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Buddhist Ideas in English Poetry

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by

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Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end,
Each changing place with that which goes before
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
Nativity, once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned,
Crooked eclipses against his glory fight,
And Time that gave, doth now his gift confound.
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth,
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth.
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow;
And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.

So Shakespeare, England's greatest poet, expressed his idea of *anicca*, the law of change. The sense of change, of passing and death are constantly recurring in English

poetry. So is the idea of suffering (*dukkha*) and rarely, very rarely there is a striving after *anatta*, but never is that supreme Buddhist truth realised, for ever since Plato and the late Old Testament prophets, the Churches in the West have firmly held that man possessed a soul.

It is not surprising that the poets who see into the heart of things should see these truths, for did not the Buddha himself say:

> Whether Buddhas appear in the world, or whether Buddhas do not appear, it still remains an immutable fact that all physical and mental constituents of existence are impermanent (anicca), are subject to suffering (dukkha) and that everything is without an ego (anatta).

But to return to change, of which Shelley said: "Nought can endure but mutability," the former Poet Laureate, John Masefield, has described it cosmically in *The Passing Strange*:

> Out of the earth to rest or range
> Perpetual in perpetual change,
> The unknown passing through the strange.
> For all things change, the darkness changes,
> The wandering spirits change their ranges,
> The corn is gathered to the granges.

The corn is sown again, it grows;
The stars burn out, the darkness goes;
The rhythms change, they do not close.
They change, and we, who pass like foam,
Like dust blown through the streets of Rome,
Change ever too; we have no home.

But change, as the Buddha showed, is accompanied by suffering and poets are more intensely aware of suffering than ordinary people. The universality of suffering has been summed up by Francis Thompson, a Catholic poet:

Nothing begins and nothing ends
That is not paid with moan;
For we were born in others' pain
And perish in our own.

Suffering has never been more poignantly described than by the young lyrical poet, Keats, "gold-dusty from tumbling amid the stars," when, in the ecstasy of that lovely *Ode to a Nightingale*, he remembered the dread disease (T. B.) which gnawed at his lungs. He then cried out in anguish against:

The weariness, the fever and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan,
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs.

Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despair.

"And thus (as the Blessed One said) have you long time undergone suffering, undergone torment, undergone misfortune and filled the grave yards full: verily, long enough to turn away and free yourself from them all." But that deep insight, which saw the cause of all this suffering in the craving and clinging of our own desires, had not been attained by the poets who cried out in bewilderment. Meanwhile the theologians try to reconcile the problem of pain with their conception of an all-wise and infinitely-loving God. We will leave them with their dilemma.

One poet at least did understand the law of cause and effect which gives rise to *kamma*. William Blake, in the eighteenth century, might have been writing as a Buddhist when he said:

He who shall hurt the little wren
Shall never be beloved of men.
A robin redbreast in a cage
Puts all heaven in a rage.
A dog starved at his master's gate
Predicts the ruin of the state.
The wild deer wandering here and there

Keep the human soul from care.

This reminds us that *metta*, or loving kindness, for animals is found very frequently in the English poets. One could quote from James Stevens, particularly his poem *The Snare*, which expresses his deep feeling at the cry of a rabbit caught in a cruel trap, or from Ralph Hodgson or W. H. Davies, the tramp poet, who wrote:

The shot that kills a hare or bird
Doth pass through me.

But for real understanding which is the heart of mind, there is nothing better than D. H. Lawrence's poem, *The Snake*, from which this is taken:

Someone was before me at my water-trough.
And I, like a second comer, waiting.
He lifted his head from his drinking as cattle do,
And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,
And flicked his two-forked tongue from his lips and mused a moment.
And stopped and drank a little more,
Being earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels of the earth
On the day of Sicilian July with Etna smoking.

And voices in me said. If you were a man
You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.
But must I confess how I liked him,
How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water-trough,
And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless,
Into the burning bowels of the earth.

The Buddha likened the world to a bubble and a mirage; the same simile is in these lines by William Drummond (1585–1649):

This life, which seems so fair,
Is like a bubble blown up in the air
By sporting children's breath,
Who chase it everywhere
And strive who can most motion it bequeath.
And though it sometimes seem of its own might
Like to an eye of gold to be fixed there.
And firm to hover in that empty height,
That only is because it is so light—
But in that pomp it doth not long appear;
For when 'tis most admired, in a thought.
Because it erst was nought.

In Francis Bacon, too, the bubble analogy occurs, with

even stronger emphasis on the unavoidable dukkha of life:

> The World's a bubble, and the life of man less than a span.
> In his conception wretched, from the womb
> So to the tomb:
> Curst from his cradle, and brought up to years,
> With cares and fears.
> Who then to frail mortality shall trust,
> But limns on water, or but writes in dust.
> Yet whilst with sorrow here we live oppressed,
> What life is best?
> Courts are but only superficial schools
> To dandle fools;
> The rural parts are turned into a den
> Of savage men;
> And where's a city from foul vice so free,
> But may be term'd the worst of all the three?
>
> Domestic cares afflict the husband's bed,
> Or pains his head;
> Those that live single, take it for a curse,
> Or do things worse;
> Some would have children, those that have them moan
> Or wish them gone;
> What is it then, to have, or have no wife,
> But single thralldom, or a double strife?

Our own affections still at home to please is a disease;
To cross the seas to any foreign soil
Peril and toil;
Wars with their noise affright us; when they cease,
We are worse in peace;
What then remains, but that we still should cry
For being born, or, being born, to die?

If Buddhism is pessimistic, as some people persist in asserting, then so is the best of English poetry, and it would be a superficial view, indeed, that presented life in any other colours. To call Buddhism pessimistic is evidence of a shallow mind, and perhaps, an unfeeling heart. All true poetry is born of the tragic sense and a sympathetic participation in the woes of others. The man who says, "But I enjoy life! Life is good!" will never make a poet, although he may make a facile rhymester for birthday cards.

A. E. Housman has well expressed this anguish of the poet for the pain of others:

The stars have not dealt me the worst they could do.
My pleasures are plenty, my troubles are two.
But oh, my two troubles they reave me of rest,
The brains in my head and the heart in my

breast.

He goes on to wish (not quite sincerely, one feels) that he could have the ease of mind enjoyed by those:

> That relish their victuals and rest on their bed
> With flint in the bosom and guts in the head.

No. The true poet would never exchange the acute sensibility that makes him a poet, for the callousness of one who is untouched by suffering that is not his own, though there might well be times when he thinks he would be thankful to do so.

Could there be any grander assertion of mutability, and of the pitiful delusion of power that afflicts mankind, than this magnificent sonnet of Shelley?

> I met a traveller from an antique land
> Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
> Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
> Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown
> And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
> Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
> Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,
> The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed.
> And on the pedestal these words appear:

'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

While most of the religions of the world lay stress on man's helplessness and assert that it is only by supernatural aid that he can attain release or blessedness, Buddhism claims that each must win salvation for himself. Buddhas can but point the way; each must make for himself an island, must go to himself as a refuge This point of view finds expression in many of the English poets, from Shakespeare's:

The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars,
But in ourselves,

to Wordsworth's:

Here must thou be, O man!
Strength to thyself; nor helper hast thou here:
Here keepest thou thy individual state;
No other can divide with thee this work.

It is only fair to state that later in life, when his vision had dimmed, and his poetry had correspondingly deteriorated, Wordsworth became a thoroughly

orthodox Christian.

But Browning, too, felt that the Truth was to be found within man himself, not outside, though here again, in agreement with the eternalism of the Western philosophers, he conceived Truth to be something permanent and unchanging, though imminent in man, waiting only to be realised. This is from *From 'Paracelsus'*,for Browning had studied the works of the alchemist:

> Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise
> From outward things, whate'er you may believe.
> There is an inmost centre in us all
> Where truth abides in fullness; and around,
> Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
> This perfect, clear perception—which is truth.
> A baffling and perverting carnal mesh
> Binds it, and makes all error: and to know
> Rather consists in opening out a way
> Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape,
> Than in effecting entry to a light
> Supposed to be without.

It sounds so plausible when one considers how our view of reality is obstructed and perverted by the *āsava* or biases and intoxicants. Nevertheless, as the Buddha said: "A corporal phenomenon, a feeling, a

perception, a mental formation, a consciousness, that is permanent and persistent, eternal and not subject to change; such a thing the wise men in this world do not recognise; and I say, also, there is no such thing."

T. S. Eliot, one of the greatest English poets, had some such experience as Browning, though much more deeply realised, for Eliot had read widely in Vedantic and Buddhist writings. He is very difficult to read and understand, yet here and there his lines are shot through with Buddhist thoughts, like veins of gold in amber—as for example in his play *The Cocktail Party*, which achieved a great success in London and New York. There, in trying to unravel the problems of lives tangled by mind-created illusions of human attachment, the psychiatrist, who is the central character, advises his patients that they must "work out their own salvation with diligence." Three times these last words of the Buddha are repeated in the play. The following excerpt from the latest and one of the most significant poems, *Burnt Norton*, though not strictly Buddhist, shows the profundity of Eliot's thought, which approaches some of the Mahāyāna doctrines. It begins:

> The inner freedom from the practical desire,
> The release from action and suffering, release from the inner
> And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded

By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,
Erhebung without motion, concentration
Without elimination, both a new world
And the old made explicit, understood
In the completion of its partial ecstasy,
The resolution of its partial horror…

The poets of deepest insight are those who find the way which the Buddha found in his darkest hour. It was when, nearly at the point of death as a result of asceticism and self-torture, prostrate upon the ground and unable to rise, he had a flash of memory from his childhood: "I thought (he said) how when the Sakyan, my father, was ploughing, I sat in the cool shade of the rose-apple tree, remote from sensual desires and ill conditions, and entered upon and abode in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by thoughts directed and sustained; born of solitude; full of zestful ease."

Then he asked himself: "Is this, I wonder, the way to wisdom?" There came the answer: "Yes, this is the way to wisdom." So entering upon that way, Gotama discovered the cessation of suffering, the way to Nibbāna.

Wordsworth seems to have had similar experiences, as did Blake and others. But by reason of the hindrances and delusions of their native culture they

were unable to follow the way to its conclusion. It is interesting, however, that Wordsworth too wrote about his experiences as boy in the country:

> I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that was as something not apart from but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times, when going to school, have I grasped at a wall or a tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to reality.

The state came naturally to him, as no doubt it did to the young Gotama. In *The Prelude*, the greatest philosophical poem in the English language, Wordsworth describes the experience in noble language. He calls it:

> That serene and blessed mood
> In which the affections greatly lead us on—
> Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
> And even the motions of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul;
> While, with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the heart of things.

At the heart of things the Buddha found anicca, dukkha and anatta. But the last of these, the truth that all component things are without permanent entity, or soul, is hidden from those who have the delusion of a permanent soul or ego. It is only by those in whom self has become completely extinguished that this, the unique and most profound truth of Buddhism, can be realised.

There is a hint of anatta in Shakespeare, so I will continue, as I began, with a quotation from the greatest English poet. His play *The Tempest* is an epitome of life and self-conquest. Near the end of the play the wise man, Prospero, who has gained the magic power of conjuring up gods and goddesses, fairies and nature spirits, has been causing these wraiths to enact a play. Suddenly, with a wave of his wand, he makes it all disappear. Turning to his astonished audience, he says:

> Our revels are now ended. These our actors,
> As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
> Are melted into air; into thin air.
> The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
> Yes, all that it inherits, shall dissolve,
> And like this insubstantial pageant faded,
> Leave not a wrack behind. We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on; and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep.

It seems that Shakespeare did not envisage the possibility of rebirth, but his contemporary, Webster, has a suggestive passage in *The Duchess of Malfi*:

I know death hath ten thousand several doors
For men, to take their
Exits; and 'tis found
They go on such strange geometrical hinges,
You may operate them both ways.

The renaissance of classical learning after centuries of neglect and Church disapproval had introduced Platonic and Pythagorean ideas into European thought, as we find in these lines from Milton's *On the Death of a Fair Infant*:

Were thou that just
Maid who once before
Forsook the hated earth,
O tell me sooth,
And cam'st again to visit us once more?
Or were thou that sweet smiling Youth?

And again from the philosopher Henry More (1614–1687):

I would sing the pre-existency

Of human souls, and live once o'er again
By recollection and quick memory
All that is passed since first we all began.
But all too shallow be my wits to scan
So deep a point, a mind too dull to clear
So dark a matter.

Coming to later times, we find some even more direct affirmations in the English poets of a belief in a continuity of existence through many lives. *In Visions of the Daughters of Albions*, the mystical poet William Blake wrote:

Tell me where dwell the thoughts forgotten till thou call them forth?
Tell me where dwell the joys of old? And where the ancient loves,
And when they will renew again, and the night of oblivion past,
That I might traverse times and spaces far remote, and bring
Comforts into a present sorrow and a night of pain?

Wordsworth, despite his commitment to Christianity, did not give up his belief in a cycle of rebirths, as a little-known poem of his, containing these lines, *Addressed to an Infant* testify:

Oh, sweet newcomer to the changeful earth,
If, as some darkling seers have boldly guessed,
Thou hadst a being and a human birth,
And wert erewhile by human parents blessed,
Long, long before thy present mother pressed
Thee, helpless stranger, to her fostering breast.

How widespread the interest, if not the belief, in rebirth was among the poets of the eighteenth century is a subject has that long been obscured by neglect, possibly because the idea was not an orthodox Christian one.

We find it expressed by Thomas Moore, the Irish poet:

Though new the frame
Thy soul inhabits now, I've tracked its flame
For many an age, in every chance and change
Of that existence, through whose varied range
—
As through a torch-race, where, from hand to hand
The flying youths transmit their shining brand
—
From flame to flame the unextinguished soul
Rapidly passes, till it reaches the goal!

But the most decided of all the English poets in this respect was Percy Shelley, who, not being bound to the creed of any church, was free to proclaim his belief in rebirth without reserve or ambiguity:

> Worlds on worlds are rolling ever
> From creation to decay.
> Like the bubbles on a river,
> Sparkling, bursting, borne away.
> But they are still immortal
> Who, through birth's orient portal
> And death's dark chasm hurrying to and fro,
> Clothe their unceasing flight
> In the brief dust and light,
> Gathered around their chariots as they go;
> New shapes they still may weave,
> New gods, new laws receive,
> Bright or dim are they, as the robes they last
> On death's bare ribs had cast.
>
> *Hellas*

In all these poetic visions it is the idea of an immortal, transmigrating "soul" that dominates the picture; and while the universal principle of mutability is acknowledged, there is no philosophical attempt to reconcile it with the notion of an unchanging entity. The Buddhist concept of rebirth without a persisting "soul" or ego-principle had to wait for more scientific

thinkers to give it recognition. Nevertheless, in the lines of Shelley quoted above there is a distinct affirmation of the law of karma: “Bright or dim are they, as the robes they last on death’s bare ribs had cast.” It is a confident assertion of belief in a moral order in the universe, from one who had the courage, in youth, to proclaim himself an atheist.

I hope that the reader may be stimulated by these few extracts to search for himself in the rich treasure-house of English poetry for more evidences of thought which touches upon Buddhism. If he does, he will be greatly rewarded. Truth is glimpsed in many different ways by different people, and the poet is not least among those who can claim insight into the realities of human life.

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