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Attitudes To Life

Ruth Walshe



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By

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Attitudes To Life

I

n this essay I want to give you as little book-knowledge as possible. Yet, in order to underline my approach, let me start off with a quotation from Goethe's Faust:

*"Greift nur hinein ins volle Menschenleben!
Ein jeder lebt's—nicht vielen ist's bekannt.
Und wo Ihr's packt, da ist's interessant!"*

*"Just dip into the fullness of life!
Everyone lives it, not many understand it.
But wherever you seize it, it's full of interest."*

Now what I want to do is to introduce six real persons to you and try to examine their attitudes to life through Buddhist eyes. When I say *attitude to life*, I mean the way a person looks at life and accordingly re-acts to it. We Buddhists even go so far as to say that we only know life through our senses and elaborate these sense-impressions in our mind.

Therefore, whenever we speak about life, it is not life as it is—but only the mental image we have

formed for ourselves. Of course, there must be as many mental images of life as there are people in this world of ours. For each one of us is quite different from the other. Yet we find that there are groups of people who look at their sense-impressions of life in a similar sort of pattern. We say they have a similar attitude to life.

Now I have taken six people of my own acquaintance—each of them representing such a group—and I have given them six different labels:

1. The philosopher.
2. The materialist.
3. The perfect mother.
4. The woman who is afraid of life.
5. The non-accepter of dukkha (frustration, suffering), and
6. The accepter of dukkha.

Let us first have a look at Albert, the philosopher. He is a well-known doctor, a highly intellectual and cultured man. The world calls him very successful, for he is admired and loved by his patients as well as by his family and friends. He has a very good income, owns a house and a car and he even writes books on medicine and psychology. When you meet Albert

outside his consulting-room, he is most charming and interesting, though perhaps a little condescending at times. But when you get to know him better, you find that his way of thinking, though very sharp and logical, is rather abstract and schematic and he dearly loves a juicy argument—even before breakfast. Albert’s favourite topics, besides his own subjects, are politics, economics and philosophy—in fact, anything created by man’s intellect. He has a very good wit—but little sense of humour—strong opinions, conventional convictions and is a great lover of personalities and traditions ...

Would you say there was anything fundamentally wrong with Albert? From the Buddhist point of view: decidedly yes. For Albert mistakes the intellect for life. Please don’t think that I regard the intellect as a bar to spiritual development. To think that would be quite wrong. We certainly need all the intellect we can muster to understand Buddhism and its application to daily life. Without intellect we could never lift the thick cloud of delusion we all suffer from and understand the Eightfold Path so clearly laid out by Buddha. But once we start treading this path, our intellect alone is no longer sufficient. Through watching ourselves like an outsider in meditation and later throughout the day, we start developing an awareness of ourselves, our surroundings, other

people—in fact, everything we call our life. This awareness is only dim in the beginning, but with perseverance and sincere effort it can become so sharp and one-pointed that it ceases to be awareness and becomes insight. It is then that we reach the point where we transcend the intellect. Briefly, I would like to sum up the difference between intellect and insight thus: Intellect is the sharpness of mind still ego-bound while insight is the sharpness of mind no longer ego-bound. It is universal and all-embracing.

But Albert does not want to admit—even to himself—the limitations of his intellect. Instead of using it, as I have just pointed out, to understand the first stage of his journey and then to be content to let insight take over—if only for a flash of a moment—he uses it as a shield between himself and life. Between himself and his own sense-impressions of the outside world. Though outwardly successful, he suffers-like the rest of us—from the feeling of insecurity which arises by identifying himself with the ego. To ward off this unpleasant feeling he greatly welcomes his intellect. But what does he do? He only tells himself more and more that he is a permanent entity—that he must build up and protect that permanent entity. So his ego-belief gets stronger and consequently his feeling of insecurity increases too. He reasons it all out with his intellect and represses emotions and doubts as much

as he can. He is what Jung calls a very strong thinking-type. He just hasn't got the courage to see life as it is—in the raw! He dare not lift the lid of his own dustbin too far. As a psychologist Albert has some idea of what might be popping up. So he has developed a strong subconscious warning system which sounds the alarm at the slightest threat to his carefully built-up intellectual world. And so he only buries his head yet deeper in the sand ...

Charles has the label materialist. He is a very common type in our 20th century and I'm sure most of you know one or two yourselves. Mine is rather a charming man, kind and very clever. When I first met him many years in Vienna, he was a student of German. Rather hard up—but already developing a taste for the pleasant things in life. A few years ago I met Charles again in London. He has now become a very prosperous business-man, rather thin on top, with a fat cheque-book and an enormous black stream-lined car. He is divorced—like so many rich men and film-stars—and has half a dozen girl-friends trailing after him. He eats as well as his body allows him, drinks more whisky than soda-water and smokes fat American cigars. I shocked him right to the core when I told him that I was a Buddhist.

"No", he said firmly, "no Buddhism for me, my girl! Why should I give up all my pleasures? Surely I have

worked hard enough to get them.”

“But you don’t have to give them up,” I replied demurely. “You would just gradually lose the taste for them”.

Charles was horrified, “Worse still! What good would all my money be then!”

I chuckled, “You could give it to a Buddhist Society, since you would have no more use for it yourself!”

He shuddered. Since then Charles hardly dares to see me any more ...

Do you think Charles is really happy? I can honestly say that he is not. In fact, he is a living example for me that craving and clinging only increases one’s suffering. True enough, Charles has what we call a happy temperament and seems on the surface more or less content with his lot. He does not even crave for much more money any longer, since most of it would only go straight to the inspector of taxes. But he clings with all his might to all his possessions and defends them like a tigress her young! He’s terribly restless and blasé, since he has tasted nearly everything his materialistic world can offer him. He has become a slave to his own sense-pleasures—for there seems to be very little else in his life. Mind you, Charles is not uncultured, he likes reading good books, for example. But, like Albert, he makes quite sure that these books

don't become his world. He won't let anything penetrate his ego. Books are only there to give him an intellectual stimulus—in one word, they provide him with yet another sense-pleasure; that of the mind. His feeling of insecurity is even greater than in the case of Albert—for his world is mainly built on money. And —yet deep down in him he knows only too well that he is the great loser. All he craves for is ever-changing and impermanent. And so is his ego, of course. Only that which knows and understands—in fact, which is knowledge and understanding and truth all in one—exists:

Fortunately, I believe in karma and rebirth: For I'm still fond of Charles and I like to think that in time he too will free himself from all his ignorance and delusion and gain enlightenment. After all, Charles is kind and helpful. He once told me that he only has one philosophy: that of everyone being just a little kinder. He himself keeps to it for he does a lot of good deeds which, in spite of his obstinate belief in his ego, will in his many lives to come sure enough open the doors to Nibbāna more and more, that is, if Nibbāna has any doors.

And now we come to the fair ladies. The first I want to introduce to you is Winnie—the perfect mother. She is what you might call a homely type: very capable and friendly. You just can't help liking Winnie. When I

first met her, her daughter Rosemary was about nine. I soon found out that Rosemary was the be-all and end-all of Winnie's life. Her entire conversation, interest and worries always centred round Rosemary. While her husband Peter usually sat in a corner, rather shy and absorbed, reading a book.

I should think most of you must have known such a Winnie at one time or other in your lives. And you must have been just as thoroughly bored by her as I used to be. But unfortunately the case of a possessive mother is much more serious and complicated than just the surface-boredom she inflicts on her friends. My Winnie nearly broke up her marriage over Rosemary and did her best to ruin the child into the bargain. For it didn't take Winnie long to turn Rosemary into a thoroughly spoilt little brat. The children at school disliked her and the teachers complained that she was difficult and conceited.

And what did Peter do? The poor man had very little say in the whole matter. So he withdrew more and more to his library. He started going out on his own and even during the summer holidays he went mountain-climbing in Switzerland while Winnie took Rosemary to Blackpool. She didn't seem to mind. Her whole life was Rosemary—to such an extent that her own seemed completely subservient to it. In fact, she almost became Rosemary with all her problems,

worries and pleasures. She didn't seem to be interested any more in her marriage nor in her husband—such was the strength of her maternal instinct. Fortunately Peter was a very clever and understanding man, and being very fond of both his wife and child, he put up with the situation as well as he could and adjusted his life accordingly.

Quite a lot of people these days openly criticise the so-called “perfect” mother, They say her attitude is due to an excessive mother-instinct coupled with too much possessiveness. Quite right, true enough. But we Buddhists go much further than that. Why in fact Buddhism is often described as one of the most effective mental therapies is because it goes so much deeper than even the psychiatrists. It doesn't only touch the root of the trouble—but it lifts it right out. Now how would the Buddhists analyse poor old Winnie? We would say, together with the psychologists, that Winnie has projected her ego onto her daughter Rosemary. So far, so good! But what exactly lies underneath this projection of the ego? Let us get to the root of the diagnosis, for only thus can we cure the disease. As a homoeopath once explained to me: it is not enough to discover that the patient suffers from a cancer of the stomach—we must also find out what kind of mental state brought about this illness. In this particular case, he told me it is always due to

some kind of frustration. Only when we successfully tackle the patient's frustration can we be sure that his cancer—though it might be cured by the physician—doesn't, come again!

This impressed me very much, for I suddenly realised that Buddhism is doing exactly the same thing: it cures the mental state which brought about the disease. Now let us go back to Winnie again. Why has she all her life projected her own ego onto Rosemary? The first reason is obvious: because she has a specially strong maternal instinct which was by no means fully satisfied. She should have had at least half a dozen children! But surely this doesn't really explain why Winnie submerged her own personality into that of her child? She could have loved her dearly—even possessively—and still led her own life independently from that of Rosemary. But Winnie's feeling of insecurity is specially strong and so her own ego feels the need of extending even further—to that of her child. After all, she thinks like so many mothers, Rosemary is part of herself. But is that so? Again we Buddhists say: decidedly no! If you believe in karma and rebirth, you will look upon Rosemary as the outcome of all her own volitions, thoughts and deeds, good and bad, from the past and present. Buddhism even goes so far as to say, there isn't such a thing as mental inheritance, only physical. Perhaps you might

now understand why Buddhists say that, before we can advise and help anyone else, we must first be able to understand and help ourselves. As a rule, we know little enough about what goes on within us—how much less we know about someone else’s inner life?

Thus advice soon becomes interference and often does more harm than good. But, even when we are in a position, through mastering our own emotions to some extent, to understand another person’s difficulties and shortcomings, we can’t really give him much direct help. All we can do is to lead him on very gently where he can help himself. That is, in fact, all a good teacher can do. Now to live your child’s life on top of yours, so to speak, is quite ridiculous. I said right at the beginning that what we call life is only the mental image of our sense-impressions. How can we therefore have a mental image of someone else’s sense-impressions?

But the cause of Winnie’s extreme possessiveness where Rosemary is concerned is not only due to insecurity and excessive maternal instinct. There is also a lot of greed and conceit behind it all. Actually conceit is always a form of greed: greed for the manifestation of the ego. And this automatically brings about clinging. The greedier we are, the more we crave for and cling to sense-objects. Hence Winnie’s clinging to Rosemary! Her case, however, is

so exaggerated, so subnormal that Winnie no longer craves for her own sense-objects—but mainly for those of her child. Her ego has almost swallowed up Rosemary's! I think there is a good deal of frustration at the back of all this too. What Winnie was not able to get and achieve in her life, she now endeavours to achieve through Rosemary. The child's life is still in the making—so Winnie can build up new hopes, ambitions and desires which she now identifies with Rosemary's.

Let me say this however: I have great admiration for some mothers who, unlike Winnie, are not possessive and gladly sacrifice their lives for their children. For this is certainly the purest form of all worldly love. But when you analyse even this kind of love in the Buddhist way, you will still see the element of desire at the back of it: the desire for the child's love in return for your own. It is because of this attitude of unemotional analysing that some people accuse Buddhists of not feeling enough love for their neighbours as the Christians do. But this certainly is not so. Only in Buddhism we distinguish, besides worldly love, between loving kindness, compassion and sympathetic joy: *mettā*, *karuṇā* and *muditā*. In all these three faculties the ego is not involved. Therefore they are universal, all-embracing—the same as insight-wisdom: *paññā*. In fact, *karuṇā* and *paññā*

always work together. I would, say: one faculty develops the other until they fill the whole being. This is the end-goal for any Buddhist: enlightenment!

Paula—the woman who is afraid of life—is a matron in a large hospital with plenty of scope for organisation and responsibility. Perhaps you might find it difficult to imagine a woman in such close contact with life and suffering being afraid of it herself. But then she is not a physical coward. Her fear is much more subtle than that: she is afraid of mental suffering. What does she do? She surrounds herself with high brick-walls. Her attitude towards life is greatly limited.

Paula is prudish, sex-frustrated—but she tells herself that her work is far more important than husband and children. She is a genuinely righteous woman with a very high ethical code. But her code is narrow at the same time. She dare not face what Jung calls the shadow: neither her own nor even that of others. She has not a grain of humour—so she just could not take it. In order that she can be a thoroughly good woman all her life, she strictly avoids any temptations which might lead her into strange and dangerous waters. She makes herself look even plainer than she is and never gets any nearer to a man than she can possibly help in her career. Naturally, Paula is a strict vegetarian, non-smoker and teetotaller. She is

the most uninteresting person I've ever met!

You might think that the Buddhists would, in some way or other, approve of Paula. After all, she hasn't got many sense-attachments, nor does she do harm to other people. In fact, she is a religious person who has trained herself to look within. But—and that's the trouble—only to a rather shallow degree. For, as I said before, she never allows the pendulum to swing the other way. Now Buddhism never believes in repression and frustration. It is the philosophy of letting go of going right through suffering to non-suffering. Only by courageously facing up to the shady side of ourselves without any excuse or judgement, can we ever hope to transcend it. When I say: without excuse or judgment, I mean just the watching again—the watching of an outsider. Thus we don't allow emotions to come up which, after all, only fortify the ego. Instead, knowledge will come up and knowledge is wisdom. If we don't recognise a thing for what it is, how can we deal with it? It is like polishing one side of a penny only. The other side, dark and filthy, is constantly buried in the sand. And yet it is all the time one and the same penny!

Mizzi—the non-accepter of dukkha—is quite a different woman altogether. You might almost call her Paula's opposite! When I first met her in Vienna she was extremely attractive and smart and very

flirtatious. She was what we call a woman of the world, or may be of the demi-world—for she modelled woollen jumpers and knew quite a lot of the leading Viennese fashion-photographers rather intimately.

But then one day, when Mizzi was not quite so young anymore and seemed a little tired of woollies and photographers, of cocktails and dancing, she suddenly went out and got herself a religion. She went in mainly for dogmas and rituals, In a way the dogma was good for her, for she lacked self-discipline—but she became rather holy at the same time. That was a pity because it wasn't genuine, but only the holiness of her strong ego. You see, as the years went by, something in her which we might call the potential for enlightenment, tried to come up. But again and again the ego pushed it down, deeper and deeper, hiding it under its thick shadow. So poor Mizzi has been suffering from pulls and counter-pulls all the time, as in fact most of us do. But through Buddhism we, at least, learn how to by-pass or even drop the ego—if only for a little while during meditation or mindfulness. Yet all Mizzi's ego can do is to adopt holiness in order to pretend to herself and to others that all is well with her. Where she greatly differs from Paula, however, is that she can't avoid temptations for she is what the Buddhists call the greedy type. That is

to say, her greed prevails over hatred and delusion—the other two unwholesome roots. Actually we have, of course, quite a bit of all three. The three wholesome roots are non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion.

Though Mizzi is now a respectably married woman with children and grand-children, her ego hasn't changed all that much since her youth. She still has greedy emotions and always wants to be the centre of everything. She continuously pushes herself into the limelight—even at the expense of other people. Only when she has got what she wants for the moment, does she consider anyone else. Yet she manages to deceive herself all the time. She is—at least consciously—convinced that she is sweet and gentle and helpful all round. It is true, she can be all these things—but only, as I have just pointed out, when her ego is satisfied for the time being. She is still very religious, goes to church regularly, and says her prayers. But there again she mainly uses her religion to ease her conscience. The trouble with poor old Mizzi is that she always wants to be and never is!

I feel that our own egos are not all that much better than Mizzi's—but the main point I want to stress is the need to be honest with ourselves. Don't let us put a cloak of holiness over our shadow and pretend it isn't there! Only by facing up to it, are we in a position to accept dukkha, which is the direct result of our false

identification with the ego.

Of all my six living examples, the one who comes nearest to accepting dukkha is Eth. Eth—short for Ethel, you know, Eth used to be my “daily”—or rather “weekly.” When I first met her, she was in rags and her Cockney accent was so thick that it took me quite a while to understand her. Yet in spite of this, we soon became friends. She was of a refreshing naivety coupled with a lovely sense of humour. Her life-story was that of great genuine hardship. Already at an early age Eth had to stay away from school a lot in order to look after her family. Her mother was often ill and she happened to be the eldest of a great number of children. When she married, it only meant more hardship and work, for they were very poor and Eth bore one child after another. Her husband died comparatively young and then she had to struggle all alone to bring up her five children.

By the time I knew Eth, most of them were married—but she was still slaving away all day long. When she was not out working, she now had to mind her many grandchildren, while their mothers worked in factories. When you consider that poor thin little Eth had helped to bring up three generations in her sixty-odd years, you can’t help admiring her. And she just accepts her hard lot as something unalterable. Neither is she envious of all the people round her who are

better off than she is, nor does she ask herself how it comes about that life is so “unfair” to her. In fact, she is a thoroughly good Buddhist without knowing it. You might have thought she knew all about the doctrine of karma and rebirth. Actually, Eth is not particularly religious in one way or another. She nominally belongs to the Church of England—but never has time to go to church. Nor has she ever spoken about God to me.

Sometimes I ask myself whether Eth is very near to enlightenment. This is rather a difficult question to answer. I feel she is certainly a good deal nearer to it than I am, or than most of my acquaintances are. There seems no doubt whatsoever that spiritually she is a highly developed woman. If only her intellect were equally balanced, I feel, she could be almost there. She has little greed and little hatred—but there is quite a bit of delusion. For unfortunately, owing to her lack of education, her thinking is still rather primitive and illogical. Her mind needs to be trained and sharpened. On the other hand, through the very hardship of her present life and her great sense of humour and fun Eth has acquired a lot of common sense which in my opinion can be equated with the lower states of insight.

I feel Eth is a very interesting example for us Buddhists. Without knowing anything about

Buddhism at all, she has chosen the right path and has courageously progressed a good deal towards enlightenment. In some ways it might be even a good thing that her intellect is not developed enough to understand the Buddhist teaching, for she is blissfully unaware of all the pitfalls of its wrong interpretation. On the other hand, I often want to comfort her by pointing out the value of the very dukkhā she has to go through. But then she doesn't seem to need any comfort: she is always cheerful and content!

Perhaps you are asking yourselves now what is the Buddhist attitude to attitudes to life? Well, what we are striving at throughout our life is to break that protective shell of ours that grows harder and absorbs more and more of the living tissue. This protective shell is; in fact, no other than our good old friend, the ego. Now you might ask, what is left after we have successfully smashed our protective shell? This is, indeed, a difficult question, for the answer can't really be given in words—in concepts. We Buddhists say that we are not a permanent entity as the ego wants us to believe: We are but a series of moments of consciousness. Once our protective shell, made up by our vast ignorance and delusion, is broken, our true nature—which never was “ours”, but is part and parcel of the whole Universe—is realised. As I said before, the absolute can't be explained in words,, nor

understood by our intellect. But let me try to put it to you this way.

As long as we have the delusion of an ego, we will have all sorts of attitudes, convictions and views, which are all thought-created. In fact, instead of having a direct experience of life in the present, we live in a world of thoughts of either the past or the future. We live by our memories, speculations and fears.

We miss so much of life by reproducing it second-hand in our mind.

But once we have realised our true nature by breaking through our protective shell, we will live in the present moment. All our bare attention will be given to the act without the assumption of an ego outside the act. That moment will fill the whole of our action—the whole of our sense-impressions: the seeing, the hearing, the smelling, the touching, the tasting, the knowing.

As Buddha said to Bāhiya:

“In the seeing, Bāhiya—there is just the seeing.
In the hearing, Bāhiya—there is just the hearing.
In the knowing, Bāhiya—there is just the
knowing.”

(Udāna)

Table of Contents

Title page	2
Attitudes To Life	3