

Open to all

Evil Revisited – and Good

‘The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword, are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man.’ Thus William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. To Blake’s examples one might add the crash of the tsunami as it hits land, the crack of thunder, and the havoc wrought by volcanoes and earthquakes. All these are manifestations of non-human energy, of the tremendous power of nature. All are forms of natural evil, in that they may be causes of pain and suffering to human beings. What of Blake’s destructive sword? In one sense it belongs to nature, for the materials of which it is made are of natural origin. It is destructive only in the hands of man, who has made the sword.

Man, the individual man, is himself an embodiment of energy. He embodies it in more highly developed forms than the lion or the wolf, and like them enjoys using his energy and expressing it. He too ‘roars’ and ‘howls’. We may call this expression ‘human culture’.

Not only does man enjoy expressing his energy, he can enjoy seeing the expression of energy by the natural world. He can delight in the storm, for he can feel in it an energy akin to the energy of which he is an embodiment. Similarly, he can enjoy the sight of a forest fire, when the golden flames shoot up hundreds of feet into the air, even though he can, at the same time, feel sorry for those who lose their homes or even their lives in the conflagration.

He can even delight in killing other human beings and in seeing them killed. Worse still, he can enjoy inflicting pain and suffering. He can enjoy torturing them, using his more developed intelligence to devise more sophisticated forms of torture, from the rack and the iron maiden to waterboarding and prolonged solitary confinement. In all this he is guilty of committing moral evil. The mind and emotions can also be made to suffer unbearably, as when a child is tortured in front of his parents, or a friend in front of a friend. This is

perhaps the worst form of human suffering, from which it follows that delight in inflicting such suffering is the worst form of moral evil.

But moral evil does not exist in a vacuum. It is something done by human beings to other human beings, as well as to animals. It is an individual human being like ourselves who is cruel, malicious, and sadistic, whether in act or in speech. He or she can actually enjoy inflicting pain and suffering. But why is this? Why does one human being delight in inflicting pain on another human being? To some it has seemed that the answer to this question lies at the bottom of a very black hole. In the case of a small boy who torments small creatures, it is due to a lack of empathy which normally he develops as he grows up and is socialised. Adult human beings may give reasons for their behaviour, which they do not necessarily see as being evil. Some may believe that they are acting in the interest of their religion, as when heretics are burned at the stake or tortured to death. Others see it as necessary for the maintenance of the existing social and political order.

According to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, 'Man is the cruelest animal.' This does not mean that every human being commits actions of conscious, deliberate cruelty, but the potential for doing so, and even for delighting in so doing, is in us all. Usually we do not like to think of ourselves in this way. We like to think that we are basically good and kind, and incapable of doing anything really evil. At the same time we do not find it difficult to see the evil in others, or even to project onto others the evil that is in ourselves. Thus it is possible for us to demonise the enemy or the opponent, whether in war or any other situation of conflict or disagreement. To 'demonise' means to see the other person as a demon, that is, to see them not as another human being but as a devil. This can be done not only by the individual but by whole societies, especially those of a religious or quasi-religious nature. Thus the terms heresy, sorcery, witchcraft, and sexual perversion come to be conflated.

A boy is able to torture small creatures because he is bigger and stronger than them. He, in his turn, may be made to suffer by a bigger and stronger boy, and the latter may suffer painful

chastisement at the hands of an adult who has authority over him. In all these cases there is a disparity of power, whether real or perceived, and it is this disparity that makes it possible for one person to torture another, as well as to delight in so doing. There is a similar disparity of power between employer and employee, which is why in a democracy employees band together in trade unions in order to reduce the disparity, even though it cannot be abolished completely. Beyond both employer and employee is the government, whether democratic or totalitarian in structure. In the latter case, the imbalance of power is extreme, or even absolute, with the government possessing virtually all the power and individual citizens hardly any or none at all. In these circumstances the government, through its various agencies, can do whatever it likes with the individual. It can imprison him or her, it can determine what kind of work they do, how and where they live, and it can physically and mentally torture them without any possibility of appeal. Such a government can persecute, even massacre, whole communities of its own subjects, as did Stalin in Russia, Mao Tse Tung in China, Pol Pot in Cambodia and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. Hitler's systematic extermination of six million or more European Jews had a complex background, involving as it did religious, ethnic and pseudo-scientific factors.

Disparity of power makes it possible for the stronger to oppress and abuse the weaker and even to torture them and to delight in torturing them. Thus there is an immense amount of suffering in the world, suffering that is due not to natural power but to human agency. So much suffering is there, indeed, that some have thought that moral evil was not just a part of human nature but that there existed a principle of evil outside humanity. Beside this principle, however, there was a principle of good, and human beings were urged to fight on its side. Be that as it may, the disparity in power does also make it possible for the stronger to help the weaker, and to delight in helping them, whether materially or in other ways. For many Buddhists this spirit of unbounded altruism is embodied in the figure of Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Avalokiteśvara has many forms, in one of which he appears with eleven heads and a thousand arms and hands. Some serious-

minded Buddhists, whether within Triratna or outside it, aspire to be a hand of Avalokiteśvara or even a finger.

In the course of the transmission of the Dharma from India to China, Avalokiteśvara underwent a change of sex, becoming Kuan Yin, known in the west as the Goddess of Mercy. She is clad in a milk-white robe, one corner of which is modestly draped over her chignon, and her face wears an expression of maternal concern. Sometimes she is depicted sitting on a rock, for compassion is based upon wisdom and is not separate from it.

Here we are not so far from Blake as one might have thought. 'The most sublime act is to set another before you', he says in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. It is of this 'sublime act', performed constantly and in an infinite variety of circumstances, of which Avalokiteśvara /Kuan Yin is the radiant embodiment.

The figure of the sex-changing Avalokiteśvara may be of particular interest to those people who are making or who have made the difficult journey from one gender to the other.

Sangharakshita

Adhisthana

22/11/2017 – 18/12/2017