

# Book Review

## *IN THE TRACKS OF BUDDHISM.*

By Frithjof Schuon.  
(Allen & Unwin. 28s.).

Review by Christopher Woodman

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From the very beginning of his first book, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Frithjof Schuon adopted towards the insidious relativisms of our times the same uncompromising attitude which characterized the works of René Guénon. With the same severe Guénonian economy of language, in which each sentence unfolds with an adamantine inevitability, Schuon set forth the essential metaphysic which was to direct all his subsequent activity. "We have only one concern—to express the impersonal and uncoloured Truth—so that it will be useless to look for anything 'profoundly human' in this book, any more than in those of René Guénon, for the simple reason that nothing human is profound; nor will there be found therein any 'living wisdom,' for wisdom is independent of such contingencies as life and death, and life can add no value to something which possesses none in itself—quite the contrary. In the spiritual realm there is no 'life' other than holiness, whatever may be its mode, and this always rests precisely upon what 'dynamists' and other modern illogicians call 'dead' wisdom." (p. 15).

Frithjof Schuon's most recent book, *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, translated with great care by one of the few capable of shouldering such a burden, Marco Pallis, does express the "impersonal" and "uncoloured" essence of the Buddha Dharma in the modern world. Those who value the "profoundly human" will find nothing to their liking here. The philosopher will not find a trace of "living wisdom," nor will the scholar, the historian, psychologist, or sociologist, find those comfortingly categorical analyses, based on historical development, social needs, and "borrowings" which characterize so much of the modern study of Comparative Religion.

*In the Tracks of Buddhism* is as difficult as it is important. Although slim, only 146 pages of actual text, it is divided into no less than three parts and seventeen chapters, a degree of subdivision one would expect of a much bulkier work. Yet its content is far "weightier" than most books three or four times as heavy and few readers will be able to assimilate it in one even quite exceptionally attentive reading. The terseness of the style, which is almost aphoristic at times, combined with the complex brevity with which each aspect is dealt, can be understood only with the deepest, most unreserved collaboration on the part of the reader. This will undoubtedly alienate those who expect authors to "prove" their "points" by substantially developing their "arguments"—in other words, to do all the work for them. The assumptions behind this lamentable example of modern relativism were dealt with conclusively at the very beginning of Schuon's career; it is most important to review these preliminary ideas at this point

because the failure to grasp them will stand for many as the primary obstacle to comprehending *In the Tracks of Buddhism*. "The 'simplicity' of an idea is by no means a gauge of its truth, as the most modern thinkers seem to believe, and while it is undeniable that anything can be expressed simply, it is none the less true that simple language, when used to convey truths of a metaphysical or esoteric order, will constitute a symbolism which will be more difficult to penetrate, at least for the profane reader, the more lofty the order to which its content belongs. Such language, which is moreover that used by the sacred Scriptures, will run the risk of being even less accessible than the most subtle demonstration." (*Transcendent Unity of Religions*, p. 15). Everything Schuon says is naturally expressed through "terminological contingencies" but because his analysis is wholly traditional, in the higher sense which readers of this journal will appreciate, his statements can be embraced as "relatively absolute." The tendency today is to start rather from an "absolute relativity"; "only too often it happens that discussion begins about attributes before there has been agreement about things in themselves." (*In the Tracks of Buddhism*, p. 34).

As Marco Pallis so often reiterates, including in his Preface to the book in question, Buddhism is above all others the religion of *upāyas*, i.e. provisional or skilful means or methods. Although Schuon approaches traditions as of spiritual and not human origin, at the same time he compares them not as degrees of absolute truth in themselves, but as contingent *upāyas*, according to the spiritual effects they produce in their adherents. There must always be as many traditional possibilities as there are *samsaric* forms, but the goal, which is non-contingent and cannot be "conceived," is always the same. It is through this approach that Schuon avoids the vagaries of the contemporary academic reduction of traditions to different levels of "civilization" and their interactions (e.g. Buddhism as a "reformed" Hinduism). What is more, Schuon's method of "relatively absolute" traditional analysis is itself an *upāya*; his aphoristic "manner" develops a degree of concentration in the reader which then in turn vitalizes the actual "content." If one approaches *In the Tracks of Buddhism* with that confidence and most urgent expectation which a familiarity with Schuon's other works inspires, one will not simply gain new facts about Buddhism and the relationship of its different schools, nor will one "find out" anything "more" at all, but one will find oneself *existentially* drawn deeper into the Dharma. It is in this sense that *In the Tracks of Buddhism* is of quite unusual importance. Schuon's *upāya*, developed over many years, and the traditional *upāya* above all others, the Buddha Dharma, come together in a most extraordinarily powerful way. "In Buddhism, which is refractory to speculations of a literalist kind, language seeks to communicate or release a state of 'being' rather than a 'thought': understanding and being tend to be merged as far as this is possible, whence the wide use of *upāyas*, 'instrumental concepts,' of which the justification is not so much a truth conceived in the abstract as an inward transformation and intuition which is in a sense 'existential,' if such a paradox be permissible." (p. 143).

One might at some point be tempted to suggest that the Guénon-Schuon approach to the great revelations could become an entire tradition on its own, specifically Western in character, and quite independent of any religious *upāya* the world has known before. It is therefore most important to recognize from the start that this new *upāya* could never, under any circumstance, become a substitute for direct participation in an existing tradition. In fact, all the work of Guénon and Schuon is directed toward accomplishing one of two things, either to assist those who are traditionless, and therefore have no access to the formless, to discover the traditional form which suits them best, or to stimulate the intellect already channelled through a traditional form to push on toward a direct perception of the formless beyond, i.e. to transmute the exoteric

into the esoteric within a particular tradition. This twofold objective is extremely important to keep in mind as so many of us today have the inclination to go it alone, to seek our own spiritual development, utilizing traditional techniques on occasion, but always remaining quite independent of "established" traditional forms; this tendency may even be reinforced by the profound spiritual excitement which both Guénon and Schuon can stir up. For this reason it is of the utmost importance to stress the fact that the main purpose of *In the Tracks of Buddhism* is not to absorb Buddhism into a vague "perennial philosophy," but on the contrary to facilitate personal absorption *into* Buddhism. For it is, in fact, the essential *prajñā pāramitā* Buddhism, that tradition which is on the whole most unattached to objective, apparently absolute formulations, which can perhaps most readily absorb those dedicated to this new "Western" *upāya*. (This caution will of course be useless to those scholars and critics who approach "Comparative Religion" relatively, who are reluctant to bow down humbly before tradition at all levels and in all its manifold possibilities.)

Although something like two thirds of the present book (now "carefully revised, rearranged and amplified") appeared in *Images de L'Esprit* (Flammarion, 1961), the total effect of *In the Tracks of Buddhism* is quite new. No attempt is made to map out the whole field of Buddhism; in fact, the book assumes that, with two notable exceptions, the reader is already comfortably possessed of this preliminary knowledge. These exceptions are, however, very important. Part II consists of a thorough treatment, never attempted in the West before, of the complex symbolism and mythology of Shinto, presented as "Buddhism's ally in Japan." Indeed, the alliance of Buddhism and Shinto resulted directly in the remarkable flowering of Japanese civilization. The *Translator's Preface* draws attention to the considerable contribution of this study: "Very few Europeans have much idea of what Shinto is about; in fact many people in the West feel a certain prejudice against it inasmuch as its ethical prescriptions, especially those relating to chivalry and honour, were shamelessly exploited in the period that followed the Meiji revolution by those whose interest it was to turn the Japanese sense of loyalty into an instrument of a modern (therefore essentially Western and profane) nationalism; the disasters of our time proceed from there." (p. 10). Beside this important consideration, a substantial familiarity with Shinto, providing as it has so much of the essential disciplinary background of Japanese life, may help to counteract the grievous Western tendency to seize the unalloyed Sudden Insight aspect of Zen as the whole process.

The other notable exception to the assumption that the reader has a general Buddhist background involves another Japanese traditional phenomenon, Jodo, the Pure Land school of the devotees of the Buddha Amitābha. This extreme *bhaktic* aspect of the Buddhist tradition has been almost totally neglected in the West; indeed when mentioned it is often dismissed as not orthodox, primitive and superstitious. If setting this misunderstanding straight were the only accomplishment of this book, it would still be of unusual importance. For the problem of Jodo crystallizes a basic theme running throughout the "discontinuous (though invisibly connected) tableaux" which build up *In the Tracks of Buddhism*. Despite that spiritual "economy" which assures that each tradition has a "characteristic perspective" and answers to a unique spiritual "necessity," each and every "particular spiritual perspective is commonly discoverable somewhere within the framework of a tradition that seems to exclude it; thus, theism reappears in a certain sense in the framework of Buddhism despite its characteristic non-theism." (p. 18). Buddhism, which might be superficially described as a pure *jnana marga* certainly does not withhold the *bhaktic* nourishment which is indispensable to balanced spiritual development. So even the Theravada, which is outwardly one of the most *jnana*-orientated aspects of the Buddhist

tradition, includes this element in actual practice. Some Mahayanists, moreover, may be surprised to find their way described as a "path of love," analogous to Christianity, though this too "comprises two poles," the Bodhisattva (universal compassion) on the one hand and the Void (Advaita-Vedānta) on the other (p. 152). Within the Buddhist tradition, Jodo expresses the *Bhaktic* alternative most concretely and it is therefore an invaluable reminder that Buddhism does, in fact, have room for Grace simply because "other power" is an Absolute characteristic.

*In the Tracks of Buddhism* does not compromise. Most readers must expect to feel the heavy hammer blows directed against themselves at some point because very few indeed will have escaped altogether those subtle ambiguities of the modern world which Schuon so economically and yet so devastatingly exposes. The theme of the "latter days," the Dark Age, runs throughout. All the insidious practices based on the assumption of objective progress, history, science, medicine, psychology etc., are ruthlessly diminished. In the context of the Buddhist tradition, if only because of what Schuon calls its "anti-individualist point of view," the modern perversions are revealed in their true colours more clearly than in the light of any other tradition. Thus it is that the dust jacket simply expresses the author's aim: "to present Buddhism, not merely as a historical phenomenon and still less as a philosophical system, but as a still living spiritual force and as a touchstone for discernment in respect of many things which men find especially worrying at the present time." And it is Buddhist *Grace*, not the well-worn Buddhist logic, Buddhist non-theism, Buddhist self-analysis, which is the original message of this book. "The man of our time can lay claim to no spiritual originality unless it be a super-abundance of distress, to which the answer will be, by way of compensation, a secret outpouring of Graces, always provided that man does not close himself from beforehand to the celestial offer to save him. The greatest of all human miseries is a refusal to lay oneself open to Mercy." (p. 78).