

Religion as 'Skilful Means'

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I

The concept of *upaya* (or *upayakausalya*), 'skilful means', has functioned on various levels within the Buddhist tradition, with considerable differences also in its degrees of prominence. It is a major concern in the Lotus Sutra, the Prajnaparamita literature and the *Teaching of Vimalakirti*, but absent or almost absent from many other scriptures. However, I am not going to concern myself here with the history of the concept. I am not competent to do so; and fortunately Michael Pye had done this in *Skilful Means: A Concept of Mahayana Buddhism* (1), of which I shall be making use.

There is a narrower and a broader use of the notion of *upaya*. In its narrower meaning it presupposes that a teacher knows some truth which is to be communicated to others so that they may come to see it for themselves; and the skilful means are the devices which the teacher uses to do this. Thus in the Pali scriptures the Buddha is constantly using similes and parables and often asking skilfully leading questions. Further, he is not usually declaring general truths, valid for all times and circumstances, but is speaking to a particular individual or group and is taking account of his hearers' karmic state and adapting his words to the stage of understanding at which he perceives them to be.

I think it is evident that skilful means, in this narrower sense, are used by religious teachers in all traditions. Jesus, for example, used parables and similes and asked leading questions, as also did many others. Indeed, skilful means are used in all pedagogy (3). Any teacher of philosophy is accustomed to introduce material in a planned order, knowing that novices in the subject are often not able properly to grasp the sophisticated concepts and distinctions which more advanced students can understand and use. Further, he sometimes utters partial truths, which are also partial falsehoods, because they represent the next stage of understanding of the person he is addressing. In short, there is nothing unusual or remarkable in this narrower sense of *upaya*.

In its more comprehensive sense, however, the concept expresses a profound insight, excitingly illuminating or deeply disturbing according to one's presuppositions, into the nature of Buddhism, and perhaps also into the nature of religion generally. It first appears in this broader sense in the Buddha's parable of the raft in the *Majjhima Nikaya*. A man coming to a great stretch of water sees that the side he is on is dangerous but the other side safe, and so he wants to cross over. There is no bridge or boat, so he takes branches and grass and constructs a raft and paddles himself over to the other side. Since the raft has been so useful he is tempted to lift it on to his shoulders and carry it with him. What he should do, however, according to the Buddha, is to go on, leaving the raft behind. Likewise the *dharma*, he says, is 'for carrying over, not for retaining... You, monks, by understanding the Parable of the Raft, should get rid even of (right) mental objects, all the more of wrong ones.' (3). This parable is thus a skilful means in the narrower sense about skilful means in the broader sense. The contemporary western philosophical reader is at once reminded of Wittgenstein's statement towards the end of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (6.54) that 'My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognises them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it).'

This thought that the *dharma* itself is a skilful means is taken up as a major concern in the Mahayana. Michael Pye says, 'The Mahayanists saw the whole Buddhist religion as a vehicle for "crossing over" and for "bringing over", which are inseparable. In short, Buddhism is skilful means' (p.15). This explains, Pye thinks, how it is that the Buddhist movement has been able to move into different cultures and take correspondingly different forms. For the Indian Buddhism preserved in Sri Lanka and with variations in other Theravada lands, and likewise

Chinese, Tibetan, Korean and Japanese Buddhism, are all distinctively different in ways that reflect the characters of these different civilizations. And we may be seeing today the development, particularly in the United States, of a western form of Buddhism which again has its own distinctive emphases. For all of the successive forms that the *dharma* takes are adapted to the needs of different peoples and periods.

But this thought immediately provokes questions. How far is it to be taken? It is one thing to say that the Theravada is appropriate for some people (particularly, presumably, those in Theravada lands who have been formed by it) and Zen for others, Pure Land for others again, Tibetan and Tantric Buddhism for yet others; and likewise that among the various forms of Buddhist philosophy some people will find this more illuminating, others that. But it is another and more radical thing to say that the Four Noble Truths, containing the basic concepts of *dukkha* and *nirvana*, and also that the further concepts of *pratitya samutpada*, *anicca* and *anatta*, and again the concept, so stressed in the Mahayana, of *sunyata*, are not absolute but provisional, and relative to the human mind, or rather to some human minds, being skilful means for drawing them on from one state to another. Again, is the doctrine that all doctrines are skilful means to be applied to itself? And would not this lead to a logical paradox analogous to the statement 'This statement is false'?

It seems, then, that there must be a limit to the view that Buddhism is a skilful means. For the idea of means implies the idea of an end. Buddhism, then, is a skilful means to what end? The Buddhist answer will be awakening, enlightenment, liberation, *satori*, *nirvana*. But is this answer perhaps itself also a skilful means? If so, we are left with nothing but means which are not means to anything, and the whole system collapses into incoherence. To avoid this it seems that we must say that the doctrine of the end to which Buddhism is a means is not itself another skilful means but is intended (to coin an inelegant term) non-upayically.

We are led, then, to draw a distinction between the upayic and the non-upayic elements of Buddhism. In fact the distinction is not one of the totally upayic and the totally non-upayic, but of degrees of upayity. But on this continuum there are nevertheless important differences to be noted; and in locating them we can, I think, profitably use the distinction familiar within modern critical Christian thinking between, on the one hand, religious experience, and on the other the philosophical and theological theories to which it has given rise. Let us at any rate explore the possibility that we can distinguish between Buddhist experience, and the concepts and language by means of which this has been expressed, and treat the latter as much more strongly upayic than reports of the former.

In the stories of the Buddha's life and teaching in the Pali scriptures there seem to be two key modes of experience. There is ordinary human experience, which is pervaded by unsatisfactoriness, anguish, suffering, anxiety, not having what one wants, and having what one does not want, including the unavoidable realities of sickness, pain, loss, decay and death. All this is a pervasive aspect of human experience. No honest and reflective person, however fortunate his or her own personal circumstances, is likely to deny that this is indeed a feature of our human situation. The Buddha called it comprehensively *dukkha*. And so long as no additional conceptual baggage is loaded on to the term, and it is used simply as a finger pointing to an important fact, it seems to be entirely acceptable. *Dukkha* is not a metaphysical theory but refers to an experienced reality.

The other experience which lies at the origin of Buddhism is of course Gautama's nirvanic experience, achieved at Bodh Gaya and maintained through the rest of his life. It seems preferable to speak of a nirvanic experience rather than of an experience of *nirvana*, since the latter might suggest that '*nirvana*' refers to a place or entity of some kind. Those today who believe that they have experienced nirvanically do not profess to be able adequately to describe this mode of experience; and I shall certainly not try to do what they are not able to do. Nevertheless, if the word is not to be a mere sound without any conceptual content we must have some idea, even if only a relatively vague one, of what we mean by it. The Pali scriptures seem to me - though I speak subject to correction - to suggest a state of complete inner freedom (4), equilibrium, peace, lack of angst (5) and a sense of being entirely 'at home' and unthreatened in the universe, which expresses itself both in a positive affective state (6)

and in compassion for all forms of life (7). Having encountered a few people - some of them Buddhist, others Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh - who in some degree exhibit such a state of mind or being, I have no difficulty in accepting that Gautama's nirvanic experience occurred, and occurred in unprecedented fullness. The Third Noble Truth, then, the truth of the cessation of *dukkha*, which is the truth of *nirvana*, can also be regarded as a report of experience rather than as the formulation of a theory.

Further, Gautama was aware of the way by which he had moved from his immersion in *dukkha* to the freedom of *nirvana*, a way that he spelled out for others in the fourth Noble Truth as the Eightfold Path. This is a moral and spiritual discipline which gradually produces a cessation of self-centredness and a transcendence of the ego point of view, thus eliminating the opposition between self and others (8). And like the fact of *dukkha*, the way to *nirvana* was a reality given in Gautama's experience, a reality that he expressed in the second Noble Truth, affirming that the *dukkha* character of ordinary experience is a product of the ego point of view, with its self-centred desires and aversions.

The Four Noble Truths, then, should be regarded as reports of experience rather than as theories or speculations. But nevertheless, we must not forget that even at this basic level there is always an element of interpretation. All epistemic experience (experience that purports to be experience-of) involves the use of concepts which endow it with a meaning in terms of which we can behave appropriately in relation to that which is thus experienced. Our conceptual system is embodied in language, and the world as described is therefore always partially formed by the human experiencer and language user. This legacy of the Kantian epistemological revolution, recognizing the active and creative role of the mind in all awareness of the phenomenal (that is, experienceable) world, and the consequent 'theory-laden' and hence relative and provisional character of all affirmations about it, has important implications for the study of religion. It entails that all human awareness necessarily exhibits distinctively human forms, and that an intuition of the universe as it is in itself, rather than as it appears within human consciousness, could not be expressed in any language, but would require silence.

As soon, then, as the Buddha decided to break his initial silence and communicate the truth to a suffering world, thereby setting the wheel of *dharma* in motion, he was using skilful means in the sense that he was conveying in language something that cannot in principle be captured in language. For, as Michael Pye surely correctly insists, 'The concept of skilful means has to do with the status of religious language and symbols of all kinds' (9).

There are however (as we noted above) what we may clumsily call degrees or, perhaps better, levels of upayity. Whilst all statements, from the four Noble Truths to the most manifestly speculative positions of later Buddhist philosophy, are necessarily 'theory laden', they can nevertheless be classified on different levels according as the concepts employed are universal human concepts - for example, the concepts of space, time, causality, thinghood - or are products of specialised theories, occurring within particular optional ways of seeing and understanding the world: for example, the Yogacara concept of the 'store consciousness' (*alayavijnana*) or the notion, affirmed by some but denied by other schools of Buddhist philosophy, of the essential self (*puḍgala*). Using this distinction of levels we may say that the concepts of suffering, desire and greed, the cessation of desire and greed, morality and meditation, are more or less universal and that the four Noble Truths accordingly operate at a relatively low level of upayity.

Let us now turn to the notion of *pratitya samutpada* ('codependent origination'), arrived at by the Buddha during the weeks of meditation following his enlightenment at Bodh Gaya. As it appears in the Pali canon, this is a spelling-out in more detail of the second Noble Truth concerning the source of *dukkha*. The list of elements in the continuous loop varies slightly in different texts. Here it is given, not as an account of the arising of *dukkha*, but of its ceasing:

Lo! I have won to this, the Way to enlightenment through insight. And it is this, that from name-and-form ceasing, cognition ceases and conversely; that from cognition ceasing, the sixfold field ceases; from the sixfold field ceasing, contact ceases; from contact ceasing,

feeling ceases; from feeling ceasing, craving ceases; from craving ceasing, grasping ceases; from grasping ceasing, becoming ceases; from becoming ceasing, birth ceases; from birth ceasing, decay and dying, grief, lamentation, ill, sorrow and despair cease. Such is the ceasing of this entire body of ill. (10)

This analysis seems to me to involve a considerable use of optional concepts and assumptions. The basic observation, embodied in the second Noble Truth, that *dukkha* is a product of the point of view of the self-enclosed ego with its ruling desires and aversions could surely be spelled out in detail in a variety of other ways, using different systems of psychological and physiological concepts and distinctions. *Pratitya samutpada*, in the sense in which it first appears in the Pali scriptures, thus strikes me as on a distinctly higher level of upayity, or theory-ladenness, than the four Noble Truths. It points - surely correctly - to the closed circle of *dukkha*; but the precise way in which this circle is divided and labeled is to some extent optional. This is a cake that can be cut in different ways.

However, in the Mahayana *pratitya samutpada* took on a larger meaning which links it with the notions of *anicca* (transitoriness) and *anatta* (no soul) and, in a further extension, with the key Mahayana notion of *sunyata* (emptiness). In this larger use *pratitya samutpada* means that the entire life of the universe consists in the ceaseless change of a kind of gravitational system of mutually dependent elements in which nothing exists independently but everything is partly constituted by the influences upon it of everything else. What we call a 'thing' comes to exist and ceases to exist as an outcome of innumerable interacting forces, and consequently has no ontological status in isolation from the rest of the world and outside the universal flow of change. This applies to ourselves also. We are not permanent substances - this is the truth of *anatta* - but are temporary events in the ever-changing life of the universe. Indeed, the whole world is empty of the independent substantiality that we project upon it in awareness. It is empty of the entire conceptual structure and ego-related meaning in terms of which we construct our ordinary experience. This is the truth of *sunyata*.

It appears to me that the doctrine of *anicca*, in its extended form, affirming that the universe is an endless continuum of change, without beginning or end, must be a theory rather than a report of experience. That everything we observe, including even an apparently unchanging mountain, is in fact changing, however slowly, and that human life is subject to the inevitability of old age, decay and death, represents a very widespread, indeed probably universal, perception in all ages and cultures. But that the entire universe, in the most comprehensive sense of that word, shares this evanescence and that there is accordingly no reality that transcends the flow of time, is surely a larger claim than can legitimately be made on the basis of our own experience. That everything we observe is transient can safely be affirmed; but the evidence on which this is affirmed cannot authorize the further claim that there is no eternal reality transcending the realm of temporal change.

Further, such an affirmation would conflict with another aspect of the Buddha's teaching, namely that the transition from *dukkha* to *nirvana* is a real possibility for everyone because it is based upon the eternal ultimate nature or structure of reality. The universe has a certain objective character which grounds the possibility of *nirvana* for all conscious beings. It is this that makes the *dharma* good news and that motivated the Buddha to preach it to needy humanity (11).

This understanding of Buddhism as involving a conception of the ultimate as the ground or source of all temporal existence, in virtue of which the *dharma* is good news for all men and women, is an understanding of it as a religion of liberation or (in Christian language) salvation. But there is also another understanding of Buddhism as a psychological technique with no metaphysical implications. On this interpretation Buddhism is essentially the practice of meditation as producing an inherently valuable condition in which the anxieties created by the ego point of view melt away and are replaced by a serene state of consciousness. This understanding of Buddhism has been eloquently expressed in the west by Don Cupitt in such books as *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980) and *The World To Come* (London: SCM Press, 1982). It seems to appeal particularly to westerners who have been repelled by

the anthropomorphism of much Christian thought about God and by the mythology that goes with it.

This psychological understanding of Buddhism makes it not so much a gospel for the world as a special option for a fortunate few. For it is not held that the structure of the universe is such that the limitlessly desirable nirvanic state is possible for everyone. In a purely theoretical sense its attainment is of course possible for everyone; but in the actual conditions of human life it is available only to a minority. Just as it is true, but as an ironic truth, that everyone in an impoverished third world country is free to become a millionaire, so it is true, but only in an ironic sense, that the attainment of *nirvana* is a present possibility for the millions around the world who are struggling simply to survive under the pressure of desperate poverty, many as refugees close to starvation, or under soul-destroying oppression and exploitation. The Buddha himself recognized that *nirvana* is not a practical possibility for most people in their present life. Most people still have to progress towards it through a long continuing succession of lives. However, in the purely psychological form of Buddhism this picture of a vast karmic progress through many rebirths until awakening/enlightenment is at last attained is regarded as an imaginary projection with no foundation in reality. The present life is the only one there is, and only those who attain *nirvana* in this life ever attain it.

We have to accept that there are different forms of Buddhism, or even in a sense different Buddhisms, with an important division between that which includes a metaphysic - that is, a picture of the nature or structure of the universe - that constitutes good news for the whole human race, and that which does not. There are also, in this sense, different Christianities; and in the work of Don Cupitt a non-metaphysical Buddhism and a non-metaphysical Christianity come together in a mutually reinforcing way. Epistemologically, the debate is between the realist and non-realist interpretations of religious language. Is the Buddhist language that is apparently about the structure of the universe to be understood in a non-realist way (that is, not as referring to anything beyond ourselves, but rather as giving symbolic expression to our own mental states); or in a naive realist way (in which it is assumed to apply literally to that to which it seems to refer); or in a critical realist mode (as referring to realities beyond ourselves, but realities that are always apprehended in terms of human concepts)? I take it that naive religious realism is not a live option for most of us today and that the issue is between non-realism and critical realism.

Within a non-metaphysical version of Buddhism as only a meditational practice which deconstructs the angst-laden ego, offering however no comprehensive insight such as would constitute the *dharma* as good news for all humankind, the notion of *upaya* covers all Buddhist teachings beyond 'the doctrine of Sorrow, of its origin, of its cessation, and the Path' (13), seeing them as skilful means to lead people to the practice of meditation. From this point of view the whole notion of the limitless outgoing compassion at the heart of the universe manifested in awakened beings who seek the enlightenment of others, is an attractive piece of wishful thinking. And it must be granted of course that it may indeed be mere wishful thinking. But this sceptical view does not seem to me to fit well either the teachings of Gautama as reflected - admittedly at some remove of time - in the Pali scriptures, or in most of the later developments of Buddhist teaching. It will therefore be worth while to go on to ask what part the idea of *upaya* plays in a Buddhism whose language is understood in a critical realist mode as referring - though always through inadequate human thought-forms and language - to the ultimate structure of reality. Let me outline a possible such view.

IV

Within the Mahayana tradition a distinction is drawn between, on the one hand, the indescribable ultimate reality in itself, variously referred to as the Buddha nature or the Dharmakaya or (in the *Ratnagotravibhaga*¹⁴) as 'the perfectly pure Absolute Entity' (*dharmadhatu*), and on the other hand the manifestations of this to human consciousness,

varying according to our varying human receptivities: 'The Absolute Body (*dharmakaya*) is to be known in two aspects. One is the Absolute Entity which is perfectly immaculate, the other is its natural outflow, the teaching of the profound truth and of the diverse guidance.'¹⁵ I take it that this is also the distinction used by Shinran when he cites this passage of T'an-luan:

Among Buddhas and bodhisattvas there are two aspects of *dharmakaya*: *dharmakaya-as-suchness* and *dharmakaya-as-compassion*. *Dharmakaya-as-compassion* arises out of *dharmakaya-as-suchness*, and *dharmakaya-as-suchness* emerges into [human consciousness through] *dharmakaya-as-compassion*. These two aspects of *dharmakaya* differ but are not separate; they are one but not identical.¹⁶

In his Introduction to Shinran's text Yoshifumi Ueda says that 'the ultimate formless and nameless *dharmakaya-as-suchness* (nirvana) manifests itself in the world as Amida Buddha, *dharmakaya-as-compassion*, emerging in this samsaric ocean to make itself comprehensible to men' (17).

Given this distinction between the ultimate inconceivable reality, the *dharmakaya*, and its manifestations to human consciousness, we can say that the negative Buddhist language about the *dharmakaya* as formless or ineffable is far less upayic than the positive, specific, detailed language about its manifestations. The first, very limited, range of discourse is upayic only in the minimal sense in which all human thought and language is inescapably so, that is, it inevitably reflects some aspect of the 'shape' of the human mind as embodied in the kinds of concepts of which it is capable. But the second range of discourse is upayic in the more substantial sense that it involves a (conscious or unconscious) selection from a range of possible concepts. Thus the Theravada thinks in terms of *nibbana* but not of the *Trikaya*. Large sections of the Mahayana, but not of the Theravada, use the concept of *sunyata*. Jodo and Shin, but not Zen, think in terms of the manifestation of the ultimate Buddha nature in the Pure Land. Tantric Buddhism thinks in terms of yet other manifestations of the Buddha nature. And all these different modes in which the ultimate Reality is manifested to Buddhist understanding are modes of *upaya*. They are ways in which particular Buddhist faith communities, formed by their own powerful traditions, conceive and experience the Ultimate in relation to themselves.

In this use of the term '*upaya*' it is assumed that the ways in which the ultimate *dharmakaya* affects our human consciousness differ according to the varyingly distorting effects of *avidya* (ignorance). We are thus presupposing the basic epistemological principle that was formulated by St Thomas Aquinas (in *Summa Theologica*, II/II, Q. 1, art. 2) as *cognita sunt in cognoscente secundum modum cognoscentis* ('things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower'). It was above all Immanuel Kant who brought into the stream of modern western thought the realization that the human mind is active in all awareness, shaping the phenomenal (that is, experienced) world in the process of cognizing it. His insight has been massively confirmed by more recent work in cognitive psychology and has been given a new cultural dimension in the sociology of knowledge; and we can now apply it in the epistemology of religion in the hypothesis that the Ultimate is manifested to us in a range of ways formed by the culturally variable structures of the human mind. We can say this in Buddhist terms by speaking of the *dharmakaya* as manifested to us in a range of ways formed by the versatile operations of *upaya*.

This interpretation presupposes, first, the experience of the Buddha and, in varying degrees, of many others who have followed his Way, and secondly, the faith-conviction that this experience is not simply the psychological state of a relatively few but is at the same time the manifestation, or presence, within human life of the eternally Real, so that on the basis of this experience affirmations can be made about the ultimate nature or structure of reality. The notion of *upaya* is, then, the notion that the cosmic significance of the nirvanic experience can be conceptualized in a variety of ways, all of which communicate the importance and availability of the experience, but none of which constitutes the one and only correct way of conceptualizing it. These schemes of thought are provisional and instrumental, and are to be

discarded, like the raft in the Buddha's parable, once they have fulfilled their function. Further, there are a number of different conceptual rafts, each of which may serve the same purpose equally well for different people or even for the same person at different times.

V

I now want to suggest that this pattern of a liberative and transforming experience accepted by faith as manifesting the presence to or within human life of the ultimate transcendent Reality, and conceptualized in the history of the tradition in a range of ways, occurs not only in Buddhism but in all the great salvific religions. I only have space here to spell this out a little in the case of Christianity, and then to indicate in the sketchiest way how it may also apply yet more widely.

What, then, would this notion of *upaya* sound like if translated into Christian terms? It would mean that there is a basic Christian experience and a range of theological conceptualities in terms of which this can be understood; and it would imply that these theologies are all provisional and instrumental, as alternative ways of setting the experience in an intelligible context.

As in the case of Buddhism, we should begin by assembling some indications of the nature of the core experience. It is variously called - in terms which already embody theological commitments - the experience of salvation (presupposing the Fall-Redemption scheme), or of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit (presupposing a Trinitarian scheme), or of being in Christ or Christ in the believer (presupposing a distinction between the historical Jesus and the transcendent Christ), or again in such more consciously contrived terms as Paul Tillich's notion of participation in the New Being. Leaving these labels aside and looking at the experience itself as it is reflected in the New Testament documents, we see in the very early Christians a conscious re-commitment to God as made real to them by Jesus, an excited and exhilarating sense of participating as 'insiders' in God's final act of inaugurating the Kingdom, and a joyful liberation from the fear of both demonic and human powers. We see also a freedom from self-concern, based on trust in God, within a close-knit faith community in which 'all that believed were together, and had all things in common' (Acts 2: 44). These early Christians were indeed new people, born again into a new spirit, no longer living for themselves but for the lord Jesus who, they believed, was soon to come again to rule in the new Jerusalem.

Can we prescind from the special historical circumstances of the first Christians - particularly their belief that the end of the Age was about to come and Jesus to return in glory - in order to identify a core of Christian experience which has continued through the ages? I suggest that when we look at those whom we regard as Christian saints (who are not by any means always those who have been officially declared saints by the Catholic church) we see above all the centrality of the divine in human lives, relegating the little human ego to a subordinate role. To the extent that they are filled with the divine Spirit they are freed from natural self-centredness, with its manifold anxieties, so that they are no longer ultimately oppressed by the *dukkha* aspects of life, for 'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8: 3-9). Fundamental to this cosmic confidence is the radical ego-transcendence that St Paul expressed when he wrote, 'I live, and yet not I, but Christ liveth in me' (Galatians 2: 20); and he lists the fruits of this new spirit as 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Galatians 5: 22-3).

The experience of a new life is believed by Christians to rest upon the ultimate nature of reality. The basic religious faith, in its Christian form, is that the love and power of God revealed in Christ are not figments of our human imaginations.¹⁸ Thus far the basic formal inner structure of Christianity parallels that of Buddhism.

The parallel continues with the development of the Christian interpretative theories that we call theological doctrines. The transformed outlook, with its new mode of experience, was explained by soteriological theories, beginning with the idea that we have been made at-one, or at peace, with God by being ransomed on the cross from the power of the devil; and moving in the medieval period, to the idea of being pardoned and reinstated by God because Christ's death was accepted as a 'satisfaction' to appease the offended divine majesty; and again at the Reformation by the idea that on the cross Jesus was bearing as our substitute the just punishment for human sin. These are all Christian doctrines of the atonement, explaining how Christ has enabled God to forgive sinful men and women and accept them into the heavenly kingdom. Many Christian theologians today regard these theories as highly implausible, picturing God as they do as a finite deity bargaining with the devil, or on the model of a medieval feudal baron concerned for his own dignity and status, or again as a stern cosmic moralist who is incapable of genuine forgiveness. However, these ideas, which today seem so strange and unattractive, have in the past enabled Christians to put their experience of salvation into a (to them) intelligible context and so to accept God's acceptance of them. They have thus functioned in different past states of society as skilful means. They are upayic formulae designed to render intelligible the fact of salvation - the way of being in the world that flows from seeing God through the eyes of Jesus.

The various other elements of Christian doctrine - the idea of the Fall presupposed by the traditional atonement theories, the idea of the Trinity and of the deity of Jesus as the second Person of the Trinity incarnate, the pictures of heaven, hell and purgatory, the doctrinal authority of the church as the Body of Christ and of the sacraments as channels of divine grace - are on this view likewise upayic. They are not absolute and eternal truths but optional conceptualities which have proved useful to those whose formation they have influenced, but not generally to others.

This is not of course the way in which Christian doctrine has been officially understood within the churches. The view I have outlined represents rather a development of the approach initiated in the nineteenth century by the great Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. And it remains a complication that there is no such thing as *the* (universally agreed) Christian understanding of God, Christ, redemption, humanity, the church and its priesthood, of the nature of theology, or of the life to come. Christian interpretations of all these major themes vary from one historical epoch to another, and in a given epoch from one region to another, and within a given region, from one group to another, and within a given group often even from one individual to another. Amidst all these variations it is worth remembering that the Christian dialogue with the other world faiths has so far been largely based within the western or Latin development of Christianity embodied in the Roman and Reformed churches. But in the rather different eastern or Greek development, embodied in the Orthodox churches, there are some interestingly differently approaches. This is true, for example, of the understanding of salvation. Whereas in western Christianity salvation has generally been understood by means of a transactional model, according to which the death of Christ cancelled a debt or penalty of some kind, in eastern Christianity it has been predominantly understood in terms of a transformational model according to which men and women are gradually changed under the influence of divine grace on their path towards 'deification' - not that they literally become God but that they are transformed into what Irenaeus called the finite likeness of God. This way of thinking is sufficiently analogous to that of Buddhism for it to be natural to ask whether the awakened human being and the 'deified' human being are not the same person described in different conceptual languages?

If we have thus far been at all on the right lines we have seen that Buddhism and Christianity are both skilful means to a radically new or transformed state of being - a state which is intrinsically desirable and which is believed both to depend upon and to manifest the ultimately Real. In each case descriptions of the core experience are upayic in the minimal sense that all our concepts and language are perforce distinctively *human* concepts and language. But the further more specific ideas used in conceptualizing this experience arise from the different characteristics of the various cultural streams of human life. Within some

cultures people find it more natural to think in monistic, in others in dualistic, and in yet others in pluralistic ways; in some to conceive the ultimate in personal, in others in non-personal terms; some cultures prefer imaginative richness, others an austere sparseness in their symbols and in the formation of myths; some opt for intellectual complexity, others for simplicity, in the formation of doctrine; and so on.¹⁹

Phenomenologically, the Buddhist experience of awakened life and the Christian experience of the new life in Christ are different; for different concepts are required to describe them, and these are integral to different comprehensive conceptual systems. But at the same time the two types of core experience have very important features in common. They both hinge upon a radical shift from self-centredness to a new orientation centred in the Ultimate, even though the latter is conceptualized and therefore experienced in characteristically different ways. Further, the fruit of the transformed state, in basic moral and spiritual attitudes and outlooks, is very similar. The awakened person is filled with a compassion (*karuna*) and the saved person with a love (*agape*) which seem in practice to be indistinguishable. The Buddhist and the Christian thus appear to be responding to a cosmic reality which affects them in essentially the same way - although this effect may also be expressed within yet other cultural contexts in different concrete ways.²⁰

The possibility, then, that so obviously presents itself is that these two great religious traditions constitute different - indeed very different - human responses to the Ultimate or Real which, in itself beyond the scope of human concepts, is manifested to humankind in forms to which our concepts importantly contribute. In Buddhist terms the Ultimate is *sunyata*, or the Dharmakaya, the reality that is empty in respect of all that we can think or say, for it is beyond everything that human thought projects in the act of cognition. In parallel Christian terms, the Ultimate is the transpersonal Godhead that is manifested within Christian experience as the heavenly Father. The Ultimate is thus the 'God above the God of theism';²¹ or the 'real God' who is an 'utterly unknowable X', in distinction from the 'available God', who is 'essentially a mental or imaginative construction' (22), or again 'the noumenal Focus of religion which... lies beyond the phenomenal Foci of religious experience and practice' (23); or again the noumenal 'Real *an sich*' in distinction from its experienced personae and impersonae.²⁴

Within Christian history this distinction, as explicitly drawn, has until recently been largely confined to the more mystical side of the tradition. But nevertheless it has been implicitly recognized by virtually all the great theologians. For whilst they have developed an elaborate positive language about God as Father, Son and Spirit (debating whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son or only from the Father), and about the divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, goodness, justice, mercy and so on, they have also stressed that God in God's ultimate being is ineffable, beyond the range of our human thought. This recognition of the sheer transcendence and mystery of God runs through the history of Christian thought. For example, Gregory of Nyssa wrote:

The simplicity of the True Faith assumes God to be . . . incapable of being grasped by any human term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic and all supramundane intelligence, unthinkable, unutterable above all expression in words, having but one name that can represent His proper nature, the single name being 'Above Every Name' (25).

And St Augustine declared that 'God transcends even the mind',²⁶ whilst St Thomas Aquinas said that 'by its immensity the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches' (27). Clearly such statements presuppose a distinction between on the one hand, God in God's ultimate reality, beyond the reach of our human concepts, and on the other hand God as humanly known and described, a distinction between God *a se* and God *pro nobis*.

Analogous distinctions occur in the other great world traditions. Hindu thought distinguishes between *nirguna* Brahman, Brahman without attributes because beyond the scope of human thought, and *saguna* Brahman, Brahman with attributes, humanly experienced as Ishwara, the personal God who is known under different aspects by different names. Jewish and Muslim

mystical thought distinguish between, on the one hand, *En Soph*, the Infinite, or *al Haqq*, the Real, and on the other hand the self-revealing God of their scriptures. In Taoism the *Tao Te Ching* begins by declaring, 'The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao.' And we have already noted the distinction in Mahayana Buddhism between Dharmkaya-as-suchness and Dharmkaya-as-compassion.

In the light of this widely recognized distinction the possibility emerges that the great world traditions constitute different ways of conceiving, and therefore of experiencing, and therefore of responding in life, to the Ultimate. They are thus different forms (each including many sub-forms) of *upaya*, skilful means to draw men and women from a consuming natural self-concern, with all its attendant sins and woes, to a radically different orientation in which they have become 'transparent' to the universal presence of the Ultimate.

Notes

1. Michael Pye, *Skilful Means: A Concept of Mahayana Buddhism* (London: Duckworth; and Dallas: Southwest Book Services, 1978).
2. See Arvind Sharma, ' "Skill in Means" in Early Buddhism and Christianity', *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol.10 (1990), pp. 23-33.
3. *The Middle Length Sayings*, vol. I, trans. I. B. Homer (London: Pali Text Society, 1954), pp.173-4.
4. 'My heart is utterly set free' (*Theragatha*, x).
5. 'When such conditions are fulfilled, then there will be joy, and happiness, and peace, and in continual mindfulness and self-mastery, one will dwell at ease' (*Digha Nikaya*, I, 196).
6. 'He who doth crush the great "I am" conceit - this, even this, is happiness supreme' (*Udana*, ii, 1).
7. 'because of his pitifulness towards all beings' (*Digha Nikaya*, II, 38). *Dialogues of the Buddha*, 4th edn, vol. ii, trans. T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (London: Pali Text Society, 1959), p.31.
8. 'Thinking on there being no self, he wins to the state wherein the conceit "I am" has been uprooted, to the cool [*nirvana*], even in this life' (*Anguttara Nikaya*, IV, 353).
9. Michael Pye, 'Skilful Means and the Interpretation of Christianity', *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol.10 (1990), p.19.
10. *Digha Nikaya*, II, 3-5 (Pali Text Society translation, p.27).
11. *Majjhima Nikaya*, I, 169.
12. *Digha Nikaya*, II, 36. Cf. 'Here, in this world, it is quite rare to obtain the pure gem... the sight of the Buddha should be known as not easily achieved in this luckless world by those whose mind is afflicted by various passions' (*Ratnagotravibhaga*, Karika 51, Takasaki, p.372).
13. *Digha Nikaya*, II, 41. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, 4th edn, trans. T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, Part ii, (London: Pali Text Society, 1959) p.34.
14. Jikido Takasaki, *A Study of the Ratnagotravibhaga* (Rome: Is. MED, 1966) p. 284.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Shinran, *Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone'*, A Translation of Shin ran's *Yuishinsho-mon'i* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1979), p.5.
17. *Ibid.*, p.6.
18. Accordingly, the non-realist interpretations offered in the nineteenth century by Ludwig Feuerbach and today by such writers as Don Cupitt (and, perhaps less certainly, D.Z. Phillips), retaining the entire corpus of Christian language whilst understanding it as non-referential, are deeply subversive.
19. The anthropologists, ethnologists and sociologists have only begun to trace the ways in which these variations in basic ways of thinking have come about. But Max Weber, in the early twentieth century, laid the foundations for this research. See, for example, his *Sociology of Religion* (1922; Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1964).
20. For example, in the centuries before the rise of modern democracy, when power was concentrated in the hands of emperors and kings, Christian love had to be expressed in personal rather than political ways; and a like consideration applies to some Buddhist societies.
21. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1952), p.189.
22. Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 85-6. Cf. *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia, Pa: Westminster Press, 1981).

23. Ninian Smart, 'Our Experience of the Ultimate', *Religious Studies*, vol. 20, no.1 (1984), p.24. Cf. *Beyond Ideology* (San Francisco, Cal.: Harper & Row, 1981), ch. 6.
24. *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, 2nd ed. 2004).
25. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, I, 42, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. V, trans. P. Schaff and H. Wace (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1954), p.99.
26. St Augustine, *De Vera Religione*, 36: 67.
27. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, Bk. I, ch. 14, para. 3.