SOME COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS
ON THE DIVERGING USES OF DESIRE
IN BUDDHISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND JÔDO SHINSHÛ

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SOME COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS ON THE DIVERGING USES OF DESIRE IN BUDDHISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND JÔDO SHINSHÛ

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Buddhism and Christianity appear to take rather different positions on the human desires: Buddhism speaks of the annihilation of desire as the goal of the path, while Christianity speaks of the necessity of "ordering" and "unifying" desire. We are here directly faced with the questions: How serious is this divergence? Would it have to do more with rhetoric than with content? How irreconcilable are these positions? Is the difference merely theoretical or does it have practical consequences?

A full treatment of the question would, I guess, have to consider the following points:

1. A (philosophical) phenomenology of desire;
2. The respective cultural roots of the opposite positions: desire in Indian and Greek thought;
3. The treatment of desire in Christian thought and spirituality;
4. The treatment of desire in Buddhist thought and practice;
5. The case of Shinshû.

There can, of course, be no question of treating all these points in this paper and, since the other papers of the panel promise to cover the Christian and Jôdo Shinshû angles of the problem, I intend to focus mainly on desire in Buddhism and restrict my comments on the other points to a few short remarks.

The Phenomenology of Desire

A few gleanings from encyclopedia entries, elementary as they are, may still be helpful:

Desire is one of those important subjects that are seldom discussed under their own names.... There is no standard inventory of experiences, realities, or relations to which the term refers.

Desire is commonly understood in volitional terms, in which case it is identified with such things as willing, wanting and wishing, choice and appetite, inspiration and motivation, and even with intention. Desire is also understood in more emotional or affectional... terms, in which case it is associated or identified with such things as emotion, feeling, passion, love, eros (and eroticism), attachment, craving....

The nature of desire is such as to place it between instinct and volition...; it is inferior to volition because it is not propelled by a disinterested, impersonal idea.

C. G. Shaw gives us a further hint: "With various religions, the attitude towards desire is determined in accordance with their general attitude towards the world."3 This is, of course, eminently true. The difference on this score between Buddhism and Christianity certainly has everything to do with a world as created by God and samsâra produced by human avidyâ. But, a more detailed look at that very generic word...
"world" may be required. To begin with, within that world the human make-up must come under special scrutiny: Is its natural condition basically flawed or not? Or, in other words, how radically is it infected by "original sin"? Moreover, the following factors, to which we must come back later, cannot be omitted: the difference in relative evaluation of the cognitive and appetitive elements of the human; the conception of the absolute as nothingness or as absolute being; and, finally, the kind of logic employed in the search for a solution to the human predicament.

Even to a hasty scrutiny, desire soon appears as a paradoxical phenomenon. Thus, for instance, desire appears to intend two things which, however, do not necessarily imply one another; the possession and enjoyment of a desired object and the suspension of itself. From this point of view our problem might have to be formulated as follows: Along which (different) lines do Buddhism and Christianity divide the horns of the dilemma?

The Cultural Rhetorics in the Background

Here we can only remark that Buddhism and Christianity apparently share the general evaluation of desire of the culture wherein they developed as religions; but they have been obliged to rethink the problem somewhat within the framework of their specific path to salvation. In connection with Indian culture, R. A. Delattre speaks of "a tradition in which desires are ultimately to be overcome in detachment," ... "[although] in that same tradition, desires appropriate to the stages of life on the way to liberation are affirmed and even celebrated with imaginative exuberance." And also of Taoism it can be said that "desire is presented as a problem rather than a resource for true spirituality" and the goal lies in weaning oneself of all desires. Greek thought can then, on the other hand, be characterized as containing "a generally more positive assessment of desire"—although its problematic side is duly taken into consideration, for instance, by Plato and the Stoics.

From this viewpoint, it could be asked how Buddhism changed the parameters of the problem by conflating the different stages of the Brahmin's life into one single path; and how Christianity had to rework the Greek solution in light of its different idea of the human (original sin) and of the Absolute.

Pure Land Buddhism and Desire

If I may be permitted to formulate in abbreviated terms how I see the special contours presented by the problem of desire in the context of Pure Land religiosity, the following could be near the mark.

In Pure Land Buddhism, desire apparently occupies central stage, in the centrality of Amida's Original Vow (aspiration, prayer) and the importance of Desire for Birth in shinjin (faith); and, moreover, desire appears in a very special light in the idea of salvation "with the passions still in place." It further seems to me that on this point Pure Land Buddhism shows a marked divergence from the general Buddhist pattern. I do not want to imply, of course, that these elements would be absent from the "Path of Sages." The role played by the vows in the bodhisattva path may suffice to convince us of the opposite. Still, the question remains whether the fact that these appetive elements come to take an absolutely central position does not constitute the whole of Pure Land Buddhism into a Gestalt not explainable anymore by the general Buddhist doctrine on desire. In other words, can Shinshū doctrine rely on the general Buddhist doctrine on desire or does it need its very own "theology of desire"? The latter necessity seems to be in-
timed by the following words by Soga Ryōjin. While pleading for a Shinshū doctrine that focuses on the specific core of Pure Land Buddhism, Soga writes: "When asked what the object of Shinshū doctrine is, I would say that it consists in clarifying the Vow-Desire (gan-yoku) as the principle and background of faith." This reminds me of a sentence wherein the centrality of desire in both Old and New Testaments is expressed:

Scripture...expresses most of all the theme of the alliance, that is, the theme of the march of two desires toward one another; first the desire-initiative of God to give himself to his human creature, and then the desire-response of the human creature to its God.  

DESIREE IN BUDDHISM

We come now to the question I would like to investigate in a little more depth: What exactly is the Buddhist position on desire? What is its meaning and function in the whole of Buddhist doctrine and practice? Where is it finally based on?

I had already an occasion to remark that the Buddhist "rhetoric" on desire stands in rather sharp contrast with the Christian one, which is for instance expressed in this word by St. Augustine: "The whole life of a good Christian is a saintly desire," or again by St. Thomas, when he writes: "The goodness of desire is to be the indispensable motor of all action." On the other hand, Buddhism and Christianity can be said to have at least one aim in common in present-day society: to deliver people "from the obsessions of a culture that thrives on the stimulation and exploitation of egocentric desire." This prompts us anew to ask the question: Are these two positions really so different? Do not they have, at the least, several things in common?

There can be no doubt about the fact that the Buddhist position on desire, insofar as it is radically negative, is paradoxical and looks untenable. This paradox has been objectively expressed as: "Desirelessness is ideal; yet, one must cultivate one's desire to attain the ideal.... Although ultimately one strives to be free of all desires, the only way to accomplish this is by means of desire." Some of its implications can be appreciated from two contrasting texts:

Somebody asked Jōshū, "Buddha is the enlightened one and teacher of us all. He is naturally free of all the passions (kleśa), is he not?"  
Jōshū said, "No, he is the one who cherishes the greatest of all the passions."  
"How is this possible?"  
"His greatest passion is to save all beings!" Jōshū answered.

In one of the Hinayāna sects it was held that "there was no Mercy in the Buddha's heart, since Mercy was considered to be one of the passions."

This may be the place to remark that, although the negative judgment on desire evidently goes back to the Buddha himself, in his Four Holy Truths, it would be too much to expect that all the varieties of Buddhism would treat desire in exactly the same way. A notorious dissident, of course, Tantric Buddhism or Vajrayāna, which has been defined as "a path in which desire and sense perceptions are made part of the path." Since I do not feel competent to treat it, I shall leave this "last turning of the wheel" out of consideration under the title of "exception"—at the avowed risk of omitting something essential for the total picture of Buddhism. Of the other dividing line, that between Hinyāna and Mahāyāna (with its passions-
What Is Wrong with Desire?

We must now ask ourselves the question: What is it that inspires the radical negation of desire in Buddhism? Which negative implications of desire are pointed out in the Buddhist texts? A (provisional) list of these shortcomings could run as follows:

1. Desire’s most evident shortcoming is, of course, that it can be classified among or identified with the passions (klesa), those penultimate causes of all human suffering. Desire thus prevents us from reaching the “peace” of nirvāṇa. As Dōgen has it, “When the heart seeks nothing, it is at peace.” A question, to be inserted here for the comparison with Christianity, is whether “peace” necessarily covers the full and ultimate human ideal.

2. A consideration especially developed by the Mahāyāna is that all desire is founded in a wrong dualistic judgment that discriminates between good and bad, pleasure and pain. And, indeed, all “desire invokes, if it does not actually generate, tension and contrast—between the present and the future, the actual and the possible, the real and the ideal.”

3. Desire thus stretches us toward the future and prevents us from fully living the present moment, which is after all the only reality for us. “And we will no longer want anything, that is, we will also have broken free from the future, so that our awareness and life will no longer be shaped and animated by that imagined future.” It must be remarked here that things will get complicated once it is pointed out that this tension between the real and the ideal is required for the ethical “ought” and the struggle for justice, once one “returns to the marketplace.”

4. It is further stressed that all desire is self-centered. Dōgen says that people who strive to attain Buddhahood, a noble desire if there is any, may look like “genuine people of the Path,” but in fact “because they practice for the betterment of their own selves, they are still not free from ego.” We may be reminded here of the reproach of self-centeredness addressed to the arhat by the Mahāyāna followers. In Christianity this becomes the problem of the relationship between the “love of self” (the desire of heaven) and the “pure” love of God.

5. Desire, even the desire for Buddhahood, is also said to be contrary to the truth that we are not apart from Buddhahood, and not lacking in anything, but instead “fundamentally complete in every respect.” D. T. Suzuki once expressed this by the words: “Paradise has never been lost and therefore is never regained.” On this point, Buddhism and Christianity seem to be on a collision course, since in the Christian story the human appears as having a fundamental, constitutive desire for the lost paradise, for God’s presence. But, at this point, it may be better to expand the Suzuki quote, because it appears to express very succinctly several motifs we shall come across below:

Paradise has never been lost and therefore is never regained. As Staretz Zosima says..., as soon as one wishes for it, that is to say, as soon as I become conscious of the fact, Paradise is right away with me.... Eschatology is something never realizable and yet realized at every moment of our life. We see it always ahead of us though we are in reality always in it. This is the illusion we are conditioned to have as beings in time or rather as “becomings” in time.
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Mahāyāna and Desire

Coming to the study of Buddhism from a Christian background, I had naturally supposed that the secret of the Buddhist dynamics lies in the opposition between samsāra and nirvāṇa, the abhorrence of that perpetuum mobile of birth and death and the concomitant desire for the quiet peace of nirvāṇa. I was then really shocked when I learned of the Mahāyāna “equation” of samsāra and nirvāṇa. Does not this do away with the dynamism of Buddhism? And what can this possibly mean religiously? Could an investigation of what happened to the view of desire in that transition become a key to a better understanding?

On the level of theory, the Mahāyāna critique of the Hīnayāna position is easy enough to understand. After all, this critique only asks the obvious question “why the ideal goal itself should be exempt from the fundamental condemnation of desirous attachment to all objects and conditions.” At the hand of the Theravāda commentaries of the Aṭṭhakavagga Sutta, G. Burford, for instance, has shown that, notwithstanding their general negation of desire, the Theravāda people in fact recognized the necessity of desire on the Buddhist path and, I could add, came very near the Christian position.

[Those commentaries explain] that trainees for the ideal aspire for entrance to the path and that entrants to the path long for arahantship, but that arahants do not hold anything as ideal. This implies that desire for the goal is a necessary part of the path to it, and also that those who desire anything other than path entry or arahantship (and thus nibbāna) do not qualify as Buddhist trainees.... Such lower goals constitute the desire that entraps one in the less-than-ideal condition, while the higher desire, for attainment of the ideal goal, actually helps to raise one from that condition.

In Western logic, the removal of that contradiction could be effected in two ways: either by making the fundamental negation of desire consistent, by extending it also to the “higher” desire for nirvāṇa, or by doing away with the basic negation of desire and recognizing also “lower” desires as possibly valuable. It appears, however, that Mahāyāna in fact found a third way, a more radical (and, possibly, more ambiguous) solution. While Western logic leaves the horns of the dilemma in place, Mahāyāna logic does away with the distance presupposed by the very existence of desire, the distinction itself between the desiring and the desired, by its “samsāra-sive-nirvāṇa.” Thereby, on the one hand, nirvāṇa, by its presence in samsāra itself, ceases to be possible object of desire, since desire essentially implies absence; and, on the other hand, samsāra, the human condition as it is with its passions and desires, comes to be sanctified by its identity with nirvāṇa.

So far so good: as a logical schema I can still follow that. But what does that do the concrete doctrine and praxis? And does not it conjure up more problems than it solves? For a minimum of concreteness, let us provisionally see this logic at work in the discourse of some Mahāyānists.

Whereas the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva spirit would find the true form in the ordinary man’s delusions, the practice of those of the Hīnayāna who are called Pratyeka Buddhas is to annihilate completely all love and grasping and to negate completely human life.... The spirit of the Bodhisattva is to find life at the heart of desire and grasping.

In his Discourses at Eihei temple, Zen master Dōgen says: “When the clay is plentiful, the Buddha is big.” By clay he means the raw passions.... And the more abundant it
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is, the greater the Buddha into which it comes to be moulded. The stronger the force of attachment, the greater the Buddha which is made.\(^{25}\)

Enlightenment (bodhi) is originally pure;
Creating the mind that seeks it is then illusion.
The pure nature exists in the midst of delusions,...
All living things of themselves possess the Way;
If you part from the Way and seek it elsewhere,
Seek it you may, but you will not find it.\(^{26}\)

It is hard to believe, however, that this shift to the Mahāyāna position would have been motivated or triggered simply by a concern for logical consistency. Much more practical (and, possibly, much more intrinsically religious) motives were of course involved. Among the motives with a possible bearing on our question, one might think of the following:

1. The consciousness of the danger of “self-seeking,” ever-present even in the noblest of quests, is well documented in the Mahāyāna texts.
2. The painful experience that nobody seemed to reach attainment (anymore) — which also may be one of the roots of the “Latter Days” (mappō) idea — may also have been at work. It is postulated, for instance, by A. Herman when he writes:

[Realizing that desirelessness is impossible], that is to say, seeing that there is no way out of the paradox of desire,
understanding that, as Mādhyamika Buddhism puts it,
there is no way to nirvāṇa, no goal to be desired or achieved, then one “lets go” of the way and the goal, and that “letting go” leads to, or is nirvāṇa.\(^{27}\)

3. The lay protest against the presentation of the monastic life as the necessary path to the goal may also have entered into this. A goal not defined by the path that leads to it naturally loses is contours.

4. A reaction against the unreasonable length of the path, as found in the traditional presentations, may also have been involved. For, as Carl Bielefeldt remarks, “Since the religious goal of buddhahood was inherent and not something to be achieved, the key to religious practice was...to give up merit-making and abandon aspirations for the dharma; since our distance from the goal is measured only by the persistence of our attempts to achieve it, one who abandons such attempts...immediately closes that distance.”\(^{28}\)

How Consistent is the Buddhist Negation of Desire?

We have already seen that the basic Buddhist position on desire is one of radical negation, and also that, in practice, the Theravāda admits a distinction in desires and the necessity of the desire for the final goal. Even the Dhammapada, which proclaims “delight only in the destruction of all desires” (nr. 187) and “Bhikkhu, be not confident as long as you have not attained the extinction of desires” (nr. 272), in other places speaks in a positive vein of “He in whom a desire for the ineffable has sprung up” (nr. 218) and “those who strive after Nibbāna” (nr. 226). And Rhys Davids, in his eagerness to exorcise the 19th century European image of Buddhism as a spineless pessimism, sums up as follows:

In no case, however, was the training to be carried on with cool impassivity, except in certain advanced stages.
The sincere student is constantly described as being aglow or ardent (ātāpi), strenuous or earnest (appamatta), full of energy and endeavor... and filled with eager active desire (tībbachanda)...\(^{29}\)

And, of course, Mahāyānists cannot avoid similar language.
Thus, for instance, Dōgen will use expressions like the following: "[Obtaining the truth] is a question of one's aspiration being thoroughgoing or not;" "It is the one who arouses a serious striving who quickly attains enlightenment;" "As long as one studies the Buddha dharma with the earnest intent to obtain awakening before one dies, there should not be a single person who would fail to attain."30

Occasionally, one also comes across texts which explicitly distinguish between good and bad desires. Thus, Soga Ryōjin indicates that the Shinshū Patriarch, Dōshaku, distinguishes forms that lead to attachment and forms conducive to liberation, good and bad desire, good and bad love, and "teaches that the avid desire for the merits of the Pure Land and Amida is certainly not something to be destroyed."31 And recently the popular Buddhist writer, Hiro Sachiya, wrote: "The Buddha condemns as producers of suffering only those desires (yokubō) which constitute a thirst (katsuai) that can never be quenched, because it reproduces itself."32

Do not Desire Enlightenment

It looks as if, in Mahāyāna and especially in Zen, the full power of negation is directed at the "higher desire" for nirvāṇa and enlightenment, rather than at the everyday human desires. In the footsteps of earlier Chinese Zen masters and in the context of the "Original Enlightenment" idea, Dōgen, as is well known, strongly denounces "practice for the sake of obtaining enlightenment." One sentence from the Zuimonki may sum it all up:

Only he can be called a true wayfarer, who has cast body and mind into the Buddha Dharma, and practices without hoping for anything further, even awakening to the Path and obtaining the Dharma-truth.33

A rudimentary analysis could distinguish the following elements in Dōgen's presentation of the question:

1. There should be no selfish motives in one's practice. "Not to study the Buddha Dharma for oneself, but solely for the sake of the path." Which reminds one of the Ad majorem Dei Gloriam motif in Christianity: practicing, not to obtain anything for oneself but solely for the greater glory of God.

2. There should be no striving or seeking at all in the practice. "Cutting off all seeking, one should not desire the fruit of Buddhahood."34 The implication appears to be that an attitude of striving is detrimental to the practice itself. This is clearly indicated in a text by Musō Soseki:

I spent three years in my secluded life in the mountains but I had not yet reached a final view. One day I remembered Bukkoku Zenji’s parting words: "If a Zen student makes the slightest distinction between the secular world and the priestly world, satori will remain unattainable." I realized that although I had coveted nothing at all in this secular world, my desire for the Dharma had ensnared my mind and stood in the way of enlightenment. When I realized what my mistake had been, my craving vanished, and from then on I could spend every day with my mind empty.35

3. The central idea is, of course, that all seeking of enlightenment tears practice and enlightenment apart, puts enlightenment outside as an object to be sought. Such enlightenment does not exist; there is no object to be expected, sought, or gained.36 The fact is that practice and enlightenment are identical and should never be thought of separately.

To think practice and realization are not one is a heretical
In the Buddha Dharma, practice and realization are identical (shushō ittō). Because one’s present practice is practice in realization,..37

For (distant?) parallels in Christianity, I can only think of St. Augustine’s “I would not be seeking You, if I had not already found You,” and the idea that monastic life is not so much seeking God as simply living in God’s presence (although here the two do not seem to be thought of as excluding one another).

4. Absolutely out of the question is to see the relationship of practice and enlightenment as one of cause and effect; rubbing the tile to make it into a mirror. Here the “sudden enlightenment” idea comes into play. Huang Po had already something to say on this: “To practice the six paramitas and a myriad similar practices with the intention of becoming a Buddha thereby is to advance by stages, but the Ever-existent Buddha is not a Buddha of stages.”38 And C. Bielefeldt’s remarks may be relevant here:

The mystery of the sudden practice of Zen lies in its conflation of cause and effect. Whether the practice is reduced to the goal of awakening or whether the goal is embedded in the act of practice, the two must occur simultaneously.... [Zen] must keep itself above any such distinction [of enlightened and non-enlightened] by collapsing the path and its goal and by asserting a transcendental plane of religion beyond the causal laws governing human spiritual works.39

In some respect, this may come near the lack of causal relationship between the good life and salvation, and the gratuity of God’s gifts in Christianity. Both occasionally endanger the motivation for manful practice.

If not Desire, What can Motivate the Practice?

I submit that the answer to this question must, finally be: no motivation for human action without desire. Indeed, we have seen that even Dōgen does not succeed in being fully consistent in this question and sternly demands “earnest striving.” Still, there may be something more at work here, which is not so easy to pin down, but at which Rhys Davids hints:

At the opposite extreme of these aspirations [for nibbāna], which might be called the vis a fronte, Buddhism places, as the driving power a tergo, the world’s great burden of ill....40

Dōgen appears to agree with this when, after saying that all depends on whether one’s determination is thoroughgoing or not, he adds: “And to arouse this determination, it is necessary to earnestly contemplate the impermanence of the world.”41

But up to this point the argument looks rather specious to me, since the loathing of this world and the desire for deliverance from it are only the two sides of the same coin and cannot be separated psychologically. But Dōgen delves deeper and, instead of negating the vis a fronte, turns it into a kind of vis a tergo by presenting enlightenment as there from the beginning and imbuing the very practice. It looks as if Dōgen would not object to the idea of being influenced or “moved” by enlightenment, but definitely does not want to put enlightenment “in front of him.” His view would then agree with that of the Sthaviras, who saw apraṇīhita (the “wishless”) as one of the three Doors to Deliverance. “The word a-praṇīhita means literally that one ‘places nothing in front.’”42 That triggers, of course, the question of what is wrong with being attracted by something in front. The answer could be that, once one puts something in front, as an object, one clothes it
with forms, born out of one's desires. Nirvana is an object of craving only in so far as one forms a mistaken idea of it. Under the influence of 'sensuous craving' one may strive for Nirvana because of the bliss, joy and delight associated with it.... Under the influence of the 'craving for extinction' one may hope....

All this opens up a Pandora box of new questions. In original Buddhism there cannot be a vis a fronte independent from the vis a tergo, since the content of nirvāṇa is nothing but the negation of saṃsāra. Still, already the Abhidharma spoke of a shift in the motivation of the wayfarer: having been driven up to then by his dissatisfaction with this world, at a certain moment his "wisdom eye" opens and, "Nirvāṇa, having become more real to him than anything else, now can act as his 'objective support,' not in the sense that he can make statements about it, but in the sense that it increasingly motivates his conduct." And there is also the fact that, in Mahāyāna, nirvāṇa came to be invested with four positive characteristics: permanence, bliss, self, and purity. However this may be, the still more intriguing question is whether the case of Christianity (and of Pure Land Buddhism) can be basically different: How far does, in Christianity, the vis a fronte transcend (have content apart from) the vis a tergo? In any case, Shan-tao's parable of the "two rivers and a white path" appears to see the two as complementary: Shakyamuni urging on from behind (the eastern bank) and Amida summoning from in front (the western bank).

**BACKGROUND INVESTIGATIONS**

The above considerations may have thrown some light on the contrasting views and "uses" of desire in Buddhism and Christianity, mainly by exploring some "horizontal" connections, but we shall really understand the meaning and scope of the divergence only when we succeed in getting some insight into the way these attitudes fit into and are rooted in the respective "general attitude towards the world" of the two religions. In the few pages that remain I shall attempt to at least point out a few of these "vertical connections" which the conception of desire entertains with the deeper layers of these world views.

**Nature and Predicament of the Human Being**

It would be hard to deny that desires constitute an important part of the human as we actually encounter it in ourselves and in others. In Christianity desires are valued in a basically positive way, because they are seen as being part of human nature as willed and brought into existence by a benevolent God and constituting a link with that God. Original sin caused a significant disorder in the human desires, but did not basically pervert human nature. In original Buddhism, on the other hand, there is no question of such a transcendentally founded "nature" of the human being, and the human situation is judged to be radically flawed precisely by (ignorance and) the desires and the ego identified with them. Desirelessness and non-ego are then naturally seen as the right situation. The possibility of reaching that state is then clearly affirmed, but the ground of that possibility nowhere indicated (except maybe vaguely in the idea of Dharma). In the ideas of Tathāgata-garbha and Buddha-Nature, Mahāyāna found the potentiality for liberation and the ground for a more optimistic view on the human predicament: a kind of inherent and originally pure human "nature," habitually covered however by the dust of the
ego and its desires. The perversion, effected by the desires, does not reach any longer the deepest level of the human make-up.

Pure Land Buddhism, at least in Soga Ryōjin's reading of it, harks back to Shakyamuni's original evaluation of the human situation, beyond the more optimistic evaluations that appear on "the Path of Sages," and does not recognize any potential for salvation immanent in the human being. The potentiality for salvation, however, is now clearly pointed out: Amida's merciful Vow-Desire. The desire for Birth, something eminently positive, can then not be ascribed to the human being; it must have Amida for its real origin and subject.

Desire between Theory and Praxis

R. Buswell detects in Buddhism a "creative and persistent tension between that religion's cognitive claims and its most characteristic conative injunctions," i.e., between its theory, the logic of emptiness, and its praxis or mārga. A real knowledge of Buddhism can then only be had by "an approach...that gives mārga and Buddhism's conative import [its affirmative soteriological message] a value equal to that normally assigned to the cognitive message of śūnyatā and associated concepts [its metaphysical negation]." He then expresses his regrets over the fact that in many presentations — and namely that of the "Kyoto School" — we are offered a "truncated, asymmetrical, perhaps even eccentric Buddhism...; Buddhism as a tradition of exclusively cognitive import, inordinately preoccupied with the most apophatic register..." Applying this, rather crudely (also for brevity's sake), to our problem, we could say that Buddhism tends to situate the paradox of desire between its theory of emptiness, for which desire is absolutely taboo, and its practice for which desire is absolutely necessary. All this amounts to saying that the Buddhist theory on desire by itself does not explain its own religious reality, or, as I have expressed it elsewhere, that the logic of emptiness gives us a view of the top without accounting either for the ladder that brings one there (the path) nor for the bottom whereon that ladder rests (the original secular situation).

Evaluation of the Cognitive and the Appetitive (Conative)

As indicated above, desires can be said to belong to what, in the Western tradition, has been called the "appetitive" side of the human, which itself comprises the volitional (will) and the emotional (feeling). In that same tradition, relatively much attention has been given to that part of the human make-up and, in the Middle Ages, the relative superiority of the cognitive and the volitional became the subject of heated discussion. I sometimes get the impression, probably based on ignorance, that the same cannot be said of most Eastern tradition, where the bases seem to be heavily loaded in favor of the cognitive. However this may be, R. Delattre's remark is well taken: "Where reason is set over against and valued above either will or emotion, desire will usually be viewed as spiritually problematic," and at least of Buddhism it cannot be doubted that it is a religion of Awakening or Wisdom.

In Buddhist theory, then, the conative or appetitive side of the human does not seem to be recognized as originally and legitimately there, but either seen as illusion, a "privatio" of right knowledge, or reduced to the cognitive. The "decision" to enter the Buddha path is called "bodhicitta," which translates as "the thought of enlightenment" or "entertaining the idea of Buddhahood." Thus, a European Buddhist warns his co-Europeans that:
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One should not confuse desire and hope, which suppose projection, tension toward, with the pure act which determines the Buddhist 'path,' of which the two perfect models are the decision of the Buddha to obtain enlightenment at the foot of the bodhi tree and the vow, prajñāhāna, of the bodhisattva.48

We can see the same tendency at work in the sentence quoted above (p. 6), wherein D. T. Suzuki reduced the “wishing for Paradise” (an appetitive act which presupposes a real absence) to the consciousness of the presence of Paradise.

The most important “consequence” of the superiority of the cognitive in Buddhism, for Buddhism itself and also in view of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, is the difficulty Buddhist theory has in giving a proper place to Mercy or Love. For, love undoubtedly belongs to the conative and, indeed, implies desire (pace, Nygren’s agape). Unfortunately, we must limit ourselves here to a few remarks on this important subject. We find, in Buddhist texts, enough indications of the consciousness that Mercy is not reducible to Wisdom. We must only remind ourselves here to a few remarks on this important subject. We find, in Buddhist texts, enough indications of the consciousness that Mercy is not reducible to Wisdom. We must only remind ourselves of Joshū’s declaration above, and we find the presentation of the bodhisattva as the one who knows how to combine in himself the two contradictory things: Wisdom which does not recognize the real existence of others, and Mercy which recognizes the others as real and actually takes care of them. Still, in the logic of emptiness, Mercy tends to be reduced to Wisdom, as the insight into the non-duality of self and other — again nothing conative recognized.49

Desire, Time, and Emptiness

The D. T. Suzuki quotation leads us to a further basic element of our question. Desire presupposes a real distinction in real time: the moment of absence of the object desired and the moment of presence in its fulfillment. But, this “seeing Eschatology (the moment of fulfillment) ahead of us” is declared, by Suzuki, to be “the delusion we are conditioned to have as beings in time....”50 Time, thus, is no constituent of the human being’s real existence, but only of the illusory dream it builds up by its desire. When time is delusion, desire cannot be given a positive reality and, we could add, neither can the “path” to Buddhahood.

The Absolute Background

The deepest backdrop of the difference in evaluation of desire is evidently the difference in conception of the Absolute: On the one hand, Being as acting, desiring, loving personhood, which actively attracts the human by means of the very desire at the heart of the human and, on the other Being as emptiness, wherein all desiring, acting, loving has been neutralized in a totally transparent Wisdom, a pure consciousness not limited by any object, project, or aim, which cannot attract but can be “realized” by a total “Abgeschiedenheit” from all action and desire.

NOTES

5. Ibid., p. 308.
6. Ibid., p. 311.

Donald Lopez points out that in the idea of klesa, Buddhists preserve “the basic binary opposition of pollution and purity” of the older ritualistic religion: Desire then offends the “purity of mind,” nearly as something “organic.” (Cf. Donald S. Lopez, “Paths terminable and interminable” in Buswell and Gimello, op. cit., pp. 155-157.

23. Grace Burford, ibid., p. 58.
25. Ibid., p. 52.
29. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, “Desire (Buddhist)” in J. Hastings, op. cit., Vol. 4, p. 668. Stronger wordings can also be found, as, for instance, in Sántideva’s Bodhisattvavatāra: “Then I will never turn back from smiting the passions. I will grapple

with them, will wrathfully make war on them all, except the passion that makes for the destruction of the passions.” (As quoted in E. A. Burtt, The Teachings of the compassionate Buddha. New York: New American Library, 1955, p. 137)
31. Soga Ryōjin senshū, Vol. I, p. 120.
32. Hiro Sachiya, in Daihōin of February 1993, p. 84.
33. Rhys Davids (op. cit., p. 668) is also of this opinion: “...desire...becomes a source of danger only when the object of desire is such as to give no lasting satisfaction when it is attained.”
34. Dōgen, Zuimonki, VI, 21.
36. Ibid., IV, 8.
38. Cf. “The Zen Teaching of Huan Po” in Chr. Humphreys, op. cit., p. 188.
41. Dōgen, Zuimonki, III, 11.
43. Edward Conze, Ibid., p. 67.
44. Edward Conze, Ibid., p. 58.
46. R. Buswell, Ibid., p. 27.

The author also remarks there: “Desire and hope, which in Christianity attain the dignity of theological virtues, are impurities (klesa, śrava), even when their object is nirvāṇa or the attainment of Buddha-Nature.” (p. 194)

On the presentation of desires as “impurity,” cf. Donald Lopez in R. Buswell & R. Gimello, op. cit., pp. 154-157. The author argues there that “the basic binary opposition of pollution and purity” of Hinduism is maintained in Buddhism, although transferred from the physical to the mental realm.
49. A suggestive treatment of the difference between the Oriental and Semitic religions on this point can be found in a book, pointed out to me by James Heisig: John Burbidge, Being and Will. An Essay in Philosophical Theology New York: Paulist Press, 1977. The author proposes that, in order to bring unity into their respective
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world views, the two work with a different "fundamental analogy." The Orientals with an analogy of being, and the Semites with an analogy of will. Of the Oriental way of thinking, he then says, for instance: "That he might adequately express the ultimate truth of being, the individual decides to cancel all limiting distinctions by transcending both desire and will." (p. 85)