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We are all familiar with the fact that man in former days readily believed in the existence of an unseen world, a world of ghosts, demons, nature-spirits which were worshipped as gods, and a host of other supernatural beings. This world lay all about him and in some respects was more real to him than the physical world. It was his belief in it, and in the power of the forces it contained, that gave birth first to primitive magic and later to religion.

Even today, vast numbers of people all over the world, and not merely among savage tribes or backward peasantry, but in advanced and educated communities, particularly in Asia, still believe in this mysterious realm and in various classes of beings that inhabit it, to an extent that would surprise most Westerners apart from those who have made a study of the subject. To the Asian mind it is equally surprising that Westerners, with the exception of spiritualists, are sceptical regarding it.

Since this widespread belief cannot be attributed to ignorance or to any collective infirmity of mind, there must be another reason for it. If it is a reason that the

average Englishman, American or Australian finds difficult of acceptance, the obstruction may be in his own mental attitude. We are all conditioned by past habits of thought, the mental climate of our environment and concepts, those “idols of the market place and of thsuperior knowle theatre” [1] which we take to be established truths without having troubled to question them. Before dismissing the ideas of a considerable portion of the human race as mere fantasy we should do well to examine first the background of our own thinking.

For many years past, science has been exploring the physical world and laying bare its secrets. In order to do so, scientists have worked on the assumption that for every visible phenomenon there must be a physical explanation, and this axiom has had to be taken as a fundamental principle of scientific method. It must always be so, in regard to the substance and laws of this tangible world in which we live and receive our ordinary sense-impressions, for once it were admitted that a certain phenomenon was not to be explained by any but supernatural means, all systematic investigation of it would come to a stop at whatever point the investigator found himself baffled. It always has to be believed that if the answer to a particular problem is not at present available within the limits of scientific knowledge, it will ultimately become known

through an extension of the methods already in use. This may quite legitimately be called the scientist's creed; it states his faith in the rationale of the principles on which he works.

The remarkable success of the method has given the ordinary layman a picture of the universe that appears to leave no place whatever for any laws or forces apart from those the scientist knows and employs in his work. But as knowledge increases and the scientist develops a philosophic mind his own picture of the world changes. He knows, better than the reader of popular science literature, how limited scientific knowledge is when it is confronted with the ultimate questions of man's being. So we get Sir James Jeans with his concept of a universe which, although it excludes God, nevertheless bears all the marks of a mental construction; Bertrand Russell with his opinion that it is unreasonable to suppose that man is necessarily the most highly developed form of life in the universe; Max Loewenthal showing on physiological and dialectical principles that the mind must be something independent of the brain cells; and a number of other eminent scientific thinkers who are not afraid to admit that knowledge gained on the material level, while it can show us the way in which physical processes take place, has brought us no nearer to a revelation of their underlying causes.

But the non-technical man-in-the-street who sees only the astonishing success of scientific research has come to hold the mistaken view that the principle which calls for a material explanation of all phenomena must mean that there cannot, ipso facto, be any other laws or phenomena apart from the physical. In other words, he mistakes the principle adopted as the necessary basis of a certain method for a final verdict on the nature of existence. That in itself is an unscientific view, for science does not deliver any final verdicts on any question, least of all on those beyond its present scope. The materialist who adopts a dogma to that extent is departing from true scientific principles. If, as a scientist, he tries to make his discoveries conform to his dogma, he is betraying the first rule of his calling.

Fortunately, that does not happen where scientists are still free men, and the horizons of scientific thought are now being expanded to include phenomena that cannot be classed as material. We now have not only biologists who are seemingly on the verge of discovering how non-living matter becomes transformed into living organisms, but also workers in the field of parapsychology who are intensively studying a range of hitherto neglected phenomena connected with the mind itself. Their findings, surprising and sometimes disturbing as they

are, do not come before the general public to the same extent as do those of scientists whose work has a more immediately applicable function, such as that of the nuclear physicists. But these discoveries, nevertheless, may prove ultimately to be of greater value to mankind than the more sensational work of the scientists who are giving us new, and potentially dangerous, sources of power.

Parapsychology is the term used to denote all forms of extrasensory perception (E.S.P); it has given scientific respectability to the study of a variety of mental phenomena whose existence has always been known to non-scientific peoples, such as clairvoyance, telepathy and trance-mediumship. One reason for the fact that it has not yet received universal recognition is that no absolutely satisfactory scientific methodology has so far been devised for investigating these faculties, since obviously the formulas of physical experiment and verification cannot be applied. So far, the investigators have been able to present the results of experiments in telepathy, telekinesis, clairvoyance and clairaudience which show the existence of such extrasensory faculties in certain persons, but they cannot yet offer a scientifically-formulated account of the laws or conditions under which they operate. This is the case at present with the work of the numerous Societies for Psychical Research and that of Dr. J. B.

Rhine of Duke University, California, Prof. Thouless of Cambridge and a number of other independent investigators. They are having to formulate tentative principles as they go along, which is not a simple task when dealing with a realm of intangible and highly variable phenomena. It is complicated by the fact that the faculties in question manifest themselves in the same person to different degrees at different times, and appear to be intimately connected with emotional states.

At present the evidence for E.S.P. is mostly statistical. Nevertheless, considerable advance has been made in the application of scientific method to the study, using sophisticated techniques for the detection of fraud and an increasingly rigid control of experiments to eliminate bias on the part of the observer. There is already an extensive literature on the subject, from which anyone who is interested may form his own theories. It is important if only for the light it sheds on the religious and mystical experiences, to say nothing of the miraculous element in religion, that man from the earliest times has believed in. Since the so-called "supernatural" has always been a part of man's universal experience, it obviously does not "prove" the truth of any particular religion. It only proves that there are indeed realms outside our normal range of perception, and faculties

that are not subject to the limitations of the physical sense-organs. But this we already know from physical science itself, for it has shown that the world we perceive is something quite different from the actual world; so different that it is in fact impossible to establish a convincing relationship between them. No one has yet succeeded in showing how the subjective world can be made to tally with an objective reality. This constitutes the major stumbling-block of modern philosophy.

The European tradition of materialistic thinking goes a long way back. Even in an age when "philosophy" still meant the natural sciences, it was necessary for Hamlet to remind Horatio that "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy," with the accent on the last word. Yet still quite a large number of people in the West continue to believe in ghosts, or "entities on the Other Side," as some spiritualists prefer to call them. The persistence of the belief among rational and practical-minded people can be accounted for only on the assumption that there is some objective basis for it, or at least that it represents some aspect of experience which they, in common with people in more primitive societies, have known. If this were not the case it must surely have been eradicated completely by the centuries of realistic thinking that lie behind us.

There is scarcely any need, then, to explain away the fact that Buddhism does not confine its view of life to the world of our immediate sensory experience. On the contrary, as a system of thought claiming to embrace every aspect of man's experience it would be incomplete and seriously defective if it did so. Realms of existence other than the human may not be strictly necessary for the working-out of the all-important Buddhist principle of moral cause and effect; but if Buddhism denied them, as it categorically rejects the theory of a Creator-God and an immortal soul, it would be denying something that may one day be proved as a scientific truth; something, moreover, which is already accepted by some on the basis of logical inference and by many others through direct experience.

Although Buddhism lays all the emphasis on the importance of the human plane of existence, since it is here, and here alone, that there is freedom of choice between good and bad action, the Buddhist texts mention other spheres of being, some below and some above the human realm. In particular, there are many references to Devas and the various spheres they inhabit. The Devas, or "Shining Ones," are beings born in higher realms as the result of good kamma (= karma in Sanskrit) generated in previous lives as human personalities. They are of various grades and

enjoy the appropriate results of their past meritorious deeds, but their condition is not permanent; they are not "enjoying the bliss of heaven" for all eternity. When the force of the good kamma has expended itself in results, they pass away and the current of their life-continuum finds a new manifestation elsewhere; they are reborn as the consequence of some residual kamma, good or bad, from previous lives, which has not hitherto taken effect. All beings have an undetermined store of such kamma, technically known as katatta-kamma, which comes into operation in the absence of any fresh kamma from the immediately-past life. [2]

Thus, although the word deva is usually translated "god," these beings are not in any sense gods as the term is generally understood. They are not considered to have any power over human actions or destiny—nor even necessarily superior knowledge. One of the titles given to the Buddha is that of *satthā deva-manussānaṃ*, the "Teacher of gods and men," because in the Pali scriptures it is said that the Devas themselves came to him for instruction in the Dhamma. Their place, therefore, is below that of the highest human being, the All-Enlightened One, who is also a visuddhi-deva, or "god by (self-) purification."

Beings who are reborn in the higher realms carry with them the beliefs they held when they were living

on the human plane, so that "revelations" from other worlds do not necessarily carry any more truth than those that have a human origin. But the Devas who have understood the Buddha Dhamma, themselves pay respect to the human world, as being the most suitable sphere for moral endeavour and for the attainment of Nirvana. Alone among the realms of existence, it is the human plane whereon Buddhas manifest themselves; so it is said that the god Sakka, after his conversion to Buddhism, daily saluted the direction in which the human world lay.

At, the same time, the Devas have a claim to the respect of human beings, for it was by the practice of virtue, and by deeds of supreme merit, that they attained to their present condition. The reverence paid to them by Buddhists on this account is of a quite different order from the worship given to gods who are believed to be controllers of human destiny.

In this sense it is true to say that Buddhism is non-theistic; the worship of gods for favours or forgiveness of sins has no part in it. To this extent it is not very important whether a Buddhist believes in the existence of higher states of being or not. But it is important for the appreciation of Buddhist philosophy to have a clear understanding that whatever other realms of existence there may be, they are all subject, like our own, to the law of cause and effect. Since

cause and effect belong to the natural order, even though they may operate in ways that are non-physical, as in the case of the mental faculties of extra-sensory perception, the realms of the Devas are not supernatural worlds; it is more accurate to regard them as extra-physical. The distinction may not be at once apparent; but if our own world of sense-data is a mental construction, as Yogācāra philosophy and Berkeleyan immaterialism maintain that it is, there is no reason why there should not be other realms of being constructed on the same basis. We know for a fact that the world as it appears to us is something quite distinct from the world of physics, and that understanding alone should make us chary of accepting it at its face value. Our familiar world of objects that appear to be substantial and real is nothing more than the interpretation we give to a something that is quite other than our senses report to us a world of atomic energy, with scarcely anything substantial in it. The true nature of that world still remains a matter for metaphysical speculation, with which the Buddha was not concerned. He taught that the reality could be known only through insight developed in meditation, and that the secret lay not outside but within ourselves: "Within this fathom-long body, O Bhikkhus, equipped with the mental faculties of sensation, perception, volition and

consciousness, I declare to you is the world, the origin of the world, its cessation and the Path leading to its cessation."

Aldous Huxley, in his two brilliant essays, "The Doors of Perception" and "Heaven and Hell" (1956), cites Bergson's theory that the function of the brain, nervous system and sense organs is in the main eliminative and not productive. According to this view, the area of individual awareness is practically infinite and extends to modes of being outside those commonly experienced; but with such an awareness continually present, life in the ordinary sense would not be possible. There has to be a "reducing valve" (Huxley's term) which philtres this multiple complex down to the essentials of consciousness that are required for biological survival. The reducing valve is the brain and nervous system, which isolate us in the sphere of individual consciousness formed by our sense-impressions and concepts. If for some reason the efficiency of the reducing valve is lowered, other material flows in, material which is not necessary for biological survival and may even be inimical to it, by lessening the seeming importance of ordinary life. From this come the trance experiences of mystics and the visionary entry into other worlds that has been the common property of mankind in all ages. Huxley's conclusion is that these experiences have a validity of

their own which is independent of the means used to obtain them. I quote the final paragraph of his "Heaven and Hell," the second of the two essays on his experiences under the influence of mescaline:

> "My own guess is that modern spiritualism and ancient tradition are both correct. There is a posthumous state of the kind described in Sir Oliver Lodge's book, *Raymond;* but there is also a heaven of blissful visionary experience; there is also a hell of the same kind of appalling visionary experience as is suffered here by schizophrenics and some of those who take mescaline; and there is also an experience, beyond time, of union with the divine Ground."

Huxley's "divine Ground," since it is not a personal God and is free from attributes, functions and any remnant of personal selfhood, appears to be of the same nature as the highest Brahma realms of Buddhism, if it is not that complete cessation of becoming which is the final goal of all, Nirvana.

All beings live in worlds created by their own kamma; the nature of the being creates the peculiar features of the world it inhabits. But in Buddhist doctrine there is no abiding ego-entity, no immortal and unchanging essence of selfhood. When it speaks of rebirth it does not mean the transmigration of a soul

from one body or state to another. It means that a new being is created as the result of the volitional activities, the kamma, of one that has lived before. So long as desire remains unextinguished, and with it the will-to-live, the stream of cause and effect continues to project itself into the future, giving rise to one being after another in the causally-related sequence. Their identification with one another lies solely in the fact of each belonging to the same current of kamma generated by desire, so that what each one inherits from its predecessors is only a complex of tendencies that have been set in motion by the act of willing and doing.

In this connection even the word "birth" has to be understood in a peculiarly Buddhist sense, as meaning "arising" (jāti), or coming into existence, and not merely in the sense of physical generation. It also stands for the moment-to-moment coming into existence of mental impulses or units of consciousness in the ordinary course of life. The stream of consciousness is made up of a series of such momentary births and deaths. In sleep and unconsciousness the current still flows on in the form of the subconscious life-continuum. And at death the last moment of the series is immediately followed by the first of a new sequence, in perhaps a different form and under entirely different conditions of birth. In

Pali, the language of the Buddhist texts, another word, punabbhava, is used to denote this renewed existence after death. The old personality, being a psycho-physical compound and therefore unstable and impermanent, has passed away, but a new one arises from the mental impulses it had generated. In this way the kamma of a human being may bring about renewed existence below or above the human level, in a being of a quite different order.

The question of identity between any two beings belonging to the same sequence is not in any way different from the same question as it relates to different stages in the life of an individual. In the ordinary course of life we find that the nature of some persons alters radically for better or worse with the passage of time, while that of others remains fairly constant. Change is sometimes slow and imperceptible; sometimes it comes with dramatic suddenness; but change is continually and inevitably taking place. Birth and death—or death and rebirth—are merely points of more complete psycho-physical transition in the continuous flow of "becoming." The new being may inherit many characteristics, both mental and physical, from the previous one, or it may differ in everything except the predominant characteristic developed in the last life. The deciding factor is the nature and strength of the kamma of the

human being, and more especially the kamma present in the consciousness at the last moment before death. [3]

Impermanence, suffering and absence of any enduring self-essence: these are the three characteristics of all life. Whatever sentient beings there may be in the cosmos besides man and the animals, they are all marked by these three characteristics. They are all subject to decay and dissolution. When we come to realise this we cease to concern ourselves with heavenly states or with metaphysical speculations connected with them. All that is left is the urgent need to gain release from the delusions and attachments that bind us to the incessant round of renewed existences. It is only in the attainment of Nirvana, the Unconditioned and Absolute, that eternal peace is to be found. The Buddha, supreme Teacher of Gods and Men, discovered the Way, and out of his compassion for suffering beings revealed it to all. But, having found it, he could be no more than a guide and instructor to others. Each of us has to tread the path for himself, working out his own deliverance. Worlds may be infinite in number, but the same law prevails everywhere and gods must again become men to fulfil their destiny. Like the deeds that caused them, rewards and punishments—man's interpretation of

the universal law of action and reaction—pass away. There have been men, like Alexander the Great, deified by priests while they were yet alive; but it is not by bloodshed that gods are made; it is not by ceremonies that men are sanctified. The humblest man living, if he has all his mental faculties intact, can forge for himself a higher destiny than these. In the law of change lies opportunity. Piled up, the bodies of our dead selves would raise a mountain loftier than the peak of Sumeru. [4] And the man who has made his own mountain should try to climb it. Who knows where it might lead him? Perhaps to the abode of the gods—or Beyond.

Notes

1. Two of Bacon's classifications, adopted by him from Giordano Bruno. [Back]

2. This comes about because some kinds of kamma are of greater moral consequence than others. An action of heavy moral significance produces its results before one that is of lesser importance and so delays the results of the latter. Furthermore, the results of kamma have to wait upon the arising of suitable conditions to bring them about. The interplay of counteractive forces in the good and bad kamma of an individual is the factor that makes kammic operations incalculable. [Back]

3. Death-proximate kamma, consisting of a mental reflex (*nimitta*) symbolizing some act, or aggregate of actions, performed in the past life. This arises in the last moment of consciousness and forms the basis, good or bad, for the consciousness-moment that immediately follows it. The last consciousness-moment therefore gives the key-signature to the next existence. Death in unconsciousness or in sleep also has its death-proximate kamma; this occurs on the dream level and does not manifest outwardly. Those who die

in full or semi-consciousness frequently show, by their happy or, fearful state of mind, the kind of death-proximate kamma that is coming into operation. Huxley makes some interesting observations on this in his references to the Tibetan Book of the Dead in the two essays mentioned previously. [Back]

4. Mount Meru, the mythological home of the gods; the Indian Olympus. [Back]

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