

Lecture

BUDDHISM AS AN INTERACTIVE MESSAGE

Victoria Lysenko

Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy,
Department of Oriental Philosophies
Volkhonka 14, 119991 Moscow, Russian Federation
State University for Humanities
Miusskaya square 6, Moscow, Russian Federation
E-mail: vglyssenko@yandex.ru

Most of the time, in the West, Buddhism is being accused of pessimism. Why? Where does this kind of accusation come from? Normally, criticism of Buddhism refers to the Buddha's saying "All is *duḥkha*" (*sarvam duḥkham*), which is often interpreted as "All is suffering". But the notion of *duḥkha* could not be reduced to that of suffering, especially when the latter is loaded with specific Christian associations with the vicarious sufferings of Christ and the Atonement, that is those propitiatory properties of suffering which are highly venerated in Christianity. Christ has suffered for us and his suffering purified us from our sins, or in Catholic terms, made satisfaction for our sins. According to the Buddha, suffering will produce only more suffering and nothing good. As for the Buddhist *duḥkha*, it has the more general meaning of dissatisfaction, frustration and is, rather, close to the existential notions of anxiety, uneasiness (*Angst* and *Sorge* in German).

In fact, *duḥkha* is connected with the idea of the incompleteness and insufficiency rather of the human beings, than of the world as such, for the word "all" (*sarvam*) in this formula does not refer to the world or to anything in the world. The Buddhists were never much interested in the world as it is. The word "all" has the specific Buddhist terminological meaning of the five *skandhas* – or the five groups of psycho-somatic phenomena constituting individual experience. What are these phenomena? 1) *rūpa* (bodily psycho-somatic experience), 2) *vedana* – sensations (pleasant, unpleasant and

neutral), 3) *saṃjñā* (verbalized synthetical identification of perceptual experience, like “this is a cow”), 4) *saṃskāras* (those factors that make our experience a part of a karmic process – intention, will, thoughts etc.), and, finally, 5) *viññāna* – this *skandha* is specially difficult to interpret and there are many different opinions thereon. For me, it means some sort of cognitive experience of recognition and identification of the objects as pertaining to this or that *indriya*, or sense faculty. So, when we come in contact with some object, it is the *viññāna* which directs our perceptual experience through one of the channels either of vision, or hearing, or taste etc. The Buddhist meaning of the formula “*sarvam duḥkham*” is that all those groups of phenomena (*dharmas*) are the instruments of an unsatisfactory karmic experience which is connected with anxiety. But this statement of the Buddha does not constitute an ultimate truth of Buddhism, it is only the first thesis, the first Noble Truth, or the Truth of the Noble Ones (*ārya*), according to a more adequate translation. The three other Truths are to follow.

The Second Truth is about the cause of “*sarvam duḥkham*”. The Buddha maintains that it is desire, or thirst for objects of senses as well as the idea of “I”, “mine”. Please, take notice of this: *duḥkha* is not a sort of state of affairs in the world, or a kind of Metaphysical Evil beyond the human level, or the result of Satan’s wickedness, *duḥkha* is produced by human commitment to the objects of senses through the idea of “I”. The Third Truth delivers very good news – that *duḥkha* which is created by human beings in their own minds, can be eliminated in the same manner, any human being in his or hers own mind. And the Fourth Truth gives really the best news – there is a practical way to eradicate *duḥkha*. It is called the Eightfold Noble Path (*āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*): right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. So we see that the Buddha’s message is not pessimistic at all! On the contrary, it not only explains to us why we are frustrated, but also shows us the real path to emancipation from *duḥkha*.

Those who accuse the Buddha of pessimism put the stress only on the First Truth and lose sight of the other three Truths. The conclusion to be drawn from all the Four Truths is not only optimistic in character (exemption from *duḥkha* is possible!), but quite pragmatic and constructive (it may be achieved by everybody!).

And the last argument against the so called “Buddhist pessimism” – Have you ever seen a gloomy Buddhist? Just remember the ever laughing and self-ironical Dalai-Lama as compared with solemn Christian hierarchs and Muslim muftis. As we all know, the latter have some serious problems with their sense of humor.

Another accusation against Buddhism, repeated by its critics, is that of escapism – the desire to escape from the problems of society, to immerse in religious practice (meditation) without participating in social activities. However, the transformation of the human person by eliminating aggression, jealousy, anger, intolerance, which is the goal of the Buddhist practices, does help any individual to live in harmony with oneself and the world. By the same token, it may help a society, too. “We are changing - the world is changing”.

Why is Buddhism called a world religion?

Buddhism was the first religion in the history of mankind that had turned to man as such - to the individual, person, independently of his or her origin and position in society. It is this openness and accessibility of the Buddhist message for everyone that makes it a world religion (along with Christianity and Islam, which appeared much later). But what do we mean when we speak of Buddhism as a “religion”? Which concept of religion are we making use of? If our idea of what religion is has been framed by the so called Abrahamic religions - Judaism Christianity, and Islam, then we will see in Buddhism a number of facts that are clearly contrary to that very idea of religion.

Judaism, Christianity and even Islam are based on the Old Testament, they are monotheistic, that is, they believe in one God, who created the world (creationism), and they also recognize Revelation as «the self-manifestation of the Divine and the proclamation of His will to a man» (Alexander Men, 1935–1990, a Russian Orthodox priest, theologian, Biblical scholar and writer).

In Buddhism, there is no divine creator of the universe, nor any messenger of Him carrying His word to the mankind, nor any God-become-man. The Buddha never claimed to be a god or a mediator between human beings and some higher power, nor did he consider himself a supernatural being. The founder of Buddhism spoke of himself as of one who had the experience “previously unknown” - the experience of awakening (bodhi). But that bodhi experience - again is not a Revelation coming from God, but an act of insight into reality as it is (yathābhitam), resulting from the use of certain methods of meditation and psycho-techniques (the Buddha calls them “The Path”). The Buddha definitely protested against the cult of his person (“Do not bring me flowers, garlands, gifts, better follow the Dharma” – D. II. 138), and he always insisted that the most important thing - is not he, the Buddha, but what he had discovered and taught – the Dharma, his Teaching (“Those who see the Dharma see me”). The Buddha is primarily a Teacher, and it is this role of a Teacher (guru) he believes to be his own, unlike the situation in Christianity, where God is treated in accordance with the paternalistic paradigm as the Father-Son.

The Buddha is also different from the prophets or teachers of the Abrahamic religions. What he is delivering is not some ready-made knowledge but, rather a particular skill, owing to which his discovery can be mastered through personal experience. For him, teaching people how to emancipate themselves from the hardships of rebirth (saṃsāra) was more important than providing them with an object of faith or a picture of the world.

Nor is there in Buddhism any immortal soul, which may come to present itself before the Lord to be accountable for its transgressions. Buddhists developed a highly original psychological as well as philosophical idea of non-soul, or, still better, non-self (anātmavāda). For them the doctrine of the eternal and unchangeable self, or soul, being a subject of cognitive and other activities as well as the centre of individual experience cannot account for the moral responsibility of a person: if it, the soul, or ātman, is not changing according to one’s good and bad deeds, the karmic retribution is impossible. Nothing is permanent in the individual: as such the individual is a series of ever changing psycho-somatic phenomena, none of which could be identified as “I” (it is this idea which draws much interest from the part of modern cognitive scientists, those

who, like Francisco Varela, believe that the notion of ‘I’ is a pure convention, without any physiological reality¹).

What is equally important for understanding Buddhism is the absence in it of any divine providence of the Supreme Being, directed to the highest good of the whole creation, man and mankind in particular. Nor do we come upon any redemption from suffering and death through which an innocent God-man would atone for the sins of the human kind. According to the idea of karma, there is no way for the person to avoid the results of his or her actions. Everyone has to pay for one’s deeds.

There is no absolute and unconditional faith (“I believe, because it is absurd”), and no absolute devotion (forgetting oneself), which the gods of other religions require and receive from their followers. The Buddhist Eightfold Path does not begin with the faith but with the “right view”, as it is more appealing to the mind of human beings than to their emotions and feelings.

From this follows the next significant “no” in Buddhism as compared with Christianity and Islam - it has no religious belief in supernatural forces. The existence of gods, ancestral spirits and other supernatural beings is recognized in Buddhism as a part of the “natural” order of the universe. All these creatures are also subject to the law of karma (a moral retribution “for” deeds) and saṃsāra (endless rebirth), in exactly the same way as humans, animals, and other beings. Among them all, the human being is the only one able to reach the end of karma and saṃsāra, a goal inaccessible to the gods themselves. This is the main religious goal of Buddhism - nirvāṇa (literally “extinction”). However, nirvāṇa is not the total destruction of personality, or nothing, as it is often understood in the West. “Extinction” - refers to the suppression of affective states, which are those of desire, passion, anger, hate, etc.

Let us note that karma and saṃsāra – are also not a matter of faith. We cannot say that Buddhists believe in reincarnation. For them it is a real fact which can be submitted to an “experimental” test. For example, they believe that by entering into a particular meditative state, one can remember one’s past existences and see the perpetual birth and death of other creatures. According to the stories of the Buddha’s life, he experienced what is called in Buddhism a retrocognition just before the moment of “awakening”. Those who have not experienced it yet, trust the authority of the Buddha.

Finally, in Buddhism there is no religious organization, comparable to the Christian Church.

What makes Buddhism a religion, then? Why, despite everything that was said above, do we still designate it with this word? First of all, it is a promise to save its followers from the painful problems of human existence in the world, that is, the promise of salvation, or, to avoid Christian associations, let us rather talk about a promise of emancipation. But emancipation from what? Is that an emancipation from the problems caused by the finitude of the individual human existence: illness, old age, fear of death, etc.? Yes, definitely, from them as well. However, for the Buddhists, these problems are

1 Varela, F. J.; Thompson, E.; Rosch, E. *The embodied mind: cognitive science and human experience*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991.

only manifestations of a more fundamental problem - the endless rebirths (*saṃsāra*). The destiny of a person may change under the influence of his or her intentions, thoughts, words and deeds: disease, poverty, humiliation - these are consequences of bad thoughts and deeds, while joy and well-being are the results of moral behaviour. That is the law of karma - the law of retribution “for action” (karma means “action”) that determines the fate of a man in this and in future lives. Any reincarnation, even the most favourable one (for example, in the form of a deity enjoying bliss in the heaven) in terms of Buddhism (as well as Hinduism and Jainism) is still an evil that continues to bring *duḥkha*, and the highest religious goal is the emancipation from the cycle of rebirth as such. A Buddhist is a Buddhist, to the extent to which he or she believes that the Buddha’s teachings are the path leading to such emancipation.

However, looking at the forms that Buddhism took during the course of its long history, we find many signs of a “normal” religion: the cult of Buddhas (not exceptionally of the Buddha Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism), the cult of holy places, trees, the worship of stupas that store the remains of the Buddha and other Buddhist saints, as well as the cults of local gods, and so on. Is that a degradation of the Buddha’s teachings? Or a violation of the covenants of the Master? The distance between the doctrines of different Buddhist traditions is, indeed, so great that sometimes it seems impossible that they could proceed from one and the same source. However, it is improper to say that this or that doctrine, whose followers consider themselves Buddhists, has violated certain principles enunciated by the Buddha, and, therefore, should be declared “heretical”. In the history of Buddhism there were no heresies, as there was no single ecclesiastical canon: each school or trend of Buddhism created its own “sacred literature”. How can such a situation be accounted for? Heresy arises only if there is something to deviate from, some generally accepted tenets. For example, there are 12 tenets in Christianity, which are called the “symbols of faith”. They were adopted at the first and the second councils in 325 and 381, respectively, and are mandatory for all Christians.

In Buddhism there are no doctrines or revealed truths, formulated by the Church. What is usually considered as “a Buddhist symbol of faith” - the “Three Jewels” of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – does not include any strictly determined truths, and, therefore, in the evolution of Buddhism these Three Jewels underwent some changes, sometimes quite significant: the Buddha – from the historical Buddha Shakyamuni to the many Buddhas of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, the Dharma – from the doctrine of emancipation, based on psychology and meditation to a universal religion with a pantheon, a complex ritual as well as to diverse religious and philosophical doctrines, the Sangha - from a small group of wandering ascetics to many followers (monks) in different countries. The most important element in the triad is the Dharma (teachings), the others are subservient to it: i.e. the Buddha is a Dharma Master, and the Sangha is the community of those who follow it.

What is the Dharma, then? To define it in precise terms is impossible. It is that experience, through which everything is seen “as it is” (*yathābhutam*), and at the same time the method, using which one can try this experience oneself. The peculiarity of Buddhism as a religious doctrine is that it is not formulated in some common and

universal form, meant for all people without exception. The Buddhist Dharma is always a specific message to a particular person in a particular situation. There is no Dharma for everybody, there is a Dharma, presented according to the peculiarities of each category of the Buddha's interlocutors.

What did incite the Buddha to seek and find such forms of preaching, which in each case would correspond to the level of the spiritual qualification of his listeners? It is his compassion for the hardships of sentient beings in association with the desire to help them. But help comes on one condition - they had to be aware of their problem and they had to come to him with the firm resolution to find the way out of it. As my teacher, Merab Mamardashwilli used to say, "The light may come only from one's own darkness".

The message of the Buddha differs from a sermon, as we are used to understand it. It's not just the proclamation of truth to some undetermined audience, to a crowd. In Buddhism, the audience is of a paramount importance; finally, it is from the audience that the initiative comes. The audience is a group of individuals or one individual in which some need has matured, some issue has been formulated. It is hard to imagine that the Buddha came to some village, stood at the market place and preached his doctrine. The Buddha never imposed himself, he only responded to some "request". His talks, as they are presented in the texts of the Sutta-piṭaka, are always related to certain situations. Here he comes surrounded by his followers, to a particular locality, and then some local person or itinerant hermit addresses him with a particular question and the conversation begins (the background of the question under discussion is also explained in the texts).

As an example let us take the "Veludvāreyayya-sutta". The Discourse to the People of Bamboo Gate" (SN 55. 7/5 352-356).

"Thus I have heard. At one time the Blessed One was wandering in Kosala country by stages (on a teaching tour) with a large community of monks and eventually arrived at the brahmin village Of Veludvara (Bamboo Gate). ...

3. Then the Brahmin householders of Veludvara went up to the Blessed One. Some exchanged greetings with him; some greeted him with their palms together; some announced their name and clan before the Blessed One – and then sat down at one side. Some kept silent sat down at one side.

4. Sitting down at one side, the Brahmin householders of Veludvara said to the Blessed One:

Master Gotama, we have such desires, wishes and hopes:

"May we dwell in a home full of children! May we enjoy Kāsī sandalwood! May we wear garlands, scents and make-up! May we enjoy gold and silver! When the body breaks up, after death, may we be reborn in good destination, in a heavenly world.

As we have such desires... may Master Gotama teach us the Dhamma in such a way that we might dwell in a home full of children..."

(All these practices are believed in Buddhism to be an obstacle to the spiritual development, that is, the Brahmins of Veludvara openly declared their commitment to the way of life, which from the Buddha's point of view is an affliction, but he, as we will

see, does not condemn them for that and does not call them to give up their property - VL).

6. The Buddha: “Here, householders, a noble disciple reflects thus:

“I am one who wishes to live, who does not wish to die. I desire happiness and dislike suffering. Since I am one who wishes to live... and dislikes suffering, if someone were to take my life, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me.

Now, if I were to take the life of another – of one who wishes to live, who does not wish to die, who desires happiness and dislikes suffering – that would not be desirable and agreeable to him, too.

What is undesirable and disagreeable to me is undesirable and disagreeable to others, too. How can I inflict upon another what is undesirable and disagreeable to me?

Having reflected thus, he himself refrains from harming life, exhorts others to refrain from harming life and speaks in praise of refraining from harming life. Thus his bodily conduct is purified in three respects (he does his own good and the good of others, and makes others share his good convictions). The same discourse is repeated with regard to other great precepts: taking the not-given, sexual misconduct, false speech, divisive (the speech that divides one from one’s friends), harsh speech, and frivolous talk”.

So, we can see that for the Buddha moral virtue is not a private matter but a social reality.

After that, the Buddha explained to the householders the advantages of the stream-winning state (the first level on the Path to awakening).

As we have noticed, the moral principles are exposed by the founder of Buddhism, not as a “Testament”, coming from above, but as utilitarian principles of a human society, the effectiveness of which people learn in their own social experience. Let us remember the golden rule of morality - do not do to others what you do not want to be done to you. Only by persuading householders that it is better to live without committing such misconduct than with committing it, the Buddha tells them about the opportunities open to those who renounce the worldly life and step on the Buddhist path.

He does not resort either to denunciations or to persuasions; there is nothing vague and incomprehensible in his speech, only a real and reasonable perspective. In Buddhism, this kind of tactics is called *upāya-kaushalya* or “skillful means” (of converting people to Buddhism).

The Buddha is evidently aware that he is talking not to a *tabula rasa*, but to individuals with certain life experiences, character, values, temperament, abilities, strengths and weaknesses. The Buddhist principle of *upāya kaushalya* means that the Buddhist message, to be efficient, must be situational, contextual. Everyone is following Buddha’s Dharma by means available to him or to her: a farmer – by the rotation of a prayer-drum and the worship of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, a monk – by meditation, a scholar - by argument. The content of the Buddha’s message is determined by its destination, by those to whom it is directed.

If we try to reconstruct some systematic and coherent doctrine from the Buddha’s discourses and conversations, we will come across many difficulties. For example, in some suttas the Buddha described *nirvāṇa* as a bliss, in some others he gives an

apophatic definition of it. Even his followers did not always agree about what the Buddha “really” had in mind. This gave the impulse for the creation of a vast Buddhist exegetical literature and the development of the original Buddhist hermeneutics. For the proper understanding of the Buddhist texts one should be aware of the fact that the style and the direct (literal) content of the Buddha’s discourses depend on the mentality, the intellectual level and the system of values of his interlocutor or listener.

This initial focus on the recipient, the addressee, or the receiver of the Buddhist message has made Buddhism what it was and still is – a religion that takes many different forms, depending on the cultural context. Chinese Buddhism is a religion that speaks to Chinese people using their language, cultural codes and system of values. Japanese Buddhism is a synthesis of the Buddhist ideas and the Japanese culture, etc. This Buddhist ability to “mimic” and to harmoniously adjust itself to the surrounding cultural landscape is unparalleled in other world religions.

Buddhism does not necessarily imply any faith in the Buddha Shakyamuni, the founder of this religion. In Chinese and Japanese Buddhism the worship of other Buddhas, such as Amitabha or Vairocana is much more popular, while in South-East Asia Buddhists revere Buddha not as a supreme being, but rather as a saint and a great sage. There are Buddhist groups that leave out any form of cult, and underline the paramount importance of “internal” work on oneself - meditation (Chan, Zen). But no matter how great the differences between the various schools and trends of Buddhism are, yet all of them, I believe, are forms of the same religion preached by the Buddha Shakyamuni. Why is this so?

Firstly, the Buddha himself spoke of the “variability” of exposition of his Dharma. Secondly, however far did Buddhism drift apart from its original form, there always remains a kind of core teaching, which was attributed to the Buddha Shakyamuni. Different schools attached to this core an unequal value, but nevertheless it is preserved in the historical memory of the Buddhists as belonging to “the Buddha himself”.

Buddhism is sometimes called a “weak religion”. What is meant by this? First, the absence in it of the theistic dimension (the concept of God as the Creator and the Ruler of the universe). It is usually assumed that the “strength” of a religion is determined by the power of the God or gods, in which its followers believe. From this point of view, the monotheistic religions are “stronger” than the polytheistic one, like a state in which power is concentrated in one hand, may be stronger than states with a “scattered” power. The almighty and all-seeing God is not only revered, but feared. For many people, the fear of punishment is a much stronger stimulus to moral behaviour, than the vague promise of reward in heaven. A strong God as well as a strong master takes responsibility for his offspring. In return, the strong God requires absolute faith and absolute loyalty. The faith is also a great power that can raise one above oneself, and the conditions of human existence, that can make him a “*passionary*” (a passionate man) carrying the light of his faith to others.

The third factor is the force of the religious organization, structuring the life of believers, determining their world views, priorities, and behaviours. In short, the “strength” of religions, from this point of view, depends on their capability to direct a

person to a higher authority beyond herself. In Buddhism, this supreme authority is man himself, the Buddhist view of the world - is a look directed to the inner realm of the human being, the look which is focusing on the human inner experience of the world and of oneself. It is inside human beings that Buddhists seek and find the source of spiritual transformation. The Buddha never talked on how the world functions and how it arose, and when he was asked such questions, he refrained from answering them, repeating that his teaching has only one taste - the taste of emancipation, which is not coming from outside, from God, and, which human beings can achieve only through their own efforts, using the methods discovered by the Buddha (“Be a light, a lamp unto yourself”).

Buddhism never had any conflicts with the scientific world outlook. It did not connect its teachings with one particular picture of the world, focusing, as I mentioned, not on the world as such, but on the world as opening itself from the perspective of human experience. Contemporary scientists who are in search of a theory that would explain the paradoxes of modern research into the structure of the universe as well as into the problems of consciousness raised in cognitive sciences (by Varela and his companions) often refer to the Buddhist theory of dharmas (as elements of the flow of individual experience) and the idea of interdependence of all things and phenomena (*pratītya-samutpada*, dependent co-arising of things).

From a purely pragmatic point of view (in terms of psychological efficiency) the “weakness” of Buddhism (especially early Buddhism) consists in the fact that it makes one to turn in on oneself, requiring to be “strong”, “adult”, to develop one’s will and to increase one’s awareness, while at the same time not giving any comfort, in contrast to other religions that bring people out of themselves and put them in front of God. God who not only punishes but also provides comfort and hope (we all know how inefficient may be a consolation that at the moments of despair we can contrive for ourselves, and how badly we need to shift some of our heavy burden onto someone else).

But this so called “weakness” of Buddhism is at the same time its “strength”. Buddhism teaches a person to take responsibility for his own thoughts and actions, making him aware of the fact that only these very thoughts and actions, and not their evaluation by God and his Judgment determine his or her future (in theistic religions there is always a back-door: sin, of course, is bad, but you can repent and God forgives you). Buddhism seeks to rely not upon the faith of a person but upon his or her mind and will as the engine of spiritual transformation and final emancipation from the cycle of reincarnations. And as for the comfort, it gives place to understanding based on one’s own experience as in the famous Buddhist parable of the mustard seed².

A certain young woman named Kisa Gotami had an only son, and he died. In her grief she carried the dead child to all her neighbors, asking them for medicine, and the people said: “She has lost her senses. The boy is dead. At length, Kisa Gotami met a man who replied to her request: “I cannot give thee medicine for thy child, but I know

2 See: The Mustard Seed [interactive]. [accessed on 12-04-2012]. <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/btg/btg85.htm>>.

a physician who can". The girl said: "Pray tell me, sir; who is it?" And the man replied: "Go to Shakyamuni, the Buddha".

Kisa Gotami went to the Buddha and cried: "Lord and Master, give me the medicine that will cure my boy". The Buddha answered: "I want a handful of mustard-seed". And when the girl in her joy promised to procure it, the Buddha added: "The mustard-seed must be taken from a house where no one has lost a child, a husband, a parent, or a friend". Poor Kisa Gotami now went from house to house, and the people pitied her and said: "Here is a mustard-seed; take it!" But when she asked: "Did a son or a daughter, a father or a mother die in your family?" They answered her: "Alas the living are few, but the dead are many. Do not remind us of our deepest grief". And there was no house without a loss of some beloved one.

Kisa Gotami became weary and hopeless, and sat down at the wayside, watching the lights of the city, as they flickered up and were extinguished again. At last the darkness of the night reigned everywhere. And she considered the fate of men, that their lives flicker up and are extinguished. And she thought to herself: "How selfish am I in my grief! Death is common to all; yet in this valley of desolation there is a path that leads him to immortality who has surrendered all selfishness".

Putting away the selfishness of her affection for her child, Kisa Gotami had the dead body buried in the forest. Returning to the Buddha, she took refuge in him and found comfort in the Dharma."

The same situation appears in a Christian legend (I found it in Anthony Sourozhsky's book "Life. Disease. Death", Klin, 2001). A woman came with her grief to the priest, and he sent her home asking her to come back tomorrow. While sleeping she had a dream in which her son grew up and became a bandit who raped and ravished good people. Waking up, she thanked God for the death of her son.

Of course, in terms of comfort, the Christian approach is more prompt. That woman was a true believer and, therefore, deserved consolation. We do not know whether her son really would have been a bandit if he had survived, or whether a priest induced this dream to relieve her sufferings. The Buddha did not even try to comfort the woman, he created a situation in which she had an experience which elevated her to a new level of understanding reality. Not that she believed in the Buddha, as he did not request anything and did not show any miracles (like a comforting dream). She came to the realization in her own experience of what he taught – the impermanence of reality.

Comparing these two similar and, yet, very dissimilar stories, we can clearly see the difference. In the latter case what matters is the faith, that poor woman's faith in God. The Christian God is compassionate: He sends a trial – the death of her son, and he - through his priest - sends a consolation. In the first case – it is the inner evolution of the person consisting in a growing awareness and understanding of the impermanence (anityatā), selflessness (anātmā) and anxiety, uneasiness (duḥkha) as the three main characteristics of human experience and the way to get rid of them in order to attain emancipation.

As the Buddha said to Kisa Gotami: "Nor from weeping nor from grieving will anyone obtain peace of mind. On the contrary, his pain will be all the greater, and he will

ruin his health. He will make himself sick and pale; but dead bodies cannot be restored by his lamentation.

Now that you have heard the Tathagata, Kisa, reject grief, do not allow it to enter your mind. Seeing one dead, know for sure: “I shall never see him again in this existence”. And just as the fire of a burning house is quenched, so does the contemplative wise person scatter grief’s power, expertly, swiftly, even as the wind scatters cotton seed.

He who seeks peace should pull out the arrow of lamentations, useless longings, and the self-made pangs of grief. He who has removed this unwholesome arrow and has calmed himself will obtain peace of mind. Verily, he who has conquered grief will always be free from grief - sane and immune - confident, happy, and close to Nirvana, I say”.

Victoria Lysenko, Rusijos mokslų akademijos Filosofijos instituto Orientalistikos centro; Maskvos Valstybinio humanitarinių mokslų universiteto profesorė, habilituota daktarė. Mokslinių tyrimų kryptis: indų filosofija.

Victoria Lysenko, Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy, Centre of Oriental Philosophies; Moscow University of the Humanities, Professor, Habil. Dr. Research interest: Indian Philosophy.

