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## TOLSTOY'S VIEWS ON BUDDHISM

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The aim of this article is to present some of the most significant Tolstoyan opinions and beliefs on Buddhism, to account for the sources of these beliefs and to make a critique of their adequacy in light of a full knowledge of Buddhist teaching.

Any attempt at summary or systematization of Tolstoy's views on Buddhism should define more narrowly their nature. Tolstoy's views and opinions on the Buddhist religion are not scholarly pronouncements based on long years of painstaking and minute research on which elaborate points of religious doctrine are either accepted or refuted. His initial impetus to read and study Buddhism as well as other religions was born out of an existential quest which often turned into polemics when certain aspects of religious teaching did not conform to what religion, in Tolstoy's opinion, should teach. Tolstoy had his own views on religion and his views and opinions on Buddhism and other religions are influenced by whether Buddhist teachings and doctrines corroborate his views. This does not mean that Tolstoy did not learn anything from Buddhism and that he did not include any Buddhist beliefs into the core of his creed. Tolstoy adopted the Buddhist concept of Karma in its totality. There is a curious dialectic in Tolstoy's approach to Buddhism whereby Tolstoy's own ideas are somewhat transformed and the product of this confrontation is a new synthesis of Tolstoyan and Buddhist beliefs. This dialectic of Tolstoy vs. Buddhism was not static since Tolstoy's views on religion in general and Buddhism in particular changed throughout his life. The doubting Tolstoy in Confession of 1879 is different from Tolstoy in "What is Religion" in 1902.<sup>1</sup> Because of the nature of Tolstoy's dialectical thinking on religion and its evolution no internal consistency of his views on Buddhism could be found. On different occasions he both extolled and criticized different aspects of Buddhism.

Tolstoy's views on Buddhism also depended on the nature of Buddhist sources available to him as well as on the commentaries of

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<sup>1</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenij, The Anniversary Edition, T, 39, pp. 3-26.

Buddhist 19th century scholars whom he read and who influenced him. The 19th century was a period of discovery of the oriental religious heritage. The most prominent 19th century Buddhist scholars, among them Eugene Burnouf, Carl Koppen, Friedrich Max Muller, Hermann Oldenburg, and Rhys David, translated Buddhist manuscripts from Sanskrit and Pali originals. Tolstoy read their books in English, French and German and commented on them in his correspondence. He was also aware of Schopenhauer and his interest in Buddhism through his close friend Afanasij Afanasievich Fet, who was the Russian translator of Schopenhauer's The World as Will and Idea (Die Welt as Wille und Vorstellung) which appeared in the 1870's. Schopenhauer and all these scholars with the exception of Oldenburg and Rhys David considered Buddhism to be a pessimistic, life-denying religion and this is the view to which Tolstoy also subscribes.

#### Tolstoy's Four Fold Criteria as Applied to Buddhism

Tolstoy's religious quest centered on the religious universals, that is the common ethical and moral core in all religions. Huxley refers to a similar concept with his term "perennial philosophy," which he describes as "...primarily concerned with the one, divine reality substantial to the manifold world of things and lives and mind."<sup>2</sup> Huxley's definition of "perennial philosophy" is similar to Tolstoy's statement on true religion "according to my conviction there is only one true religion. This true religion of mankind has not yet been revealed completely, but it appears in fragmentary fashion in all needs."<sup>3</sup> Tolstoy's positive assessment of Buddhism and other religions depends on the extent to which they emphasize the perennial philosophy and his negative assessment on religions and the stages in their development depends on the extent to which these religions strayed from the common ground of perennial philosophy into idiosyncrasies of ritual, miracle and dogma. The universality of common religious ethics is Tolstoy's first requirement for an ideal religion. Tolstoy's second requirement finds the ritualistic, dogmatic and supernatural contrary to reason and he insists that religion be in full accord with the dictates of reason. The third Tolstoyan requirement for an ideal religion in addition to its universality and conformity to reason is its life-affirming and practical aspect. The fourth requirement is that the individual is responsible for his acts, the law of cause and effect, the karmic law which Tolstoy accepted from Buddhism. These four major requirements play an important role in Tolstoy's views on Buddhism.

#### Comments and Discussion of Buddhism in Tolstoy's Writing

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<sup>2</sup>Aldous Huxley, The Perennial Philosophy (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1945), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Birjukoff, Tolstoi und der Orient (Zurich und Leipzig: Rotapfel Verlag, 1925), p. 118.

Tolstoy already knew the story of Buddha's life as is demonstrated in his Confession (1879) where he invokes four sages--Socrates, Solomon, Schopenhauer and Sakya-Muni--as his spiritual mentors whom he asks for help in resolving his spiritual crisis. Tolstoy relates the story of Buddha's life, his encounters with an old man, a sick man and a dead man and he sums up Buddha's teaching in the following way: "To live with the consciousness of the inevitability of suffering, weakening, old age and death is impossible--one should free oneself from life, from any possibility of life."<sup>4</sup> If life is really so hopeless, then the only liberation, according to Tolstoy, is suicide. To live life without thinking about the future and its accompanying pains is impossible for Tolstoy. Before continuing with his life he insists on knowing the purpose and meaning of his existence. "I, just like Sakya-Muni, could not go on a hunt, when I knew that there was an old age, suffering and death. My imagination was too vivid."<sup>5</sup> Tolstoy withdrew from Buddhism before this religion had any impact on him. Tolstoy, overawed by the enormity of its consequences, stopped at the first noble truth of Buddhism in which suffering, old age and death were proclaimed to permeate life. The first noble truth taken in isolation from the rest of Buddhist teaching is indeed not comforting although it is a statement of fact. Taken in isolation it does not indicate a way out of the human condition and this is how Tolstoy understands it. He conceives it as a pessimistic and life-denying teaching which he cannot accept unless he is ready to deprive himself of life. For Tolstoy the Christian message is the only life affirming message. To follow all other philosophers, east and west, is to end up with the same depressing conclusion.

In addition to Confession, sources for Tolstoy's assessment of Buddhism can also be found in scattered and brief statements he made in his diaries, essays and correspondence on the subject, in his treatise "Religion and Morality," written in 1893,<sup>6</sup> as well as in the life of Buddha prepared by his collaborator Bulzanzhe and edited by himself,<sup>7</sup> his translation of Carus' story Karma,<sup>8</sup> his adaptation of "Eto Ty ("This is Thyself")<sup>9</sup> from an anonymous German author and in his adaptation of the Buddhist legend "Kunala's Eyes."<sup>10</sup> There are, in addition, statements

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<sup>4</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, T. 23, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, T. 23, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, "Religiya i npravstvennost," Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, T. 39, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup>P. D. Bulanzhe, "Zhizn' i Uchenie Siddarty Gotamy, Prozvannogo Buddoi, t. e. Soversheneishim," Zhizn' Dlia vsekh, no. 4 April 1910, pp. 75-84.

<sup>8</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, T. 31, pp. 47-56.

<sup>9</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, T. 34, pp. 138-140.

<sup>10</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, "Glaza Kunaly," Krug Chteniya, No. 6, 1912, pp. 125-127.

about Buddhism made by characters in his novels and a Buddhist view of the world appears in his later work, particularly "Master and Man" and The Death of Ivan Il'ich.

Tolstoy's life of the Buddha "The Life and Teaching of Siddhartha Gautama called the Buddha, the Most Perfect One"<sup>11</sup> which he edited for Bulanzhe exemplifies the life and the activity of a religious founder in the context of Tolstoyan ideal religion. Siddhartha, in this story, brought up as a follower of Hinduism, turns away from this religion because of its meaningless, sacrificial ritual. He rebels against the narrow confines of the Hindu dogma and wants to establish a rational religion which conforms to common sense and reason. Tolstoy describes the true life to which the Buddha aimed as razumnaia ("reasonable") and quotes the Buddha's words to his disciples "Your reason and the truth which I have taught you will be your teachers after I depart."<sup>12</sup>

There are no supernatural agents or events, no miracles, in this version of the Buddha's life. The Buddha is a human being albeit an enlightened human being, who using his reason and his practical instructional skill points out the path for other human beings to tread. All the requirements of an ideal Tolstoyan religion are present here, the universality, the appeal to reason as a final arbiter of religious discrimination, and the life affirming and active pursuit of self-perfection on the part of the Buddha and his followers. While conforming to Tolstoyan requirements for an ideal religion this is an essentially true description of the Buddha according to the canons of early Buddhism.<sup>13</sup>

Contrary to his evaluation of Buddhism as a positive, life-affirming religion in the story of the Buddha's life in "Religion and Morality" (1893) Buddhism is regarded as the religion of extreme renunciation not only of all goods of life but of life itself. As Tolstoy puts it, "Buddhism considers that the world should disappear as it causes personal suffering."<sup>14</sup> In his pessimistic appraisal of Buddhism, Tolstoy follows Schopenhauer who defined Nirvana as a denial to live and who claimed, based on his understanding of early Buddhism, that suicide was

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<sup>11</sup>P. D. Bulanzhe, "Zhizn' i Uchenie Siddarty Gotamy, Prozvannogo Buddoi, t. e. Soversheneishim," Zhizn' Dlia vsekh, no. 4, April 1910.

<sup>12</sup>P. Bulanzhe "Zhizn' i Uchenie Siddarty Gotamy, Prozvannogo Buddoi, t. e. Soversheneishim" Zhizn' Dlia vsekh 3-v (1910), p. 81.

<sup>13</sup>Theravada 'Doctrine of the Elders' is a name of the oldest form of Buddhist teachings handed to us in the Pali language. Theravada is the only one of the old schools of Buddhism that has survived among those which is called Hinayana. It is sometimes called Southern Buddhism or Pali Buddhism. This form of Buddhism was the first one to be discovered by Western orientalists. The Theravadins claimed that theirs was the authentic and original form of Buddha's teachings.

<sup>14</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, "Religija i npravstvennost'," Polnoe sobranie, T. 39, p. 8.

far from being the denial of the will and represented its strong affirmation.<sup>15</sup> Tolstoy's awareness and early enthusiasm for Schopenhauer's philosophy predates Tolstoy's interest in Buddhism and it is possible that Tolstoy's account of Buddhism as pessimistic is influenced and reinforced by his reading of Schopenhauer. Tolstoy's assessment of Buddhism as a pessimistic, life-denying religion is also reflected in the comments made by protagonists in his fictional works. In "The Kreutzer Sonata" Pozdnyshv talks about the futility of life, "But why live? If life has no aim, if life is given us for life's sake, there is no reason for living. And if it is so, then the Schopenhauers, the Hartmanns, and all the Buddhists as well, are quite right."<sup>16</sup> Anna Karenina's final reflection before her suicide are in the same spirit although she does not mention Schopenhauer or Buddhism: "Where did I leave off? On the thought that I couldn't conceive a position in which life would not be misery, that we are all created to be miserable, and that we all know it, and all invent means of deceiving each other, and when one sees the truth, what is one to do?"<sup>17</sup> A lady sitting in the same train compartment addressed her companion, "'That's what reason is given man for, to escape from what worries him....' The words seemed an answer to Anna's thoughts."<sup>18</sup>

The view that Buddhism is not only a pessimistic religion and philosophy but that it represents a complete annihilation of life is also present in Tolstoy's assessment of Buddhism. "I read Buddhist teaching. It is marvellous but it is only a teaching. The mistake is only to save one from life completely. Buddha is not saving himself but he is saving people. He forgot that if there were nobody to save, there would not be any life."<sup>19</sup> Tolstoy may have been led to the annihilistic view of Buddhism because of the popular belief among the 19th-century Buddhologists and Schopenhauer that the word Nirvana means 'blowing out life.' The metaphor of blowing out life as a Buddhist symbol for Nirvana, is present in Anna Karenina in the scene before her suicide when the light in her candlestick blows out as well as in a similar blowing out of light before old Prince Bolkonsky's death in War and Peace.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, ts. by E. F. J. Payne from the German Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung (Indian Hills, CA: Falcon Wing Press, 1958, 1, p. 398. "The interest in Buddhism... was awakened in him (Tolstoy, D.M.) not without Schopenhauer's influence," S. Levitskij, "Tolstoy i Shopengauer," Novyi Zhurnal, Kn. 59, 1960, p. 210.

<sup>16</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenij, T. 27, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, Anna Karenina (New York: The Modern Library, 1965), p. 796.

<sup>18</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, p. 796.

<sup>19</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenij, T. 49, p. 121.

<sup>20</sup>See Harry Hill Walsh, "A Buddhistic Leitmotif in Anna Karenina," Canadian-American Slavic Studies, 11, No. 4 (Winter, 1977), pp. 561-567.



### The Perennial Philosophy in Buddhism

For Tolstoy early Buddhism and early Christianity are strikingly similar. When asked about the essential difference between early Buddhism and early Christianity, he says "There is none, in both there is a gospel of the God of love and a denial of a personal god."<sup>21</sup> Later, Mahayana Buddhism<sup>22</sup> in contrast to early Buddhism, developed elaborate devotional practices, in which the Buddha was given a divine status. For Tolstoy this transition from a religion of the mind to a religion of the heart and the imagination is tantamount to perversion and degeneration, a descent into the miraculous and the ceremonial and away from the conformity to reason. He remarks to his secretary, in 1908, "I read everything about Buddhism, what a strange teaching! And how it was perverted! Such an abstract teaching and suddenly there appeared the same creation of gods, the idol worship, the paradise and the hell.... Quite the same superstitions as in Christianity."<sup>23</sup>

### The Unity of Life

Buddhist religion provides many examples illustrating the unity of life. Jatakas stories of the previous incarnations of the Buddha from an animal to a human being and finally to an enlightened human being show the continuity and the unity of life in its different forms. In one of these stories the Buddha-to-be is a snake caught and tortured by village boys. The moral of the story is the reverence and respect for life, even the lowly animal forms of life have the potential for self-realization and enlightenment.

Tolstoy's story Eto ty<sup>24</sup> (You are this, that art thou or This is thyself) is a good example of both Tolstoy's concept of the unity of life and its realization in the Buddhist storytelling tradition. The Sanskrit Tat tvam asi, You are this, This is thyself or That art thou is a well-known expression in Hindu philosophy indicating the relationship between the individual and the absolute; the Atman or immanent eternal Self, is one with Brahman, the Absolute principle of all existence. The expression

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<sup>21</sup>V. F. Bulgakov "Knigi ob Indii v biblioteke L. N. Tolstogo" Kratkie soobshcheniia Instituta Vostokovedeniia, V. 31, 1959, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup>Mahayana. One of main traditions or schools of Buddhism: 'great' (maha), 'means of salvation' (yana). Late Buddhism in contrast is Hinayana (early Buddhism).

<sup>23</sup>N. N. Gusev, Dva Goda s Tolstym (Moskva, 1912), p. 130.

<sup>24</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, T. 34, pp. 138-140. Tolstoy translated this story from the German theosophical journal Theosophischer Wegweiser (1903, No. 5, pp. 163-166) written by an anonymous author under the title "Das bist du."

is frequently repeated in the sixth chapter of the Chandogya Upanishad (1600 B.C.) as the teacher Uddalaka instructs his son in the nature of the supreme. The unity of life is also the cardinal principle of perennial philosophy. The ethical aspect of Tat tvam asi inspired Tolstoy's short story "Asarhadon, King of Assyria" (1903).<sup>25</sup> In this story the two warring kings Asarhadon and Lailie, one defeated and the other one victorious, exchange their personalities. Asarhadon is put in the place of Lailie who is about to be executed. The result of the exchange is Asarhadon's spiritual conversion; he realizes that "life is one in all and shows in himself or herself only a part of this all-pervasive life"<sup>26</sup> and "...you can only improve life in yourself by destroying the barriers that divide your life from others and by thinking of others as yourself and by loving them."<sup>27</sup>

The Tat tvam asi principle which is the source of Asarhadon, is of oneself. According to Tolstoy the culmination of the Tat tvam asi realization is love which he formulates as "...the only reasonable activity of man."<sup>28</sup>

The same idea of the unity of life is expressed in Tolstoy's story What Men Live By. The moral of the story is that man should not live by the self-centered concern and care for himself, but by his love for others. The authentic life is manifested in our concern and love for others.

In Tolstoy's story Master and Man Brekhunov, a self-centered, profit-oriented merchant realizes Tat tvam asi when he is lost in a blizzard with his servant. He realizes that he and his servant are one as he tries to revive his freezing servant with the warmth of his own body.

#### The Karma Concept and the Individual Responsibility

Paul Carus' story Karma<sup>29</sup> made a big impression on Tolstoy, who

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<sup>25</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, "Assirijskij Tsar Asarhadon," Polnoe sobranie sochinenij, T. 34, pp. 126-30.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenij, p. 91.

<sup>29</sup>Paul Carus, Karma, a Story of Buddhist Ethics (La Salle, Illinois: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1901). In this preface to the translation of this book Tolstoy gives his definition of the Buddhist term karma "Karma is a Buddhist belief that not only the character mold of each person but also all his fate in this life is a consequence of his or her actions in a previous life," L. N. Tolstoy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenij, T. 31, p. 47.

translated it into Russian. The story states two propositions: the notion of individual moral accountability for acts and deeds committed and the notion that there is no happiness for an individual human being unless it is a part of universal human happiness, something which represents another variation on the Tat tvam asi theme.

Karma is the law of cause and effect in Buddhism. Good deeds bring about good results and they influence our fate in the coming life and conversely evil, immoral actions are followed by bad consequences in the next life. This is how Tolstoy understands this concept in his preface to Carus' story "The truth, much slurred in these days, that evil can be avoided and good achieved by personal effort only and that there exists no other means of attaining this end...."<sup>30</sup> Karma in Sanskrit means "action" and in Buddhist interpretation "...denotes the wholesome and unwholesome volitions and their concomitant mental factors, causing rebirth and shaping the destiny of beings."<sup>31</sup> The Buddhist interpretation also includes mental factors such as wholesome or unwholesome thoughts.

Consequently, according to the ineluctable Karmic law evil doers in this story perish, while the individuals who persorm good deeds find peace and happiness. The fact of each person in this story is determined by his actions and deeds.

The individuals in the story who do not realize the unity of life and who do not themselves in other individuals commit karmic evil in setting up their ego and its interests above the welfare of other human beings. Only those individuals who are able to set aside their selfish, egocentric impulses are able to find the truth. This is the moral of Karma.

#### Tolstoy's Sources of Buddhism

The prevailing opinion of European Buddhist scholars in the 19th century is that Buddhism is a life-denying, nihilistic religion. Their books, which Tolstoy read, exerted a strong influence on him as on his views, which parallel theirs. Schopenhauer, like Tolstoy, read their books and came to the same conclusion about the nihilistic nature of that religion. The first noble truth in Buddhism states that life is suffering because it entails sickness, old age and death. This statement alone can be interpreted as a depressing and a life-negating assessment of life. Nirvana, a basic concept in Buddhism, a goal of Buddhist aspiration and striving was understood to be an extinction of life by Schopenhauer and other Buddhologists. An understanding of life as something imbued with

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<sup>30</sup>Paul Carus, Karma, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup>A. I. Shifman, in his book Lev Tolstoy: Vostok (Moskva: Nauka, 1971), cites the reasons for Tolstoy's attraction to Buddhism: (1) the teaching of equality, (2) the denial of a personal god, (3) Buddhist ethics.



suffering was considered in their interpretation to be evil. Referring to a person who denies the will-to-live, Schopenhauer writes "He willingly gives up the existence that we know; what comes to him instead of it is in our eyes nothing, because our existence in reference to that one is nothing. The Buddhist faith calls that existence Nirvana, that is to say, extinction."<sup>32</sup> Schopenhauer and Tolstoy accepted the etymology of 'Nirvana' suggested by Colebrook as signifying "...extinct, as a fire which has gone out; set, as a luminary which has gone down..."<sup>33</sup>

Max Muller, a prominent 19th century orientalist and one of the chief sources of Tolstoy's knowledge on Buddhism, was mystified by Nirvana although he accepted Buddhist ethics. For him as for his predecessor Buddhist scholar Burnouf and St. Hilaire, Nirvana meant annihilation. Muller, relying on the same etymology of Nirvana accepted by Colebrook writes: "Every Sanskrit scholar knows that Nirvana means originally the blowing out, the extinction of light, and not absorption. The human soul, when it arrives at its perfection, is blown out..."<sup>34</sup> and "True wisdom consists in perceiving the nothingness of all things, and in a desire to become nothing, to be blown out, to enter into the state of Nirvana."<sup>35</sup> Muller could conceive that all efforts at self-perfection which Buddhism preaches would result in "...trap bridge hurling man into abyss, at the very moment when he thought he had arrived at the stronghold of the Eternal."<sup>36</sup> Thus to Max Muller the very idea of nihilism appears as an impossibility.

The charge of Buddhism as being a nihilistic doctrine is also levied by Barthelemy Saint-Hilaire. He argues that even if Nirvana were to be an absorption in God, it would still be an annihilation: "I confess, moreover, that even in this mitigated form (as absorption), which it does not have, Nirvana would seem to be so close to nothingness that I should easily confuse the one with the other. Absorption in God - especially the God of Brahmanism - is the annihilation of the personality, that is to say, true nothingness for the individual

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<sup>32</sup>Richard F. Gustafson in Leo Tolstoy, Resident and Stranger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) does not treat Tolstoy's views on Oriental religions. Gustafson offers a detailed and insightful analysis of Tolstoy ideas on religion in general.

<sup>33</sup>Nyanatiloka Bhikshu, Buddhist Dictionary. Manual of Buddhist Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (1807), p. 566.

<sup>34</sup>Friedrich Max Muller, Selected Essays on Language, Mythology, and Religion (London: Longman's, Green and Co., 1861), Vol. 2, p. 283.

<sup>35</sup>Friedrich Max Muller, Selected Essays, Vol. 2, p. 219.

<sup>36</sup>Friedrich Max Muller, Selected Essays, Vol. 2, pp. 301-2.

soul...."<sup>37</sup>

The concept of Nirvana conceived as annihilation, death, and the renunciation of life, is presented in Tolstoy's fiction. Tolstoy describes death in his fiction (examples include the death of Prince Andrei in War and Peace, of Brekhunov in "Master and Man" and of Ivan Il'ich in The Death of Ivan Il'ich) as the loss of consciousness of self as an entity and as an immersion in some new mode of existence. The Tolstoyan concept of death resembles the Nirvana state of tranquility and purity. Tolstoy uses the word 'awakening'<sup>38</sup> to describe the passage from life to death, the same term which is used in Buddhism to indicate the passage from 'samsara' (the everyday world of frustration and suffering) to 'nirvana.'

Not all 19th century orientalist believed as Tolstoy did in the annihilistic character of nirvana and in the pessimistic nature of Buddhism. Oldenburg and Rhys David, the orientalist whom Tolstoy read, and who did not influence his assessment of Buddhism, differed from the prevailing 19th century view on the subject. They insisted on the worldliness of nirvana.<sup>39</sup> Nirvana, in their opinion, is a state of sinlessness and painlessness realized in this life. As more Buddhist manuscripts became available and knowledge of Buddhism in its entirety became better known, the views of Tolstoy and the 19th century orientalist on the nihilistic understanding of nirvana and the pessimistic character of Buddhism as a whole, turned out to be one sided. The etymology of the key Buddhist term nirvana as put forth by Colebrook and accepted by Schopenhauer and Tolstoy as an extinction of the will to live was superseded by a different and more appropriate and credible etymology in which nirvana in Sanskrit or nibbana in Pali is connected with the nibbati 'to cool by blowing.' The cooling does not refer to cooling or freezing to death but "...to a state of greed, hatred and delusion, the three principle forms of evil in Buddhist thought."<sup>40</sup> A person thus cooled is 'healthy' and has attained salvation.

Pessimism as the philosophical doctrine asserts that the universe

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<sup>37</sup>Barthelemy Saint-Hilaire, Le Bouddha et sa religion, 3rd ed., 1866, pp. 5-6.

<sup>38</sup>"Yes, that was death. I died. I awoke. Yes, death is awakening!" Aylmer Maude, The Short Work of Tolstoy (New York, 1956), p. 577.

<sup>39</sup>Unlike Muller and Burnouf, Oldenburg does not believe in the annihilistic character of Buddhism. "If anyone describes Buddhism as a religion of annihilation and seeks to develop it therefrom as from its specific germ, he has, in fact, succeeded in wholly missing the main drift of Buddha and the ancient order of his disciples." Hermann Oldenburg, The Buddha, His Life, His Doctrine, His Order, trans. by William Holy (London: William and Norgate, 1882), p. 260.

<sup>40</sup>Trevor Ling, A Dictionary of Buddhism, Indian and South-East Asian (Calcutta: K. A. Bagchi, 1981), p. 150.

is fundamentally evil and malevolent. Buddhism is not philosophically pessimistic in that sense because it teaches that sorrow or evil is due to ignorance of the true nature of reality and a false conception of self.

Tolstoy considered nihilism and pessimism as negative qualities and he mistakenly attributed them to Buddhism like Schopenhauer and other 19th century European orientalist who did not have full access to all Buddhist schools and who based their opinions on a misunderstanding of the notion of nirvana. He also contrasted in some of his statements and in his fiction the positive life-affirming message of Christianity to the negative life-denying message of Buddhism.

#### Rationality and Buddhism in Tolstoy's Interpretation

For Tolstoy "religion is the awareness of those truths which are common and comprehensible to all people in all situations at all times, and are as indisputable as  $2 \times 2 = 4$ ... Religion is like geometry."<sup>41</sup> Awareness of the universal truths for Tolstoy is grounded not in blind faith but in faith coupled with reason and with reason as a final arbiter. As Tolstoy's biography of the Buddha suggests, early Buddhism is a religion where Buddhist truths are experientially validated and the Buddha's divinity is denied.

Paul Carus in The Gospel of Buddha, one of Tolstoy's favorite manuals of Buddhism and one he read intensively (it contains many marginal notes by Tolstoy) writes: "Now, Buddhism is a religion which knows of no supernatural revelation and proclaims doctrines that require no other argument than 'come and see'."<sup>42</sup>

The first noble truth of Buddhism that life involves suffering is confirmed by the presence of old age, sickness and disease. The Buddha's authority in the early Buddhist scriptures is not based on his divinity but on his insight which can be always realized in human experience. Early Buddhism does not contain miracles, hardly any ritual and a minimum of dogma, and as such conforms to Tolstoy's ideal concept of religion. Later Buddhism, in which the Buddha's divinity was proclaimed and in which miracles, ritual and dogma abound, was considered by Tolstoy to be a debasement of the original doctrine.

This tendency to mythologize and mystify Buddhism can be observed directly in the interpretation of the life of the Buddha found in Lalita Vistara; each new edition of this book is more complex and miraculous, and Buddhist dogma becomes more elaborate and concrete through additions and commentaries which move away from the simple original abstractions.

This differentiation between an earlier pure form of Buddhism and

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<sup>41</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenij, T. 63, p. 339.

<sup>42</sup>Paul Carus, The Gospel of Buddha (Chicago: The Open Court, 19023), p. 9.

a later debased form, often expressed in terms of a dichotomy between what the Buddha taught and the commentaries on his teaching or between Buddhism and the personal teaching of Buddha, exists in the writings of Burnouf, Saint Hilaire and Max Muller. Tolstoy's idea of freeing original early Buddhism from later "perversions" and misinterpretations is reflected in Max Muller's statement in a letter of July 26, 1895, to a Mr. Dharmapala: "You should endeavor to do for Buddhism what the more enlightened students of Christianity have long been doing in the different countries of Europe: You should free your religion from its latter excrescences, and bring it back to its earliest, simplest and purest form as taught by Buddha and his immediate disciples. If that is done, you will be surprised to see how little difference there is in essentials between the great religions of the world."<sup>43</sup> Muller's formulation is basically in agreement with Tolstoy's identification of a primitive Christianity and a primitive Buddhism, stripped of the alleged irrationality of rituals, miracles and dogma. Muller's and Tolstoy's high regard for early pure Buddhism and its wisdom and their disregard for later schools of Buddhism as being an adulteration of an earlier teaching is not justified within the historical framework of Buddhism. The contrast between the alleged rationality of earlier Buddhism and the alleged irrationality of later developments misses the point. The Buddhist tradition has always advocated a diversity of approaches to the Godhead depending on the psychological makeup of the believer. There was a way of knowledge and a way of devotion suitable to intellectual and emotional individuals respectively. Tolstoy obviously favors the former but this preference is due to his sober, rationalistic outlook and not to imperfections, ethical or philosophical, of later Buddhism where devotional and mystical elements predominate. Tolstoy criticised later schools of Buddhism as "...exalted Buddhism, which, with its monasteries and representations of Buddha, and its solemn rites, has changed into mystical Lamaism..." and of Taoism "...with its sorcery and incantations."<sup>44</sup> It should be noted here that the term 'mystical' had for Tolstoy negative connotations as could be seen from the subtitle of The Kingdom of God Within You: "Christianity not as a mystical doctrine, but as a new understanding of life." Tolstoy's concept of 'rational' Buddhism has much in common with Oldenburg's who was cited in the bibliography of Tolstoy's biography of the Buddha. Oldenburg's interpretation of Buddhism was rationalistic; mysticism was foreign to him and he was criticized in his own time for his rationalistic presentation of Buddhism. This coincidence of views between Muller and Tolstoy on the degenerative development in Buddhism and Oldenburg and Tolstoy on the practise and rational character of early Buddhism does not imply the influence of the former on the latter since Tolstoy held similar views before reading these authors. Tolstoy's views were confirmed and reinforced through the reading of these writers.

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<sup>43</sup>Friederich Max Muller, Selected Essays, Vol. 2, p. 350-51.

<sup>44</sup>L. N. Tolstoy, "Chto takoe religija i v chom sushchestvo jejo," Polnoe sobranie sochinenij, T. 35, p. 166.

### Buddhism as a Positive Religion

In spite of Tolstoy's disagreement with the alleged nihilism and pessimism of Buddhist religion and with the mystical character of later schools of Buddhism, he found Buddhist ethics conforming to the perennial philosophy. These principles are condemnation of violence and war. Tolstoy believed that non-violence was practiced in Buddhist countries in contrast to Christian countries which inflicted violence on an Asian population and oppressed them. The history of Buddhist religion itself, one may add, shows more tolerance for divergent views and no outright persecution compared to the history of Christianity.

In "Kunala's Eyes," an adapted Buddhist legend, Kunala, an emperor's son, is blinded. Deprived of his eyes Kunala acquired a perfect, pure 'eye' of truth and higher reality. The abandonment of an ego-centered existence as a prerequisite for true happiness, occurs as a theme both in perennial philosophy and in Tolstoy's fiction (The Death of Ivan Il'ich and Master and Man). Tolstoy finds in Buddha's teaching the same ethical tenets he, himself, proclaimed in his essay "On Life." "Buddha says that happiness consists in doing as much good to others as possible. Regardless of how strange this appears on superficial observation it is undoubtedly so; happiness is only possible by renouncing the aspiration toward personal, egoistic happiness."<sup>45</sup>

In summarizing Tolstoy's views on Buddhism several factors should be kept in mind. Tolstoy's early Christian upbringing and conditioning, his relatively late exposure to selective Buddhist writings, the polemical character of his statements on religions in general and Buddhism in particular as well as his own views on the essence of the ideal religion.

Orthodox Christianity was part of Tolstoy's heritage and his world view. He thought that it was superior to other world religions in its formulation and practice of eternal and universal ethical truths. In comparison with Buddhism with Christianity, he considered the latter to be more oriented towards "preaching the possibility and necessity of founding the Kingdom of God on earth."<sup>46</sup>

In the later period of his life in the late eighties and nineties as he evolved a concept of Christianity without supernatural elements he became more even-handed in comparing the merits of Buddhism with those of Christianity. He emphasized more the ethical principles of Buddhism and disregarded what he thought were the negative aspects of nirvana. On the metaphysical side, Tolstoy never reconciled the contradiction between the Christian concept of God and the self-regulating Karmic mechanism in Buddhism, preferring to ignore metaphysics in favor of common ethical grounds.

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<sup>45</sup>R. F. Christian, Tolstoy's Letters (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), Vol. 2, p. 635.

<sup>46</sup>A. I. Shifman, Lev Tolstoy i Vostok (Moskva: 1971), p. 115.

Tolstoy's first personal contact with Buddhism was a lesson in non-resistance to evil by a Buddhist lama who was his neighbor in the Kazan' hospital. He told Tolstoy the story of his life. During a sleigh ride in Siberia he was attacked by bandits. When asked by Tolstoy what he did then he answered, "I crossed my arms on my chest and I prayed to Buddha to forgive the lawbreakers." The evidence of Tolstoy's special interest in Buddhism came much later after his spiritual crisis and his definite breakup with the Orthodox church in 1879. In 1886 Strahkov wrote to him about Burnouf's book Le Lotus de la bonne foi. Several weeks later Strahkov refers to Koppen's Die Religion des Buddha, Barth's Les religions de l'Inde, Bergoigne's Vedes and Muller's Sacred Books of the East.<sup>47</sup> Valuable as these books may have been as the sources for the study of Buddhism at that time they suffered from certain shortcomings. They often described Buddhism within the Christian framework of reference and they misinterpreted some key Buddhist terms such as nirvana. Their predilections and prejudices were reflected in Tolstoy's views on the subject, particularly on his understanding of nirvana and the ramifications of that concept on his evaluation of Buddhism in general. Tolstoy's intense involvement with Buddhism came at a stage of his life when his views on religion were already formed. Buddhism was for him a sounding board when his ideas and opinions could be confirmed and reinforced.

This dialectical interplay between his own ideas and those held and expounded by other philosophies, religions and people was polemical and the context of these polemics varied. This may explain differences and contradictions in his statements and assessment of Buddhism at different points in time. In Confession, Buddha is introduced as Sakia-Muni as a fourth "S" in addition to Solomon, Socrates and Schopenhauer, as a foil to his idea of salvation through Christianity. In his essay "Religion and Morality" Tolstoy's polemics is directed against Buddhism and other religions within the context of his belief in the primacy of Christianity. A corrective to this view came later when Buddhism and Christianity were both identified as a gospel of the God of love. His views, then, evolved in the direction of identifying an essential ethical identity shared by both religions.

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<sup>47</sup>Carl Koppen, Die Religion des Buddha (Berlin: Schneider, 1957-59), Vol. 1; Auguste Barth, Les religions de l'Inde (Paris: Sandoz et Fischbacher, 1879); Abel Bergoigne, Le religions vedique (Paris: E. Bouillon, 1895); Eugene Burnouf, Le Lotus de la Bonne Foi (Paris: 1850); Frierich Max Muller, The Sacred Books of the East, continued series starting with 1875, "The Religions of China, (1) Confucianism, (2) Taoism, (3) Buddhism and Christianity," in Nineteenth Century, Vol. 48 (1900).