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The Marriage of Wisdom and Method

In order to illustrate the present theme I have drawn on two traditions, the Buddhist and the Christian; if such a juxtaposition of two very different pictures of the universe and of man's place in it implies something of a confrontation on the one hand, it also provides, on the other, a means of reciprocal confirmation across the bridge of contrast: all comparisons of orthodox, that is to say intrinsically valid, religious forms are able to serve this dual purpose.

Among the most salient differences between the two religions here in question are that, whereas in the Christian view the idea of Divine Personality dominates the scene together with its created counterpart, the human person, the Buddhist religious economy bypasses the former idea altogether while also picturing our human situation in a manner remote from the familiar ways of Western thinking; for it, that individual consciousness which we tend to equate with a constant personal entity appears as but an unstable aggregation of constituent factors involved in one overriding process of change, *samsâra*, the World's Flow: to know true personality, or true divinity for that matter (Buddhism would avoid both these terms), one must first awaken from one's existential dream; one who has done this is called *Buddha*, or the Awakened One. Meanwhile, to try and imagine what that supreme experience is like is only to entangle oneself further in the net of

illusory conceptualism and the unending speculations it is for ever giving rise to.

A no less conspicuous difference can be seen in the respective attitudes of the two traditions to the question of sin, which with Christian thinkers through the ages has become an almost obsessive preoccupation. The classical definition of sin, to be found in any standard catechism, is the willful disregard, by commission or omission, of a revealed law. 'Willful' is the keyword here, for if an undesirable action arises out of sheer ignorance so that the will plays no part, then the word 'sin' will not apply, nor will such sanctions as would go with a given action if sinfully, that is to say willfully, undertaken apply there either. Here obedience or else offence offered to the Divine Legislator, that God who is both justly merciful and mercifully just, will determine, for a Christian, his every moral valuation.

A Buddhist on the other hand, though by no means indifferent to sin (no religion could possibly minimize this vital issue), will assess all questions of offence, not by referring back to a divinely imparted law, but to the *nature of things*; no one judges our actions but ourselves or rather, to be more accurate, it is again the nature of things which will judge us because implacable judgment inheres in its very substance. Similarly, if there be a hell it is we who create it; having created it we should logically not be too surprised when we find ourselves trapped there until such time as the eschatological consequences of our misdeeds have played themselves out; similar considerations would of course apply to a paradise, as a recompense for righteous action. All this, for a Buddhist, forms part of the endless process of existential becoming; it is from the process itself, and not from certain of its symptoms, that he seeks deliverance and this, for him, can only come about through awareness of the true nature of the process itself or, as Buddhism prefers to put it, from a divestment of those persistent misconceptions which keep that process fueled.

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For one who views things thus, the to us familiar concept of forgiveness becomes practically unthinkable, being replaced by the idea of purification through knowledge; whereas for a Christian the divine prerogative to remit sins following on human repentance does evidently include the idea of purification as a consequence, for an adherent of the Buddhist religion it is knowledge alone which constitutes the lustral water wherewith to wash away the traces of sinful pollution in the human soul.

At this point in the argument one can, however, imagine someone chipping in with the question ‘Does this nature of things to which you have alluded differ all that much from our own idea of “God,” except by the absence of a personal attribution which, after all, may have remained latent simply because in the Buddhist wisdom there was no call to single it out?’

‘Now you are asking something,’ one would feel minded to reply, for indeed this question is a crucial one wherever inter-religious encounters are concerned and, moreover, this question contains the very means of reconciliation we all would fain discover in the present time of trouble, when for the first time in recorded history not just a certain religion but religion as such is under vicious attack. Better not attempt to elucidate this question further for the time being, but rather let it be allowed to act as a gentle ferment in one’s mind so that the vintage of unforced understanding may mature there in its own time. What has been said hitherto will, as one hopes, be enough by way of preparation for the more detailed discussion to follow.

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To start off, let me recall an episode I heard mentioned at the time of the Dalai Lama’s visit to Britain in the autumn of 1974. Someone had asked him how he felt about the Chinese invaders of Tibet; did he not hate them for the way they had

treated and continued to treat his countrymen? The person putting this question doubtless expected some answer to the effect that the Buddha's teaching, like Christ's, excludes hatred and violence, even in return for a great wrong. But what he got was something quite different, of which the matter-of-factness must have astonished anyone used to the habitual emotionalism of Western moralists, for what the Lama said amounted to this: Do the Tibetans stand to benefit in some respect or other from hating the Chinese? Or alternatively, will the Chinese draw some benefit from being thus hated? And if neither party is to derive any advantage, what's the point, then, of hating?

This answer of the Dalai Lama, moreover, reflects an attitude that I and others have commonly observed among members of the Tibetan refugee community, most of whom, incidentally, are not ex-landlords and their like as alleged by propagandists out to whitewash the Chinese occupation but quite simple people belonging to peasant families—some are monks of course, most of whom also come from peasant stock, certainly not the kind of people to think up a sophisticated version of their own motivation. One may well ask oneself whether such restraint in the face of brutal persecution could really be the outcome, not of some heroic exercise of human self-restraint, but of an apparently cold-blooded consideration of the data concerning the matter at issue. Could it be, as the Dalai Lama's remarks suggested, that an act of focused attention was enough in itself to charm away vindictive impulses which, for most people the world over, would seem almost excusable under the circumstances and in any case wellnigh irresistible?

Yet this is in fact the gist of the Dalai Lama's comment on that particular occasion, namely that the most potently intellectual and moral instrument to be found in man's psychological armory is this very faculty of focused attention previously mentioned, the faculty of 'mindfulness,' as it is usually called by Buddhists, without the cooperation of

which, as they say, no other human virtue however sublime is able to be exercised with any sureness. For this reason mindfulness occupies a preeminent place in the Buddhist scale of values, so much so that most of the elementary techniques connected with meditation are concerned with fostering a habit of rhythmic attentiveness without trying to get this geared at the outset to anything like what we would call a spiritual theme. If some people are inclined to question the usefulness of such undramatic practices as watching the alternate inflow and outflow of one's breath for hours at a stretch, this is because the Christian injunction to pray, though not excluding in principle the possibility of such technical aids to attention, does not include as a matter of course, as happens in Buddhism, a technique for keeping sharp the tools to be used for this purpose; emphasis on the whole is laid on the objects of prayer, wisely coupled with encouragement to use canonic forms of prayer like the 'Our Father' and the 'Hail Mary,' which undoubtedly have a power to regulate the human psyche far greater than any prayer improvised by the person himself; this should be said in passing.

The problem of distraction nevertheless will often arise and when this happens it is more than likely that the person so affected will be expected to rely immediately on the will, in the context of the Grace of God, in order to recall himself to a state of attention. Here Buddhists would be inclined to say that the human will, like anything else in one's psychic make-up, starts off already weakened by improper use and therefore requires intelligent training, failing which its action will remain too fluctuating to stand up to the pressures of distracting thoughts such as no man, be he English or Tibetan or other, can expect to be immune from. Ability to use the will effectively, which our moralists too readily take for granted, is not all that easy, it does not go without its corresponding skill which may in fact be equated with that very mindfulness we have just been discussing.

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At this point one might even hazard an elementary definition of mindfulness by saying that it is the methodic application of intelligence to any and every human contingency from the most outward and everyday actions to those inward-looking operations that fall into the category of mystical experiences. It is therefore not unreasonable to posit the presence of mindfulness whenever there is question of exercising will-power rightly.

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From the angle of mindfulness it should now be possible to consider some of the practical problems affecting a religiously intended life in this world, by taking our stand upon a principle which is basic to the teachings of the Great Way, Mahayana, this being the name collectively applied to the northern schools of Buddhism comprising the regions of China, Japan and Tibet, to which must be added Tibet's cultural offshoot in Mongolia, not forgetting the Kalmuks of the steppes west of the Caspian who form the only Buddhist group indigenous to Europe. The principle in question is expressed by saying that, for any human enterprise to be brought to good result, two mutually dependent factors have to be called into play to which are given the names of 'Wisdom' and 'Method'. This idea is further expressed by comparing Wisdom to the eye which discerns and Method to the legs which carry one along. There is a happy parable lending point to this moral, often quoted but which bears repetition; it runs as follows:

Two men set out to reach the city of Enlightenment but neither was able to make much progress because each was suffering from a serious disability; the one man was blind and the other man was lame. Eventually they hit on the idea of joining forces (one might have said of combining their disabilities), so the lame man climbed on the blind man's back after which they set out together, with the man who could see

pointing out the way while the man with sound legs advanced along it, and thus they both arrived safely in the city.

Let us now turn to the consideration of the symbolism which has given its title to the present essay: 'the Marriage of Wisdom and Method'. This symbolism runs right through the sacred iconography of northern Buddhism and has been given the greatest extension in Tibetan art. What we are shown in countless frescoes on temple walls, in painted scrolls for domestic use, and in cast images are paired figures clasped in the ecstasy of union and holding certain objects in their hands, namely a bell and something like the thunderbolt of Jupiter as known to Graeco-Roman antiquity; this second object is called *vajrâ* in Sanskrit, *dorje* in Tibetan, whence the name of Darjeeling, which means 'place of the *dorje*'.

The bell is always associated with the female partner, who stands for Wisdom; the *dorje* with the male partner, representing Method. Within the general context of this symbolism, these erotic portraits represent variously named Buddhas with their celestial Consorts so that other details will vary to match their titles, but the Wisdom-cum-Method relationship is maintained overall.

When Christian missionaries first came in contact with these artistic creations their built-in prejudices led them to see in these paired figures some kind of pornographic motive, an abomination of the heathen; in fact images of this type are regarded by Tibetans as radiating a message of austere purity—it is their critics who unwittingly revealed the baser instincts of their own prudish minds. However, apart from these anthropomorphic representations, Wisdom and Method are commonly symbolized by the two ritual objects already mentioned, both made of metal, namely the handbell and the *dorje*, every officiating monk or lama possesses these two objects, which are used both in temple worship and in all sorts of accessory rites; their detailed examination will help to throw their functional significance into sharper relief.

First the bell: this always bears the same devices and is cast in a special alloy yielding a clear and beautiful note ('the voice of wisdom'); as we have seen, the bell belongs to the female partner in the association. Its handle is crowned with the goddess-like head of Prajna Paramita, Wisdom Transcendent, here equated with Tara, the mother of Bodhisattvas or beings dedicated to Enlightenment who, in the Tibetan tradition, reproduces many of the characteristics which, in the Christian tradition, are associated with Mary—a case of spiritual coincidence, certainly not of historical borrowing. Self-evidently, every man born of woman is a potential Bodhisattva; it but remains for him to turn this potentiality of his into an actuality by ripening his wisdom through a deploying of the appropriate method. The latter will necessarily vary somewhat from person to person, since no two beings are alike nor can their path to the Center be quite identical; this also should be noted. The voice of the bell is an invitation to us all to undergo transformation into a truly human being, failing which one remains human in principle, but subhuman in fact.

As for the *dorje*: this consists of a central shaft flanked by four (sometimes subdivided into eight) flanges, with a constriction where the right hand grasps it in the middle. These lateral flanges correspond to the four directions of space which between them 'encompass' the universe. Here we evidently have to do with an *axial* symbol, of which the implications are far-reaching. In fact, a precisely similar symbolism belongs to the three-dimensional Cross, whereof the *dorje* is but a variant. Christians should always remember this metaphysical meaning attaching to the central emblem of their tradition, for the Cross, by thus 'measuring' the worlds, already proclaims the truth that one who is raised upon the Cross shall be both Judge—to measure something implies sitting in judgment—and Savior.

The salvational message of the Cross springs out of its very structure: first we have the upright, corresponding to the

universal axis as such, which must be conceived as extending indefinitely in both directions and thus connecting together all possible levels of existence, all worlds, all beings. Read from above downward the axis traces the path of Grace, the attractive influence of Heaven as the Chinese sages have it; read from below upwards it indicates the homeward path to be followed by those who, having been touched by Grace, wish to retrace it to its source. All that we call 'spiritual life' is summed up in this two-way traffic between Heaven and Earth: such is the message of the Cross's upright.

Second, we have the transverse beam of the Cross, representing for its part a particular degree of individual existence and notably the human degree as such; to complete the scheme one would have to imagine an indefinite series of such transverse branchings corresponding to other existential degrees in all their variety, but, symbolically speaking, the one transverse example suffices to illustrate the essential relationship to the axis, which will hold good for all other comparable cases.

As with the Cross, the same symbolical features are recognizable in the form of the *dorje*, with the handgrip corresponding to the Cross's intersection and carrying the selfsame human implications. Given man's situation at this point on the Cross's central shaft, it can be seen that his intrinsic vocation is to serve as a connecting-link between Earth and Heaven and, in virtue of this unique prerogative, to act as an advocate with the higher Powers for all his fellow beings dwelling at lower, that is to say more limiting, existential levels; to regard himself as being merely their exploiter is a flagrant betrayal of his own status. The frequent reference, in the Buddhist sacred writings, to 'human birth hard to obtain' reflects this situation; to be so privileged and yet fritter away this precious opportunity in trivial pursuits makes no sense; one may well ask oneself, 'Why then does this happen to us so often?' A man must be worse than complacent to suppose that he can neglect such an opportunity and yet stay

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where he is in the scale of existence; a fall from such a height is bound to take one to a depth proportionately abysmal; it seems no more than logical to say so.

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I remember once hearing a lama say that with the first inkling of one's own ignorance one is already one step forward in the path of knowledge: this has doubtless been said before, but it cannot be repeated too often. Once such an awareness dawns upon one's mind one is immediately faced with a choice: shall I continue as before or shall I turn in my tracks (which is what the word 'conversion' means literally)? Here the will can have an important part to play, for if this first impulse to reconsider one's life be a grace (as it must be, seeing that it was no initiative of one's own that evoked it), it is still not an automatic certainty that one will respond to that grace positively; where there is a choice the will, informed by intelligence or else confused by ignorance, will necessarily enter in. However, assuming that one decides to heed the mysterious call, the next step is bound to take the form of asking oneself the question 'What must I do now? How can I find out?' This amounts to a request for method: wherever there is a 'what?' or a 'how?' method must needs take a hand. Nevertheless, the earliest step of all is always a manifestation of wisdom, corresponding to a grace; and so will be the end of the road, after method has given all it had to give, when Wisdom Transcendent will shine of its own light.

The important thing to note here is that the first step in the direction of man's true home will typically be a negative one; one turns away from something in favor of something else, one abjures a life governed by profane preoccupations in order to seek the knowledge which comes when the human ego has ceased to treat itself as divine in its own right. In order to fit oneself for the exacting task ahead one finds oneself compelled to undergo some sort of discipline not of

one's own devising, a scheme of dos and don'ts, and this is precisely what the outward prescriptions of a religion do for one, their purpose being to steady the being throughout his or her earthly sojourn. It is nevertheless possible to see further into these same prescriptions, by tapping their latently symbolic potential; treated intelligently, a religious law need not seem irksome; but in any case its rough and its smooth should be accepted as part of an organic traditional whole.

We live in an age when there has been a wholesale repudiation of whatever belongs to the formal order, be it linked to the practice of a religion or ostensibly social in its bearing. Where people have not cast away their ancestors' religious allegiance altogether in order to align themselves with those who regard the idea of a spiritual order as totally outmoded, they have been attracted in increasing numbers to cults offering mystical experiences on the cheap, that is to say minus any requirement that the would-be disciple should adhere to that religious form where the esoteric teachings he seeks originated and from the traditional armory of which his instructors in these teachings will draw all their instruments; for the disciple, moreover, his adherence to the appropriate religious form will constitute his guarantee that what he is being offered is genuine: beware of a professing 'master' who offers a Sufism without Islam or a Tibetan Tantric initiation without Buddhism, or the Jesus Prayer without Christianity for that matter.

But the converse also applies: it would be equally improper for a Christian to ask for a Buddhist *mantram* or for a Buddhist to start invoking the Divine Name in Arabic like the members of a Sufi confraternity. One can deeply revere the same truth when uttered in a foreign language but this does not mean that one can pick and choose from several languages at random; to respect the internal purity of each is also a way of showing reverence. As for oneself, surely one religious language correctly spoken is enough. This present

paper was completed late one evening: next morning I attempted to sum up its conclusions in a few parting words.

For any man, his state of wisdom will coincide with his ability to direct an unflickering mindfulness upon whatever happens to come his way—in Christian terms, with his ability to see God everywhere and at all times and to shape both judgments and behavior accordingly. ‘Faith’ is that intermediate mode of knowledge which, at any given stage of life, fills for us the gap between mere belief and that unlimited awareness known to Buddhists as ‘Enlightenment’. It has been said of faith that, besides light, it comprises an aspect of obscurity; it can readily be understood why this must be so, pending the moment when one will ‘see not in a glass darkly, but face to face,’ as St Paul puts it. *Method* covers all that will be conducive to a state of wisdom at any degree: preeminently Method provides us with the opportunity to *verify* those truths we hold by faith through expressing them ontologically, that is to say in terms of our own being.

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Conformably with the traditional symbolism, Enlightenment coincides with the consummation of the marriage of Wisdom and Method; if this statement sounds rather final, it does nevertheless leave room for an awareness towards which what has been said hitherto has all along been converging, namely recognition of the truth that, as between the twin principles that have provided the subject of our present discussion, there exists no actual barrier of otherness; this distinction, though valid and therefore useful on its own showing, can be transcended in the knowledge that Method, statically conceived, is none other than Wisdom; Wisdom, dynamically conceived, may properly be called Method. For a man of ripened intelligence, Method *is* Wisdom, Wisdom *is* Method: readers familiar with the Heart Sutra will surely recognize the parallel implications. Such an awareness, once

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awakened, can never be put to sleep again, though a sinful unmindfulness may overlay it, in which case it continues to work like an abscess that has become tightly enclosed, until a true *metanoia* allows it to come out again into the open. When left unimpeded, this same truth can transfigure a man, coloring his perceptions as fast as they arise and conditioning his every activity. Even when only incipient, a knowledge of the ultimate identity of Wisdom and Method is already a powerful means of gaining freedom from that obsessive compartmenting of attention between the notional and the bodily side of things, abstract thought and involvement in action, which has been responsible for so much damage in this world of ours. By living out this truth both as contemplation, when one can fairly call it 'Wisdom,' and practically, as Method, one can be brought to the threshold of that Mystery of which the Buddha has unlocked the door. Nothing that we can do or say or think escapes from this twofold need; the whole teaching about Wisdom and Method turns on satisfying that need, daily and hourly.