

Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht: Two Apostates of Buddhism

I would like to talk about two major figures in modern German and world literature, focusing on quite a special problem that has not often been discussed and that they both – as far as I can see – have in common. It is the attraction of a Buddhism which in some ways was fashionable in intellectual Germany around 1900. What I would like to show is that both Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht for a certain period have expressed a strong attraction towards Buddhism – or at least towards what was supposed to be Buddhism in the shape of German translations and traditions – and that they both later refrained from it, partly for artistic, partly for political reasons.

I

The following lines may sound quite familiar to some among you: “Ignorance brings about distinctions, distinctions bring about knowledge, knowledge brings about image and reflection, image and reflection bring about the sixfold field (which means the six senses: to see, to hear, to smell, to taste, to touch, to think), the sixfold field brings about the sense of being touched, the sense of being touched brings about feelings, feelings bring about thirst, thirst brings about being attached <”das Anhängen”>, being attached brings about birth, birth brings about getting old and dying, pain and passion, sufferings, depression, despair: this is how the whole wide range of sufferings is brought about. [...] “Being attached” consists of five pieces <”Stücke”, “aspects”>: one piece is being attached to form, one piece is being attached to feelings, one piece is being attached to awareness, one piece is being attached to distinctions, one piece is being attached to conscience.”

These lines sound less familiar to readers and scholars who love the essay and narratives of Thomas Mann. But in fact, I have quoted them here from Thomas Mann’s 9th Notebook, written in 1908 (p. 34-36), including a number of excerpts from a book, the title of which TM here uses as some kind of headline: *From Gotama Buddha’s Teachings on Knowledge (Aus Gotama Buddha’s Erkenntnislehre)*.¹ Thomas Mann’s exact source is still unknown, in spite of long and intense research done esp. by Jim Reed and his collaborators. But we know that Thomas Mann as early as 1897, when he was 22 years old, owned a collection of legends and sayings of and about the Buddha – translated to German from a Chinese translation of an Indian text.

¹ Thomas Mann: Notizbücher. Vol. 2, ed. Hans Wysling and Yvonne Schmidlin. Frankfurt/M. 1992.

But what is quite obvious here is the fact that a primary source for Thomas Mann's early *interest* in Buddhism is the German philosopher Arthur *Schopenhauer's* book about "The World as Will and Representation" ("Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung"),² combined with its very different adaptations in Richard Wagner's music theatre and in Friedrich Nietzsche's vitalist philosophy. One can feel this dependence, and this Schopenhauerian focus of Thomas Mann's interest in the Buddhist teachings, in the following quotations from Buddha's teachings that recurrently make use of Schopenhauer's key word: "These five pieces of being attached, o monk", Thomas Mann's notes continue, "are rooted in the Will." Then: "All suffering is rooted in the Will, comes from the Will: for the Will is the root of all suffering." And finally: "All things are rooted in the Will."

Thomas Mann comments: "Wherever Gotama wants to make his point most distinct and clear, he has *not* used the word 'Will' – which in his language just like in ours refers to the vast realm of all willing and unwilling activities, but preferred to say 'thirst' in order to mark the epitome of any primal utterance of the Will: 'Being attached is brought about by being thirsty.' 'Any sufferance that ever occurs – it is all rooted in being thirsty.'" 'Thirst' thus equals Schopenhauer's 'will to live' – being focused on sensual desire, life after death and even suicide, which of course only opens the way to new reincarnations and thus to new thirst and sufferings.

Obviously from these beginnings onward, Thomas Mann has connected these thoughts not only to Schopenhauer, but also to German romanticism and to Goethe; it is, I suppose, not by accident that the immediate *context* of these Buddhist excerpts quotes both Novalis and Goethe. Thus, Thomas Mann creates an immediate connection between Buddhist traditions (including their philosophical adaptations in Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner and Nietzsche) on the one hand and German literature and poetry on the other – it might even look as if he had found his very first approaches to German romanticism following these paths.

In the very beginning of the 20th century, with a culminating point in the year of 1903, Thomas Mann planned to write his second novel, following the by then world-famous "Buddenbrooks" and its story of art and decadence, under the title of "Maja".³ It was conceived as a complex society story about the bourgeois society and the bohemian art scene in Munich, built around a tragic love story between a sensitive lady and an attractive and seductive artist – following the biographic model of his own unfulfilled, homoerotic and thus

² Thomas Mann himself has hinted at this in a letter to the famous Indologist Heinrich Zimmer in a letter June 28th, 1941. *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen: Thomas Mann*, ed. Hans Wysling and Marianne Fischer, vol. 2, Frankfurt / M. 1979, p. 591.

³ Cf. Hans Wysling: *Zu Thomas Manns Maja-Projekt*. *Thomas-Mann-Studien*, vol. 1, Bern 1967, p. 23-47.

forbidden love affair with the musician Paul Ehrenberg. The novel was meant to demonstrate how all love, all desire and passion, all yearning for earthly fulfilment are useless illusions one has to see through and, if possible, overcome. The novel was never accomplished, but huge parts of Thomas Mann's many notes and excerpts were used in novellas, in the novel "Royal Highness" and as late as in the 1940s in the novel "Doktor Faustus". The planned title, though, "Maja" indicates its very roots in Buddhist philosophy. Referring to Maja's veil as the veil of illusion – or in Schopenhauer's expression: "representation" – covering the meaningless and aimless dynamics of "Samsâra" or, in Schopenhauer's terms, the blind and never-ceasing Will, the novel was meant to give an illustration of this insight by using stories, characters and images from Thomas Mann's and the reader's own time and culture. As far as we know, Thomas Mann had first come across the expression "Maja" in *Nietzsche's* book "The Birth of Tragedy", in which it is connected with both *Schopenhauer's* metaphysics of the Will and with *Richard Wagner's* music dramas. But as both his private library and our extract from his notebooks show, Thomas Mann was soon aware of its Buddhist origins and looking for the original teachings of the Buddha about it.

In one of the short and lesser known novellas which derived from the "Maja"-plans, rising about the novel's ruins, this link between Thomas Mann's critical view of his contemporary society and culture and Buddhist teachings is made explicit. The story is simply called "Anecdote" ("Anekdote"), and I quote its very first lines: "We had had dinner together, in a group of friends, and stayed up late in our host's drawing room. We sat there smoking, and our conversation was placid and a bit sentimental. We talked about the veil of Maja and its shining and illusionary splendour, about what Buddha calls 'being thirsty' <"das Dürsten">, about the sweetness of desire and the bitterness of knowledge, about the great seduction and the great deception."⁴ And it goes on like this.

That was in 1908, the year of his diary notes mentioned above, and it probably marks the culmination point of his genuine interest in and his sympathy for Buddhist teachings. Ten years later, though, we can still hear the echo of this early sympathy in his huge treatise on art, politics, and philosophy called "Reflections of a Non-political Person" ("Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen"), accomplished after four years of exhaustive work in 1918. Among many other topics, he reflects upon the sensuality of Richard Wagner's music and drama, about what he calls Wagner's unending desire for love and unification, his "universal eroticism". And here, he interprets this fundamental driving force in Wagner's art as the expression of his "'sinfulness' in the ascetic sense of the word" ("seiner ‚Sündhaftigkeit‘ im asketischen

⁴ Thomas Mann: *Frühe Erzählungen 1893-1912*, ed. Terence James Reed. Frankfurt / M. 2004.

Sinne”) and, in the same breath, of “what Buddha calls ‘being attached’” (“dem, was Buddha das ‚Anhängen‘ nennt”). How, by the way, does he know about this, how can he speak about Wagner’s creative powers as if he spoke from Wagner’s own point of view? Because, he explains, he himself has experienced by “insight” (“nach meiner Einsicht“) what remained an artistic “instinct” (“ein Instinkt“) for the great composer. This, indeed, is intimate knowledge about one artist by the other.

Why, then, did Thomas Mann not follow the Buddha’s path, anyway? Why did he distance himself from the Buddhist teachings that he had learned – and written – about in his early years with so much affection? Here, I believe, we come to the core of his *concept of art* – of being an artist, understood as a fundamental way to live, to *be*.

In one of his finest essays ever, in many ways more a prose poem than an essay in the proper sense, young Thomas Mann has for the first time marked the line of separation between his concept of art and his Buddhist inclinations. The text is called “Sweet Sleep”, “Süßer Schlaf”, published for the first time in 1909, one year after his Buddhist notes (if I may use this expression).⁵ In his own later comments, he calls the text “a composition” or “a song I sang once in the praise of sleep”. It is too long to be quoted here, in spite of its extraordinary beauty, so I have to concentrate on only two aspects of its argument (for there *is* an argument in this touching song of prose). The first is the analogy between sleep, ecstasy, and death on the one hand – and the Buddhist concept of “Nirvana” on the other, the analogy of finding eternal redemption by losing oneself and by escaping the tyranny of the Will, of “being thirsty”; and in so far, the text is clearly written in praise of forgetting oneself, getting in touch with the elementary powers of the unconscious, and finally being lifted away in the enlightenment of “Nirvana”. The second aspect of the argument, though, is a warning *against* this Buddhist yearning. If one follows the route towards “Nirvana”, Thomas Mann argues, one has to abandon any production of art, for even if art is a means of getting at distance towards the Will (as Schopenhauer proclaimed), it still keeps you in touch with a life you have to experience in order to transform it. If being an artist means going through all the “sweetness of desire and bitterness of knowledge” again and again in order to find the material you can use for a narrative that then lifts the veil of Maja – then you have to follow the path from “sinfulness” and deception to a merely temporary salvation over and over again. Indeed, this seems to have been Thomas Mann’s early metaphysics of art, developed from a distinctively *Christian* form of what has been called romantic *art religion*. And he has expressed it in a number of his early essays: Yes, the artist can become some kind of

⁵ Thomas Mann: Essays, vol. 1 (1893-1914). Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer 2002.

redeemer, a saint and an priest at the same time, merely by transforming the ugliness of the world of Will which he himself has passed through into something lasting and beautiful, a piece of art. It is, as he put it in another early article, “the belief that bad and silent things can be redeemed and made good by being articulated” („Glauben [...], daß böse und stumme Dinge erlöst und gut gemacht werden, wenn man sie ausspricht“), because “the soul of a poet is yearning, and the last and deepest yearning is the yearning for redemption“ („Denn die Seele des Dichters ist Sehnsucht, und die letzte, die tiefste Sehnsucht ist die nach Erlösung“). Renouncing on the way to Nirvana, the artist has to accept his – as Thomas Mann calls it in the same context – worldly “martyrdom”.

So this is what turns him away from Buddhism. And again, it is Richard Wagner – the other Schopenhauerian artist with so strong ties to Buddhist philosophy – who has made this decision for the first time; Thomas Mann only has to follow his example. Let me quote some crucial passages from “Sweet Sleep” to illustrate this:

We, creations of a blind driving force, step forward from a night without suffering into the day and march on. Burnt by the sun, we step on thorns and cutting stones, our feet bleeding, our breast coughing. Horror, if the glowing street of strife lay before us without any separation, without any temporary aim, endlessly blinding! Who would have the power to walk it until the end? Who would not sink to the ground in hopelessness and repentance! But the night, our home, is made to interrupt, many, many times, the passion way of life, so that every day has its purpose [...] with embracing arms, our heads sinking back, with open lips and blessed, breaking eyes, we enter into its delicious shadows [...] My love for the sea [...] is as old as my fondness for sleep, and I know well, where both of these sympathies have their roots. I have a lot of “Indian-ness” <Indertum> inside of me, a strong and heavy longing for that form – or formlessness – of perfection which is called “Nirvana” or Nothingness, and even though I am an artist, I feel a very un-artistic inclination towards the Eternal, articulated in an abjection of composition and measure. What makes me maintain a position *against* it, believe me, is correction and discipline, it is – to use the most serious expression – *moral*... What is moral? What is an *artist’s* moral?

Moral has a twofold face [...] it is a refusal of freedom, infinity, [...] the decision to *be* and to suffer [...] not purity [...] but passion and pain [...] It is not depression, but passion; it is what Gotama Buddha calls “being attached” <das Anhangen> [...] which deprives us of our sleep, and this is not only of some physical significance: it makes us feel that our soul has lost its home, that it has gone astray and cannot find its way back

[...]. This is for certain: greatest is he who keeps his faith and longing for the night – and does the work of the day, anyhow. This is why the work that I love most, is [...] Richard Wagner's "Tristan".

In his famous speech about "Richard Wagner's Passion and Greatness", given in the year of 1933 and eventually leading to his exile from Nazi Germany, TM has even more explicitly marked this distinction between living as a Buddhist and being an artist. He writes: "Ah, art! How right Buddha was in calling it the most distinctive path *away* from salvation!" Then he refers to Wagner's plan of writing what he calls "a Buddhist drama" and continues: "Buddhist drama, this is exactly the problem. It is a contradiction in itself – that is what he became aware of when facing the difficulties of using the human being that was completely freed, beyond all passion, in one word: the Buddha, for dramatic and especially musical purposes. The Pure, the Holy, all that is pacified through Knowledge, is artistically dead; holiness and the drama can never be united, that is obvious."⁶ And just like Wagner before him, Thomas Mann decides to follow the way of *art* and abandon his own desire for the path that might lead him to Nirvana.

Anyway, this is not his last word about Buddhism. In later references, he strikes a lighter note. But from his early decision onward, all this is written from a general humanistic point to view, recommending the Buddhist scriptures as a part of world literature in a globalized world and thus creating mutual understanding between peoples and cultures. His only personal relation towards Buddhism remains that of an intimate solace in the midst of his troubled life as an artist. When in 1921 Karl Eugen Neumann's groundbreaking new German translation of "The Teachings of Gotama Buddha" is published in three volumes ("Die Reden Gotamo Buddhas"), Thomas Mann writes an enthusiastic letter to the editor about this work that "has to be counted among the greatest deeds of translation that have ever been done for our people". Neumann, who as we know was a friend of the Nobel-prize winning Buddhist writer Karl Gjellerup, dedicated one copy also to Thomas Mann himself, thus acknowledging also the latter's affiliation with Buddhist thought. As an answer, Mann allowed the publisher to print his letter as a public recommendation of Neumann's work. And there he praises the translation for its „mild wisdom that resolves all errors and so often has refreshed me" ("deren milde, irrtümlösende Weisheit mich so oft erquickt"). Thus, even in his later years, the artist

⁶ „Ach, die Kunst! Wie recht hatte Buddha, sie als den allerbestimmtesten Abweg vom Heil zu bezeichnen! Es ist ein langer, stürmischer Brief an die Wesendonck aus Venedig, vom Jahre 1858, worin er <Wagner> ihr von seinem Plan eines buddhistischen Dramas ‚Der Sieger‘ erzählt. Buddhistisches Drama, da eben liegt der Haken. Es ist eine *contradictio in adiecto* – das ist ihm klargeworden angesichts der Schwierigkeit, den vollkommen befreiten, aller Leidenschaft enthobenen Menschen, den Buddha eben, für die dramatische und namentlich musikalische Darstellung brauchbar zu machen. Das Reine, Heilige, durch Erkenntnis Pazifizierte ist künstlerisch tot, Heiligkeit und Drama sind nicht zu vereinen, das ist klar.“

Thomas Mann found in Buddhism some kind of shelter from the storm. And when Heinrich Zimmer publishes his famous book on “Maya”, Thomas Mann even finds a new access to the old topic, though from a significantly more distanced point of view than in his early years.⁷

II

The Buddhist story of Bertolt Brecht, the renowned Marxist poet and playwright, is comparably shorter and easier to tell. But it is nonetheless fascinating and surprising in its own right. In fact, there is only one poem in which Brecht explicitly refers to the Buddha. And at first glance, it seems to be quite odd, reducing Buddhist teachings to a simple, if not simplistic political message.⁸

The Buddha’s Parable about the Burning House (1938)

Gotama, the Buddha, taught

About the wheel of yearning that we are fixed to, and recommended

To abandon all desire and thus

Without any wishes to enter Nothing-ness, which he called Nirvana.

But one day, his disciples asked him:

What is Nothingness like, Master? We all should like

To abandon all desire, as you recommend, but tell us

If this Nothingness which we then will enter

Is something like this being one with all things created

Lying in the water, with a light body, about midday,

Almost without thought, resting in the water or falling asleep

Hardly knowing how one adjusts one’s plaid

Sinking fast; if that Nothingness, thus

Is of this merry kind, a good Nothingness, or if this your

Nothingness is merely a Nothing, cold, empty, and meaningless.

The Buddha was silent for a long time; then he said in a quite relaxed manner:

There is no answer to your question.

But in the evening, when they were gone,

The Buddha still sat there underneath the bread tree and told the others

Those who had not asked, a parable as follows:

⁷ See Dieter Borchmeyer’s contribution to this conference.

⁸ Brecht, Svendborger Gedichte. Große Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe, vol. 12, Berlin / Frankfurt, M.

Recently I saw a house. It was burning. The flames
Had reached the roof. I went closer and noticed
That there were still people inside. I entered through the door and shouted
To them that the roof was on fire, thus asking them
To leave quickly. But the people
Did not seem to in a hurry. One man asked me
While the heat was already eating his eyebrow
What it was like outside, if it was raining
Or if a storm was blowing, if there was another house
And things like that. Without answering
I left. These, I thought
Must burn before they stop asking. Indeed, my friends
If the soil underneath your feet doesn't feel so hot that you
Would prefer to change places with no matter who instead of staying, then
I don't have anything to tell you. Thus spoke Gotama, the Buddha.
But even we, who are not occupied with the art of acceptance any more
Rather occupied with the art of nonacceptance, making
All kinds of earthly suggestions, teaching people how to
Get rid of their human oppressors, even we think that answering
Those who keep asking us, facing the capitalists' bombs and planes approaching
What we think about this and how we imagine that
And what their little savings and Sunday cloths will look like after the great change
Will be a matter of no importance.

No doubt, whatever the Buddha might have taught about the liberation of the mind, Brecht reduces it to a political liberation from the oppression by fascism, which again is interpreted as the ultimate (and ultimately aggressive) consequence of capitalist exploitation. The poem is to be found in the volume of Brecht's so-called "Svendborg Poems", accomplished in his Danish exile, in the small city of Svendborg, and published in 1938. With their discreet and unmatched rhythmic qualities, this mixture of prose and poem that Brecht mastered so beautifully, these 43 prosaic lines give a fine example of the new prosodic art of non-metrical and unrhymed poetry that he proclaimed in an important article shortly after the "Svendborg Poems". It is easy to see that the 43 lines are composed in five groups of lines (if not stanzas), each marked with a dot at the end – line 1 to 4, line 5 to 15, line 16 to 17, 18 to 35, and 36 to 43. In the first group, the 'narrator' or speaker gives a very short résumé of the Buddha's

teachings in general. In the second group, the disciples ask the question that many readers might have wished to ask as well: about the nature of the Nirvana, illustrating their expectations in beautiful images of water, sleep, physical and mental peace. The third group is the most remarkable, because with its only two lines, it is by far the shortest; and it marks the exact centre of our text: It is the Buddha's paradoxical answer – stating that there is no answer to that question. This is where the poem could very well have ended, leaving us with the unsatisfying but somewhat sufficient knowledge that there is no positive knowledge about the state of enlightenment which in common language can only be circumscribed in negative terms, as “Nirvana” or “Nibbana”. But the poem goes on. The fourth section lets the Buddha speak again, but with a remarkable change in the communicative situation. Now the Buddha turns to “those who had not asked”, and as it turns out, speaking about the others: the fools who keep asking instead of following his advice. With the end of his parable about the burning house and its stupid and foolish inhabitants, the fifth and final section begins, closing the narrative frame. Again, the narrator addresses the readers directly and – quite surprisingly – transforms the Buddha's spiritual advice into an explicitly political call for action. “We”, he says without giving any further identification of who “we” are, are not interested in that kind of metaphysical art anymore; and we have no specific interest in suffering either. Instead, it is our will to liberate us from those terrible capitalist powers that threaten our existence. And this is a situation in which any further questions about what will come after our insurgence, after “the major change” in society, is just as foolish and even deadly as in the burning house in the Buddha's parable.

Only a brief look at the context of the “Svendborg Poems”, including the circumstances of Brecht's life and work in 1938, will provide a deeper understanding of the somewhat enigmatic allusions in the text. Living in Scandinavia – instead of the Soviet Republic which he so ardently fought for in his writings –, Brecht found himself confronted with German fascism on the one side and Stalin's terror on the other; time and again asked by others – and wondering himself – where his and his comrades' combat against fascism in the final end might lead him. Maybe even into just another system of terror and oppression? This, the poem answers with the Buddha's words, is no legitimate question. In fighting the most barbarian form of injustice the world has ever seen, we have to stand as one – this is about leaving the burning house. What the world outside, afterwards, might be like: that is a question we might ask further down the road, not now.

So far the easy interpretation, in which the reference to Buddhism mainly serves as some kind of camouflage, a costume for an idea that could just as well have been expressed in a different

manner, with different images and characters. But why the Buddha, of all people? Let me try to give a brief explanation, taking a second and closer look at the text and its contexts. In the same book of poetry, the “Svendborg Poems”, Brecht also includes other spiritual leaders and metaphysical poets from earlier ages, establishing some kind of dialogue between their teachings and his own time, figures like Ovid, Tu Fu, Dante, among others. The most popular of these ballads is the legend of Lau Dse and the making of the famous book about the Dao, “Dao-De-Jing”. Brecht had read this classic Chinese book in the brilliant translation by Richard Wilhelm – who, as we have learnt from Adrian Hsia,⁹ also deeply influenced the completion of Hermann Hesse’s “Siddharta” and especially in modern German literature often led to some kind of blending of Buddhist and Daoist traditions, ideas, and images.

In many ways, Brecht’s – though much more artistic and formally brilliant – poem on Lau Dse can be compared to our text about the Buddha. In both cases, a teacher of spiritual wisdom, of renunciation, abdication and tranquillity finds himself confronted with the demands of political fights, war and class struggle. Lau Dse, just about to leave China and to go into exile, is stopped by a customs official who obviously is meant to represent the working class and forces the philosopher to write down his teachings about the power of Dao, thus enabling the oppressed class to use its insight for its own purposes of social resistance and liberation. Here in the Buddha-poem, it is the narrator himself who takes that stance, using the Buddha’s spiritual parable as a decisively political tool in the midst of a fight for survival.

In a little book that came out last year,¹⁰ I have tried to trace Brecht’s ballad about Lau Dse back to his very early, indeed pre-Marxist interest in the Daoist teachings. Among the central motifs in his early poetry and dramas, the image of flowing water is dominant – swimming in the rivers, driving in the lakes, becoming one with the fundamental powers of Nature, even with God, not withstanding anything, giving in to the flow, just letting go: those are recurring images and ideas, and it can hardly be overstated how close they are to Lau Dse and his most famous interpretation of the Dao in the image of flowing water. The American Daoism expert Alan Watts has chosen it as the title for his famous book: “Tao – The Watercourse Way”.¹¹ Young Brecht was very familiar with that, as with its contrast towards Marxism. As early as in 1921, he vividly distances himself from the Soviet system. “At the moment, I am strictly against Bolshevism”, he notes in his diary, adding: “I am horrified not by the turmoil over there, but by the order that in fact has been achieved.” In this situation, he discovers Lau-

⁹ Adrian Hsia: Hermann Hesse und China. Frankfurt / M. 1974.

¹⁰ Heinrich Detering: Bertolt Brecht und Laotse. Göttingen 2008.

¹¹ Alan Watts: Tao. The Watercourse Way. 1957.

Dse's Daoist philosophy about the ever-changing and ever-constant Dao, as a solace and a spiritual strength. A few days later, and a few pages later in his diary, he again mocks a friend who "believe in progress" and notes: "But he shows me Lau Dse, and Lau Dse and I have so much in common, that my friend is simply stupefied." In my book, I have tried to show – and I can only sum that up here, without any textual demonstration – how this genuine Daoism that can be traced throughout all of Brecht's writing, soon gets in conflict with his Marxism and finally his attempts to even follow Stalin, in the fight against Nazi Germany. Although his political decisions become very clear, and although his support of Stalin in 1938 is out of question, his quest for some kind of spiritual redemption and his sympathy for Lau Dse remains strong and vital; and the "Legend of the Dau-De-Jing" in the "Svendborg Poems" give the most impressive impression of it.

Re-reading the Buddha poem in *this* broader context, there seems to be more to it than meets the eye. Remember how the disciples try to explain what "Nirvana" might be like, and you rediscover Brecht's own Daoist imagery. If Nirvana is not "something like this being one with all things created / Lying in the water, [...] Sinking fast", then it must be "merely a Nothing, cold, empty, and meaningless". It is his own early problem that he lets the foolish disciples express here. When the Buddha then turns them off, admonishing the other listeners that there are things more important than this question and that now it's all about evading an unacceptable situation, when finally the narrator adds the anti-spiritualistic point of the practical political action that is necessary now: then the poem can be read as some kind of *self-education of the poet*, and as a very concise survey of Brecht's own intellectual biography. Here, we can follow his path from his early Daoist excitement that now is closely linked to the Buddhist quest for Nirvana, through his conversion into a Marxist writer and activist and into the complex political situation of 1938 where he feels obliged to abandon any metaphysical curiosity.

If we finally ask for the source of *his* Buddhist knowledge, we'll find further evidence for his continual (though publicly concealed) interest in the spiritual traditions of the East. In contrast to Thomas Mann (whom he hated, by the way), Brecht does not quote Buddhism from Buddhist sources and their translations, but from a contemporary novel which you all know well, I suppose. When the pilgrim Kamanita, in Karl Gjellerups Nobel-Prize winning novel of the same title, asks the Buddha about the Nirvana, Gjellerup lets the Buddha answer: "What do you think, my friend, if there was a house, seized by fire" – and then follows, in great detail, the parable that Brecht quotes from this novel, amounting to the final admonition: "So now you, pilgrim – go ahead and keep walking, as if your house was surrounded by flames!"

for the house *is* on fire. And which house? The world! Set on fire by which flames? The flames of desire, the flames of hatred, the flames of deceit. The whole world is swallowed by fire, the whole world is filled with smoke, the whole world is trembling.”¹²

This is my point: that Brecht has taken the centrepiece of his poem from the most explicitly Buddhist piece of art that was to be found in both Germany and Denmark by the time of his Danish exile; that while reflecting it, he has struggled with the very same images and ideas that had troubled young Thomas Mann before him; and that, just like Thomas Mann, though for quite different reasons, he has abandoned the path of Buddhism in order to act in the world and for the world – as an artist, as a politician, as a political artist.

¹² Karl Gjellerup: *Pilgrimmen Kamanita*. Copenhagen 1906.