

## THE SPIRIT OF FAITH AND BUDDHISM

### Notes on the fifth means by which we can acquire the spirit of faith

**Brother Victor Gil**

From the Collection:

«– *What is the fifth means by which we can acquire the spirit of faith and conduct ourselves by this spirit?*

– *It is to exercise continual watchfulness over ourselves, so as not to perform, if possible, a single action from natural impulse, through custom or any human motive.»*

After the General Chapter of 1966-67 Br. Jourjon, FSC, wrote the book "Pour un renouveau spirituel" as a commentary on the Rule and Constitutions approved by the 39th General Chapter. Speaking on the debate on the spirit of faith in the Chapter of 1966, he questions articles 5-8 of the Rule of 1947. Especially he criticizes the content of the passage from the collection quoted above, which was part of article 6 of the 1947 Rule. Even though his queries appear in the form of questions, we can summarize his thinking by stating the following:

- this passage has a certain "odeur janséniste";
- it invites us to deny present social conventions;
- this is old fashioned, since we have now become more understanding and more open;
- it denies our understanding of human values;
- it is against the spirit of Vatican II. (1)

In the book it is not stated whether this summary is his own or is a summary of the thinking of the members of the General Chapter.

The result was the suppression of articles 5-8. They were replaced by article 2i: «The Brothers strive to purify their motivation, achieve a measure of self-mastery, and respond to the will of God».

Very general, very open and very understanding...

In the present Rule (1987) this article has become part of article n. 6: «They strive continually to purify their interior motives and to achieve a measure of self-mastery so as to accomplish all their actions by the "guidance of God, by the movement of his Spirit and with the intention of pleasing him"»

How is this to be achieved? The answer is left to each one's initiative and imagination.

Even though Chapter two of the original Rule (1947) is still kept in the 1987 Rule, its significance may pass unnoticed and its value is somehow reduced. Probably what was needed at the 1966 Chapter was a deepening of the articles

that were "executed" rather than a re-wording in a rather wide, meaningless language.

Personally, I have come to re-discover the value of some of the "discarded" articles during my readings on Buddhism. Right from my first readings in 1964, when I came to Thailand, I found many general points in Buddhism which reminded me of some of the teachings of the Holy Founder. It is only lately that I have come to establish some connexions. The question behind my re-reading of Buddhism was: What is there in Buddhism that allows more than 200 million people to keep it alive, with some of them having a very profound spiritual life? What is the heart of Buddhism?

Simplifying what is to be presented later, the answer could be: "the heart of Buddhism is a continuous purification of the heart, to bring about a continuous growth of the spirit". And this is precisely related to the spirit of faith, "the spirit of this Institute".

#### Degrees or levels of the Spirit

Reading the book "The liberated Spirit in everyday life" by the Buddhist monk Buddhadasa (2), I found a passage and various pages which called my attention because they represent both the heart of Buddhism and are related to the teaching of the Holy Founder.

Speaking of the *citta* (heart-mind, mind, spirit) and the way of training it (we would say "the means of obtaining the spirit of faith), he quotes Buddhist scriptures:

«Among the things which are our enemies, there is no greater enemy than the spirit which has the wrong foundation, and among the things which are our greatest friends, there is no greater friend than the spirit which has the right foundation.»

If by foundation we understand "motivation", the meaning of the passage becomes clear. The spirit can be our greatest enemy or our greatest friend, depending on what moves it. And he continues:

«We see the great importance of having the right spirit both when we do our ordinary duties and when we practise spiritual exercises. Everything is summarized in the training of the spirit.» Among the ways of studying and therefore training the spirit is to become familiar with the levels or degrees of the spirit. He distinguishes four levels described as follows:

**First level:** The spirit that moves in the sensuous plane (3, 4).

In both ethics and religion the spirit is said to be on its lowest level when it is usually at the level of animals. We can say with great certainty that for this kind of spirit the satisfaction and contentment lies in the things that it likes, i. e., it finds its satisfaction in sensuality, desire for the acquisition of things. In the sensuality stage the spirit has its satisfaction in things which are material, sounds, odours, taste, touch, imagination. It is not just related to sexual matters, but it is the feeling or desire to acquire, possess and enjoy material things. Most men are generally at this level, which is not different from that of animals and beasts. The center of interest for this kind of spirit is sensuality; the spirit moves in the world of matter, in the realm of the senses. This is the lowest kind of spirit or the spirit at the lowest level of consciousness.

**Second level:** immaterial within the material (5)

At this second level, the spirit is a little wiser, because it has greater experience and has obtained a little more wisdom. It is not centered on sensuality. It is centered on things which are purer, more peaceful, cooler to the mind. Its object of interest is not sensuality. Before it used to find its contentment in sensual things, but now it moves to a realm which derives pleasure from material things, but does not have an experience of sensuality. It takes interest in things that produce a certain amount of concentration outside of oneself, e.g., collecting stamps, coins, plants, gardening, raising birds or pets. It is pleasure which is not related directly to the senses; it even loses interest in the pleasure of the senses. However, the spirit is still coarse. This level is higher, purer than the first one.

**Third level:** Abstract plane (6): satisfaction in non-material objects.

At this level the contentment of the mind is in immaterial things. The spirit is attracted by more subtle realms; purer things are the object of its interest. Now it has non-material things as the objects of its concentration and pursuit. The happiness brought about from this kind of interest is of higher quality than the previous two stages. The realm of interest is higher. For example, some might move towards devotional practices, or look for things that will bring honour and reputation, which are not material objects; these are abstract objects. But the dedication given to these objects might be misleading. For example, even though reputation is not a material object, its cause might be deceptive. Even achieving merit may be a cause of defilement, of increasing our selfishness.

**Fourth level:** Supramundane plane (7); supernatural spirit.

This is the supramundane or supernatural spirit. The first three levels are called mundane or worldly because the spirit finds its satisfaction in the things of this world.

The fourth stage is the stage of the Arahant (the saint). It looks at the impermanence of things and finds them deceiving, unsatisfactory. Whatever is in a state of flux, impermanent, is not worth groping for. None of these things has substance. The spirit which has wisdom jumps to the real world of the supramundane, i.e., the realm of the supernatural: this is the spirit that moves the saints.

**Which spirit, which level?**

Even though we might not have exercised ourselves in observing these different kinds of realms in which the spirit can move, their study is extremely important. We can notice them at various times at work in ourselves.

If we examine ourselves, we can find these four kinds of spirit at work in ourselves, unless we are not capable of observing ourselves. In a given day there are times when we find satisfaction in sensuality; other times we would like to be alone in a quiet place without anybody coming to disturb us, away from the things that we have coveted; perhaps we just want to look at the stones, listen to silence, experience peacefulness or even experience eternal emptiness. All these are different states of the spirit.

Sometimes we are tired of everything in the world, tired of money, of power, reputation, etc. We would like to be above all these things, even though it might be for a short time only; but this need is not felt with strong determination, so we cannot call ourselves spiritual, since most of the time we stay in the realm of sensuality.

We could compare ourselves to those animals that live in the water and are caught and thrown onto the beach; they will soon slip back into the water. Or we can compare ourselves with certain kinds of animals that live in the water and sometimes jump in the air to get some oxygen or come to land for a while; but finally they do not stay for long; they must go back to the water. This is an image of the ordinary, natural man who lives in the realm of sensuality, but on certain occasions, certain times, even though it might be for a short time, its spirit might move from the sensual to the material, immaterial or supernatural realms (for short times) to taste other domains.

This kind of knowledge is the best kind of knowledge that man can acquire, the most precious and marvellous knowledge that will make us know about things which are higher and higher. Some people might feel that it might be better to leave this study for later as they grow older; at that time, certainly, it will be easier and faster to know these levels of spirit; however, before then, it is possible to move very far into the domain above the mundane.

If we are careful we will observe that the spirit at the level of the realm of sensuality is extremely agitated, so agitated that it is almost impossible to sit down quietly; the other realms are higher and the spirit is much less agitated; they are much more restful and peaceful until we reach the highest rest in the last realm of the supernatural level. Thus we can stop the turmoil of the heart by reaching into higher and higher levels.

Now the question may arise, "How is all this related to the spirit of faith?"

**Do nothing naturally, by custom or human motive, only by faith.**

If we are familiar with the language of the Holy Founder, it will be rather easy to find the four levels of spirit in his writings, especially in his treatise on the spirit of faith in the *Collection*.

Instead of speaking of the levels of the spirit, he speaks of doing things with the "eyes" or "the light" of:

1. the eyes of the flesh
2. the eyes of nature
3. the light of reason
4. the light of faith.

To each of these eyes or lights corresponds a way or motivation for doing things: 1. naturally, 2. by habit, 3. human motive, 4. motive of faith.

«To look upon things with the eyes of the flesh is to look upon things according to their external appearance, and on account of the pleasure felt in their enjoyment.» This corresponds clearly to the first level mentioned above.

«To look upon things with the eyes of nature is to regard them according to our natural likings or dislikings.» This corresponds to the second level.

«To look upon things by the light of reason is to consider them as reason enables us to see them.» This corresponds to the third level.

«To look upon things with the eyes of faith is to look upon them in accordance with the teachings of faith.» This is the spirit which moves in the supramundane (supernatural) level.

Buddhism is very clear that the first three levels are children's games, of no interest, of no help whatsoever to liberate the spirit: they are not interested in these first three levels. The only level that will liberate the spirit, bring enlightenment, is that level where there is no defilement; there is no selfishness even for religious reasons; they call it the supramundane level; we call it the spirit of faith. And this is the level where the Holy Founder wants the Brothers to move all the time and teach their students to move as well.

### Eastern psychology and De La Salle

In the last few decades some psychologists have taken interest in the study of consciousness as an object of study for "scientific" psychology. Some of them are "inventing the wheel" on topics that were studied over two thousand years ago by eastern meditators. Western thinkers since the time of the Greeks and Romans have been influenced by Eastern philosophies. After all, Alexander (356-323 BC) and his armies founded a kingdom that spread well into north India, and both technologies and ideas travelled across Eurasia on the silk routes, centuries old even in Alexander's time. Plotinus (205-270 A.D.) was one of the early philosophers whose thought closely paralleled the psychological views of Eastern thinkers of his day. A native of Egypt of Roman descent, Plotinus went to Persia and India in 242 to study their philosophies. His ideas became the hallmark of Christian mystics for centuries after. Plotinus's doctrine became part of Christian psychology, surfacing in one form or another within the influential writings of the Egyptian St. Anthony, St. John of the Cross and Meister Eckhardt, to name a few. (8) Can we add the name of De La Salle to this list?

### Conclusion

It is a pity that Buddhists (pagans?) are more perceptive in their understanding of the levels of the spirit (degrees of the spirit) than we who are supposed to be experts in the spirit of faith! When the Founder mentions four different kinds of motivation and rejects three of them as not worthy of the life of a Brother, is he being Jansenist and old-fashioned? He certainly invites us to criticize present social conventions; he certainly criticizes "cheap" human values and invites the Brother to go for the higher human values. In rejecting three kinds of motivation, the Holy Founder is referring to basic human spirituality (as Buddhism) and encourages the Brother to go for that motivation which represents only a "movement of the Spirit". How can this be against the spirit of Vatican II?

If it is true that "that which is of the utmost importance, and to which the greatest attention should be given in an Institute is that all who compose it possess the spirit peculiar to it...", I am afraid that this has not appeared in the personal questionnaire sent to prepare the 1993 General Chapter. There is not a single question on the Brothers' "possession" of the spirit of faith.

### Contemporary psychology and the spirit of faith.

Of particular interest for our understanding of the spirit of faith and how to grow in it are the writings of:

1. Lawrence Kohlberg on the stages of moral development;
2. James W. Fowler on the stages of faith;
3. Karl Ernst Nipkow and Fritz K. Oser on the stages of religious development. (9)

The study of their theories and research could help us to rediscover and update the teachings of the Holy Founder on the spirit of faith.

1. P. A. Jourjon, FSC. *Pour un Renouveau spirituel. Commentaire des Règles et Constitutions des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes établies au 39<sup>e</sup> Chapitre Général 1966-67*, p. 64-67.
2. Buddhassa. *The liberated spirit in everyday life* (in Thai). p. 211-213.
3. Bhumi: Planes of consciousness, degrees of spiritual development.
4. Kamavacara-bhumi: sensuous plane.
5. Rupavacara-bhumi: form plane.
6. Arupavacara-bhumi: formless plane.
7. Lokuttara-bhumi: supramundane plane.
8. Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey. *Theories of Personality*. Third edition, John Wiley and Sons, 1978, p. 350.
9. *Stages of Faith and Religious Development, Implications for Church, Education and Society*. Edited by James W. Fowler, Karl Ernst Nipkow, and Friedrich Schweitzer. SCM Press, 1992.