

“I’d rather have Eternal Emptiness”¹—Goethe and Buddhism

This article is a translation from the German draft of public lecture given by the IOP European Centre on 29 May 2005.

Manfred Osten

THANK you for the kind introduction. It reminds me of the Russian proverb: “Too much incense blackens even the prettiest saint.” Also, I apologize for speaking without a manuscript today. You most probably remember the sad story of the British Lord who read off his manuscript before the House of Lords and—by accident—also read off the small print noted down by his ghostwriter. There was stated: “This speech is a little bit thin but good enough for the House of Lords.”

I want to especially thank you for letting me speak to you about Goethe here in Bingen; Goethe visited Bingen in 1814 and donated an altarpiece to the St. Rochus’ Chapel in 1816. In his significant essay on the St. Rochus’ Festivities in Bingen, we find the following sentence on the meaning of the classical: “The classical is that which is plentiful and masterly. All other eras are either plentiful but not masterly or masterly but not plentiful.” So it is up to you to choose where we find ourselves at the moment. In any case, the great dramatist Friedrich Hebbel focused on the abundance of the plenty when he put Goethe into the formula with the words: “At first it was a dot, which in silence widened into a circle/to finally embrace the world.”

I especially mention this, since one might assume that Goethe, while embracing the world, might also have embraced the Buddha. This is even more possible since Goethe’s life fell into an era in which Friedrich Schlegel and a whole string of other scientists founded Indology as a science. In fact, Goethe participated actively in the findings of the research about India. In 1787 in Rome, he even thought about traveling to India. Many people might not be aware of this fact. I would like to mention two significant poems which resulted in his intensive preoccupation with the Indian research: first, the *Paria-Trilogy* in which a lower entity connects with a higher being and therefore an enormous widening and enlightenment of both merged persons is possible—thus a mystic-Buddhist notion; and second the poem “*The God and the Bayadere*” in

which God embraces a sinful person. The conclusion of this poem—which in my opinion is written in revolutionary words—is “temptation comes from above,” that is, not from below as we all believe.

Also, Goethe dealt with the topic of *Baghavadgita*, the great work of Indian poetry, which he learned of through Karl Wilhelm von Humboldt. He especially dealt with the *Sakuntala* by Kalidasa, one of the great Indian poets of the 5th century. This work left major traces, among others, in “Prelude in the theatre” in *Faust*.

In 1829, three years before his death Goethe, talking to Eckermann, finally compared the individual steps in life with one another and called the last, the highest step “quietism;” this means taming the will. During this, he explicitly referred to Indian philosophy. This means he apparently knew of concepts in Buddhism, the great ten steps of life and wisdom. We do not know to what degree he talked about this in front of others—there are no explicit statements from Goethe referring to Buddhism. This is why I would like to restrict myself to reflection on the works of Goethe and his biography, which in my opinion converge greatly with the principles in Buddhism, especially with the principles of the Buddhism in the Lotus-Sutra-tradition. I want to deal with these particularly at the end of this lecture.

I will do this in three steps. First, I would like to show the alternative world to the Buddhist one—using the tragedy of *Faust*. Then I would like to deal with three literary figures, which can be found in the works of Goethe. Here significant approaches, parallels and convergences with Buddhist thought are recognizable. Finally, I will deal with Goethe’s own considerations in his prose writings and also with the “*Maxims and Reflections*”—with his fundamental attitudes toward the world, which can communicate truly significant insights, which are connected to Buddhism.

I will begin first in an inverted manner with the opposing world, the *Faust* tragedy. You may recall that the ten great steps of wisdom begin with the animalistic and go up to the state of the Bodhisattva, i.e. from hell to heaven so to speak. Here we have a tragedy in which the exact opposite path is shown, namely “From Heaven through the world and down to hell.” This is the great sentence right at the beginning of the tragedy. The question is: “What are the principles of this tragedy that this opposite path is taken? What, considering the reasoning and acting of the Western world, does this tragedy show?” What has definitely entered this tragedy is basically a metaphoric mirror of our Western reasoning.

Above all things the question is: “How is it possible that *Faust* should

be the prototype of the one who does not realize the sorrowful state the world is in—in the sense of Buddhist reasoning?” Meant is the inability to recognize what holds the world together from the inside, even though he has striven for this. Why is Faust the prototype of the person who through his actions increases sorrow in the world and, therefore, basically is the countermovement of that which Buddhist teaching actually demands? The crucial formulation for this aberration, this deviation from the Buddhist virtues, can basically be seen through emphasis on rational oriented thinking and its inherent impatience. Faust is the prototype of he who thinks hasty and is exclusively rationally-oriented, a reasoning which cannot consider the entire connection in the sense of the mind—the mind is a totally different dimension, which does not appear in him here—but he is the one who anticipates our modern culture of mobilization, of science and of acceleration with its most modern curse (“And cursed be patience most of all”³). He is the one who above all uses his ratio in the sense in which Mephistopheles explains it before God. He (as a reproach) says to God:

His life would be less difficult, poor thing,
Without your gift of heavenly glimmering;
He calls it Reason, using light celestial
Just to outdo the beasts in being bestial.⁴

These are the variations that you can find in this work—the use of the animalistic rationale triumphs many times. Here he celebrates his great orgies of the modern age, since he already speaks of countless devices of modern acceleration, which Mephistopheles makes available to Faust: “the fast coat, the fast sword, fast money, fast love.” During the Easter stroll, Faust is introduced as a person who already—in a Buddhist conception—appears from the background of bad karma. Basically, you see, he was a mass murderer. During the Easter stroll, he tells his famulus Wagner his early experiences with his father, who was an alchemist.

We made these hills and valleys our resort,
And ravaged there more deadly than the pest.
These hands have ministered the deadly bane
To thousands who have perished; I remain
To hear cool murderers extolled and bless'd.⁵

This means that Faust is here revered by the crowd, which does not realize that he has fed their ancestors, their parents, with the poison they miserably died of. It is basically Faust who demonstrates this trail of the

animalism—the lowest region from which Buddhism ascends—by indeed practicing an abundance of crimes with these devices—I remind you of Margaret’s fate, the mother’s fate, the murdering of the brother. In the second part of the tragedy, he continues by not learning from these deeds but washes them off in the dew of Lethe in the sense of celebrating modern orgies of forgetting. Then in the fifth act, he sets out in the triumph of a blinded life and an increase of suffering on earth; meaning the great deeds of blindness by Faust, who is dazzled or rather goes blind due to worries. This means he lives in a world of consciousness that is solely oriented to the future. In an act of violence, he has Philemon and Baucis and the father of the gods, Zeus, who is present in the form of a wanderer, killed. He is deluded in a tremendous error of “Standing on freedom’s soil, a people free.”⁶ They are actually forced laborers of the modern age, of this century.

Weimar and Buchenwald are united synoptically since it says about the forced laborers:

Nightly rose a wailing sorrow,
Sacrifice of human blood;
Trim canal was seen the morrow,
Where had ebbd the fiery flood.⁷

And in the end, the enormous bias of error in which Faust mistakes a gigantic drainage ditch within the scope of a huge modern project with his own grave. I have mention this briefly since I believe that it is important to realize the tremendous tableau of non-realization, non-enlightenment and an increase of the sorrowful constitution of the world placed here in a gigantic way. I believe that just this interpretation of Faust against the Buddhist background could bring forth an abundance of insights if one was to concern oneself with the matter deeply.

Counter-realms seen by Goethe that go in the direction of Buddhism can interestingly enough also be found in Faust. Goethe lived by the principle that we must build a contradiction to every aphorism if we want to face the truth even slightly. He said: “I love to go where contradictions buzz; how funny, no one grants the other the right to be mistaken.”⁸ This contradictive thinking to the fatal path of the Faust-tragedy, “From Heaven through the world and down to hell”⁹ is represented by Mephistopheles from whom I have also taken the quote “I’d rather have Eternal Emptiness.”

In a mysterious way, Goethe arrives at a point of view, which one would not associate with the character Mephistopheles. Yet it stands to

reason since Mephistopheles is the one who sees through the world in lucidness, knows Faust truly and controls him exactly because he knows of the mechanisms of failing enlightenment and of failing to lessen suffering. At the end he looks at his victim, i.e. Faust, the old man who here lies in the sand and says:

A foolish word, bygone.
 How so then, gone? [...]
 Yet circle back, existence to possess:
 I'd rather have Eternal Emptiness.¹⁰

If you think about the fact that Buddha himself basically was a heretic to Brahmanism since he was the one who would not accept the two principles being Brahma and Atman and instead discovered the notion of Nirvana, then you realize that the phrase “I'd rather have Eternal Emptiness” comes close to this condition in a peculiar way. Here in an enormous lucidness Goethe put into the words of Mephistopheles the senseless deeds of Faust who now shows whereto this “scattering,” that is connected to Nirvana, actually leads—that actually here the condition is achieved—metaphorically at least as he puts it—which he expresses with his final words.

To set things clear one might add that the *Upanishads* saw the chance to achieve salvation through recognizing the identity of Brahma and Atman, i.e. Brahma as being the fundamental principle of all being and Atman as the individuation, the individual soul. That means, when we come to realize that these two principles belong together, in fact are identical, then according to Brahmanism and *Upanishad* teachings, we are redeemed. Buddha, on the other hand, deliberately leaves aside this notion of salvation and instead introduces the “idea of deliverance” of Nirvana.

This exactly is the point to which Mephistopheles points to at the end of this enormous tragedy. Interestingly, he explained this at the start since at the beginning of the tragedy he takes the freedom of introducing himself in front of the background of Nirvana by saying:

The spirit I, that endlessly denies.
 And rightly, too; for all that comes to birth
 Is fit for overthrow, as nothing worth;
 Wherefore the world were better sterilized;
 Thus all that's here as Evil recognized
 Is gain to me, and downfall, ruin, sin
 The very element I prosper in.¹¹

Here again you see this phrase which is reflected in “Faust” through the sentence “I’d rather have Eternal Emptiness”¹²—“Wherefore the world were better sterilized.”¹³

Here are peculiar convergences which are expressed through an alleged negative-character of this Faust-tragedy and which have not been reflected upon under this aspect.

I will now talk about a character, which can be interpreted in a different, positive way as being convergent with Buddhist principles. It is he who is sworn to the tower; it is Lynceus. Lynceus appears in the 5th act of the second part of the Faust-tragedy. Goethe sealed this second part because he was convinced that nobody in a blind world in his time could understand this work. Explaining this to Wilhelm von Humboldt he said: “The world is ruled to-day by bewildering wrong counsel, urging bewildered wrong action.”¹⁴ This means he has recognized the blindness of Faust and his acts of violence—this hasty action and hasty thought—these being the principles that his own age, the 19th century, lived by. He was convinced that nobody could understand this work since the mirror set up there is a mirror that we in the 21st century can actually recognize now.

The character of Lynceus belongs to this mirror in a positive sense. He is the only one here who has attained something like a state of enlightenment. Lynceus does not take part in increasing sorrow in the world, does not take part in Faust’s actions but is the enlightened one who observes the world and sees it in the way that Goethe once put it: “Only he who observes has conscience; the acting are always unconscionable.”¹⁵ Here we find both antipodes that are described with this verdict, i.e. Faust who acts unconscionably, and here the observer who, through his calm contemplating, so to speak Buddhist enlightened state, gains insight in the great connections of Buddhism, this being the connection of what I have mentioned before: the *Upanishads* see this as the connection of Brahma and Atman but also as the identity of the world with the individual, the connection of nature with himself—he is the one who observes the world from his tower above and who says:

In all things perceiving
The charms that endure.¹⁶

In this short phrase, you can already see the Lynceus’ insight into the great connection of being when he adds:

And, joy thus achieving,
My own joy is sure.¹⁷

Here we find a position, a *vita contemplativa*, set up in the tragedy itself, which is opposite to the whole culture of mobilization of the modern age, the hypertrophy of the *vita activa* as is represented by Faust.

Yet we find another character in Faust, that of Homunculus. Goethe had the audacity to create a character who wants nothing to do with the condition of the Western mobilization-culture, the culture of ratio and the logo centric culture. This is Homunculus.

This might amaze you since we know Homunculus to be an artificial creature which, in fact, in the spirit of the ratio obedient culture, was created in a phial by famulus Wagner who has now advanced to become a molecular biologist and genetic designer. Homunculus, therefore, is an artificial creature who carries the flaw of the over-hasty culture just like Dolly, the cloned sheep, which is not capable of surviving. These are our great utopias and science-fiction-images we connect to today's progress—that today we are able to completely destroy or change the phenotype of man by interfering with the genotype.

Goethe anticipated this figure with the failure of the project and now the great turning point comes that the creature chooses a completely different path. Homunculus leaves Faust's world of science and, since he has come into this world imperfect, defective, wants to become a "complete" entity, connected to the entire cosmos. He seeks advice—not in Buddhism but asks ancient philosophers (who are claimed to have been influenced enormously by Indian culture), the pre-Socratic philosophers. Above all, it is Thales and the mythological figure Proteus who give him advice to move away from this erroneous sorrow-increasing conscience of his half-nature and to move towards a totally different condition. Their advice reads:

Submit to a request so winning,
And start to be at the beginning.¹⁸

Toils on earth, what'er they be,
Amount to plaguey drudgery.
The waves give life more growth and ease:
Come now to the eternal seas
With Dolphin-Proteus.¹⁹

And they advise him that when he has gone through this enormous deceleration process from the beginning of creation, meaning a death-defying leap back 3.5 billion years, then he should begin to ascend again but under the condition, for God's sake, not to make his way to the state

of the consciousness of antiquated people, the state of the non-enlightened people. Their advice reads:

But be not lured by higher striving,
For at the state of man arriving
Finished and damned is your career.²⁰

Here precautions are taken which aim toward a completely different world and which show convergences with an all-embracing love as far as the actual procedure in which Homunculus returns to the beginning of creation is directly connected to the great fest of Eros of the Galatians in the gulf of the Aegean Sea. According to the advice of the Pre-Socratic Philosophers, Homunculus throws himself into the sea, which experiences a great marine phosphorescence, and smashes his phial on Eros' wagon of the Galatians. He is, therefore, in a state of loving all, reverted to the beginning of creation. These are very peculiar thoughts of Goethe that are worth being reflected upon in front of a Buddhist background.

Now I wish to talk about a figure that is not connected to Faust but emerged at the same time as the creation of the second part of "Faust," this being the "*Elective Affinities*." Also, here we find a character having much to do with convergences and parallelisms of Buddhist principles; it is Ottilie. A figure who has received too little attention and who—similar to Lynceus—is in a state of contemplation. She is the only figure who is not obedient to the ratio, who does not take part in the enormous impatience and make-work that is characteristic for all the other figures in the novel but rather whom she refuses. In the moment in which, however, she is dragged into the inscrutable whirl of increased suffering, the culture of error when a child falls out of her embrace and drowns, she refuses herself ultimately by devoting herself to total asceticism. She refuses herself to existence altogether and enters a state which seems the Goethenian paraphrase of Nirvana. Actually, it is something like an anticipation of the Kafkanian professional-faster and finally dies through renunciation—renunciation as one of the great possibilities which Goethe saw for himself and which he also makes a subject of discussion in "*Wilhelm Meister*," to refuse oneself and to not participate by increasing suffering in the world. The path this character chooses shows in a cryptic way how much Goethe repeatedly tried to include just these counter realms in opposition to the Faustic culture of acceleration into his work—with small success. No other figure was more misunderstood than Ottilie, as with other characters I have mentioned, having never been interpreted in this way. I believe we should keep the character Ottilie in mind.

I will now discuss the questions connected to Goethe himself: what Goethe displayed in his lifestyle and which at least appear to have parallels or convergences with Buddhism. Very early in the relationship to Mrs. von Stein Goethe said: “Thou, alas, wast in some former state/Or my sister or my loving wife!”²¹ This means Goethe took into his contemplation the notion of reincarnation, a notion which Buddha took over from the *Upanishads*, from Brahmanism. So he saw the possibility of the causality of retribution for our behavior in the previous life. At a ripe old age, he reflected on his own thoughts in connection with reincarnation and metempsychosis and mentioned to Eckermann that the thought of his continuation after his passing rises from the idea of his doings: “If only I stay indefatigable until the end, nature must grant me another existence.”²² Here we see astounding convergences dealing with metempsychosis and reincarnation. Goethe did not itemize these ideas in many places but he did touch them. They might have been very familiar to him, especially through Engelbert Kaempfer’s description of Japan. In the 17th century, Kaempfer managed to get into Japan unauthorized via Lemgo. There he, among other things, described Japanese Buddhism in his great travel diary. Goethe also got acquainted with the ginkgo tree and the ginkgo leaf which originates from the Japanese language—“*ginkyō*” meaning “silver apricot”—and which shape he perceived in a very Buddhist way, namely as a “two but not two.” In this leaf, he sees the superficial separation we usually assume between subject and object; but at the same time perceive that subject and object, body and mind, are ultimately parts that are identical, that belong together, that are in connection of a great entirety. This leaf is ultimately something that—in the “*West-Eastern Divan*” in which this poem “*Gingo biloba*” is included—led Goethe to the idea that we should give up the culture of ratio altogether and should go entirely different ways, which have to do with the nature of “two but not two.”

We should try to replace the ratio with a completely different means of realization, i.e. the human mind that Goethe, in the “*West-Eastern Divan*”—defines as the “higher leading.” This, therefore, is the realization of the identity of subject and object, of nature and man in the great connection of the cosmos in which, as Goethe believes, we all exist. Goethe described it with the following words: “Since love is life and life’s spirit.”²³ This means a somewhat Buddhist ascent towards a realization, an entirely different, elevated insight into the total connection with the cosmos.

These thoughts, by the way, are relatively well prepared through his study of Spinoza’s writings. Through Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, he was

encouraged to do so, and saw these thoughts of so-called Pantheism, meaning the oneness of God and nature and also humankind, as part of nature molded in Spinoza's work. Take for example the character of Werther. In countless places in his letters, you have this feeling of completeness, this connection, the sense of oneness with the cosmos and with nature. Werther is basically a Pantheist—one could say also a Buddhist—because he senses this comprehensive harmony and here, in a completely different sense than the haughty ratio, humbly acts in this connection.

And this is the other great idea that Goethe connects closely to the Buddhist thought: that he regarded the principle of gratitude as the highest that we can achieve in existence. Goethe defined this connectedness with the cosmos and nature with the following words: "Life can only be valued to the extent that it is committed to gratitude."²⁴ This might sound somewhat old-Franconian but basically means that life only makes sense when we live it with a grateful mind. These are notions which are connected closely to Buddhist principles. Goethe himself, incidentally, repeatedly thought about the reduction of suffering in the world. This is a fact I would like to point out at the end. Goethe himself said: "We all suffer from life." That means he did indeed recognize the condition of suffering in the world and, for his part, tried to decrease this suffering. Regarding a spider in the "*West-Eastern Divan*" Goethe says:

Once when I a spider had kill'd,
Then methought: wast right or wrong?
That we both to these times should belong,
This had God in His goodness willed.²⁵

Goethe especially recognized the reduction of suffering in the fact that humankind is erroneous. He regarded our state of shortcomings as a chance to elevate ourselves from this point toward love and sympathy. He said:

If you cannot free yourself from errors
You will freely forgive others.
If you do make mistakes
Don't let it sadden you.
Your shortcomings will teach you to love.²⁶

Thank you very much for your attention.

Notes

- ¹ Goethe, *Faust*, translated by Philip Wayne (Penguin Books: England), Part Two, Act V, p. 270.
- ² *Ibid.*, Part One, Prelude in the Theatre, p. 37.
- ³ *Ibid.*, Faust's Study (iii), p. 84.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, Prologue in Heaven, p. 40.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, Outside the City Gate, p. 65.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, Part Two, Act V, p. 269.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 254.
- ⁸ *Zahme Xenien* [Gentle Ironies], Book 1.
- ⁹ Goethe, *Faust*: Part One, Prelude in the Theatre, p. 37.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Part Two, Act V, p. 270.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, Part One, Faust's Study (ii), p. 75.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, Part Two, Act V, p. 270.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, Part One, Faust's Study (ii), p. 75.
- ¹⁴ Selected Letters, To Wilhelm von Humboldt, 17th March 1832: *J.W. von Goethe*, translated by Dr. M. Herzfeld and C. Melvil Sym (Everyman's Library: London), p. 1180.
- ¹⁵ *Maximen und Reflecionen* [Maxims and Reflections].
- ¹⁶ Goethe, *Faust*: Part Two, Act V, p. 260.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 260.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Act II, p. 150.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 150–151.
- ²¹ *Vermischte Gedichte* [Miscellaneous Poems], *The Life of Goethe*, vol. 1, Albert Bielschowsky, translated by William A. Cooper (AMS Press: New York), p. 300.
- ²² *Goethes Gespräche mit Eckermann* [Goethe's Conversations with Eckermann], 4th February 1829.
- ²³ *West-Östlicher Divan* (West-Eastern Divan), VIII. Suleika Nameh (Book of Suleika).
- ²⁴ Letter to Karl August.
- ²⁵ *West-Östlicher Divan* (West-Eastern Divan), VI. Hikmet Nameh (Book of Proverbs), translated by Edgar Alfred Bowring. <http://www.worldwideschool.org/library/books/lit/poetry/ThePoemsofGoethe/chap41.html> (accessed 14 August 2006).
- ²⁶ *Zahme Xenien* (Gentle Ironies), Book 3.