

PARADOX AND POETRY
IN
“THE VOICE OF THE SILENCE”

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Buddhist canonical literature, which subsists not merely in volumes but in libraries, falls quite naturally into two main groups, each possessing certain distinctive features. The *sutras*, as the works comprising the first and more important group are designated, purport to be discourses delivered by the Lord Buddha Himself or, in a few cases, those given by Arahant and Bodhisattva disciples speaking either with His approval or under His inspiration. The *sastras*, the works comprising the second group, are treatises composed by the great *acaryas*, founders and exponents of the various Buddhist schools, in order to elucidate and systematize the teachings of a particular *sutra* or group of *sutras*. The distinctive features of these two groups of works, which we have differentiated at length elsewhere,¹ will for our present purpose be sufficiently indicated by saying that whereas the method of the *sutras* is direct and intuitional, aiming at spiritual awakening rather than intellectual conviction, that of the *sastras* is definitely more discursive and logical.

The Voice of the Silence, though it does not claim to be the utterance of a Buddha, is nevertheless akin to the *sutra* rather than to the *sastra* group of texts. Like the longer and more celebrated discourses, it seeks more to inspire than to instruct, appeals to the heart rather than to the head. To make use of De Quincey's classification, it belongs not to the literature of information, the purpose of which is to augment knowledge, but to the literature of power, the aim of which is to move. So important is a clear understanding of the difference not merely between the kinds of effect they are calculated to produce and the organs upon which they are intended to act, that, according to *The Voice of the Silence* itself, the disciple at the very outset of his quest is admonished, “Learn above all to separate Head-learning from Soul-wisdom, the “Eye” from the “Heart” doctrine”.² By Head-learning is meant, of course, a merely intellectual understanding of spiritual truths. Not that such an understanding is deprecated, much less, still condemned: the Master simply insists on the necessity of recognizing its limitations, a task which most people—even religious people—seem to find extremely hard. Soul-wisdom on the other hand signifies what the *Prajnaparamita* corpus of *sutras* calls simply *prajna*, Wisdom, and the *Lankavatara Sutra* *aryajnana*, Noble Knowledge, a purely transcendental faculty for the apprehension of spiritual truths which, when fully developed, is identical with the Bodhi or Enlightenment of a Buddha. Just as it is the function of the “Eye” doctrine of the *sastras* to impart Head-

¹ *A Survey of Buddhism*, pp. 317–20

² P. 27. All references are to the *verbatim* reprint published by Theosophy Co. (India) Private Ltd., 40, New Marine Lines, Bombay I.

learning, so it is the function of the "Heart" doctrine of the *sutras* to stimulate the development of Soul-wisdom. We are not to suppose, however, that there are two doctrines, in the sense of two different bodies of teachings: it is a question of a difference of attitude, of approach. Inasmuch as it conforms to the *sutra* rather than to the *sastra* type of literature, *The Voice of the Silence* seeks to awaken Wisdom by appealing to the heart—not a physical organ but a transcendental faculty—and by encouraging the disciple to adopt an attitude in which the intellectual will be subordinated to the spiritual.

How does it do this?

Buddhism, it is well known, upholds the equal validity of reason (*anumana*) and experience (*pratyaksha*). The latter is twofold, consisting on the one hand of the contact of the five sense-organs and the mind (regarded as merely a sixth sense) with their respective objects, and on the other of the various levels of *dhyana* or *samadhi* wherein, though consciousness is intensified, the senses and the mind no longer function. This second type of experience is itself subject to further sub-division. If the object of the *dhyana* or *samadhi* is, though good (*kusala*), still mundane (*laukika*), the experience itself, despite the fact that it transcends the physical and mental levels, is necessarily mundane too, and as such incapable of directly conducing to liberation (*moksha*). If the object of the *dhyana* or *samadhi* is transcendental (*lokuttara*) the *dhyana* or *samadhi* is also transcendental and its development therefore equivalent to the attainment of a stage of the Transcendental Path leading directly to Nirvana.

This distinction between the two types of meditational experience, one mundane the other transcendental, is of the utmost importance, and had it been more widely known and uncompromisingly insisted upon the world would have been less at the mercy of teachings which, though claiming to issue from the Absolute, in fact proceeded only from the upper reaches of the phenomenal. Whether transcendental or mundane, however, *samadhi* in the full sense involves not only a holding of the senses in abeyance but also a complete suspension of mental activity, and it is perhaps this very fact which, by acting as an occasion for a misapplication of the principle of the identity of indiscernibles, has been chiefly responsible for the confusion of these two radically different modes of experience.

Since in *samadhi* the mind is transcended it follows that the various functions of the mind, such as perception, memory and ratiocination, are transcended too. Consequently the possibility of giving an account of *samadhi*, in terms of the concepts which the mind has either generalized from sense-impressions or evolved spider-like from its own entrails, is by the very nature of the meditational experience precluded. The superconscious, as the mystics of all religions have insisted, is beyond reason. This does not mean that it contradicts reason. For it could contradict reason only if they occupied a common level; if it diverged from reason as it were on the horizontal plane, instead of being separated from it, as with the mundane *samadhi*; vertically, or as with

the transcendental *samadhi* by "the abrupt disappearance of the latter into a "fourth" dimension which, since it is transcendental hence absolute, stands in no relation to reason at all. Only reason can contradict reason. In fact, as Nagarjuna and his followers maintained, reason is inherently self-contradictory. We should therefore be on our guard against the very common error of assuming that by the mystical is meant anything irrational and illogical. As T. S. Eliot sardonically remarks, before one can go beyond the intellect one must have an intellect.

But meanwhile the problem of communication remains. How is it possible to convey the nature of *samadhi* to one who has no personal experience of it when language, the main vehicle of communication, is derived from those very levels of experience which *samadhi* transcends? Certain Zen masters, of course, solve the problem in their own way by endeavoring to dispense with language altogether. The traditional Buddhist solution of the problem is much less drastic. One group of *sutras*, of which those constituting the *Prajnaparamita* corpus are the most prominent, places its reliance mainly on the method of systematic paradox. Another group, which includes the *Saddharma Pundarika* and the Larger and Smaller *Sukhavati-vyuha Sutras*, has recourse to poetry, especially in the highly developed form of cosmic myth.³ *The Voice of the Silence* is probably unique in making use of a combination of both methods, a procedure which no doubt has much to do with the extraordinary effectiveness of this little treatise in awakening the dormant Soul-wisdom of the qualified disciple. Before proceeding to illustrate this thesis with examples from the text itself it will be necessary for us to try to gain a clearer understanding of the nature of both paradox and poetry.

A paradox has been facetiously defined as a truth standing on its head to attract attention. As far as it goes the definition is not a bad one, for in its own way it does attempt to bring out two highly relevant points: firstly, that a paradox involves a contradiction and, secondly, that it contains an element of truth. In the case of a paradox in the merely rhetorical sense of the term the contradiction is only apparent and the truth which it is intended to emphasize quite capable of being stated logically: the paradoxical form is no more than a literary trick to excite attention. The paradoxes of the Buddhist scriptures, however, are what may be termed paradoxes *per se*; the contradictions they involve are real contradictions, and the truths which, through those contradictions, they try to convey, or better to indicate, are truths not susceptible to logical analysis. Buddhist paradox, in other words, is an attempt to express in terms of logical contradiction that which transcends logic. Exactly how this is done cannot be understood without at least passing reference to the so-called Laws of Thought.

³ *A Survey of Buddhism*, pp. 348–64.

According to the first of these, the Law of Identity, A is A, which means that it cannot be not-A, or that a thing is identical with itself. The second law, the Law of Contradiction, states that A is not not-A. The third, the Law of Excluded Middle, states that A either is or is not B; meaning that between two contradictory statements there is no middle ground, so that if one is denied the other must be affirmed. These laws or principles of thought constitute, at least in theory, the ultimate foundation not only of all philosophy but of every field of human achievement in the development of which reason has played a part, and to deny them at that level would produce on civilization and culture an effect comparable to that of a violent earthquake upon a town. So disastrous a denial as this is never contemplated, of course, by the genuine mystics (who usually display sterling common sense in their attitude to the affairs of everyday life) for, as the Mahayana so emphatically maintains, the absolute truth is not to be realized except in dependence on the relative truth. But whatever their other differences may be probably all mystics without exception refuse to commit what would be for them the elementary mistake of trying to abide by the Laws of Thought when speaking of those things which transcend logic because they transcend the rational mind. Spiritual experience, they unanimously insist, is as it were three-dimensional, the intellect two-dimensional. Even as a number of "contradictory" projections of a portion of the globe can give us, when compared, a more adequate idea of its true size, shape and contours than only one, so a statement which involves a logical contradiction stands a better chance of being able to describe the content of the *dhyana-samadhi* experience than one which is logically self-consistent.

For this reason do the religious geniuses of all times and ages, attempting to describe the indescribable, speak of the dark light, the dazzling darkness, the nothing which is everything, the voidness which is full. Hence, admonishing the spiritual aspirant, do they urge him to lose his life in order to find it. In all these paradoxes, though, expressive and effective as they are, lurks still some residue of the merely literary and rhetorical. Only in the Buddhist *sutras*, perhaps, especially in those of the *Prajnaparamita* corpus, can we find the paradox of unmitigated logical contradiction in all its glory employed on a grand scale to express the experiences not merely of mundane *samadhi* but of the transcendental.

Says the *Vajrachhedika Sutra*, describing the attitude to be developed by the Bodhisattva:—

One who has set out on the career of a Bodhisattva should reflect in such a wise: "As many beings as there are in the universe of beings, comprehended under the term "beings," —egg-born, or born from a womb, or moisture born, or miraculously born, with or without form, with perception, without perception, with neither perception nor non-perception,—as far as any conceivable universe of beings is conceived; all these I should lead to Nirvana, into the realm of Nirvana which leaves nothing behind. But, although innumerable beings have

thus been led to Nirvana, no being at all has been led to Nirvana. And why? If in a Bodhisattva the perception of a "being" should take place he would not be called a "Bodhi-being." He is not to be called a "Bodhi-being" in whom the perception of a self should take place, or the perception of a being, or the perception of a living soul, or the perception of a person.⁴

This boldly paradoxical passage makes it clear that since he has his being in a sphere describable only in terms of logical contradiction the Bodhisattva, as he manifests in the world of the senses and the mind, is himself a contradiction, a living paradox.

Even more tersely explicative of the Prajnaparamita's "logic of contradiction" is a text from the Saptasatika in which the Buddha says:

"Beings, beings," O Subhuti, as non-beings have they been taught by the Tathagata. Therefore are they called "beings."⁵

Greater havoc could hardly be played with the Laws of Thought than this!

The Voice of the Silence uses paradox as a method of awakening Soul-wisdom in much the same way as the *Prajnaparamita*, though of course it does not use it on nearly so grand a scale. Even the title of these chosen fragments from "The Book of the Golden Precepts" is, as a moment's reflection will show, profoundly paradoxical. It is as though the hand which transcribed them for the good of humanity, and dedicated them "To the Few," had written in letters of fire above the sanctuary portal an awful warning that here was ground upon which the intellect could not tread, where only a chastened and sublimated spiritual intuition that worked not within the narrow bounds of formal logic could possibly hope to gain admittance. May that warning not go unheeded as we attempt to bring to the surface a few of the pearls of meaning which lie hidden in the abyss of this paradoxical juxtaposition of the contradictory terms "Voice" and "Silence"!

Mme. Guyon, the great 17th century French mystic who was the friend and spiritual adviser of Fénelon, makes a distinction which will be of use to us in approaching our subject. There are, she says, four kinds of silence: the silence of sound, the silence of desires, the silence of thoughts, and the silence of the will. These are of course not unknown to Buddhist tradition. In the *Samyutta-Nikaya* of the Pali *Sutta-Pitaka*, for example, occurs a passage which makes it perfectly clear that the *ariya-mona* or "noble silence" of the Buddhist texts corresponds to the third of Mme. Guyon's four silences (not to the first, the silence of sound, as generally imagined). After relating to the brethren how, when he was secluded and living all alone, there had occurred to him the discursive thought "The Ariyan silence! they say. Now what

⁴ EDWARD CONZE, *Selected Sayings from the Perfection of Wisdom*, p. 79.

⁵ *Selected Sayings*, p. 105.

means this Ariyan silence?" Moggallana the Great, one of the two Chief Disciples of the Buddha, proceeds:—

Then, friends, I thus thought: "Herein a brother, by the suppression of discursive thought and investigation, enters on and abides in the Second Trance, a state of internal calm of heart, concentrated on its object, free from discursive thought and investigation, born of mental balance, a state of zest and ease. This is called *the Ariyan silence*.⁶

Here *ariya-mona* is plainly equated with the second jhana (Skt. *dhyana*), wherein, in contradistinction to the first *jhana*, there is no discursive thought and investigation (*vitakka-vicara*) but only concentration (*samadhi*), zest or joy (*piti*), and happiness or ease (*sukha*).

More germane to our present enquiry, however, is the fourth kind of silence, the silence of the will. By will Mme. Guyon presumably understood self-will, that is to say, any movement of the soul that was not in accordance with the will of God. So much must the will of the creature be one with that of the Creator that, according to her doctrine of disinterested love, the soul must love God even though he decrees its damnation. Obviously the conception of will is closely linked with that of self. In a sense they are correlative. If the one is grossly conceived, the other will be grossly conceived too; if subtly, with corresponding subtlety. Immured as she was within the Christian tradition, Mme. Guyon, for all her acuteness, could hardly be expected to perceive the finer shades of selfhood so palpable to Buddhist eyes, long accustomed to the minutest psycho-spiritual analysis. Consequently her conception of self-will is in comparison gross (fine as it may be in its immediate Christian context), and her silence of the will not the ultimate silence of the will. If *Sunyata* is described as the absolute cessation of even the faintest vestige of self-consciousness or ego-sense, however, and if from the cessation of self-consciousness the cessation of self-will necessarily follows, then obviously it should be possible to regard the complete cessation of self-will as equivalent to the realization of *sunyata*. Silence in its profoundest sense is thus *Sunyata* and *Sunyata* is the Absolute Silence.

No less deep is the ultimate meaning of "Voice." In almost all religions and cultures the voice, speech or utterance of man, as he expresses his thought in words, has been regarded as symbolizing the creation of the world by God, the involution of the spiritual into the material, the manifestation of the Absolute as the relative. *Sunyata*, the ultimate principle according to Buddhism, is not regarded as exercising creative functions: it is neither the First Cause nor the existential ground of things. But it would be a grave mistake to assume that it is therefore devoid of a dynamic aspect. This dynamic aspect is *karuna*, compassion. According to the Mahayana School compassion is much more than an emotion. Three kinds of *karuna* are distinguished. In the words of Henri de Lubac, who prefers to render *karuna* by "pity":—

⁶ *Some Sayings of the Buddha*, p. 94.

The first sort of pity has as its object the beings who suffer; it is *sattvalambana karuna*—the ordinary, inferior kind of pity, tainted by the vulgar error of believing in the reality of living beings. The second sort, which is higher, has as its object painful sensations themselves; this is *dharmalambana karuna* [phenomena, including sensations, are technically known as *dharma* in Buddhist philosophy]⁷ and the person who experiences it knows that beings do not exist, but only their Dharma [or constituent psycho-physical phenomena]. But this is still only an approximation to true knowledge, for the painful sensations do not exist in or by themselves; and so this second sort of pity still involves *avidya* (nescience). There must therefore be a third kind of pity—pure pity, the pity which has no object; *analambana karuna*. A virtue is all the higher, the more it is in this sense pure. Perfect pity, ideal pity—“the great pity”—will therefore arise, not from the love of creatures nor to put an end to suffering, but quite gratuitously, from the love of pity itself. And, at this highest level, just as it is no longer directed towards any living being or any reality, so it is not the possession of any particular person.⁸

It is of this third kind of *karuna* that *The Voice of the Silence* itself speaks in the well known passage, “Compassion is no attribute. It is the Law of LAWS—eternal Harmony, . . .”⁹ Strictly speaking, Compassion in this sense is no more an aspect of *Sunyata* than it is an attribute of the thinking, feeling self. To describe it as an aspect of *Sunyata* means in effect to assert that, unlike *Sunyata*, which possesses independent reality, Compassion possesses merely dependent or derivative reality, which in turn implies the assertion that it is not fully real. A number of Mahayana texts make it clear that *Sunyata* is as much an aspect of *Karuna* as *Karuna* is of *Sunyata*. In fact in the *Dharmakaya*, or whole Body of Reality in the ultimate sense, *Sunyata* and *Karuna*, the conditioned and the Unconditioned, *Samsara* and *Nirvana*—in fact all possible pairs of logically contradictory terms—are related in a manner inconceivable to the intellect, so that the relation cannot be described in terms of unity or of difference, nor yet in terms of neither unity nor difference. Only from the purely relative standpoint is it permissible to speak of *Sunyata* manifesting as *Karuna*, or of one being static the other dynamic, as though they were two distinct or even distinguishable entities. Both transcend the reach of logic. The only way in which their relationship can be described is by some such paradoxical, that is to say logically contradictory, expression as “The Voice of the Silence.” Speaking again from the relative standpoint, it may be said that the fact that these precious fragments from “The Book of the Golden Precepts” bear such a profoundly paradoxical title may be taken as an indication that they emanate

⁷ Additions within brackets are by the present writer.

⁸ *Aspects of Buddhism*, 1953, p. 40. HENRI DE LUBAC does not reveal the source of this classification.

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 75–76.

from, and are intended to help the disciple attain to, a state beyond the power of reason to describe.

The contents of *The Voice of the Silence* are, in parts, no less paradoxical than is its title. Only two examples will be given here, the reader, we believe, preferring to enjoy the excitement of discovering and studying others for himself.

In Fragment I the neophyte is warned, "Thou canst not travel on the Path until thou hast become that Path itself."¹⁰ The path referred to is of course the spiritual path. In all religions, but perhaps most of all in Buddhism, where the figure of The Way reigns supreme, is the spiritual life depicted as a progression through a series of stages—the first lying beneath one's feet, the last glimmering hardly discernible through the mists of the far distance—and the spiritual aspirant as a pilgrim or traveler. While the analogy has many advantages, as its worldwide popularity attests, it is by no means exempt from the danger that dogs every metaphor employed to elucidate religious or philosophical themes—the danger of being understood too literally and too logically, so that it becomes not the stimulus of a spiritual response but merely the starting point of a chain of deductions. In the present case, the danger lies in pushing the metaphor of the path so far as to think that because, in actual fact, the path and the traveler of the path are two different entities the spiritual path and the spiritual aspirant are two different entities too. From this there follows a conclusion diametrically opposed to the fundamental principles of Buddhism—the conclusion that just as the traveler, from the beginning to the end of his journey, remains unchanged in relation to the portions of the road over which he travels, so the self or ego or principle of personal identity persists unchanged as it passes through the succession of spiritual experiences or stages intercalated between the mundane starting point and the transcendental goal. Against this perfectly logical but absolutely wrong deduction the paradoxical statement that, in reality, you cannot travel on the Path until you have become that Path itself launches a vigorous protest.

As all schools of Buddhism maintain, the idea of an unchanging soul or self or *atman* distinct from the various mental processes is a delusion, in fact the greatest of all delusions, so that only from the standpoint of relative or conventional truth is it possible even to speak of the attainment of Nirvana by this or that person. Spiritual progress consists not in the acquisition of spiritual attainments by the ego as though they were a species of personal property but in the attenuation of the ego, or rather of the false idea of egohood, in such a way that from gross it becomes subtle, from subtle more subtle still, until in the end the aspirant becomes as it were an impersonal stream of spiritual energy which, becoming progressively wider and deeper, eventually discovers that it coincides with the fathomless ocean of Nirvana. By its paradoxical identification of Path and pilgrim *The Voice of the Silence* in effect reminds us that just

¹⁰ *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 14.

as the "individual" or "person" is merely a name for certain psychosomatic states, so "Path" is no more than a convenient designation for a succession of thoughts, words and deeds oriented in the direction of "Enlightenment." Whether at a higher or a lower level, there is in reality no question of personal acquisition at all.

This links up with the vitally important teaching, found in Fragment II, concerning "The Two Paths." These are the path of the *Sravaka* and the *Pratyekabuddha*, on the one hand, and that of the Bodhisattva on the other. In *The Voice of the Silence* the first is called "The Open Path" and "The Path of Liberation," the second "The Secret Path," "The Path of Renunciation," and "The Path of Woe." According to the popular interpretation, the difference between the two paths is that while one aims at individual emancipation the other aims at universal emancipation. Whereas the *Sravaka* is content to become an Arahant, to gain Nirvana for himself alone, the Bodhisattva is not satisfied unless he achieves Supreme Buddhahood, for in this case he will be able to lead a multitude of other beings to Nirvana. But as we have already pointed out, Nirvana is not something that can be owned, either individually or collectively. The Bodhisattva's renunciation of the Open Path, the path of personal liberation, is therefore not to be construed as meaning that this path represents an actually realizable possibility. What it means is that the Bodhisattva resists the temptation of thinking of Nirvana as a personal acquisition. In *Prajnaparamita* language, he realizes that Nirvana is to be attained by means of a non-attainment. With this lapse into paradox we remind ourselves that, after all, of all methods of giving expression to transcendental realities that of logical contradiction is perhaps the safest and least open to misunderstanding. A metaphor may be taken literally, a paradox never. Without some appreciation of the reason why *The Voice of the Silence* gives so profoundly paradoxical a twist to the time-honored figure of The Way, we shall be able to understand neither the message of this marvelously meaningful little treatise nor the implications of the Bodhisattva Ideal.

Our second example of the use of paradox in *The Voice of the Silence* is taken from the end of Fragment III, where the Bodhisattva, now on the threshold of Enlightenment, is told:

. . . if thou would'st be Tathagata, follow upon thy predecessor's steps, remain unselfish till the endless end.¹¹

This is profound doctrine, but we are not now concerned with the passage as a whole but only with the paradoxical phrase with which it concludes. It is no mere coincidence that the expression "the endless end" should have been used in association with unselfishness of the most exalted kind—the unselfishness of a Tathagata or Buddha.

¹¹ P. 78.

Now there are some who understand Nirvana so crudely as to imagine that it does in the gross literal sense stand at the end of the spiritual path, as it were waiting to be reached or realized by the aspirant. Besides bringing Nirvana, which is eternal (*dhruva*) in the sense that it transcends time, within the time-series, such literal-mindedness in effect commits the far graver mistake of treating Nirvana as though it could in reality be the object of personal attainment and possession. As we have already shown at sufficient length in the case of the first paradox, that of the Path, the Bodhisattva does not and cannot treat Nirvana as a personal possession, for it is of his very essence to have transcended those false notions of absolute selfhood, of real personal identity, upon which the idea of possession is necessarily grounded. Since he is incapable of thinking of Nirvana as a possession, or as being in the ultimate sense an attainment, the Bodhisattva cannot regard it as in reality constituting the end of his career. We do not wish to labor the point, for to those who followed the previous paragraph with attention it will already be sufficiently obvious. *The Voice of the Silence* speaks of "the endless end" for what is basically the same reason that it speaks of the pilgrim becoming the Path. Adopting a slightly different point of view, however, it may be said by way of supplementary explanation that if, to speak in accordance with the relative truth, the attainment of Wisdom is the "end" of the Bodhisattva's career, that end is "endless" because Wisdom is ultimately non-different from Compassion which has for object the uninterrupted succession of birth, old age, disease and death in the *Samsara* which, as a process, is without end.

From paradoxes we pass to poetry. The poetry of *The Voice of the Silence* is in places as beautiful as its paradoxes are startling. By poetry we do not mean verse, for in their English dress, at least, these inspired utterances fail to observe the rules of classical prosody. But what is poetry? For the purposes of our present discussion—enough ink has already been spilled in attempts to define the indefinable—we shall take it that the essence of poetry is imagery. The poetic image, or more simply the image, is defined as "anything concrete or abstract introduced figuratively to represent something which it strikingly resembles, as sleep for death." Imagery, of whatever kind, is thus based on comparison. Not on any kind of comparison, however. An image is made only when the objects compared are of different kinds but possessed of the same attributes. Thus in the case of the metaphor "golden sunset" we compare a phenomenon of sun and clouds and sky with a metal because, though the objects are of quite different kinds, they share a common quality, in this case a color.

Despite the fact that in its decline poetry, or what by Courtesy continues to be styled poetry, either uses the old figures of speech mechanically or manufactures new ones artificially, the comparisons between one object and another which constitute as it were the life-blood of the image are not arbitrary. In the section "Transition to the

Tantra" of *A Survey of Buddhism*¹² we tried to show how the sacramental action of the Tantras was based on the *Avatamsaka Sutra's* conception of the universe as a gigantic system of correspondences. The poetic image is similarly based. And just as the efficacy of the sacramental action of the Tantras is ultimately due to the essential truth of the *Sutra's* teaching, so does the power of the image to induce poetic experience ultimately derive from the fact that its comparisons are not merely fanciful but strike deep root into the very nature of things.

Images are perceptions of real correspondences. These correspondences the true poet—not the mere versifier or wearer of poetic reach-me-downs—perceives intuitively. The intuitive perception of a correspondence through an image constitutes poetic truth. It is because they possess the power of perceiving correspondences, or imagination in the Blakean sense, that the great poets of the world are not merely "the idle singers of an empty day" but "the hierophants of an unapprehended mystery." Not unoften, indeed, are we delighted by the discovery that there is more Soul-wisdom in the pages of the poets than in those of the academic philosophers and the professionally devout. The poet, as the Romantics clearly saw, and as Carlyle so magnificently dinned into the ears of an unbelieving generation, is a prophet and seer. Hence we need not be surprised to find that the prophets and seers are poets. The Vedic rishis, the authors of the poetical books of the Old Testament and the Sufis of medieval Iran, were poets as true as any that ever breathed. Mohammed, Christ and the Buddha—to go higher still in the scale of spiritual attainment—all made extensive use of metaphor and simile in their teachings. That this should be so is undoubtedly due to the fact that images based on a system of correspondence are more easily able to arouse the imagination, to stimulate the intuition, or (to revert to the term beloved of our present text) to awaken Soul-wisdom than more rational methods.

Hence *The Voice of the Silence* abounds in imagery. One can hardly turn a page without encountering at least one strikingly beautiful figure of speech. What could be more vigorous than the image in which it is said that the Disciple's sins ". . . will raise their voices like as the jackal's laugh and sob after the sun goes down; . . ." ¹³ or more vivid than the picture of the Hosts of Souls hovering birdlike over "the stormy sea of human life," ¹⁴ or more solemnly beautiful than the simile which says of the newly arisen Buddha that He stands

. . . like a white pillar to the west, upon whose face the rising Sun of thought
eternal poureth forth its first most glorious waves." ¹⁵

¹² Pp. 406–12.

¹³ *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 9

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 71.

Examples could be multiplied indefinitely. An assiduous student might well compile for *The Voice of the Silence*, as E. M. Hare has done for the *Sutta-Nipata*,¹⁶ an Index of Similes.

But imagery, though the essence of poetry, is not the whole of it. Other elements are also needed. For instance rhythm. Though it is nowadays generally admitted that poetry can dispense with meter and rhyme, it would be difficult to imagine it existing without some kind of rhythm, either regular or irregular. This may well be because rhythm is essentially a periodicity, a reflection of sameness and difference within the order of time, and as such indirectly in correspondence with imagery, their reflection in words. Be that as it may (for it is no more than a speculation), there is no doubt that the poetry of *The Voice of the Silence* is strongly rhythmical and that its marvelous effects are owing, in some cases at least, as much to rhythm as to imagery. Consider, for instance, the following sublime passage, arranged in stanza form so that the reader may be the better able to appreciate how strongly, indeed regularly, rhythmical it is:—

Let thy Soul lend its ear
To every cry of pain
Like as the lotus bares its heart
To drink the morning sun.

Let not the fierce Sun dry
One tear of pain before
Thyself hast wiped it
From the sufferer's eye.

But let each burning human tear
Drop on thy heart and there remain;
Nor ever brush it off, until
The pain that caused it is removed.¹⁷

The prosodist will observe that the stanzas scan perfectly. In the first stanza two iambic trimeters are succeeded by two iambic tetrameters, the second is composed of trimeters and dimeters, while the glorious third stanza consists of four iambic tetrameters.

That merely rhyme should be needed to make this "poem of pity" acceptable not only as poetry but as perfectly good traditional English verse is no accident. Shelley in an inspired moment spoke of "the incantation of this verse." All great poetry is incantation. It produces its effect more by sound than by meaning. The classic illustration of this profound truth is the famous first line of Keats' *Endymion*: "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever." According to a story, probably apocryphal, Keats originally wrote, "A thing of beauty is a constant joy" and showed the line to his friend Leigh Hunt, whom it failed to satisfy. Keats thereupon thought again and wrote

¹⁶ *Woven Cadences of Early Buddhists*, pp. 181–82.

¹⁷ P. 14.

the line previously quoted. The difference in meaning between the two lines is negligible; both are iambic pentameters; but one is poetry, the other prose. Why so tremendous a difference? The answer can lie only in the fact that whereas the meaning is the same the associated sounds, including the respective rhythms of the two lines, are different. A poem is a kind of mantra. We might even say that while imagery is the content of poetry, the mantra is its form. Indeed, just as poetry can sometimes substitute a meaning for an image and still remain poetry by retaining its mantric form, so it can substitute meaning for mantric quality and remain poetry in that case too. In other words, though poetry in the fullest sense combines image, mantra and meaning, a combination of image and mantra, or of meaning and mantra, alone, is also poetry. Meaning by itself is prose: the addition of meter merely condemns it to be verse. Such distinctions should not, however, be mistaken for divisions. A poem, as we have insisted in "Advice to a Young Poet," is a whole, and its "parts" though distinguishable are inseparable.¹⁸

In passages like the one quoted above, which is one of the loftiest peaks of that Himalayan range of spiritual truths that is *The Voice of the Silence*, all the constituents of poetry in the full sense of the term are present. It is as though whenever it has anything of special importance to impart the text either explodes in paradox or erupts into the imagery and starts shaking with the mantra-like vibrations of poetry. The fact that *The Voice of the Silence* consists of, or at least contains, what are really mantras in English, incidentally may account for the circumstance that as a whole it does not correspond to any known Tibetan text, though individual verses seem to have been identified. For as an eminent Tibetologist has suggested to the writer, if the translator of these three fragments from "The Book of the Golden Precepts" was as much concerned to reproduce the mantric effect of the original as to translate its literal meaning she may well have found some sacrifice of the letter to the spirit of the text inevitable.

The Voice of the Silence is not, however, all paradox and poetry—a mercy for which the weakness of human nature is doubtless sufficiently thankful. Little valleys of rationality and prose do intervene, for even the Himalayas are not all peak and precipice. But as he rests in them between bouts of spiritual mountaineering even the most casual reader should remember that the message of *The Voice of the Silence* is not to be understood unless we realize that it appeals to the heart, that it strives to develop intuition, to awaken Soul-wisdom, and that in so doing its principal methods are paradox and poetry.

¹⁸ *The Aryan Path*, August 1953. p. 345.