chariot, it looks as if the wheels on which it moves towards heaven may be the periodic downfalls of civilizations on earth."

When Toynbee finally returned to Japan in 1956, he was understandably disappointed in what he interpreted as the pervasive materialism that had filled the moral vacuum created by the disappearance of many of the ancient Shinto cults. He was equally dismayed by the seeming dissolution of Japanese Buddhism into a mire of meaningless ritualism. What impressed him instead, he told his flattered hosts, was Japan's repudiation of a militant, religious nationalism, a lesson that the rest of the world, including Britain and the USA, would do well to learn. When, after numerous lectures and some TV appearances, the *Asahi Shimbun* published one of his articles as a keynote for reflection in the coming year, Toynbee became a familiar public personality to millions of Japanese.

All of this set the stage for Toynbee's astonishingly triumphant tour of Japan in the fall of 1967, that culminated with his lecture at the Imperial Palace before the Emperor, dignitaries of the Imperial Household, and the leaders of various public offices, including the Ministry of Education. In the decade since he had last visited Japan his fame had continued to increase, despite the disenchantment of early promoters like Henry Luce's *Time-Life* media empire over Toynbee's criticism of U. S. imperialism. By 1967, the two volume summary of *A Study of History*, edited by D.C. Sommerville, had been translated into Japanese and was successfully competing with a new translation of Marx's *Das Capital* for preeminence among intellectuals and students of public affairs.

In his lecture Toynbee told the Emperor that what alarmed him the most was the stark contrast "between the technological virtuosity of present day Japanese life and its spiritual vacuity." Earlier he had recalled his positive impressions of Shinto in 1929, although later he admitted that: "In Shinto I have met with a living religion of the same kind as the extinct pre-Christian Greek and Roman religions. Greek and Roman religion is congenial to me, and this may lead me to over-estimate the virtues of Shinto as well as Buddhism."

Toynbee had been invited to deliver two lectures at Kyoto Sangyo University, entitled "The Coming World City" and "Mankind's Future." In the course of these talks he introduced the Japanese to the new field called *ekistics*. The brainchild of Constantine Doxiadis, an architect, city planner, entrepreneur and renaissance man, ekistics was the study of the relationship between the 'built environment' of humans and their resulting patterns of social interaction. As a refugee of the Greek-Turkish wars of the early 1920s, Doxiadis had been impressed by the ability of squatters on the outskirts of Athens to humanize their squalid surroundings and maintain a village type of communal life within the larger chaos of the megapolis. Doxiadis' vision, shared in part by Toynbee, was that the key to humanity's future lay in consciously constructing urban space as a network of inter-connected communities, each with a sort of sacred center, much as the Greek temple had served as the nucleus for the emergence of the polis, or city state. In 1962, during one of Doxiadis' yearly conferences at Mykonos, Toynbee had joined with other leading thinkers to declare that: "At the base of all human settlement lie the neighborhoods and villages. These must be identified, resurrected or created."

In Japan Toynbee had obviously been struck by how the remnants of village life persisted amidst the wholesale destruction of old buildings and entire neighborhoods by Allied bombers and the Ministry of Construction. Added to this was his admiration of how the village mentality had been transferred to the Japanese company, prompting him to remark to the Emperor that while in the field of industrial relations the Japanese "may be more authoritarian," they were also "more paternalistic and more human," in contrast to other systems like those of the USA and the USSR. Toynbee's even-handedness in matters of

inter-cultural comparison was undoubtedly one of the things that endeared him to the Japanese, and this was reflected in the remarkable series of articles that ran daily in the *Mainichi Shimbun* for over four months in the fall of 1970.

Responding to questions posed by Kyoto Sangyo professor Kei Wakaizumi, Toynbee turned the lengthy interview into a discourse on how moral questions must ultimately rest on religious teachings. At the center of most religions, he claimed, even those covered over by a dense growth of priestly invention, was the common counsel to "overcome self-centeredness and to surrender ourselves to love, and they point out practical ways of acting on this counsel." What is most needed today, he urged his readers, is to sift out "these permanent truths and precepts from the temporary forms which are the traditional expressions of them. We need to re-express them in forms of their own, forms which will no doubt become out of date and in their turn will have to be re-expressed by our successors." After months of such sentiments in the *Mainichi*, Wakaizumi concluded his interview by hailing Toynbee as a kind of *bodhisattva*. Later on Daisaku Ikeda treated the historian as such, inviting him to jointly write a book about humanity's future and, with its publication in 1976, shortly after Toynbee's death, promoting it and Toynbee with the considerable resources of the Soka Gakkai sect.

The spirituality that had first begun to impress itself upon Toynbee in moments of trial in Kyoto had thus, almost a half-century later, come forth full blossom through the careful husbanding of Japanese interlocutors. But while Japan owes a debt to Kei Wakaizumi and Daisaku Ikeda for getting Toynbee to explicitly link his spiritual beliefs to questions of moral and social import, the Englishman's theory of history all along had shown deep affinities with fundamental Buddhist teaching, especially that of the *Mahayana* variety. While for reasons of space it would be difficult to fully explore this connection I would like to suggest a few links between the basic concepts of Toynbee's *A Study of History*, and fundamental propositions that are accepted by many, if not most, schools of Buddhism.

The question that Toynbee had posed himself, and which occupied his mind throughout his life, was why and how civilized societies have come into existence. Like the Buddha, Toynbee believed that it was life, not death, that had to be explained. Indeed death at all levels, including that of social systems, was merely a reversion back to the more natural state of unity, perfection and inactivity. As both Greek and Indian sages had pointed out for centuries, the greatest punishment is to be born and the most precious gift is to return from whence we have come. Kalidasa, the Sanskrit poet, once observed that if we gather a few drops of water from the sea and place them in a pot, surely that is what is unusual. And when the pot breaks, and the water returns to its source, what could be more normal than that?

Similarly, Toynbee felt that the normal condition for human society was static, unselfconscious and completely governed by unthinking adherence to tradition. Why then had some cultures taken flight and developed the many arts and sciences we celebrate as coeval with great civilizations? Toynbee felt, like the Buddha, that such questions were ultimately unanswerable in language and the closest we can come to understanding them is through the use of myth and symbol. In *A Study of History*, he made extensive use of comparative mythology to develop the concepts for which he is most famous, those of *challenge* and *response*.

Challenge refers to the deep disturbance of the womb-like security experienced by primitive humanity, an archetypal undulation best illustrated by myths such as those of expulsion from Paradise, the story of the Buddha leaving his palace of pleasure, the passing from the *Yin* state to that of the *Yang*, the willingness of Christ to be crucified. In each case the great disturbance is part of a larger movement of forces external to the actors, forces represented by figures of supreme fascination to storytellers of all ages and traditions: the Serpent, Mara, Loki, Judas. To Toynbee the idea of the adversary was at the center of all movement towards civilization. Without such a challenge he believed there could be no response, no marshalling of human energies and social resources sufficient to lift a people from a condition of inane inactivity to one of creative confrontation with the unknown reaches of human nature.

As in Buddhism, Toynbee believed that wisdom begins in suffering, *dukka*, and this suffering is heroic. Through the pain and difficulty of trying to surmount the challenges with which the field of history, or *karma*, continually confronts societies aspiring to be born, individuals within those societies forge new understandings of the essentials of life and new paths towards incorporating these truths into the fabric of their social institutions. As a society successfully meets its challenges they begin to come less from external sources and more from the interior of a society, its very soul, in fact. The level of maturity to which a society may attain is dependent upon the ratio between externally caused and internally derived challenges. Civilizations whose members spend most of their energies meeting the challenges of external agressors or the environment are much less likely to solve the problems of life than those who use their wisdom to forge nourishing links between their citizens, cut and polish new facets of the human personality and share the surplus of their bounty with as many as can be imagined.

Once a society begins to emerge from the blissful stupor of unconsciousness there is no guarantee of how high it might rise. Survival rests entirely on the development of individuals who can offer the means to meet the challenges that beset them. But Toynbee believed that the continual encounter with a succession of challenges can stimulate an infinite variety of creative responses, and in this sense there is no pre-determined shape to the life of a society. In fact, it is a central tenet of Toynbee's thought that as long as a society is creative nothing can be predicted about it. Once, however, the Promethean impulse has passed, societies begin to enter into an identifiable series of stages that end in either suicide, when they are unable to solve their social and moral problems, or murder, when they are eliminated by other societies through war.

The key element determining the trajectory that a society follows is the relationship between its creative minority, those who meet the challenges, and the bulk of the citi-

zenry who are irresistibly drawn to follow the creators' example. The nature of this relationship is very elusive and Toynbee again resorts to metaphors, especially those taken from art, to explain it. Much like the continual fascination that creative artistic activity exercises over the minds of the masses, so too does creative social ingenuity foster the leadership that guides a people on its upward course. The classical example of such a bond is naturally the myth of Orpheus, whose beauty and musical skill so enchanted the people that they willingly followed his example of what constitutes the good life. There is a fine line, however, between an Orpheus and a Pied Piper and herein lies the tragedy of all forms of leading and following. What might begin as a dance can easily turn into a military march in which the conductors' batons become clubs to keep the followers in line.

The Buddha well recognized this fundamental problem when he spoke about spiritual leadership. Human beings occupy a vast range of different positions in relation to their ability to emancipate themselves. He illustrated this with the example of the lotus, whose roots were covered in mud, the stem immersed in water, and the blossom open to the sun. Some human beings will remain mired throughout their lives; they will not listen to the song of others or even to their own. Others are ready to bloom, they do not need the help of a teacher to find their way to the sun. But the middle lot, those not rooted in mire or open to the light, need the teacher's example to help them grow. It is for this middle group, the Buddha said, that he had come. In Toynbee's mind those who furnished the creative impulse to a society were like blossoms of the lotus. The middle group would willingly follow them, he believed, if they continued to discover fresh solutions to the challenges of karma. Those mired in the mud would need to be trained, regimented in their lives in order to survive and keep on growing. But if ever the mandate of heaven were withdrawn, and the minority lost its power to constructively engage social problems, then its rule would have to be insured through compulsion. The *creative* minority thus becomes the *dominant* minority and the resulting rigidity causes society to enter into a readily identifiable pattern, or cycle of decline.

At the root of this process is the problem of *mimesis*, or imitation. Instead of drawing upon their own inner resources, human beings habitually look outside themselves for patterns of thinking and behavior that they can borrow. To some degree this is necessary for social survival. But when this tendency begins to affect the powers of the creative minority to successfully author useful inventions, the forms of living that are imitated by the less creative masses become ossified, obstructive and ultimately lead to social senility and collective death. The Buddha also continually warned against this human temptation towards externalization. At the center of many of the sutras and stories about his method of teaching is the remarkable ingenuity he displayed in getting his students to stop relying on stock answers and conditioned reponses to his questions. Often when they questioned him he would lapse into silence, hold up a flower, make some gesture, or ask a counter question that would prevent any reliance upon a series of routinized steps or procedures. The resolution of this problem of imitation later became the central component of many schools of Buddhism which framed it in terms of the supremely difficult dialectic between *wisdom* and *method*, theory and practice, thought and action.

Toynbee's studies of history also shared with Buddhist thought the conviction that human evolution occurs within a universal context in which there are no chosen people, uniquely privileged castes or nations that stand outside the sway of cause and effect, the great wheel of life, or what Buddhists call the operations of the twelve *nidanas*. Much of the fascination that Toynbee exercised over Asian readers was his willingness to find civilizational units, i.e. groups of societies linked together through shared thinking and experiences, in every part of the planet. Indeed,Toynbee found dozens of such civilizations in his adventure into the past, although he was perplexed towards the end of his life by the seemingly unstoppable tendency of Western civilization to swallow all of its former competitors. This was alarming because in the past the survival of the human species had been assured through the infinite variety of its creations. If ever one civilization triumphed completely over all of the others, the resulting uniformity of responses to the challenges of karma would result in tragedy. Once the process of decline begins, as it indeed it has in every civilization that Toynbee identified, it would involve not just a portion but the whole of the human race. Hailed by even his most severe critics as the true founder of *global history*, Toynbee had always drawn comfort from his expectation that it would never become uniform.

Toynbee's research had confirmed that in every part of the planet, new civilizations had grown from the ashes of once mighty predecessors. From the ending of the Roman Empire, for example, there grew up the Western Christian and the Orthodox Christian worlds. Before the flowering of Hindu society was one that Toynbee called Indic, while the great age of Chinese civilization under the Han had been proceeded by that which Confucius had idealized through his tributes to the Duke of Chou. Toynbee tried to explain the dynamics of these successive flowerings and endings by coining the terms *internal* and *external* proletariat to name the classes of people who transmit the most critical cultural variables from one age to the next. The internal proletariat represents those most dispossessed by the increasingly irrelevant dominant minority in a dying culture. They actually survive its destruction through creating a universal church which bridges the dark ages between civilizations, much like Buddhism did in India, Christianity in Europe, and Confucianism in China. The external proletariat, on the other hand, are those outside the pale of the old culture who form war bands to destroy it. In time the external proletariat winds up accepting many aspects of the dead civilization when it converts to the universal church it finds subsisting within the carcass of its victim. Toynbee thought that together these terms best explained what he called social *palingenesis*, or group rebirth.

It is thus readily apparent that for students of Buddhist thought, Toynbee's approach to history suggests fascinating avenues of thought and speculation about social devel-

opment. While Toynbee does not explicitly adopt the Buddhist terminology, he presupposes that universal causation, or conditioned co-production , applies to the life of civilzations as well as that of individuals. One could suppose, then, that he is attempting to work out the mysteries of collective karma, which one Buddhist text has described as "the karma of the cycle of thy births, the destiny of those who, in their pain and sorrow, are born along with thee, rejoice and weep, chained to thy previous actions." On this point Toynbee seems to be underscoring the Buddhist teaching that the common features of the cultures into which we are born merely exhibit, *en masse*, the characteristics, or bundles of *skandhas*, that inhere deep within our own natures. Such knowledge, if deeply pursued, could possibly help us to unravel the delusions that collectively ensnare us, and in so doing provide practical wisdom of what we must do to help others to do the same. This would be no mean accomplishment. As one of the oldest Buddhist texts declares: "For mankind, intent on its attachments it is hard to see this principle, namely conditionedness, origination by way of cause. This principle too is hard to see, namely the cessation of all compound things, the renunciation of all clinging to rebirth, the extinction of craving, absence of passion, cessation, nirvana."

The Buddhist historian would then agree with the older justification for the study of history, one that was still current when Toynbee was a boy. We study the life and death of humanity in order to understand ourselves. The ancient philosophers of the East always taught this. In the Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna tells Arjuna that the study of the ways of karma occupies the highest thoughts of the greatest sages. If calling Arnold Toynbee a bodhisattva is perhaps excessive, certainly he cannot be denied the status of a sage. He took the collective life of humanity as his field and tried to uncover the mysterious working out of its destiny. While the *Study of History* has a great many flaws, Toynbee stimulated the minds of countless millions to extend the idea of an intelligent, cause-governed natural world to the domain of global history. In this he was a pioneer, one whose footprints set the path for others to follow. As our world becomes smaller and more intricately connected, as the universal import of the Buddhist dharma becomes more profoundly understood, it is hard not to think that in the future the most useful universal histories will begin by strengthening the foundations that Arnold J. Toynbee first laid down.

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PHILIP GRANT teaches politics in Kyoto and is a regular contributor to Kyoto Journal. See "Cult Fiction," KJ # 33, "Japanese Dreams, American Nightmares: The Meiji Issei in Japan," KJ # 28, and "The New World Order and a Culture of Non-Violence," KJ # 22.