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ELIADE ON BUDDHISM

Mircea Eliade's book *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* has deservedly become a classic, and has reached, as he intended, a far wider audience than the narrow circle of Indologists. The book's popularity may justify the following remarks. It was originally published in French in 1936, then in an enlarged French version in 1954, and in English translation in 1958. There has thus been ample opportunity for revision, and indeed in the second English edition (1969),¹ which we are taking as our text, Eliade notes (p. xi) that he has made 'numerous minor corrections'. However, the accuracy of his observations on early Buddhism still leaves much to be desired. Let us try to set the record straight.

We are principally concerned with chapter V, *Yoga Techniques in Buddhism*, and with three points in chapter VIII. Let us take the latter first. All of them concern the Buddha's alleged connections with shamanistic traditions. On p. 326 we read of the Buddha, 'he is no sooner born than he takes seven steps and touches the summit of the world'. Reference is given to *Majjhima-nikāya*, III, 123. But that text mentions only the seven steps; nothing about touching the summit of the world. Moreover, Lamotte has assembled² all fifteen classical versions of this legendary episode, and in none of them does the (future) Buddha touch the summit of the world. Actually this is unsurprising, because Buddhists do not believe the world to have a summit. Maybe the confusion arose through the word *aggo*: the Pali passage cited has the new-born Buddha say, '*Aggo 'ham asmi lokassa, seṭṭho 'ham asmi lokassa, jetṭho 'ham asmi lokassa . . .*' Lamotte's translation is of course correct: 'Je suis le premier du monde, je suis le meilleur du monde, je suis l'aîné du monde; . . .' This correction makes it more than doubtful that the passage alludes to 'the conception of the seven heavens', as Eliade claims lower on the same page; it certainly vitiates his statement that 'the Buddha transcends the cosmos by symbolically traversing the seven heavens' (p. 327), and disqualifies the passage from being later adduced as an example of 'the symbolism of ascent' (p. 335).

On p. 321 we read, 'When the Buddha, after his Illumination, paid his

¹ Pub. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London. The American publishers are the Bollingen Foundation, New York. The pagination of the main text is the same as in the first edition, and is very close to that of the 1954 French edition.

² *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse de Nāgārjuna*, I, Louvain 1949, note 3 to p. 6. Eliade refers to this volume several times.

first visit to his native city, Kapilavastu, he exhibited a number of miraculous "attainments" . . . he rose into the air, cut his body to pieces, let his limbs and his head fall to the ground, then joined them together again before the spectators' wondering eyes. Even Āśvaghoṣa describes this miracle . . . ' At this point there is a reference, the only one for the passage, to the *Buddhacarita*. 'Even' should imply that other authors besides Āśvaghoṣa report the miracle. In his review of the 1954 French edition¹ Lamotte pointed out that neither Āśvaghoṣa nor any other text has the Buddha dismember himself; that was in 1956, but the mistake survives. The point is of some importance, because it is the only classical Indian reference given for the rope trick; if indeed there are no others, it affects the whole section on 'Yoga and Shamanism' (pp. 318–26).

On p. 331 we read, 'The *Majjhima-nikāya* (I, 244) speaks of the "heat" obtained by holding the breath, and other Buddhist texts say that the Buddha is "burning"'. This sentence implies that early Buddhist meditation, as typified by the Buddha, produced a sensation of heat. The reference to the *Majjhima-nikāya* is correct so far as it goes, but the passage is part of the Buddha's description of the *wrong* way in which he meditated before his Enlightenment; it is part of the mortification of the flesh which he rejects at the beginning of the First Sermon. For the 'burning' Buddha, Eliade gives one reference: *Dhammapada* 387. This is an isolated verse, and reads:

*Divā tapati ādicco; rattiṃ ābhāti candimā;
Sannaddho khattiyo tapati; jhāyī tapati brāhmaṇo;
Atha sabbam ahorattam Buddhho tapati tejasā.*

We accept Buddhadatta's translation:² 'The sun glows by day; the moon shines by night. In war-array glows the warrior. In meditation glows the Brahman. By day and night glows the Buddha in His splendour'. The verse does not seem to provide evidence that the Buddha exudes 'magical heat' (the title of this section of the chapter) or that he can be associated with the 'practices of "magical sweating" and of creation through auto-thermy' as Eliade associates him in the next sentence.

The sum effect of our three objections is to remove all early (say, B.C.) references to anything which would associate the Buddha or early Buddhists with the shamanistic practices which Eliade is discussing in this chapter. (There remains the association with *iddhi*, super-normal powers, discussed in chapter V—on which see below.) In particular it removes all association between Buddhism and the rope trick, of which Eliade writes (p. 323), 'In this "miracle" we can distinguish two separate shamanic elements: (1) the dismemberment (initiatory rite) and (2) the ascent to heaven'. It appears

¹ *Le Muséon*, LXIX, 1956, pp. 218–21.

² *Dhammapadam*, ed. and trans. A. P. Buddhadatta Mahāthera, Colombo n.d., p. 104.

that the Buddhist examples adduced for *both* these phenomena are invalid. We may further note that in his review¹ of the 1954 French edition the Tibetologist David Snellgrove denies any 'immediate connection between the Indian rope trick and the Tibetan practice of *gcod*' (pp. 323-4), and questions Eliade's interpretation of Tibetan data on p. 325 and his statement that 'Magical flight and ascending to heaven by the help of a ladder or a rope are also frequent motifs in Tibet' (p. 329). If both Snellgrove and we are right, very little of this part of the chapter remains viable.

Chapter V contains some spelling mistakes (to begin with the least important points) which are surprising. The Pali word for 'monk', *bhikkhu*, is mis-spelt eleven times in the chapter, *jhāyin* ('meditator') four times and *pīti* ('rapture') three. There are serious mistakes in the Pali which cannot be ascribed to misprinting or even to the shoddy editorial work which pervades much of the book; it is not mere pedantry to be upset when on p. 197 Eliade writes of 'meditation "without an object" (*nīrmitta*)', because by confusing the word for a meditation object, *nimitta*, and the privative prefix *nir*, he has reversed the sense. As the linguistic mistakes cited, and others, have survived since the original (1936) version, one hopes that the proofs of the next edition will be read by someone who knows Sanskrit and Pali.

We come now to a series of points concerning the use of the *Sāmañña-phala-sutta* and related texts. The *Sāmañña-phala-sutta*, which Eliade himself quotes and refers to more than once, is the *locus classicus* for an extended account of the Buddhist's progress to Enlightenment via the four yogic meditational states called *jhāna*. Passages from it occur in many other texts,² sometimes with small verbal changes or additions to fit the context.

The descriptions of the four *jhāna* quoted from the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta* on pp. 170-1 occur also, with the exception of a few essentially repetitious phrases, in the *Sāmañña-phala*, so there seems to be no reason to consider it 'highly probable' that it was 'in the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta* (10 ff.) that the technique of Buddhist meditation was formulated for the first time' (pp. 169-70). Eliade's original reason for citing the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta* may have been that it goes on to give some extra meditational stages beyond the four *jhāna* (another reason for thinking the text later than the *Sāmañña-phala*) which he proceeds to quote; but here too there is a small muddle, for at the top of p. 173 he refers to 'the ninth and last *samāpatti* [meditational attainment]' although in the text he has quoted there are only eight stages. It is other texts (see Pali Text Society dictionary *s.vv.* *samāpatti* and *vimokkha*) which have nine, by inserting as a penultimate stage the mental state of 'neither consciousness nor unconsciousness'; these texts also slightly change the definition of the last (highest) *samāpatti*.

¹ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1956, pp. 252-4.

² See especially T. W. Rhys Davids in the *Introduction* to his translation of the *Sāmañña-phala-sutta*, *Dialogues of the Buddha, Part I (Sacred Books of the Buddhists, vol. II)*, London 1899, p. 59.

In the *Sāmañña-phala-sutta* the stages immediately following the fourth *jhāna* are: meditation on the constitution of one's physical body; the creation of a body 'made of mind' (*manomaya*); and the acquisition of a set of supernatural powers (*iddhi*) of which the first is 'having been one he becomes many' and vice versa, the next is the power of invisibility, and the rest are all locomotional—flying, etc. The sequence seems logical and important. These are followed by progressively more spiritual attainments, culminating in Enlightenment.

On p. 178 Eliade quotes the *iddhi* and some of the further powers from the *Sāmañña-phala*, and continues, 'The same list of powers occurs in the *Akaṅkheyya-sutta*; for each *iddhi*, a particular *jhāna* must be practiced'. [*sic*] He then quotes some *iddhi*. Two points here. Firstly, the list is indeed identical, but this fact is obscured by the use of a different translation. Secondly, the *Akaṅkheyya-sutta* (as it is known to its friends) nowhere indicates that different *jhāna* produce different powers, nor is this the case, for the texts show that all four *jhāna* are prerequisite for any of the powers. Thus this whole paragraph (pp. 178–9) becomes redundant.

On p. 165 Eliade quotes the passage about creating a body made of mind. (Again, it occurs in the *Sāmañña-phala*, but he cites another text.) His translation says that it has 'transcendental faculties [*abhinindriyam*]' though this is only a dubious variant reading for *ahinindriyam*, 'lacking no organ of perception' (see the P.T.S. dictionary *s.v.* *abhinindriyam*). Be that as it may, Eliade is assimilating this mind-made body to initiation symbolism, and Buddhist Enlightenment to mystical death and resurrection. At the bottom of the same page he writes, without reference or substantiation, 'The importance of the *guru* as initiatory master is no less great in Buddhism than in any other Indian soteriology'. So far as concerns pre-Tantric Buddhism, we emphatically disagree; early Buddhism was unusually exoteric, and in most strains of the Theravādin tradition to this day the importance of the *guru* has been radically de-emphasised, compared with other Indian traditions. Moreover, we have shown above that in the texts this mind-made body is created several stages before the meditator achieves Enlightenment, and in fact immediately precedes the acquisition or supernatural powers which seem to flow directly from it. One creates a mind-made body, and the very next thing one multiplies oneself. Now Eliade himself in a later passage, the long paragraph running from p. 179 to p. 180, very well shows that the Buddha devalued and even strongly disparaged the exercise of these *iddhi*. Again, we are all free to choose our own metaphors, but Buddhist symbolism regards the Enlightened person as 'dead in life' rather than as reborn to a new life; Professor Zaehner tells us that the very title of the Buddha, *Tathāgata*, means 'dead' in the *Mahā-bhārata*. Thus it becomes highly unlikely that this mind-made body is considered to have any soteriological value. At the beginning of the next section (p. 167) Eliade compounds the

muddle: 'To obtain the state of the unconditioned—in other words to die completely to this profane, painful, illusory life and to be reborn (in another "body"!) to the mystical life that will make it possible to attain *nirvāṇa*—the Buddha employs the traditional yogic techniques . . .' This at least puts a gap between the mind-made body and Enlightenment; but 'to attain the state of the unconditioned' is 'to attain *nirvāṇa*'; it is not just an intermediate state which 'makes it possible'. In fact the Buddhist who attains *nirvāṇa* does so in his own body; he may on the way acquire the ability to create a double of himself, but both the texts and the living tradition make it clear that this is irrelevant to his salvation.

By quoting passages from the *Sāmañña-phala-sutta* out of sequence, mostly under other names, Eliade has performed a variant of the rope trick: plucking the dismembered pieces of the text out of the air, he has 'before the spectators' wondering eyes' reconstituted them into something rich but strange.

A still more important point, germane to Eliade's whole thesis about yoga as a means to escape from time, concerns pp. 182–5. Eliade writes (p. 183) that the Buddha 'set a very high value on the ability to remember previous lives. This mystical ability made it possible to reach "the beginning of time"—which, as we shall see in a moment, implied "emerging from time"'. This last statement, on which depends the argument in the following two pages, is completely wrong: although the Buddha discouraged cosmological speculation, Buddhists certainly do not believe that time has a beginning. That their philosophy precludes such a possibility is well stated by von Glasenapp:¹ 'Buddhism knows neither a first cause of the world, nor an all-embracing spiritual substance giving rise to all that is. It is rather that something comes into being in dependence on and conditioned by something else. A first beginning is as impossible as a definite end'.

Eliade seems to arrive at his conclusion through failing to take seriously his own comment on the *Brahma-jāla-sutta*, that 'The Buddha's refusal to discourse on the metaphysical consequences that might be drawn from one or another supra-normal experience is a part of his teaching'. (pp. 181–2) In the same paragraph he goes on to talk of 'the "reality" whose beginning had been beyond the karmic cycle'. In an attempt to prove that this is indeed how Buddhists conceived the matter, Eliade on p. 183 both misquotes and misinterprets the *Brahma-jāla-sutta*: 'Thus, for a beginning, let us recall that the Buddha attached great importance to *memory* as such; the gods lose their divine condition and fall from their heavens when "their memory is troubled". Even more: inability to remember *all* of one's former existences is equivalent to metaphysical ignorance . . . [some of the gods alluded to] become able to remember their former existences, but not *all* of them, in other words, they do not remember the *beginning* of their series

¹ H. von Glasenapp, *Buddhism: a non-theistic religion*, English trans. London 1970, p. 50.

of lives . . .’ Three points are subtly misquoted. Firstly, the word translated ‘memory’, *sati*, can indeed have that meaning, but in the Pali canon usually refers to the present and means ‘self-awareness’; in the passage cited Rhys Davids translates it as ‘self-possession’ and ‘self-control’, which in the context seems correct. It is in this sense that the Buddha attached importance to *sati*. Secondly, the passage describes not ‘the gods’ but a certain group of gods. Thirdly, what they come to remember is ‘their previous existence, but no further back’. Individually these inaccuracies appear trivial, till we focus on the interpretation of the passage, given ‘in other words’: the text carries absolutely no implication about the finitude, or even the length, of the series of lives. This particular passage merely says that some who say they had only one former life are being ridiculous; and the *sutta* as a whole says the same of all sorts of metaphysical views.

The series of one’s former lives is infinite. Eliade quotes a Sanskrit scholastic text which says that ‘the Buddhas remember an unlimited number of *kalpas* [eons]’ (p. 184), and in the Pali tradition Buddhaghosa¹ says the same; but on the next page Eliade has the Buddha ‘declare that he alone had re-recognized all his former existences’, which is not at all the same thing. Thus Eliade has given no evidence valid for Buddhism that ‘One arrives at the beginning of time and finds nontime’ (p. 185).

The last point to be made about Chapter V is comparatively minor, a question of emphasis. On p. 191 Eliade mentions the beginnings of *bhakti* (devotion) in Buddhism, and quotes a text: ‘“All who have but faith in me and love for me, have heaven as their destiny”’. Taken out of context this statement may mislead. It is the last in a list of statements in which the Buddha pronounces on the soteriological value of certain attitudes and practices by saying what will happen to those who hold to them. All the other groups are said to be destined to attain *nirvāṇa*. In the context one should probably translate: ‘All who have nothing but faith in me . . .’ Buddhists regard all existence in heaven as temporary, and would probably deny that rebirth there had ‘soteriological value.’

Taken singly, the above criticisms of chapter V may not appear momentous. Taken together, however, they may cast doubt on the chapter’s value as a contribution to our understanding of early Buddhism.

To conclude, let us venture a criticism which is necessarily more subjective, but may also be of wider interest. Near the beginning of his chapter on Tantrism, Eliade hypothesises (pp. 201–2) that Tantrism represents ‘the spiritual counter-offensive of the original inhabitants’ against Hinduism. The most important theme to emerge in the last part of chapter VIII and in chapter IX, ‘Conclusions’, is a somewhat similar historical view of yoga as a whole. There is a certain fluctuation about the formulation of this more general thesis which makes it difficult to discuss it briefly without running

¹ *Visuddhimagga*, XIII, 16, *fn.*

the risk of misrepresenting Eliade's views. But the argument for the aboriginal origin of Tantrism seems unsatisfactory. Tantrism, we are told, first developed in certain northern border regions of India; possibly then also in the south—though the arguments here are tenuous. In any case it was in origin geographically marginal. Aboriginal inhabitants, on the other hand, we know to have been found in every major region of India. (Ethnographic precision is irrelevant at this level of the argument.) Moreover, Eliade himself shows in constructing his more general thesis that other aboriginal features of Indian religion, such as tree worship, and possibly including yogic meditation itself,¹ had appeared in Indian religion well back in the first millennium B.C.; he even adduces Kuiper's thesis about Austro-asiatic elements in the vocabulary and mythology of the R̥g-veda. But if all this aboriginal religion has got into the earliest Indo-Aryan documents, why does the whole constellation of Tantrism leave no trace in those documents for two thousand years? We would deduce that Tantrism must have been born from the meeting of (known) Indian traditions with a foreign influence. Eliade writes (p. 202): 'We must also reckon with possible Gnostic influences, which could have reached India by way of Iran over the Northwest frontier.' But in the previous sentence he has reminded us that 'the "tantric country" par excellence is Kāmarūpa, Assam'. Does this not suggest that the seminal influence must have come from China and/or Tibet?²

We may speak of languages; we may speak of geographical areas. But we must be wary of speaking of 'aboriginal', or for that matter of 'Indo-Aryan' religion or spirituality. True, the Indian social system is predominantly endogamous in theory; but how many can have been the speakers of Indo-Aryan who reached the Punjab in the second millennium B.C.? And it is most unlikely that the discoverer of the Aryan eightfold path can be numbered among their genetic descendants.

¹ But *vide contra* the review by Jean Filliozat, *Journal Asiatique* CCXLIII, 1955, pp. 368–70.

² The probable influence of Taoism on Tantric yoga (and perhaps vice versa) has since been demonstrated by Jean Filliozat, 'Taoisme et Yoga', *Journal Asiatique* CCLVII, 1969, pp. 41–87.