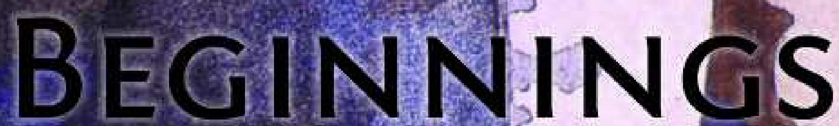
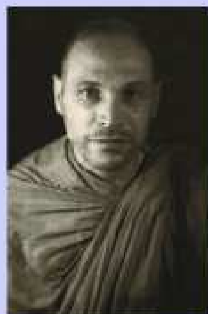


Beginnings

Collected Essays of S. Bodhesako

Buddhism/Philosophy BP 425



BEGINNINGS: COLLECTED ESSAYS

This book contains all the known published and unpublished essays by S. Bodhesako: *Beginnings, Change, The Buddha and Catch-22, The Myth of Sisyphus, Faith,* and *Being and Craving*.

S. Bodhesako was an American Buddhist monk who studied literature and creative writing at the University of Iowa. Like many of his generation, he investigated alternatives to the accepted Western lifestyle. After he became a Theravada Buddhist monk in India in 1966, Ven. Bodhesako moved to Sri Lanka, where he spent most of his monastic life. He used his literary and philosophic skills to write some innovative, witty and thought-provoking Buddhist essays, all of which are reproduced in this collection. In his essays Ven. Bodhesako investigates the relations between the Pali Canon and modern, especially existentialist, Western philosophy and literature.

In the first essay, *Beginnings,* the author discusses the authenticity and relevance of the Buddhist Canon. The second essay, *Change,* investigates the concepts of change, impermanence and time in relation to experience and argues against equating them with the concept of flux or continuous change. In the third essay, *The Buddha and Catch-22,* the similarities between Joseph Heller's novel and the Buddha's Teaching are discussed. The next essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus,* is a Buddhist reinterpretation of the Greek myth of Sisyphus, which is symbolizing the endless, recurring nature of our tasks. Ven. Bodhesako also discusses Albert Camus' interpretation of this myth. The essay *Faith* investigates the relevance of faith in the Buddha's Teaching, while the last essay, *Being and Craving*, deals with the Buddhist concept of craving and its traditional interpretation.

This collection is of interest to those who like to learn about the Buddha's Teaching from the perspective of modern Western philosophy and literature as well as those who like to learn about alternative, modern interpretations of traditional Buddhist concepts.

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COLLECTED ESSAYS
OF
S. BODHESAKO

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Preface

I am pleased to introduce this collection of writings by the late Venerable Bodhesako. I met him in 1971 while living in India as a layman. I had never met a Buddhist monk and it was his example and his guidance that inspired me to go forth into a life of renunciation. Ven. Bodhesako would often say that if someone couldn't clearly explain their ideas in writing they probably hadn't fully and clearly considered their own view of things. Writing well was important for him because clear writing reflected clear thinking and clear thinking was crucial in establishing right view—in establishing an accurate intellectual representation of Dhamma.

Some of the fondest memories I have of my time with Ven. Bodhesako were when he would recount stories from the suttas. He had read the suttas broadly and considered them deeply. He had a prodigious memory and was a great storyteller. In the early 80's I was fortunate to spend some time on retreat in an area blessed with numerous cool caves in Northern Thailand. Ven. Bodhesako joined me for a couple of weeks. Each morning we would walk 4 kms to the nearest village to collect alms food. After the morning meal we would retire to the coolness of our caves and in the evening come down to the valley floor for a warm cup of tea. We had no electricity and often no candles to light the little pavilion we used for our meals. Ven. Bodhesako would then recall with delightful animation some edifying story from the suttas and suddenly the times of the Buddha would come alive and the Dhamma would inspire me for my evening's meditation.

May this collection of writings give inspiration and understanding to those who seek an end to suffering.

Ajahn Vīradhammo
Ottawa, Nov 18, 2007

Sāmaṇera Bodhesako: Scratching the Itch

Where does one begin? One begins, writes our author, from where one is. Yet wherever I am, I either want to stay here or go there; I either want my circumstances to change or to remain the same. Depending on my situation, to a subtle or great degree I am clinging to what is happening now, dissatisfied and hoping for something better or fretting about what might happen. So, wherever one is, whether in a routine, a crisis or even bliss, it is in a state of recurring craving, care and concern: wanting pleasure and not wanting pain, yet powerless to control fate or know the future. To realise this intrinsic insecurity is to admit there is an underlying problem, manifested in various ways:

> Herein the intelligent person, he who does not shrink from unpleasant truths ... may describe it in any of a number of ways—anxiety, loneliness, insufficiency, frustration, inconstancy, boredom, uncertainty, bondage, meaninglessness, impermanence, despair—but however it appears it will be seen, if it is seen at all, to be fundamental.[1]

Obviously, each of us at times feels anxious, bored, lonely, frustrated, etc. But intelligent as we are, is not our instinctive reaction in those instances to avoid the confrontation, to *look away* from the fundamental or chronic problem, to 'shrink from unpleasant truths' and existential doubts by keeping busy, going on holiday, taking a pill, calling a friend, turning on the radio? The distress is acute, immediate, and we want instant, even if temporary, relief. [2]

Yet when we treat only acute symptoms we are fooled into thinking we are cured of the disease. In Ven. Bodhesako's autobiographical novel he recalls a limerick having to do with a lady from Natchez whose clothing is all in patches because, as she puts it, 'Where Ah itches Ah scratches'. After our initial chuckle or surprise at the droll verses[3] it may occur to us that she must be afflicted by a

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1. *Beginnings,* p. 1.
2. 'In other words depending on *any* feeling there arises a specific craving which seeks escape from dukkha and synonimity with the pleasure it conceives of (as its own).' *Change,* § 9.

persistent, or better, *recurring* itching and subsequent scratching to have worn through all her clothing; so, while her words are comic, her situation is undeniably tragic, for her scratching can only exacerbate the itch, not cure it.[4] Those of us familiar with the Saṃyuttanikāya may recall the references to the flayed cow chewed upon whether exposed to air, water or 'wherever it were to stand'; and to the jackal tormented by mange who cannot be at ease no matter where he goes.[5] Unfortunately, the cow, the jackal and even our Natchez lady are unable to assuage their suffering by changing location, standing still or scratching.

Throughout his works Ven. Bodhesako draws upon the image of the itch and its implications to explain the nature of our existence, which, he informs us, is ironically determined by a never mollified craving for it. His insight into the 'recursive structures' inherent in experience and his expositions by reason, simile and analogy have accurately diagnosed the *puthujjana*'s inflammation—yours and mine—and our impulsive reaction to intensify it.

A thorough reading of this compilation, especially *Change* and the illuminating essay entitled "Being and Craving," reveals that *taṇhā* is more than skin deep: the *puthujjana*'s very being is predicated upon desire for not only the scratch *but also the itch and their recurrence*. Hence, they reinforce each other, and this truly vicious circle will spin out of control as long as it is not brought to a

---

3. From *Getting Off: A Portrait*, p. 176 (not yet published). Ven. Bodhesako occasionally injected humour into his writings, even amidst the most serious discussions of our existential dilemmas. From his university studies of literature and creative writing he would have been familiar with the striking effects of juxtaposing the serious and comic. For examples we may recall the comic episodes in tragic works such as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and of course Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Hence, the apt title Ven. Bodhesako chose for his selection of Ven. Ñāṇavīra's letters (*The Tragic, the Comic and the Personal*), since his mentor was himself noted for 'black humour' in his correspondence.

4. Technically the term tragic implies more than mere misfortune; the situation is such that a protagonist's *action* (*kamma*?), instead of solving his or her dilemma, only makes it worse. Everything Oedipus does in order to avoid committing the prophesised incest and parricide in fact works to fulfil it.

5. Puttamaṃsa Sutta (SN 12:63); Sigāla Sutta (SN 17:8).

standstill by reflexion.[6] Our author himself, while a young monk, was astonished to find that he was 'itching all over'. Once in robes he realised as never before the extent of his latent dependency on women, tobacco, afternoon meals, music, fond memories and books for stimulation and satisfaction (books being the hardest of all to give up), and how severe were the symptoms of withdrawal.

Yet we know that an austere lifestyle alone cannot solve the issue of *taṇhā*; otherwise, ancient ascetics would have been enlightened long before the birth of the Buddha. As Ven. Bodhesako emphasises, the Pali term implies not craving solely *for* this or that, for love or money, but also *wanting to want*. For example, as a former smoker he realised that one takes another cigarette because one wants to feel the invigorating effects of nicotine and the *instant relief* from the craving for it; but if there were no craving, the next potential (or absent) cigarette would not hold out the promise of pleasure. Similarly, never truly content with any single present experience, we look forward to the next—one cigarette, one kiss, or one book is not enough—because the satisfaction derived therefrom arouses desire for another. Thus we understand more profoundly the nature of addiction, which does not merely crave another dose, but also the state of craving another dose. The addict does not want to stop wanting. And the *puthujjana* is the addict *par excellence:*

> The itch being present, there is the search for a scratch. Although we can never discover a lasting and satisfactory scratch we can always rediscover the itch. But the itch is never the scratch and we are unable to effect the magic that would turn the torment of endless itching into the supposed bliss of an endless Perfect Scratch.[7]

Moreover, the ongoing search for a Perfect Scratch is in vain because it is dependent on an intentional imperception of the *structural necessity* of Change, which although not continuous or 'in flux'[8] is always, if not now occurring, at least *lurking* in 'my self' or 'the world'. Therefore, every experience is haunted by impermanence,

---

6. It is crucial to remember that Ven. Bodhesako and Ven. Ñāṇavīra before him distinguish between the states of 'reflection' (thinking about something) and 'reflexion' (self-examination).

7. *Change,* §12.

8. For Ven. Bodhesako's vigorous argument against the notion of flux, see *Change,* §§ 1–5.

and because of it sweetness and light are soured and dimmed. This job provides a good living, but I may lose it; today this body feels healthy, but perhaps tomorrow, perhaps ten years from tomorrow, it may be in pain and cause me suffering; what fascinates me now may eventually annoy me. Even if my circumstances are not noticeably changing, the mere awareness that they *can* at any time is disconcerting, like the apprehension of a black cat crossing one's path. Involvement with and in things is the foundation of the rickety construct of me-and-mine, doomed to collapse, because it is ever undermined by the structural necessity of Change:

> There are two sources of dukkha in the world, not just one: the uncertainty inherent in the world (inasmuch as I could suffer loss, failure, or death at any time) and the certainty inherent in the world (inasmuch as sooner or later I certainly will suffer loss, failure and death). Craving tends to stabilize pleasure, but the uncertainty of the world tends to destabilize it. Craving tends to destabilize dukkha, but the certainty of the world tends to stabilize it. Invariably the world wins; but craving always demands another chance.[9]

And the *puthujjana* will always give craving another chance, because it dupes him into believing that if *this* experience is not fulfilling, then *that* one will be, so he tries again … and again. Ignoring the unpleasant truths of impermanence and uncertainty, he will get a new car, a bigger house, a 'more secure' job in his non-stop search for the 'supposed bliss'.

Furthermore, as our author explains in his fresh approach to the concept of *kāmataṇhā* we want both the itch and scratch to be as intense or exciting as possible. Whatever I experience is just an event, but if it is exhilarating I infuse a greater value to it. For example, we often hear of the wish 'To Live Life to the Fullest', which implies that as in a Hollywood movie there ought to be as much action and as many thrills as possible—from travelling to faraway lands, winning a marathon, or performing life-saving surgery. It is not enough to stick to the same routine; we want our lives to be meaningful, worthy of legacy, and entitled to more than the normally allotted fifteen minutes of fame. Yet *kāmataṇhā* can be even more insidious. We need to have as much 'fulfilment' as possible not just for ego-gratification, but also in order to *fill time*, so that we do not become bored, or

9. *Change,* § 10.

worse, compelled to reflect on this pressing need. If we are not busy enough, if we are not accomplishing something or sufficiently entertained by phenomena[10] we become anxious, uneasy, or even desperate. Then every passing hour seems maddeningly dull, trivial, tedious and futile, 'the same old stuff, endlessly repeated'. Ven. Bodhesako found that whilst on *cārikā,* wandering alone in the Ceylonese countryside with neither diversion nor destination, he craved experience, being and doing in themselves:

> Something to do: that's what was needed. My eyes roamed about, seeking anything which the gaze could seize upon. Ears, nose, body mind, all were *prowling,* hunting as the bear or leopard. I kept waiting for something to happen ... I kept seeking something to distract me ...
>
> Something to *do:* Being requires activity ... and so my identity was always contingent upon my involvement with, and in things.[11]

Our starting point, therefore, must be our subjective recognition of the inherent restlessness of the six senses and their prowling for contact, for something to do, for intense and exciting events. One outbreak in particular is merely a symptom of our chronic condition, which resembles the jackal's mange: the craving that goads us to go wherever, and then goads us wherever we go. In sum, says our author, 'if we scratch the itch what we invariably find is more itch. If we scratch the surface what we invariably find is more surface'.[12] Until we realise the absurdity of all this, there is no true beginning, no further reflexion, and a largely unexamined life continues in Natchez, spent in an 'endless round of pastimes'.[13]

So, instead of searching for the Perfect Scratch, Ven. Bodhesako prescribes the topical application of what he calls the 'calamine lotion of reality'. Its after-effects are neither exhilarating nor intoxicating (hence unlike those of 'Living Life to the Full'), but instead palliating and tranquilising. Simply put, but by no means simply followed, is the protocol:

> To cure an itching skin disease the first thing to do is to prevent the patient from scratching and making it worse. Unless this can

10. In its original sense, meaning 'what appears before me'.
11. *Getting Off,* p. 245.
12. *Change,* § 12.
13. *Beginnings,* § 1.

> be done there is no hope of successfully treating the condition. But the patient will not forgo the satisfaction of scratching unless he is made to understand that scratching aggravates the condition, and that there can be no cure unless he voluntarily restrains his desire to scratch and put up with the temporarily increased discomfort of unrelieved itching.[14]

As Ven. Bodhesakoobserves, the task cannot be easy, for we have already noted that in most instances the patient does not even understand that he is afflicted; consequently, he does not want to be cured. It would mean forgoing the fervour enjoyed from pastimes, from desire and satisfaction, from experience itself. Moreover, the understated prediction of 'temporarily increased discomfort of unrelieved itching' at first sounds worse than the disease. The calamine lotion of reality seems, if we may be permitted the expression, hard to swallow.

However, the remedy will begin to work as we acquire a 'vertical view' of the predicament, one not overwhelmed by the inflammation of *taṇhā*, or better, no longer succumbing to it,. Then it is possible to appreciate the efficacy of the treatment and thereby undertake it.[15] In the following works by Ven. Bodhesako it becomes clear that the ultimate relief from suffering, the fundamental problem, is found in reflexion, which 'detensifies' experience. As he will demonstrate, 'the method to be illustrated, then, may require not a minor adjustment of one's understanding but a *complete reorientation of one's mode of thinking*'.

Dr M. John Stella
January, 2551

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14. Ven. Ñāṇavīra Thera, Letter 13. Our author greatly admired Ven. Ñāṇavīra and was responsible for the publication of his *Clearing the Path* (Colombo: Path Press, 1987; reprinted by Buddhist Cultural Centre, 2003). Ven. Bodhesako uses the 'existential' or 'subjective' approach to the Dhamma he learned from the British bhikkhu. Therefore I recommend that those who find this collection beneficial also read the writings of Ven. Ñāṇavīra. For more on Ñāṇavīra Thera, and also on Ven. Bodhesako, see www.nanavira.org.
15. See the Māgandiya Sutta (MN 75), where the Buddha is compared to a physician who administers *uddhavirecana* ('purgatives and emetics') to restore the sight of his patient, so that he may then be cured of his former blind attachment to sensual craving.

About the Author

Sāmanera Bodhesako (Robert Smith) was an American Buddhist monk. Born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1939, he studied at the University of Iowa, specializing in literature and creative writing. He embraced Buddhism in 1966 in India, where he was accepted as a Buddhist monk called Ñāṇasuci at the Bengal Buddhist Association of Calcutta, and spent several years in Sri Lanka. After leaving the robe in 1971, he continued his studies in Colorado. In 1980 he again became a Buddhist monk, this time in Thailand under the Venerable Somdet Ñānasamvara of Wat Bovornives. In 1982 he returned to Sri Lanka, living mostly in the upcountry region of Bandarawela. In 1988, while on a return journey to the United States to join his father for the latter's eightieth birthday celebration, Ven. Bodhesako died from a sudden intestinal hernia while in Kathmandu.

During the last years of his life he founded the Path Press for which he edited *Clearing the Path: Writings of Ñāṇavīra Thera* (Colombo, 1987). For the BPS he edited *The Tragic, The Comic and the Personal: Selected Letters of Ñāṇavīra Thera* (*Wheel Publication* series No. 339–41, 1987.)

About the Works

This book contains all the known published and unpublished essays by Sāmaṇera Bodhesako.

Beginnings: The Pali Suttas, was published in 1987 by the BPS in the *Wheel Publication* series, No. 313–315. The corrections and additions which Ven. Bodhesako wrote in his copy of the printed book (now at the Forest Hermitage) have been included in this edition.

Change was published in 1988 by Path Press, Colombo.

The Buddha and Catch-22 was published in 1987 by the BPS in the *Bodhi Leaves* series as No. 110.

The other essays have never been published in printed form, but are available at www.nanavira.110mb.com/other.htm. Ven. Bodhesako's autobiography, *Getting Off,* is available at http://www/buddhanet.net/cmdsg/go1-1.htm#Contents.

Abbreviations

Sutta references are firstly to discourse number and, after the slash, to volume and page of the Pali Text Society edition, except for Theragāthā, Dhammapada and Suttanipāta, for which reference is to the verse number. Vinaya references are to the Khandhaka number of the Mahāvagga or Cullavagga, in Roman numerals, followed in Arabic numerals by subsection and paragraph as well as volume and page number.

Vin	Vinaya Piṭaka
DN	Dīgha Nikāya (Sutta number)
MN	Majjhima Nikāya (Sutta number)
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya (*Saṃyutta* and sutta number)
AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya (*Nipāta* and sutta number)
Th	Theragātha
Dhp	Dhammapada
Sn	Sutta Nipāta
Ud	Udāna

I

Beginnings: The Pali Suttas

Respectfully dedicated to my Upajjhāya,
Venerable Phra Somdet Ñāṇasaṃvara

PREFACE

A discussion of beginnings would be entirely unnecessary were it not that beginnings seem invariably to precede whatever conclusions may exist. It follows from this that if we hope to arrive at any conclusions in our lives then we must perforce begin. But where? The present work is concerned entirely with this question. Herein our discussion is, by design, twofold.

First, we will discuss the human situation, and the inherent need to discover a method, a way, whereby we may resolve the dilemma of that situation. This method must be coherent: we must have a standard whereby we can judge which actions will and which will not lead us towards a conclusion. Accepting a standard is, precisely, our beginning.

Second, we will discuss whether the collection of texts known as the Pali Suttas might not offer such a standard. These texts, the oldest we have from among the various Buddhist schools, have much to recommend them. However, objections have been raised concerning their authenticity. These objections refer to the very origins and the early transmission of the Suttas. In order to evaluate these objections an understanding is needed of how these texts came into being and how they were passed on. This is the second sense in which we are concerned about beginnings.

Although this historical point occupies the bulk of our essay, it is thematically subservient to our primary question—Where does one begin?—and is relevant only to the extent that the primary question is seen to be relevant. This work, then, is not historical as such. Rather, it happens that an inquiry into the primary question turns out to involve an historical consideration.

The objection may be raised that any teaching which calls itself *akālika*, or non-temporal, as the Pali Suttas do, can never be understood by raising an historical question, which is necessarily temporal. This of course is perfectly true. The problem of existence, in its very nature, can never be resolved by such a method. It is only through a non-historical approach—specifically, one that is personal, passionate, and persistent—that our perilous situation in the world can ever be comprehended. In this sense the only basis for judging the Suttas would be to put their advice into practice and resolve the personal dilemma, thereby coming to know for certain that the Suttas are what they claim to be. But herein we are not yet at the point of discussing how to *proceed*. We are still involved with the prior question of whether these Suttas offer a standard which, if acquiesced to, will lead to an end. And although an historical inquiry can never in itself lead us to a *conclusion*, it is at least possible that it might lead us to a *beginning* inasmuch as it can serve as an initial indication to our question: Where does one begin?

Except where otherwise noted, all factual information in this essay is garnered from the Pali Suttas and their companion-piece, the Vinaya. In these texts we find accounts of the first months following the Buddha's awakening (Khandhaka I, Mahāvagga, Vinaya), of the final months before his decease (Dīgha Nikāya Sutta 16),[1] of the events leading up to the First and Second Councils, together with an account of those Councils (Khandhakas XI and XII, Cullavagga, Vinaya), and, scattered through the texts, incidental information and clues about the middle period of the Buddha's ministry. Considerable additional information is available in texts of later date, such as the Commentaries. However, for our purposes such data are not needed, for though our account in no way contradicts the known facts available from primary sources, it is our intention to present here not a factual history but an imaginative one. We may recall the dictum: "Higher than actuality stands possibility." We are not attempting to set forth what *did* happen but what *must have happened*. Our account is more *reasoned* than *reportorial*. As such our methods are not those of scholars; nor do our conclusions rest upon ever finer points of contention, but rather upon a commonly-held understanding of how, in their broad outlines, things generally evolve: gradually and piecemeal rather than suddenly and definitively.

1. Translated as *Last Days of the Buddha,* the Wheel Publication No. 67–69.

This is not to say that what follows will be of no interest to scholars. On the contrary, because of the broadness of the base upon which our findings rest, it is hoped that scholars may well regard them as a significant as well as an original contribution to their discipline. However, an understanding of what follows requires no knowledge of or interest in scholarly questions. For most, perhaps, this account will be sufficient. For those who feel that they would benefit by further exploration into the substantial scholarly literature on the early history of Buddhism, this account can serve as a standard for evaluating the various conflicting views and judgments that are to be encountered therein. Avoiding those conflicts, we offer herein, using the data of the texts themselves, the most *reasonable* account of their beginnings and a *reasonable* assessment of how much confidence we can place in them, in order to make our own beginning.

Beginnings: The Pali Suttas

Where does one begin?

Where does one begin? This is obviously the first question. And when the issue at hand is the manifest need to explore and resolve the root-problem of our personal existence, then this question takes on a primacy in terms not only of sequence but of importance. One begins, of course, from where one is, for from where else can one begin? Herein the intelligent person, he who does not shrink from unpleasant truths, will acknowledge the problem. He may describe it in any of a number of ways—anxiety, loneliness, insufficiency, frustration, inconstancy, boredom, uncertainty, bondage, meaninglessness, impermanence, despair—but however it appears it will be seen, if it is seen at all, to be fundamental, for it is bound up in one way or another with a sense of one's own mortality.

When we apprehend the ever-present possibility of our own immediate dying,—the impossible possibility, says Heidegger,—then any notions we may have about our golden and glittering prospects in the world will be seen to be illusory inasmuch as they, and we as well, end in death.[2] The gold is now seen for the leaden bondage that it really is, the alchemy has failed, and we see ourselves to be in perpetual subjugation to the uncertainty inherent in the world. And we then feel, deeply, the need to act.

There *must* be release from this overwhelming fact of our own mortality: we cannot believe otherwise. But, equally certain, we don't know the way to that release else, surely, we would already have taken it. Can we find this way? Fine and earnest people have tried before us—that we know—and have admitted failure. Our task, then, cannot be easy. But having recognized our existence in this world as *inherently* unsatisfactory, we now sense the utter *necessity* of seeking

---

2. This body will perish; it's old;
   a nest of distress.
   It breaks up, this putrid mold:
   life ends in death. Dhp 148

the means to transcend it. We are unwilling to plunge yet again—again!—into that endless round of pastimes wherein most people waste their lives in the effort to avoid facing the truth of their own mortal existence. Although we don't know the way ourselves, it is yet possible that there exists some teacher, some teaching, to provide guidance. And so we look about us, and we find… orators, teachers, therapists, hucksters, salvation-mongers, apostles, psychologists, preachers, gurus, swamis, saviours and salesmen by the score, each offering his own brand of salvation. And thus we arrive again at our original question: where does one begin?

They can't *all* be right. If it were so easy, we would have no need of a teacher, for we and everyone else would already have done the work ourselves. Besides, many of these teachings, anti-teachings, disciplines, non-disciplines and weekends are manifestly in contradiction with one another (and sometimes even with themselves), both in doctrine and in practice. And therefore, unless we abandon consistency of both thought and effort, we must acknowledge the importance of choosing among them intelligently (unless we believe them to be uniformly *mistaken*, in which case the choice would again seem unimportant). For the choice we make will be our beginning, and from that beginning—made wisely or foolishly—everything else will follow.

Nor need we believe ourselves to be totally incompetent to make that choice. For although it is a truism that, as is sometimes argued, the only way to know for *certain* which teaching or teachings are in accordance with truth is to see truth for oneself, yet we can even now make a reasonable assessment of these teachings. To be unenlightened is not to know *nothing*; for were that the case we should not long survive in this uncertain world. We are free from confusion at least to the extent that we now see the need to free ourselves from it totally.[3] Having acknowledged the problem, we can sort out from among those teachings which offer themselves to us those that at least address themselves to that problem from those that merely pander in one way or another to the world's proclivity for any comfortable, or even uncomfortable, notion in order to avoid facing the problem. For underlying each practice will be a doctrine or

3. The fool who does his folly see
is a sage to that degree.
Who to sagacity gives airs,
that fool, he is "A fool!" declared. Dhp 63

general attitude, and from this we can come to know the general nature of each teaching and can thereby separate the relevant from the superfluous. And thus it is that, eventually, we will come to the Buddha's Teaching.

The Buddha's Teaching

The Buddha's Teaching: what images it conjures—compassion, serenity, acquiescence, wisdom, bliss, selflessness. In such terms is it often described, even from afar, even among those who know only its general outlines. Such is the image of this Teaching that is in world-wide circulation; and with such qualities does it invite seekers of peace to take a closer look. With such a reputation it may perhaps prove to be the fount of advice and guidance we so need. And therefore we eagerly approach it, to find... Theravada Buddhism, Mahāyāna, Ch'an, Korean Zen, Vajrayāna, Tantric and dozens of other sects and sub-sects, large and small, new and old, all claiming to be the Teaching of the Buddha. And so it is that again we return to out original question: Where does one begin?

Are these schools different in name only? Or do they differ as well in attitude, approach, doctrine and practice? Is all one? Is all a diversity? Does nothing really exist? Does everything really exist? Or are these disparate views merely worldly wisdom, best abandoned in favor of seeing that "*Whatever* is arises dependent on conditions and is not without conditions"? Must we save others before we will be able to save ourselves? Or must we save ourselves before we will be in a position to save others? Is everything already perfect? Or is it only suffering that arises, suffering that ceases? Do we all have Buddha Nature? Or is all existence empty, without essence? Will we all eventually arrive at eternal salvation? Or do only those achieve liberation who see that all conditions are impermanent? Is *nibbāna* (Skt. *nirvāna*) to be found in *saṃsāra*, the round of existences, or are they mutually exclusive? What is the sound of one hand clapping?

If we accept that truth, whatever else it may be, is at least not self-contradictory, then the question necessarily arises: which among these paths, diverse and often at odds with one another, will offer us that way to liberation which we seek?[4] And if these teachings *are* all different—or even if they are *not*—which of them is that Teaching set forth 2,500 years ago by a certain member of the Gotama family of the Sakyan clan, in northern India, known today as the Awakened

One, the Buddha? If it were only possible to come to a reasonable judgment on this point, then we might be able with one stroke to cut through the tangle of confusion we meet with when we inquire into the nature of "Buddhism." For we will then find—if the Teaching lives up to its reputation—one coherent, sufficient and, above all, *relevant* Teaching which can serve as a standard in our inquiry into the nature of our mortal existence. And perhaps this is possible.

We know that the Pali Suttas—the discourses in the Pali language—are acknowledged by all Buddhist schools to be the oldest record we have of the Buddha's Teaching. We know that nearly a century ago the scholars of the West performed an about-face from their original majority position and now fully acknowledge the primacy, as regards age, of those Suttas. But we also know that certain objections have been raised with regard to the origin and transmission of those discourses. Are these objections valid? What is the difference here, if any, between "oldest" and "original"? How trustworthy are these texts as we now have them? With what degree of confidence are we able to ascertain the truth of the matter? Fortunately, it is possible to know, with reasonable confidence, the way in which these texts were first gathered together and then handed down to us. Let us inquire.

Syncretism?

It may be objected at this point (or even sooner) that all this *inquiry* is absurd and that the "obvious" approach, for goodness sake, is to take *whatever* is useful *wherever* we find it and to get on with the thing already instead of dancing about the starting line for, after all, truth isn't the exclusive preserve of any one narrow sectarian doctrine, is it? And this eclectic attitude sounds very good until one *tries* to "get on with the thing" by *taking* "whatever is useful" etc., for it is at precisely this point—the point of beginning—that the question arises: what is useful? And what merely seems to our blind eyes to be so? Without a standard we would be unable to choose between meditation, ascetic austerities, prayers to the heavens, or snake-charming as paths to liberation. It is precisely this—a standard—that

4. If one does *not* accept that truth is at least consistent with itself—i.e., that truth is not false—then this question will *not* arise. Instead, one will remain lost in one's inconsistencies and will fail to see that coherent movement wherein one can achieve freedom from confusion and anxiety.

we felt ourselves to be in need of when we decided to seek guidance beyond our personal opinions and judgments.

Although the question of *specific* doctrines lies outside our present inquiry (for we are not yet well-placed to make the necessary distinctions), something can nevertheless be said about the *approach* to specific doctrines, i.e. making a beginning. Here the question is not "*Where* does one begin?" but "*How* does one begin?": perhaps the question that immediately follows upon "Where?" and which is still prior to any actual beginning. And there seem to be two general answers to this question, How does one begin?, which we can conveniently label as the "smorgasbord" approach and the "crystalline" approach.

In the syncretic smorgasbord approach one views spiritual teachings as if they were a smorgasbord spread out on an enormous table, to be partaken of by all who seek spiritual sustenance. The seeker, plate in hand, helps himself to whatever he cares to, in whatever quantity and variety appeals to him—let's see now, a bit of TM on toast, some Karma Yoga and coleslaw, a dash of Sufism for spice, a bit of this, a bit of that—and if he has chosen wisely, he will consume, spiritually, a satisfying and nutritious blend which—who knows—just *might* lead to....

The crystalline approach, on the other hand, assumes that no truth can be more consistent or relevant than the teaching by which it is revealed, and that therefore a teaching that truly *leads*—i.e. is one-pointed and consistent rather than an amorphous collection of spiritualisms—is akin to a many-faceted crystal, wherein each facet may reflect its own prismatic colours, but each is nonetheless inseparable from the crystal as a whole, for the crystal, being an organic unity, is indivisible. In this approach there can be no pick-and-choose attitude, for to fragment such a teaching is to miss its holistic essence. In such a case, having once made the decision that this is the standard we choose to follow, we will thereupon voluntarily subjugate our personal preferences in favour of the advice of our teaching, *even when it is directly contrary to our own wishes*. This does not preclude taking "whatever is useful." Rather, it gives us a basis for judging what is and is not useful. And if it should happen that within our chosen teaching we already find all that we need in order to "get on with it", then so much the better.

But if the charge of narrowness is nonetheless made, then we will note first that an arrow that is broad and wide is far less likely

to hit its mark than one that is properly shaped for one-pointed flight; and second that the charge of narrowness is made without understanding. For no point of view can be understood except from its own frame of reference, an observation which already suggests the crystalline approach, for all that it is true of syncretistic views as well.[5] It is most commonly the case that people do not question the assumptions that underlie their own basic attitudes—after all, it's obvious, isn't it?—but until they do so, they will be necessarily unable to understand a point of view that does not arise from those assumptions except from within their own viewpoint, which is to say that they will not be able to understand it at all. And the charge of narrowness is made from the syncretistic point of view without comprehending the crystalline point of view.

The collection of discourses known as the Pali Suttas wholeheartedly recommends itself to the concerned individual as being that guidance to the transcendental which he seeks. They inform the seeker firstly that his life-problem arises dependent for its condition upon a wrong view of things, and secondly that a right view, which would undermine and end that problem, is to be achieved by following right-view guidance, namely, the training-course set forth by the Buddha. There can be no doubt after even a brief look at these texts that they staunchly advocate the crystalline approach towards liberation. In many ways do they declare themselves to be all-of-a-piece,[6] a Teaching not to be understood by taking from it according to personal preference.[7] Therefore when inquiring into the Pali Suttas it is a necessity, if one hopes to understand what is meant therein by "right view", to adopt the crystalline approach, and we do so here.

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5. An extreme extension of the eclectic, smorgasbord view, common enough nowadays, is that "all teachings lead to a common goal" or, at least, that the *deepest* teachings (= "those I most approve of") do. A discussion of this idea is beyond our scope; but since this view so accords with the spirit of the times that it is particularly liable to be accepted uncritically, it is worthwhile to note that if (as is the case) it is a mistaken view, then its adoption would be an insurmountable barrier to realization of that which transcends what is common.

6. E.g.: "Monks, just as the great ocean has but one flavour, the flavour of salt, so too this Teaching has but one flavour, the flavour of freedom."—Cullavagga 9.1.4/Vin II 236 = AN 8:19/A IV 199) = Ud 5.5/56.

Beginnings

THE Pali Suttas have their beginning in the Deer Park at Sarnath, not far from Benares (present-day Vārānasi), where the Buddha first taught to others that which he had himself already realized through proper attention and right effort. The five monks who heard that first discourse would have had to pay close attention in order for understanding to arise. Thus, when they were thereby led to see for themselves that which the Buddha had already seen—"whatever is of a nature to arise, all that is of a nature to cease"—they would not forget the words which had so stirred them. Having now overcome—at last!—that aversion to seeing (as it actually is, rather than—mistakenly—as something else,) what had always been *there* to be seen, they would naturally delight in those words which had led them to this release from the inner tension of that aversion and, delighting therein,[8] they would remember them well[9]. They might for their own pleasure call to mind what they had heard; they might for their mutual pleasure repeat it to each other[10]—as we ourselves

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7. E.g.: "Monks, even with a teacher who dwells giving importance to material things, an heir to material things, conjoined with material things, haggling such as this would be untenable: 'If we have it so, then we will do it; if we don't have it so, then we won't do it.' What then, of a Perfect One who dwells unentangled with material things? Monks, a faithful disciple, having scrutinized the teacher's advice, proceeds in accordance with this: 'The Exalted One is the teacher. I am the disciple. The Exalted One knows. I do not know.'"—MN 70/M I 480: Kīṭāgiri Sutta. Numerous additional passages could be quoted to support the two texts above; but perhaps it is not necessary to belabour the point: those who require more evidence can find it themselves, by going to the Suttas.

8. "...while being taught the Teaching for the ceasing of personality (*sakkāyanirodha*) he whose heart neither springs forward nor is made serene nor is composed, he is not freed..."—MN 64/M I 435.

9. This discourse and that by which the five achieved full liberation have been preserved for us. The intervening discourses, by which they grew in the Teaching, though referred to, have not been preserved.

10. "...and those monks who are worthy ones with cankers destroyed, endowed with perfection, having done what should be done, laid down the burden, achieved the goal, fully destroyed the fetters of being, freed by right comprehension—they, on hearing the Teaching, dwell pleasantly here and now."—AN 9:4/A IV 362–3.

might often recall and recount something which has given us delight—but they would not yet be doing so in order to instruct; for there was as yet but one teacher: the Buddha. All that was taught was what he taught; and there was therefore as yet no variance in the expression of that Teaching.

There came a time—probably a few weeks later—when as many as sixty, having been instructed, had come to full realization and now lived the holy life (*brahmacariya*) fulfilled as monks in the Buddha's Order. It was at this time that the Buddha spoke his oft-quoted instructions:

"Monks, I am freed from all shackles, both heavenly and human. Monks, you too are freed from both heavenly and human shackles. Wander, monks, for the benefit, the happiness of the manyfolk, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the benefit, the happiness of royalty and men. Let not two go by one way. Teach the Teaching, monks, that in both word and spirit is wholesome in its beginning, wholesome its middle, wholesome in its conclusion. Proclaim a holy life that is utterly perfect and pure. There are beings with little dust in their eyes who, not hearing the Teaching, will be lost. But some will understand..."[11]

Thus the monks dispersed, to teach according to their individual abilities and proclivities[12]. At first they may have repeated, for the most part, what they remembered. Surely they would differ in what they recalled. Surely they would differ in what they chose to repeat. Here a discourse would be repeated only in summary; there it would be given in full; elsewhere it would be expanded and expounded upon. As the monks gained in communicative skills, as they learned to recognize which facets of the Teaching best suited various auditors, they would—at least some of them—have supplemented or supplanted the remembered words of the Buddha with their own descriptions of "the way things are", and many discourses by disciples have been preserved for us. The insight would be the same, but the descriptions would differ, depending on both the occasion

11. Mahāvagga 1.11/Vin I 20–21 = SN 4:5/S I 105–6.

12. It is worth noting that the ability to teach does not follow automatically upon perception of truth, nor are all enlightened ones equally skilled in communication. See AN 1:14/A I 23–5. Worldly or social skills have no particular relevance to achievement of that which transcends society and the world, except insofar as a talent for such skills may hamper one's perception of the need to surpass them.

and the individuals[13]. And thus as the Teaching spread there would have been, unavoidably, a growing diversity in what was taught and remembered.

It could not have been long before there came to be monks in the Order who, though earnest, had not yet seen the Teaching for themselves. These would not have taken the same delight in the discourses as those whose insight had penetrated the Teaching thoroughly. Nor would they have had the same faculties for remembering them, for knowing the essentials, and for avoiding *mis*-remembering them. And hence there arose the need not only for listening but for *learning*. For unless the talks were memorized—in those days there was neither paper nor ink—those new monks might have, between themselves, exchanged naught but misconceptions and, in solitude, foundered in confusion. Thus we find throughout the Suttas dozens of passages in which the need for learning, repeating and committing to memory is stressed and praise is given those with such learning, usually with the warning that mere learning, without application is inadequate[14].

There were some who excelled at teaching, who were particularly inclined to do so, and who possessed those outward qualities which attract followings. Thus there arose large companies

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13. See SN 35:204/S IV 91–95, wherein four monks give four different answers, all commendable by the wise, to the question, "To what extent is vision well-purified?" See also the Mahā Gosiṅga Sutta, MN 32/M I 212–29.

14. E.g. Venerable Ānanda: "Here, friend Sāriputta, a monk has mastered the Teaching...; the Teaching thus heard, thus mastered, he teaches to others in detail, he makes others recite in detail, he makes them repeat in detail. The Teaching thus heard, thus mastered, he thinks and ponders upon in his heart and considers by mind. In whatever lodgings dwell monks who are learned, going by the rule, keepers of the Teaching, of the Discipline, of the Summaries, he comes to those lodgings (to stay) for the rainy-season (retreat). Approaching them from time to time he inquires and questions (of those monks): 'Sir, what is the purpose of this talk?' Those venerable ones disclose to him the undisclosed, make clear the unclear, dispel doubt regarding multifarious doubtful things. In this way, friend Sāriputta, a monk may hear a Teaching he has not heard; and Teachings he has (already) heard will become unconfused; and those earlier Teachings which had formerly touched his heart re-occur to him; and he recognizes what was unrecognized."—AN 6:51/A III 361–2. See also MN 32/M I 213.

of monks each of which became separated from the others both by geography and by lifestyle. Some were forest dwellers, others lived near a town; some were sedentary, others roamed about and so on according to the preferences of each teacher. Many monks, of course, did not join companies: after completing the training, they went off and spent the rest of their lives in solitude or with a few like minded companions. These monks certainly fulfilled the Buddha's Teaching, but they would have played no role in the gathering and preserving of the outward expression of that Teaching, etc., and are not further considered in this account.

Each company would have developed its own body of memorized discourses, with its own framework of summations and expansions, each group of teachings possessed of its own set phrases, conventions, and methods of exposition. Certain aspects of this variance and diversity would have been, among the as-yet-unenlightened, a source for confusion and disagreements. Indeed, some of these differences have been recorded. See, for example, the Bahuvedanīya Sutta, MN 59/M I 396–400 = SN 36:19/S IV 223–28, wherein the Buddha settles a doctrinal dispute by explaining how it is that the various teachings he has set forth about feelings are, though different, not contradictory.

The Teaching was at this time established; it was well-remembered; it had spread. But it was as yet uncoordinated, unstandardized; it was as yet not gathered together.

The Venerable Ānanda

Within the first year after the Buddha's enlightenment, there entered the Order that individual who, apart from the Buddha himself, was best equipped to influence the development of the Suttas as an organized body of teachings, and to whom we therefore owe an immense debt. Without Venerable Ānanda it is possible that we would not have the Suttas today at all.

Venerable Ānanda, cousin of the Buddha, went forth from the lay life not long after the Buddha had visited his kinsmen, the Sakyans, at Kapilavatthu, where both had grown up; and from the time of his going forth it would seem that Venerable Ānanda spent most of his time near the Buddha. Indeed, for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's ministry Venerable Ānanda served as the Buddha's devoted personal attendant, following him "like a shadow"—Th 1041–1043. He did many services for the Buddha, and he also did one for us: he listened.

At that time many people called on the Buddha: monks and nuns, lay followers, kings and ministers, even adherents of other teachers. Some asked for guidance or explanations, some made conversation or put to him prepared questions just to hear what the Buddha might say, and some even challenged and debated with him. To all, the Buddha taught about suffering and about the way to put an end to suffering. Some of these people became enlightened[15] right then and there, while listening to the Buddha: MN 140/M III 247, etc. Others would bear in mind what had been said and, thinking it over and applying it, would achieve enlightenment at some later time: AN 8:30/A IV 228–35, etc. Still others never succeeded to this extent but improved themselves and obtained a bright rebirth: SN 40:10/S IV 269–80, etc. And some, of course, went away without having benefited at all by their meeting: MN 18/ M I 109, etc.

To all these people the Buddha spoke only about suffering and the path leading to the end of suffering, but he did so in many different ways, explaining himself using various approaches. We must all begin from where we are; but we are not all in the same place, spiritually, when we begin. Different people will respond to different forms of expression. It is important to remember, when reading these Suttas, that they were not spoken in a vacuum: there was an actual person, or people, sitting before the Buddha, and what the Buddha said was spoken with the aim of resolving a particular conflict, usually internal. If we forget this point, we leave ourselves open to the danger of misconceiving the Teaching in mechanistic terms as an impersonal explanation rather than as good advice on how to live, and on how to develop a view of things that is free from attachment and unhappiness.

So the Buddha explained about ignorance, conceit and suffering in many different ways; and Ānanda was there. And he not only listened, he also remembered. So he did two services for us.

Among the monks the custom arose of teaching each other their favourite discourses through the techniques of sequential and simultaneous recitation (practices still found today). Venerable Ānanda took a particular interest in talks worthy of preservation, and with his quick wits[16] he learned many discourses delivered by his

15. In this essay the word "enlightened" is used of the *sekha*—see below—as well as of the arahat, the latter being described as not only enlightened but also liberated.

fellow monks, as well as those given by the Buddha, thereby increasing his value as a repository of the Teaching[17]. Since, further, he was well known as a monk who had heard much, learned much, and was approachable, willing to help whenever he could, there can be no doubt that he was often asked by others to teach them discourses or just to recite them so that they might be heard. So he taught others—e.g. SN 22:90/S III 133–4; AN 9:42/A IV 449—and helped to spread the Teaching among both his contemporaries and those who followed after. This is a third service by which we are indebted to Venerable Ānanda.

The question had to arise: in what form should these discourses be taught? Clearly they could not include every word that had been spoken[18]—at least not in the case of every single Sutta—lest the learning become so cumbersome as to be self-defeating. Although mindfulness is central to the practice of the Buddha's Teaching (SN 46:53 (V 115)), monks were not all equally gifted in the ability to memorize: the discourses had to be put into a format conducive to

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16. At AN I:14/A I 24 is recorded the Buddha's declaration of Venerable Ānanda as being foremost, among all monks, both in wide knowledge and in retentive memory, as well as in good conduct, resoluteness, and personal service.

17. In the Theragātha (v. 1024) Venerable Ānanda says that he knew 82,000 of the Buddha's discourses (as well as 2,000 by the monks). This works out, over a vigorous forty-five year ministry, to nearly five discourses a day. This is sizable, but many of them are but a few lines, so it is not impossible. However, we should bear in mind that the numerical precision so highly valued in Western culture has been (and is yet) of little importance in Indian culture: these figures are best understood as "a very great many." In India a different sort of precision—Ānanda's—was valued. (See AN 10:95/A V 193–5.)

18. And, clearly, they do not. For example, in the Culla Saccaka Sutta, MN 35/M I 227–37, we are given the account of a talk between the Buddha and Saccaka, who had previously boasted that in debate he would make the Buddha shake, shiver, tremble and sweat. We expect that in the face of such superior wisdom Saccaka will be reduced to silence and dismay; but in the text it requires but four pages of print to accomplish this. Surely Saccaka was a worthier opponent, with sufficient experience and skills at "eel-wriggling" (*amarāvikkhepa*) to last longer than that! We must suppose that the actual talk was of greater length, and that the text gives us but the gist of what was said.

their being accurately remembered, while at the same time preserving their essence as teachings.

The solution that was chosen[19] was to remove superfluous matters, to condense what had been said, to crystallize those aspects of the Teaching which are found repeatedly—the four noble truths, the eightfold path, the method of right conduct, restraint of the faculties, mindfulness, the various levels of meditation, the five aggregates, dependent origination, and so on—into the most concise descriptions possible, to couch the whole of this into a set pattern conducive to memorization, and to introduce as much repetition and re-iteration as possible. A typical Sutta, then, will begin by telling where the discourse took place, it will introduce the person or persons concerned and provide us with any other information necessary; then the theme will be stated concisely; each aspect of the theme will then be brought forward in its turn, repeated, developed (with a copious use of synonyms,) expanded, summarized and re-iterated. Similes may be introduced, in which case by means of parallel construction with the subject matter their relevance will be unmistakable. Each possible permutation will be dealt with in turn, the opening thematic statement will be recapitulated, and the Sutta will then conclude with remarks usually of approval and pleasure. The purpose is clear: to make absolutely certain that the matter at hand is stated so clearly that an intelligent person, open-minded, willing to listen, not bent on his own views, could not possibly misunderstand.[20] Thus the arising of stock material and techniques, and also their spread, as they came into usage among the various companies of monks that flourished, took place during (and not only after) the Buddha's ministry—although, as we shall see, their influence was with limitations: there were those companies that kept to their own forms.

Some find the Suttas, with all of their re-iteration, excruciatingly

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19. As to *how* it was chosen we are given no hint: the Suttas say nothing in this regard. Our information is derived entirely from the results: the Suttas are in fact constructed in the way described.

20. "Monks, these five things lead to the stability, to the non-confusion, to the non-disappearance of the Good Teaching. Which five? Here, monks, the monks master a well-grasped discourse, well laid down by word and line. Monks, of what is well laid down, the purpose is well followed. This, monks, is the first thing that leads to the stability, to the non-confusion, to the non-disappearance of the Good Teaching..."—AN 5:156/A III 179.

boring. "This," they suggest, "could hardly be the message of a Fully Enlightened One." They suppose that because they themselves are not enthralled that therefore the message cannot be that of a Buddha. Not only do they fault the method, but the message as well; for were the message—renunciation—delightful to them, its repetition would hardly be objectionable. But when the idea of non-attachment is appreciated and approved of, then in both their message and their method the Suttas will be found to be both memorable and rememberable.[21]

The Four Nikāyas

EACH company had its own core of favourite Suttas, which newcomers would learn at least in part. Some of these discourses would be derived from talks by the company's own teacher or stories of local monastic history; others would be drawn from the stock common to all groups. Thus we would expect few companies—probably none—not to have within their ranks those who could recite one version or another of such standard texts as deal in full or in brief with "the gradual teaching," "the foundations of mindfulness," and so on. However, we would also expect that from the common pool each company would choose largely not only those discourses whose subject matter appealed to them but also the type of discourse that appealed to them. Thus some groups would learn brief and pithy sayings while others would prefer discourses which developed their subject matter in detail. Still others would gravitate towards texts in which subject matter was intertwined with character and event, resulting in a story-form. This latter sort of text would have particularly appealed on two grounds to monks living near villages or towns. First, such monks would have had the leisure to learn these generally longer Suttas (for life near the towns is easier than life in remote jungle thickets); and second, when the laity would assemble on the new- and full-moon observance days, they would find such Suttas more interesting to listen to than those with little characterization and story. Hence it is the case that the collection of discourses which are long (called the Dīgha Nikāya) does in fact address itself to matters of concern to the laity far more

21. This, however, is in no way an objection to condensations of printed translations—intended for *readers* rather than *listeners*—for the sake of economy of space.

frequently than any of the other collections. Indeed, nearly half the discourses in this collection are addressed to laypeople, and in most others layfolk play a significant role.

Life in the forest is not as easy as life near a town. Aside from time devoted to meditation, there are many time-consuming chores. Forest monks would have less time for the learning of long discourses and perhaps, less inclination: not only are forest monks often more given to meditation than are village monks, they are also less frequently visited by laypeople, and therefore have less need to accommodate lay interests. Many of them, however, would wish to know discourses which dealt instructively in detail with a subject. Thus, one who is practising (say) perception of emptiness would likely find it worthwhile to learn at least one of the discourses which develops this theme[22]. Many forest monks would wish to have at hand, for reference in their practice as well as for the joy of associating with the Good Teaching (*saddhamma*), discourses that consisted of something more than a pithy saying, but which yet were more concerned with instruction than with story and characterization. They would learn Suttas of a moderate length, and they would choose subject matter in accordance with the interests they were pursuing. Hence there is a collection of discourses which are of middle length (Majjhima Nikāya), rich in variety of subject matter, but of less immediate relevance to the concerns of the laity than the longer discourses, and in which the laity play a much smaller role, hardly a quarter of these talks are addressed to laypeople.

Naturally, many teachers taught by way of a particular subject, such as the practice of reflection in regard to, e.g., the sense faculties, or the holding aggregates, or feelings, etc. As today, then too the followers of each teacher would of course take particular interest in learning discourses that pertained to the subject that concerned them or to some other point of interest: nuns would learn discourses involving nuns; the monks living in the forest of Kosala would remember events and talks which took place there, and so on. Hence there tended to coalesce, with no planning necessary, collections of discourses grouped according to subject matter, and today these exist as the Saṃyutta Nikāya.

We see, as we inquire into the Buddha's Teaching, that it is much

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22. "… Because, Ānanda, it is empty of self or of what pertains to self, therefore it is said, 'The world is empty.' …"—SN 35:85/S IV 54.

given to enumeration: three kinds of feeling, four right efforts, five powers, six senses, seven factors of enlightenment, the eightfold path, and so on. This may be regarded as a device to serve both mnemonic and pedagogical purposes. Thus, the meditation levels known as jhānas are almost always enumerated as four and almost always described in accordance with a set pattern. That they need not be so enumerated and described is suggested by among others the Upakkilesa Sutta, MN 138/III 162 (among others), wherein the same range of concentrative attainments is described in six stages. Again, the usual description of those who have seen truth but not yet achieved full purification (i.e. the *sekha*, trainee, or *ariyasāvaka*, noble disciple) is three-fold (viz., Stream-enterer, Once-returner, Non-returner); but at AN 9:12/IV 380–1 we are given a nine-fold division. That these categories are in fact not invariably described according to their usual formulations is strong evidence that they need not be. (Again, higher than actuality stands possibility.) Since the purpose of the Buddha's Teaching is neither to classify nor to analyze but to lead one to see something about oneself, classification is used only for its mnemonic and pedagogical value (though herein its value is great). There are discourses which teach non-attachment to feeling (and other aspects of experience) without making any enumerations: SN 12:12/S II 13; 36:4/IV 206–7; 36:21/IV 230–1, etc. The stock descriptions are commonly given because it was found to be generally easier, both as an aid to memory and in the service of one's own practice, to use them as such. It would be expected, then, that some monks would avail themselves of this numerical device (which is an Indian literary style also found in non-Buddhist texts: the Jaina *Ṭhānāṅga* is an example) and so would learn discourses according to the number of items discussed. Hence today there exists a collection of discourses arranged numerically, up to eleven: the Aṅguttara Nikāya[23].

We can see, then, that even during the life of the Buddha these discourses were not distributed randomly: already they must have been organized, in an embryonic form, along the lines in which we now have them. Indeed, the texts themselves refer—AN 3:20/A I 117 etc.—to *dhammadhara, vinayadhara, mātikādhara*, or those who keep (= learn) the Teaching, those who keep the Discipline, and those who

23. In addition to the four Nikāyas described above, there is a fifth collection, the Khuddaka Nikāya. However, it will be convenient to discuss its growth later, inasmuch as it is of later growth. For now we will consider only the four great Nikāyas.

keep the Summaries, i.e. the Pātimokkha. Their formal organization would not have been a radical and innovative leap, but the logical next step in a process that had already developed to some extent.

However, the Suttas were probably not formally organized into Nikāyas during the Buddha's lifetime. During that time the Canon was still decidedly open and growing. When they became unwieldy in volume, then no doubt some loose organization was evolved—"Let *this* company learn *these* discourses; let *that* company learn *those* discourses"—but any formal structure would have been continuously interrupted, requiring recomposition in order to accommodate popular and important new discourses. Thus the Suttas never refer to themselves in terms of the Nikāyas that we now have. Rather, we find fairly often a nine-fold division of the texts: discourses, mixed prose and verse, expositions, verses, solemn utterances, sayings, birth stories, marvels, catechisms (*sutta, geyya, veyyākaraṇa, gātha, udāna, itivuttaka, jātaka, abbhūtadhamma, vedalla*—MN 22/M I 133, etc. This is not to suggest that the texts were ever organized along this nine-fold division The classification is probably taken from the broad tradition of monasticism existent at that time[24]. This tradition no doubt included criteria according to which teachings could be judged, and the texts sometimes demonstrate (often to non-Buddhist ascetics, e.g. the wanderer, later Venerable Vacchagotta, at MN 73/M I 489–97 that the Teaching was complete in all its parts as judged by these standards (see also AN 7:55/A IV 82–84). But the use of this nine-fold classification shows that the texts do, in fact, describe themselves. Therefore their failure to do so in terms of Nikāyas demonstrates that such a division did not come into existence until after the Canon was no longer fully open, i.e. after the Buddha's decease.

The First Council

"Come, friends: let us recite the Teaching and the Discipline before what is not the Teaching shines forth and the Teaching is put aside, before what is not the Discipline shines forth and the Discipline is put aside, before those who speak what is not the Teaching become

24. As are certain other Canonical technical terms: *jhāna*, for instance, which was certainly known to the Jains—see SN 41:8/S IV 298—and to such outside teachers as Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta—MN 26/M I 164–65. Convincing evidence could be cited for a number of other terms as well.

strong and those who speak what is the Teaching become weak, before those who speak what is not the Discipline become strong and those who speak what is the Discipline become weak."[25]

Thus, a few months after the Buddha's decease a meeting now known as the First Council was held in the hills outside of Rājagaha (modern Rajgir, in Bihar) in order to put the Vinaya and the Suttas into a formal structure for the sake of those who would come later, i.e., us. Venerable Upāli, who had gone forth at the same time as Venerable Ānanda, was designated responsible for the Vinaya, as was Venerable Ānanda for the Suttas. The account of their stewardships consists of but a few lines of reportage, probably edited long after the event—most likely together with the account of the Second Council, the report of which seems to be much more contemporaneous with its subject matter.

The evidence is twofold. First, we would expect the Cullavagga to have, if not fewer, at least not more Khandhakas than the Mahāvagga. In the Suttas we often encounter Mahā/Culla pairs, and the Mahā is invariably the longer. At any rate the Tenth Khandhaka of the Cullavagga is concerned with the nuns. It would be inconsistent with attitudes displayed elsewhere in the texts for the nuns' disciplinary matters to be placed ahead of the monks' concerns, particularly such an important concern as the Council. Therefore, the account of the Councils must have been appended at a time when the Vinaya was already considered closed to interpolations. Indeed, the account of the Councils was almost certainly the final addition to the Vinaya texts.

Second, it is said in Khandhaka XI that Venerable Ānanda recited the *five Nikāyas*. Therefore the account could not have been edited until a time when the five Nikāyas actually existed. Since the Suttas never refer to themselves as consisting of Nikāyas at all, let alone as five, if we were to assume the account to be contemporary, we would be forced to suppose that this classification came into being quite dramatically. It is more reasonable to suppose that a body of material existed which, though not formally included in the First Council compilation, adhered to it as supplementary matter; that that material must have included an account of the Council itself; and that it, as well as certain other materials, eventually came to be

25. So Venerable Mahā Kassapa, the elected head of the First Council; Cullavagga XI.1.1/Vin II 284.

included in the Canon before the Canon itself was regarded as closed. The account was included at a time when the five Nikāyas already existed as formally organized bodies of texts, but probably was codified quite soon after, for the specification of the number *five* suggests an attempt to legitimize the last of them, the Khuddaka Nikāya.

Be that as it may, it is not difficult, despite the brevity of the reportage, to imagine what must have taken place. The Council was no mere recitation of texts: that had been going on for forty-five years and did not require a special assembly. The Council's aim must have been two-fold:

1) To decide what, out of the vast store of material at hand, should be given the protection of formal organization; and

2) To set up a mechanism to preserve this material.

Obviously it couldn't *all* be saved. Not only were there the Buddha's discourses, all 82,000 of them (or so),[26] but also the discourses of many other monks, some of them learned, wise, enlightened, liberated. Some of the discourses were duplicates—the monks from Sāvatthī remembering the Buddha saying such-and-such when he was there; the monks from Kusināra remembering him saying quite the same thing on a visit to them—others varied in greater or lesser extent. Some variations were revealing, others perhaps less so. These elders wanted this discourse included, those elders had other requests. In addition to the formal discourses there were events of some significance: the famine in Verañjā and its effects on the Order, Devadatta's attempt at a schism, an attempt on Venerable Sāriputta's life (Ud 4.4/39–41)), and so on. Which of these were worthy of preservation? Which would be of less value to those who came later? How much was enough, and how much too much? These decisions were, with regard to the Suttas, Venerable Ānanda's responsibility as, with regard to the Vinaya, they were Venerable Upāli's.

The selection being made, it was then necessary to assign to

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26. We noted earlier (footnote 15) that Venerable Ānanda knew 84,000 discourses. The four Nikāyas as we now have them— sixteen volumes; 5,500 pages in their abbreviated roman-script edition—contain according to the Commentarial reckoning a total of 17,505 discourses (some are quite short). Though the precise number of discourses is problematical, we can see that in any case what was included, voluminous as it is, is but a fraction of what was available.

different teachers the responsibility of learning and passing on a certain portion of a collection; for even among the august members of the Council—there were 500 elders, we are told, "not one more, not one less," and all were liberated—few would have been able to learn the Suttas in their entirety. If one-hundred of them took responsibility for the Vinaya, there would have been one-hundred each for the long discourses, the middle length discourses, the grouped collection, and the enumerated collection[27]. Even though most monks could take responsibility for passing on to their following no more than a portion of a collection, yet every part of this organized recension would have been the responsibility of a large number of schools. Thus, if one or several schools died out, their tradition would not thereby be lost.

(A digression here on the question of memory may be worthwhile. Literate people sometimes express doubt that large segments of text could have been accurately remembered during the five centuries before they were first written down. But anthropologists have often remarked on the extraordinary and proven ability of their non-literate informants to remember accurately. It would seem that the comparatively poor memory of literate folk is due to their very literacy: they don't *need* to cultivate the faculty of memory. They forget (if they ever knew) that like all faculties, if they don't use it they lose it. In literate cultures that part of experience that is not readily recordable tends to become impoverished: literacy is not without it's drawbacks.

(Although Venerable Ānanda was pre-eminent in the ability to learn discourses apparently possessing what today is called a "photographic memory", the ability to remember segments of texts which, in print, take up a volume or more, was not an unusual ability. Even today, when we have authoritative editions of all the texts printed in a variety of scripts, the ability is not unheard of.

(In Burma government-regulated examinations are offered monks annually to test their recall of the texts, as well as their

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27. These figures—other than the "500"—are entirely speculative. Their purpose is only to demonstrate that, whatever the specific details, a mechanism for preserving the texts was entirely feasible. However, the Commentarial assertion—*Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* I,13—that primary responsibility for these four collections was assigned respectively to Venerable Ānanda, the pupils of Venerable Sāriputta, Venerable Mahā Kassapa and Venerable Anuruddha, lends support to our suggestion.

understanding of them. At present (1983) there are in Burma alone four monks who have demonstrated their ability to recite by memory not only the Vinaya and Sutta collections in their entirety, both of which are more voluminous today than in their original First Council recension, but also the seven volumes of the (later) Abhidhamma. Since 1949 when the examinations were first offered, 67 monks have passed the oral and written examinations for the five volumes of the Vinaya and 265 have done so for the Suttas comprising sixteen volumes. Additionally, well over 300 monks have passed oral and written examinations proving their perfect recall and understanding of one entire Nikāya (Dīgha: 122; Majjhima: 89; Saṃyutta: 52; Aṅguttara: 55). The number who can recite large portions of a Nikāya—a volume or more—must be substantially higher. In Sri Lanka, where recitation is also greatly valued but where, however, examinations are not offered, one can find many more such reciters[28].)

(When we remember that the cultivation of mindfulness and awareness is a central discipline in the Buddha's Teaching, that the Suttas were arranged in as mnemonic a manner as possible, that monks were encouraged to review often the discourses in their minds and that they were expected to meet frequently for group rehearsals, both within their own company and together with other companies, we will not be surprised that at a time when memorization was the only way to transmit the Teaching, such an ability, assiduously fostered, would be widespread and reliable. It will be seen, then, that it was not (as is often asserted) due to the writing down of the texts that they achieved their definitive form. Well before that time, when they had come to be regarded as sacred, there already existed a method whereby they could be transmitted from generation to generation without error.)

Not everyone agreed with what was being done. A wandering monk, the leader of a large company, Venerable Purāṇa, while travelling through the Southern Hills south of Rājagaha, came to the cave in the canebrake where the Council was meeting. At this time the Vinaya and Suttas had already been recited (i.e. organized, assigned and rehearsed).

"Friend Purāṇa," the elders said to him, "the Teaching and Discipline have been recited together by the elder monks. Please submit yourself

28. Data courtesy: Religious Affairs Department, Rangoon.

to this recitation."

"Friends," he replied, "the Teaching and Discipline are well-recited by the elders. But in the way I have heard them in the Exalted One's presence, in the way that I have received them in his presence, thus will I bear it in mind."—Cullavagga XI.1,11/Vin II 288–9.

Thereby Venerable Purāṇa rejected not only the organization of the Suttas into collections but, apparently, the structuring of the Suttas individually into the form in which they had been cast for transmission. The Council had no "legal" status by which it could compel other monks to submit to its decisions nor is the notion of compulsion consistent with the spirit of the Suttas and the Vinaya: its strength lay in the collective repute, the upright conduct, and the wisdom of its individual members. They could urge, and perhaps generally receive, compliance; but they could not command it. Probably, then, Venerable Purāṇa was not the only teacher who chose to go his own way. Others too, though acknowledging that the Council's recension was well-recited—i.e., providing right-view guidance—may have preferred to continue teaching according to their own methods. We don't know for sure for none of those other traditions have survived. The only record we have today of the Buddha's Teaching is that dependent upon the collective repute, the upright conduct, and the wisdom of the individuals who comprised the First Council.

Later Additions

"But how do we know," it may be asked, "that with the closing of the First Council the Sutta recension that they compiled remained intact, without additions? For if no additions were made later then, true enough, we would have here the actual Teaching of the Buddha. But what grounds are there for accepting this as so?"

A good and important question. The answer being, that we *don't* know that "no additions were made later": quite the contrary, we *do* know they were made.

The Canon had been open and growing for nearly a half century. For it to be suddenly closed, and for there to be an immediate acceptance of that closure sufficiently widespread for it to be effective, is contrary to reason. Only when the compilation had come to be generally regarded as sacrosanct could the Canon be successfully closed; and such an attitude necessarily develops

gradually (witness Ven. Purāṇa). And the evidence of the Suttas themselves supports this view. There are, for example, discourses in which Venerable Ānanda appears not as the Buddha's shadow but quite apart from the Buddha. In these discourses he is regarded, except by Venerable Mahā Kassapa, as a respected elder; at AN 10:96/ A V 198) he is called *mahā-ācariya*, "great teacher" and at SN 16:11/S II 218) he is said to have been touring the Southern Hills leading a great company of monks. It is clear that at least some of these discourses took place after his attendancy on the Buddha had ended, with the decease of his master. Indeed, two of them—Subha Sutta, DN 10, and Gopaka-Moggallāna Sutta, MN 108—state specifically in their introductory material (D I 204 and M III 7) that they took place "not long after" the Buddha's decease. And there are discourses involving monks other than Venerable Ānanda in which the text itself informs us that the conversation took place after the Buddha's passing away[29]. Nor can we reasonably suppose all these talks to have occurred during the few months between the Buddha's decease and the convening of the First Council. Some of them may have, but Madhura (of MN 84), for instance, was in Western India, not so far from present-day Delhi but a great distance From Rājagaha, over very bad roads (AN 5:220/A III 256)): even if the discourse itself had originated before the Council met, it could hardly have become known in Rājagaha in such a short time, let alone become popular enough for inclusion in the recension. But even if such is maintained, there still remains the Bakkula Sutta, MN 124/M III 124–28, in which Venerable Bakkula asserts, at least thirty-three times, that he has been a monk for eighty years.

Now, all accounts agree that the Buddha's decease took place forty-five years after his awakening. Therefore even if Venerable Bakkula had been ordained very soon after the establishment of the Order[30], the discourse still had to have taken place at least thirty-five years after the closing of the First Council. And in all likelihood it took place even later than that (although Venerable Bakkula could

29. E.g. the Madhura Sutta, MN 84/M II 83–90, with Venerable Mahā Kaccāna and King Avantiputta of Madhura; the Ghotamukha Sutta, MN 94/ M II 157–63, with Venerable Udena and the brāhmaṇa Ghotamukha.

30. This, however, is unlikely. Venerable Bakkula seems to be mentioned, in the whole of the four Nikāyas, in only one other context: in AN 1:14/A I 25 he is declared by the Buddha to be foremost among all monks in respect of good health.

not have been spoken of by the Buddha unless his ordination took place during the Buddha's lifetime: i.e. the Bakkula Sutta postdates the First Council, but by less than eighty years). We can be quite certain, then, that the First Council did not produce the version of the texts that we now have. But we can be equally certain that the compilation they produced is in no way dramatically different from what we now have. Consider:

If we examine the seven Suttas just referred to, we will notice that they have in common a distinctive feature. Whereas the usual way the discourses begin is: "One time the Exalted One was dwelling at..."[31] *these* discourses make no mention of where the Buddha dwelt. Rather, they begin: "One time Venerable Ānanda (or Venerable Udena, or whoever) was dwelling at..." In other words, by this method they inform us at the very start that they are in fact later additions and are not to be taken as having been part of the First Council's compilation[32]. There is no attempt to disguise the fact. On the contrary, there is a conscientiousness in its assertion.

And when we look through the Nikāyas we find other discourses which follow this same form: "One time Ven. So-and-so was dwelling at..." Although they do not always otherwise declare themselves to be later additions—for once should be enough—yet often we can find further telltale evidence that this is so. Thus for example in the Dīgha Nikāya aside from the already-mentioned Subha Sutta, there is only one other discourse out of the thirty-four in that collection wherein

31. Because the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas contain numerous short discourses, therein this formula is often abbreviated or omitted entirely. This almost certainly was done by the later scribes rather than the earlier reciters. In these instances we know that the Buddha is the speaker by his use of the term *bhikkhave*, the vocative form for "monks"; for in those days all monks addressed one another as *āvuso* (= "reverend" or "sir"); only the Buddha used the term *bhikkhave*.

32. This is in distinction to those Suttas, presumably *not* later additions, in which although the Buddha plays no part whatsoever in the narrative, yet his dwelling place at that time is nevertheless given according to the usual formula. Examples will be found at DN 34; MN 5, 9, 28, 69, 76, 127; SN 5:1, 6:3, 6, 9; AN 6:34, etc. A comparison of SN 55:52/S V 405–6 and SN 56:30/S V 436–7 points up the distinction. In neither case does the Buddha appear "on stage"; in both cases he is quoted; the first discourse begins "One time the Buddha was dwelling at..."; the second begins "One time a number of senior monks were dwelling at..."

we are told the dwelling not of the Buddha but of the main individual, Venerable Kumara Kassapa, in this case. This discourse—the Pāyāsi Sutta, DN 23/D II 316–58—involves a long discussion between Venerable Kassapa and the chieftain Pāyāsi, mainly on the subject of rebirth. The chieftain presents a series of thought-out reasonings as evidence that there is no rebirth. Venerable Kassapa presents counter-arguments, primarily in the form of elaborate similes[33], showing the flaws in Pāyāsi's theses. In the end, although Venerable Kassapa does not actually *offer* any arguments in favour of rebirth, Pāyāsi declares himself to be both convinced and pleased.

Now, on numerous occasions the Buddha declared that for beings constrained by craving there is rebirth (SN 22:25/S III 26) etc). He said that he could remember his own past lives (MN 4/M I 22) etc), that he could see the passing on of beings according to their deeds (MN 4/M I 22–3) etc), and that by means of certain mental practices others could develop these abilities (AN 10:102/A V 211) etc), and had done so: e.g. the Venerable Mahā Moggallāna and Anuruddha. But nowhere do the Suttas record the Buddha arguing in favour of rebirth on *logical* grounds; nor would we expect him to do so for rebirth is not a matter of logic. Yet despite Venerable Kassapa's assertion that until then he had neither seen nor heard of anyone sharing Pāyāsi's views, there must have been many sceptics to judge both from the views ascribed by the texts to the various teachers of the day and from the frequency with which the Suttas assert rebirth; and most monks—even among those who had personally achieved complete self-purification—would have had to accept rebirth on the basis of confidence in the Buddha rather than from direct knowledge (see SN 12:70/S II 122–3, and compare AN 7:54/A IV 78–82). After the Buddha's decease, then, there was a strongly felt need for some sort of textual authority to lend support to these monks on the question of rebirth, just as the Madhura Sutta, mentioned earlier, seems to

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33. Like Venerable Bakkula, Venerable Kumāra Kassapa is mentioned elsewhere in the four Nikāyas only at AN 1:14/A I 24, where he is declared foremost in respect of embellished speech. Had the Pāyāsi Sutta not been appended to the Canon, we would have had no example of this. He is also mentioned once in the Vinaya. In affirming the validity of his admission to the Order, for which one must be at least twenty years of age, the Buddha stated that age is reckonable not from birth but from conception, declaring that it is in the womb that "the mind (*citta*) first arises, consciousness (*viññāṇa*) first becomes manifest."—Mahāvagga 1.75/Vin I 92.

have been included to lend support to the Buddhist teaching of ethical equality between castes. It matters not at all that Venerable Kassapa's similes are unlikely to convince a modern sceptic: they were appropriate to their time; they filled an existing need. And that need would have been felt most strongly among the reciters and preservers of the long discourses.

The Pāyāsi Sutta (which is obviously the model for the much later *Milindapañhā*) could have been made much shorter—and hence included in any of the other Nikāyas—by eliminating extraneous introductory and concluding material and some of the more elaborate similes; so it was not only due to considerations of length that it came to be included in the Dīgha Nikāya[34]. Rather, questions about rebirth are more apt to be raised by the laity (whose goal is to obtain a good rebirth) than by monks (whose aim is to transcend rebirth entirely), and in fact the arguments of the Pāyāsi Sutta, concerned as they are with reasoning and simile, are more likely to convince a layperson than a practising monk who—questions of relevance aside—might be better convinced by evidence concerned with direct reflexion and perception. Of the four Nikāyas the Dīgha is, for reasons we have already noted, the one most directed to the interests of laypeople (thus lending substantiation to the Commentarial suggestion that Venerable Ānanda was primarily responsible for this collection). Hence the monks who would most likely seek textual support on the question of rebirth would be the *Dīghabhāṇakas*, the "reciters of the Dīgha." There would have developed among the individuals of the various companies who shared the responsibility for various portions of the long discourses a consensus that the Pāyāsi Sutta, until then a part of the peripheral material known by those reciters but not included in their texts, should be formally included in the Nikāya. Since the Dīgha is divided into three *vaggas*, or sections (each about a volume in length), and since the Pāyāsi Sutta, is now the last discourse of the second *vagga*, the responsibility apparently was assigned to or taken up by those who recited the middle portion of the long discourses. (However, it was not always the case that later Suttas came to be placed at the end of a *vagga*, as the evidence shows.)

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34. Nor is length an absolute criterion. There are at least fifteen Suttas in the other three Nikāyas that are longer than the shortest of the Dīgha Suttas.

The discourse makes no claim to being the *ipsissima verba* of the Buddha. It presents itself as being, in its central portion, a conversation between a certain fairly obscure monk and a certain layman, apparently mentioned nowhere else in the Suttas; there is no reason not to accept it on those terms. It acknowledges itself to be a later addition (as the Commentator Dhammapāla points out at Vimānavatthu Commentary, p. 297: indeed, every discourse identified by the traditional commentaries as post-First Council begins, it seems, with the "One time Venerable So-and-so" formula). But it was not a haphazard addition: the mechanism by which the Suttas were passed on necessitated, before the Canon was closed, that additional material could be inserted only when there was a common accord among those who were responsible for a portion of the texts.

Turning now to the Majjhima Nikāya we learn more about the process of adding discourses. Other than those already mentioned there are two discourses in the Majjhima that make no mention of the Buddha's dwelling place: the Anumāna Sutta, MN 15/M I 95–100) and the Māratajjaniya Sutta, MN 50/I 332–8. Both begin: "One time Venerable Mahā Moggallāna dwelt in Bhagga Country…" Since we know from SN 47:14/S V 163–5 that both Sāriputta and Mahā Moggallāna predeceased the Buddha, the discourses themselves could not have taken place after the time of the First Council, as was evidently the case with the Pāyāsi Sutta; rather they were simply not included in that compilation[35]. But we note that the two Majjhima Suttas have the same venue, and that the Bhagga Country was an out-of-the-way place, at least as measured by the infrequency of its mention in the Suttas[36]. Since Venerable Mahā Moggallāna and Venerable Sāriputta were the two chief disciples of the Buddha, the monks living among the Bhaggas would certainly have remembered the former's visit to them and would have kept in mind what he had

35. There are a number of other discourses which also begin "One time Ven. So-and-so…" but which similarly must have been delivered during the Buddha's lifetime. For example there are about seventy-five such Suttas involving either or both Ven. Mahā Moggallāna or Ven. Sāriputta. There are also two Suttas (SN 41:9/S IV 300–302 and AN 2:36/A I 65–7) wherein it is specifically stated in the dialogue that the Buddha was then living (at Sāvatthī, in the latter instance, but in the former the location is not given). Therefore we cannot assert that all "One time Ven. So-and-so…" discourses were delivered after the Buddha's decease: only that they came to be included in the Canon at a later date.

said and done, as part of their local tradition.

There must have been in residence there some companies of *majjhimabhāṇakas*, preserving at least the first third of the Majjhima Nikāya (which today contains 152 Suttas and, like the Dīgha, is divided into three volume-length *vaggas*). They would be the ones to have wished to include these two discourses—all the more precious for having taken place *here*—in their collection, to raise them from the lower status of local tradition and to afford them additional protection against being lost. When meeting with neighbouring *majjhimabhāṇakas* (as they must have done from time to time, not only to recite together) they successfully convinced their fellow-monks to include these two discourses in their own recitations. Thus, due in effect to local boosterism, the Canon grew. And when we look at the Saṃyutta Nikāya we find further evidence of this.

In the entire Vana Saṃyutta (SN 9/S I 197–205) we find no mention of the Buddha. And all but one of these fourteen discourses take place in Kosala. The monks living in the woods (*vana*) of Kosala apparently managed to get their own local tradition, much involved with deities, included in the Canon. So apparently did the followers of Venerable Sāriputta, for although elsewhere in the Nikāyas he is found frequently in discussion with the Buddha, in the Sāriputta Saṃyutta (SN 28; S III 235–40)) none of the ten discourses make mention of the Teacher; nine of them take place in Sāvatthī. Similarly the four consecutive Saṃyuttas (38–41) named after, respectively, the wanderers Jambukhādaka and Sāmaṇḍaka (each containing sixteen conversations with Venerable Sāriputta, the first set entirely in Magadha, the second among the Vajjians), Venerable Mahā Moggallāna (eleven discourses, all set in Sāvatthī), and the lay disciple Citta (ten discourses, all set at Macchikāsaṇḍa) are apparently later additions to the Saṃyutta Nikāya of discourses already in existence when the First Council met, but not compiled by them. (The Suttas

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36. A number of other “One time Ven. So-and-so…” discourses are also set in remote locales: Āḷavi, Avantī, Cetī, Madhura, etc., generally West of the centres where the texts locate; Venerable Ānanda: Vesāli, Pāṭaliputta, Rājagaha, Kosambi. Although during the Buddha’s day the West of India was still “pioneer country” as regards the Teaching, we know (as discussed in the Appendix) that within a century of the First Council these western territories had risen to monastic prominence (and, perhaps, cultural importance as well: Taxila was already a centre of learning even in the Buddha’s day: Mahāvagga 8.1.6–7/Vin I 269–70.

concerned with Citta clearly reveal attitudes of lay devotees rather than of monks.)

And there are further examples in both the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas; but we need not investigate them, for we can see by now that the method whereby any new material could be inserted into the collections had to involve a consensus as to its suitability and also to include in each case a "warning label"—"Venerable So-and-so was dwelling at…"—that the discourse is not part of the original compilation. There are about 200 such discourses, filling roughly 350 pages of print, which is about six per cent of the total.

And by the same evidence we can know that neither was any material lost nor were any of the Suttas arbitrarily altered. For exactly the same mechanism that required consensus in order to add to the Canon would have come into force had any attempt been made to alter a text. And we can well imagine the difficulty, the virtual impossibility from the very outset, of such a consensus being achieved in order to alter what had been laid down by those very monks who were venerated as the founders of the various lineages (see SN 14:15/S II 155–7).

In order for any Sutta or part of a Sutta to have been lost, we should have to suppose either a collective amnesia among all the monks of all the companies who were reciters of that Sutta—hundreds, or more probably thousands of ambulatory amnesiacs!—or else the breaking up and disappearance of every single company responsible for a certain portion of the Suttas—and this in a time when all the evidence indicates that the Order was thriving and growing—together with the refusal or inability of any single monk (or ex-monk) from any of those lost companies to come forward to teach the texts to the surviving groups. A most improbable combination of events! No, the evidence shows clearly that there were additions to the texts, but to suppose either substantial changes or losses is contrary to reason.

It must be emphasized (primarily for the benefit of scholarly readers) that we did not begin by assuming that Suttas which do not refer to the Buddha in their introductory material are therefore later additions to the Canon. Rather, we first discovered a few Suttas that certainly describe events that had taken place after the Buddha's decease. Examining them, we noticed that they possessed one feature in common and in distinction to the great majority of discourses. We then looked at other texts which also displayed this feature and

found therein further grounds to accept that those texts, too, were probably later additions to the Canon. We described in detail the evidence found in several of these texts and indicated in brief other Suttas providing additional evidence; but we do not propose to present the data to be found in a number of other texts, for to do so would require a very long and technical and uninteresting digression. We will note only that this evidence consists of a large number of small, and a few not-so-small, points, all tending in the same direction, with no cases of an opposite tendency[37].

For how long did this process of slow accretion continue? We can be quite certain that by the time of the Second Council, which met a century after the Buddha's decease, the process had already ended, the four Nikāyas being regarded as closed, and that this view was ratified and finalized by that Council. The evidence:

All additional Suttas involve "first generation" monks, i.e. contemporaries of the Buddha but who, in some cases, outlived the Teacher[38]. The only instance which can reasonably be considered an exception is that of Venerable Nārada, whose talk with King Muṇḍa—Ajātasattu's great-grandson, according to later accounts—is recorded at AN 5:50/A III 57–62. However, even in this case we have a discourse at SN 12:68/S II 115–8—clearly earlier than the Aṅguttara Sutta, for there he is said to be already a worthy one (*arahat*), i.e. fully liberated, whereas here he is self-described as not yet *arahat*, still a *sekha*—where Venerable Ānanda also has a part. So if Venerable Nārada was not contemporaneous with the Buddha, he was at least not far from it. At any rate, Venerable Nārada's discourse to King Muṇḍa is, as we have it, identical to a discourse to the monks spoken by the Buddha: AN 5:48/A III 54–56.

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37. Since this evidence—"One time Venerable so-and-so dwelt at..."—once noted seems obvious, it may be wondered why it has been unreported until now. That the Commentaries should not remark upon it is not remarkable, not only because they lacked in the Fifth Century A.D. the scholarly apparatus available today—word- and name-dictionaries, concordances, indexes, etc. and of course printed editions of the texts, annotated and convenient to use—but also because India has been historically unhistorical-minded (see footnote 15): a concern with dates has traditionally been regarded as secondary to the act of placing one's faith in a teaching. Historical questions are a particularly Western concern. As to why, therefore, modern scholars have failed to note this evidence, it may be kindest to allow each reader to form his own judgment.

Later sources tell us that it was during the time of Kālasoka, the third Magadhese king after Munda, that the Second Council convened. The Vinaya's description of this Council is much more detailed than, and about twice the length of, its report on the First Council. The impetus for the meeting was the exposure and condemnation of certain relaxations of monastic discipline which had arisen among a company of monks centred in Vesāli (the famous "ten points," the most important of which concerned a relaxation of the prohibition against "accepting, using, or consenting to the deposit of money"). We are told of the politicking that went on before the Council met, and we are introduced to the main players in that drama, the leading monks of the day. Not one of these eight monks nor any of the lesser monks mentioned is known to the four Nikāyas. If the four Nikāyas had been then regarded as open to additional material, surely we would expect to find these monks represented[39].

What happened is clear: however highly these monks might have been regarded individually, (for, of course, some of them would have achieved full purification) those monks who were not contemporaries of the Buddha could never achieve the distinction of those who had known him personally. Later monks belonged, inevitably, to a particular lineage which (like caste) could not be transcended. Only the founding elders, those who had established the lineages, could be regarded as beyond those lines. If the doings and sayings of these second generation monks were admitted to the Nikāyas, where would it end? The decision that needed to be reached if the Nikāyas were to survive at all was that with the passing of the

38. A half dozen or so of these later discourses speak only of "a certain (unnamed) monk," or "a group of monks." Naturally in these cases we cannot know definitely that the monks were contemporaries of the Buddha. However, there is no reason to suppose otherwise: we find other texts wherein unnamed monks converse with the Buddha. There are another half-dozen or so Suttas involving monks who are mentioned nowhere else in the Canon and whose generation therefore cannot be established except by reference to post-Canonical works. Again, this is a feature found in some Suttas that are not later additions. At any rate, we would expect that were there any Suttas involving second generation monks, at least some of those monks would have been well-known leaders of companies, not the obscure or unnamed. No discourses involving nuns, it seems, are later additions.

first generation the collections *had* to be closed. Had they been left open they would have become amorphous and protean—not to be confused with "rich and varied"!—and would have lost their very purpose. Therefore whatever pressures may have developed to incorporate this or that "second generation" discourse needed to be opposed and obviously were.

The Fifth Nikāya

THE material which was admitted to the Four Nikāyas during the first century after the Buddha was but a fraction of what was remembered. Much of this material, which included a great deal of verse[40], must have been in common circulation, the preserve of no single lineage or group of companies; for within the four Nikāyas and also within the Vinaya we find not only one Sutta referring to another[41] but also, here and there, Suttas referring to material which

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39. One of these monks, Venerable Sabbakāmī, has some verses (453–58) in the Theragātha of the Khuddaka Nikāya (see below)—appropriately enough, on the subject of sensuality (*kāma*). He is specifically identified in the report of the Second Council as being the oldest monk in the world, 120 years of age, and as having been a pupil of Venerable Ānanda.

Westerners sometimes express surprise, or more than surprise, at the number of monks reported to have lived to extreme old age. However, it is recognized that the qualities that are co-adjuncts of mental calmness (lack of bodily stress, etc.) contribute to longevity; and since it is the business of monks to cultivate calmness (though not for the sake of long life), it is to be expected that monks would outlive the general populace. The Suttas tell us—Dhp 109, etc.—that longevity is also linked to respect for one's elders. However, since this would not seem to be statistically quantifiable it is unlikely that Western medical science will ever be in a position either to confirm or disprove this thesis.

40. Surprise is sometimes expressed at the quantity of verse in the five Nikāyas. But verse not only has obvious mnemonic value whereby the compilers would give it priority over prose passages; less obviously but more importantly it has great inspirational value. It is sometimes suggested that not only was verse if ever seldom spoken spontaneously as the texts often report, but also that much of it "must have been" created in a later—i.e., more literate—time. Such is the prejudice of a prosaic era; but a more poetic age—Elizabethan England, for example—would not have shared this misconception.

lies outside the first four Nikāyas[42]. There was also new material being generated to fulfil new needs (as with the Pāyāsi Sutta on rebirth), or to describe new events (as with Ven. Nārada's talk to King Muṇḍa). What was to be done with all of this? To add substantially to the Nikāyas would have established an unfortunate precedent leading to the inevitable dissipation of their integrity; yet to leave the material disorganized would be to abandon much that was worthy to an early destruction. The solution chosen was the creation of the fifth collection, the Khuddaka Nikāya.

Khuddaka means "small" and at first the Khuddaka Nikāya was indeed small. Today, with fifteen separate sections, it is the most voluminous of the Nikāyas, but originally it consisted of probably six or seven separate short texts, each of which had been compiled and preserved, prior to inclusion in the Nikāya, individually on its own merits.

The Theragātha and Therigātha, for instance, consist of the verses of various monks and nuns, respectively. Here there can be no doubt that some of the verses are by second generation disciples (e.g. Venerable Pārāpariya's verses, 920–948), and that the texts grew substantially after the First Council. This is only to be expected: the two collections do not pretend otherwise. The Dhammapada is a collection of popular verses. Quite a few are to be found elsewhere among the Suttas, but as many or more are unique to this compilation. Most of the verses stand alone, unconnected to the others. We have no direct evidence as to the date of its closure, but the arrangement and distribution of the verses suggest that it could well have grown during the first century. The Sutta Nipāta is, like the Dhammapada, a collection of popular verse, but it differs in that its verses form longer poems, each of which is regarded as a discourse. Indeed, some of them have prose attached, as a sort of introductory bunting. A few of the poems appear within the four Nikāyas; the remainder are the most popular of those longer poems that are not included therein. As such, a number of its passages are quoted within

41. Although we are unable to cite an example of such a referring Sutta which does not seem to be a later addition, at least one such text—SN 46:3/ S IV 286–7—was evidently not a later creation, but was spoken during the Buddha's lifetime.

42. As at, e.g., Mahāvagga 5.13.9/Vin I 195–6 = Ud 5.6/59, at SN 12:31/S II 47–50, at AN 3:32/A I 133–4, etc. The above examples all refer to or quote from passages found today in the Sutta Nipāta of the Khuddaka Nikāya.

the four Nikāyas (as noted above), which has given rise to the mistaken view that the Sutta Nipāta contains the "oldest layer" of texts. Certainly, some of the Sutta Nipāta texts are contemporaneous with the first four Nikāyas; but they do not pre-date them[43].

The Udāna is a collection of eighty solemn utterances spoken by the Buddha on special occasions. The Itivuttaka contains 112 short Suttas, each accompanied by verses, the relevance of which is not always apparent. This fact together with some seeming textual corruptions suggest that it may have had a longer independent life before being incorporated into the Khuddaka Nikāya. If this is so, it indicates what happened to those texts that did not receive the formal protection of organization.

"The Jātaka contains only the verses connected with the 547 tales of previous existences of the Buddha. The [prose] tales are in a commentary of the fifth century A.D., which claims to be translated from Sinhalese [to Pali].... Professor T. W. Rhys Davids has stated that these tales are 'old stories, fairy tales, and fables, the most important collection of ancient folklore extant,' which we are not able to deny."[44]

Since the Jātaka verses are often incomprehensible without the prose commentary, it is difficult to see how they could predate the prose. The prose, however, would predate the fifth century commentary into which it was translated and collected. The origin of these verses, then, remains indeterminate. It is sometimes thought that since these three texts—Udāna, Itivuttaka, Jātaka—are mentioned as part of the ninefold description of texts (see above) that they must

43. This notion of older and younger layers of text assumes, contrary to the evidence, that the first four Nikāyas grew over a period of centuries by a process of heterogeneous accretion until they reached their present form. As such, it is part of the syncretistic approach which we have already rejected. Certainly some discourses are older than others inasmuch as they did not all appear simultaneously on one sunny afternoon. Other than the few exceptions already discussed, it took about forty-five years for them to evolve; and it should be no great surprise that various individuals, including the Buddha, might, on occasion, refer to or even quote from what had already been said.

44. Venerable Aggamahāpaṇḍita A. P. Buddhadatta Mahāthera, on p. 260 of his collection of monographs, *Corrections of Geiger's Mahāvaṃsa Etc.* (Ambalangoda, Ceylon, 1957).

be, like the Sutta Nipāta, part of "the oldest layer" of texts that we now have; but it is more reasonable to suggest that they were so named because the ninefold description was already in existence.

The other eight texts that are today included within the Khuddaka Nikāya are generally regarded as late additions, and need not be discussed.

The formation of this collection probably arose during the century between the two Councils rather than with the Second Council itself: such developments need time to generate strength and achieve general acceptance. By the time the Council assembled, the force of opinion would have already been in favour of including this new collection in the Canon: the Council's function herein would have been to ratify and reinforce this consensus and, no doubt, to decide upon its organizational details. They would also have had a hand in deciding final organisational details for the other Nikāyas and for the Vinaya. It was possibly at this time, for example, that DN 16—see Preface, paragraph six—was expanded to its present form (or at least a previous expansion was at this time ratified) by including passages taken from the other parts of the Nikāyas. And, too, those few texts, the "six percent" which had been added to their collections by the various *bhāṇakas*, would have been cast now into their final forms[45].

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45. That the Twelfth Khandhaka account of this Council makes no mention whatsoever of a recitation of the Suttas, nor any decisions as to the fifth Nikāya, nor the placement of later additions within the four Nikāyas, does not mean that they were not done then. First, the report as given omits a number of other important details as well, such as the refusal of the Vesāli company to accept the Council's decisions and to abandon their practices. Second, it would be expected by all monks as a matter of course that whenever a body of monks met, they would review their texts in order to prevent (or discover) variances. Third, the purpose of the account was to condemn the Vesāli monks. The full list of ten points is censured, item by item, three times in the space of fifteen pages and denounced as a whole many times more. To have reported on other matters would have diluted the force of the anathematization. Finally, in the Bakkula Sutta (discussed above) a phrase is inserted—"inasmuch as for eighty years Venerable Bakkula has..."—after each statement of Venerable Bakkula's achievements. This phrase (according to the Commentary: M-a IV 193) was inserted by the elders who made the recension of the Teaching. We are not told which elders, but from our own examination we can see clearly that it would have had to have been the elders of this Second Council.

It needed to be done, for the monks of the Vesāli company, along with their supporters, seem (according to a non-Canonical text, the *Dīpavaṃsa*, vv. 32ff.) to have refused to accept the ruling of the Council, breaking away and forming their own council, wherein they re-arranged and, it seems, added to the texts to suit their own purposes. During the next 250 years this company split up and resplintered into numerous factions, each having evolved its own set of doctrines and disciplinary codes[46]. None of these texts have survived: again, as with Venerable Purāṇa, we learn the survival-value of organization[47]. The fact that the Suttas and Vinaya[48] have survived as coherent entities can now be seen to be itself strong evidence that they have survived unchanged.

Conclusions

WITH the closing of the Second Council we have no further Canonical information regarding the history of the Suttas. Gleanings from later texts inform us that a Third Council was held in the time of King Asoka, at which meeting the rift which had opened up more than a century earlier, with the Second Council, now widened and

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46. Some scholars might question the identification of the Vesāli company with the progenitors of the splinter groups or suggest, more modestly, that only some of these sects evolved from the Vesāli monks, the remainder breaking away from the Councils' lineage at later dates. These are scholarly issues, which it would be out of place to discuss here. Perhaps the fullest discussion, together with informative charts, is to be found in the Prefatory Notes to the Aung/Rhys Davids translation of the Kathāvatthu (*Points of Controversy*, Pāḷi Text Society, London, 1915).
47. Though these texts have not survived as collections, yet scattered fragments have been rediscovered in Sanskrit, and more coherent units have been preserved in Chinese and Tibetan translations.
48. The evolution of the Vinaya is parallel to that of the Suttas. A description of its evolution would be more complex, partly due to the need to consider what is nowadays known as the "old commentary"; but it would follow the same lines of reasoning used herein; and it would arrive at the same conclusions: like the four Nikāyas, the Vinaya achieved essentially its final form during the first century following the Buddha. The question of when the "old commentary" came to be embedded in the text, and of how the Parivāra became semi-attached to the Vinaya proper need not concern us. For a short note on this subject, see the Appendix.

variant forms of doctrine began to emerge which eventually formed what is now known as Mahāyāna. The four Nikāyas were left unchanged while the Khuddaka Nikāya was cast essentially into the form in which we now have it. (A few of the very late additions to this collection—notably the Buddhavaṃsa—appear to have undergone slight further editing, perhaps at the Fourth Council. On this, see Adikaram's lucid, though technical, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon* (Gunasena, Colombo, 1946, p. 35.). Also, missions were sent to many countries and the Teaching was successfully transplanted in all directions. Of particular note, the Order was established in Ceylon from whence came many of the later reports and which became the centre for study, preservation and practice of the Pali Suttas for many centuries.

About 450 years after the Buddha a famine struck Ceylon. For twelve years food was so scarce that the Order of monks was almost decimated partly, we are told, due to some of the laity turning to cannibalism. Some of the Suttas were in danger of being lost. Monks who were too weak to stand rehearsed the texts where they lay. When at last the famine ended, it was realized that the texts needed to be put into writing for their greater protection[49]. Not only the famine but—according to Adikaram (op. cit., p. 79)—the danger of frequent invasions from South India, the entry into the Order of irresponsible and irreligious people (on which point see *Mahāvaṃsa* 33.101), and the fickle favour of kings also played a part in this decision. Accordingly, a Fourth Council was convened, wherein this was accomplished.

In the centuries after this Council the texts continued to be preserved as much by recital as by manuscript, for making even one handwritten copy of the five Nikāyas, of the Vinaya, and of all the material that had evolved and survived alongside them, the Abhidhamma, the Commentaries, the Chronicles, and so forth, would

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49. Although writing had been known in India for perhaps two centuries before the time of the Buddha, apparently the technology of paper and ink was as yet undeveloped. Messages, letters and the like might have been scratched onto the smooth underside of bark, then rubbed with black oil to "ink" the writing, but no way had then been found to preserve for long what was thus marked. No clay tablets have been found from this era, although two brick inscriptions of a Sanskrit Sūtra, dating some centuries after the Buddha, have been found at Nālandā: *Epigraphia Indica* XXI, pp. 177–99.

have been a labour of many years and then the manuscript had to be preserved against the manifold dangers of destruction. But by this time the Suttas were firmly embedded in the minds of those who learned them as being sacred and unalterable by as much as a single syllable.

The dangers we have seen to be inherent in an open Canon were long since past. It was no longer possible for additional material to be added to the texts. There still remained the dangers of accidental alteration (copyists' errors, etc: see previous footnote) and of loss due to the disappearance of companies and sometimes the decline of the Order. We need not discuss these in any detail. We know what variations exist in manuscripts that were separated from each other by thousands of miles and hundreds of years, and we are confident that these differences are not significant. Although we cannot assert definitely that no material was lost, at most only a small amount could have disappeared without our knowing of it through the various records that were made relating to the texts, some of which, such as the Asokan edicts were engraved in stone. We can accept that the texts survived, at least for the most part, and with no more than insignificant changes, to the present, weathering various worldly vicissitudes which we need not trace; for we have now explored the origin of the Suttas and discovered how it is that these Suttas which we have today can be reliably regarded as being the actual Teaching of Gotama Buddha.

Well before the time of the famine in Ceylon, it had been discovered that when young *ola* palm leaves, scraped and boiled, were marked with treated carbon black, the writing produced could be legibly preserved for many years. Only then did recording become worth the effort involved. The results, however, are not entirely in favour of the written record. The critical editions of the texts strongly suggest that almost all the variant readings that are noted therein are the result of copyists' errors. Very rarely do these variant readings make a difference in meaning; usually it is a matter of a word being added or dropped, or differences as regards abridgement, spelling, and the like.

Choosing a Standard

In spite of all this there are still those who will insist that the four Nikāyas as we have them contain material that, though in the guise of earlier texts, are, in fact, later additions[50]. Though few, perhaps, will go so far as to charge the monks with unscrupulous mendacity[51],

some will nevertheless reject many texts as "not original Buddhism." Their reason for doing so is, almost always, a personal disagreement with the descriptions or instructions found therein. They will often conceal this fact with phrases like "historical doubts", but in the end it comes down to their unwillingness to believe that a Fully Awakened One could possibly teach anything that they themselves did not agree with.

We do not entertain such notions, for we have not forgotten that we started out by acknowledging our need for guidance, and we do not presume to know as well as (or even better than) our guide (See Ud 8.7/90–1). But even so it must be admitted that anyone, and particularly Westerners, coming fresh to this Teaching will almost certainly discover discourses containing material that sounds, to their contemporary ears, a bit, well ... *improbable*. This is a real problem for many newcomers; for it is likely that they will encounter approaches and attitudes which are unfamiliar. Until one has mastered the unsurpassable art of acquiescence (*khanti*), without which learning is impossible, there will naturally be resistance to what demands of us that we surrender those notions and conceits which we hold most dear. This is the difficult part of the Teaching, and to pretend otherwise would be to do a disservice to both the

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50. Early and later Sanskrit Sutras of Mahāyāna as well as Tibetan scriptures and other late traditions are full of this. Those who wish to defend these traditions have been known to assume quite gratuitously that since these other traditions are manifestly full of invented material that the Pāḷi Suttas must be also. But if the preceding account is largely correct, then this view must be erroneous. If such a view is nevertheless insisted upon, then its proponents would need to offer a description of the evolution of the Pāḷi Suttas demonstrating a reasonable and human sequence alternative to the one offered herein. Such an account would have to be in accord not only with reason but with the known facts. Even if such an account were made, it could be at best an alternative interpretation, in no way devaluing what has been presented here; but to our knowledge such a description has never even been offered.

51. To such a distasteful charge there can (and should) be no reply (see AN 4:42/A II 46), for it is a product of the same attitude which seeks to understand the world in terms of conspiracies. If dishonesty is *assumed* then "evidence" will *inevitably* be "discovered" to confirm the assumption. The only way to resolve such a dilemma is to explore carefully the need to make the assumption in the first place.

Teaching and the inquirer. And among the first resistances to arise nowadays will be those involving differences in world views. Since the Teaching comes to us embedded within a cultural context that is in some ways alien to the viewpoint with which we are on comfortable and familiar terms, it is natural that we congratulate ourselves for being so much more advanced. It can be profoundly difficult to recognize that the truths offered by our own culture are neither eternal nor absolute, and need not be valued any more highly than other viewpoints.

An analogy: Suppose it was said that there exist in this very world invisible beings—countless millions of them—which have the power to affect our welfare. Some of them are helpful, but others, unfortunately, cause only trouble and illness. However, there are certain people who wear special costumes and who possess special and powerful means whereby they can actually see these invisible beings. Moreover, they have devised special powders and potions by means of which they can counteract the baneful influence of the harmful beings. True or false? Most Westerners have derided this notion, sometimes vehemently, with snorts and sighs aplenty. But suppose now it were added that these invisible beings are called "germs" and "viruses" and that they have been investigated by white-coated laboratory scientists who possess electron microscopes, and who have discovered antibiotics and other drugs.

"Oh, but that's *different*!" many will reply; and indeed it is. But what exactly is the difference? Language, certainly; but beyond that there is also a difference in the conceptual imagery used to account for the experience of illness. The imagery and vocabulary that are familiar are accepted while what is strange is rejected.

We do not wish to suggest by this analogy that the *only* difficulties in understanding the Buddha's Teaching are linguistic or cultural: there is, beyond them, the personal difficulty, the difficulty which started us on our quest. We need to assert, cherish, and develop the view that the real difficulty is our own failure to see, as they really are, that craving and conceit which are themselves the condition for our own failure to see, as they really are, that craving and conceit...[52] But before ever coming to *that* difficulty a newcomer may find himself faced with thorny doubts, and he may not see the

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52. "Ignorance, monk, is the one thing with a monk's elimination of which ignorance is eliminated and gnosis arises."—SN 35:79/S IV 50

source of the thorns. He may assert that it rains due to appropriate meteorological conditions, and scoff at the Suttas' suggestion that it rains because the rain gods are active (AN 5:197/A III 243)). After all, who has ever seen a rain god? But who has ever seen a meteorological condition?

The difficulty may be illustrated by an example from the author's own experience. When I first began to inquire seriously into the Buddha's Teaching, I found—in addition to much that impressed me most favourably—a discourse whose topic was "the thirty-two marks of a great man" and whose point (as I took it) was that these marks were *physical* and that the Buddha had such marks, *ergo* he was a great man. Coming from a rationalistic tradition, I was unable to accept this. It smacked of deification or worse, and seemed totally incompatible with the spirit of investigation that pervaded those Suttas that had most impressed me. Besides, some of these marks—projecting heels, ankles midway in the legs, legs like an antelope's, no hollow between the shoulders, white hair growing between the eyes, head shaped like a turban, etc.—seemed quite simply freakish. I asked several of the other young Western monks, who confessed that they, too, could not accept this discourse. "Here," I then decided, "is an obvious case of a later addition: this Sutta had to be invented by those who had never seen the Buddha."

This view was confirmed when I noticed, in the Sāmaññaphala Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya that when King Ajātasattu visited the Buddha for the first (and only recorded) time, as he approached the pavilion where the company of monks sat, he asked his physician which one of the monks was the Buddha (D I 50), and he was told that the Buddha was the one sitting against the middle pillar. "Had the Buddha really been endowed with those peculiar, alien, and odious marks," I reasoned, "the king would not have had to ask such a question. But even if he did ask, then the obvious answer to be given would have been that the Buddha was 'that funny-looking fellow in the middle.'"[53] And then I read the Dhātuvibhaṅga Sutta, MN 140, wherein it is told how the Buddha, travelling alone, put up one night side by side with a monk who told him that he (the monk) was on his way to meet the Buddha for the first time. Only after hearing a teaching did this monk realize, from the profundity of the discourse, that his companion had to be the Buddha himself. "*Surely,*" I decided, "if the Buddha had been endowed with those absurd marks, this monk would have known at once who his companion was."

And so I set aside that discourse on the thirty-two marks, and all was well, until … I discovered *another* Sutta on the same subject, and then *another,* and *another,* and finally I realized (with some dismay) that the subject was dealt with, sometimes more than once, in every Nikāya except the Saṃyutta. Had it appeared only once, or maybe twice, I could have set it aside as an oddity and forgotten about it; but here it was popping up all over the place! My appreciation of the other discourses had been growing as their methodology became gradually more familiar and comfortable; but now my confidence in the authenticity of the collection as a whole was shaken. What was I to do?

"Leave it alone," I was advised. "Use the Suttas for what they're for: right-view guidance. There's no Sutta that teaches the existence of a permanent condition, or of a pleasurable condition, or of anything that can be taken as self. Don't reject what's precious just because you think you see a few wrinkles in it." And so for many years I did my best to ignore those "thirty-two marks" discourses and tried to make use of what was manifestly valuable.

During those years I came to a growing understanding of the importance of putting trust in one's teacher (see note 5b) and a growing conviction that "they who have faith in the Buddha have faith in the highest: they who have faith in the highest have the highest results"—AN 4:34/A II 34. The Buddha knew that those who, trusting his advice, lived in accordance with it would do themselves the most good and therefore, with no conceit whatsoever, out of compassion for others, he did and said that which would achieve this end.

Everyone can and does change his appearance to some extent, as the situation requires. For example, when called in by the boss for a tongue-lashing, one may quite literally make oneself smaller by hunching the shoulders, etc., perhaps without even being aware of it;

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53. According to the commentarial tradition of the Abhayagiri Vihāra, Ajātasattu was only a child when he had last seen the Buddha and could not recognize him after the intervening lapse of time. The Mahāvihāra tradition maintained that the Buddha, who emanated six-fold rays and possessed a body marked with special characteristics, could not be mistaken for anyone else and that Ajātasattu was merely pretending not to recognize him. It is thus evident that, unlike the Abhayagirivāsins, the commentators of the Mahāvihāra insisted on the superhuman characteristics of the Buddha. See p. 26 of *Robe and Plough,* by R.A. Gunawardana, Tucson, 1979.

but when showing off before friends one may "walk tall." Anyone who has practised meditation even to a modest extent is likely to come to an appreciation of the enormous powers that are available to one proficient in advanced levels of meditation. It becomes an easy matter to accept that the Buddha (or for that matter anyone meditatively advanced, even one who has not achieved enlightenment—Devadatta, for example), could alter his appearance to a far greater extent than most people, even to the extent of appearing with all thirty-two marks.

These marks, each of those discourses tells us, belong to the lore of the brāhmaṇa caste. The Suttas, it seems, never assert the *correctness* of this lore; nor do they digress into a refutation of it. In each case a brāhmaṇa came to the Buddha intent upon judging the Buddha's worth as a teacher by whether he had these marks[54]. Knowing that appearances don't matter but that rightly-placed confidence is of great value, the Buddha, it would seem, let those brāhmaṇas see what would convince them of the truth that he is the "incomparable trainer of men to be tamed" and thereby won them over to acceptance of right conduct (and, in some instances, to enlightenment: e.g. the brāhmaṇa Pokkharasādī of the Ambaṭṭha Sutta, DN 3).

I am still not particularly impressed that the Buddha could display those thirty-two marks that the brāhmaṇas believed to be the signs of a great man, for I suspect that even Devadatta could have done so; but these Suttas were not addressed to me. They were intended to inspire faith in the brāhmaṇas, who believed in their lore as we do in ours. More impressive is the display of wisdom that uses, rather than disputes with, cultural limitations to lead one to what transcends such limitations. I still have no special use in my own practice for those "thirty-two marks" Suttas, nor for others which, it seems, are also intended for those with a different sensibility—e.g. DN 14 on previous Buddhas and the birth of Bodhisattas; MN 129 on hell-realms and world-monarchs—but they are no longer a basis for doubt and scepticism, or a barrier to acquiescence in what is beneficial[55]. The lesson being, that it is not an act of wisdom to judge and reject

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54. In the Brahmāyu Sutta, MN 91/M II 133–46, after the marks are displayed, then additionally the Buddha's conduct is held up to close critical scrutiny over an extended period of time before he is finally acknowledged to be a "great man."

discourses on the basis of personal preference or belief (ref. the Kalama Sutta, AN 3:65/A I 188–93), for if we do so, we then lose the possibility of transcending those preferences and beliefs.

Is it possible, then, to set forth a reasonable standard whereby, when we find ourselves encountering one of those "thorny barriers," we can act reasonably? Perhaps the following will be relevant.

Having already acquired an overview of the Suttas—as one might inspect the general contours of a road map prior to setting out on a journey, without excessive concern for specific details—we will have noticed that certain passages are found repeatedly, with little variation, throughout the four Nikāyas. If we have the Buddha's Teaching at all, then surely we have it here: it would be the wildest irresponsibility to assume that the gist of the Teaching is found only outside these core texts. Not only must we accept them as authentic, but also as fundamental, of the essence, for why else would they be so often repeated? These texts can be trusted as being that right-view guidance we have been seeking. Should any of these oft-repeated discourses seem discrepant with one another or with our own views, then this is evidence that there is a difficulty in our own understanding which needs to be uncovered and resolved (or abandoned).

We should be in no rush to judge. These Teachings cannot be understood except from their own point of view, and coming to understand that point of view is a growth that takes, usually, more time than we think it will. And we should be careful to take the Suttas quite literally, as saying what they mean and meaning what they say. They speak often of knowing both the letter and the spirit; nowhere do they advise an interpretive approach. We need to change ourselves, not the world, and the world includes the Suttas. To interpret is still to follow our own notions, rather than right-view guidance. Indeed, to interpret is to *deny* ("…when he says *black* what he *really* means is…").

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55. This account of these "thirty-two marks" Suttas will probably satisfy those who come to the Teaching from a rationalistic culture; but there may well be other explanations, suited to those with a different background, no less valid than what is offered here. Whatever increases faith in right-view guidance is proper. "They who have faith in the noble eightfold path have faith in the highest. They who have faith in the highest have the highest results."—AN 4:54/A II 34; translated in the Wheel No. 8.

With this background established, then those discourses which are found but once or twice can be considered. The bulk of them will present no difficulty. They will be seen to be in accordance with the root-texts, being variations or expansions on a theme, as too will those texts which we have identified as later additions to the four Nikāyas. But should any of them seem to be in contradiction with one's own understanding, then there is an opportunity to examine that understanding, to discover what needs to be surrendered[56]. However, if one is not yet at a stage of development where such acquiescence is possible, then that Sutta can be set aside (which is not to say rejected) until a time when understanding and calmness have been developed sufficiently so that a reconsideration of the text will be useful. By following such a practice one can come to know that, indeed, this Teaching is well-expounded, immediate, non-temporal, evident, leading, to be known individually by the wise.

We set out in search of a guide whereby we could find the way to resolve the root-problem of our personal existence. We have discovered that the Teaching of a Fully Awakened One is at hand, and that there is reason to trust, not reason to doubt, that Teaching. What remains is to put that Teaching to use, to make it a personal reality. Restraint, renunciation and purification are difficult, not easy. But indulgence, attachment and defilements can never lead to happiness and peace. What needs to be done is clear. We have reached an end of our inquiry ready, at last, to begin.

Appendix

At the beginning of the century, when the Buddha's Teaching had only recently come to widespread notice in the West, many questions were yet unsettled. Although it was already recognized except, perhaps, among those most hostile, that the Buddha was rather more than a primitive sun-myth, yet many other mistaken ideas were being put forward to explain, or to explain away, the Buddha and his Teaching. Some of these notions sound today quite as naive as the sun-myth theory: but others, despite the evidence, continue to be raised (hence the preceding essay). Doctrinal matters aside, the most fundamental of these concern the place of Pali as a language in Indian history and thought, and the dates of composition and

56. On this point, see the Dīghanakha Sutta, MN 74/M I 497–501, and the Cintā Sutta, SN 55:41/S V 446–8.

compilation of the various Canonical texts.

Prof. T. W. Rhys Davids—unquestionably the most influential of the early scholars concerned with Buddhism—dealt with these questions at length in various articles and books, the most comprehensive and easily available of which is *Buddhist India*. Published in 1903, although it is touched both by a lingering Victorian ethnocentricism and, doctrinal matters aside, by some lesser judgments since demonstrated to be erroneous, it is nevertheless the earliest general statement of what is, in the main, the accepted view on these questions today.

Although a scholarly examination of these questions will never yield an understanding of the Teaching, yet mistaken notions may well be an obstacle to comprehension. Some, therefore, will find a certain amount of investigation into these points to be of value. While the question of the place of Pali as a language and of the date of the Vinaya have not been part of our inquiry, yet it may be pertinent to quote briefly on these subjects.

On the first point, Rhys Davids concludes that there existed at the time of the Buddha "a language common among the cultured laity ... which bore to the local dialect much the same relation as the English of London, in Shakespeare's time, bore to the various dialects spoken in Somersetshire, Yorkshire, and Essex"; that this "conversational dialect" was in use "not only throughout the Kosala dominions, but east and west from Delhi to Patna, and north and south from Sāvatthī to Avantī"; and that on this dialect was based "Middle High Indian, Pali, the literary language."[1]

A scholarly debate has been in progress for the last fifty years (with no end in sight) challenging and defending this judgment. It should be noted, then, that even a "worst-case scenario," namely, a conclusive and convincing demonstration that Pali was not the language spoken by the Buddha (but see DN 16/D II 108), would not require us to change anything in this essay. For if, as some contend, Pali is a western Prakrit while the Buddha spoke an Eastern dialect, all that would be demonstrated is that the final editorial work on the texts was done by monks who hailed from western India. In this regard we should note that the account of the Second Council in the Vinaya repeatedly describes the orthodox monks as being from the West, and the heretics as being from the East. And if, as others contend, Pali as we now have it postdates the Buddha by a century or more, then all that would be demonstrated thereby is that at the

Second Council (and, for the Khuddaka, the Third) the decision was made to "modernize" the language[57]. There would be in neither case any need to question the authenticity of the Teaching as we have it.

On the second point we may turn to Rhys David's *History and Literature of Buddhism* (the "American Lectures") of 1896 wherein, early in Lecture VI, he remarks:

… the first disruption in the Order took place … on matters connected with the regulation of the Order itself. One hundred years after the death of the Buddha, according to the oldest account … there arose a certain party in the Order which proclaimed and practised a loosening of the rules in ten particulars …

To put an end to the disputes upon these points, a Council of the leading members of the Order was held at Vesāli and the heretical opinions were condemned. The long-continued struggle on the question—as important for the history of Buddhism as the Arian controversy for that of Christianity—agitated the whole Buddhist world to its very centre …

Now the ten indulgences are each summed up in a single word: and these words are, each and all of them, conspicuous by their absence from the Books on the laws and regulations of the Order included in the canon (i.e. the Vinaya), except that they appear in an historical account added quite evidently as an appendix (i.e. the Twelfth Khandhaka, discussed in our essay), to the collection of treatises, or Khandhakas … This fact is of the very greatest importance in determining the date at which those Khandhakas must have been composed. The ten points in dispute were all matters of ecclesiastical law. They all related to observances of the Brotherhood. Is it probable that, in a set of rules and treatises which seek to set forth, down to the minutest detail, and even with hair-splitting diffuseness, all that has any relation to the daily life of the Brethren and the regulation of the Buddhist Order—is it probable that, in such a collection, if, when it was compiled, the struggle on these ten points had already burst into

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57. In this regard we should note that at the time of the Second Council, North Indian settlements had evolved in social differentiation to the point of being on the verge of coalescing into the sub-continent's first empire (the Mauryan: Chandragupta, Bindusāra, Asoka, etc.) of this inter-glacial period. These centuries were by all accounts times of great social upheavals, and it may be expected that—as with English today—language would have been subject to considerable diffraction.

flame, there should be no reference at all, even in interpolations, to any one of these ten disputes? That the difference of opinion on each of the ten points remains altogether unnoticed in that part of the rules and treatises where, in the natural order of things, it would obviously be referred to—that the rules are not in any way altered to cover, or to suggest, any decision on the points in dispute,—and that they are mentioned only in an appendix (= the Twelfth Khandhaka), where the Council held to decide them is described, shows clearly that the rules and treatises, as we have them, must have been put together before the time when the Council of Vesali (= the Second Council) was held.

Lastly, on the question which has concerned us at length—the date of the Suttas—we offer relevant excerpts from Chapter X of *Buddhist India*:

… As to the age of the Buddhist canonical books, the best evidence is the contents of the books themselves—the sort of words they use, the style in which they are composed, the ideas they express. Objection, it is true, has recently been raised against the use of such internal evidence. And the objection is valid if it be urged, not against the general principle of the use of such evidence, but against the wrong use of it. We find, for instance, that Phallus-worship is often mentioned, quite as a matter of course, in the Mahābhārata, as if it had always been common everywhere throughout Northern India. In the Nikāyas, though they mention all sorts of what the Buddhists regarded as foolish or superstitious forms of worship, this particular kind, Siva-worship under the form of the Linga, is not even once referred to. The Mahābhārata mentions the Atharva Veda, and takes it as a matter of course, as if it were an idea generally current, that it was a Veda the fourth Veda. The Nikāyas constantly mention the three others, but never the Atharva. Both cases are interesting. But before drawing the conclusion that, therefore the Nikāyas, as we have them, are older than the existing text of the Mahābhārata, we should want a very much larger number of such cases, all tending the same way, and also the certainty that there were no cases of an opposite tendency that could not otherwise be explained.

On the other hand, suppose a manuscript were discovered containing, in the same handwriting, copies of Bacon's *Essays* and of Hume's *Essay*, with nothing to show when, or by whom, they were written; and that we knew nothing at all otherwise about the matter. Still we should know, with absolute certainty, which was relatively the

older of the two; and should be able to determine, within a quite short period, the actual date of each of the two works. The evidence would be irresistible because it would consist of a very large number of minute points of language, of style, and, above all, of ideas expressed, all tending in the same direction.

This is the sort of internal evidence that we have before us in the Pali books. Any one who habitually reads Pali would know at once that the Nikāyas are older than the Dhammasaṅgaṇī; that both are older than the Kathāvatthu; that all three are older than the Milinda. And the Pali scholars most competent to judge are quite unanimous on the point, and on the general position of the Pali literature in the history of literature in India.

But this sort of evidence can appeal, of course, only to those familiar with the language and with the ideas. To those who are not, the following points may be suggestive:

On the monuments of the third century B.C. we find the names of donors of different parts of the building inscribed on those parts (pillars, rails, and bas-reliefs). When the names are common ones, certain epithets are added, to distinguish the donors from other persons bearing the same name. Such epithets are either local (as we might say, John of Winchester) or they specify an occupation (as we might say, John the carpenter, or John the clerk) or are otherwise distinctive. Among these epithets have been found the following:

1. *Dhamma-kathika*.—"Preacher of the system" (the Dhamma)—the "System" being a technical term in the Buddhist schools to signify the philosophical and ethical doctrine as distinguished from the Vinaya, the Rules of the Order.
2. *Peṭakin*.—"One who had (that is, knew by heart) the Piṭaka." The Piṭaka[58] is the traditional statements of Buddhist doctrine as contained in the Sutta Piṭaka (= the five Nikāyas). The word means basket, and, as a technical term applied to a part of their literature, it is used exclusively by the Buddhists.
3. *Suttantika*.—"A man who knows a Suttanta (= Sutta) by heart."
4. *Suttantakini*.—"A woman who knows a Suttanta by heart." Suttanta is, again, a technical term used exclusively of certain portions of the Buddhist canonical books, more especially of the Dialogues....[59]

58. Piṭaka, like Nikāya, is a later term, not found in this technical sense in the Suttas.
59. By "Dialogues" Rhys Davids means the Dīgha and Majjhima Nikāyas.

5. *Pañca nekāyika*.—"One who knows the Five Nikāyas by heart." The five Nikāyas, or "Collections," as a technical term used of literary works, is applied to the canonical Buddhist texts, and to them only….

The expressions here explained are used on Buddhist monuments and refer to Buddhist books. They are conclusive proof that some time before the date of the inscriptions (that is, roughly speaking, before the time of Asoka), there was a Buddhist literature in North India, where the inscriptions are found. And further, that that literature then had divisions known by the technical names of Piṭaka, Nikāya, and Suttanta, and that the number of Nikāyas then in existence was five.

But this is not all. Asoka, in his Bhabra Edict, addressed to the Buddhist Order (the Sangha), recommends to the Brethren and Sisters of the Order, and to the lay disciples of either sex, frequently to hear (that is to learn by heart) and to meditate upon, certain selected passages. And of these he, most fortunately, gives the names. They are as follows:

Ariya-vasāni (now found in the Dīgha Nikāya, in the portion called the Sangiti Suttanta).

Anāgata-bhayāni (now found in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, vol. III pp. 105–108).
Muni Gātha (now found in the Sutta Nipāta, verses 206–220).
Moneyya Sutta (now found in the Itivuttaka, p. 67, and also in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, vol. I p. 272).
Upatissa Pasina.—"The questions put by Upatissa" (more commonly known as Sāriputta). There are so many such questions in the books that opinions differ as to which of them is the one most probably referred to.

There is a word at the commencement of this list which may either be an adjective applied to the whole list or the name of another passage. However this may be, this Edict of Asoka's gives the actual titles of some of the shorter passages included, in his time, in those books, the larger divisions of which are mentioned in the inscriptions just referred to.

Now the existing literature, divided into the same larger divisions, contains also the shorter passages. To suppose that it was composed in Ceylon is to suppose that, by an extraordinary series of chances, the Ceylon writers happened to hit upon just the identical technical terms, two of them then almost fallen out of use, that had been used in these old inscriptions (of which they knew nothing) for the names they gave to the larger divisions of the literature they made. And we must further suppose that, by another extraordinary series of chances, they happened to include in those divisions a number of shorter

passages, each of them corresponding exactly to those mentioned by name, long before their time, in Asoka's Edict, of which also they knew nothing. To adopt such a theory as the most probable explanation of the facts would be nothing less than absurd....

We must take our Pali canonical books then to be North Indian, not Singhalese in origin: and the question as to whether they have suffered from their sometime sojourn under the palm groves of the mountain *vihāras* in the south[60] must be decided by a critical study of them in their present condition. Towards such a study there are some points that can already be made.

The books make no mention of Asoka. Had they undergone any serious re-editing after the reign of the great Buddhist Emperor (of whom the Buddhist writers, whether rightly or wrongly, were so proud), is it probable that he would have been so completely ignored? The books never mention any person, or any place, in Ceylon; or even in South India[61]. They tell us a goodly number of anecdotes, usually as introductions to, or in illustration of, some ethical point. It would have been so easy to bring in a passing reference to some Ceylon worthy—in the same way as the brahmin Buddhaghosa does so often, in his *Atthasālinī*, which *was* revised in Ceylon[62]. If the Piṭaka books had been tampered with, would not opportunity have been taken to

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60. *Vihāras* = temples, monasteries. By "in the south" Rhys Davids means Ceylon (where live the Singhalese people.)

61. The single exception, overlooked by Rhys Davids, is in the Udāna (Khuddaka Nikāya), wherein it is stated that Bāhiya Dārucīriya travelled from his dwelling at Supparaka to Sāvatthī to learn the Buddha's Teaching. Suppāraka has been identified with Sopāra, a town just north of Bombay. However, this instance strengthens, rather than weakens, Rhys Davids' argument, for it shows that the compilers of the Udāna, though they knew something of South India, yet had no interest or reason to make more than this single passing reference to it. (Compare, on knowledge of distant parts, MN 9/M II 149.) This could hardly have been the case had there been editorial treatment of the texts at a time when the Teaching had already penetrated southward into Kāliṅga (Orissa) and beyond.

62. Buddhaghosa was the compiler of most of the traditional commentaries, including the *Atthasālinī* (compiled, not revised, in Ceylon): c. fifth Century, A.D., from South India. (Although the Commentaries were translated from Sinhalese into Pāḷi and compiled at that time, they probably "ceased to grow by about the middle of the first century A.D."—Adikaram, *op. cit.* p. 41)

yield to this very natural impulse?

We know a great deal now of developed or corrupted doctrine current in Ceylon, of new technical terms invented, of new meanings put into the older phrases. Not one single instance has yet been found of any such later idea, any such later form of language, any such later technical term in any one of the canonical books….

It would seem, then, that any change that may have been made in these North Indian books after they had been brought into Ceylon must have been insignificant. It would be a great advantage if we should be able to find even one or two instances of such changes. We should then be able to say what sort and degree of alteration the Ceylon scholars felt justified in making. But it is clear that they regarded the canon as closed.

While the books were in North India, on the other hand, and the canon was not considered closed, there is evidence of a very different tone. One whole book, the Kathāvatthu[63], was added as late as the time of Asoka; and perhaps the Parivāra[64], a mere string of examination questions, is not much older. One story in the Petavatthu[65] is about a king Piṅgalaka, said in the commentary to have reigned over Surat two hundred years after the Buddha's time; and another refers to an event fifty-six years after the Buddha's death. The latter is certainly in its right place in this odd collection of legends. The former may (as the commentator thinks) have been added at Asoka's Council. Even if it were, that would be proof that they thought no harm of then adding to the legendary matter in their texts[66]. And the whole of the Vimānavatthu[65] (really only the other half of one and the same work), is certainly very late in tone as compared with the Nikāyas.

The same must be said of two other short collections of ballads. One is the Buddhavaṃsa,[65] containing a separate poem on each of twenty-five Buddhas, supposed to have followed one another in succession. The other is the Cariyāpiṭaka[65], containing thirty-four short Jātaka stories turned into verse. Both of these must also be late.

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63. In the Abhidhamma collection, not Sutta.
64. Now attached to the Vinaya (see footnote 46 of our essay).
65. We think it more likely that the entire Petavatthu, and the Vimānavatthu as well, were added to the Khuddaka Nikāya in the Second or Third Century B.E.
66. Of the Khuddaka Nikāya.

For in the Nikāyas only seven Buddhas are known; and Jātakas, in the technical sense, are not yet thought of. This particular set of Jātakas is also arranged on the basis of the *pāramitās*, a doctrine that plays no part in the older books. The Ten Perfections (*pāramitās*) are qualities a Buddha is supposed to be obliged to have acquired in the countless series of his previous rebirths as Bodhisatta. But this is a later notion, not found in the Nikāyas. It gradually grew up as the Bodhisattva idea began to appeal more to the Indian mind. And it is interesting to find already, in these latest of the canonical books, the germs of what afterwards developed into the later Mahāyāna doctrine, to which the decline of Buddhism, in the opinion of Professor Bhandarkar, was eventually so greatly due…"

Postscript

THIS much having been said about the Pali Suttas, it remains to say a few words concerning accessibility. [67]

The texts have been published in many scripts. Roman-script editions the texts are available from the Pali Text Society (PTS), England (http://www.palitext.com). The Vipassana Research Institute, Igatpuri, India, has digitalized the whole Sixth Council edition of the Tipitaka and many other Pali Texts in digital, searchable format. It is distributed on a CD ROM and can also be downloaded at http://www.tipitaka.org.

A very inexpensive edition is (or used) to be available in Devanagari script—only the script need be learned, not the language—from Motilal Banarsidass, Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 007, India.

The P.T.S. also publishes grammars, dictionaries and other aids to learning this not very difficult language. Less costly grammars have been produced in Sri Lanka by Ven. A. P. Buddhadatta, Ven. Nārada Mahāthera, and others. The *New Course in Reading Pali,* by Gair & Karunatilake is published by Motilal Banarsidas. Lily de Silva's *Pali Primer* is published by the Vipassana Research Institute, India. Inexpensive dictionaries compiled by Ven. Buddhadatta are the *Concise Pali English Dictionary* and the *English-Pali Dictionary*. They are available from various publishers in India. They have been digitalized and can be downloaded from http://www.bps.lk. The PTS Pali English Dictionary has also been reprinted cheaply by publishers in India.

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67. A lot of things have changed since Ven. Bodhesako wrote the postscript and it has therefore been revised. (BPS Editor.)

More information on learning Pali can be found at the Access to Insight website: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bullitt/learningpali.html

The P.T.S. offers English translations of the five Nikāyas (of which the most reliable renderings are K. R. Norman's translation of Thera-Theri-gāthā as *Elders' Verses I, II* and the Suttanipāta as *The Group of Discourses* respectively). Wisdom Publications, Boston, USA, offers translations of the Majjhima Nikāya by Ven. Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, called *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha,* the Saṃyutta Nikāya by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, called *Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (also available from P.T.S.), and a translation of the Dīgha Nikāya by Maurice Walshe called *Long Discourses of the Buddha*. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's revised and expanded edition of Nyanaponika Thera's *Aṅguttara Nikāya Anthology* (published by the BPS) called has been published by Alta Mira under the name *Numerical Sayings of the Buddha*. A cheaper version without Venerable Bodhi's introduction is available from the BPS.

The Buddhist Publication Society (BPS) publishes a nice translation of the Udāna and Itivuttaka by John D. Ireland called *The Udāna and the Itivuttaka,* and a reliable translation of the Dhammapada (along with the Pali) by Ven. Buddharakkhita. Ven. Ñāṇamoli's *Life of the Buddha* (BPS) is a well-selected and well-translated anthology. The BPS also publishes reliable translations[68] of selected texts; see www.bps.lk. For a fuller listing of texts, translations, anthologies and linguistic aids, see Russell Webb's *An Analysis of the Pali Canon* (B.P.S., *The Wheel* No. 217–220).

Appendix

From a letter written by the author

As for *Beginnings*, it was intended to serve a very different purpose from *Change*. Most people adopt a point of view because it happens to fit in with the group they happen to join up with or because it is

68. On the other hand, one must beware of a few mass-marketed "translations" (particularly of the Dhammapada) which grossly misrepresent the Teaching, either by gratuitously mistranslating certain key terminology, or by acting so free and loose with the text in general as not to deserve to be called a translation.

supportive of other choices they've already made—in other words, the point of view is, for them, secondary, and what is primary is their own personal wishes ... There are also two other groups for whom the essay was written, although they are not specifically singled out.

First there are those who are already committed to a Sutta approach and who have a measure of *saddhā* in the content of the texts, but who might find that this faith is bolstered and enhanced by an account which is addressed to some of the questions which are raised concerning the derivation of those texts.

The other group to whom the essay was "secretly" addressed is that of Westerners who though following a Theravāda tradition are doing so under the guidance of a living (or recently deceased) teacher rather than the Suttas. It was partly in the hope of undermining the anti-Sutta views of this group that the essay was also written.

This group, of course, has a problem inasmuch as they cannot deny the Suttas totally without denying their own teachers, who are supposedly following the tradition of the Buddha; but on the other hand they also cannot accept the Suttas totally without denying their teachers, who are teaching doctrines which simply don't fully square with the Suttas. Few of them will bother to think through the consequences of this problem, since they didn't accept whatever doctrine they are following because of the doctrine but because it was either part of the apparatus of the group they joined up with or else because it is, in their view anyway, a means of justifying the choices that they would have made anyway. But those who are willing to consider the problem of their situation (every situation has its problems, of course, I don't mean to suggest that their situation has problems and mine doesn't; only that the problems of their situation are not the same problems as mine—by problems I mean philosophical or epistemological problems, not the personal problem that is in every situation), to ask themselves whether the choices they are making are not, as a whole, internally inconsistent, may be influenced by the essay, at least to the extent of being challenged to think for themselves ...

Of course, an historical argument is not in itself going to establish *saddhā* in the Suttas; all I would expect that it might do is to provide sufficient incentive for a few people to investigate the Suttas sufficiently (and with a suitably-predisposing attitude towards acquiescence) that such *saddhā* will have a chance to grow for more personal and fundamental reasons.

II

Change
An Examination of Impermanence in Experience

PREFACE

> Whatever is great in the sphere of the universally human must not be communicated as a subject for admiration but as an ethical *requirement*.
>
> Soren Kierkegaard[1]

WHEN we first hear the Buddha's Teaching, we listen, each of us, already imbued with our own set of views and opinions. Some of these views will harmonize with this Teaching. Others, just as surely, will not. Were it otherwise the Teaching would be quite needless, for either there would be nothing for us to learn from it or else everything. And if everything then there could be no avenue of approach, no common ground upon which we might make a beginning. It is because of this partial match that it is possible for us to benefit from the Buddha's right-view guidance if we wish to and will allow ourselves to do so. And it is because of this partial mismatch that we fail to see how to do so.

Commonly, the initial reaction is to judge the Teaching in the light of what we already accept as true. We try to understand it in terms of our own views. Some will be uninterested in doing otherwise. They will have no greater use for this Teaching than as a device for confirming to themselves what they have already decided to be the truth. To such people nothing useful can be said. Yet there are also those who genuinely desire to learn—i.e. to change

1. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945) tr. by D. F. Swenson, p. 320.

themselves—but who do not see any way to proceed other than to evaluate the Teaching in the light of their own beliefs. But it can be said that in a sense the whole of this Teaching is a caution to do the opposite. Right-view guidance is offered as the standard by which we may judge our own views. By accepting that criterion we can understand those views fully, and thereby perceive the conditions upon which those views depend.

The Teaching, after all, informs us from the start that there are such things as "right view" and "wrong view." Wrong view, the Teaching insists, is as inextricably tied up with craving and suffering as right view is with their absence. But right and wrong view, it seems, are not just a matter of a difference of opinion. They differ more fundamentally in that the former is a seeing of what the latter is blind to. And we, who are not free from craving and suffering, are not free precisely because we fail to understand what is meant by "right view." Thus we are faced with a dilemma. For if we do not understand what is meant by "right view," then how is it possible for us to judge our own (wrong) views by that standard, and thereby come to understand wrong view as being wrong view?

This essay is not an effort to answer such a question. It is, rather, an attempt to indicate a way in which each of us can resolve the dilemma for himself; for it cannot be resolved in any other way. Each of us must see for himself what it is that he is blind to.

That blindness—so the Buddha's discourses repeatedly assert—is involved centrally with our failure to see, to know, the nature of impermanence. And yet in our own experience everywhere we look we see that things are indeed impermanent. If the Buddha is correct then what have we missed?

This question provides us with the basic strategy of our essay. Our procedure will be first (in sections 1, 2, and 4) to critically examine one common response to this question, "What have we missed?" This reply derives from a misconception about the Teaching which is both common and pernicious. We shall discuss not only the unsatisfactoriness of this response but also the nature of that unsatisfactoriness. Then, after taking our bearings (in section 5) by means of some relevant discourses, we will suggest an alternative understanding (already introduced in section 3 and developed more fully in section 6) and discuss its implications.

It is a feature of this alternative understanding that it is organically connected with our first question, "How is it possible to

understand wrong view as being wrong view?" In order to illuminate this connection we will discuss (in sections 7 through 11) impermanence and the failure to recognize it for what it is. We shall do this using light shed by the central doctrine of this Teaching, the four noble truths. When we understand the nature of blindness, or wrong view, there is then the possibility of ending that blindness by seeing.

However, if we aim at changing ourselves in a fundamental way it would surely be ineffective to merely substitute one view (however "right" it may be) for another (however "wrong"). Such a task would be more-than-Herculean, inasmuch as Hercules was only required to clean out the Augean stables and was never required to replenish them.

Even more fundamentally, it would fail to be fundamental. To achieve a basic change we need to understand not only specific views. We must also comprehend the general mode in which we perceive the world. This mode or attitude is the context dependent upon which all specific views, right and wrong, arise. For views, like everything else, arise with condition, not independently. If therefore we can come to see the general attitude dependent upon which there arise fallacious views about impermanence, then that attitude can be relinquished. And with its abandonment all views which persist dependent upon that fallacy will be automatically abolished.

We will find, then, that this thorough discussion of impermanence, and of the failure to see it for what it is, will also be a discussion of the requisites for an examination, each for ourselves, of the human dilemma—ours. We shall then conclude our study with a consideration (in section 12) of the overview by means of which there arises a wrong view of impermanence, and we shall compare it with the overview by means of which there arises right view. In doing so we shall have set forth a method whereby one can see for oneself what is meant by "wrong view" and "right view."

The mode of expression of this essay is essentially descriptive, analytical, and comparative. The analytical descriptions offered herein—particularly those of the structures of ignorance, of craving, and of experience-in-general—though straightforward, may strike readers variously as intriguing, exotic, alien, or even objectionable. If the objection is no more than a rigorous insistence that anything radically different from one's already-familiar outlook must necessarily be mistaken, then (as has already been observed) nothing

can be said. Nothing, that is, except that with such an attitude one will in any case never be able to make proper use of the Teaching. But others, though wishing to understand, may still find the mode of expression foreign to their own way of thinking and therefore baffling. This is the same problem as that of changing oneself: however willing, one may yet not see how to do so. In such a case the *first* change that is necessary is a change in the way one sees the problem.

If the mode of expression of this essay is foreign it might be possible to use that very alienness as a tool in achieving for oneself a primary change. For although the essay employs a discussion of impermanence as its base, its real concern is not just the problem of change but the problem of changing oneself, in a radical manner. Such a change is difficult to see and difficult to achieve. But if we would put an end to craving, to blindness, to suffering, and to all the unhealthy states that are involved therein, then it is utterly necessary that we see the utter necessity of such a change. Only by doing so can we make a beginning.

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Reliable source material is to be found in the four major collections (*Nikāyas*) of the Sutta Piṭaka, in its companion, the Vinaya Piṭaka, and in a few other short texts: the Sutta Nipāta, the Dhammapada, the Udāna, the Itivuttaka, and the Theratherīgāthā. In this essay these texts are referred to collectively as "the Suttas." In this essay no other texts are relied upon as representing the Buddha's Teaching.

Change

1. Impermanence is central

We will no doubt all agree that the notion of change, or impermanence (*anicca*), is central to the Teaching of the Buddha. We are told repeatedly, in the oldest texts as well as later ones, that attachment to the impermanent results in woe. Purity, desirelessness, freedom from unhappiness in all its forms—in short, full enlightenment—is achieved by non-attachment. Non-attachment is inseparable from perception of impermanence. And conversely, it is through failure to perceive impermanence that beings continue to cling to this and that. Thus we remain mired in the slough of greed, hatred, delusion, and misery.

But what exactly can all this mean? For it is plain from the start that we already perceive impermanence, all of us. I see a sheet of white paper gradually fill with black marks. I hear various sounds (chirps, hums, gurgles) begin, endure for some time, and then fade. I perceive bodily percepts (warmth, a faint giddiness, an itch) change in character or cease altogether either rapidly or slowly. I think a succession of thoughts, images, ideas. All manifestly impermanent. And all of this is, undeniably, perception of change. "But," it must then be asked, "if you're so perceptive why aren't you enlightened?" So it is clear at once that the Buddha's Teaching, if it means anything at all, must mean something other than this by the term "perception of impermanence." What is that "other than this?"

The usual reply—the answer we find in almost all accounts of Buddhism, both popular and scholarly—is to the effect that this perception of change is merely conventional (*sammuti*). There is a higher, or ultimate (*paramattha*) truth, a perception *other than this* which we must develop: not only do things change; they *always* change, i.e. they are in flux. By "flux" is meant either of two essentially equivalent ideas. "Pure flux" asserts that all things always change: they do not endure unchanged for any time whatsoever. "Impure flux" holds that just as matter is composed of basic units, known as atoms, so too, time consists of basic units, known as moments. These moments are *the rate at which everything changes*.

They are, it seems, extremely brief. Various figures are bandied about, but a common one is 176,470,000,000 moments (more or less) "in a single flash of lightning." With such phenomenal speed material phenomena whiz past our awareness. Mental events, it seems, occur about seventeen times faster.

Clearly, only enlightened beings could hope to perceive such a flux. We commoners must live out our lives in blissful (or not-so-blissful) ignorance of this truth. Nevertheless we can hardly refrain from trying to imagine what the world must be like when everything—*everything!*—is seen to change and flicker and dance about always, and in all ways, with such incredible rapidity that its very reality seems to be at best merely tenuous. Yesterday I wrote some words, black marks on white paper. Today that paper melts into an evanescent and fluctuating whirl. No longer white—no longer even rectangular (for both colour and shape now change ceaselessly)—it seems indefinable, perhaps even impalpable. And those black squiggles, now illegible, are no longer meaningful or, the same thing, they contain all meaning, O paradox!

The wall, once so solid and immobile, now resembles a broiling impasto, as vermiculative in its ceaseless and pervasive mutations as a seething mass of maggots shrouding an overripe corpse. And this chair, once so firm and supportive: how is it that I don't now plunge through its insubstantial flimsiness to fall endlessly down some unutterable abyss? Could *this* be the perception we are admonished to strive for, as being valuable above all else? In such a world how could we even brush our teeth, let alone experience the unalloyed bliss of non-attachment? Before such a vision we can readily develop a sympathy for the view, sometimes encountered, that enlightenment may be all very well and good as a future aspiration, but not *now!*

Of course it might not be that way at all. Imagination is not reality. A perception of universal flux might be but a gentle rippling of the surface, so to speak. A sort of universal vibration more akin to, say, a mild acid trip than to the demented visions of a psychotic madman. This would be a vast improvement over the former conceptualization, to be sure. But it is not at all clear that it would be an improvement over our everyday perception, however drab and mundane and conventional that perception might be.[2] But even if we allow that it is (as we are assured) quite free from any such disquietude as arose when we tried to imagine what perception of

universal flux might be like, and even if we allow that such a perception might be (in some way) beatific, yet as a vision of reality it is still unsatisfactory.

It is not just a matter of declining to accept that perception of impermanence is co-extensive with a disdain for common sense. More importantly, the Buddha proposes, does he not?, that perception of impermanence stands in an organic relationship with relinquishment (as does non-perception of impermanence to attachment). And leaving aside (for now) the question of whether flux is a valid concept in its own right we still must ask: In what way is this notion holistically connected to letting go? After all, an ordinary person, even were he to assent to the doctrine of flux, would not *thereby* see (even conceptually) a connection with the ideas of attachment and unhappiness. This is demonstrated by the many non-Buddhist thinkers, from Heraclitus to Henry Burlingame III who are in exactly this position. Of course one can *argue* a connection. But the fact that an argument is needed is already evidence that the connection is more a matter of reasoning than of self-evidence. And however reasonable the argument may seem it is still an argument.

This is in striking contrast to the notion of conventional or "everyday" change. Even an ordinary person (let alone an enlightened one) can readily see how *that* notion is connected to attachment and woe. No argumentation is necessary (for who has not loved and lost?), albeit he might not thereby see the way to free himself from such attachment, or even wish to do so. When non-Buddhists write about impermanence in its "everyday" sense it is common for them to conclude their remarks with cries of "Alas!" and "Alack!" however much they may then increase their distress by advocacy of strategies of attachment and indulgence—"Gather ye rosebuds while ye may," "Eat, drink, and be merry…," and so on.

To give a concrete example, if I accept that this concrete slab (which is dear to me) is changing "all the time" there is in that no arising of anxiety. My ownership is not thereby affected. Nor is there

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2. "Most of us want some kind of deep, marvellous and mystical experience; our own daily experiences are so trivial, so banal, so superficial, we want something electrifying. In that bizarre thought of a marvellous experience, there is this duality of the experienced and the experience. As long as this duality exists there must be distortion…."—J. Krishnamurti, *The Impossible Question* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 75.

any *a priori* reason why this belief in (or even perception of) flux should induce in me an attitude of relinquishment. It could as well lead me to cling all the tighter. If, for instance, I were to choose to regard this concrete slab as "always changing" then that very "always" could lend it (in my eyes) a sort of backhanded permanence which *discrete* change would not. But suppose I see that my slab could be broken or stolen, that it must be polished and protected, and that in any case it will inevitably be destroyed like all concrete slabs before it. Then it is clear at once, to enlightened and unenlightened alike, that attachment to such a thing must lead to disappointment. And, on a subtler and more immediate level, the awareness that this is so must necessarily produce in me a present apprehension of that disappointment *even though the concrete slab may now be undergoing no apparent (or even actual) change.*

The common man may neither wish to nor be able to apply the observation of discrete change to the generality of his experience. But he is certainly capable of applying it at least to the specific case, and may even succeed thus in freeing himself from a debilitating dependency on concrete slabs. But however much he may strive to apply a belief in flux to his experience, it will necessarily remain separated from that experience by a gulf of rationalization. For flux differs from discrete change not only in that its connection to dissatisfaction is (at least for you and me) a matter of concept, not of percept, but also in that its relation to experience itself is ultimately a matter for conjecture.

2. The usual argument for flux

The usual argument for flux runs like this: We can see that comparatively major changes (the manufacture and eventual destruction of my concrete slab, for example) occur infrequently. Subsidiary changes (e.g. cracks; chipping around the edges) are more common events. Minor changes (scratches on the surface, accumulation of dirt) can be noticed yet more often. It is easy enough to perceive in this progression a principle: less significant changes tend to occur more frequently than more general ones. There is the temptation to leap from this to the notion that *below the threshold of perception* changes are occurring, though we cannot observe them, with yet-greater frequency. It requires only one further extrapolation to reach the conclusion that ultimately (as

opposed to merely conventionally) everything is changing, on an atomic level, all the time: flux. And, it is explained, it is because we fail to see this truth that we form attachments to the impermanent, thereby exposing ourselves to misery.

It is seen at once that this argument (which is certainly *reductio*, if not *ad absurdum*) bases itself upon the observation that things change at diverse rates, subsidiary changes occurring more frequently, and that it concludes with the view that things change at the same rate, constantly. Not everyone will accept a conclusion which contradicts its own premises, but those who will do so once must be prepared to do so twice. For the whole purpose of this double extrapolation from observed discrete change to hypothesized continuous change—based as it is upon analogy rather than upon necessity—is to then use this very flux as an explanation of that same discrete change. Manifest discrete impermanence is taken as the gross outcome of the extremely subtle hypostasized changes that constitute a Reality as yet hidden from our perception. Flux is thus conceived as a sort of primordial essence.

The histories of science and religion are littered with the failed remains of similar efforts to discover such a base. The 19th century scientific notion of an all-pervasive "ether" and the Christian concept of an all-pervasive "God" are examples. All such essences are self-contradictory, flux no less than the others. Out of uniformity we can never arrive at the diversity of the world we actually experience.

If everything changes at the same rate then how is it that we are aware of *slow* and *fast*, and base our lives upon this perception? Ketchup pours slowly, but a shooting star flashes across the sky. Are we to ascribe this to a misperception of reality? Do meteors fall slower for enlightened beings? Does ketchup pour faster? But if an enlightened being perceives different rates of change he cannot *also* perceive continuous universal change. If some things change faster then necessarily there must be some moments (if we insist upon this concept of "moments") when other things do not change at all. Therefore if we posit a relationship between constant and variable change then that relationship is necessarily self-contradictory. However, if the relationship is severed then either the notion of flux must remain divorced from the realm of experience or else we must suppose a world in which continuous and discontinuous change are operative independently—a schizoid world!

Rather than such an impossible world, some—particularly those inclined towards mysticism—prefer none at all. They assert an essence—the Absolute, the All, or some other capitalized Concept—and deny the mundane lower-case reality which is our common lot. They find flux a handy and simple garb with which to conceal naked reality. After all, if everything is always changing then how could such evanescent ephemerae have more than an inferred or second-hand existence? Is not Ultimate Reality—a really *real* Reality—to be found by perceiving flux, or even by going beyond it?

Yet however much the evidence of immediate experience is denied, the world continues to exhibit, in the face of our will, the characteristic of resistance. Therefore, to lend support to the denial, recourse is sometimes had to a wilful misreading of the texts, and in particular of the doctrine of not-self (*anattā*). After all, it needs but a slight familiarity with the Suttas to recognize their major concerns. Conceit, (mistaken) concepts of immutability and essence, the will to possess—these, and not a mere denial of the self-identity of the various things in the world ("a rose is not a rose is not a rose") are their recurrent themes. The relevance of the notion of selfhood, and of the Buddhist response to that notion, is made clear in verse 62 of the Dhammapada:

> "I have sons! I have wealth!"
> Thus the fool concerns himself.
> He has not his very self.
> Whence sons? Whence wealth?

To transmogrify this notion of selfhood into a mere denial that things exist is an attempt to avoid the impact of the Teaching. Such a denial is the sort of wisdom the Suttas avoid: see SN 12:48/II 77. They unequivocally assert that things (e.g. pleasure and pain—SN 12:18/II 22) exist. "Matter (Feeling...; Perception...; Conditions...; Consciousness...) that is impermanent, woeful, and liable to change is reckoned to exist by the sages in the world; and of that I too say 'It is.'"—SN 22:94/S III 139.[3] "'Everything exists:' this, Kaccāna, is the first extreme. 'Nothing exists:' this, Kaccāna, is the second extreme. Avoiding these

3. F. L. Woodward's translation of this passage—*Rūpaṃ* (etc.) *bhikkhave aniccaṃ dukkhaṃ viparināmadhammaṃ atthisammataṃ loke panditānaṃ ahaṃ pi tam atthīti vadāmi*—in vol. 3 of *Kindred Sayings* (London, Pali Text Society, 1955) entirely misses the point.

extremes the Tathāgata [= the Buddha] teaches the middle way....”—SN 12:15/S II 17 = SN 22:90/S III 135. In other words, “This is mine” is illegitimate because “mine” is illegitimate, and not because of the supposed illegitimacy of “this is.”

3. The structure of time

The doctrine of flux is often associated with the notion that time consists of particles (“...at this point in time...”) which move sequentially past something known as “the present.” While only one point (or “moment”) “at a time” is co-synchronous with “the present” (a concatenation of concepts reminiscent of a tangle of rusty barbed wire) other points, equally real, exist in the past and the future. This is sometimes extrapolated to an extreme in the simplistic notion that we can perceive only “one thing at a time”—as if things were incapable of appearing within a context. In this model time is often compared to a river, and the various phenomena of experience to floatage.

However, if we understand time to be not a thing within (or upon) which all other things exist, but a characteristic *of* phenomena, then confusion need not arise. Things exhibit, variously, the qualities of blueness, of clangorousness, of sweetness, of pungency, of warmth, or of calmness (to name but one quality perceived through each of the senses). But we do not suppose (unless we are Platonists) that there are therefore universal qualities, “Blue,” etc., from which these various characteristics are derived. Why, then, need we assume that temporality (or, the same thing, impermanence) is different?

True, it is universal, unlike all other qualities.[4] But it is not thereby any the less a quality inherent to phenomena rather than something imposed externally. The notion of time being external to phenomena, of things existing *in* time, brings us back to the search

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4. Spatiality can be present in any single-sense experience (and *a fortiori* in any multi-sense experience), but it need not be. It is thus actually not entitled to its privileged position alongside temporality (“the space-time continuum”) as a universal characteristic. Anguish, for instance, is not spatial, though it is certainly temporal. In this limited sense we can say that it is time that is of the essence. (By the way, according to *The American Heritage Word Frequency Book*, compiled by John B. Carroll et al., the word “time” is the most commonly used noun in modern English.)

for some basic essence ("Time is Nature's way of preventing everything from happening all at once.") which is simultaneously both within and outside the range of human experience. Such a model is not merely suppositions but pernicious.

When such notions are set aside we shall be able to see that there is a basic and observable temporal structure to experience: it is organized hierarchically. This has already been implied in the observation that subsidiary changes occur more frequently than general ones. Things exist not in isolation but against a background of what they are not. For as long as we differentiate between a figure and its background the figure remains itself. Each figure greater than a point (a perceived point, that is, and not the ideal and suppositious points of mathematicians) is necessarily a construct of subsidiary components, for each of which the figure serves as background. And each background is in turn subsidiary to and defined by a yet more general level of experience. When change occurs it does so on a particular level of generality, and against a background of non-change at the next higher level.

Thus, a song is a sequence of notes of defined intervals. The notes change, but the song (which is the context within which the notes are characterized) remains the *same* song until it is finished. It would be meaningless to say, as the notes follow one another, that the song is changing. Our very sense of what a song *is* is that it is, precisely, an organized sequence of notes. It is *because* the notes change (and not their organization) that there is a song at all, let alone the same song.

Change always occurs at a specific level of generality. But at any level the change is total: what is ceases to be and is replaced by something else, or by nothing else. But on the next higher level there is no change at all: what is remains what it is until it ceases to be what it is. If the song is part of a more general performance then we can say that though the song has ended and another has begun there is still the same concert, for the concert is the background to the songs. The note is finished but the melody lingers on. The song is over but the concert continues. The concert is concluded but there is still the fag end of the evening to go. How long "the present" lasts depends upon our perspective. It is for this reason that in common language there is quite properly a plasticity in the scope of the word "now."

The present can mean this very second (the nick of time), the next sixty seconds (while this song—"The Minute Waltz"—is playing), today

("What a difference a day makes..."), a season ("Summertime, and the livin' is easy..."), or even the last million years or so ("In comparison with the Tertiary period, then, the Pleistocene is marked by..."). How long "now" lasts depends on its context, and context is a matter of perspective. It is only against a background of sameness that change can be perceived. This is "change while standing"—*ṭhitassa aññathattaṃ*, A III 47/A I 52. Without difference we cannot speak of change; but without steadiness how can we speak of difference? Change *requires* non-change as its background, as what it is not.[5]

Again: this sentence remains "this sentence" and not "a different sentence" until such time as (within the terms of experience of it) it ends. It remains "this sentence" even though its subsidiary parts, namely the words which comprise it, arise and cease in an organized sequence as experienced entities. And even though that sentence has now come to an end, has ceased utterly, has been replaced by another sentence, namely this one, yet this is still the same paragraph, specifically the eighth paragraph of the third section of an essay called *Change*. And on a yet more general level, until it demonstrates its own title by concluding, this essay will remain the same essay, *Change*, even after this paragraph has come to an end. To wit:

Since on each higher level of generality there is no change at all we can say that from a point of view within any one level the next higher level is eternal. Or, better, extra-temporal. Just as change is perceptible only against a background of non-change, so too impermanence (temporality) is perceptible only against a background of extra-temporality. But that extra-temporality exists only in relationship to its less general foreground, and it is thus not *independently* extra-temporal. Its extra-temporality is due entirely to a particular point of view. And since points of view are invariably temporal, that extra-temporality will cease and be utterly ended when the perspective of the experience changes and no longer gives support to eternality. Thus, *the extra-temporal exists only with temporality as its condition*—a point to which we shall return.

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5. The relationship between particularity and rate of change is such that in some hierarchies we can arrive at a level of immediacy wherein change is so rapid that it is apprehended only irrationally, as a blur. No doubt with practice the threshold at which perception of discrete change degenerates into an indiscriminate blur can be lowered, but it cannot be eliminated any more than one can eliminate a horizon by running towards it, however fast a runner one may be.

Absolute eternality—eternalness quite independent of any point of view—is another matter. All that can be said is that, since experience necessarily requires a point of view, absolute eternality is outside the realm of any possible experience. It is inherently unknowable, unrealizable. But it would be a mistake to go farther by raising questions of its "existence." This is all that can be said of absolute eternality, but it is not all that can be said of the desire to discover an absolute eternality. Since this desire is bound up with the inability to understand what is meant by "perception of impermanence" we shall have much more to say about it in the course of this essay.

In normal experience we are skilled at skipping between points of view based on different levels of generality. So accustomed are we to these leaps that we seldom notice the transition. In developing a reflexive attitude we can become skilled at not so leaping, or at least in looking when we do. It is in reflexion that the hierarchical is seen to be fundamental to experience in ways that our primitive examples do not illustrate. But to everydayness this relative extra-temporality may seem paradoxical, inasmuch as its very existence is entirely dependent upon there being a temporal foreground. We expect our eternities to be made of sturdier stuff. We expect them to be absolute. It is disconcerting to find that every eternity exists dependent upon its temporal foreground, without which it would simply cease to be eternal. To be extra-temporal, then, is a quality which inheres in a thing (by virtue of endowment) *now*. It is eternal *at this minute*. In other words, a thing can be eternal, but only until it comes to an end.

Thus, if one adopts the point of view of the notes, the song is eternal. It does not merely outlast any particular note (for by that reckoning it would be merely temporal); it is on an entirely different plane of being than the notes. The song is what the notes are *for*: it is only by virtue of there being a song at all that the notes can be characterized *as* notes. Were there no song then the individual sounds could not be regarded as music: there would be no notes. In other words the note *qua* note exists only by virtue of the song, which is the note's purpose in life.

Things always appear in a context, however rarefied. It is this context which allows us to distinguish "this" from "that." In order, then, to identify a thing, to "name" it, we must know (among other things) what it is *for*. Therefore the song is *necessarily* on a higher level of being than the notes, and cannot be regarded as having the

same sort of temporality. (The door will also outlast the notes, but we do not therefore say that from the perspective of the notes the door is eternal. No, for the door is unrelated to the notes, not part of their noteness.)

Of course, the song is extra-temporal only from the point of view of the notes. From the point of view of the song itself it is the concert that is extra-temporal. (Extra-temporal, that is, within the hierarchy we have constructed here. We should observe, though, that this hierarchy—notes, song, concert, evening—is but one of numerous possible hierarchies, many of which could exist within an experience simultaneously, cutting across one another at various junctures.) And from the perspective of "an evening on the town" the song may seem interminable, but it would never seem eternal. From this perspective it is but one feature, to be followed by others, as notes are features of the song.

The song could cease to exist only when the next more immediate level (the notes) ceases to exist. As long as there *are* notes from which there *could be* that point of view the song *must* endure. But when the song ends there is no longer the possibility of regarding its non-existence from the viewpoint of the notes. In this sense the song is (always from the viewpoint of the notes) quite beyond temporality.

But observe that although in this example the background[6] (the song) actually does last longer than the foreground (the particular notes) this is not always the case. If a thing exists or an act is performed *for* some purpose, then that purpose is (from the viewpoint of the thing or the act) extra-temporal regardless of how long it endures "by the clock." If we do something merely for the pleasure of doing it, then even though the pleasure lasts not a whit longer than the actual doing, nevertheless from the point of view of the doing the pleasure is extra-temporal. It is endowed with a substantiality which the action does not possess. And it is "the point of view of the doing" that we normally adopt while involved in an activity .

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6. The use of the terms "figure," "background," etc. are here given a more restricted meaning than their equivalents in Gestalt psychology. In Gestalt the figure is not necessarily "for" the ground; it is merely that part of experience which receives primary attention. Though ground may validly be understood thus, our present interest makes it convenient to use terminology with a more restricted meaning, wherein the background is the "for"-ground.

"The eternity which man is seeking is not the infinity of duration, of that vain pursuit after the self for which I am myself responsible; man seeks a repose in self, the atemporality of the absolute co-incidence with himself."[7] As soon as a thing is taken up as being "this, my self" it is immediately accorded the status of being *what everything else is for*. It is thus regarded quite literally as extra-temporality personified.

4. Impermanence and desire

PHILOSOPHICALLY, then (as well as conceptually), flux is an utterly unsatisfactory doctrine, inasmuch as it totally ignores the fundamental hierarchical nature of experience. It fails to see the difference between the forest and the trees. If, however, one adopts the attitude, "So much the worse for philosophy," then it must be noted that flux was intended to explain not only discrete change but also attachment and its resultant unhappiness ("...it is *because* we fail to see flux that..."). Thus, it is not enough to assert that the small cracks on my concrete slab are the result of its being of the nature to be "always changing." We must also say that had I only been aware of this flux (as distinct from my indubitable awareness of perceivable changes) I would have known how pointless it must be to choose attachment to what is so changeable. Only thereby would I now be impervious to any apprehension that might be occasioned by the deterioration of the slab.

However, it is not the case that apprehension (which is internal) would be mitigated by a perception of flux (which is external). Flux neither gives rise to apprehension nor accounts for it: we need to look towards attachment for that understanding.[8] Further, if flux is to explain unhappiness due to one sort of change then it must explain it with regard to other sorts of change as well. Wear is not the only hazard to my concrete slab. It might fall and shatter irreparably. And while we might accept the explanation of sub-

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7. J. P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Methuen, 1957), trans. by Hazel E. Barnes, pp. 141–2.

8. He who is subject to craving, alas!,
his sorrows increase like abounding grass.
But he who surmounts this base craving sheds pain
just as the lotus sheds droplets of rain. Dhp 335-36

perceptual change, or even of flux, in the case of the gradual appearance of cracks, it is more difficult to do so in the case of breakage by sudden impact. The connection to an accumulation of a vast number of infinitesimal changes is tenuous. But this is not all. It is also possible that the slab could be stolen: slab-thieves lurk everywhere. Are we to suppose that the unhappiness occasioned by the theft of what is dear to me is also explicable meaningfully in terms of flux? But if flux is not relevant to the unhappiness resultant from loss by theft then it also cannot be relevant to loss by wear or tear, for both the loss and the unhappiness are in each instance of the same order.

After all, it is not change *as such* that is a source for unhappiness (in which case there would be no escape from sorrow), but change *from the way I want things to be*. A skilful repairing of my concrete slab is a change, but it is of itself cause not for anxiety but for gladness.

My electronic clock functions dependent upon a vibration rate of some thousands of cycles per second (admittedly, a long way from the enormous figure of 176,470,000,000, but not bad for all that), and the rapidity of its vibrations causes me no alarm (unless the alarm function is switched on). Rather, I would be perturbed if the clock were to *stop* vibrating, to *stop* changing (and registering) "all the time:" to become other than the way I want it to be.

A hundred-rupee note is no less negotiable today than it was a month ago, for all that it may be said to have changed 457,410,240,000,000 times in the interim. Where is the sorrow in that sort of change?

The sun courses daily across the sky; the seasons progress annually; and this in itself does not induce anxiety. Rather, I should be disconcerted and grieved if the sun were to *stop* transiting the sky, or if it were to remain always winter, or even always summer. This would be truly upsetting. Yet this is not so much a matter of change as of becoming otherwise, i.e. other than the way I want or expect things to be. The sun's position has *stopped* changing "all the time;" the seasons have *ceased* their advancement. This is the sort of change I turn from and wish to deny. For even if matters were not arranged in their most perfect possible order they were at least *arranged*: day followed night, winter followed autumn. There was not the threatening anxiety of *uncertainty*: if *this*, what *next*?

But the doctrine of flux is a doctrine of certainty: *every*thing is *al*ways changing. It is therefore a falsification of our manifest awareness of the world's unreliability: things change when we

expect (and wish) them not to. The need to hold to and proclaim this doctrine is thus revealed for what it is: not a coming to truth but a fleeing from it. In the face of the world's insecurity the doctrine of flux is an attempt to retreat into a position of certainty.

Yet despite our efforts we cannot change the fact that things change and become otherwise. What *can* be altered is our attachment to the things of the world *whether or not* they are in a state of flux. To make observance of flux the basis of one's efforts, then, at minimum misses the point by going too far (*atidhāvati*: to overshoot the mark). It is a misdirection of effort. It diverts us from the task of recognizing our own inappropriate efforts to appropriate the world, steering us to a less relevant (but far easier) effort to perceive in the world our own notions about the world.

Rather than perceive impermanence as the decay and decrepitude of old age, as the weakening of the faculties, the loss of control over the body, the gasping for air as life ebbs, the fearsome uncontrollable slide from light to darkness as our very identity—body, perception, consciousness, all—fades away and breaks up—rather than perceive impermanence as *that*, how much more comfortable to blandly assert that everything is always changing, and thereby to move from the threatening and vertiginous perceptual realm to the safely exorcised sphere of the conceptual, while at the same time concealing this entire movement by a dialectical dance of complacency. No, change is involved with suffering not because of change *per se* but because things do not remain the way we wish them to remain even when the way we wish them to be is "to be changing."

So then, even if conceptual and philosophical considerations carry no weight there are still other difficulties that must be faced by any who would have their beliefs (and disbeliefs) based on something more profound than somnolence. For we have seen that at the very least the question, "What is meant in the Buddha's Teaching by the term 'impermanence'?" is not so easily answered as has been sometimes supposed.

And yet, this same Teaching repeatedly insists that perception of impermanence is a necessary condition for uprooting the basis of human dissatisfaction. So it is clear that regardless of difficulties, complexities, or the length of our inquiry, we must explore, with openness and diligence, the question: Does the Buddha's Teaching of impermanence mean a teaching of flux, or does it not? For if it does

then either we shall have to find a way to accommodate the objections already raised, or else we shall have to abandon the Buddha's Teaching as untenable. And if it does not then we shall have both to decide what it *does* involve, and also to account for the widespread and long-lived endurance of a misconception which cannot be regarded as trivial.

For it is not only nowadays that we find expositors setting forth the doctrine of continuous change as being what the Buddha taught. As far back as fifteen centuries ago we find this doctrine already firmly embedded in the perspective proposed in various expositions that have come down to us. But what do we find if we go back yet another ten centuries, to the oldest Buddhist texts extant? To those texts which represent, if any at all do, the actual Teaching of the Buddha?

5. What the Suttas say

It is generally agreed by both traditionalists and scholars alike that no Buddhist texts predate the four major Nikāyas of the Sutta Piṭaka, and that these Nikāyas originate either with the Buddha himself or within a few score years of his decease.[9] Therefore the way to discover what the Buddha meant by change (or for that matter any other doctrinal concept) it is necessary to examine these texts and learn what is said therein.[10]

Rather than trying to be exhaustive (and perhaps exhausting) it will be adequate herein to offer but one quotation from each of the four Nikāyas, chosen from a host of congruous alternatives. Those who read the Suttas will discover for themselves the additional evidence that is to be found therein. Those who do not may prefer to consider the discussion which follows rather than peruse numerous citations of Canonical authority.

> **1)** And which, friends, is the development of concentration which, developed and made much of, leads to mindfulness and awareness? Here, friends, feelings arise known to a monk, known they persist, known they go to an end. Perceptions arise known, known

9. This point is discussed in detail in my essay, *Beginnings: The Pali Suttas*.

10. This procedure is not proposed as a *substitute* for the practice of the Teaching but as a *part of it*. For only thus may we be confident that we are proceeding correctly and in accordance with right-view guidance.

they persist, known they go to an end. Thoughts arise known, known they persist, known they go to an end. Friends, this is the development of concentration which, developed and made much of, leads to mindfulness and awareness.—D 33/III 223.[11]

2) And those things in the first meditation—thinking and pondering and gladness and pleasure and one-pointedness of mind, contact, feeling, perception, intention, mind, wish, resolve, energy, mindfulness, equanimity, attention—these things are analyzed step by step by him. These things arise known to him. Known they persist, known they go to an end. He understands thus: Thus these things, having not been, come to be. Having been, they disappear.—MN 111/M III 25.[12]

3) Friends, the arising of matter [...of feelings; ...of perception; ...of conditions; ...of consciousness] is manifest, ceasing is manifest, change while standing is manifest.—SN 22:37/S III 38.[13]

4) But indeed, sir, whatever is existent, conditioned, intended, dependently arisen, that is impermanent. What is impermanent is unpleasurable. What is unpleasurable is [to be regarded as] "This is not mine; I am not this; this is not my self." Thus this is correctly seen with right understanding as it really is. And I understand as it really is the uttermost refuge from that [suffering].—AN 10:93/A V 188.[14]

All these statements are positive assertions that things not only arise and pass away but that they also *endure*. They are not

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11. *Katamā ca āvuso samādhibhāvanā bhāvitā bahulīkatā satisampajaññāya saṃvaṭṭati? Idhāvuso bhikkhuno viditā vedanā uppajjanti viditā upaṭṭhahanti viditā abbhatthaṃ gacchanti; viditā saññā uppajjanti viditā upaṭṭhahanti viditā abbhatthaṃ gacchanti; viditā vitakkā uppajjanti viditā upaṭṭhahanti viditā abbhatthaṃ gacchanti. Ayaṃ āvuso samādhibhāvanā bhāvitā bahulīkatā satisampajaññāya saṃvaṭṭati.*

12. *Ye ca paṭhamajjhāne dhammā vitakko ca vicāro ca pīti ca sukhañ ca cittekaggatā ca phasso vedanā saññā cetanā cittaṃ chando adhimokkho viriyaṃ sati upekhā manasikāro tyāssa dhammā anupadavavatthitā honti tyāssa dhammā viditā uppajjanti viditā upaṭṭhahanti viditā abbhatthaṃ gacchanti. So evaṃ pajānāti: Evaṃ kira 'me dhammā ahutvā sambhonti hutvā pativentīti.*

13. *Rūpassa [Vedanāya; Saññāya; Saṅkhārānaṃ; Viññāṇassa] kho āvuso uppādo paññāyati vayo paññāyati ṭhitassa aññathattaṃ paññāyati.*

statements that everything (or even anything) is in a state of flux. Indeed, although the four Nikāyas occupy some 5,500 pages of print in their abbreviated roman-script edition, there seems to be not a single statement anywhere within them that requires us to understand thereby (in opposition to the above passages) a doctrine of flux. On the contrary, the Suttas are wholly consistent on this point (as on others). Therefore even in precisely those passages where we would most expect to find such a doctrine, if it were to be found in the Nikāyas at all, the assertion is conspicuously absent. Thus for example at MN 28/M I 185, we find:

There comes a time, friends, when the external earth element is disturbed, and then the external earth element vanishes. For even of this external earth element, great as it is, impermanence will be manifest, liability to destruction will be manifest, liability to decay will be manifest, liability to become otherwise will be manifest. What then of this body, which is held to by craving and lasts but a little while?...[15]

Here the impermanence of even the earth element (and, farther on, of the elements of water, fire, and air) is emphasized precisely to demonstrate the yet-greater impermanence of this body. If the notion of flux was congruent with the essence of the Buddha's Teaching would this not be a perfect opportunity to point out that even the four elements (let alone this body) are so impermanent as to be changing all the time? But no, all that is asserted is that even this body lasts "but a little while." Is "a little while" more than a single moment? Apparently so, for—apart from what is implicit in this Sutta—at SN 12:61/S II 94–5, it is said that, in contrast to the mind, "this body, formed of the four great elements, is seen enduring one year, two years, ...fifty years, a hundred years or more...."[16] And if the body lasts more than a moment, what then of the four external

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14. *Yaṃ kho pana bhante kiñci bhūtaṃ saṅkhataṃ cetayitaṃ paṭiccasamuppannaṃ, tad aniccaṃ; yad aniccaṃ tam dukkhaṃ; yam dukkhaṃ taṃ n'etaṃ mama n'eso 'haṃ asmi na m'eso attā ti: evaṃ etaṃ yathābhutaṃ sammappaññāya sudiṭṭhaṃ, tassa ca uttariṃ nissaraṇaṃ yathābhutaṃ pajānāmīti.*

15. *Hoti kho so āvuso samayo yaṃ bāhirā paṭhavidhātu pakuppati antarahitā tasmiṃ samaye bāhirā paṭhavidhātu hoti. Tassā hi nāma āvuso bāhirāya paṭhavidhātuyā tāva mahāllikāya aniccatā paññāyissati khayadhammatā paññāyissatī vayadhammatā paññāyissati viparināmadhammatā paññāyissati kiṃ panimassa mattatthakassa kāyassa taṇhupādinnassa....*

elements (i.e. external to the body), which the MN 28 passage asserts by implication to be longer-lived than the body? Why, if these elements were believed to be changing *all* the time, would it be said that "there *comes* a time?" Why too would the *liability* to change be asserted, rather than the posited moment-to-moment change itself? Why, if these elements were taken to be changing right now, is the future tense used, "will be manifest?"

Again, when we turn to SN 22:99/S III 149–50 we find.... Ah, but let us not seek further, for in this matter of textual evidence examples could be multiplied almost endlessly. Yet in spite of such evidence (or perhaps because of it) there will still be those who will assert that the doctrine of flux is nevertheless central to the Buddha's Teaching. They will point to passages which, in speaking of impermanence, do not absolutely disallow an interpretation of flux. And it is certainly true that not every reference to change is so rigorously qualified as to eliminate every possible mis-reading. Unlike this essay, each Sutta was addressed to a known audience, with known attitudes and ideas. There would have been no need to correct misconceptions that those particular individuals did not hold. (And, unlike today, it seems that in the Buddha's time the notion of flux was neither widespread nor deep-rooted. This is evidence of the influence scientific materialism has had on contemporary thought, if not evidence of the "inevitable progress of mankind.")

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16. *Dissatāyaṃ bhikkhave cātummahābhūtiko kāyo ekaṃ pi vassaṃ tiṭṭhamāno, dve pi vassāni tiṭṭhamāno..., paññāsaṃ pi vassāni tiṭṭhamāno, vassasataṃ pi tiṭṭhamāno, bhiyyo pi tiṭṭhamāno....* This Sutta goes on to point out that although the body can last a century or more, yet the unenlightened commoner is able to be disenchanted with, dispassionate towards, and freed from the body. But on the other hand "what is called 'heart' (*citta*), 'mind' (*mano*), 'consciousness' (*viññāṇa*) day and night arises as one thing and ceases as another," and yet "the unenlightened commoner is unable to be disenchanted with that, to be dispassionate, to be freed. What is the reason? For a long time, monks, the unenlightened commoner has subjectivized, identified with, and manipulated this [mind]: 'This is mine; I am this; this is my self.' Therefore the unenlightened commoner is unable to be disenchanted with that, to be dispassionate, to be freed." Evidently, then, it is not by perceiving the brevity of a thing's endurance that a liberative insight can arise: it seems to be more a matter of perceiving that however long a thing endures it cannot properly be identified as "mine," as "I," or as "my self."

That some texts do not specifically disallow a certain understanding, then, is insufficient as evidence that such an understanding was intended. What is needed if flux is to be demonstrated as centrally important to the Teaching is at least one single passage somewhere in those 5,500 pages of text which *requires* us to accept impermanence as meaning continuous change. This, and also a reconciliation between flux and the passages (such as those just quoted) which would seem to rule out such an understanding. Both of these things, and also a satisfactory response to the objections, both conceptual and philosophical, already raised to the doctrine of flux. All of these, and also a rigorous demonstration of the relevance of flux to attachment, and to the experience of dissatisfaction.

Inasmuch as a straightforward reading of those Suttas clearly requires an understanding inconsistent with the notion of flux an argument has been concocted to get around this difficulty. The Buddha, we are told, certainly did speak of impermanence in terms of discontinuous change, which, after all, is an aspect of the ordinary experience of ordinary people. But when he did so he was speaking in *conventional* terms, whereas when he taught about flux he used *ultimate* terms, a distinction which herein we have failed to make.

The acceptance of this dichotomy between conventional and transcendental language is widespread today, as is the supposititious parallel distinction between conventional and absolute truth, or reality. Therefore some may be surprised to learn that such a distinction (whether with regard to language, truth, or reality), like the notion of flux itself, is of later invention and is not to be met with in the Suttas. Quite the contrary, it is specifically and repeatedly condemned. At MN 99/M II 202, for instance, the Buddha goes out of his way to lead his listener to acknowledge the superiority of conventional speech (as well as of speech that is well-advised, spoken after reflection, and connected with the goal) over unconventional speech (and also over speech that is ill-advised, etc.). And consistent with this, at MN 139/M III 230 the monks are advised that when teaching they should (among other things) “not deviate from recognized parlance.”[17]

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17. *Samaññaṃ nātidhāveyyāti*: I B. Horner’s rendering is used. Ven. Ñāṇamoli translates as: “he should not override normal usage.” Elsewhere I use my own translations.

The Suttas, then, clearly assert that they are to be understood as saying what they mean. They are not to be interpreted, for to do so must result in misunderstanding them. Inasmuch as the texts themselves advocate the use of everyday language, and nowhere suggest the validity of some superior form of expression (known, like some arcane password, to only the few) such a dichotomy must be rejected.

6. A circular argument

WHAT, then, *do* the texts mean by "impermanence?" We can at once rule out the possibility that impermanence means "no change." The notion that nothing ever changes could appeal only to the followers of Zeno, Enō, Pakudha Kaccāyana (DN 2/D I 56), and others of their ilk. The Suttas dismiss this notion out of hand. If, too, we have eliminated the notion of continuous change, then clearly the only possibility remaining is *dis*continuous change. By discontinuous change is meant that while everything is *subject* to change, and *could* change at any time, and *must* change sooner or later, yet also things *endure*. At some times they change and at other times they do not. The problem is that quite some while ago we already acknowledged that though we can perceive discontinuous change, we are not thereby enlightened; and that situation seems not to have changed just yet (which is itself evidence for discontinuous change, if not yet for enlightenment).

What, then, is the difference between discontinuous change (as perceived by us) and discontinuous change (as perceived by an enlightened being)? I would suggest that it is not so much a matter of seeing impermanence as it is of seeing the *necessity*, the *inevitability*, of impermanence in all experience. The point may be made clearer by means of a simile (for by means of a simile "some thoughtful people know the meaning of what is said"—SN 12:67/S II 114).

You and I would have no difficulty in accepting the statement "all circles are round." It is obvious. Indeed, it is virtually a pleonasm. True, we have not inspected every circle that exists and tested each for roundness. True, we may have personally come across but a minute fraction of all circles that presently exist (let alone those that have been or will come to be). And yet this introduces no jot of doubt into our conviction that all circles are in fact round. Our certainty is structural, not statistical.

On the other hand the statement "All swans are white" is statistical. We must always allow for the possibility that a black swan might be found; and black swans were in fact discovered during the explorations of Australia, after which logicians had to change their paradigm to the proposal that "All crows are black." To date (1988) no white crows have been reported, but the universe is a vast and varied place. Perhaps in some as-yet-unexplored hinterland of Borneo.... But we do not suppose, however vast and varied the universe may appear, that some day a circle will be discovered which is, say, pentagonal. We understand that this cannot be. The statement "All circles are round" describes not a statistical observation but a structural necessity: if it isn't round it's not a circle. (We may ignore the irrelevant case of circulars which are in fact rectangular.)

But suppose (unlikely though it may be) that we should meet someone who though otherwise both sane and intelligent does not happen to see the structural necessity for the roundness of circles. He, presented with the proposition that all circles are round, might nevertheless agree with it. After all, in his entire life he has never once seen a single circle that was not round as round could be. Yet his assent would be of a different nature than ours. For him doubt would still be possible. Perhaps in the frozen methane wastes of Io, or in the intense gravity of the sun's crucible, there might exist a circle that was, say, *oblong*. He could not be sure, for he has failed to recognize the principle that roundness is the condition for circles. When there is roundness there are circles; with arising of roundness circles arise. When there is not roundness there are not circles; with ceasing of roundness circles cease.

And even if he were to assent to this principle, yet for as long as he failed to see its *necessity* that assent of his would be statistical in nature, and would thereby miss the point entirely. Reviewing (again) the argument by which he became convinced of this truth about circles he might think, "*This* time I see the reasonableness of that structural principle; and when I thought about it *last* it also seemed correct to me. But will I still agree with it tomorrow?" It can be said of our friend that although he may (in a certain sense) see the structural necessity for the roundness of circles, yet he has failed to see that necessity *in a structural way*. He has thereby succeeded only in raising his blindness to a higher plane, and has not thereby achieved vision.

Our friend, who is congenial and acquiescent, wishes to be (as are we) beyond doubt in this matter. He would like to understand

how it is that the roundness of circles is a matter of necessity rather than a mere matter of fact (for he has heard, as may well be the case, that higher than actuality stands possibility). But how is he to accomplish this? For although it is clear to him that a mere statistical survey of circles will never achieve this certainty (since no such survey could ever hope to be exhaustive), yet any explanation he may devise (or purchase from zealous hawkers of various persuasions) could never be more adequate than the dubious perception upon which it is based.

He may endorse some creation theory or other regarding an original proto-Roundness out of which all circles emanate. He may espouse an eschatological view about an eventual return of all circles to the One Great Circle (so Round that the roundness of known circles is but a shadow of Its roundness). Or he may entangle himself in pseudo-phenomenological theories that circles are nothing more than a vast number of minute particles of roundness, these particles being perceivable (and only with vast effort) to but the few. In this thicket of views all talk of such phenomena as curvature would be regarded as merely conventional speech: ultimate terms could refer only to these minute particulae of roundness, and it would be towards their perception that he would direct his efforts.

You and I know that our friend, though earnest and dedicated, would be chasing phantasmagoria. Such a pursuit can end only in either a frustrated (though honest) defeat or the misery of a fraudulently assumed success. Or else it will end in the grave. But what might we do to help him?

First, of course, we must convince him to abandon all speculation as irrelevant. He must understand that theories are misleading and pernicious obstructions to a right view of things. Rather, he must focus his attention on what he can actually perceive. For truth is to be found not (as he seems to suppose) somewhere beyond his present experience, but by seeing within that present perception a relationship which, though basic, has been overlooked.

What he needs to see is really quite simple. Indeed, a good part of his problem is that he has made things much too complicated, and has thereby masked the truth. It would be of little use, then, to point to the great variety of existing circles. Certainly, circles can be red or blue, large or small, thick or thin. Some are made of stainless steel, others of sealing wax. Some contain artificial preservatives, others are vicious. A few are very valuable. Many are made in Hong Kong.

But all of this variety is actually superficial. What needs to be seen is not their diversity but that which is common to every circle.[18] And for this it is sufficient for our friend to sit down with one single circle of any convenient colour, size, and composition, and to try to see what is essential to it. What is there dependent upon which the circle is in fact a circle? If he comes to recognize the essence of any one circle he will understand the essence of all circles. And if our friend can avoid being misled by theories, if he can eliminate the extraneous, if he can attend to what is essential, he may succeed in doing just this, and thereby pass beyond all doubt, as are we, as to the fact that "All circles are round."

Now, is universal impermanence a statistical truth or a structural necessity? Although you and I may agree upon its necessity, we must also agree that this truth is evidently not so evident as is the roundness of circles. For (despite our analogous friend) we will actually all agree on roundness, whereas we do not all agree on impermanence. Indeed, not only do we not all understand that universal impermanence is a structural, not a statistical, truth; there are even those who assert that there exists Something which is neither statistically nor structurally impermanent. Between roundness and impermanence, why this difference?

Our friend's failure to see the inherent roundness of circles is gratuitous. His blindness is a mere negative, like not happening to know that the door-key is under the mat: were the information available our friend would no doubt be readily able to make use of it. His wrong view is not due to anything he does. He experiences neither an urge to deny the impossibility of a square circle nor any compulsion to seek one out.

On the other hand, a failure to see the structural necessity for change is due to an active intending to not see. It is a negating rather than a negative, a choosing to conceal that which presses for attention, a willing to perpetually perpetrate a misperception. In brief: self-deception.

Self-deception: Sartre speaks of "bad faith" and Heidegger of "inauthenticity;" more straightforwardly, Kierkegaard calls it "twaddle." By whatever name, self-deception is notable in that it

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18. "This Teaching is for one who delights and rejoices in uniformity; this Teaching is not for one who delights and rejoices in diversity."—AN 8:30/A IV 229.

involves not only denial of the truth but also denial of the deception. For if we were to deny the truth but to acknowledge the deception ("Yes, it is true that I am denying the truth") then the deception would be transparent stuff indeed. But it is not sufficient merely to deny the deception: we must also deny the denial of the deception. For to acknowledge that we were denying the deception would be no improvement—if that is the right word—over confessing to the deception. But even this is insufficient: if we do not deny the denial of the denial...of the denial of the deception the entire cover-up becomes unraveled, threatening the exposure of.... And, as matters progress backwards, we find that we have already become instantly involved in an endless regression, namely that familiar stairway, the infinite hierarchy.

We saw that experience was hierarchical in its general outlines; we now discover that within experience there exist autonomous hierarchical structures. In the experiential hierarchy "notes—song—concert—evening" the content determined the level within the hierarchy. *Notes* is more immediate than *song* and cannot be otherwise. But in the hierarchy of self-deception denial of knowledge is found on *every* level, and thus describes not a particular level but the hierarchy as a whole. Such hierarchies can be described as replicative, or as *recursive*.[19]

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19. The word might be defined, dictionary style, as: "Recursive: *adj*. see Recursive." Curiously, recursive hierarchies seem to play an important role in some branches of Western science, including computer programming, wherein it is essential that such programs do not contain any true recursive hierarchies. For if even one were to be introduced the computer would become involved in an endless cycle and the program would never conclude. In other words, although art may imitate life, a computer program, if it is ever to arrive at a conclusion, had better not do so too closely.

The term "recursive" (as well as several other words) has been adapted with a somewhat altered meaning from Douglas R. Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (Penguin Books, 1980). Hofstadter's book is provocative, witty, imaginative, wide-ranging, entertaining, stimulating, and, alas, quite mistaken in its fundamental approach to understanding the human situation. Neither his deterministic views nor (at the other extreme) the free-will views of Prof. J. R. Lucas can come close to the middle way taught by the Buddha.

Recursiveness is important because it offers a stability not present in "ordinary" hierarchies. Remove "an evening on the town" and the entire structure—notes, song, concert—collapses. But remove "denial of knowledge" and we find that...we *can't*. Recursiveness is not a feature found merely on each level, like the identical floral pattern on each dish in a stack: rather, recursion is the link between adjacent levels. The denial is always on the next most general level to the knowledge. From the perspective of the knowledge, then, the denial is extra-temporal. As long as we fail to achieve a point of view established outside this hierarchy, knowledge can never escape being encompassed by denial, and the structure must remain inviolable. Thus the structure of self-deception has a stability not found in non-recursive aspects of experience—as everyone knows who has ever succeeded in freeing himself from even the narrowest of such deceptions.

But why go to the trouble of so much self-deception? Why should we be so reluctant to acknowledge the necessity, in experience, of impermanence, when we feel no such hesitation in asserting the necessity, in circles, of roundness? The answer will be found reflected in the entire history of humankind. We seek happiness. We seek freedom. We seek security. Or, more fundamentally, *we seek*. And so we return, as we must, to craving.

Despite the fact that we want things to be *this* way, the universe displays an uncanny predilection to arrange that things shall be *that* way. Things become otherwise. Even when things are as we would have them be, they exhibit the disconcerting quality of not remaining so. We deny to ourselves the necessity of impermanence out of a desire for things to remain as we wish them to be.

But it is not only for this reason that craving is incompatible with perception of impermanence. More fundamentally, craving is teleological, or purposeful, in character: it is always *for* something. And what it is for is (as we have already seen) its background, or context. And its background is (as we have also seen) of a higher temporal order. From craving's viewpoint, then, its object is always extra-temporal. Craving is bound up with the ongoing (i.e. temporal) effort to discover the Eternal, for in its view only the Eternal can be free of the anxiety due (so it believes) to the world's uncertainty. The extra-temporal does not change: it is certain.

It is not merely an odd quirk on craving's part, then, that it seeks the permanent: it is in its very essence entirely unable to do otherwise. Although it can never achieve its goal (any more than the

note can become the song), it always looks towards its goal, and indicates it. Looking towards what it tries to regard as Eternal, it is not well placed to perceive the structural necessity for impermanence. It should be little wonder, then, that there is an organic relationship between craving and non-perception of impermanence (as also between perception of impermanence and relinquishment).

Craving is purposeful: it is always *for* something. On a gross level we have our specific cravings for this or that; but were they the only sort of craving that existed then we should soon enough be able to put an end to them by the simple expedient of gratification. But no, even after we have "everything we could possibly want" we find that there is still craving. We still want something further. Even when we are most bored with the world's diversions we find (if we bother to look) that there is still a searching, a wanting. Indeed, without wanting there could not be that boredom. Although there is nothing specific within the world that we can identify as what we want, yet still we want. Adrift, desire casts about, like an unmoored ship seeking anchorage. And that casting about is the hunger which characterizes desire. Nothing offers the promise of gratification, and yet we cannot help but seek. And what is the object of our desire? We don't know. What we do know is that we want there to be such an object: we want something to want.

Wanting to want: it is because we crave for craving (as moonstruck teen-agers are sometimes said to be "in love with the idea of being in love") that craving achieves its stability. For observe: craving cannot desire *itself*. If it could co-incide with itself it could be self-contained, and would no longer possess (or be possessed by) its central characteristic, drive. For there to be drive there must be a seeking outside itself.

What, then, is the meaning of *craving for craving*? This: what craving is for, its context, is of a higher temporal order than the craving itself. In craving^{a} for craving^{b}, craving^{b} is not the same craving as craving^{a}: it is structurally more general. Craving therefore appears as a hierarchical complex wherein more immediate craving gives support to craving-in-general and more general craving gives context to the immediate.

For example, within the terms of writing this essay the most general craving is "wanting to write this essay".[20] It is only within the context of the general wish to write the essay that "wanting to write

this paragraph" has any meaning: it is (if it is not later deleted) for the essay, and if there was no wish to write the essay it would not occur to me to write these words. But, too, it is only by wanting to write these words that "wanting to write an essay on impermanence" comes to be endowed with substance. Without a specific desire, a wish to do this *particular* thing, the general desire fails to achieve solidity. Thus, in any experience involving craving, craving will be manifest *at every level*. Craving, as ongoing (temporal) search, craves the extra-temporality of a more general craving, while the more general craving requires the substantiality of the specific. Together (which is how they always appear) they form a recursive structure wherein "craving for craving" both describes the hierarchy as a whole (rather than just one level of it) and also links adjacent levels of the hierarchy to form a structure that is both stable and regenerative.

And yet there is also craving for this and that. Being negative in essence, craving cannot appear at any level of generality as *pure* craving. It requires a positive object to lend it a borrowed positivity: this or that. Only when it is costumed with this guise of substantiality will craving (for this or that) appear to everydayness (i.e. to unreflexiveness). Everydayness lacks the reflexive distance necessary to recognize the relationship between craving and its object. Only in reflexion (i.e. in mindfulness-and-awareness, or self-observation: see footnote 11) is the structure of craving for craving revealed. We do not merely crave this or that, nor do we merely crave for craving: we crave to crave something. Craving for craving, as a construction, seeks anchorage at every level. (My wish "to finish this paragraph" is *part of* my more general desire "to finish this essay." Thus craving for craving integrates itself into the ordinary [non-recursive] hierarchy of sentence/paragraph/essay and parasitically feeds on it, while at the same time concealing its hungering negative essence behind the in-being positivity of its host.) (Craving for) craving for this and that, then, arises out of, and conceals, craving for craving (for this and that).

When any specific objective in the world is taken up as extra-temporal that very taking up is no less than an act of enchantment (i.e. a self-deception) wherein the underlying fact of craving for

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20. I could speak, of course, of yet-more-general intentions which give "wanting to write this essay" its context: seeing what my thoughts look like on paper, wanting to share an understanding with others, or perhaps simply seeking my fame (or notoriety) and fortune; but it is not necessary to complicate the example by enlarging it.

craving is disguised. Sooner or later, however (and more frequently at more immediate levels of experience), the object of enchantment changes and becomes otherwise. Then craving is disenchanted with that object, though not with itself. It is at this time that craving for craving becomes exposed and, needing the security of concealment, seeks to hook onto a new mooring. In this interminable search for an absolute eternity craving craves, ultimately, the entire world (and even with that would remain unsatiated). It attempts in vain to coincide with itself, to be itself fully, and thus to end the anxiety of separation from its true object: craving. Much more could be said about this, but not within the context of an examination of impermanence and of the structure of concealment of the nature of impermanence. For more on the relationship between craving for things and craving for craving see DN 22/D II 308–11.

The principle of recursiveness (which we now see to be involved with both self-deception and the inability of [experience involved with] craving to comprehend impermanence) has been described in less formal terms than ours as *a vicious circle* (a round one). The vicious circle is the dilemma of indulgence: the more one takes the more one wants; the more one wants the more one takes. It is also the dilemma of self-deception: the more one denies the less one sees; the less one sees the more one denies.[21] But the advantage of describing this principle in terms of hierarchies is that we are then better able to explore its structural features.

Craving (for craving), for example, can be shown to re-occur at each and every level of experience (and is therefore more accurately described as a vicious spiral than as a vicious circle): when craving is present at all it is all-pervasive. It regenerates itself, and is self-perpetuating (as "notes" and "song" are not). Thus it displays exactly the same recursive structure we have already discovered in self-deception. It is easy to see, then, how these structures interact and re-inforce each other. When there is self-deception it is because, in some fundamental sense, we *desire* to deceive ourselves; and when there is craving we cannot avoid the deception that is inherent in that very craving. No wonder it is so hard to be free from the misery occasioned by these twin nemeses!

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21. This is the dilemma of the drunkard in St.-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* who, we will recall, drank to forget. To forget what? That he was ashamed. Ashamed of what? Of drinking.

7. The four noble truths

But (it will be asked) if this is the structure of that deception and craving which underlie the generation of all ill, and if the Buddha's Teaching is (as it claims to be) concerned entirely with ill and the path leading to its ceasing ("Both formerly, monks, and now, it is just suffering that I make known and the cessation of suffering."—MN 22/ I 140), then why is there nothing found in the Suttas about recursive hierarchies? To which the simple answer must be: there is, repeatedly and on many levels. And if it is due to recursiveness that deception and craving achieve their stability then a closer look at this peculiar creature may better help us to understand (and, we may hope, to end) the ill which is its consequence. Perhaps, then, there is value in an examination, even at length, of ways in which the Suttas illustrate the principle of recursiveness.

The most fundamental level of the Buddha's Teaching is that of the four noble truths: the truth of dukkha,[22] the truth of the arising of dukkha, the truth of the ceasing of dukkha, and the truth of the path leading to the ceasing of dukkha. The fourth truth is, in its expanded form, that of the noble eightfold path, namely, right view, right attitude, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The first of these factors, right view, is defined (at e.g. DN 22/D II 312) as knowledge of the four noble truths. Such knowledge will of course include knowledge of the fourth of these truths, namely the noble eightfold path; and it will of course include knowledge of the first factor of that path, namely right view. Therefore right view means (among other things) having right view about right view. Further, it means having right view about right view...about right view. Not only does one know, but one knows that one knows. As with properly aligned mirrors, which reflect each other's images endlessly, so too the hierarchy of knowledge is recursively infinite.

But what about the unenlightened, who do not see the four noble truths? They, of course, have wrong view. And if right view means knowledge of knowledge, then clearly wrong view will entail

22. We have been using a variety of terms—dissatisfaction, suffering, and so on—to serve where, in Pali the single word *dukkha* tells all. It will be convenient in the following discussion to use this singular word rather than the variety of English terms, none of which cover as wide a territory as *dukkha*.

ignorance of ignorance. Such unfortunate individuals not only do not see the four noble truths; they do not *know* that they don't see them. Indeed, they do not even know that they don't know…that they don't know that they don't see them. And what is this but precisely the same recursive structure already described in our discussion of self-deception?

8. The first noble truth

BUT this is not all. Recursiveness is a feature not merely of the four noble truths taken as a whole: it is a feature of each of them taken individually. (True recursiveness would not have it otherwise.) Thus, the first noble truth, that of dukkha, is described in an expanded form as:

Birth is dukkha; ageing is dukkha; death is dukkha. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are dukkha. Not to get what one wants is dukkha. In short, the five aggregates associated with holding are dukkha.—MN 28/M I 185, etc.

These five aggregates—matter, feeling, perception, conditions, and consciousness—associated with holding (*pañc'upādānakkhandhā*) can be regarded as the constituents or general categories of experience. Without them there would be no experience; in themselves they are sufficient to specify any experience.

In the Suttas each of these five aggregates is described in greater detail. In particular, feeling is frequently described as being threefold: "Monks, these are three feelings: pleasant feeling, dukkha feeling, neutral feeling."—SN 36:1/S IV 204. Each of these three feelings could be described in yet greater detail if we cared to do so. How might we describe the feeling called dukkha?

We have just seen that the Suttas frequently describe it in terms of the five aggregates involved with holding. And among these aggregates is "feeling," which includes dukkha. And so we arrive at the proposition that dukkha is describable in terms of the five aggregates, which include dukkha, which is describable in terms of the five aggregates, which include dukkha, which.… In other words, no description of dukkha is possible that does not include dukkha in the description itself. ("Pain hurts.")[23]

This may be regarded by some as *ad absurdum*, but it could never be called *reductio*. But in truth is it so absurd? Consider if it were otherwise—if, that is, it were possible to analyze suffering in terms of

components that were more fundamental than, and which did not include, dukkha. Then we would be unable to say *sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*, "All conditions are suffering," for we would have found a level of experience which was not involved with dukkha. Such a level would be wonderful indeed, if it could be found. But where is it? Certainly the Buddha's Teaching, which asserts *sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā* as a fundamental principle, does not offer hope that any such experience is possible.

Furthermore, the analysis is necessarily endless; for each time we analyze dukkha into its components we come face to face with dukkha yet again. There is no limit, no essence, no ground we can arrive at wherein we can say "*This* entity is an ultimate, not further analyzable." Were it otherwise—i.e. if there was an Ultimate Level in the experiential hierarchy, an absolute, an essence, from which all reality emanated and within which it was concentrated, like a bouillon cube—then we would be unable to say *sabbe dhammā anattā*, "All things are not-self;" for the notion of selfhood is bound up with the search for an ultimate. Such an ultimate would be wonderful indeed, if it could be found. But where is it? Certainly the Buddha's Teaching, which asserts *sabbe dhammā anattā*: "All things (temporal and extra-temporal) are not-self," as a fundamental principle, does not offer hope that any such ultimate is to be found.

Earlier (in section 3) we discovered that "the extra-temporal exists only with temporality as its condition." We can now note that an alternative way to say this is *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*, "All conditions are impermanent." To see what is manifestly impermanent as being manifestly impermanent can be done without the guidance of a Buddha: it is a truth which has been discovered by sinners as well as by saints. But conditions (or background: i.e. "for"-ground), as we have seen, already present themselves as being extra-temporal. From there it is no trick at all for conceit to invest these conditions with an absolute extra-temporality, and to conceal the deed with endless swathings of self-deception.

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23. Descriptions couched in physiological terms sound very learned and meaningful until one examines them more closely. Then it will be seen that although such descriptions certainly discuss the propagation and progress of electrical impulses along certain neural pathways, and theorize about controlling mechanisms and the like, yet in the end they have said nothing whatsoever about *pain* (and *a fortiori* about pain's arising, its ceasing, and the non-neural path leading to its cessation).

However, its task is endless, for the deception is inevitably undermined by the temporality of all conditions. And as craving flits before the revelatory power of impermanence there is ever the gap between recognition and concealment. Herein craving is exposed and, with right-view guidance, with proper attention, and with eyes sufficiently cleansed, it can be seen. Attachment regards impermanence as an enemy, contests with it, and fails to understand its ongoing defeat. Renunciation regards impermanence as an ally and makes use of its power of discovery. Only thus can it come to understand the true nature of that hopeless contest and to abandon it. But no, we do not abandon it: even, as it might seem, against our will, we find ourselves self-deceived, and come again and again to grief.

> Thirst-led folk run here and there,
> frantic as the hard-pressed hare.
> Attached and held by fetters' chain,
> repeatedly they come to pain. Dhp 342

What, then, keeps it going? For although these hierarchies of ignorance, of craving, and of dukkha are recursive, they are not independent. Indeed, as we shall see, interdependence is the essence of the second noble truth. Only if we believed in perpetual motion could we accept that these structures might be self-contained, requiring no input of energy to keep them going—sheer indulgence. And belief in perpetual motion approximates to belief in the Eternal—a belief which, due to hunger, is craving's wrong view. Since craving is necessarily dynamic, it necessarily requires fuel.

The Pali word for fuel is *upādāna,* which also means "taking up," "attachment," or "holding." *Holding* is the more versatile word, and we shall use it here. (However, the meaning "fuel" is not merely incidental, and should not be forgotten. "Fuel" is akin to "food." Compare the recurring phrase, "All beings are sustained by food"—A 10:27/v,50, etc.—and also "All beings are sustained by conditions"—D 33/D III 211.) And what is this holding/fuel? "That, friend Visākha, in the five aggregates involved with holding which is desire-and-lust (*chandarāga*), that therein is the holding."—MN 44/I 299.

The fundamental holding is holding to a belief in self (*attavād'upādāna*: MN 11/M I 67). This is the outcome of conceit (*māna*). Conceit is grounded upon the five aggregates. "By holding matter there is '(I) am' (*asmī ti*), not by not holding; by holding feeling...; by holding perception...; by holding conditions...; by holding

consciousness there is '(I) am,' not by not holding."—SN 22:83/III 105. Herein holding (which is the direct consequence of craving) and conceit (which is self-deception in its most fundamental and virulent form) become intertwined in one complex recursive structure. This structure derives its impetus for regeneration from desire-and-lust for the five aggregates (or some part of them) and results in dukkha of every sort. How this result comes about, and the nature of the result, is our next topic.

9. The second noble truth

The second noble truth, the truth of the arising of dukkha, is intricately recursive. No description of "the arising of dukkha" can ignore the key roles played by craving and ignorance. We have already seen how craving and ignorance are recursive. Any structure of which they form an integral part cannot be less so. However it is not our purpose here to illuminate all the recursive interplay and echoing discoverable within the second noble truth. (Nor, by the way, was our discussion of recursiveness in the first noble truth by any means complete: we did no more than to touch upon one aspect of one of the aggregates.) Rather, in light of what the second noble truth reveals about recursion we shall try to better fathom the stability and strength of those structures. For therein perception of (the necessity of) impermanence is concealed, and therefore these structures are fundamentally involved in the arising of dukkha.

Dukkha arises dependent upon there being craving and ignorance. Craving and ignorance are related to dukkha in a describable way which, not being haphazard or casual, can be called structural. The principle which describes this structure is called dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). It is stated in the Suttas as "when there is this, that is. With arising of this, that arises." (See MN 79/M II 32, etc.; this phrase also immediately follows the words "the middle way" in the SN 12:15 quotation of section 2.) This principle is exemplified throughout the texts in a variety of formulations, but most commonly in a construction of twelve factors which takes the form "By means of (*paccaya*) A there is B; by means of B there is C;...." This sequence begins with ignorance (*avijjā*), proceeds through conditions (*saṅkhārā*), consciousness, name-and-matter, six (sense-) bases, contact, feeling, craving, holding, being, and birth, and ends: "By means of birth there come into being ageing-and-death, sorrow,

lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. Thus is the arising of this whole mass of dukkha."—MN 38/M I 262–3.

Dukkha arises, we are told, dependent upon birth and ageing-and-death. And the Suttas also tell us that "birth is dukkha; ageing is dukkha; death is dukkha." This suggests that dukkha arises dependent upon dukkha. But whereas earlier we might have dismissed this notion as a mere cyclical argument, now that we have discovered the importance of recursiveness we are more inclined to credit the idea—misery breeds misery—as being worthy of investigation.

Dukkha generates more dukkha. Furthermore, dukkha is the necessary consequence of dukkha. This is due to an essential feature of dependent arising: not only does B exist dependent upon A; it is also the inevitable and necessary consequence of A Indeed, an exact translation of *paṭiccasamuppāda* would be "dependent (*paṭicca*) **co-** (-*sam-*) arising (*uppāda*)," which states this feature exactly.

Thus, for example, it is not only the case that ageing-and-death arise dependent upon there being birth, and that otherwise they have no basis in existence. It is also the case that if there is birth then there *must* be ageing-and-death. Birth which does not give rise to ageing-and-death is impossible, however much we may wish it to be so. (Similarly, circles exist dependent upon there being roundness. Without roundness there are no circles. But also, roundness without the circle is unthinkable.) So too, as being gives rise to birth, birth is the inevitable consequence of being, as are being of holding, holding of craving, and so on.

However, not every series exhibits this property. In both experience and in the Suttas we can find sequences of a different type, wherein although B follows from A it is not the case that it *necessarily* does so. Such series are non-recursive. In the Upanisā Sutta, SN 12:23/S II 29–32, a sequence of this non-recursive type emerges from a variant dependent arising sequence. Using the non-technical term "support" (*upanisā*) rather than the usual "by means of" (*paccaya*), the discourse begins with ignorance: "Supported by ignorance, conditions." It then proceeds through the other factors in sequence as far as "supported by being, birth," and then goes on:

supported by birth, dukkha; supported by dukkha, faith; supported by faith, joy; ...gladness; ...(inner) harmony; ...happiness; ...concentration; ...knowing and seeing what is; ...disenchantment; ...dispassion; supported by dispassion, freedom; supported by freedom, knowing destruction (of the cankers).

Although dukkha is certainly the inevitable consequence of ignorance, yet faith, joy, gladness, and the rest are, unfortunately, not. Although there cannot be, for example, joy (as it is meant in the texts) without faith, there can be faith without joy: to the extent that faith is poorly placed it could well give rise not to joy but to yet more dukkha. Strictly, then, this latter series is not an exemplification of dependent *co*-arising since it lacks the recursive feature of being self-generating (as craving breeds more craving, etc.).[24]

It is because it is non-recursive that it is so easy for this sequence to collapse, leaving us mired as always in the recursive structure which originates in ignorance. It is only when the sequence reaches the state of "knowing and seeing what is" (which is the first stage of enlightenment, when ignorance is undermined and knowledge [of knowledge] has arisen) that this collapse is no longer possible. Another non-recursive structure emerging from dependent arising exemplification is to be found at DN 15/D II 58–9, and related sequences are common: e.g. DN 21/D II 276ff; A 10:61/A V 114–5. Unlike these sequences, the usual exemplification, ignorance to dukkha, is illustrative of *co*-arising.

Dukkha, then, generates more dukkha, and more dukkha is the inevitable consequence of dukkha. This may shed light on why some expositors have chosen to translate *imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti* as "when there is this, this is"—rather than, as we have rendered it, "when there is this, that is"—inasmuch as the same thing keeps being regenerated, which is the basic feature of recursion. "It is just dukkha that comes into being, dukkha that stands and disappears."—SN 5:10/S I 135.

Even so, we cannot regard birth, ageing-and-death, and the rest as *nothing but* dukkha. For if that were possible we would be unable to distinguish any term from the others (as the Suttas certainly do: see how each term is described in light of the perception of the noble disciple [*ariyasāvaka*] at MN 9/M I 46–55). Rather, dukkha may be seen as an inevitable and central quality of each, as is roundness of circles. Although all circles are certainly round, still we can distinguish one circle from another. (However, circularity has a simple structure which is non-recursive: one circle does not necessarily generate more circles. This is fortunate, for were it otherwise we should be as

24. Thus, the question:
Do little fleas have lesser fleas that bite 'em,
And so on and so forth, ad infinitum?
is not so much a question of recursiveness as of infestation.

swamped by circles as we are by dukkha.)

Since we can distinguish the various terms each from the other we can see that amongst these terms is feeling. Included in feeling, of course, is dukkha. This presents us with exactly the same situation as we discovered when examining the first noble truth: there is an interplay between a "whole" and one of its "parts." However, we can now recognize that when recursiveness is involved we cannot in fact call anything a whole, inasmuch as wholeness, or conclusiveness, is never achieved.

If the concept of wholeness is nevertheless insisted upon we are unable to decide whether it is dukkha (as the first noble truth, or as the outcome of the second noble truth) that is the posited whole and feeling (as one of the aggregates, or as an intermediate factor in the arising of dukkha) that is a part of that whole, or feeling that is the whole and dukkha that is one of its parts. "Wholeness" is an adopted way of conceptually organizing observed phenomena, and we would make a serious mistake to suppose wholeness to be inherent in the phenomena themselves.

The concept of wholeness is isomorphic with certain aspects of experience, which is why we tend to reify it.[25] But we see that it is not so with all aspects, which is why reification is a mistake. And in particular it is not so with those aspects which are fundamental to the problem of dukkha, which is why the mistake is serious.[26]

This relationship between feeling and dukkha is found in both the first and the second noble truths. These truths are similar because they are both examinations of the same thing: dukkha. They differ because they examine dukkha from different perspectives. The first noble truth is an analysis in terms of constituents while the second is in terms of relationships.

In the same way we might examine, say, a bicycle from a variety of perspectives. In terms of constituents we could speak of handlebars, seat, tires, frame, etc. In terms of relationships, of how the thing *works*, we might say that with movement of the pedals there is movement of the sprocket; the sprocket drives the chain; the

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25. Even more fundamentally, we tend to reify the concept of wholeness because it is vitally implicated in the notion of absolute extra-temporality ("this, my self"). In this sense, though, it is more than a mere tendency: the ordinary person, unable to do otherwise, does not see that such reification is not *a* mistake but *the* mistake.

chain forces the wheel to revolve, and so on. Or in terms of manifestation we could regard its motion, either as circular (the wheels) or linear (the whole machine, handlebars, seat, and all).

Thus too, the first noble truth is concerned with the constituents of experience (matter, feeling, perception, conditions, consciousness) as they are involved with holding. The second noble truth describes relationships (by means of feeling, craving arises; etc.). And the Teaching as a whole points repeatedly to the manifestation of these related constituents as dukkha (the sorrowfulness of dukkha, the sorrowfulness of conditions, the sorrowfulness of changeability: *dukkhadukkhatā, saṅkhāradukkhatā, viparināmadukkhatā*—SN 38:14/S IV 259 = SN 45:165/S V 56). And it urges an understanding of this manifest dukkha by comprehending the four noble truths: a holistic understanding of the impossibility of wholeness, and of the dukkha which arises in nevertheless seeking it.

Feeling cannot be regarded as a wholeness encompassing all dukkha; yet within the framework of dependent arising feeling is on a more general level than the dukkha which arises dependent upon it. In other words, “By means of feeling there is (via several intermediate steps) dukkha” is a hierarchical statement. This is not to suggest that we can establish a one-to-one relationship between the various items of dependent arising exemplifications and hierarchical levels: dependent arising is not merely a hierarchical formulary. It takes but a moment, for instance, to realize that although “birth” structurally precedes “ageing-and-death” it does not do so hierarchically. Ageing-and-death is not a component of a more general thing, birth, nor is it *for* birth. It does not have birth as its

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26. Even experience “as a whole,” *pañc'upādānakkhandhā*, does not constitute a wholeness. In experience there is that which is central, or attended to most closely; that which is peripheral, or accorded less attention; and that which increasingly approximates to utter vagueness. But where the “horizon” lies, beyond which there is not the slightest awareness, we can never say. For if we attempt to discover it what we find instead is that the focus of attention has shifted and this “horizon,” if it actually exists, has moved to a new limit. Although experience clearly does have its limits we are unable to discover directly “where” those limits are. We can only (mis-)conceive them. For analytic purposes experience may in certain ways be taken as an entity, a unit, yet strictly we can never regard it as constituting a wholeness, as something complete.

goal, not even though we accept the Buddha's declaration that for beings fettered by craving there is rebirth.

Indeed, it might seem more reasonable to assert the opposite, that birth is "for" ageing-and-death, and has ageing-and-death as its goal. But although this is certainly true it is not true hierarchically, for still birth and ageing-and-death are on the same level, not on different ones. And so too with being,[27] holding, and craving: they must be differentiated from birth in ways other than hierarchical.

But when we come to feeling we arrive at a higher level, for feeling is more general than the dukkha which arises dependent upon it. Herein we will be reminded of our earlier observation that craving always looks towards a more general level than that which it itself exists on. We now see that this more general level is invariably involved with feeling. This is only to be expected, for *fundamentally* what craving seeks is pleasure. It is in fact only in the second place that it all-too-readily identifies pleasure with a more general craving than itself ("that yet more eternal me that I crave to be"). And it is only in the third place that (with the appearance of holding) there is a seizing upon (the things of) the world as that which (by providing opaque positivity to the transparent negativity of craving) is endowed with or able to provide pleasure. Thus craving always seeks pleasure, and in seeking always discovers dukkha.

After feeling the next more general level is name-and-matter. Since this is a category unknown to Western thought it seems unavoidable, if we are to say anything at all about it, that we begin with a brief explication. For our purpose we can understand name-and-matter as approximating with "things-as-they-appear(-in-experience):"

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27. Some might think it more reasonable that being should be said to follow upon birth rather than to precede it: without birth how could there be being? But on the ontological precedence of being, cf. Sartre, *op. cit.* pp. 136–42, of which we can quote only a few lines: "… Actually it seems shocking that consciousness 'appears' at a certain moment, that it comes 'to inhabit' the embryo, in short that there is a moment when a consciousness without a past is suddenly imprisoned in it. But the shock will cease if it appears that there can be no consciousness without a past.… There is a metaphysical problem concerning birth in that I can be anxious to know how *I* happen to have been born from *that particular* embryo.… But… we do not have to ask why there can be a birth of consciousness, for consciousness can appear to itself only … as *being already born* …."

And what, monks, is name-and-matter? Feeling, perception, intention, contact, attention: this is called name. The four great elements and the matter taken up by the four great elements: this is called matter. This which is name and this which is matter: this is called name-and-matter.—SN 12:2/S II 3–4, etc.[28]

Matter exists, whether or not it is cognized. (I don't need to look at my clock in order for it to function.) But experience of matter always involves a context which, though not the matter itself, is part of the experience of it. This context is how matter appears, or is characterized, or identified (as "*This* thing"), or named. Such an orientation is describable in terms of contact (involvement in experience), perception (visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, conceptual),[29] attention (direction of emphasis), intention (what it is for), and—feeling. "Name-and-matter together with consciousness" (DN 15/D II 64) is a way of specifying experience-in-general. To say more than this would take us away from our central purpose.

We see that just as feeling, which is the condition for dukkha, also includes dukkha, so too name-and-matter, which is the condition for feeling, also includes feeling. And just as feeling,

28. It will be seen that this definition of matter is recursive: matter is defined in terms involving matter. Therefore, regardless how exhaustively we analyze matter, we will never find a level which does not involve matter. Nor will we ever arrive at an ultimate level to matter, as physicists are repeatedly discovering. No matter. The four great elements (earth, water, fire, air) are sometimes elaborated in various ways—most naively by supposing matter to be made *from* the four elements, compounded in various proportions (a move often found in conjunction with the supposition that name-and-matter can be equated with mind-and-matter; but on this topic, never mind); and perhaps most successfully as aspects or modes of behaviour which matter manifests. The Suttas seem to neither support nor to discourage such efforts. Rather, they regard these elements in more elementary terms: anything solid is an instance of earth-element, etc. This approach reinforces the basic recursive definition of matter: as matter is defined in terms of the elements together with matter taken up, so too the elements are described in terms of matter, which leads back again to the elements. See the MN 28 quote, beginning in section 5 (footnote 15) and concluding in section 12.

29. See AN 6:63/A III 413: "Monks, I say perceptions result in description...."

together with the dukkha which is a part of it, represents a more general level than the dukkha which arises dependent upon the arising of that feeling, so too name-and-matter, together with the feeling that is a part of it, is on a more general level than the feeling which arises dependent upon the arising of that name-and-matter.

This gives us three hierarchical levels of feeling within the stock dependent arising exemplification. In the following discussion we will distinguish between them, when we have need to do so, by designating the feeling which is part of name-and-matter as feeling[a]; the feeling which exists dependent upon name-and-matter and which is the seventh factor of the usual exemplification as feeling[b]; and the (feeling of) dukkha which is the outcome of this whole formulation as feeling[c]. When we need to distinguish between levels of craving we shall refer to craving which exists dependent upon the feeling which is a part of name-and-matter as craving[a]; that which is the eighth factor of the dependent origination series as craving[b]; and that which exists dependent upon the (feeling of) dukkha which concludes the series as craving[c]. Other particularizations, where necessary, will follow the same pattern.

Since "By means of feeling[b]...there is dukkha[c]," it follows that whenever there is feeling *of any kind* there is also feeling that is dukkha. Both pleasurable feeling and neutral feeling are inseparable from dukkha. For pleasurable feeling, when it exists, is taken as being "that which craving conceives [itself to be for]," while neutral feeling arises when craving, although not actually delighting in a particular matter, regards that matter as "*potentially* delightful."[30] Therefore when we say "feeling" we say *more* than "dukkha," but we never say anything *different* than dukkha. So too, when we say "name-and-matter" we say *more* than "feeling" (since "name" also includes perception, intention, contact, and attention), but we never say anything *different* than feeling. And since, again, when we say "feeling" we never say anything different than "dukkha," therefore when we say "name-and-matter," just as when we say "feeling," we only say "dukkha." Therefore it is said: "It is just dukkha that comes into being...."

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30. It also arises in the case of one who perceives the necessity of impermanence (i.e. a noble disciple, *ariyasāvaka*) when, not delighting in a particular matter, he regards it as "*not* potentially delightful." But this distinction goes well beyond the level of discussion we have reached so far.

However, there is a movement here towards the arising of more specific and obvious dukkha. This movement is designed to conceal the more pervasive and inescapable (dukkha) feeling that is inseparable from "what craving is for" and which, in its most general manifestation, is part of "experience-in-general" (name-and-matter together with consciousness). In other words, dependent upon *any* feeling there arises a specific craving which seeks escape from dukkha and synonymity with the pleasure which it conceives of (as its own). And this movement always results in a yet-more-specific sorrow.

To some it may seem that the distinctions we are making here are artificial and hollow. To distinguish between "By means of feeling^{a}...dukkha^{b}" and "By means of feeling^{b} ... dukkha^{c}," or between "By means of feeling^{a} ... craving" and "By means of feeling^{b}, craving," or between other sets of relationships which differ from each other only in regards to their position within the hierarchy—it may seem that such distinctions are but a mere tautologous argument which reveals nothing at all about the generation and regeneration of dukkha. That this is not the case can best be demonstrated by means of an illustration.

Suppose that Bandha, a common labourer working for day-wages, is trudging down the road, his pick and spade resting on one shoulder. It is the end of a hot and tiring day. Occasional cars cruise by, raising the dust and also raising Bandha's recurrent wish that he could be such a one as to own a car. To be able to drive about when and where he pleased, and not to have to breathe dust and exert his tired body! His perception of the world (fine cars, cloying dust, tired body, etc.) is imbued with a wistful regret for his lot, a pervasive muted dukkha at his utter remoteness from the way he would choose things to be.

Yet since he accepts the virtual impossibility of achieving his wish he does not dwell overmuch upon it. He thinks instead, a bit lazily perhaps, of the dinner he will eat when he gets home. Not so fulfilling a prospect as the world of cars and wealth, to be sure, but pleasurable nevertheless, and much more likely to be realized. His attention, then, is divided roughly into thirds. There is the actual world in which he walks, and which is for him both manifestly and essentially dukkha; and then there are the imaginary worlds, the one of wealth, which promises exquisite pleasures but which is very remote; and the other of dinner, which anticipates more common pleasures but, being close to hand, is the principle object of his intentions.

The imagery he creates as he walks along helps Bandha to avoid facing the dukkhā of his actual situation, namely, that he is a common labourer working for day-wages with no prospect of ever being anything else except disabled or dead. Still, thoughts of cars and wealth cannot but increase his awareness of the contrasting details of his actual situation, namely, that he is in fact walking, that his feet hurt, that his tools weigh him down, and so on. And too thoughts of dinner cannot but increase the grumblings of his empty stomach, and his awareness of those grumblings.

Thus, he avoids facing the general dukkhā of his situation by means of heightened awareness of particular dukkhas[b], and these dukkhas[b] become manifest by craving[a] for pleasure. (More formally, craving[a] is born of the dukkha feeling[a] which is an aspect of experience-in-general. While in flight it "discovers" mind-based percepts [i.e. imagery], touches upon them, and conceives them as being pleasurable[b]. This conceived pleasure[b] gives rise to a more immediate level of craving[b], which elaborates, or gives substance to, that craving-for-pleasure[a] which is its context.)

Were he interested in reflexion Bandha would discover that by confronting this general dukkhā the particular dukkhas[b] would pale into unimportance. But, like almost everyone else, he prefers virtually any intensity of particular (and interchangeable) dukkhas to the single persistent gnawing general dukkha of being-for-death. However, Bandha has lived long in this situation and is inured to it. His defences are long-established and habitual, and he need not take on any further specificity of dukkha to conceal from himself his day-to-day involvement with dukkhā.

But now suppose that while passing a car-sales showroom Bandha should happen to notice a poster announcing a sales promotion scheme wherein anyone could freely enter his name into a drawing, the grand prize being the very fine car on display in the showroom window. And suppose that on this particularly hot day Bandha's imagination should become inflamed with the notion that he himself might win this draw.

Thereby his dream of owning a car—and all the wealth that goes with it!—would not seem as remote as he had always accepted; it would now appear as a *very real possibility*. In this intense pleasure which craving has conceived not only are his specific aches and tirednesses totally set aside. Not only is the minor pleasure of anticipated dinner quite forgotten. More importantly, the intention

to utterly disguise dukkhā is temporarily achieved, or at least virtually so: Bandha is now hardly aware of his actual situation, let alone the dukkha inherent in it.

So he resolves to enter the showroom at once to put down his name for the draw. But so ensnared is his attention in the imaginary situation he has conceived for himself that he fails to notice that the establishment has already closed for the day. Only when he finds the door locked does this check to his fantasy force him to pay sufficient attention to his actual world to understand that there is an obstacle in his way. This obstacle is involved with dukkha[b], a more immediate order of feeling than the pleasurable feeling which craving is for. But the enchantment has been invested with such potency that the dukkha of the locked door is comparatively minor and is insufficient to break the spell of that fantasy. Never mind the locked door; tomorrow morning first thing he will put down his name.

So he turns from the showroom, his eyes still possessed by the car that will be his. Such flight from the real dukkha of his situation can only yield more specific dukkhas. In this case Bandha, inattentive to his actual world, takes but a few steps before he stumbles over a rubbish barrel he had failed to notice, knocking over the barrel and himself as well.

This is an obstacle sufficient to force his attention back to the real world. So now Bandha is suffused with a sense of himself as having been lost (to fantasy). How could he have been so careless? And worse, he recognizes (with a mental fall more painful than his bodily one) that this is not the first time he has suffered the consequences of daydreaming. How many jobs has he lost? And that time he set the mattress on fire, nearly burning down the whole house! It fills his awareness in an instant, and Bandha sees this fall as being "typical: the sort of thing that I'm always doing." Thus there is the appearance of the very general and pervasive dukkhā of despair: "I'll never be anything but a failure; I'm a born loser, it's the story of my life."

This despair will of course have its gratifications, for this despair is not cast upon him, as is a net on a fish, but is *chosen*. There is the advantage of ease, for instance. For "the story of my life" (and however poor a story it may be, it is better than no story at all) doesn't require of Bandha any unusual initiatives to perpetuate. But it is nevertheless despair, and Bandha recoils, needing escape. If only he was able to take an outside view of his situation he would be able

to simply abandon the position from wherein despair is generated, for he would then see the deception. But Bandha does not have the immense advantage of external guidance in right view, and cannot see this way out of his dilemma, however much (or perhaps because) escape is so needed. This need is the craving[a] which arises dependent upon his sense of despair.

But it wasn't his fault! He didn't knock over that rubbish barrel on *purpose*, these things are *always* happening to him, he's got no luck at all. Thus the despair at perceiving his own shortcomings ("the sort of thing I'm always doing") is transmuted into grief at the injustice in the world ("these things always happen *to* me") by a simple act of denial of responsibility. But not actually transmuted: rather, the despair is simply concealed by interposition of the more immediate dukkha[b] of grief, for the responsibility remains, however much it is denied.

There is, of course, a gratification in this grief: innocence, non-responsibility. But still, it remains a grief which cannot be overlooked. A return to the fantasy is impossible, at least as yet, for Bandha has not yet even picked himself up from amidst the spilled rubbish. The actual world still demands that he attend to his situation within it. But grief generates its own craving[b] for pleasure. How, then, to escape this grief?

Any broken bones? Bleeding? Contusions? At least a mark or two? In fact Bandha wasn't hurt at all by his spill; but it is always possible to find some bodily pain or other if one looks assiduously enough. And it is equally possible to ascribe it to any cause one wishes, and to dwell upon it and to magnify it, particularly if doing so helps one to avoid dwelling upon something else. So Bandha discovers some pains[c], and begins to invent a story which he hopes[c] will evoke appropriate sympathy from his wife. Here is a fantasy with enough modest pleasure in it to compensate for the dearth of actual bodily injuries—if only there had been a little blood as testimony of his innocence!—which would otherwise have almost adequately concealed the mental ones.

But his wife, Bandha knows, will be unlikely to offer much sympathy. He could be half-dead and she would have for him nothing but complaints, gossip, and underspiced food—to be married to such a woman! And the idiot who left that trash barrel in the middle of the road where innocent passers-by could break their bones—the world is full of fools!

Bandha's lament is a denial of responsibility for his pains, just as "no luck at all" is a denial of responsibility for an already well-disguised despair. It is therefore dukkha[d] which, of course, generates its own cravings for flight from dukkha and search for pleasure. What mode will it take? Perhaps Bandha will cease to curse the fools of the world only to begin feeling sorry for himself: a hard day's work for such poor wages, a long hot walk home with no companionship, an empty belly, and now *this!* What chance for an unlucky fellow like Bandha to win that car? Poor Bandha, he's the only one with any sympathy for his own tribulations, with any appreciation of his own true worth, nobody else cares at all. And thus this dukkha[(e)] generates craving for sympathy and appreciation. Oh, to be understood!

And so it goes, each dukkha generating further dukkha for so long as there is flight. And each fresh dukkha more immediate, more obvious than the last—indeed, painfully so. And thus is the arising of this whole mass of dukkha: sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair.

This sequence (which takes much less time to live it than to tell it) is now completed. Bandha has disguised the fundamental nature of his situation enough to enable him to deal with it, in his own way. He begins to pick himself up—nobody to give him a hand, even in this!—and to proceed home. But hardly has he risen to his knees when he notices two street urchins guffawing at his misfortune, and at once he is suffused with the awareness of *having been seen*.

That defensive structure of sorrow, lamentation, pain, and grief he has devised in order to conceal the despair of his situation was adequate to his eyes alone. Left to himself he could have ignored the fact that the world-in-general, let alone specifics, is radically and fundamentally at odds with the way he would have it be. But now he stands (or, rather, half stoops amidst the spilled rubbish) exposed to the eyes of the world, and that defensive structure is inadequate.

Thrust from a world in which he was the possessor of a fabulous car into one in which he is laughed at even by street urchins, Bandha must now find a way to extricate himself (again!) from such dukkha. And who are they but a pair of stray waifs, probably homeless? How dare they laugh at the misfortune of an honest and hardworking labourer, the strength of the nation! Away with them!

And so Bandha resolves upon prideful anger as his shield. And if it is felt with sufficient intensity anger can indeed conceal a great

amount of dukkha. But it will not conceal it with anything other than dukkha, for anger is but dukkha transmogrified. No matter how he twists about Bandha cannot conceal dukkha except by generating further (and more immediate and more obvious) dukkha.

But anger, though far more endurable than naked despair, is also far less durable. It requires a correspondingly more immediate effort to be maintained in being. Yet it can serve as a refuge only for so long as it is maintained, and maintained with sufficient intensity. Therefore it entails the channelling and expenditure of a great deal of energy, or fuel. This is tough work, and it is itself painful. And furthermore (furthermore indeed!) it cannot give rise to anything other than yet more craving—revenge? quick, a stone! all this rubbish about, but where's a rock?—and more dukkha.

But of course as Bandha picks up a good-sized missile the two urchins flee; and Bandha rises to his feet with a gratifying sense of having been victorious at last in his dealings with the world, never mind all that has gone before. This single victory, celebrated by throwing the stone at the now-empty roadway, when relived and elaborated upon, will augur promise of a rosy future wherein Bandha can exult on his way home to dinner.

Or rather, would have exulted. But unfortunately for him, as he turns to proceed homeward—giving the rubbish barrel a good shove with his foot, just to show the world what a triumphant Bandha is capable of—he realises that he has been observed not only by that pair of children. Four gentlemen in trousers stand beside the open doors of a car—*theirs!*—which they are obviously about to enter. Equally obvious, they have paused just long enough to observe Bandha's antics—a sarong-clad labourer who tries to enter that toney dealership and then, unable to tear his eyes from the showroom window (some driver Bandha would make!), first upsets both a trash barrel and himself, and then threatens small children with rocks. The whole sequence, they saw it all. And now, with a glance at one another and the briefest possible of smiles all round, they turn from Bandha (who realizes in the full light of their vision of him that he had also forgotten, in his triumph, to pick up his fallen tools) and they enter their car, conversing with casual friendliness in a world which is theirs.

To rouse anger at the street urchins was an easy enough matter. But in full view of four well-dressed gentlemen who live in the world of which he merely dreams, Bandha is stripped of any possible defence. He can only hope to escape their imperious glances by

flight, and so he turns, routed and utterly mortified to his very being. He stands exposed and naked to himself; and as he quickly gathers up his tools and hurries away from the scene of his disaster he knows that now he will never enter that showroom to put down his name. It will be long before he will willingly pass this way again. He will say nothing at all to his wife. He must begin again the endless chore of dressing himself in swathing upon swathing of dukkha.[31]

We can see, then, that our description of the hierarchically recursive interconnectedness of feeling and craving is no mere theoretical structure but rather a generalized description of what happens, again and again, in life. Our example is necessarily rudimentary, and is also confined to the psychological level: we have not yet reached the transcendental (*lokuttara*) level which is actually the beginning of the Buddha's essential Teaching,[32] but more sophisticated examples can be discovered in one's own experience.

The experience may be as trivial as a slight grimace or as profound as full-blown paranoid delusion. But every instance veils within itself on every level the basic structure of conceit ("I know…") and of craving ("I want…") and is fuelled by desire-and-lust. Insight into this situation is capable of exposing what is hidden therein. The value of paradigmatic description lies not in its being elaborate, clever, or original, but in its capacity to lead us to an understanding of the situation within which we find ourselves endlessly entrapped. It can serve thus as that right-view guidance referred to earlier.

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31. It would be entirely possible to illustrate in relation to Bandha's experience not only the various levels of feeling and craving but also of holding ("This is what I am,"), being ("and this is the way the world is:"), birth ("others are born rich winners; I'm a born loser,"), and ageing-and-death ("the story of my life: my destiny."), or to strictly describe the regeneration of dukkha using these terms (which are intermediate between craving[b] and dukkha[c]) as was done a few pages back using the six (sense-)bases and contact (which are intermediate between dukkhā and dukkha[b]). Such a description would be more complex than that involving the bases and contact, but it would come to the same thing: dukkha regenerates dukkha. Apart from the formal description itself (which could not be brief) some of these terms would require their own explication. This is better left undone, at least here, for we must stop sometime, and considerations of length suggest it be now. But the important point is not to carry out such an analysis but to understand that it could be done.

Some may regard such analysis as "mere intellectualizing." However, if intellectualizing means using one's intelligence this is not necessarily a bad thing. It cannot be a substitute for insight, but if properly used it can be a prelude. For it is only by understanding the nature of our situation in the world that a movement is possible which, rather than perpetuating that situation, ends it.

10. The third noble truth

The third noble truth, the ceasing of suffering, is the converse of the second, the arising of suffering. But it is not merely the opposite, or the same thing said in an opposite way. The structural principle which characterizes it—"When this is not that is not; with ceasing of this that ceases"—when taken together with the characterizing principle of arising, together form a general description of the structure of impermanence. It is insight into this very structure that marks the difference between the ordinary person and one who sees not only things (e.g. impermanence) but also the nature of things. Such an insight is frequently described (at e.g. SN 56:11/ S V 423) as seeing that "whatever is of a nature to arise, all that is of a nature to cease."

Of course, it is not only by the conjunction of these two noble truths that the nature of impermanence is described. Each of them separately says the same thing, both as principle and as

32. The Buddha's Teaching is designed to lay bare a level of experience which it is the concern of all other levels to hide, and from which all action originates. To reveal what is common to all behaviour what is needed is not specification but universalization. In specification we would take (for example) "By means of feeling, craving" to mean "Because of this particular feeling there is that particular craving," an approach which can produce an excellent behavioural psychology. But it can also be understood as "Because there is such a thing as feeling there is also such a thing as craving," an approach which can lead to an understanding not only of things but of the nature of things. This perception is developed when, in reflexive examination of, say, (experience of) a particular feeling those qualities which particularize the feeling are ignored [they are "put in brackets," so to speak], and attention is centred upon those qualities which are common to all feeling. This particular feeling is seen as "but an example of all possible feeling." Thus it is seen as a universal.

exemplification. It is apparent, for example, that "By means of birth there comes into being ageing-and-death" is but a different way of saying the same thing: "Whatever is of a nature to arise, all that is of a nature to cease." And this truth is implicit in every statement with the form "By means of A there is B" where B is the necessary consequence of A

The usual exemplification of the third noble truth has such a structure. It involves the same twelve factors, ignorance to ageing-and-death, in a formula with the pattern "With ceasing of A ceasing of B; with ceasing of B ceasing of C...." Clearly this is a description of impermanence, of how things (and in particular dukkha) cease. Therefore all that was said concerning impermanence and recursiveness in section 9 will apply *mutatis mutantis* to the third noble truth. There remains the need to indicate how it is that perception of impermanence is concealed, and how it can be revealed.

It can be seen from what has already been described that dependent arising is most commonly exemplified as a twelve-factored formula not because it takes eleven steps to get "from" ignorance "to" dukkha (for it is only conceptually that ignorance and dukkha can be distanced), but because to say more would only be endlessly repetitive of what has already been said. On the other hand, to say *less* is certainly possible: many exemplifications are to be found which in various ways omit some or even most of the terms.

Thus, some people can work out the personal significance of dependent arising by considering their experience in light of one or another aspect of the exemplification. Others will use the exemplification as a whole, while still others will do their work based on the guidance of the principle itself. Dependent arising formulae (and the principle as well) are best regarded not as quasi-scientific explanations but as pedagogical paradigms, designed to provide guidance in the work of comprehending the perilous nature of one's situation. They can, of course, be misapplied. But it does not follow from this that there is only one "correct" way to use them. This essay does not attempt to explore the diversity of possible applications.

That there is such a diversity of exemplifications will of course occasion no surprise. As with any recursive structure, to see any part of the structure is to see the whole of it. This is in contrast to non-recursive structures. One could not construct a bicycle with no greater understanding of it than, say, the relationship of the pedals to

the sprocket. Taken together with Sutta statements (at e.g. SN 56:30/ S V 436–37) that he who sees any one of the four noble truths sees all of them, this is in itself sufficient proof (if one is still needed) that recursiveness is of the essence in the Buddha's Teaching. Dependent arising, then, keeps saying the same thing over and over: in the structure of any experience the more specific arises and ceases bound up with the more general context within which it exists. Existence apart from a context, as well as a context apart from specification, is utterly impossible.[33]

And whatever is bound up with conditions is contingent. It is at all times liable to become other than the way we would have it be, and is at no time fit to be regarded as "me" or "mine." It is inseparable from dukkha. And this is true of all experience, all the way up to "name-and-matter together with consciousness," which is to say experience-in-general. ("Experience-in-general" is to be understood here as "the most general level of experience," rather than as "experience taken as a whole.")

But what, then, of experience-in-general? This, at least, might seem to constitute if not an ultimate then at least a limit. For within the realm of experience, which is the only realm of which we can know or say anything at all, what could be more general than this?

We can readily understand that name-and-matter arises dependent upon consciousness, for name-and-matter can be known or described only insofar as it is in fact cognized, or present. If it is not cognized its very existence is beyond any reckoning,[34] and therefore

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33. This is not to suggest that this is *all* that dependent arising says: "Ānanda, this dependent arising is deep and is seen to be deep. It is by not wakening to and penetrating this Teaching that mankind is entangled..."—DN 15/D II 55 = SN 12:60/II 92. And at SN 56 19/S V 430, it is said of each of the four noble truths that they have numberless shades and variations of meaning.

34. This does not contradict our earlier statement that "matter exists whether or not it is cognized." Although there is no valid reason to doubt that even when it is not cognized matter continues to exist, and there is considerable indirect evidence to support this notion, still, when it is not cognized then at that time matter is outside the bounds of experience. But when it is cognized matter can never be present "bare," i.e. as uninvolved with feeling, perception, intention, contact, and attention. What is cognized is name-and-matter, and it is name-and-matter, not matter, that exists dependent upon consciousness.

name-and-matter is negative as regards existence. It can derive only a borrowed existence (whereby it becomes reckonable) from consciousness, and as regards existence its being is that of a debtor.

What, then, of consciousness? Is it independent? When we considered Bandha's troubles, we found that a movement towards the specific did not lead to escape from either dukkha or the conditions that give rise to dukkha. What, then, of a movement towards generality?

The answer is to be found in the well-known variant dependent arising exemplification found at DN 15/II 56–7, which begins: "By means of name-and-matter, consciousness; by means of consciousness, name-and-matter; by means of name-and-matter, contact; ...feeling ..." etc.[35] It is clear that here there is no "first term." Nothing independent is to be found. Just as name-and-matter depends upon consciousness (without which matter could not be involved in experience *as* name-and-matter) so too, "this consciousness turns back from name-and-matter; it does not go beyond" (DN 14/D II 32). This inter-relatedness is compared at SN 12:67/S II 114, to two sheaves of wheat leaning each against the other: if either falls they both fall. They stand together and they fall together.

In other words, a consciousness which does not cognize something, a "pure" consciousness ("pure," here, in the sense of "without content" rather than "without defilements") is as impossible as a fire without fuel. Consciousness may be understood as *the presence of things*—for if a thing is cognized it must in some sense be present, and we cannot know of a thing that "it is [present]" unless it is cognized. There cannot be "presence" without there being something that is present. So too, consciousness can only exist dependent upon there being "the cognized," and it can be known or described only in terms of that content.

Just as a fire becomes reckonable only dependent on the means

35. This exemplification omits "six (sense-)bases." Since these bases are implicated in every experience (that involves perception), and since perception is part of "name," the omission does not in fact "leave out" the bases. (How, after all, does one omit perception from experience?) It merely changes their involvement from being explicitly stated to being implicitly understood. The bases are also immediately implicated in any experience (involving contact), and contact is both part of "name" and "the factor which precedes feeling." So from this view the bases are implicated on each level of experience, as indeed they must be.

whereby it arises—when fire burns by means of logs it becomes reckonable only as log fire; when fire burns by means of faggots... by means of grass... by means of cow-dung... by means of chaff... by means of rubbish it becomes reckonable only as rubbish fire—so too, consciousness becomes reckonable only dependent on the means whereby it arises. When consciousness arises by means of eye and forms it becomes reckonable only as eye-consciousness; when consciousness arises by means of ear and sounds... by means of nose and smells... by means of tongue and tastes... by means of body and tangibles... by means of mind and ideas/images it becomes reckonable only as mind-consciousness.—MN 38/M I 259.

We can say, then, that of itself consciousness lacks content. But there can be no presence without *something* being present. And since consciousness (or presence) cannot cognize (or be present to) just itself,[36] it can derive only a borrowed essence (whereby it becomes reckonable) from name-and-matter, and therefore consciousness is as negative regarding essence as is name-and-matter regarding existence, and as regards essence its being is that of a debtor.

DN 15/D II 63–4 leaves no doubt as to the significance of the inter-relatedness of name-and-matter and consciousness:

Thus far, Ānanda, may one be born or age or die or fall or arise. Thus far is there a way of designation, thus far is there a way of language, thus far is there a way of description, thus far is there a sphere of understanding. Thus far the round proceeds as manifestation in a situation—so far, that is to say, as there is name-and-matter together with consciousness.

Another way in which the Suttas indicate the relationship between consciousness and its content is in terms of the aggregates. Consciousness taken together with the other four aggregates can be regarded as "experience-in-general" in the sense of "the totality of

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36. Consciousness, like experience, is hierarchical but it is not itself recursive. We cognize various levels of experience: consciousness of feeling^{c} is more immediate than consciousness of feeling^{b}. But we cannot say "consciousness *of* consciousness (of x)." There cannot be presence *of* presence; there can only be presence of "the present thing." Unless something is actually present there cannot be presence. "By means of name-and-matter, consciousness." Our discussion of consciousness will be limited to the most general level of experience (of which consciousness of feeling^{a} is one aspect), namely, consciousness together with name-and-matter.

experience" or "the aggregate of experience." Not only is the interrelationship or inseparability of feeling, perception, and consciousness explicitly stated (at e.g. MN 43/M I 293); the dependence of consciousness upon the other four aggregates is also described at length. See e.g. SN 22:53/M III 53–4, which concludes: "Monks, whoever should say thus: 'Apart from matter, apart from feeling, apart from perception, apart from conditions, I will show the coming or going or disappearance or appearance or growth or increase or fullness of consciousness'—that situation is not possible."

Whether in terms of aggregates or of name-and-matter, there can be no doubt that this mutual dependence of essence and existence is essentially (and existentially) the same as the mutual dependence of specificity and context, which we have already discussed. Just as "existence" is the most general possible context, so too "essence" is the most general possible specification. Therefore we can see that the fundamental exemplification of dependent arising can be stated concisely in the form found at DN 15: "By means of name-and-matter, consciousness; by means of consciousness, name-and-matter." Whatever follows afterwards does so by way of expansion, not by way of innovation.

However, most dependent arising formulas do not in fact begin by explicitly stating the interdependence of consciousness and name-and-matter, nor do they end there. More often we find, "By means of ignorance, conditions; by means of conditions, consciousness; ...name-and-matter; ...six bases; ..." etc. And if indeed "name-and-matter together with consciousness" is the most general possible of existential specifications, then what can be meant by "conditions?" For if they are yet-more-general than "the most general possible" they must be impossible. But if they are not yet-more-general what could they be? And is not "By means of conditions..." a mere tautology, akin to saying "With conditions as condition..." or "By means of means...?" If it is more (or less) than a tautology, then what is it? And, above all, what specifically are these "conditions," nested so prominently between "ignorance" and "consciousness?" And what have they to do with impermanence?

When we look through the Suttas we find a considerable variety of things identified as "conditions" (*saṅkhārā*): in-and-out breaths, thinking, pondering, perception, feeling, merit, demerit, imperturbability, intention, contact, regarding, doubt, wavering, kingly possessions and apnt of the Buddha's Teaching: *non-independence.*

Not only are there "conditions;" there are also, unavoidably, "conditioned things" (*saṅkhatā dhammā,* sometimes shortened to "things," *dhammā*). In the same way, there is not only "dependent arising" (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) but also "dependently arisen" (*paṭiccasamuppanna*). These pairs are simply two sides of a coin: if any thing is a condition then there is something else which is conditioned by it. If any thing is conditioned there must necessarily be also a condition (or conditions). If there is dependent arising, there are things dependently arisen. If things are dependently arisen, there is dependent arising.[37]

Now, within the context of dependent arising the term "conditions" is invariably described as consisting of three general categories. "There are three conditions: body condition, speech condition, mind condition"—MN 9/M I 54, etc. And it happens that the Suttas never specify "conditions," either further or otherwise, within the dependent arising context. This has permitted the growth of a diversity of opinions regarding the significance of "conditions" within the dependent arising context. And it is against this diversity that we ask, "What are these 'conditions,' nested so prominently between 'ignorance' and 'consciousness?'"

How is "conditions" described in other Sutta contexts? We need not look far to find a discourse (e.g. MN 44/M I 301) in which "conditions" is defined in the same terms as in the dependent arising context. "There are, friend Visākha, these three conditions: body condition, speech condition, mind condition." Examples are offered: "The in-and-out-breaths, friend Visākha, are body condition. Thinking and pondering are speech condition. Perception and feeling are mind condition." An explanation is provided. "The in-and-out-breaths, friend Visākha, are bodily. These things are bound up with the body.

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37. See SN 22:79/S III 87, where all five aggregates, including conditions themselves, are described as conditioned things. "And, monks, what do you say are conditions? 'They condition the conditioned;' that, monks, is why they are called 'conditions.' And what is the conditioned that they condition? Matter as matter is the conditioned that they condition. Feeling as feeling is the conditioned that they condition. Perception as perception is the conditioned that they condition. Conditions as conditions is the conditioned that they condition. Consciousness as consciousness is the conditioned that they condition. 'They condition the conditioned,' monks. That is indeed why they are called 'conditions.'" See also SN 22:81/S III 94–99.

That is why the in-and-out-breaths are body condition. First, friend Visākha, having thought and pondered, afterwards one breaks into speech. That is why thinking and pondering are speech condition. Perception and feeling are mental. These things are bound up with the mind. That is why perception and feeling are mind condition."

But it is sometimes argued that although these diverse items are (for reasons we need not detail here) the examples of preference within their native context, namely, certain meditative attainments, yet this context is rather remote from considerations of the structure of the second noble truth, "the arising of dukkha." Might we not find a more relevant example in the context of the first noble truth?

In this context, that of the aggregates, "conditions" is often defined as "six bodies of intention—intention with regard to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, images/ideas—these, monks, are called conditions." (SN 22:56/S III 60, etc.) Here, then, the example of choice is choice. And at SN 22:79/S III 87 (quoted in footnote 37) we are told that it is due to conditions (which, of course, would include intention) that the aggregates are conditioned as matter, feeling, perception, conditions, and consciousness, respectively.[38]

It is said that consciousness is conditioned *as* consciousness by conditions. This sounds much the same as "By means of conditions, consciousness." Perhaps, then, "conditions" within the context of the second noble truth is not far removed from that of the first? Would it be legitimate to regard conditions within the context of dependent arising as involving (partly, at least) intention?

We can agree that intentionality is certainly fundamental to experience.[39] After all, it is revealed as such by reflexion. And being fundamental, our texts do not ignore it. Not only is it found in the explication of "conditions" (as the fourth of the five aggregates); it is, as well, one factor of name-and-matter. (See SN 12:2, in chapter 9.) If we are to regard it also as a factor in the "conditions" upon which consciousness depends, would this not be yet another instance of a term appearing first in a specific context and then in a more general one? The problem with supposing so is that this requires us to conclude that "intentions" are not only fundamental to experience (with which we can entirely agree) but that, surpassing even consciousness, they wholly transcend experience (which is but idle speculation).

It appears, then, that we cannot import an understanding of "conditions" into the dependent arising context without encountering difficulties or objections. From various quarters

numerous questions have been raised.

Was the term "conditions" ever specified, in a dependent arising context, in some discourse now lost to us? Was it left unspecified either through neglect or a simple inability to address every possible question that future ages could raise? Was the meaning of the term not then regarded (as it is in some circles today) as dependent upon its context? Was it deliberately left as an open category? Or are there still other possibilities yet to be imagined?

The "lost discourse" theory is the least likely alternative. There is no reason to suppose that any discourses, once gathered into the protective framework of the Nikāyas, were ever lost. For scholastic evidence in support of this judgment see my *Beginnings: The Pali Suttas*. What, then, about neglect? It is always risky to ascribe to other eras the values and assessments of our own milieu; but from our present perspective it is difficult to imagine that the subject was not deemed as being as important in the Buddha's time as it is today.

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38. This does not imply idealism: the aggregates are conditioned, not created. But neither does it imply positivism: there is not merely the discovery of an already-existing world, complete with its relationships and implications. There is a middle way whereby this can be understood. Matter is perceived by the bodily senses as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches, and by the mind as the imaginary counterparts of these. These percepts are then characterized by involvement with intention, feeling, and attention; and it is this characterized matter which I use to construct my world.

Thus, if I hear a crackling sound (perception of matter by ear) I may characterize (or "name") it as "fire." I will then conceive a set of worlds in which "fire" plays a role, either agreeable ("dinner will be ready soon"), neutral ("just some old rubbish"), or disagreeable ("hey, that's my *house*!"). However, I have learned that if my concepts do not accord with reality then I am liable to find their burden difficult to bear. Therefore I will consider whether these (or any of my conceived worlds) are isomorphic with what is further revealed of matter's behaviour. Investigating, I see a length of shiny colour waving briskly (perception of matter by eye), which I identify as "some plastic snapping in the wind." I decide (or intend) that what I see is what I hear, and re-interpret the crackling as "sound of plastic." With this re-conditioned matter I construct a new world, perhaps a pleasurable one wherein "I can deservedly relax, having dealt efficiently and successfully with an emergency." Then I smell smoke. And so on.

But other points are not so easily decided. Independence of context? True, words have meaning even when they stand alone, independent of grammatical context; and this is particularly true of technical terms. But at the same time words are not independent of their context, which can alter significance in ways which are at times subtle beyond all description.[40] When “conditions” appears in the dependent arising context then to what extent does it take on fresh tones, or overtones? And how can we tell?

And if that seems to be a fine-edged distinction, then what are we to make of the question of deliberate non-specification? There is a strong argument in its favour. Dependent arising involves the whole of experience. To specify conditions in any way might be taken, wrongly, as suggesting that there are aspects of experience in which conditions play a greater role than elsewhere. Yet, against this view there is the equally strong contention that nowhere is it said that “conditions” is deliberately left as an open category. In other words, not only is “conditions” not specified; its non-specification is also not specified. This strategy has its aesthetic appeal; but the Suttas usually

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39. It is worth pointing out that intention does not *precede* action. If I think about getting up then at that time there exist both “the intention to think about getting up” and “thinking about getting up.” If later I do in fact get up then at that time there exist both “the intention to get up” and “(the act of) getting up.” It is perfectly possible for me to get up without prior consideration (i.e. planning), but it is quite impossible for me to get up without *at the same time* intending to do so. “Monks, I say intention is action. Intending, one does action by body, by speech, by mind.”—AN 6:63/A III 415. Everydayness confuses intention with planning (which is the intention “to think about intending”), and therefore everyday language does also, even in some non-technical Sutta passages. In reflexion the distinction is clear: each act is accompanied immediately and at once by its intention. But for as long as reflection (= thinking about) is confused with reflexion (= self-observation) planning will be confused with intention. For so long the meaning of “responsibility” will be misunderstood.

40. “‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’ ‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’ ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master—that is all.’” Clearly neither Alice nor Humpty Dumpty had grasped the notion of interdependence of content and context.

spell out in detail every point which could possibly be misunderstood. That this is not done in the present case argues against deliberate non-specification.

We could, if we wished, argue the above points more closely than we have. But no matter how refined our argument it would remain but an argument. No matter how subtle our scholasticism we would be no closer to understanding.

We see that we cannot go to other contexts in order to determine the meaning of "conditions" within the dependent arising context. This is a valid strategy for determining the meaning of some Sutta terms. But with a word as critical and as contested as *saṅkhārā* we find fine distinctions being drawn in support of various positions. (And, in any case, the Suttas ought not to be regarded as a sort of gigantic puzzle, its parts all interlocking. Each discourse originated within its own particular context, even though that context has not always come down to us. While all discourses point, distantly or closely, to the same goal they do not all do so in the same manner. It is not an error to find relationships between Suttas, but some caution must be taken before drawing conclusions from such comparisons.)

We see, too, that we can neither invoke historical hypotheses (lost texts) nor base conclusions on speculations about the unstated motives of the Buddha or of his disciples. Not thereby will we discover meaning and purpose in the texts.

What we must do, it seems, is to examine the dependent arising texts themselves, and refrain from going beyond them, either to other texts or to conclusions they do not themselves support. And we must also remember that those texts come to us within the context of our own experience. We do not rely upon our experience to understand those texts, of course, for the message of the texts is that we mis-conceive that experience. Rather, we remember that the texts are a guide to recognizing that which, within our experience, we have not hitherto recognized. Our understanding of the texts must be an understanding relevant to experience. For we are not trying to decide which side of a chalk line we should stand on. We are seeking to resolve a personal dilemma. And we cannot do so unless our considerations are personal.

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Earlier we asked whether "conditions" could possibly be yet-more-general than "the most general possible." If we require of

"conditions" within dependent arising contexts that they be (primarily at least) intentions, then clearly we could not subsequently understand them as being involved with the hierarchy of experience. In such a case we would be forced to seek for some other way in which we could explicate dependent arising in terms that were isomorphic with what is revealed by a reflexive examination of immediate experience.

But—fortunately, perhaps, for hierarchical experience—this move is not called for.[41] For it must be insisted that in fact the Suttas never actually do take the step of identifying conditions in dependent arising contexts as being (or including) intention, any more than they do with the triad beginning with in-and-out breaths, or with any of the many other specific items which throughout the texts are identified in various contexts as being conditions. They never go beyond offering the three open categories of body, speech, and mind. In other words, all aspects of experience, bodily, verbal, and mental, arise with condition, not independently. Since this is a move they consistently avoid, for us to make it in defiance of their lead (however much our own view may invite us to do so) may well be a case of missing the point by overshooting the mark (see chapter 4).

And what, then, might be the point of leaving the term "conditions" unspecified in dependent arising contexts? If we are to understand the term in a way which is relevant to our concerns we

41. However, there is one way in which we might properly regard "conditions" as being intention. We have seen that in experience there is not only a simple hierarchy (e.g. "the clock tower" is more specific than "the Fort," which is more specific than "Colombo," which is more specific than "Sri Lanka") but also a hierarchy of "for"-ness (e.g. the cup is *for* containing tea; tea is *for* drinking, which is *for* quenching thirst, which is *for* comfort; etc.). What a thing is for can be regarded as its intentions ("potentials" would be more precise, but the imprecision is not fatal). Therefore we might understand "By means of conditions…" to mean "Because there is a hierarchy of intentions (or of potentials)…." "Structure" is a more fundamental category than any category within that structure. In this sense, then, "conditions," as intention, might properly be regarded as "surpassing even consciousness." Although herein we will not discuss this approach further, yet to the extent that the idea proves to be isomorphic with experience it could be (for some people) conducive to setting aside mistaken notions and coming to see the uses of right view.

shall reject any explanations which lie outside the range of experience. Certainly, when we looked, earlier, through the Suttas at the various things which within their contexts were identified as being conditions we found nothing which lay outside experience.[42] Indeed, to the extent that they are found at all, all conditions clearly depend upon consciousness (without which, of course, there would be no experience for these conditions to be found within). This leads us to two observations:

1) The relationship of conditions to consciousness is reminiscent of the relationship between feeling and dukkha. Neither feeling nor dukkha could be regarded as either "a whole" or as "part of a whole," and yet we were able to differentiate between them in terms of precedence. Here too, although any *particular* conditions are certainly dependent upon consciousness (as well as upon contact—MN 109/M III 17) for its involvement within experience, yet consciousness depends upon the fact that there is such a thing as "conditions." Therefore the category "conditions" takes precedence over the category "consciousness."

2) The relationship of conditions to consciousness is reminiscent of the relationship between name-and-matter and consciousness. Indeed, the parallel is so close that the mistake is sometimes made of

42. The single exception is *āyusaṅkhārā*, conditions for life (i.e. things upon which life depends). These are said (at MN 43/M I 295–96) to be "things that are not experienced." We are never told what any of these unexperienced conditions might be. Contemporary theory, though, might indicate lymphatic circulation and the firing of neural impulses as examples, inasmuch as the body would probably not survive the total cessation of either. But though we can know about these life conditions indirectly, or conceptually, nobody actually *experiences*, say, the replication of his own DNA as part of ongoing cellular activity. To what extent such phenomena are merely reified conceptual devices, designed to organize and rationalize what is directly experienced, is a question which fortunately we need not decide here. But that there are things which, though beyond our direct experience, are capable of maintaining (or of terminating) life should not evoke surprise. However, those life conditions which lie beyond the realm of experience can have no direct bearing on the problem of dukkha (which is the problem of craving-based experience). Therefore, following the lead of the Suttas, we shall say no more about them. Such irrelevancies can best be left to the physiologists of the world.

equating name-and-matter with the first four aggregates. However "conditions," if it includes anything, certainly includes more than just intention, contact, and attention, none of which could be regarded as body or mind condition. It is by itself a broader and more-inclusive category than "name." Therefore "name" may be regarded as a particularization of "conditions." As a particularization name-and-matter is indeed as dependent upon consciousness as is consciousness upon name-and-matter. However, the category "conditions" is not at all a particularization. Therefore it is never suggested that "By means of consciousness, conditions." Conditions *as a category* takes precedence.

This brings us back to what was said earlier, namely, that in order to reveal what is common to all behaviour what is needed is not particularization but universalization. The "specific" when contrasted with the "universal" has quite different implications than when contrasted with the "general." Even "name-and-matter together with consciousness" can be described as "the most general possible of specifications" when we refer to *specific* name-and-matter and *specific* consciousness. But for investigating the root-source of dukkha we need to attend not to the specific but to the universal. And "name-and-matter together with consciousness" is *not* "the most general possible of universalizations:" conditions is.

Is, not *are*, because to say "conditions are" is to pluralize and to specify: this, that, and the other. To say "conditions is" is to singularize, to universalize, to regard any particular condition as being no more (in essence) that "an example of conditionality." The vital point is not that consciousness arises dependent on *this* condition or on *that* condition, but that *consciousness has conditions*. Therefore "conditions" is not yet-more-general: it is yet-more-universal.

In the same way our friend needed to see any particular circle—regardless of whether it was red or blue, large or small—as being in essence no more than "an example of roundness." This could not be a mere matter of *abstraction*. ("Yes, 'All circles are round' may be fine in practice, but how does it work in theory?") To abstract is no more productive than to attend to specifics while ignoring their general nature. ("Yes, this circle is hard; it is red; it is round. But will the next one be soft? Will it be blue? Will it be square?") We require *universalization*. ("This circle could serve as a template for roundness, and so could any other circle.") *What is necessary is to see any specific*

as an instance of the universal. It is for this reason that we need to regard any specific condition as being no more, in essence, than "an example of conditionality." ("This is an example of a relationship, of non-independence, and so too are all other experienced phenomena.") Only thus can we see its *universal* necessity. Therefore the category "conditions" is left unspecified.

As we saw, the other factors of dependent arising exemplifications, consciousness to ageing-and-death, can be regarded in two ways: either as specifics or as universals. As specifics ("By means of this particular A, that particular B") their use is on the psychological level. As universals ("There are such things as B if and only if there are such things as A") they look towards the root. Therefore they transcend all psychology. For psychology at its best can only explore the manifestations or symptoms of the root problem.[43] But with "By means of conditions, consciousness," specification becomes pointless, for all we will achieve is to specify consciousness (eye-consciousness, etc.—see the MN 38 extract in chapter 10). This is endless and therefore non-productive. Therefore the category "conditions" is left unspecified.

Other parts of the exemplification are designed to lead from specifics to the general. This part leads from specifics to the universal. It is universal because "By means of conditions…" describes every level of experience and every pair of related items within any dependent arising exemplification. "Craving for craving" is a true recursive statement, but it is limited to the specific case. It describes only the structure of craving. But "by means of conditions…"

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43. The texts are filled with examples of applications of this Teaching at the psychological level, but clearly there can be but one "example" of universalization. If, that is, a singularity can be called an example. But it is an instance which is repeated time and again (with variations) throughout the Suttas. "Whatever is matter, past, future, or present, internal or external, coarse or fine, inferior or superior, far or near, all matter (is to be regarded as): 'Not, this is mine; not, I am this; not, this is my self.' Thus there is seeing what is with right understanding." (The same formula is then repeated for feeling, perception, conditions, and consciousness.) This should not be understood as a call to examine individually each and every bit of matter, past, future, and present, in order to determine its nature and then to conclude, on the basis of this statistical survey, that indeed all matter very probably is not mine, etc. Clearly a different sort of examination is being called for here.

describes the structure of conditions. That is, it describes the structure of *all* things that are dependently arisen. It is therefore the universal view of all recursiveness. And being universal, rather than specific, the category "conditions" must be left unspecified.

"By means of conditions...," then, is no mere tautology: it is as concise a statement of the essence of the Buddha's Teaching as one could possibly hope for. Indeed, to say "by means of conditions..." is equivalent to saying "dependent arising." And, of course, to say "dependent arising" is to say "the Buddha's Teaching" (MN 28/M I 191). This is because dependent arising as a structural principle is self-descriptive. That is to say, it too arises with condition, not independently: it is dependently arisen. And what is the condition by means of which this principle arises? This: the condition of there being specific exemplifications of the principle.

Here we distinguish between the principle itself ("when there is this, that is..."), and its exemplifications (primarily, "by means of ignorance, conditions; by means of conditions..." and so on). The exemplification is not the principle: it is one of the many possible ways in which the principle becomes specified within (or as) experience. The principle states the general case. Just as in a world in which circles could not exist (though actually we cannot conceive of such a world) the principle that "all circles are round" would be meaningless, so too, if dependent arising totally lacked exemplifications then as a principle it would be wholly meaningless. That is, it would be no principle at all.

The principle of dependent arising, then, is not something "out there," beyond experience, yet casting its influence upon us like some baneful and invisible sun. Such a model harks back to the search for an absolute, an unmoved mover of things, a godhead. But dependent arising is a refutation of just such a model. As such, it cannot fail to be subject to its own principle. Although from the point of view of its exemplifications the principle certainly appears as extra-temporal, yet it is also certainly not absolutely extra-temporal.

Efforts are sometimes made to equate the Buddha's Teaching with eternalist religions by asserting that the fundamental insight to which this Teaching points is an eternal principle. As such it is said to be, therefore, of the same nature as that hypostasized impersonal god who, having created the cosmos, now merely sits back and observes it, paring his hypostatic fingernails. However, the fundamental point of this Teaching—namely, that an absolute or

independent thing is nowhere to be found—is self-descriptive. Therefore any attempt to equate the Teaching with eternalist doctrines can be seen to be utterly misconceived.

But this is not all. (Indeed, with recursiveness it never is all, is it?) There is yet another way in which dependent arising can be regarded as self-descriptive. More significant than being the generalization of specific exemplifications, it can also be regarded as the universalization of specific exemplifications. Here we rediscover the equivalence between dependent arising and "by means of conditions...." We have already discussed how it is that "by means of conditions..." achieves its significance as a universal. Therefore the same cannot be less true of dependent arising. Whichever term we use, the purpose of this universalization is to create a movement from the psychological level (as illustrated by Bandha's troubles) to the transcendental level (which, however, is beyond illustration). To understand how this works we must again look at holding.

The experience of the ordinary person, the *puthujjana*, is invariably involved with holding, the fundamental form of which is holding to a belief in self (see MN 11/M I 66–7). However, this self that is believed in has the nature of being inadequate. The ordinary person thinks "I am," but he is then unable to avoid the puzzlement, "But what am I?" He will seek in one way or another to establish an identity: "I am this; such is my self." If a belief in self was adequate (as is, for example, a belief in concrete slabs) then this quest(ioning) would be unnecessary. (Nobody needs to repeatedly confirm, "This really is a concrete slab; that really is what belongs to a concrete slab.") Because the ordinary person does find it necessary to repeatedly reconstruct this self identity we may say that (unlike concrete slabs) this self that is believed in lacks essence. (See Dhp 62, in chapter 2.)

However, though it certainly lacks essence, it is not strictly correct to say that "self" lacks existence, or that "self does not exist." (To make such an assertion is to go beyond what is found in the Suttas: a dangerous move.) For the ordinary person self *does* exist; but he fails to recognize that it exists *as a belief*. But this belief in self is essentially a notion of independence: a self that is in thrall to the world's vicissitudes is no self at all. Therefore the ordinary person cannot escape the conviction that this self in which he believes is independent of his belief in it. His view is that the appropriated depends on appropriation (i.e. that things are "mine" because "I am").

Therefore he fails to see that it is appropriation which depends on the appropriated (i.e. that "belief in self" persists only for as long as things are regarded as "mine").

If something permanent *could* be seized then the appropriation too would be permanent. However, what is appropriated is necessarily impermanent. *Therefore* appropriation too is impermanent. If the view "my self" could persist independently of a "this" then there would be no means by which it could be undermined. It would be permanent. It is impermanent due to the impermanence of the conditions *for* that identity. Having accepted the validity of the notion "self," the ordinary person does not see the invalidity of the question, "What is this thing, my self?" Therefore he cannot avoid his puzzlement. And since he does not comprehend his error, he cannot recognize that his continuing search for such a "self" can never succeed. He is enchanted by the notion that independence is to be found, and is thereby caught in a terrible dilemma.[44] For though such a quest is doomed this does not dissuade the ordinary person. It merely keeps him busy. Neither assertion nor denial of selfhood can resolve his dilemma. The Suttas reject all statements which deny "self" no less than those which assert it. The Nidāna Saṃyutta (SN 12/S II 1–132) is particularly rich in examples.

The need to identify "self" with "this" or "that" is a display of self's lack of essence. This need can be abandoned only when it is seen to be predicated upon accepting selfhood on its own terms: as being independent, permanent, and pleasurable. But when one comes to right view then it is understood that other than as (dependent upon) a belief such a self is not to be found (and also, of course, that *even as* dependent upon belief *such* an independent self is still not to be found). Only with such an understanding is it possible that the search for a self that is independent (of that belief) could be

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44. Despite the rationalized way in which "belief in self" is presented here, the belief, questioning, questing, and identifying are not overt and planned acts (though they are certainly *intentional*), at least in their initial arising. It is only subsequently that they become explicit as thought and thought-out. In any experience involved with holding no part of that experience can be found which is not *already* infected (such is the epidemic nature of conceit). Even in those meditative levels wherein thinking and pondering (speech conditions) have ceased, for one not fully enlightened there is still conceit. The problem, then, is more fundamental even than thought, let alone language.

abandoned, together with the belief. There will then be no ground upon which such a belief could re-establish itself.

However, when there is belief in self then all of experience is apprehended either as "this, my self" or as "that, for my self." If it isn't "me" then it must be "mine." (Even when there is a manifest disclaimer, "not mine," there is still tacit appropriation: "it *could* be mine," i.e. "it is mine as 'rejected;' I can do with it as I wish, even to the extent of choosing whether it is to be accepted or refused.")

This view is continuously undermined by the unreliability of the world. ("It seems, then, that 'this, my self' is not so independent after all: the fault, of course, is with 'this,' never with 'my self.'") But nonetheless that unreliability is in itself insufficient to lead to an abandonment of the view. What is needed is to see the nature or *unavoidability* of this unreliability. This is what Buddhas teach.[45]

The ordinary person can *potentially* identify "this, my self" with any part of experience (= the five aggregates involved with holding). But such an identification will naturally tend to gravitate to the most general level of experience (or levitate, if one conceives the hierarchy to be an *ascending* generalization). The impermanence of "this particular ache[c] in my left elbow" is far more easily exposed than that of "being one who suffers[b] from arthritis." "Being one who feels[a]" could be taken up yet more readily by the ordinary person as being "the nature of my self" (cf. DN 15/D II 66). Of course, "being one who suffers from arthritis" could *also* yield movement towards the identification, "This (my) body, my self." A. E. Housman has admirably summed up the furthest implications of such an identification:

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45. Earlier it was said that dukkha arises due to the uncertainty inherent in the world. Actually this is but half the truth. There are two sources of dukkha in the world, not just one: the uncertainty inherent in the world (inasmuch as I could suffer loss, failure, or death at any time) and the certainty inherent in the world (inasmuch as sooner or later I certainly will suffer loss, failure, and death). Craving tends to stabilize pleasure, but the uncertainty of the world tends to destabilize it. Craving tends to destabilize dukkha, but the certainty of the world tends to stabilize it. Inevitably, the world wins; but craving always demands another chance. If it were not for these two things, certainty and uncertainty, the world would be a wonderful place indeed—if, that is, there could still be such a thing as "the world."

Good creatures, do you love your lives?
And have you ears for sense?
Here is a knife, like other knives:
It cost but eighteen pence.
I need but plunge it in my heart
And down will come the sky,
And earth's foundations will depart
And all you folk will die. (*More Poems*, 26)

Identification of the body with "self" is supported by our sense of control over the body (even though we may have arthritis). But it is undermined not only by the body's manifest changeability and need for sustenance but also by comparison with the longevity of many material things external to the body. "Therefore the unenlightened commoner is able to be disenchanted, to be dispassionate, to be freed herein" (i.e. from body). SN 12:61/S II 94. See footnote 16.

The identification "this, my self" is more tenaciously involved with mental qualities and, in particular, with consciousness. For it is not only "self" that lacks essence: we have seen that consciousness too lacks essence. There is a very great difference. Consciousness lacks essence in the sense that it is simply the presence of any phenomenon (matter, feeling, perception, conditions), and is not more than that. However, "(a belief in) my self" is actively involved in seeking substantiation. A belief in self exists dependent upon craving and, the question "What am I?" having been raised, there is a quest.

Consciousness, though as negative as the notion of self, lacks the drive characteristic of "self." Yet it is seized upon, and is taken up as "this, my self." Being a "this" in relation to "my self" endows consciousness with a sort of false positivity: it comes to be conceived of as the essence of selfhood. This identification wins support from name-and-matter, for name-and-matter (as we have seen) does in fact provide that essence which consciousness lacks—an essence which the ordinary person will then ascribe to "self."

Therefore other parts of experience, when taken up as "this, my self," tend to be so identified at a remove from holding. Consciousness is interposed. And when that identity, "this, my self," comes to be altered (as it must) to a new "this" then, due to the buffering action of consciousness, there is not normally the need for a radical re-organization of "my world." Thus, "things as they are experienced" are taken as *being for* "this consciousness, my self." They become known not merely as "the cognized"—i.e. as what is for

consciousness—but as "the appropriated"—i.e. as what is for *me*.[46]

Actually, the situation is considerably more complex than the account offered here, for two reasons.

1) For the ordinary person, that which is *primarily* identified as "this, my self" is *holding* (to a belief in self). Consciousness is taken up only in the second place, and the others, if at all, only in the third place. However, holding (a complex structure which is negative in regard to what is held) is not seen *as holding*: it is seen only in the guise of the five aggregates (and the aggregates, then, are actually concealed by the holding which mimics them)—as if in a mirror one were to search for frown lines, while at the same time wearing a mask which was an exact replica of one's face, except that on the mask there was painted a becoming smile! We shall not attempt to expand on this observation.

2) For the ordinary person there is considerable ambiguity between "me" and "mine." Although "this" and "that" can be differentiated without difficulty[47] the difference between "my self" and "for me" is not so clear-cut as might be supposed. On the one hand there is an ever-widening schism between "this" and "my self"

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46. That there is a propensity to identify selfhood with consciousness is apparent, of course, not only from structural considerations or textual exegesis. We have only to look around us. Adherents of many schools of philosophy (e.g. idealism) and psychology (e.g. Jungianism, transpersonalism), as well as of religions in general, regard consciousness as being in some sense fundamental or absolute. So do other thinkers, including many existentialists and even some advocates of current teachings which nevertheless go by the label of "Buddhism." But I know of no school which seriously ascribes selfhood to the other categories we have been considering.

For example, we find in spiritual literature much talk of "pure consciousness." But there seems to be nothing said of "pure conditions," "pure perception," "pure feeling," or "pure matter" ("pure" in the sense of "nothing but") in today's mystical marketplace. (Except that, possibly, "pure matter" might be accepted by the most extreme adherents of logical positivism—but then, that breed are hardly to be found shopping in such a marketplace.) Too, there is a "Cosmic Consciousness" movement, but at present there seems to be no interest (perhaps unfortunately) in "Cosmic Name-and-Matter," "Cosmic Ageing-and-Death," or any of the others (with the arguable exception of an underground "Cosmic Craving").

as "this" becomes more explicit. This growing failure of "my self" to coincide with "this" tends increasingly to endow "this" with the character of a "that (for me)." On the other hand merely by virtue of being "for me" each "that" is already granted the *potential* of becoming "this, my self:" such is my potency.

In the following discussion (as in the previous), rather than become tongue-tied with qualifications, when we refer to "this, my self" we shall understand that it is *not* the case that thereby "my self" can be localized within experience. Not only can "my self" not be localized; it cannot even be found. Whenever there is holding, then holding is pervasive, universal.

With these qualifications made we can say that whatever is identified as "this, my self" is at that time conceived of as being *absolutely* extra-temporal. For the notion of selfhood is inherently a notion of independence, permanence, and pleasurableness. When there is the view "this, my self" then the conditions upon which that view depends are not seen. *Other* conditions can be seen, but not those upon which self-view is based. Conditions are seen, but not as a universal. This means that they are seen *as things, not as the nature of things,* and the nature of things is that they are conditioned.

When "conditions" is not seen as a universal then "by means of conditions..." (= dependent arising) is not seen, at least insofar as it applies to "this, my self." However, "by means of conditions..." can be seen in *other* relationships. Dependent arising is seen, but not as a universal. This means it is seen *as a thing, not as the nature of things,* and the nature of things is that they are dependently arisen.[48]

When dependent arising is not seen as a universal then impermanence is not seen, at least insofar as it applies to "this, my self." However, impermanence can be seen in *other* relationships. Impermanence is seen, but not as a universal. This means it is seen *as a thing, not as the nature of things,* and the nature of things is that they arise and cease.

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47. This (or that) is not to say that the differentiation does not have a degree of arbitrariness. In English we take it for granted that any thing must be either "this" or "that," "here" or "there." But in Sinhalese, for example, the division is seen as four-fold: a thing is either "this/here," or "that/there (but close to hand)," or "that/there (not close but within sight)," or "that/there (too far away to be seen)." But since appropriation is more fundamental than language (a dog, for example, can display greed but cannot verbalize it), these differences do not alter the basic problem.

And when impermanence is not seen as a universal then dukkha is not seen, at least insofar as it applies to "this, my self."[49] However, dukkha can be seen in *other* relationships. Dukkha is seen, but not as a universal. This means it is seen *as a thing, not as the nature of things*, and the nature of things is that to hold them is dukkha.

And when dukkha is not seen as a universal then not-self is not seen, at least insofar as it applies to "this, my self." However, not-self can be seen in *other* relationships. Not-self is seen, but not as a universal. This means it is seen *as a thing, not as the nature of things*, and the nature of things is that they are not-self.

Therefore *fundamentally* dependent arising is not seen, impermanence is not seen, dukkha is not seen, not-self is not seen. What is seen is "this, my self." And "this, my self" is necessarily seen to be independent, permanent, and pleasurable. And because in his endorsement of this perception the ordinary person is sadly mistaken, therefore he experiences sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair: thus is the arising of this whole mass of dukkha.

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48. There are various passages in the texts (e.g. DN 14/D II 31–35; SN 12:10 & 65/S II 10–11 & 104–07) wherein the Buddha says that he considered dependent arising in its various aspects *before* his enlightenment. This raises the question, "If perception of dependent arising marks the difference between the enlightened individual and the ordinary person, then how can these passages be understood?" The usual reply is that this perception took place in "the moment before his enlightenment" (which again raises the ambiguous notion of moments), and was the impelling perception that brought about that comprehension.

However, the texts make clear that it was in perceiving "arising" and "ceasing" that there arose "the eye (of truth), knowledge, wisdom, gnosis, light" (the usual formula for the initial perception). But the consideration of dependent arising preceded this perception (by how long an interval is not said) and was therefore the reflexion of one as yet unenlightened. The usual answer, then, explains nothing. It merely leaves us with the plaint, "It happened to *him*; but I also think about dependent arising. Why doesn't it happen to *me*?" But now, distinguishing between things and the nature of things (i.e. that things arise and cease), we can understand how it can be that the ordinary person is fully able to see dependent arising in a *certain* sense—as every reader of this essay will be able to confirm—but that this does not mean that he necessarily sees it in its *vital* sense, as a universal.

Dukkha arises, then, dependent upon not seeing dependent arising. This is ignorance. "Non-knowledge of suffering, non-knowledge of the arising of suffering, non-knowledge of the ceasing of suffering, non-knowledge of the path leading to the ceasing of suffering—this is called ignorance."—MN 9/M I 54, etc.[50] "By means of ignorance, conditions; by means of conditions…," then, may also be understood as "by means of ignorance, dependent arising." And the corollary is, of course, "with ceasing of ignorance, ceasing of conditions; with ceasing of conditions…," which may also be understood as "with ceasing of ignorance, ceasing of dependent arising." This indicates to the ordinary person how he can resolve his dilemma.

His dilemma is that he cannot perceive dependent arising, he cannot perceive impermanence, he cannot perceive dukkha, he cannot perceive not-self. And he cannot perceive them in their vital sense because he does not see how to *stop* perceiving "this, my self."

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49. Actually, there is one way in which dukkha *can* be seen as "this, my self:" when it is dukkha itself (e.g. "this ache[c] in my elbow") that is taken up as "this, my self" ("good grief!"). In such a case it is seen as *dukkhadukkhatā*, the sorrow of dukkha ("woe is me"). But it is *still* not seen as *saṅkhāradukkhatā*, the sorrow of conditions; for the conditions upon which belief in self depends are not seen. Nor is it seen as *viparināmadukkhatā*, the sorrow of changeability; for the impermanence of those conditions is of course also not seen. These two sorts of sorrow can be seen by the ordinary person only in secondary relationships, never in this vital one.

50. This Sutta goes on to say that "with the arising of cankers (*āsavā*) there is arising of ignorance." But later we are told: "With the arising of ignorance there is arising of cankers." And what are these cankers? "There are three cankers: the canker of sensuality, the canker of being, the canker of ignorance." Here then, the recursive structure of ignorance appears in yet-greater detail. Not only do cankers and ignorance arise by means of one another, but one of the cankers is the canker of ignorance. (Seven ways to abandon cankers are discussed in MN 2/M I 6–12. See also SN 22:101/S III 152–53.) Ignorance, then, is not merely a failure to be adequately informed. ("I didn't know the gun was loaded.") It is a deliberate refusal to look at that which is at all times and all places there to be seen. ("I didn't know that pain hurts.") It is a refusal supported by a recursive hierarchical structure of successive generations and generalizations of denial and a spectrum of successive specifications of dukkha.

When, as a Buddhist, he earnestly tries, he finds that by a "heads-on" approach ("*This* is not-self; *that* is not-self; nor that nor that nor that…") he does not succeed. All he succeeds in doing is, at most, to change the identification from "this, my self" to "something else, my self" (and, probably, also discovering an ever-deepening sense of frustration and futility in the effort).

This is the identical dilemma that he faces when he decides to "give up everything:" no matter how sincere his resolve, no matter how intense his effort, he finds that that resolve and effort are insufficient. It is undercut at once, always, and everywhere, by attachment. To resolve such a dilemma evidently requires something more than the simple wish to do so. For such a simple and straightforward effort, whether to perceive impermanence or to give up all attachment, will simply lead him back to the perception that he *can't*.

But we know that this is not entirely true. For although it is sometimes very difficult, yet we have all succeeded in ending certain "narrow" deceptions (such as "cigarette smoking is good for you," or "the way to cure poison ivy infection is by scratching"). And we know, too, that the Buddha's Teaching offers itself as that means whereby one can end even the "broadest" or most fundamental of deceptions, that of conceit.

But how, then, is this to be done? If a "heads-on" approach continually fails, then clearly an indirect movement is indicated.[51] The development of any *particular* perception of dependent arising, or of impermanence, or of dukkha, or of not-self—which is entirely possible for the ordinary person, within the limits described above—can lead to a universal perception.

It must be emphasized that by "a universal perception" I do *not* mean "seeing the whole of experience." (This, anyway, is an impossibility, inasmuch as the seeing, which is part of the experience, is itself not seen. Or if it is seen then the means whereby it is seen—namely, a higher order of reflexive attention, which is also part of the experience—is itself not seen. And so on.) Even if we (think we) see dukkha "everywhere" we have not thereby perceived dukkha as a universal. At best we have seen it as no more than a generality.

But dukkha can be seen as a universal in even the most specific things (e.g. "the in-and-out breaths," or anything else to do with body; or "this ache[c] in my elbow," or anything else to do with feeling;

51. "In all fighting, the direct method may be used for joining battle, but indirect methods will be needed to secure victory." Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.

or "this fear that my house may be on fire," or anything else to do with mind; and so on). It is seen as a universal if it is seen as an instance of the way all experience is necessarily organized. In other words, to see structure structurally we must see that it is dependent upon exemplification. It is futile, then, to try to see the "bare" principle. What must be seen is the particular living relationship upon which the structure is founded, and to see that it too arises, endures, and ceases dependently. It is towards this direct intuition on the most intimate level of being that the Buddha guides our efforts. When dukkha (or impermanence or the others) is seen as a universal in "this particular perception" then at that time there will not be seen not-dukkha (and the others) elsewhere.

To achieve this universalized perception requires dedication and perseverance, inasmuch as it is a perception which is at odds with all that holding to a belief in self involves. It is achieved through intelligent experimentation with reflexion and its concomitants (i.e. the noble eightfold path), using the Teaching as a guide (see e.g. AN 6:98–104/A III 441–444)[52] lest one confuse concept with percept.

But even then this perception is in itself insufficient; for when the ordinary person achieves it he still has *at the same time* a belief in self. Though he sees nothing he can take up as independent, permanent, and pleasurable, yet there remains the view that there is a person, a somebody, to be found. In this unstable position it is necessary for the ordinary person, using proper attention, to apply his perception of the universal necessity of dependent arising (and of the others) to this co-existing view.

Reference to our circular analogue may help him to understand this. But should he not succeed in this then his perception of universality can be lost. Indeed, he will probably find it difficult enough to maintain this perception. And, the perception lost, he would find himself to be still in the throes of wrong view and of the dukkha that arises dependent upon wrong view.

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52. E.M. Hare's rendering (in *Gradual Sayings III*) of *anulomikāya khantiyā samannāgato* as "living in harmony and patience" is quite misleading. The phrase actually means "endowed with compliance in conformity" (with the Teaching).

"Compliance, of austerities, is chief.
Extinction is supreme," the Buddhas say.
No ascetic causes others grief.
No recluse does oppress in any way. Dhp 184

Fortunately, however, there is the Teaching. One who has achieved this perception of universality is now in a position to fully utilize the guidance of the Teaching's outside perspective. If he chooses to not opt for pleasure then he can now acquiesce by accepting, *even against craving's view of things*, that this Teaching points the way to the end of dukkha.

When such a movement is made, then this individual will understand the meaning of "with ceasing of ignorance, ceasing of conditions." He will no longer be puzzled, as he was before, as to how there could be a ceasing of conditions (and of consciousness and the rest) and yet for an individual to remain. For even fully purified beings surely continue to breathe both in and out, and to think, to ponder, to perceive, feel, regard, intend, and so on. And yet all of these things are identified in various contexts as conditions. But now he will understand that "with ceasing of ignorance, ceasing of conditions" means that "those conditions *which depend upon ignorance* cease when ignorance ceases; and ignorance, or non-seeing, ceases when *those* conditions are *seen* to be dependent upon ignorance."

And what are those conditions which depend upon ignorance? They are the conditions dependent upon which there is the identity "this, my self." And, as such, they are not seen *as conditions*. Not being seen (for what they are), they cannot be further specified. *Other* conditions—conditions which are seen—are not conditions which depend upon ignorance. Only those conditions which are *not* recognized as such are implicated in the arising of "this consciousness, my self" or "this name-and-matter, my self" or any other possible identification of "my self."

Whereas previously such a person had been unable to see craving except on craving's own terms, now he has this Teaching to offer him an outside view. This view is not locked into those conditions which arise dependent upon ignorance. He can thereby see, as he could not before, that contrary to craving's view of things, *all* experience that is involved with "I," "me," and "mine" is wholly dukkha. There is (*pace* St.-Exupéry) no oasis of pleasure to be found within this desert of dukkha. Understanding this, wrong view is thereby exposed. It is concealment (of dukkha and of flight from dukkha) that, as the characteristics of ignorance and craving, generate and re-generate dukkha. With dukkha now fully exposed *as* concealment, *as* flight, that recursive structure which had infected all

of experience becomes destabilized and must collapse. It is by such a movement that one ceases to be an ordinary person (*puthujjana*) and becomes a noble disciple (*ariyasāvaka*), one who sees the noble eightfold path as the way to the ceasing of dukkha.

11. The fourth noble truth

Recursiveness in the fourth noble truth needs to be discussed in detail. Fortunately for the length of this essay, however, it need not be done here, inasmuch as it has already been done elsewhere with both conciseness and elegance. Here we shall only comment briefly on that discussion.

In the 117th Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya (the Mahā Cattārīsaka Sutta, or The Great Discourse of Forty Parts—M III 71–78) the Buddha sets forth a Teaching which elucidates the inter-relatedness of the various factors of the noble eightfold path.

Monks, what is noble right concentration with its support (*upanisā*—see chapter 9) and equipment? Right view, right attitude, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness: whatever is one-pointedness of mind equipped with these seven factors, monks, this is called noble right concentration with its support and equipment.

The eightfold path, then, is not a mere heterogeneous collection of terms: they function as a whole and are structurally inter-related. The Sutta expounds on that relationship.

The key phrase, recurring seven times, is "Monks, here right view comes first." This should be no surprise: we have seen that the structure of dukkha is stable due to the recursive structure of ignorance. We have already discussed (in section 7) the structure of right view ("knowledge of knowledge of…"). That this structure forms the "navigational framework" whereby the path, once discovered, cannot subsequently be lost, should need no expansion.

But to progress on the path requires not only right view. Right effort and right mindfulness are equally fundamental. Right mindfulness is the characteristic of seeing (reflexively) whether there exist defilements as the source of dukkha. It is fundamental because without perceiving faults there is actually no possibility of expunging them, and the eightfold path is essentially a path of purification. ("Monks, this path is the one way for purification of beings, for transcending of sorrow and lamentation, for going to an end of pain

and grief, for finding the way, for realization of extinction—that is to say, the four foundations of mindfulness."—MN 10/M I 55–56.)

If, knowing fault from non-fault, one sees no faults, then one can know: "There is in me no fault." In such a fortunate situation there is nothing further to be done. But if one sees fault then it is necessary—and only then is it possible—to remove that blemish. But this requires not only right view (i.e. *knowing* fault from non-fault) and right mindfulness (i.e. *seeing* fault and non-fault) but also right effort (i.e. *removing* fault, leaving non-fault), for without right effort one is in effect "sitting by the side of the road."[53]

Thus, after describing both wrong and right view our Sutta continues: "Thus these three things run parallel with and circle around right view—that is to say, right view, right effort, right mindfulness." Right view, then (as well as right effort and right mindfulness), circles around right view. But unlike the circularity of "ignorance of ignorance," the circularity of "right view of right view" is not vicious. It is benign, salutary. And so too, we are told, right view, right effort, and right mindfulness run parallel with and circle around right attitude, right speech, right action, and right livelihood. In each case "right view comes first." In other words, these four factors are established and based upon the recursive structure "right view of right view." But they are developed and perfected only dependent upon the further involvement of right view with right effort and right mindfulness.

Right view (which, in the noble eightfold path, comes first) is the counterpart of ignorance (which, in dependent arising, comes first). It is the means whereby ignorance is fully eradicated. And so too, right effort and right mindfulness can be seen as counterparts to craving and holding. Both craving and right effort are concerned with drive, with movement. But craving is concerned with acquisition of yet further blemishes (or, if craving objects to that

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53. Not only he who halts a cart run wild
I call "a driver;" also who restrains
arisen wrath, who purges what's defiled.
Other people merely hold the reins. Dhp 222

Or again:

As the smithy purifies
silver bit by bit, the wise
remove their own impurities
at each moment, by degrees. Dhp 239

formulation, then it is concerned at least with an acquisition which results in yet further blemishes). Right effort, however, is concerned with expunging of blemishes, and therefore with expunging of craving.

Right mindfulness and holding are both concerned with seeing something. But holding is concerned with seeing an independent permanent pleasurable self, whereas right mindfulness is concerned with seeing the need to discover such a self. Therefore right mindfulness is concerned with seeing holding. Neither right effort nor right mindfulness are recursive (unlike craving and holding). Without right view, mindfulness hasn't a chance of seeing what needs to be done (and is therefore not *right* mindfulness), while all effort is mis-spent (and is therefore not *right* effort). But together with right view these three form an interlocking structure. This framework provides the basis whereby the other factors and the path as a whole achieve stability as the active counterforce to the arising of dukkha. It is this structure which is the support for right concentration, and it is these factors which are its equipment. It is by means of right concentration together with its support and equipment that purification is achieved and right view and the rest are brought to perfection.

When right concentration with its support and equipment is brought to fulfilment then there are also right knowledge and right freedom. With these two additional factors the path reaches completion; for with right knowledge there is knowledge of right freedom; and with right freedom there is knowledge of right freedom. Thus there is established a stable structure which is the counterpart only of *nibbāna*, extinction (cf. MN 44/M I 304), and which is totally beyond the range of ignorance, craving, and holding.

The five aggregates, no longer involved with holding, are also disentangled from being, birth, ageing-and-death, and from any pleasure or unpleasure which can arise dependent upon these. There remain of course those bodily pleasures and unpleasures which can arise from the body's contingency. But such feelings are no longer regarded as "me" or "mine," any more than the fallen leaves in the forest, and are therefore not to be accounted as "*my* pleasure, *my* pain." They are of no consequence. And for so long as the five aggregates endure, this structure, culminating in right knowledge and right freedom, will endure. With the breaking up of the aggregates, at death, even this will finally end and utterly cease. It

too is counted (by right knowledge, by right freedom) as of no consequence.

The Mahā Cattārīsaka Sutta (which deserves far greater attention than it generally receives) is not merely an explication of the recursive structure of the fourth noble truth. It warrants a careful study also for its sound advice on how to live one's life in such a way that one becomes ever more capable of seeing the true wealth which is this Teaching, and of seeing how to make proper use of that wealth.

12. Two overviews

We have stressed that all things arise with condition (i.e. that they are impermanent), and that they depend upon (among other things) context. This is true, of course, of the views of continuous and discontinuous change that we have been examining. We accept one or the other of these views because it "makes sense." It fits, more or less, into a general overview which we have developed about "the way things are," and which is reflected in our attitude towards the world. This is reasonable enough; for to act otherwise would lead to inconsistency, self-contradiction, and confusion. Probably, not all consistent points of view can be isomorphic with the way things are. But certainly, no inconsistent ones are, for the way things are is that, at least, they are: they do not contradict their own existence.

Even one who holds an overview compatible with the idea of continuous change may find that, because of what has been said herein, that notion no longer seems inevitably necessary. Yet he may discover a lingering reluctance to discard it. For even a faulty part that fits the machinery may seem preferable to a replacement which, though itself flawless, is not compatible with *this* equipment. And no discussion of change, however skilful, can change that feeling, for it is based not so much upon a belief in flux as upon a more general attitude which receives support not only from flux but from other beliefs as well.

Our discussion of impermanence, then, cannot be complete without a consideration of the two overviews which provide the contextual support for each of the views of impermanence we have been considering. Because the groundwork has already been well laid this discussion need not be extensive.

It will be convenient to use the term *reductionism* for the overview which is compatible with flux, and *holism* for that which is

compatible with discontinuous change, for reasons which will emerge out of our discussion.

Reductionism finds much of its rationale, no doubt, in the common experience that certain complex phenomena, when reduced to sub-systems, can thereby be understood in a meaningful way. There is no shortage of examples of such phenomena, but our bicycle, being not so many pages away, is handy. We can divide the system "bicycle" into sub-systems, which will include the mechanisms of steering, propulsion, and braking, the rider's support, and so on. And an examination of these will yield an understanding, at least in some sense, of what is meant by "bicycle."

None of these sub-systems are themselves "bicycle:" the system is to be found only in the whole of the sub-systems (some of which, such as "bell," may be optional) organized in a particular functional manner. A bicycle, then, is the sum of its parts plus their organization. Although no sub-system in itself is (or includes) "bicycle," yet the sub-systems are comprehensive, both as a whole (for there is no mysterious element outside of them which is needed in order to furnish the organized sub-systems with that "breath of life" whereby—presto!—there is suddenly a *bicycle*); and individually (inasmuch as there is no component which in its nature cannot be categorized as belonging to this or that sub-system). Furthermore, the sub-systems are organized in a way which is non-iterative (that is, no sub-system is inherently inseparable from other sub-systems; every component, regardless of function, can be classified within one and only one sub-system).

Further, if we wish to understand any sub-system more fully we can reduce it in turn to its components. This will lead us eventually to the nuts, bolts, springs, levers, and what-nots that are the "atoms" which combine to form certain structures ("molecules") which combine to form higher-level structures which eventually make a bicycle.[54]

This sort of analysis, which is reductionist in character, is fully adequate to understand the structure of bicycles. Furthermore, it is the *only* type of analysis which can lead to the knowledge, "how to assemble a bicycle." And it is the sort of analysis that is pervasive not only in our dealings with mechanisms ("fit tab A into slot B...") but with so much of the way we organize our daily lives ("if I catch the 7:15 to Bosnia-Herzegovina, then the 9:10 to...;" "one more qualification, and then we can go on to ask whether...") that to question its validity as a means of analysis might seem at first to be a lunatic proposition.

And we can certainly agree that within its own sphere reductionism is a form of analysis that is both legitimate and necessary; and then we can go on to ask whether that sphere is universal. Are there, in other words, areas of human experience which *in their very nature* are not amenable to a reductionist approach? Are there areas wherein to apply such a methodology is a guarantee of misunderstanding? The answer being—to avoid suspense—yes, there are: any structure which contains one or more true recursive elements cannot, in its very nature, be understood by a reductionist approach.

Suppose, as we dismantle our bicycle (carefully cataloguing where each piece came from, what it connected to, and how it functions), we were to discover, tucked away nearly out of sight, a curious mechanism we had never noticed before: a small replica of the very bicycle we were examining—a replica complete in *every* detail. Not a mere model of our bicycle, this replica, we discover, is an integral part of it, connected to the other parts in a functional manner. What ought we to do?

Of course, we might just heave the whole machine onto the nearest trash heap in disgust and frustration (where, no doubt, Bandha will trip and fall over it). But if we wish to understand how our bicycle works we will have to understand this sub-bicycle as well. So we dismantle this unit piece by piece only to discover.... Obviously, if bicycles were constructed in this peculiar fashion then a reductionist analysis would never result in an understanding of how to assemble a bicycle. A different form of analysis would be necessary.[55]

But, it may be objected, bicycles are in fact not constructed in such a peculiar way. Ignorance, craving, holding, and suffering, it has been said, are so constructed. But it has also been said that these are actually seen (in their essential aspect) only by enlightened beings

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54. It is always possible to go below the "atomic" level. A metallurgist, for instance, might be concerned with what is, as regards bicycles, a "sub-atomic" level; for considerations of alloys can never lead to "bicycle." Which level is taken as atomic depends on purpose and point of view. The "atoms" of this essay are its words. Although a calligraphist might regard individual letters (or even pen strokes) as *his* "atomic" level, anyone who tried to understand this essay by considering it letter by letter would only exhaust himself while failing abysmally in his effort to comprehend what is said here.

and not by the likes of us, and that their existence is therefore not actually established (the structures, that is, not the enlightened beings). For, after all, we don't know that we don't know. And aside from these—it may be objected—what is there in the realm of experience that is not amenable to reductionist analysis?

Very well: consider the spaghetti packet which displays a drawing of a joyous youth holding a spaghetti packet which displays a drawing of a joyous youth holding.... As a child I used to be fascinated (and, perhaps, a trifle disquieted) by the implications of this crude illustration. I knew at once that there was no use taking a magnifying glass to it, of course. For even if the art work and printing had been done with exquisite exactitude there would still have been a point at which the yet-smaller youths chortling over yet-smaller spaghetti packets would vanish out of sight.

It wasn't the drawing that intrigued me: it was what the drawing implied. Could any of those ever-smaller smiling youths have an inkling that for the next-larger smiling youth he was but a drawing on a spaghetti wrapper? Was I myself but a...? Absurd, of course: the problem of non-recognition is not so easily settled. But it was this, much more than the drawing itself, that was an early glimpse of the unsettling effects of recursiveness.

Again: all of us have seen at one time or another an ant racing headlong around the rim of a glass or cup. And around and around

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55. In a letter to the Venerable Ñāṇavīra Thera (1 February 1959, unpublished) the late Venerable Ñāṇamoli Thera recounted a conversation he had had with a South American visitor who was not fluent in English: "...I said to him, pointing to the ironwood tree in new leaf... 'Do they have trees like that in Venezuela?' S: 'Naw, but dey ist a menna menna otchads in Venezuela.' I: 'What kind of orchards?' S: 'Whata kind? Dey grow ona da trees!' I: 'So the orchards grow on trees in Venezuela?' S: 'Sure!' I: 'What kind of fruits?' S: 'Fruits? Ah dunno. Dey ist a vat you call a flowers, plantee valuable, in da joongle onna da trees dey grow, plantee valuable!' I: 'Oh.' By this time it had dawned on me that the 'otchads' were in fact not 'orchards' but 'orchids'..." Orchards that grow on trees—which goes well beyond merely missing the forest for the trees—is an exact description of recursiveness. This particular example is laughable, but since it is this very structure which blinds us to perception of impermanence, the principle which it illustrates is of such importance (and the fruit it yields of such bitterness) that we would do well if our laughter was not that of derision but of recognition.

and.... (And perhaps many of us are familiar also with the well-known cartoon that depicts two castaways walking along the shores of an uninhabited tropical island, an island which they have obviously circled many times already, for the caption reads: "We must be getting somewhere—the tracks keep getting thicker." [And, beyond this, some of us may know the Rohitassa Sutta—SN II:26/S I 61–63 = AN 4:45/A II 47–49—wherein the Buddha says, "It is not by going that an end of the world is to be known or seen or arrived at, I say."])

From our outside perspective we can understand the futility of such a circling, and we laugh at it. But from the viewpoint of the ant (or of the castaways [or of Rohitassa) it is no laughing matter. And this not because they are deadly serious about their circling (although they may well be) but because they are totally oblivious to the structure within which they are trapped, which is in fact why they are trapped in it.

Only when they understand their situation can they also understand how to disentangle themselves from it as well as to see both the humour and the pathos of that situation. Here we discover a humour and a pathos which are not to be found in non-recursive situations. Whatever emotions might be evoked in watching the difficulties someone experiences in getting from A to B, they are of an entirely different sort than those aroused in observing the difficulties involved in getting from A to A But those difficulties can only be observed from outside the structure. This is quite easily done in the case of such narrow structures as spaghetti packets and ant-runs; but the Buddha tells us of other recursive structures that are as broad as experience itself. And the whole point of his Teaching is to indicate how to achieve an outside view of these structures.[56]

One more example of recursive structures within daily life. Consider the fractions 1/8 and 13/27. The fraction 1/8 can be written in decimal form as 0.125. That is the end of it. There is literally (or, rather, numerically) nothing further that can be said about it. In decimal form it has been fully expressed. The fraction 13/27, on the other hand, can be written in decimal form only as 0.481481481.... And as we carry out the long division sums we find that no matter how far we extend our labours we will never arrive at anything other than more 481s.

However, we need not actually continue the division in the hope that eventually we will arrive at a better number,[57] for as soon as we reach the first repetition ("40 minus 27 equals 13, bring down the zero

for 130...") we can see how the thing must continue. And we are not surprised, for we have met these non-reducible decimals before, and have learned to live with them, if not to love them. Some fractions are reducible; others are not. And among those that are not are recursive fractions. (However, not all irreducible fractions are recursive. PI for instance, in decimal form never locks into a recursive structure, even though, as has been shown, it too is endless. That it is endless, of course, has not stopped mathematicians from carrying out their calculations of pi to sixteen million decimal places (still a long way, to be sure, from the enormous figure of 176,470,000,000, but not bad for all that). On the contrary, it seems to have encouraged them. Are there aspects of experience to which pi is isomorphic?)

Normally we would not indicate the decimal as merely 0.481..., for some might think that what was intended was 0.4818181..., or 0.48111..., or even that the fraction was not iterative at all. So we repeat the series, 0.481481..., which certainly exposes the structure. But if we wish to make absolutely certain that our statement will not be misunderstood even by the slow-witted then we might iterate the series a third time, 0.481481481.... Clearly, though, to go beyond

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56. Not only is recursive function theory an important part of computer science (see footnote 19); the notion of recursiveness has yet wider applications in both science and technology. Gregory Bateson, for example, in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), p. 109, borrows terminology from communications engineering in his discussion of cultural value systems. He distinguishes between "a 'regenerative' or 'vicious' circle" and "a 'degenerative' or 'self-corrective' circle." And his discussion (pp. 201–278) of the "Double Bind" theory of schizophrenia bears striking similarities to recursive structures. Although the concepts used in these various disciplines are not always quite the same as that used in this essay (which concept we have distinguished, perhaps a bit presumptuously, as "true recursiveness"), yet they are sufficiently similar to demonstrate the existence of the structure in many aspects of human endeavour.

57. "For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious thinker. It is then the true division begins, of twenty-two by seven for example, and the pages fill with the true ciphers at last."— Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1959), p. 64.

this would be pointless. If one still hasn't understood what is going on here then to say more would only make understanding *less* likely, not more so. There is already enough information to figure things out. Indeed, there is already all the information that is possible. To say more would only mislead the cabbage-headed into the mistaken belief that the series might somehow reach an end, perhaps at some remote and infinitesimal fraction which he may then set about seeking, as if (unlike Belloc's "remote and ineffectual don") it would explain everything. But in the world of 13/27, no matter where one seeks one will never find any decimals save those of the 481 variety, on ever more immediate and miniscule levels. That is the way it is made, and it cannot be made otherwise.

In a holistic approach there can be no attempt to discover entities more fundamental than those apparent on any level of experience. It is accepted that the fundamental structure is manifest at every level of generality. Thus it is possible to discover the universe in a grain of sand (although we need not therefore follow Blake beyond his art, into realms of mystical ambiguities).

The purpose of holistic analysis is to expose this structure (which, we remember, operates between levels of generality as well as on them, and makes the structure a *hierarchy*, and not merely a *stack*). To go beyond this purpose is to turn the analysis into an endless progression (or regression). To stay within the bounds of this function is to know when to stop.

In this approach we are unable to make use of the reductionist advice given to Alice when she was in Wonderland ("Begin at the beginning, continue until you reach the end, and then stop"). For it is a feature of holistic structures that they are not only endless (unless they are brought to an end from the outside) but that even a beginning to them is not to be found. Therefore an analysis of holistic structures must go far enough to adequately reveal the recurrent structure, and then the analysis, if not the structure, should stop.

We can recognize, from our experience as well as our discussion, that our inclination towards reductionism may have a deeper basis than the recognition that "reductionism is the way much of the world can be understood." Perhaps there is a deep-set wish that this be the way the *whole* of the world could be understood. And perhaps so much of the world is compatible with a reductionist approach because we have filled our world with such artifacts in order to

avoid seeing the holistic core from which we perpetually try to escape: misery breeds misery.[58]

It is not because they are baffling and incomprehensible that we dislike recursive structures and wish them banished to some remote province. For they are in fact comprehensible, albeit in their own way. Rather, we dislike them because they don't seem to get us anywhere. In a reductionist view there is always the suggestion that "now (at last!) I'm finally getting somewhere." But in a holistic view getting elsewhere is impossible because there is no "elsewhere." No matter where we look we only find more of the same. And, too, we dislike recursive structures because they are reminders of what we wish to conceal. "What common sense wishes to eliminate in avoiding the 'circle,' on the supposition that it is measuring up to the loftiest rigor of scientific investigation, is nothing less than the basic structure of care."[59]

It is the nature of craving to be in search. Dissatisfied with what is, we seek elsewhere. The question being present, there is the search for an answer. Although we can never discover a lasting and satisfactory answer we can always rediscover the question. But the question is never the answer, and we lack the alchemy that would turn our leaden puzzlement into a golden solution. The itch being present, there is the search for a scratch. Although we can never discover a lasting and satisfactory scratch we can always rediscover the itch. But the itch is never the scratch, and we are unable to effect the magic that would turn the torment of endless itching into the supposed bliss of an endless Perfect Scratch. Difficult as it is for us, in our quest, to get from A to B, it is as nothing compared to the frustrating and impossible task of getting from A to A!

Rather than face *that* task, we will prefer to seek elsewhere, or to seek *for* an "elsewhere," or to *suppose* an "elsewhere" and then try

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58. It is of no significance that the manufacturer of those endlessly regressive spaghetti packets (as well as the makers of the many other products whose labels display the same sort of replicative artwork) presumably feels no aversion towards his package design. The purpose of such advertising is to achieve as much self-reference as possible. Rather, the significant point is that we should find that such labelling evokes in ourselves a sense of ambiguity which non-replicative artwork cannot replicate.

59. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (tr. M Macquarrie and E. Robinson, New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 363.

to will it into existence. Thus, man is always probing his experience in the hope of finding, hidden beneath its surface, something that is different and which will "explain" things (as St.-Exupéry posits the oasis of pleasure hidden in the desert of dukkha). Our world is replete with this sort of explanation, for it is what people want.

For instance, there is the Freudian notion of "the unconscious." What is this "unconscious?" Are we conscious of it? If so, then on what grounds can it be regarded as *un*conscious? If not, then how do we know it exists, except as a (conscious) conceptualization? But despite this simple objection the notion of the "unconscious" is widely and uncritically accepted, presumably because it is the sort of explanation that people *want* to accept. (The Freudian system may be described as a sort of "psychoanalysis in Wonderland.")

Another example of such "hidden depths" explanations is, of course, flux. And there are many more such unperceivable hypostasized phenomena invented for the purpose of explaining (i.e. being different than) what is experienced. Explanations abound, in terms of both matter (e.g. electrons; hyperspace) and mind (e.g. "innate releasing mechanisms;" Jung's "collective subconscious" and similar "we-are-all-one"—one *what*?—dogmatisms).

We will also find today many different answers offered to us in the name of the Buddha. Not only flux is declared to be "the Buddhist explanation of the universe" (to quote a recent title). We are also offered such concepts as "all that we experience is the result of past actions," "emptying the (mind's) storehouse of past conditions," "the one reborn is neither oneself nor another," "Buddha-nature," "thoughts of Self transcend self," and so on. The list seems to grow ever longer, although the Pali Suttas remain the same length. Nietzsche has correctly characterized this sort of explanatory "elsewhere" as "the illusion of hinterworlds." ("Was I myself but a...?") But it is not our purpose here to pick them apart one by one: probably an endless task. For by now it will be clear that in any case the Buddha offers not explanations but rather an indication of the question, and the question's root, as being that which needs examination.

The search for answers has provided us with some wonderfully clever, elaborate, and original views about "how it all works." But it can never serve as a tool for understanding our situation. For despite its cleverness it still ignores the basic nature of experience. Rather than seeking a conclusion we need to understand the inconclusive situation which exists. Therefore whatever form they may take, efforts to explain experience are misdirected, and efforts to explain

experience in terms of what itself is not experienced (i.e. of "hidden depth") are a plain self-contradiction.[60] If such explanations are accepted as concepts among other concepts they will be seen for what they are. But if they are reified then they are misunderstood, taken as being what they are not.

Certainly we can deliberately conceal things from ourselves. This is ignorance, self-deception. But all that is concealed is, ultimately, more of the same. It is concealed because we desire it to be *other* than more of the same. And it is *as something other* that we seek to make it manifest. This is why it remains concealed. Once it is understood that even if there *is* something hidden it is not something different, then there will no longer be an irresistible drive to discover such a secret essence, the impossible exception to the rule. If we scratch the itch what we invariably find is more itch. If we scratch the surface what we invariably find is more surface.

As always, it is the failure to see the recursive structure of craving, the ever-abiding quest to find freedom from the ever-abiding

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60. "Monks, it is for one who feels (experiences) that I make known: 'This is suffering,' 'This is the arising of suffering,' 'This is the ceasing of suffering,' 'This is the way leading to the ceasing of suffering.'"—AN 3:61/A I 176. Certain Pali terms are commonly translated in a way that supports the "hidden depths" view of experience. Most notable among these may be *anusaya* and *upadhi*. *Anusaya* is, to a reductionist, "latent tendency." A holistic translation would be "potential." A piece of paper has the *potential* to burn—i.e. it is flammable—but we do not suppose that it therefore contains hidden within itself, in latent form, a blazing fire. So too, for so long as there exist ignorance and craving a person has the potential to experience greed, envy, hypocrisy, and many other evil unprofitable states. But we need not suppose that therefore these states exist in some latent or unexperienced form until they are somehow "called forth" into manifestation. Certainly the third section of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10, DN 22, etc.) suggests that all characteristics of the mind can be known. It does not suggest that there are latent or hidden characteristics. As for *upadhi* often translated as "rebirth substrate" (or more simply as "substrates"), the word is a synonym of *upādāna*, "holding," and may be translated as "appropriation." This is true in all Sutta contexts. See e.g. Udāna 3.10/Ud 33: "Dependent upon appropriation (*upadhi*) this suffering is born. With destruction of all holding (*upādāna*) there is no suffering born." And MN 105/M II 260: "Appropriation is the root of suffering."

quest, which founds a further and costly failure: failure to recognize the holistic approach of the Suttas. Many Suttas are analytical in nature (and many are not: some are analogical, others are exhortative, inspirational, descriptive, or various combinations of all of these). But it does not follow that they are reductionist. Consider, for example, MN 28/M I 184–91, excerpts of which are quoted at footnote 15 and elsewhere. This discourse is perhaps as analytical in approach as any in the Canon. But is it therefore reductionist?

The Sutta tells us that just as the elephant's footprint can contain within it any other footprint, so too all skilful things go for inclusion within the four noble truths. These four truths are defined and the first truth (dukkha) is then considered in detail in terms of the five aggregates. The five aggregates are defined and the first aggregate (matter) is then considered in detail in terms of the four elements. The four elements are defined and the first element (earth) is then considered in detail in terms of internality and externality. The internal aspect is then further analyzed into "head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, stomach, spleen, lungs, bowels, entrails, gorge, dung, or whatever else is internal, personal, solid, solidified, held to."

And is all of this analysis set forth for the sake of explaining the whole in terms of its parts? Does the Sutta strive for some ultimate or atomic entity? Not at all, for the discourse then goes on to tell us that all these things, head hair, etc., are just that (earth element) and nothing more than just that, and are not to be regarded as mine, as I as my self.

Now earth element in oneself and external earth element are simply earth element. This should be seen as it actually is with right understanding: "Not, this is mine; not, I am this; not, this is my self."

These things, however base or minor they may be, are all to be regarded as impermanent, woeful, not self. It is evident, then, that the point of the analysis is neither to explain the whole in terms of its parts nor to discover any ultimate. Precisely to the contrary, it aims to show that no matter how detailed or minute one's analysis or search may be, still there is no escape from things being no more than what they are. And what they are has the nature of being impermanent, woeful, and not-self.

Every arc of a circle, however minute, displays precisely the same quality of curvature as is shown by the circle as a whole. Thus an understanding of the structure of the arc is not different from an understanding of the structure of the circle. So to even the smallest

fragment of existence is not free from the characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and not-self. And thus an understanding of the structure of the fragment is not different from an understanding of the structure of existence.

To demonstrate this DN 17/D II 169–99, takes the opposite tack from MN 28. It points out that however magnificent and expansive an appropriation might be made it is still impermanent and not worth holding to: disenchantment and freedom are preferable. The analysis, which at first may have appeared to be a paradigm of reductionist logical data processing, turns out in the end to be every bit as holistic and organic as the rest of the Teaching.

It is because they fail to understand this that so many people also fail to understand what is meant by the expression "practising the Buddha's Teaching." Their concept of such a practice is akin to searching for an invaluable golden needle in a haystack of worthless straw (see footnote 2). They seem to believe that if only they are diligent enough, sufficiently keen-eyed and nimble-fingered, they will somehow or other find this golden needle. And so they set to work, carefully sifting through the haystack, picking up each bit of straw, examining it, deciding "That's not a needle," discarding it, and reaching for the next bit. And so they discard straw after straw: "That's not a needle, that's not a needle, nor that, nor that, nor...." They believe that if they are persistent enough, and perhaps very lucky, then some day they will be able to cry out joyously, "It's a needle! It's a needle!" Whereupon all their troubles will be over.

Such people need to understand that practice of the Buddha's Teaching is *not* like looking for a needle in a haystack. It is like looking for *hay* in a haystack. What needs to be seen is something that is very ordinary, mundane, and present-to-hand everywhere. It is not a different sort of experience that needs to be discovered. It is the everyday sort that needs to be seen. But it needs to be *seen* rather than, as is usually the case, conceived (as being other than what it is). Unfortunately, though, even if they were to accept this assertion as true, human perversity is such that most people would accept it in the wrong way. They would regard it as an extraordinary and different and explanatory truth. And in the end it would make no tittle of difference to most people, for they would simply return to their haystack, pick up the next bit of straw, examine it carefully, and decide "That's not straw." Discarding it, they would reach for the next bit of straw—"No, that isn't straw either"—and the next bit, and the next: "That isn't straw, nor that, nor that...."

A holistic approach can only be understood in the mode of holism, just as non-attachment can only be understood in the mode of non-attachment (and just as, too, attachment can only be understood in the mode of non-attachment). Thus, the message of this Teaching is, in effect: "Your experience is that of a questioning; your need is for an Answer. The history of all worldly endeavour is the tale of a search for this Answer. But an Answer is *not to be found*. Therefore there is all this dissatisfaction and grief. However, there is a way to stop asking the question...."

But of course most people, ignoring or misconceiving this advice, do continue to ask their questions and to cling to their various answers. Yet whether one's answer is that everything exists, or that nothing exists, or that all is one, or that all is a diversity, or that self/God exists (free will!), or that self/God does not exist (determinism!), or that I am this, I am that, I am the other—whatever the answer, then regardless of how much wisdom may underlie it, the very fact of its being an answer at all consigns it to the realm of the world, the world of answers. For no answer is capable of uncovering and exposing the conditions upon which there is this constant need to raise these questions. And whatever one's answer is, it is only a concealment of the question, not an ending of it.

Answers do not change a person. They merely confirm for him certain assumed validities. Only if we refuse to accept *any* answer, only if we insist upon the question, drive it home, and explore its underpinnings, is it possible to transcend the realm of the question, the realm of the world. The world we experience is a world of concern, anxiety, involvement, appropriation. Any "understanding" of one's situation which does not recognize this, or which acknowledges it only as an afterthought, is fundamentally and irretrievably inadequate. Only an understanding which exposes the recursive structure of the appropriated, the appropriation, and the posited appropriator as an organic entity permeating the entirety of experience is adequate as a fundament upon which to base an investigation into the human situation—our own. Only thus can there be a comprehension of dependent arising, and thus of the futility of appropriation. Any effort which fails to see how the "eternal" appropriator is utterly dependent upon the impermanent appropriated is a futile effort. But an effort which strikes for the heart of the relationship has indeed the potential for perceiving the futility and can, by perceiving, end it.

III

The Buddha and Catch-22

It is now twenty-five years since the publication, in 1961, of Joseph Heller's astonishing novel, *Catch-22;*[1] yet so far, it seems, there has been no public comment on certain striking parallels between the Buddha's Teaching and some of the content of that novel. Perhaps it would be as well to discuss those affinities now, before another quarter century elapses.

The most immediately obvious (though hardly the most profound) similarity between the Teaching and the novel is that both are deeply concerned with man's mortality. "Old age, sickness, and death" is a phrase that occurs repeatedly in the Buddha's Teaching, as recorded in the Pali Suttas (and, indeed, throughout the later Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan texts as well). A citation of even a small portion of such textual references[2] would be far beyond the scope of this brief discussion: the fact of man's mortality—a constant peril in an inconstant world—is a perception absolutely fundamental to the perspective of life presented by the Buddha's Teaching.

And in *Catch-22* the protagonist, Yossarian (a bombardier in World War II), is no less deeply concerned about old age, sickness, and death. The spectre of their imminence is his constant dread. As his friend Dunbar puts it,

"Do you know how long a year takes when it's going away? This long." He snapped his fingers. "A second ago you were stepping into college with your lungs full of fresh air. Today you're an old man."

"Old?" asked Clevinger with surprise. "What are you talking about?"

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1. New York: Simon and Schuster; London: Jonathan Cape Ltd.
2. E.g.: As the herdsman drives his kine
   with a stick to pasture-land,
   thus decay and health's decline
   drive out the life of man. Dhp 135

..."You're inches away from death every time you go on a mission. How much older can you be at your age?"—pp. 38–9

As for sickness:

Yossarian had so many ailments to be afraid of that he was sometimes tempted to turn himself in to the hospital for good and spend the rest of his life stretched out there inside an oxygen tent with a battery of specialists and nurses seated at one side of his bed twenty-four hours a day waiting for something to go wrong.... Aneurisms, for instance; how else could they ever defend him in time against an aneurism of the aorta? ...He wondered often how he would ever recognise the first chill, flush, twinge, ache, belch, sneeze, stain, lethargy, vocal slip, lose of balance or lapse of memory that would signal the inevitable beginning of the inevitable end.—pp. 171–2

But even more than old age and sickness, it is the spectre of death itself that haunts both Yossarian and the novel: "At night when he was trying to sleep, Yossarian would call the roll of all the men, women and children he had ever known who were now dead. He tried to remember all the soldiers, and he resurrected images of all the elderly people he had known when a child..."—p. 339. Yossarian is enmeshed in a killing war which is (as the novel's disclaimer makes clear) representative of a larger framework,[3] a war to which "there was no end in sight. The only end in sight was Yossarian's own"—p. 16. Nevertheless, Yossarian "had decided to live forever or die in the attempt, and his only mission each time he went up was to come down alive"—p. 29. Yossarian feels death hovering about him—indeed, even living with him, in the form of a dead man named Mudd, who was not easy to live with.

However, old age, sickness, and death are not apprehended merely as *things*, as objects in a world of objects, in themselves neutral. The fact of death changes Yossarian's world, as it does ours, radically, and Heller's insistence upon this point is the beginning of the novel's profundity.

In a world in which death is an unavoidable presence, "it made sense to cry out in pain every night"—p. 54. Indeed, the disorder that

3. Perhaps it would be going too far to discover in this larger framework a reference to the Buddha's recognition of *saṃsāra*, the round of deaths and rebirths; but it cannot be excessive to relate the facts of birth and death to the minute and Learical apocalypse achieved in the vision of Snowden's death: "Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. ...Ripeness was all."—pp. 429–30

the awareness of death introduces into a world which, throughout our lives, we are forever trying to order, leaves us with neither simple order nor simple disorder, but rather with "a world boiling in chaos in which everything was in proper orders"—p. 143. Death, the great modifier, alters *everything*, so that for Yossarian "nothing warped seemed any more in his strange, distorted surroundings"—p. 402.

It is this strange distortion that is the keystone of the novel's humour—not merely that of its many throwaway jokes but also of the tragicomic perception which circles round and round the death of Snowden ("Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?"—p. 35: what a poignant joker), drawing ever closer, while at the same time mockingly inverting that trivial sensibility which ordinary men use to deny the disorder of death: "the Texan turned out to be good-natured, generous and likable. In three days no one could stand him"—p. 9; "Nately had a bad start. He came from a good family"—p. 12; "Yossarian couldn't be happy, even though the Texan didn't want him to be"—p. 16; "strangers he didn't know shot at him with cannons every time he flew up into the air to drop bombs on them, and it wasn't funny at all. And if that wasn't funny, there were lots of things that weren't even funnier"—p. 17. But it is not merely the one-liners that are inversions of everyday logic: that everyday sensibility is twisted into various shapes, so that each character is seen to exist in his own uniquely topsy-turvy world, a world whose shape hovers somewhere between a wry smile and a teardrop.

And of all the characters who live in their separate worlds of twisted logic (and the names, often as twisted as the logic, seem nearly endless: Hungry Joe, Chief White Half-oat, Doc Daneeka, Major—de Coverly, Milo Minderbinder, Major Major Major Major...) perhaps the most logically insane character of all is the soldier in white, who "was encased from head to toe in plaster and gauze. He had two useless legs and two useless arms"—p. 9.

Sewn into the bandages over the insides of both elbows were zippered lips through which he was fed clear fluid from a clear jar. A silent zinc pipe rose from the cement on his groin and was coupled to a slim rubber hose that carried waste from his kidneys and dripped it efficiently into a clear, stoppered jar on the floor. When the jar on the floor was full, the jar feeding his elbow was empty and the two were simply switched quickly so that the stuff could drip back into him.—p. 10

Changing the jars was no trouble to anyone but the men who watched them changed every hour or so and were baffled by the procedure.

"Why can't they hook the two jars up to each other and eliminate the middleman?"—p. 168

The other patients in the ward... shrank from him with a tenderhearted aversion from the moment they set eyes on him.... They gathered in the farthest recess of the ward and gossiped about him in malicious, offended undertones, rebelling against his presence as a ghastly imposition and resenting him malevolently for the nauseating truth of which he was a bright reminder.—p. 166

Although Yossarian too is mystified by the soldier in white, yet he "would recognize him anywhere. He wondered who he was"—p. 358. And if we need an image of saṃsāra we would have to look far to find a better one, or one more universal. The message of the soldier in white (who keeps turning up again)[4] is as universal as that of the letters in black (p. 8)—the letters which Yossarian, as bored censoring officer, blacks out completely or nearly so (and endorses them "Washington Irving" or, sometimes, "Irving Washington," thus unwittingly endangering the chaplain's life), "thereby leaving a message far more universal."

This tragicomic perception of man's condition (in which lots of things aren't even funnier) leads naturally to the question of the purpose of such a life, or of any life at all. (On the soldier in white: "It wasn't much of a life, but it was all the life he had....") Dr. Stubbs, in conversation with Dunbar, raises this point but fails to answer it:

"I used to get a big kick out of saving people's lives. Now I wonder what the hell's the point, since they all have to die anyway."

..."The point is to keep them from dying for as long as you can."

"Yeah, but what's the point, since they all have to die anyway?"

"The trick is not to think about that."

"Never mind the trick. What the hell's the point?"

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4. The circular nature of *saṃsāra* finds its parallel in *Catch-22*—if circles can have parallels—not only in the re-appearance of the soldier in white, but also in the circling round the death of Snowden, going around twice over Ferrara, the soldier who saw everything twice, and many other recurrent events and phrases. Each time Yossarian gets close to having completed his missions Headquarters raises the number required: there is always another tour of duty. Like Rohitassa (see S II 26 = A IV 45), and like us, Yossarian cannot reach an end by going.

Dunbar pondered in silence for a few moments. "Who the hell knows?"—p. 108

But if the point of life is not known, and if life is nevertheless perceived as both tragic and comic, then from another perspective it could as well be seen as both sane and insane: and this leads naturally to the novel's comic inversion of the notions of sanity and insanity, an inversion which is an underpinning of the book's logic (or, as some would have it, illogic). Continuing their conversation, Dr. Stubbs and Dunbar discuss Yossarian and the dreaded approach of a particularly dangerous mission:

"That crazy bastard."

"He's not so crazy," Dunbar said. "He swears he's not going to fly to Bologna."

"That's just what I mean," Dr. Stubbs answered. "That crazy bastard may be the only sane one left."—p. 109

Indeed, in a world in which "men went mad and were rewarded with medals"—p. 16—who is sane, save he who would escape from that world? This is Yossarian's dilemma, the "vile, excruciating dilemma of duty and damnation" (p. 136): he doesn't want to be in the war. He doesn't want to die. "He thirsted for life"—p. 331. For Yossarian the enemy is not the Germans, or at least not only the Germans. "'The enemy,' retorted Yossarian with weighted precision, 'is anybody who's going to get you killed....'" And because of this "morbid aversion to dying"—p. 297—men shrink from him and regard him as crazy. Clevinger is such a one. "You're crazy!" Clevinger shrieks at Yossarian on p. 16; but later (p. 75) we are told that the patriotic and idealistic Clevinger was a dope "who would rather be a corpse than bury one"; and finally (p. 103): "Clevinger was dead. That was the basic flaw in his philosophy." And yet, by the very fact of being part of such a world one cannot be completely sane; and to be not completely sane is to be not sane at all. But if one tries to escape is that not then evidence of a spark of sanity? Perhaps so; but the problem is that when we try to escape we discover that we *can't*: every effort to free oneself from (in Buddhist terms) involvement with craving, aversion, and delusion or (in the novel's terms) the war—every effort apparently brings one back to the same dilemma, and results only in making the problem more urgent (and perhaps also more evident), as will be recognized by anyone who has ever tried to extirpate the root of craving, and failed. Is it not madness, then, to try to escape?

And yet, if to do nothing is regarded as less insane, still that too does not lead to disengagement from a mad world. This is the very crux of Yossarian's dilemma, and ours as well: a dilemma illuminated in experience by the effort to practice the Buddha's Teaching and in fiction by Yossarian's effort to escape from the war. Heller puts it this way:

"Can't you ground someone who's crazy?" [Yossarian asks the flight surgeon, Doc Daneeka.]

"Oh, sure. I have to. There's a rule saying I have to ground anyone who's crazy. "

"Then why don't you ground me? I'm crazy.... Ask any of the others. They'll tell you how crazy I am."

"They're crazy."

"Then why don't you ground them?"

"Why don't they ask me to ground them?"

"Because they're crazy, that's why."

"Of course they're crazy," Doc Daneeka replied. "I just told you they're crazy, didn't I? And you can't let crazy people decide whether you're crazy or not, can you?"

Yossarian looked at him soberly and tried another approach. "Is Orr crazy?"

"He sure is," Doc Daneeka said.... "I can ground Orr. But first he has to ask me to."

"That's all he has to do to be grounded?"

"That's all. Let him ask me."

"And then you can ground him?" Yossarian asked.

"No. Then I can't ground him."

"You mean there's a catch?"

"Sure there's a catch," Doc Daneeka replied. "Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy."—p. 45

Thus Yossarian's efforts to establish a rational basis for being grounded must fail. Logic is an inadequate tool to deal with the human situation, for whenever we apply logic there is always a catch. This is not to suggest that logic is not necessary, but rather that it is not adequate. In this computer age we could hardly manage without logic. Let alone computers, without logic we could make neither mathematics nor music nor marmalade. But whenever we try to deal with the fundamentals of existence, with the forever unanswerable question, "Who am I?" (or any other question concerned with "me"), we find that logic neither answers that

question nor shows us the way to stop asking it.[5] ("'Why me?' was his constant lament, and the question was a good one"—p. 34.)

And the reason for this, the Buddha informs us, is because of *avijjā*, or ignorance. But *avijjā* is not a mere absence of information; it is a refusal to see what is at all times there to be seen. It is not failure to see one particular thing among other particular things, but a radical refusal to see the way all particular things are, and in this respect it is as great a modifier as death—indeed, the two are (so the Buddha tells us) inseparable. The dependent arising formulation says, in summary, "With ignorance as condition, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come into being."

The deluded person, in refusing to see the nature of all things, refuses also to see the nature of his refusal to see (which is also a thing). That is, he refuses to see delusion. Thus, by denying itself delusion sustains itself. This is stated in the Suttas (e.g. Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta, MN 9) as follows:

Friends, that which is non-knowledge of suffering, non-knowledge of the arising of suffering, non-knowledge of the ceasing of suffering, non-knowledge of the way leading to the ceasing of suffering, this, friends, is called ignorance.

For after all, what is "the way leading to the ceasing of suffering"? It is (the Suttas tell us) the noble eightfold path. And what is the first factor of this path? Right view. Ignorance, then, involves non-knowledge of right view. And right view is knowledge of the arising of suffering; that is to say, knowledge of ignorance. Right view is knowledge of right view, and also knowledge of wrong view, whereas wrong view is non-knowledge of wrong view, and also non-knowledge of right view. And this structure of ignorance is, in fact, Catch-22 at its most fundamental level:

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he

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5. It is for this reason that the Buddha's Teaching is said to be *atakkāvacara*, not in the sphere of reason or logic. (*Catch-22* is not the only well-known book which asserts the insanity implicit in being in a situation. In *Alice in Wonderland* the Cheshire Cat tells Alice, "We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad. You must be or you wouldn't have come." Indeed, *Catch-22* contains a number of very specific allusions to the Alice books.)

did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle.

"That's some catch, that Catch-22," he observed.

"It's the best there is," Doc Daneeka agreed.—p. 46

Thus, with absolute simplicity, we are condemned to madness. And if this is not convincing, Heller presses his point home by telling us (on the same page) that Catch-22 is like the flies that Orr sees in Appleby's eyes.

"Oh, they're there, all right," Orr had assured [Yossarian]... "although he probably doesn't even know it. That's why he can't see things as they really are."

"How come he doesn't know it?" inquired Yossarian.

"Because he's got flies in his eyes," Orr with exaggerated patience. "How can he see he's got flies in his eyes if he's got flies in his eyes?"

It made as much sense as anything else....

Yathābhutaṃ na pajānāti: he does not see things as they really are: the phrase—so typical a Sutta description of the *puthujjana*, the unenlightened commoner—is used here by Heller to illuminate precisely the characteristic of being entrapped in a situation. Not only does the puthujjana have flies in his eyes, he does not see that he has them, and he does not see this because he has them. His dilemma is that though he must find a way to see, yet he cannot find that way precisely because he cannot see. Indeed, he cannot even see for himself that this is his problem. And this is the dilemma which, at its most fundamental level, is the specific concern of the Buddha's Teaching. The structure of *avijjā*, the structure of Catch-22, the structure of "having flies in one's eyes": they are one and the same. Catch-22 is *avijjā*. The title character in both the novel and in our lives never appears and yet is omnipresent.

All of this does not oblige us to conclude that Heller is enlightened, or that he is even a Buddhist. Describing something and seeing it directly are two different things; and even in direct perception there are different levels of profundity. "At the field a heavy silence prevailed, overpowering motion like a ruthless, insensate spell holding in thrall the only beings who might break it. The chaplain was in awe"—p. 371. This, it is clear enough, is of the

same nature as having flies in one's eyes; and yet it is also clear enough that this sort of spell is of a much less fundamental grade. Not only can we on the outside see it, it is conceivable that the men at the field could be aware of the spell at the same time they were (for the time being) powerless to break it. Appleby, on the other hand, must be entirely unaware of the flies in his eyes.

On an even less fundamental level is the situation of the men while they await the dreaded mission to Bologna. The mission cannot be flown until the rain stops and the landing strips dry out. But the rain-forced delay in the mission only gives the men more time to be more terrified. "Their only hope was that it would never stop raining, and they had no hope because they all knew it would.... The more it rained, the worse they suffered. The worse they suffered, the more they prayed that it would continue raining"—p. 117. Again we have a situation of entrapment, but on a crude and manifest level of experience.

But though we would describe these various levels of Catch-22 as being only rough approximations to the subtle and pervasive deception of *avijjā*, as expounded by the Buddha, we must also recognize Heller's achievement in seeing the central significance of this self-replicative structure in human existence and (though he doesn't know what to do about it) in describing it in a form which has struck a deeply responsive chord in so many. Although he may lack the wisdom to resolve the dilemma he describes, yet he has sufficient wisdom to not let go of that perception; nor should we, for by being manifest such occurrences can serve both to remind us of the subtle central dilemma which is the template upon which those coarser experiences depend and also to provide us with a model which, applied with proper attention, can indicate what action, or what sort of action, can bring that central dilemma to an end.

In the end, perhaps due to the exigencies of the novel's form, Heller does suggest a solution to Yossarian's dilemma. Whether this solution works artistically is not of concern to us here. Rather, we need to understand why this suggestion of a solution is incompatible with the Buddha's Teaching.

The Buddha's Teaching is concerned with letting go of what can be surrendered within the sphere of the unenlightened (namely, sensuality, hatred, lethargy, agitation, and doubt—the five hindrances) in order to allow for the possibility of seeing what might be let go of beyond that sphere. This further perception can be indicated by one

who has already seen for himself, and must be initially accepted by the practitioner as an act of faith, until he too comes to see it. At that point it is possible for there to be a further letting go, a giving up of what can be surrendered only outside the sphere of the unenlightened, namely, all beliefs concerned with selfhood (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi attavāda*) and, eventually, the conceit "I am" (*asmimāna*). Thus the Buddha's Teaching is a course of practice concerned fundamentally with renunciation. Without giving up the world to the limits of one's ability to do so one will never be able to extend those limits: one will instead remain entrapped within the world.

Heller considers this approach, but rejects it. Yossarian certainly sees the problem: he is "unable to adjust to the idea of war"—p. 297—and repeatedly flees the oppressiveness of the world by running to "the cloistered shelter of a hospital"—p. 177—with a supposititious liver ailment. That this flight is meant to be seen as (at least in a sense) religious is borne out by a doctor who tells Yossarian that the family of a just-deceased soldier have

"travelled all the way from New York to see a dying soldier, and you're the handiest one we've got."

"What are you talking about?" Yossarian asked suspiciously. "I'm not dying."

"Of course you're dying. We're all dying. Where the devil else do you think you're heading?"

"They didn't come to see me," Yossarian objected. "They came to see their son. "

"They'll have to take what they can get. As far as we're concerned, one dying boy is just as good as any other, or just as bad. To a scientist, all dying boys are equal…."—p. 181

Thus the doctors, the staff of that cloistered shelter, perform the essentially religious function of reminding Yossarian ("how could he have forgotten") of his mortality; and they also insist that he observe the celibacy normally associated with monastic institutions:

"How do you expect anyone to believe you have a liver condition if you keep squeezing the nurses' tits every time you get a chance? You're going to have to give up sex if you want to convince people you've got an ailing liver."

"That's a hell of a price to pay just to keep alive…."—p. 181

Precisely: giving up sensuality (to say nothing of hatred, lethargy, agitation, and doubt) is a price Yossarian is not prepared to pay. He

wants the sybaritic salvation sought also by Hungry Joe, to whom women were "lovely, satisfying, maddening manifestations of the miraculous, instruments of pleasure"—p. 52—and he dreams of being interred for the duration of the war (i.e. for all eternity) in Sweden, an earthly (and earthy) paradise where he could keep himself busy siring dozens of illegitimate little Yossarians. Yossarian wants the world's pleasures without having to endure the world's drawbacks, and he fails to see the essence of the world's dangers. (Hungry Joe is more consistent than Yossarian on this point, for he goes to pieces each time he finishes flying the number of missions Headquarters requires, and recovers only when Headquarters raises the number of missions required, as it inevitably does, throwing him back on combat status.)

If any character in *Catch-22* comes close to accepting the Buddha's advice it would be Dunbar, who tries to increase his lifespan by cultivating boredom, on the grounds that when you're bored time passes slower. His idea seems to be that if only he could achieve a state of total and absolute boredom he would be, for all intents, eternal. This sounds like a rough literary approximation to meditation (although we must remember that the Buddha, unlike many Eastern teachers, quite explicitly stated that meditation by itself is an insufficient condition for enlightenment).

Dunbar, given to cultivating boredom, to seeking eternity, lies motionless in bed: he goes so far in his efforts that at one point Yossarian, looking at him, wonders whether he is still alive. This will remind us of the story of the Ven. Sañjīva who, we are told (MN 50/M I 333), was seated immersed in the highest meditative attainment when some cowherds, shepherds, and ploughmen, passing by, saw him and thought, as did Yossarian of Dunbar, that he was dead. They collected grass, wood, and cowdung, heaped it up about the Ven. Sañjīva, set his pyre alight, and went on their way. The next morning Ven. Sañjīva emerged from his meditative attainment and went wandering for almsfood. His would-be cremators were astonished at seeing him alive and gave him the name by which he became known, Sañjīva, which means "with life." Dunbar seems to have lacked the Ven. Sañjīva's meditative abilities, but each sought to escape death (Ven. Sañjīva, the Sutta tells us, successfully), and each came thereby to be taken as dead.

It is common, of course, for beginning meditators to be assailed by boredom (as well as the other four hindrances); however, this does not justify equating boredom and meditation: on the contrary, boredom is

an enemy of meditation. Despite the story of Ven. Sañjīva, then, we must regard any effort to equate meditation with the cultivation of boredom as tenuous, and as being further weakened by the episode in which Dunbar becomes *a fortiori*. However, we must also note that it is immediately after Dunbar becomes convinced, upon re-encountering the soldier in white, that (p. 358) "There's no one inside! ...He's hollow inside, like a chocolate soldier"—thereby perhaps suggesting something of the Buddha's teaching of *anattā*, of not-self—that Dunbar is disappeared. We never learn the meaning of this cryptic event ("It doesn't make sense. It isn't even good grammar"—p. 359), but if the parallel with meditation is accepted then the further parallel that would be suggested here is with *nibbāna*, extinction. After being disappeared Dunbar is described (p. 360) as being "nowhere to be found", which is exactly how the Suttas describe beings who have attained full enlightenment (*arahattā*).[6]

Perhaps a literary parallel of an achievement that transcends literature (let alone literature, *nibbāna* transcends *bhava*, being) could not be more closely described; but in any case we cannot allow that the parallel is more than a suggestion, and (no doubt inevitably) an inaccurate one at that. And in any case to be disappeared sounds, from Heller's description of it, far less desirable than extinction, from the Buddha's description of that. (Still, it would be interesting to know how much acquaintance Heller actually had, if any, with any school of Buddhism during the seven years in which he was writing *Catch-22*.[7])

And if any character tries, however ineffectually, to understand the real nature of his situation, it is not Yossarian but the chaplain. The chaplain (he was named Shipman in the hard-cover edition, but for some reason the name was changed in the paperback edition to Tappman—not his only identity crisis), who has an open mind, is continually

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6. The phrase occurs frequently in the Suttas. See e.g. the concluding lines of the Vakkali Sutta (SN 22:87). At Dhp 180 we find:

> That tangle of snares by which he'd be penned isn't found anywhere.
> His range has no end, that Buddha awake.
> What track can there be to trace one who's trackless, craving-free?

7. This question was put to Mr. Heller. The reply was that he knew "not an inkling." The range of the *puthujjana*, it seems, is more extensive than commonly supposed.

wondering what everything was all about. ...There was no way of really knowing anything, he knew, not even that there was no way of really knowing anything. Was there a single true faith, or a life after death? ...These were the great, complex questions of ontology that tormented him. Yet they never seemed nearly as crucial to him as the question of kindness and good manners. He was pinched perspiringly in the epistemological dilemma of the skeptic, unable to accept solutions to problems he was unwilling to dismiss as unsolvable. He was never without misery and never without hope.—pp. 262–3

In the chaplain's tale the human dilemma is presented from a different point of view: it is not a question of sanity or insanity but, in Kafkaesque terms, one of guilt or innocence. Because it is the nature of beings that they are continually trying to establish an existence that continually eludes them[8] their existence is perpetually in doubt, and they exist, if at all, in a state of guilt. This, it would seem, is the basic perception of Kafka's *Trial*: Joseph K. arrests himself by recognizing that his existence, being unjustifiable, is essentially guilty. And the chaplain (for whom the question "Who am I?" becomes acute when he is formally charged with "being Washington Irving"—p. 378) is also in this situation:

"You've got nothing to be afraid of if you're not guilty. What are you so afraid of? You're not guilty, are you?"

"Sure he's guilty," said the colonel. "Guilty as hell."

"Guilty of what?" implored the chaplain, feeling more and more bewildered. ..."What did I do?"—p. 373

And later the chaplain's identity crisis and dilemma of existential guilt is expressed in the same terms that were used earlier to describe Catch-22:

"I offered it to Sergeant Whitcomb because I didn't want it."

"Why'd you steal it from Colonel Cathcart if you didn't want it?"

"I didn't steal it from Colonel Cathcart!"

"Then why are you so guilty, if you didn't steal it?"

"I'm not guilty!"

"Then why would we be questioning you if you weren't guilty?"—p. 377

Thus each of us faces the question of our basic unjustifiability in

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8. Thus the question "Who am I?", whether or not it is answerable, is recognized at once to be vital and fundamental to the epistemological dilemma we each face; indeed, it is thus that there is the concept of such a dilemma at all.

a purposeless world. Some, of course, flee from these questions and deny them (by indulging in sensuality, hatred, lethargy, agitation, and doubt); but the questions return for so long as their root, the conceit "I am", exists, and the verdict is inevitable: Guilty.

"Chaplain," he continued, looking up, "we accuse you also of the commission of crimes and infractions we don't even know about yet. Guilty or innocent?"

"I don't know, sir. How can I say if you don't tell me what they are?"

"How can we tell you if we don't know?"

"Guilty," decided the colonel.

"Sure he's guilty," agreed the major. "If they're his crimes and infractions, he must have committed them."

"Guilty it is, then," chanted the officer without insignia....—p. 379

And guilty it is for all of us, if the charge is the fundamental one of being possessors, or even of simply "being": being what?

And thus Heller repeatedly and ingeniously offers us brilliant literary expressions of the dilemma of existence. The formulations are lucid and compelling, and they fully take account of the circular and self-sustaining nature of the dilemma. For this we can praise *Catch-22*, and perhaps find it of use as a tool in keeping to the forefront of our awareness the nature of our problem. But it would be asking too much to expect the novel to offer the means of resolving that dilemma. For that we must turn to the Buddha's Teaching.

IV

The Myth of Sisyphus: A Cycle

THE gods known to the Greeks have visited various fortunes and misfortunes upon humans both individually and collectively, and for as long as Asians have retold the stories of the Suttas and the Jātakas, so too Europeans have retold the fates of those mortals who have been singled out by the gods of the Greeks for special treatment.

Albert Camus, too, has gone for his inspiration to the Greeks, and in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*[1] he has developed the thesis that Sisyphus characterizes the dilemma of modern man. Sisyphus, we will recall, was a roguish king of Corinth who, because of his cruel ways, was condemned by the gods—the judges of the dead, according to one version of the tale—to push a boulder up a mountainside, only to watch it plunge to the bottom again each time he neared the lip, whereupon Sisyphus was forced to flee downhill, the plummeting boulder nearly on his heels: like all myths, the take is adapted to the purposes of the teller). Then Sisyphus would have to begin all over again. We are perhaps luckier, Camus suggests, in that we can vary our tasks. If this boulder begins to bore us, why then, there's always that one over there: notice what interesting colourations it has, new and exciting.... And for Camus, who rejected with abhorrence all notions of an afterlife or of rebirth, there was also the hope of annihilation in the grave.

In the Pali Canon too we find the idea of the endlessness of our tasks: the most developed expression of this theme is probably that of Cūlavagga 7 I,1–2 (of the Vinaya Piṭaka), the story of the going forth of Anuruddha.

At the time of the Buddha many families of the Buddha's clan, the Sakyans, were sending forth one son into the monastic life, in imitation of the Buddha. But in the family of two brothers, Mahānāma

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1. New York: Knopf, 1955; translated by Justin O'Brien.

and Anuruddha, as yet no one had gone forth. Therefore, Mahānāma thought, either I should go forth or Anuruddha should do so. So he went to his younger brother and he told him of his thoughts. But the idea of going forth was not pleasing to Anuruddha. He had been raised very luxuriously, he told Mahānāma, and described his upbringing—a life of pleasure devoid of hardships and responsibilities. And the monastic life of the homeless ones was difficult; Anuruddha was not used to bearing up to such burdens. "Therefore," he told his brother, "I am not able to go forth from home into homelessness. You go forth."

"Very well," Mahānāma agreed. "Then come along, dear Anuruddha, and I will instruct you in the duties of the household life." And Mahānāma (who had apparently been managing the family estate while Anuruddha amused himself) explained. "First the fields must be ploughed. Being ploughed, they must be sown. Being sown, they must be irrigated and drained. Being irrigated and drained, they must be weeded. Being weeded, the crop must be reaped. When it is reaped it must be harvested. When it is harvested it must be sheaved. Being sheaved it must be treshed. Being treshed the straw must be winnowed. The straw being winnowed, the chaff must be winnowed. The chaff being winnowed it must be sifted and then brought in. Having brought in the grain it is to be done just the same the next year, and the year after that."

"The work is endless!" exclaimed Anuruddha. "No end to the work is apparent. When does the work conclude? When is an end to the work apparent? When will we be able to indulge ourselves carelessly in the pleasures of the five senses?"

"But, dear Anuruddha, the work is indeed endless. No end to the work is apparent. Even when our fathers and grandfathers died the work did not cease."

"Well then," decided Anuruddha, "you know about the duties of the household life. I will go forth from home into homelessness."[2]

Thus it was by perceiving the endlessness of the tasks we have in this world that Anuruddha was persuaded to follow the teaching which leads to "laying down the burden" (e.g. MN 112/III 30)—pity Sisyphus he had not the opportunity!

If we are condemned, one and all, to a life of tasks without cease, Camus asks (for like Sisyphus he too, it seems, knew nothing of "laying down the burden"), can life be regarded as worth living? And

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2. The translation is adapted from I. B. Horner's *The Book of the Discipline* (London: Pali Text Society).

indeed he does not fear to raise the question boldly, beginning his essay with what is virtually a challenge: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." And if in the end he shrinks from his own challenge, finding in the very impossibility of man's absurd situation the conditions he believes justify that existence, still we can forgive him, for along the way he has offered us an elucidation of that situation which allows us to see through the false hope he himself eventually seizes upon.[3] But it should be remembered that Camus wrote in the hopeful years just after World War Two, when a false (and possibly nuclear) dawn seduced many thinkers. It was not until the late 1950's that most thinkers gave up waiting for the sunrise. Also we should not forget that for Camus despair (unlike Sisyphus' boulder) reached its summit not when suffering was perceived as eternal but when *even suffering* was perceived as impermanent and therefore purposeless.

We want love to last and we know that it does not last; even if, by some miracle, it were to last a whole lifetime, it would still be incomplete. Perhaps, in this insatiable need for perpetuation, we should better understand human suffering, if we knew that it was eternal. It appears that great minds are, sometimes, less horrified by suffering than by the fact that it does not endure. In default of inexhaustible happiness, eternal suffering would at least give us a destiny. But we do not even have that consolation, and our worst agonies come to an end one day. One morning, after many dark nights of despair, an irrepressible longing to live will announce to us the fact that all is finished and that suffering has no more meaning than happiness.[4]

For this it is easy to forgive him his lapse in *The Myth of Sisyphus* into the hopefulness of life-long despair; and at the same time we need not accept that hope as valid. Rather, we need to explore our own being to discover the source from which spring both the despair

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3. Lest there be misunderstanding, it should be said most emphatically here and now that this does *not* imply that suicide is either commended or recommended. Life is absurd; life is an impossible series of projects which serve no genuine purpose other than to perpetuate themselves; but even so this is not reason for suicide. One does not have to be in love with life in order to shrink from death. What the human condition is reason for is to understand that very condition, and thereby to end not life but absurdity.

4. Albert Camus: *The Rebel,* translated by Anthony Bower (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953), p. 227.

and the hope, for it is only by seeing the source that both the despair and the need to hope can be vanquished.

In this task it must be remembered that we are not like miners of gold or gems, searching for what is truly hidden, but like beings with eyes firmly shut, refusing to see what is at all times there to be seen. No digging is necessary. Here too the story of Sisyphus is relevant, for his task was always before him. He had only to look at what he was doing. But he needed to go beyond what he was doing, to an understanding of his own motivations; and here too his story is relevant, for to the Greeks even the gods were visible to he who would look at them. And whether it was Sisyphus' gods or his demons or his judges who condemned him, they were *his* gods, *his* demons, *his* judges, rather than an impersonal (or, worse, abstract) force beyond his immediate knowledge (let alone his control). Could Sisyphus have but given up his commitment to a close observation of his boulder, who knows what he might have seen?

But here we go too far, for Sisyphus, unlike us, is but a myth, and for the myth to remain valid it must never overstep the boundaries that define it.

It may be that the myth of Sisyphus can be comprehended more fully by means of illustration than discussion, and perhaps, for Buddhists, even more so when the illustration sets Sisyphus within a context which would be familiar working material to the earnest Buddhist who strives to comprehend his own situation. A cycle of illustrations is offered for consideration.

Illustration I

For countless millennia Sisyphus has been assigned the task of seizing an enormous boulder, hoisting it onto his shoulders, and then, staggering under its weight, climbing up a precipitous and menacing mountain. The gods show him some kindness. From time to time they permit him to set the boulder down and to push it uphill rather than to carry it. It is this more merciful form of labour that the gods have made known to be Sisyphus' task, for even the gods wish to be well thought of. But their mercy is limited, and Sisyphus never knows when the order will be given that he must not only again shoulder his burden but must also depart from the slight path that his passings have worn in the rock surface and to proceed instead along a more difficult and perilous way. Other times the gods

seem to ignore him altogether, and he proceeds uphill with no indication that he is being watched. What would happen if at such a time he were to set down his burden and rest? What if he were to refuse to carry on? Ah, he does not dare take the risk, for the gods can be vengeful. As terrible as is his fate, it is not so terrible as having vultures snatch and peck at one's guts and liver for all eternity, as Sisyphus knows to be the fate of Prometheus. But that's another myth.

So Sisyphus climbs, drenched in sweat by which he is not cooled, until the mountain peak is almost attained. And as he nears it the boulder seems to take on a life of its own, to become as slippery as if it had exuded some sort of oil, to twist about beneath his fingers so that no matter how great his efforts the boulder invariably slips from Sisyphus' grasp and rolls, crashing and bounding, down the great mountain until it is lost from his sight, such is the height from which it plunges.

Sisyphus allows himself one deep breath, no more, before he turns and starts down the hillside to begin all over again. This descent is difficult, but not so laborious as the climb, when he is burdened by his enormous boulder, and so it is for Sisyphus a kind of rest—provided, of course, that in his weariness he doesn't slip and fall (or do the gods trip him up? he doesn't know), and plunge head over heels, cut and bleeding, to the bottom. This has happened. Somehow he survives these falls. But whether he clambers down or falls, as soon as he reaches the bottom he at once picks up his rock—invariably it is the first thing he lays eyes on—and at once begins his upward journey.

This time, however, as the rock slips from his grasp and with gathering momentum falls from sight, as Sisyphus takes his one deep breath and begins to trudge down the slopes, grateful for his brief though partial respite, he notices an ancient man seated beside the path. Never before, in all his labours, has Sisyphus set eyes on another human being.

"Sisyphus," the old man cries. "I am worn with years and you are young and strong. I can barely walk, let alone manage this steep hillside. Come, pick me up, put me on your back as you do your boulder, and carry me down to the bottom." But Sisyphus replies, "Old man, for many days I have laboured up this mountain with not a single moment's respite, bearing my burden. Now as I return to the bottom I get a brief rest. Few men would look upon my descent as a

pleasure, yet it's the greatest and only happiness in my miserable life. How can you ask me to give it up for you, when I don't even know who you are?" "Ah, Sisyphus," pleads the old man, "you know what it means to bear a burden. Who but you could understand me? When you're as aged as I am, then carrying this body is no different from carrying a boulder, except that there is no respite, no rest. Even when I sit or lie down still I am plagued by the body's weaknesses, by its ills and pains. But when I try to climb down this steep mountain it becomes unbearable." "I understand you, old man," replies Sisyphus, "and I sympathise with you. But why should I bear your burden? Haven't I burden enough of my own?" "Ah, Sisyphus," begs the old man, "think: if only you are kind to me, then the thought of kindness will be carried to the gods and they, in their turn, will become kind to you. In my native land we call this 'good karma'." "I don't know what this 'good karma' means, old man, but I must admit that your idea is not half bad. The gods punish me because I've been ruthless towards others, particularly strangers seeking hospitality. Perhaps if I am compassionate towards others the gods will reward me. If I ignore you then surely I'll spend the rest of eternity condemned to this same terrible fate. But if I heed your plea, then, who knows? Perhaps the gods will grant me release. I'll show mercy to you: perhaps they'll show mercy to me. There's little enough to lose by trying. Come. Onto my shoulders."

And so Sisyphus carries the old man down the hill. The journey is difficult but Sisyphus succeeds. At the bottom he sets the old man on his feet. The old man blesses him, murmurs something further about 'good karma', and departs, soon lost to sight. Sisyphus expected to be exhausted from his burden but strangely he is not. Instead he feels a slight but fresh stirring of vigour in his body, and when he has picked up his familiar boulder—it is always the same one: he'd recognize it anywhere—he proceeds uphill with new strength in his arms, and a sure-footedness that he has never experienced before. And it happens thus that after many days of arduous climbing, when the mountain peak is near and the boulder seems to struggle to slip his grasp Sisyphus is able to resist it, though it requires all his strength; and at last, after these countless millennia, he arrives at the top.

He sets down the rock in a slight depression so that it cannot roll away, then he sits down to take the first rest he has ever enjoyed. In a nearby pond is some water with which he cools his body and quenches his enormous thirst. Beside the pond is a tree

which provides him with shade. He sleeps long, and when he wakes he feels wonderful. He looks about him and marvels at how pleasant is the broad mountain peak: grass grows and deer graze. Birds sing. A delightful breeze perfectly balances the warm sun. He sits enjoying the pleasures of this sylvan paradise for some minutes before he begins to grow bored.

As boredom takes hold his mind becomes restless and casts about for things to think about. He looks at his rock—*his* rock—and thinks how fine a rock it is. And how perfectly it blends in with its new surroundings! He would like this moment to last forever. But, he recognizes, times change. There will be stormy days, and winter will surely come; it cannot always be like this. But—and as the idea appears in his mind like an inspiration he thinks he hears from somewhere a burst of harsh laughter, but then decides it must be an unfamiliar bird—but what if, he thinks, I were to build a shelter and to live here forever in ease and comfort, unimpeded by rain or harsh winters? But how could I build anything? I have no axe to cut down this tree, no tools for brick-making. But of course, I could make a dwelling from stone: that would be an ideal material, a material I know about. How strong a house it would be! I know just how it will look when it's finished. And that boulder I've carried up here will be a perfect cornerstone. All I'd need, really, would be a few more boulders just like it. I could line them up, fill in the cracks, roof it over, and it would be perfect. And I know exactly where I can get such boulders. Indeed, I'll do it!

And with great enthusiasm he bounds to his feet and starts down the mountain.

Illustration II

For countless millennia Sisyphus has been assigned the task of rolling a boulder up a mountain. For countless millennia he has carried out his task, muttering under his breath of the cruelty of the gods, but never so loudly that they might hear, for the gods can be vengeful. For countless millennia the boulder has grown heavier as Sisyphus has climbed higher, until finally his strength would give out. Then the slightest impediment, a mere pebble on the path, would be enough to start the boulder sliding downhill and, unable to restrain it, Sisyphus would leap out of the way, flatten himself against the surrounding rocks, and listen in dread to the roar of the boulder as it

crashed and bounded downhill to the bottom. Always the crashes would grow louder and louder until Sisyphus' head becomes filled with pain and he would swoon. And when he has recovered his senses, when he has opened his eyes to see the terrible brilliant whiteness of the ground on which he lies, he tries to understand what he has done wrong, that this time too he should have failed in his task. It could not be his strength: of that he is sure. His strength is as great as always. No, it is the boulder itself. It does not merely *seem* to grow heavier in contrast to waning strength; it *does* grow heavier in contrast to steady and inexhaustible strength. It is the law of this mountain: as boulders are pushed uphill they become heavier.

As always in these moments before he rises and trudges downhill, Sisyphus tries to understand. He himself does not seem heavier at the apogee of his ascent, and lighter in the valley: the principle applies, apparently, only to stone. A plague! Is there no relief from his torments? Sisyphus sits, stands up, faces downhill. Then he realizes that as he has fallen this last time he has clutched at the ground, grasped hold of some pebbles, and all during his swoon, and even now, he holds them still in his hand. He flings them from him in disgust. Grievous enough that he has to roll boulders uphill; he certainly won't start carrying stones downhill as well. He watches as the stones clatter away and finally come to rest against larger rocks or, a few of them, fall so far that their tattoo is no longer audible.

Sisyphus tries to understand, but the memory of the tiny resounding accent of those pebbles plucks at his mind, obscuring thought. Slowly there grows from the seeds of their patter the germ of an idea, and the idea takes shape, blossoms into possibilities until, like some huge and ancient fig tree (what he wouldn't give for a bowlful of sweet fresh figs!) it casts its shadow upon him, a protection from the impossible sun in its azure sky. As he descends Sisyphus mulls over his idea and considers its risks and promises. Of course, it might not work. But on the other hand, it *might*. It is the first useful idea he has had since he began his labours—he can no longer remember back to that day when he began these toils, he only assumes that there must have been such a day.

As he continues his descent, he kicks at a stone and watches with a surprising amount of satisfaction as it rolls downhill a long distance before coming to rest. And when he again comes to the stone, he gives it another kick, carefully concealing from the gods the inward smile of satisfaction, not allowing it to flicker across his countenance as the stone clatters downhill.

A Cycle

Each time now that he pushes his boulder uphill Sisyphus does so in silence, uttering no private grumbles or curses. He performs his work impeccably, pushing the boulder as high as he possibly can, never pretending that his strength is overmatched, but pushing steadfastly until it is in fact inadequate to the growing weight of the boulder. Then as always he falls to one side in a swoon at the roar of the boulder. But now, when each time he arises from that swoon he has in his hand some pebbles, which he throws away—always downhill. And as he descends he carelessly kicks at a stone or two, and is secretly pleased. It is a formidable mountain, but Sisyphus has time, all the time in the world. It is not necessary to demolish it entirely, stone by stone: it is enough to lower it sufficiently so that the peak becomes attainable. Again, Sisyphus believes, his cunning will overmatch the gods. And over the centuries he comes to believe that his efforts are not useless: the mountain is in fact becoming smaller. There is no outward evidence for this, of course, not in a mere century or two: he realizes that his plan will take a long time to be fulfilled; but this, far from deterring him, only convinces him all the more that he must persevere. After all, his strength is as great as it ever was, is it not?, and against such strength as that even this mighty mountain, he is certain, must eventually yield.

He uses his native cunning as well as his strength. He has noticed that his usual route was becoming swept clear of loose stones and the path was becoming smoother-worn than elsewhere. In order not to attract the suspicions of the gods he has been varying his routes uphill. This last time he attempted yet another fresh route, over terrain he has never before walked. Now he has gone as high as he can, and as the din of the crashing and tumbling boulder has faded, as he wakes from his swoon, as he stealthily picks up his handful of pebbles and rises to carelessly toss them away, he notices that not far from him a strange man-like shape lies on the ground, a darkness against the bone-white stones of this mountain. He walks over to investigate. It is indeed a man. Never before in all his labours has Sisyphus set eyes on another human being.

"Sisyphus!" the man cries. "Water, I beg of you, a drop of water for a sick and thirsty man." "Water?" marvels Sisyphus. "I wish I had some. Believe me, it's thirsty work pushing that boulder uphill in the hot sun. But where would I get water in this wasteland? Eh? And if I'd a drop I'd have drunk it, you can believe that!" "Oh, evil day," laments the man. "How I suffer!" "No more evil than any other day that I can see," scoffs Sisyphus. "But why do you suffer? And why do

you lie like that on the ground, befouled?" "I told you, Sisyphus, I'm ill. I'm too weak to stand. I can do nothing more than lie here even, I'm ashamed to say, in my own excrement." And the sick man begins whimpering feebly. "Weak? Loss of health?" Sisyphus asks, for he knows nothing of these things: he knows only of strength, and strength overmatched, not of weakness, not of disease. So, haltingly, the man explains. And when he is done, "But what did you do, that you have fallen ill?" wonders Sisyphus.

"You don't know that either?" marvels the man. "I became mortal. That is all that is needed to fall ill. Ah, but I shouldn't be surprised, I suppose. The gods don't want my tale to be told, perhaps that is why mankind doesn't know of me. Or perhaps it's that mankind doesn't want to know of me, I'm not sure. I'm not even sure that those two things are different." And finding some last reserve of strength the sick man half sits up, leaning on his elbows, as he tells Sisyphus his tale.

"At any rate, my name is Purissa, and like you I offended the gods of my country, who condemned me to a cruel and eternal fate. As a mortal I was a drunkard, and so much given was I to drunkenness that one day, besotted I admit, I drank the sacrificial wine that had been sat aside for the gods. I don't even remember doing it, I'm sure at the time I didn't know what I was doing, but no matter: as a punishment the gods set me the task of tending their own vineyards, of harvesting their grapes, of producing their wines, and of never having a drop for myself. It was no good trying to steal: as soon as a drop of wine touched my lips it turned to harsh acid and burned my mouth, and my throat and guts as well, if I dared to swallow any. In my cups I'd used to claim that a life without wine would be no life of mine, and now there I was—me, the greatest drunkard of my age—condemned to an eternity of sobriety. How I despaired! Ah, but in my sobriety I grew clever, and devised a plan—as if one can fool the gods. I fermented a brew that was much stronger than usual, and then I declared it a vintage harvest. Oh, the gods celebrated, and how drunk they became! And while they lay in a stupor I managed to flee from their watch, and escaped after many adventures from that land, crossing into regions where there were different gods, eventually wandering into this accursed country.

"Sobriety has improved my memory, Sisyphus, as drunkenness had confused it, and yet in my sobriety I had forgotten just one thing, and it was this: when I had been taken by the gods for special

punishment I was made an immortal. As terrible as was the tasks they set me, still I became accustomed to the state of immortality: I could not age, I could not sicken, I could not die. But when I escaped the gods I also escaped that state. Upon leaving that land I became mortal again, and now again I suffer hunger, I suffer thirst, when I am with other mortals I suffer their cruelty and abuses—for in their own pain they don't realize how they can hurt others—and when I am alone, why, then I suffer terrible loneliness. Whatever ills may befall immortals, loneliness is one they are spared. Now my body has become weak and frail, my strength ebbs, my health wanes, one foot is already in the grave, and as I linger I suffer the many agonies of the flesh. And you, don't you ever remember the days before you were made legendary, when you too suffered in such wise? No, of course not: I forgot. You cannot even remember that state, just as mortals can never understand the godlike state. (However, I have heard it said that even the gods are not truly immortal, only very long-lived, so that to humans they only seem immortal. Perhaps gods merely fancy themselves immortal: in this they would hardly be different from most humans, who live their lives as if they were never going to die. But I'm no sage, only an old ex-drunk, and cannot say what is the truth in this matter.) Anyway, Sisyphus, such is my fate. I shall die soon, and who can say what will then become of me? I fear it, I admit, and wish now I had never been so clever as to deceive the gods of my country. In my native land we call this 'bad karma.' Now my life is without harmony, and this destroys the harmony of my body. I wish I could find my way back to my country, I would beg the gods to forgive me and let me tend their vineyards again, and would never dream of a drop for myself, but I fear it's too late for that. Wine? Oh, for a drink merely of water. Beware, Sisyphus, that you do not by your own cunning lose your immortality, as I have. Beware of too much cleverness. Only when it is too late will you know what it is you have lost. I can say no more!"

And Purissa fell back to the ground and lay there moaning, his face contorted with pain. Sisyphus could do nothing for him, so he left him there. It didn't pay to mix in the affairs of mortals, for they were a strange and unpredictable lot with incomprehensible problems and hopes.

He walked down the mountainside thinking deeply on what Purissa had told him. If this, his mountain, were to become diminished, would it follow that his own strength would be

correspondingly diminished? If so, then his efforts were in vain; they only succeeded in sapping his own strength amd perhaps even his immortality. And these last few years has he not indeed felt a slight malaise, a nearly-imperceptible slackening of vigour? Perhaps: he cannot be sure. And if his efforts are not in vain, then was he not trying to outwit the gods in the same manner as Purissa? And could his fate, then, be different? To tamper with his immortality was a risky business, there were many ways in which it could be destroyed. But what sort of immortality was it, he wondered, that was so tenuous as to depend on, say, a mere mountain? And what risk he had been putting himself to by his foolish conduct! He gazed up at the mountain, and gauged both its height and its vulnerability, and by the time he reached the bottom he understood what needed to be done. There was his boulder, waiting for him. But before setting his boulder to it Sisyphus bent down, picked up a handful of pebbles, and tucked them into his fist. After he had reached the highest point of his climb he would fling the pebbles uphill as far as he could. It would take him a long time, he knew, but inch by inch over the ages he would make the mountain higher. A long time, yes, but time was what he had the most of.

Illustration III

For countless millennia Sisyphus has been assigned the task of rolling a boulder up a mountain. What does he think about? Does he dwell on the luxurious life he led as a king, before he had offended the gods? Does he long for the mortal pleasures of that life, or has the memory lost all emotional affectivity? Does he consider and re-consider the decisions he made which led him to his fate? Perhaps he berates himself—how differently he would do it if he had it in his power to do again—or perhaps he exonerates himself—for after all, it is not his fault, he was only trying to do what seemed right at the time, and everybody has to consider his own welfare, the gods oughtn't to have singled him out for such punishment, should they? Or perhaps he tries to discover the fateful decision, the minute movement from which all else has followed. Or, having ceased to consider the past, does he not reflect only upon his future? How he would like to escape from his torment (elaborate schemes of deception and heroism dogged by the ragged edge of possible failure) or, more modestly, how he would like to diminish that torment (a

pair of gloves to protect his hands from the sharp edges and rough surfaces of the rock; a loincloth or even a robe to protect his body against the wind, the rain, the sun, the cold; an easier path uphill; a this, a that...): is he a sniveler? Or does he consider the present? He must be the world's greatest expert on rolling rocks uphill. Does he give imaginary lectures to audiences rapt with fascination at his expertise? Does he hear his name mentioned with respectful awe at the stoa? Does he try to invent strategies of success, a new technique of rolling, perhaps, or is he resigned to perpetual failure? For how long can hope remain steadfast? But for how long, too, can resignation endure? Perhaps he alternates between hope, resignation, and other states as well—indifference, anger, compassion. Can he feel sorry for the gods? This would be asking much, but would it be asking too much? Does he try to finagle, releasing the rock before he has pushed it as far as he truly can? Does he take pride in his work, or is it just another way to earn immortality?

What does he think of his immortality? Does it turn him into a senseless slug who thinks as little as possible, a drudge-slave who seeks relief in dullness and obliteration? Or is his immortality his only possession, and therefore all the more priceless, to be continually savoured? There are so many Sisyphuses, and are their tales each different, or are they in the end the same?

Sisyphus alive; Sisyphus here; Sisyphus now. If Sisyphus has anything to tell us, this is the Sisyphus we must understand. So:

For countless millennia Sisyphus has been assigned the task of rolling a boulder up a mountain. He will do this, he knows, for all eternity. One day as he pushes his boulder uphill, feeling weary, ill, oppressed, downhearted, it occurs to him to wonder whether all is static. Is any moment in all eternity equal to any other moment, eternally a moment of Sisyphus bearing with unequaled strength the unbearable weight of a boulder rising inchwise on the slopes of a mountain inevitably too high? Or are there different moments, eternity being polychronotic? At once Sisyphus knows that this is so. For one thing there are those periods of terror after the boulder has slipped from his grasp and he races headlong downhill to avoid being crushed by the careening rock, or else he tumbles head over heels to the bottom before picking himself up to begin all over again. Those moments are different from the time spent inching uphill. For another thing, even in his upward progress—if such a word can be used—he knows from knowledge, not from memory alone, that there

are times when he feels strong and other times when he is exhausted. There are times when he can look at his handiwork with pride and other times when he would prefer to lie down and sleep, if only such a thing were possible.

He understands that it must be so, for otherwise his punishment would be meaningless, no punishment at all, and eternity would be meaningless, no eternity at all: it would be undifferentiable from a single moment, and a single moment can never be anything at all let alone punishment. Yes, when the truth is told neither his strength nor his attitude are unwavering. He has known his moods: defiance, humility, bravery, despair. Each torment has been the worst of them all. What, then, has kept him going? It can only be his sole possession: immortality.

Is it worth having?

Suddenly Sisyphus feels alive, alert, and strong. A moment before he had felt that the weight of both the boulder and the questions he was asking himself were too great for his frail arms to bear. Indeed, for some time he has been experiencing an inexplicable loss of strength and a general malaise. Perhaps it was that very weariness that had provoked this line of introspective thought, so unusual for him. He recalls vaguely that at other times he has also felt such dolour. He is not certain whether it was during such times that he has indulged in such unwholesome ponderings, but he thinks so. But such periods always pass, it seems, and his strength and vigour are always freshened and reborn.

Yes, Sisyphus thinks: it's good to have his strength back, after such a period of weakness. Now he can set aside such a morbid line of thought, and he sets his shoulder to his boulder, prepared to resume his task, when for some reason he uncharacteristically glances away from his work at hand to see, almost underfoot, a fresh corpse, and not far away scattered piles of sun-bleached bones. He hadn't realized there was a charnel ground on this mountain: somehow he has blundered into it. How could that be? He pauses and studies the area carefully. The bone heaps mean nothing to him, but there is something compelling about the corpse, making it difficult for him to turn away. Why is that? As a warrior king Sisyphus has certainly seen enough corpses not to be bothered by one more dead body; but this cadaver seems, somehow, different. Sisyphus studies it.

It is clearly the freshly-deceased body of an old man. But in spite of its age the body still retains the signs of a vigorous life, a physical life. There is even a hint of nobility in the body, a bearing to it which before Sisyphus' eyes fades perceptibly as decay sets about its handiwork on the features. But before those features melt, before the eyes turn gelatinous and dull and the face becomes mushy, they reveal a quick secret, if only Sisyphus is fast enough to understand. But no—he has missed it, somehow, despite (or is it because of?) his freshened vigour; and even as he watches, whatever it was in the corpse that has attracted Sisyphus' attention fades into nothingness. Sisyphus stands only a moment longer and then, the spell being broken, he turns back to his boulder and again sets his shoulder to it. And as he pushes uphill, his eyeballs distended by the effort of his entire body, he reflects just once more how peculiar it is that that corpse should bear a diagonal scar across the whole of its belly—peculiar because he too wears just such a scar, acquired in battle in the days when he was king: perhaps the only permanent possession he has, other than his immortality.

Illustration IV

For countless millennia Sisyphus has been assigned the task of rolling a boulder up a mountain. Once as he is partway up the mountain he meets a stranger heading downhill. Never before, in all his labours, has Sisyphus set eyes on another human being. He stops. The stranger also stops. With one hand Sisyphus holds the boulder in place; with the other he wipes his brow. He glances upwards into the clear azure sky. The gods are not watching him at this moment; he can tell. Something about the unbrokenness of the azure convinces him that this is so. He likes to sneak rests whenever he is sure it is safe to do so. He has never been caught. Is he very clever, or is it that the gods don't really care?

The stranger is dressed in brown robes: Sisyphus as ever wears nothing. In Greece this is regarded as neither shameful nor demeaning. Over one shoulder the stranger has a small cloth bag, well-filled, and also another bag containing an ordinary clay bowl: Sisyphus leans against his boulder. The stranger bears a staff and is of upright bearing. He is thin, even boney, so that each joint is protuberant, like a knobby gourd. Sisyphus is muscular and slightly stooped from his labours. Most startling to Sisyphus is the stranger's

shaved face and head. Several days growth reveal that he is not merely bald. Sisyphus wears a full beard and his hair hangs over his shoulders. In some cities men are shorn as a minor punishment. To have no head hair or facial hair is somewhat demeaning: only small boys and old men are seen in suchwise; but this stranger is middle-aged. Yet the stranger seems unaware of the shamefulness of his state. Rather, he seems to be of pleasant demeanour and upon seeing Sisyphus he seems to be glad of the encounter, but only in a friendly wise rather than as a seeker of aid or of succour. Sisyphus does not know whether the stranger finds him as outlandish as he finds the stranger; to meet anyone on this mountain is sufficient cause for surprise. So they regard each other with mutual astonishment for some moments before any word is spoken.

"You must be Sisyphus," the stranger suggests. "I have heard tell of you. I am called Rakkhita, but that of course is only a name. I come from a very distant land, but that of course is only a place. Such details don't really matter, so let us set aside such matters. I have wandered far, perhaps too far, and now find hills strange to my eyes. But since arriving in this land I have heard of both you and many others who like you have become legends. In my land we also have our legends, though I have never met any, and sometimes they are so similar to your own that I wonder if they might not be the same other than in name. But we tell no tales of anyone who has suffered as strange a fate as you, so I'm quite glad to have this chance to meet you. I wasn't actually seeking you out, but since we have now met, let us talk briefly before we go our separate ways. Perhaps something can be said that will help us both to walk with a lighter step."

"Well said, Rakkhita. Spoken with skills that would have been admired in my court. But what is it that we might discuss that would lighten either of our steps? For I must admit that I couldn't recommend any part of my life for your emulation; yet however honourable and praiseworthy your own life may be—I cannot judge, for I know naught of it—yet I am not at liberty to do anything other than to follow my own footsteps, as has been prescribed for me."

"True enough, Sisyphus. So it is for all. Each must follow his own nose. And yet it seems to me there is more than one way to follow one's nose, and whether our steps are light or heavy will depend at least as much on how we proceed as on whither we are directed."

"I listen to your words with pleasure, Rakkhita," says Sisyphus, glancing up at the still-unbroken azure sky. "But since our

conversation may perhaps be not a long one, please explain your words without further preamble. What is this 'how' of which you speak?"

"I mean," says Rakkhita, "that we can perform our tasks in such a way as to increase our sufferings or to decrease them, and even to end them altogether. And to abide by your request for brevity, I mean specifically that we can increase our sufferings if we are heedless, if we are inattentive to what we are doing, if our mind is full of hatred, envy, and suchlike states. On the other hand...."

"Ah, pardon me, sir, for interrupting your noble speech," says Sisyphus, "but what you have already said leaves me puzzled, so perhaps I might question you as to that before further words leave me lost in an inescapable labyrinth. You know, there is another legendary figure, an architect named Daedalus who...."

"Yes, I've heard of him and his son Icarus, and they too in their ways are both symbols of the human condition—entrapped in a labyrinth, wax wings melting when flying too high, and all that—but what is your problem?"

"My problem, sir, is that my sufferings do not come from being heedless, inattentive, and so on. My sufferings come from having to push a boulder up this mountainside for all eternity. And whether I am heedless or attentive yet I must perform this base drudgery. And as for anger,"—and here Sisyphus lowers his voice and glances upwards—"you can hardly expect that in all eternity I will never become angry, even enraged, at the gods who have condemned me to this fate while they live a life of endless ease and pleasure. The most they ever do is to hurl a lightning bolt at me from time to time; and as for envy, yes indeed, I envy them greatly, how else could it be when...." And Sisyphus stops speaking, nearly terror-stricken at the realization that he has inadvertently raised his voice, perhaps too loudly for safety.

"Nobody doubts it, Sisyphus: you have a hard life. But when I spoke of heedfulness and so on I did not mean simply that you should keep your mind on your work and never allow yourself a moment's respite, not at all. Indeed, I would like you to discover how your respite might become not merely partial but total and ceaseless. But one must begin at the beginning, and the beginning of solving any problem must always be in the first place to recognize the problem and, more importantly, to recognize the nature of the problem."

“And is the nature of my problem not perfectly clear?”

“You blame your problem on the gods, and I can see how you might readily reach this conclusion. But to apportion blame is not to understand the problem; rather, that is merely to accept the problem on its own terms.”

“Now you truly confuse me.”

“Let me give you an example. Take your friend Daedalus, since you mentioned him. He was trapped in a labyrinth, and for as long as he accepted that maze on its own terms—as long as he allowed its pathways and meanderings and dead ends to circumscribe his perspective—he was trapped. His escape became possible only when he could rise above that viewpoint—quite literally, in his case—and see a different point of view.”

“Actually, I’d heard quite a different tale—that Daedalus was only the architect of the labyrinth, not its prisoner, and that it was Theseus who escaped by some sort of trickery involving a ball of twine.”

“Perhaps that is so. I had thought it was Daedalus who had made wax wings and flew out of the maze. Perhaps there are different versions, or perhaps I’ve misunderstood. You know, there are a lot of conflicting stories about you too.”

“Ah, don’t believe rumours.”

“I’ll try not to. But since I speak of Daedalus only as an example it doesn’t matter which version is in common circulation: take my version as an illustration of what I mean rather than as an historical report, if historical reports can apply to legendary figures. Consider how one who was trapped in a labyrinth might escape by refusing to accept the perspective imposed by his situation—in this case it is simply a matter of giving up an essentially two-dimensional point of view by adding a third dimension. But in other cases it might be a matter of changing the dimensions, or even of losing a dimension of thought. Can you see what I am getting at?”

“I think I see your point. You mean to say that if I could see my situation from a perspective that was not ‘behind the rock’, so to speak, I might see a way of escape from that situation as did Daedalus from his.”

“Exactly.”

“That sounds wonderful in theory. But in practice how is it to be achieved?”

“As I said, one must begin with heedfulness and attention, not so much to the problem as to the nature of the problem.”

"That sounds very fine, but you seem to forget that I use all my strength to push this boulder uphill. Where am I to find the time and energy to devote to this heed and attention that you speak of? And no doubt heed and attention are only the first steps towards this fresh perspective you want me to see."

"Quite right. I never meant to suggest it was easy. If you know of an easy way to get out from 'behind the rock', as you put it, then certainly you should attempt that. I can only speak of what I know, and easy or difficult, this is it. But clearly you are trapped by more than just a rock: you are trapped by your whole situation. And just as a diver cannot see the water that surrounds him until he breaks surface, so too to see the situation we are in we have to 'break the surface' or 'get out from behind the rock'. So all I mean to say is that if you can come to understand the essence of your situation, then and only then will it be possible for you to terminate it. This is called 'right view', and it is the only method I know to put an end to pushing rocks, to escaping from labyrinths, to ending any seemingly impossible situation. In order to end situations which appear to us as endless we must see that they are not endless, that nothing is endless, that nothing *can be* endless. When we see that it *must* end we will see how it *can* end."

Sisyphus is silent for long moments. Then: "Ah, I honour your words, Rakkhita. But I am only a legend. How could I hope to ever see beyond the framework of my own tale? I am trapped by my own existence. Your words are fine for others, but as for me...." And Sisyphus shakes his head sadly.

"Do you think it is different for others? Then this thought too is a trap. If you could examine this thought with proper attention you would see it to be so."

"If I had the time perhaps I could. But as you see, I have to devote my days to pushing this boulder. I have no time for applying your advice. Perhaps when I finally get this boulder to the top of the mountain then I'll be able to...." And Sisyphus, dejected, cannot even finish his thought.

Well, Sisyphus, I see that there is nothing more I can say to you. But perhaps our talk was not entirely wasted. At least we spoke with mutual regard and respect, and that's useful in itself, for regard and respect are part of the basis for understanding. So if we have not arrived at understanding at least we have strengthened its basis. Also, it has given you a break from your labours. But"—and here Rakkhita

glances up at the sky—"I see that there is just a hint of disturbance in the sky, perhaps only a cloud is forming, or perhaps it is more than a cloud. Anyway, since you have such attachment to your work perhaps you'll be wishing by now to return to it. So at this point I bid you farewell, and wish you much happiness."

Sisyphus looks at the sky, whose uniformity does seem to be showing some slight disturbance. "Indeed, Rakkhita, I have very much enjoyed our conversation. Perhaps as a result of it we might both proceed with lighter steps. Now I wish you farewell."

And Rakkhita continues on his own travels, down the mountainside and on to other lands, while Sisyphus again puts his shoulder to his work.

Illustration V

For countless millennia Sisyphus has been assigned the task of rolling a boulder up a mountain. In all that time he has never set eyes on another human being. As he pushes the boulder his mind drifts back to the early days of his labours. The physical hardships were never the most difficult part. At first simple loneliness, desolation, was the greatest pain. He remembers when his heart seemed heavier than his boulder. The mere sight of a living creature would have sustained him. He would dream of a glance of the distant gods, and once he convinced himself that he had glimpsed one of them; but afterwards he had to admit it to be but a figment of his imagination. No, in all his time on this mountain he has never set eyes on a single living thing.

In the early days he would try to escape, to run: oh, then the lightning bolts would flash from the sky and jolt him into unconsciousness. He remembers how he would awake dizzy, unclear, looking for something familiar to orient him, and always there would be his rock. And indeed, a few turns with the stone would clear his head and bring back the pains clear and sharp. Only later did it become more difficult to regain that clarity. Only later did that lost clarity remain no more than a memory. At first that memory was bound up with a sharp sense of longing. Then even the needle of clarity faded, and he found it easier to endure the dull hammer blows of forgetfulness.

But now he remembers those early days. Rage: one of the early emotions. First he only began to suspect the hopefulness of his task,

and a vague discontent grew in him as, time after time, he failed to achieve what should have been for him an easy goal: the summit. One day when the shoulder slipped or was perhaps torn from his grasp the truth struck him with a jolt: he was *never* going to complete his project. Then that gnawing frustration erupted into rage. During those days he would curse the gods at the top of his voice and threaten them, and dare them to match him strength for strength. But all he ever got for his troubles were the lightning bolts and distant raucous laughter. This rage was brief, lasting but a few centuries. It had been part of the clean sharp days, when his emotional states had been fleeting, so transparent were they: fear, rancour, disgust, anxiety.

One day after lightning had struck him he woke up and, rather than cursing the gods, said nothing. Thus began the period of his cunning. To all outward appearances he seemed to be a model legendary figure. But he was scheming, calculating his chances, and when the time seemed right he tried to sneak away. When the sky was clear and unbroken he would leave his boulder firmly propped partway up the mountain and then flit from shadow to shadow, hiding. This strategy never succeeded. Somehow after a long time of panic and dread he would flit to the safety of yet another comfortable-looking boulder only to discover that it was *his*, that he had wound up back where he had started. Then, half-grateful at the reprieve from the dangers of flight, he would take up his burden where he had left off. In his relief he never noticed the harsh laughter that was almost masked by his stretorous breath. And the day came when he realized that these tactics, too, were unsuccessful and that he would never be free of his burden.

The complex and longer-lived emotional states appeared: envy, boredom, embarrassment, wretchedness, despondency, bitterness, pleading, apprehension, sullenness. He had known them all. They came and went unpredictably. Each time, he remembers, he had thought the fresh perspective would be an eternity to be endured; and each time the emotion had eventually ended and the eternity of a fresh torment had begun. Each fresh emotion had appeared to him at first not as a torment but as a relief, a change for the better, and he had thought he was getting somewhere. Only later, whether gradually or suddenly, did he realize that the pain was no less, only different.

And Sisyphus remembers all of this now—and more, so much more!—because now he feels the winds stirring and he senses that

soon he will throw off the burden of being careworn—how long this latest attitude has assailed him now!—and will embark on a new perception of his condition. And this suspicion itself stirs vague whispers of anxiety. Will he see what he has been missing all these years? Or will he find himself plunged into some old and familiar, yet trackless, agony? It hardly seems his to choose.

It begins with a simple thought: there is no escape from the framework of the myth which holds him. For as long as he remains what he is—indeed, for as long as he remains anything at all—he must bear the burden of what he is. And to change from one state of being to another is only to change agonies. This thought, this perception, seems clear to him. But then as its support grows, Sisyphus takes fear, and turns from it to the new thought that in such perception there is only annihilation and madness. And if that is so, then sanity lies in what he is, in being Sisyphus, so that he recognizes—is it possible that it could be only now for the first time?—that his welfare lies not in renouncing his identity but in fulfilling it. Yes, that is the only way. And as this realization engulfs him a wave of bliss sweeps over him with such force that it is almost painful, like sharp hunger. He and his boulder—they've been through a lot together. How could he have ever thought of running away? Now at last he has won. He heaves on his boulder with such effort that his eyes bulge from their sockets and liquids drip from his nose and mouth. Sweat runs into his eyes, stinging, and turning vision into a series of fractured images. He hears his blood pounding, singing, and feels the rasping touch of his boulder, the boulder that—he knows it now—he loves. His laboured breath comes so harshly that it roars in his ears and sounds like harsh laughter. With the love comes a sense of bliss that—he is sure of it—will be eternal and unchanging. At last he has found what he has sought all these centuries. It must be so, so intense is his conviction, and he knows that he is finally victorious. Yes.

V

Faith: A Meditation and a Homily

I teach but two things, monks: suffering, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

1. A Meditation

At Citta Saṃyutta Sutta 8 (S V 298) the householder Citta (who is *anāgāmin*) asks which is better, faith or knowledge. Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta (i.e., the Jain leader, "Mahāvīra") replies, as might we all, that knowledge is to be preferred. Indeed. But what are we to do when we do *not* know? Whether the subject is roses or the nature of personal existence, if we don't know for ourselves then we find, in our ignorance, the substitute of belief.

Faith, then, is one thing at least that we all know about. Or do we? If we don't know about faith then we can only have beliefs about it. And if knowledge is better than faith, then faith in faith may not be a very hopeful position from which to begin. Nevertheless, we must begin from where we are, for from where else *can* we begin? So we explore, and learn what we do know about faith and what is a matter merely of belief. At worst, we can come to know how much we don't know, which is better than not knowing even that.

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It is sometimes believed that having faith is a matter of choice—not only that we can believe or not believe, as we prefer, but that disbelief is of a different order than belief. One who has faith in this view does not see that disbelief is of the same quality as belief. For example, the atheist no less than the theist is bound up with the assertion of the existence of God; for how can he deny what has not been asserted? His faith may be placed *here* rather than *there*, but it is nonetheless placed: for faith always demands an object, whether specific (e.g., faith in the efficacy of vitamin C to cure the common cold) or general (e.g., faith in the sanctity of all life; faith that there is

an entity, “humanity”, of which we are meaningfully a part). A faith that is not a faith in something—an abstract faith—is as impossible as breathing without air.

If we can see this fairly simple conjugation we will see too that the next step is to opt for the (seemingly) more sophisticated position of the agnostic. Herein we will believe that while denial of belief may well be of the same nature as assertion of belief, yet denial (or doubting) of both belief and disbelief is (somehow) of a different nature. Whatever may be the object of the agnostic’s position, his involvement with the assertion of that object will underlie his ability to doubt both its assertion and its denial. While maintaining this (precarious) stance he will not yet have seen that he is still bound up with belief and has not yet gone beyond. For if he does not put faith in his agnosticism, then he puts disbelief in it; and if neither, then he is doubtful about agnosticism. But in any case, he only succeeds in becoming more deeply enmeshed in an ever-expanding hierarchy of faith. As with mirrors reflecting one another, one cannot get *beyond* the reflections by trying to go *deeper*.

Now, if we are intelligent we will perceive that for as long as there is any concern whatsoever with faith, in any of its varieties and on howsoever sophisticated a level, we are not free from faith. Therein faith is *not* a matter of choice. And so perceiving we will also perceive that as long as concern, or care, exists as the foundation wherein faith gets its footing, we will never be able to transcend the *level* of faith. As long as there is care, faith will be able to arise. The way to go beyond belief, then, would seem to be not through non-belief but through non-care.

It will be seen, at this point, that care, like faith, demands an object. There is no abstract care, only care for this or that. We care for Beethoven, for our family, for a fresh tomato salad. We care about the next election, about nuclear disarmament, about our rosebushes, which are being destroyed by aphids. So to achieve non-care (and hence to transcend the level of faith) it might be supposed that each of these various cares will have to be transcended. But wait; a problem exists: for it will soon become apparent that however assiduously we may abandon *specific* cares there still remains … *care*.

Reflexion reveals that when care fails in, or is prevented from, seizing upon its object it will then *cast about*, like an unmoored ship seeking an anchorage. And that very casting about will then become care’s object—a casting about that is bound up with the belief that it is *necessary*. Indeed, until care does seize upon a new object, casting

about will seem (to care) to *be* necessary, for care has not yet seen an alternative to it. And to this extent faith can be said to be well-founded even though it is poorly-founded, inasmuch as it does not succeed in anchoring care to a position that is (what is continuously sought) stable, immutable and secure. Care cares about that very instability—and hence there is anxiety. And the stench of anxiety both reveals care and impels it.

What are we to do? We accept one or another of the numerous answers hawked by the world. This is the believer's position. Or we reject one or another of these answers. This is the disbeliever's position. Or else we are confused and in doubt. This is the agnostic position. But whatever position we take, we take it in chains. For although anxiety flees from instability it never escapes. Anxiety *is* the casting about of care, and therefore anxiety has the nature of flight. And in fleeing, anxiety only succeeds in constantly encountering itself.

And what happens when care finds (as it will, sooner or later) its temporary mooring and seizes upon some object in the world to care about? Then faith, with avidity, will take up or hold to or fasten upon the object as its salvation. If roses are one's pleasure, then roses are not merely seen and smelled and touched. More significantly, they are *conceived,* for when faith is present a rose is not just a rose. It is also, precisely, one's pleasure. And this concept adds to the rose and overlays it so that in looking then upon a rose blossom one sees primarily the overlay or the *significance* of the rose, without which the rose would be merely … a rose. And therefore when faith is placed in roses (as being one's pleasure) the rose becomes more than a rose, i.e., *not* a rose. And what is then seen is not roses but faith (in one's pleasure)—a sight that pleases. And while the rose itself is manifestly impermanent, its significance—i.e., faith—is not so; for what is signified is not roses but one's pleasure, and one's pleasure is one's own concept, one's anchorage. Herein faith is founded, and herein it founders.

Why so? Because although the impermanence of roses can be seen with perfect clarity[1] what is not at all clear (until it is too late) is that the permanence that is conceived to inhere in the *significance* of the roses ("it is conceived of by *me,* and *my* concepts will last as long as *I* do, i.e., forever") is in fact dependent upon … roses. The *relationship* of roses to their significance is hidden because the roses themselves are hidden behind their significance. The roses themselves can be seen only by setting aside their significance, i.e., by disassociating the roses

from faith (in one's pleasure). Thus, when the roses *are* seen, the relationship between the roses and their significance is not seen because the significance has been set aside and the relationship, at that time, does not exist. And when the significance is re-instated the relationship is *still* not seen because a relationship requires more than one, and when the relationship is present the roses are hidden.

There is, then, a self-concealing aspect to faith. Wherever faith is placed the dependence of that very faith upon its object is hidden, by faith itself. This is blind faith. (In Joseph Heller's novel, *Catch-22,* one character is spoken of as not knowing that he has flies in his eyes, for his having them is the reason he can't see them. How can he see he's got flies in his eyes if he's got flies in his eyes?)

Faith, then, blindly believes itself to be permanent. It does not merely *refuse* to see that it is predicated upon the impermanent; it is, by itself, entirely *unable* to do so. In order for it to come to see its own nature, the flies in its eyes, it needs an outside indication—a point to which we will return.

Since faith believes itself to be permanent, faith already has faith in itself to that degree. Its supposed permanence lends it (at usurious rates) an attractiveness that encourages it to believe that there is nowhere to be found an object more worthy of faith than itself. It can be observed, however, that faith does not—cannot—believe in itself directly: it cannot be its own object. Rather, on reflexive examination there will be seen to be different levels of faith—remember those mirrors endlessly reflecting one another—and it is the faith that exists on a more general level of this hierarchy that invests itself in belief in faith of a more immediate level.[2] The more immediate level, however, is the shorter-term level (though more to the foreground); while the more general level (though to the background) is the longer-term. So if the immediate level of faith is, due to its supposed permanency, worthy of faith, what is to be said of the more general and longer-term levels of faith? And thus a hierarchy of faith arises, the more general the level of faith the higher its level of (ascribed) permanency, extending howsoever far we care to seek for it. By believing in itself

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1. It does not require a Buddha to indicate manifest impermanence. A poet will do:

> Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
> For time it is a'flyin';
> And those same buds ye seek today
> Tomorrow will be dying. —Robert Herrick (1591–1641)

faith perpetuates itself, and thereby actually does make itself eternal ... until the bloom is off the rose. Then faith is disillusioned with roses, though not with itself, and will seek—with care—a new anchorage more worthy of its own estimation of itself.

Faith, then, believes in itself, and therein it achieves a circularity which has a degree of stability greater than faith itself. So too, care cares about itself, and achieves an identical stability. And beyond this we can see not only that (as already described) care is the condition for or foundation of faith but also that faith is the condition for or foundation of care. Faith cares about itself in the same mode that care believes in itself. For if we care about, e.g., the rosebushes that are infested with aphids, it is not only because we believe that the bushes may therefore fail to flower but, more fundamentally, because we believe that our world, our being, will be improved by those hoped-for flowers. (Imagine the chagrin and disconcertion that would result if, after spending much time and money freeing the bushes of aphids and watching them first bud and finally bloom, we discovered that rose blossoms made us nauseous and dizzy. The chagrin—more than mere surprise—would be the result of the undermining of established faith and the consequent displacement of care; and it would be a *concealment* of the displacement's underlying anxiety. For although anxiety can never escape from care it can hide behind emotion, tension and other devices of its own manufacture.) Without belief in the efficacy of an object for bettering one's life, care will not establish itself therein. And thus we have the circularity or inter-dependence of faith and care. Each sustains and supports the other. And this level of stability is higher than the circular self-dependence of each taken separately. No wonder it seems so impossible to relinquish faith!

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2. Not only faith but all experience is organized hierarchically. Reflexion reveals this, for reflexive experience is itself hierarchical, inasmuch as reflexive attention is an examination of that experience of which it is an inseparable constituent. Or: I am now writing a sentence, but *also* and *at the same time* I am writing a footnote and an essay. The sentence is more immediate than the footnote, for I have finished writing that sentence and yet continue to write this footnote. And the essay is more general than the footnote, for when I have finished writing this footnote I shall still continue to write the essay. To wit:

We return, then, to our question: what are we to do? Faith is now seen to be *not* a matter of choice. Care is, likewise, *not* a matter of choice. What options do we have? We can only accept our modicum of faith for better or worse—for we see no alternative to accepting it—and proceed from there, i.e., from where we are. If for worse, we will declare ourselves to be but hapless victims of forces beyond our comprehension or control and, making the best of a bad job, seek what pleasures or anaesthetics we can in sensuality and distraction. This can be called *bad faith*. If, on the other hand, for better, we will recognize that we are no longer involved in a mere inquiry, a clarification of a few dubious points before we proceed to more important matters. No, we are now involved in a dilemma. And no mere philosopher's conundrum either, but a dilemma that is both personal and pressing; for anxiety is the fundamental level of dissatisfaction. But for as long as care believes in its own necessity no escape from that fundament of dissatisfaction can be known. All *belief* in an escape from anxiety will be belief that is bound up with care and which is therefore false.[3] And so we choose to honestly and authentically face this impasse and examine (as best we can) its nature.

* * *

To do so, i.e., to maintain good faith with ourselves, we will find it necessary to cultivate the quality of reflexion. Herein there is, at the same time, observation of immediate experience and observation of the *nature* of immediate experience (as being, for example, with condition, not without condition). And in examining our faith it can be observed that howsoever good it may be, it is in its nature of a different quality than its object—so much so that were we to call its object positive we should have to say that faith is, in essence, negative.

Just as in breathing air we would call air positive as regards presence—it is *there*—so too we would call the breathing negative, inasmuch as it is not a presence but a filling in, a taking up of what is present. Its essence rests in its being an *absence*, i.e., in what it is *not*. (The value of a bottle of wine rests with the wine, not the bottle; the value of the bottle rests not in what it is but in what it contains.)

3. This is not to assert that there is no escape from faith and care but that there is no escape which takes them at their own valuation of themselves.

Further, air is positive not only in its presence but also in its nature or qualities. It can be windy or calm, warm or cool, humid or dry, and each of these qualities, or percepts, is positive inasmuch as it too is *there*. The breathing, however, is in its nature not an absence that is mere nothingness but an absence that partakes of *search*, and search is negative inasmuch as it is a display of a *lack*. We need to stop breathing for only a very short time for this seeking quality to become vividly evident. Finally, while air is quite independent of the breathing and will persist even when it is not being inhaled or exhaled, the breathing is totally dependent upon air and will not persist unless there is air to be breathed. Thus the breathing gets its existence on loan, as it were, and is *in debt*. Therein, too, lies its negativity.

So too, faith is exactly as negative as its object is positive. But it is more than just a taking up of what can be held: it is a taking up of what *must* be held in order for faith to maintain its basis in being. For, as we have already noted, faith demands an object. Faith is not *merely* a negative, as is a bottle emptied of its contents. It is a negative which, in order to subsist, must *feed on* or *ingest* its object. In other words, faith is a negative that continuously strives to become a positive. Faith is a substitute for knowledge. Knowledge is positive. Faith, which is negative, tries to emulate that positivity. But since it *cannot* be itself positive (and still be *faith*) it alights on a positive object and hides its own transparent negativity by simulating the opaque positivity of its object. When there is faith in roses the roses, consumed by faith, are hidden and do not appear. What appears is faith. But faith appears in the guise of roses. Herein lies faith's deceptiveness. The flies look exactly like eyes.

Faith, although manifest, appears only in the guise of roses. But this is not to say that faith is indistinguishable from roses. For were that the case then faith would *be* (on this occasion) roses, and it could rightly be said that faith had succeeded in transforming itself—impossible!—from a negative to a positive, and thereby in freeing itself of its entailment with care. But no, for when faith masquerades as roses then howevermuch faith may *look* like a rose, despite its best efforts it can never *smell* like a rose: it will smell like faith. The difference being: the aroma of roses (faith being uninvolved) simply smell, whether sweet or otherwise. The aroma is present, but not *more* than present. But when faith is disguised as roses *these* roses give off the aroma of *promise*, which involves not only the present

but the future as well. The fearfully negative stench of anxiety has now been magically transformed, in the taking up of faith's new residence, into the enticing and seductive promise of a sort of positive confidence or security. *This* is bliss and comfort. *This* is the harbinger of Spring. *This* is mine. Faith has its object: all's right with the world.

But: *is* all right with the world? *Does* faith have its object? No, for it fails to attain that positive confidence that is seeks, and without which it must remain but a negative: less than nothing. It has achieved only the *promise* of security, which is to say, no security at all. Indeed, it has not even achieved that much; for it is the roses, not the faith, that are endowed (albeit by faith) with promise. And all that faith can ever retain (despite the hopelessness of its position) is its own native characteristic, hope. But hope is not promise; for promise is seductive and beckoning whereas hope is fretful and awkward. Promise is the fullness of the roses; hope is the hunger of faith; and faith is thus revealed as a starveling. Hope is faith's momentum, as anxiety is care's. Thus faith differs from the static *thereness* of roses. The roses, as such, don't *do* anything: They are simply roses. Faith, having first endowed the roses with promise, does much—or at least it augurs much, which is already doing much.

Doing is action, and action, the Buddha has said, is intention, or choice.[4] So far, then, is faith from being a matter of choice that reflexion reveals the situation to be precisely the other way round: it is choice that is a matter of faith. Faith is a condition for choice, for action, inasmuch as it *underlies* choice. How are we to understand this?

Whatever choice one makes is made in the faith that it is in some manner the *right* choice. If one did not believe that scratching would allay (and not worsen) the itch one would not scratch. If one believes that scratching *will* worsen the itch but that using certain medications will effect a cure one will not scratch. (Unless, that is, one puts greater faith in the short-term relief of scratching than in the long-term benefits of restraint and medication, or unless one deceives oneself by adopting a posture of bad faith: "*Other* scratching would worsen this fierce itch, but not *my* scratching; I'll be very gentle;" or perhaps: "I can't help it, I *have* to scratch.") *Either* one

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4. "Monks, I say intention is action. Intending, one does deeds by body, speech and mind ..."—AN 6:63/A III 415

believes in scratching. *Or* one believes in not-scratching. *Or* one is doubtful, wavering, confused as to what to believe, in which case one believes in doubt and confusion. This is one's faith. And everything one does depends upon that faith.

Every choice one makes presupposes a faith in that choice in particular and in choosing as a mode of being. For if one didn't believe in choosing one would not choose; and if one doesn't know how not to choose it is only because one does not know how not to believe in choosing. If we are hungry and want a banana it is because we believe that a banana will alleviate the hunger. At that time our faith is in bananas. Not only *in* bananas; in a very real sense we can say that at that time our faith *is* a banana. This of course sounds funny; but it should not be rejected on that account. The world would be bleak indeed if none of the truths found in it were happy truths.

Faith is a banana in the same manner that, earlier, it was a rose: faith is disguised as a banana. But, creature of a thousand guises, it appears one minute as a rose, the next as a banana, then as the completion—the publication!—of an essay, as the long-overdue rain, as the meditation which will lead to enlightenment, as the palliative for a slight nose-cold .... An endless series of projects and projections, ordered both hierarchically and temporally. Hierarchically, faith extends as far as the general faith that "life is worth living" (or at least preferable to dying). Temporally it includes the immediate faith in one's own immortality. In one sense this can be understood as faith that this series of projects and projections actually *is* both endless and realizable, both individually and collectively. And for some this will cast doubt upon the validity of the hierarchical faith in life's value. And each facet of faith is conceived, held to and, finally, lost or abandoned.

However, there is a sense in which we *can* say not only that choice is a matter of faith but also that faith is a matter of choice; for faith is not thrust upon us. We are not helpless recipients of faith as is a bottle of its contents. Not only do we choose to believe in Irma rather than Edna, or in a banana rather than a baked potato. We also choose to believe as such. And if we don't know how not to believe, it is only because we don't know how not to choose to believe. We must observe, though, that "choosing to believe" is not a choice distinct and apart from other choices. "To believe" is not a choice as such. Rather, it is a mode of choosing. Further, examination reveals it

to be a mode of choosing which is inherent in every choice we make, just as—whatever their size, colour, national origin, etc.—every circle we see has the inherent feature of roundness. "To believe" is that aspect of choice which is involved with hope—or, better here, *expectation*. For it is in the very nature of choice that it involves expectation. Every choice, then, is a choice to believe. Things in the world—roses, bananas, itches—are the *occasions* for choice; but belief is its *substance*, if something as negative and insubstantial as faith can be so designated. Faith, then, is not only a matter of choice; it is *the* matter of choice, its substance. Faith is inherently bound up with choice. And just as there is no choice without faith, so too there is no faith without choice. As with care, faith has entered into a relationship of mutual dependency with choice, with action.

Since every choice is a choice to believe, it may be thought, then, that the way to go beyond faith might be by not choosing. But, as with care, a problem exists: we don't know *how* not to choose. Even when we attempt to refrain from choosing, that restraint is itself a choice; and hence restraint cannot by itself transcend choice. Even when we sit motionless, silent, allowing the mind to be no more than an observer, yet to the extent that there is (at least) still perceiving, feeling and cognizing, there is still action. There is still choice. Although going beyond faith would entail (as a matter of structural necessity) transcending also both care and choice, it seems that it is not by means of care or choice that faith is to be transcended. Yet inasmuch as the world is apprehended as a world of tasks to be performed, as a world of situations involved with care, it is also apprehended as a world to be believed in. Whatever we do, whatever we care about, we do and care in faith. And we are *always* doing, *always* choosing, *always* caring, *always* believing: endless mirrors, reflecting each other and supporting one another's reflections.

Are we, then, condemned to faith?

2. A Homily

In the Caṅki Sutta (MN 95/M II 171-3) we find:

... Here, Bhāradvāja, a monk lives dependent upon some village or town. Then a householder or householder's son, having approached, examines [him] as regards three things: states of greed, states of hatred, states of confusion. [He considers:] "Does this venerable one

have those qualities of greed, of hatred, or of confusion, such that with his mind obsessed by greed, by hatred, or by confusion he, not knowing, would say 'I know', or not seeing would say 'I see'? Or would he encourage another [to act] in such a way that would be for the other to his detriment and suffering for a long time?"

While examining him he comes to know: "There are no such states in this venerable one. The bodily and verbal conduct of this venerable one are not those of one who is covetous, who is malign, or who is in error. Indeed, the Teaching that this venerable one teaches is deep, hard to see, hard to awaken to, peaceful, superior, not attainable by thinking and pondering, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. This Teaching cannot be well taught by one who is greedy, hateful, or confused."

As soon as, in examining him, he comes to see that he is purified from states of greed, of hatred, and of confusion, then he establishes his faith in him. With the birth of faith then, drawing close, he pays respect to him. Paying respect to him, he gives ear. Giving ear, he hears the Teaching. Hearing, he retains the Teaching. He investigates the purpose of Teachings retained. Investigating the purpose, introspective Teachings are acquiesced to. There being acquiescence to introspective Teachings, a wish is born. With a wish born, he ventures. Venturing, he evaluates. Evaluating, he resolves. Resolute, he realizes by body the paramount truth and he sees it by penetration of it with understanding.

This is how there is awakening to truth, Bhāradvāja; this is how truth is awakened to ... [5]

Greed, hatred, and confusion: here, at least, we meet with things which we know about, and without recourse to faith. For who has not experienced greed directly, and recognized its symptoms, if not its origin? That term, "greed", covers the gamut of neediness, from the coarse hankering after things of the world (stealing a cutting from our neighbour's thriving rosebush) through the more subtle desires (plans to enter the flower show competition). We may suspect, without knowing, that there is craving yet more subtle. We may believe the Suttas, without seeing, when they speak of a craving for being, *bhavataṇhā,* and for that conceit from which spring notions of selfhood: "I"-making and "my"-making. But quite apart from faith

5. Compare MN 70, in which the same sequence is found (I 480) in a different context.

in the Suttas we are able to say with certainty, with knowledge, that we recognize greed in ourselves. And in others we recognize modes of behaviour which we associate with greed.

So too with hatred. We experience coarse forms of anger (applying yet another insecticide; for those endless aphids now seem to be resistant to every spray and powder in our arsenal) and we experience subtle forms of anger (gloom at the disdain of the other entrants to the flower show). And beyond this we may create yet more subtle forms of anger, still unrecognized, which are connected with concealment of disparity and with disguising of dissatisfaction. But even when we do not see these more subtle manifestations of hatred, or their condition, we can assert with certainty, with knowledge, that we recognize anger in ourselves. And in others we recognize modes of conduct which we associate with anger.

Confusion is more difficult. And yet there are situations wherein we recognize that we simply *don't* understand. And that recognition is non-confusion in the very midst of confusion. We can know, at least on coarser levels, and at least sometimes, that we don't know. (If even that level of self-examination were impossible then surely there would be no escape from self-deception. We would indeed be condemned to faith.) There are, it seems, more subtle forms of confusion (when, rather than "confusion", we might better speak of "delusion"[6]), the exposure of which is at the heart of the Buddha's Teaching. But until these forms are revealed their existence is, inevitably, a matter of faith. And (the Suttas tell us) the faith of the unenlightened is founded upon his failure to see the root delusion,

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6. The Pali word *moha* covers both meanings and must be translated according to context. At AN 3:66/A I 194, for instance, *moha* is specifically equated with *avijjā*, ignorance:

"What do you think, Sāḷha, is there delusion?"

"Indeed, lord."

"Sāḷha, its meaning is 'ignorance', I say."

However, at MN 78/M II 27 we read: "That mind free from desire, free from hatred, free from confusion—sprung from this are skilful virtues. And, carpenter, where do these skilful virtues cease without remainder? ..." Here, clearly, absence of *moha* describes a state *prior* to the ceasing of action. And, as the Suttas make clear, ceasing of action (including even of virtuous action—"bright action with bright result" (AN 4:231–234/A II 230–234, etc.)) and ceasing of ignorance are but two aspects of the same thing: attainment of extinction, of *nibbāna*.

and the dependence of faith upon that delusion. But even without seeing this fundamental self-deception we can say that we have the capacity to know ourselves to be confused. And in others we can recognize modes of behaviour which we associate with confusion.

So we discover an individual whose conduct, as we observe it, is free from that which we associate with greed, with hatred, and with confusion. Or perhaps, in today's wider world, we find not a living person but the heritage of one no longer living. And if it is the heritage of a Buddha then it includes a Teaching which praises generosity, friendliness, and understanding and points out the dangers of greed, of hatred, and of confusion. And if it is the message of a Buddha then it goes beyond this praise of rectitude, to expose to examination the very roots of conduct. And it offers guidance, for those who will pay heed, in examining the roots of their own conduct. If it is such a message then we, who do not know what to do with this precious and painful faith to which we are (it appears) condemned—we may choose to allow that faith to reside therein.

If we do so, the Suttas tell us, we shall then be following the path which transcends faith—the faith, that is, that has no basis in knowledge. We follow it not by abandoning faith; for that, as we have seen, is a Sisyphean effort. For all that it may depend upon roses for its sustenance, faith cannot be starved to death. Faith is an omnivore, and will never lack for that on which it can feed. But perhaps it can be put on a suitable diet? What, then, if we place our faith in knowledge?

If faith were to merely imitate knowledge then, of course, we would be no less immersed in faith than we were when faith disguised itself as a rose. But if, in imitating knowledge, faith could be led to not take itself at its own evaluation of itself, could faith then come to truly see itself?

But of course we, in our ignorance, do not know knowledge. We know only the approximation of it: the absence of that bodily and verbal conduct which is based on greed, hatred, and confusion. And even that we know only approximately, according to our ability to judge the matter, each for himself. Here, ultimately, we must each decide for ourselves; and it is not surprising that there will be a difference in individuals. And even when we find a teacher or a teaching which seems to us to be free of defilements doubt may still remain, as it did for the wandering ascetic Subhadda.

"Now there is in me a doubt," Subhadda thought; "but to this extent have I faith in the ascetic Gotama [= the Buddha], that he

could so teach me the Doctrine as to remove that doubt." And Subhadda went to the Buddha and had his doubt resolved. And, his faith established, he set out to practise the Teaching. "And from the time of his ordination the venerable Subhadda remained alone, secluded, heedful, ardent and resolute. And before long he attained to the goal for which a worthy man goes forth entirely from home to homelessness, the supreme goal of the holy life ..."[7]

In Subhadda's small vignette we see not only the act of establishing faith but of paying respect. Here, respect is not a mere physical displacement: clasped hands, bowing down, the offering of flowers, the lighting of candles and incense, and all the other magical devices that can come into play to posit or augment a sense of relationship. For Subhadda, paying respect meant, clearly, accepting that the Buddha's point of view (the point of view of knowledge) took precedence over his own (that of doubt). He did not assume that his doubt was so powerful that even a Buddha would be unable to move it. To have done so would have been to place faith in and pay respect to his own doubt. Rather, he diminished the status of that doubt by making it subservient to his faith in the Buddha's ability.

Certainly Subhadda showed to the Buddha those civilities and courtesies which are part of paying respect; and to do so is not blameworthy. However, we find in the Suttas many who did just so and who were nevertheless not moved, as was Subhadda, to renounce former ways and to take up the practice of Dhamma. Indeed, when we look at the commentary to the Dhammapada we even find the story of a monk who, it appears, deliberately avoided the opportunity to show respect by means of the ordinary civilities.

When the Buddha had announced that his final passing away (*parinibbāna*) would take place after four months (so the Commentary; though in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, in which Subhadda's tale is told, the Buddha announces the event to be three months hence) many monks spent their time constantly attending upon the Teacher. But one monk, the Venerable Attadattha, went nowhere near his fellow monks, and their attendancy. For he thought to himself, "The Teacher says that four months hence he is to pass into Nibbāna. Now I have not yet freed myself from the

7. DN 16/D II 149 & 153. The translations are Sister Vajirā's, in her *Last Days of the Buddha* (Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy: Wheel 67/69, pp. 71 & 74). Subhadda was, incidentally, the last convert before the Buddha's passing away.

power of the evil passions. Therefore so long as the Teacher yet remains alive, I will strive with all my might for the attainment of Arahatship [= full enlightenment]." Accordingly, the Venerable Attadattha (the name, perhaps invented by the Commentator for the sake of his tale, means "self-welfare") kept to himself, pondering and meditating on the Teaching.

The monks conducted the Venerable Attadattha to the Buddha and told him of the Venerable one's conduct. Whereupon the Buddha questioned him before the other monks. "Why do you act thus?" The Ven. Attadattha explained his wish to attain full enlightenment before his Master's final passing away.

Then the Buddha praised him of his wise decision, and told the monks: "Monks, whosoever sincerely loves me should be like Elder Attadattha. For truly they honour me not who honour me with perfumes and garlands. They only honour me who fulfil the higher and the lower Law; therefore others also should follow the example of Elder Attadattha."[8]

And so saying the Buddha, we are told, pronounced the verse:

> However great may be another's need,
> for one's own welfare one should maintain heed.
> Fully knowing one's own task one should
> persist in that which leads to one's own good. Dhp 166

Outward manifestations, then, are in themselves inadequate as full payment of respect. Both Subhadda and Attadattha show us what more is needed. And they show us, too, how payment of respect is founded upon faith.

Giving ear: a physical act, to be sure—but is it only that? It is if we place the emphasis on "ear". But if we emphasize "giving" then the phrase follows sensibly upon "paying of respect", and leads sensibly to "hearing the Teaching". And here again the emphasis qualifies the act. The Teaching, of course, is not some arbitrary verbiage, infinitely substitutable. We cannot hear what we wish to hear and then meaningfully call it "the Buddha's Teaching". But equally so, the Teaching is not merely a collection of certain words, independent of any listener. Rather, it is our relationship to that Teaching which determines it to be something other than mere verbiage for each of

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8. See E. W. Burlingame's *Buddhist Legends* (a 1921 translation of the commentary to the Dhammapada), part 2, p. 366 (Book 12, Story 10).

us personally. It is, for each of us, a Teaching only if we are in fact taught. This is made clear by the simile of the snake (MN 22/M I 133–34), where the snake, like the Teaching, when wrongly grasped, leads to our suffering, not to our benefit. In other words, we must *hear* the Teaching, and we must hear it *as* the Teaching.

But if we do not yet understand this Teaching—with direct eidetic knowledge, that is—then how can we hear it as the Teaching? With faith already established we choose to accept the Buddha's guidance even in preference to our own inclinations. And we hear the Teaching *as* the Teaching by accepting that it is our polestar, by setting our course directed by it. Then, guided by what we do not yet understand, we can come to understanding. Thus, even in ignorance, we can yet hear the Teaching. And in doing so there will arise, quite naturally, the wish to retain it.

Retaining the Teaching, together with *giving ear* and *hearing the Teaching*: these three acts, taken together, comprise the necessary basis for learning. Here, learning means not the mere acquisition of data, the collecting of information, but the capacity for changing oneself. If we could already see the Teaching (or, more precisely, if we could already see the goal of the Teaching: self-understanding) there would then be no need to retain it. In a sense we would be part of that Teaching and we would not need an outside source. But until then we, who are as yet outsiders ourselves, must persist in guarding and retaining what we have heard, or read. The simile of the raft (also in MN 22, referred to above—the Discourse on the Simile of the Snake: I 134–5) tells us that after we have safely crossed from danger to safety we should relinquish the raft with which we crossed. It is no longer necessary or purposeful to carry it about with us. But how foolish to think of doing so before we had crossed! And to keep and guard the Teaching, the Suttas tell us, means to commit it to memory.

We said earlier that times have changed. These days, if no living teacher is available in whom we are willing to place our faith, we can consult books. The Pali Suttas have been published and translated in their entirety. Is it not then sufficient, these days, to simply read the texts? Can we not dispense with the burdensome task of memorizing them? In a sense, yes; and in a deeper sense, no.

Yes, because the texts, as we now have them, comprise twenty or more volumes. Even in the Buddha's day few monks would have possessed the capacity and fortitude to memorize more than a small fraction of what has been preserved.[9] Lacking books, memorization

was necessarily a community effort. Today few of us belong to the sort of community suitable for such an effort. Nor need we, for we could as well memorize texts on our own, relying on books, if we found reason to do so. But to what purpose?

For the benefit of others? Before the era of printed books this made sense. But nowadays, with printed copies of the Suttas and Vinaya readily available, we could hardly be motivated to memorize texts by the thought that, unless we did so, others would not have access to the Dhamma.

For our own benefit, then? But we can dip into the books as we wish, discovering or rediscovering descriptions that ring with insight and instructions profound in their sensibility. Or, if it's a particular passage we need to recover we can usually do so. Scholars have produced a panoply of reference tools: word dictionaries, name dictionaries, indexes, concordances, check lists, analyses … Armed with these and a set of the texts we need only recall some specific detail—individuals involved, key words, locale, incidents, similes, or the like—to be able, usually, to locate the passage we need. We will sometimes invest hours in the search for a required passage, and we will sometimes fail even then; but it is not on this account that memorization of the texts (or selections from them) is to be recommended.

But no, we cannot totally dispense with the task of retaining the Teaching. Those times when we will most urgently need the texts will be when we are least willing to engage in the "objective" work of hunting up "data". For the Buddha's guidance is most crucially required precisely when we are immersed in that subjective examination of our own inner being to which the Teaching has directed us. It is then, when we are in unfamiliar territory, that it is most easy to go astray. It is then that precision is crucial. And to pierce, to see as it really is, "This is suffering", is more difficult than to split one arrow with another, shot through a keyhole. (SN 56:45/S V 453–54)

It is then that we will find book work the greatest of disturbances: a distancing to our meditation. But it is also then that we will be most in need of the Teaching, to properly direct our attention. And it is precisely those passages which indicate to us our particular self-deceptions that we are most likely to ignore,

9. For an account of the probable way in which these texts came to be collected and preserved, see my *Beginnings: The Pali Suttas*.

misremember, or misconceive, unless we have already taken care to learn them with precision. As one meditator put it, "I realize now, when I most urgently need them, that I cannot remember the most essential parts, for the simple reason that those were the most obscure to me."[10]

To retain the Teaching various strategies are possible, and we will each experiment to discover what works best for us for now. Some may prefer to take a cycle of texts for daily recitation. Others may choose a brief text or extract to bear in mind through a single day, selecting daily texts according to need. Some will choose texts that give them inspiration; others will prefer texts in which they sense a deeper meaning, or which they find puzzling, worth chewing on (rather than the rehearsal of well-learned verities). In any case, retaining the Teaching is no less important to the practice than it was twenty-five centuries ago. We need now, as much as others did then, to associate with what is wholesome.

From this we will see that the importance of retaining the Teaching becomes apparent when we investigate its purpose. And when we retain it we open ourselves to an understanding of that purpose.

The purpose of the Buddha's Teaching can be described in many ways, some strictly traditional (as in the quotation at the head of this essay), and others garbed in contemporary idiom. But however we express it, it must involve, surely, an investigation which points to the heart of our dissatisfaction. And since we do not see this heart for ourselves, our investigation will be framed primarily in the form of a question. Dependent upon what is there this dissatisfaction I experience? Since this life ends merely in the grave[11], understanding the purpose of the Buddha's Teaching means asking what, if anything, is the purpose of our life.

Note, however, that to understand such a question—what, if anything, is the purpose of my life?—does not require of us that we *answer* it. To drive the stake of a positive reply into the heart of the question's frail being is not to investigate it. It is to kill it off, or to try

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10. Sister Vajirā, quoted on page 530 of *Clearing the Path: Writings of Ñāṇavīra Thera* (Path Press, 1987).

11. Soon, alas!, this body will be felled
and, senseless, will lie sprawled upon the earth,
cast aside, its consciousness dispelled,
like a log that lacks all worth. Dhp 41

to do so. But, in our quiet moments, in a darkling world, the question will rise again to haunt us. To exorcise it we must understand, not explain. And when we understand the question we will also understand the need we formerly felt to explain it, or to explain it away.

To face these unanswerable questions about the purpose of our life puts us in a position to understand the root of suffering. To investigate the purpose of the Teaching is not a simple parroting of phrases learned, but a subjective exploration of how those phrases can be put to use. We would not investigate, say, a raft, by merely describing its physical appearance. We would put emphasis upon its function. And though we will be interested in its construction we will not be less interested in how it could be navigated. So too we investigate the purpose of the Teaching with a sense of learning how to navigate. And to navigate requires energy, mindfulness, and concentration. The Buddha confirms that a half-hearted effort, slack in energy, will not succeed. He characterizes the energetic seeker as one who vows, "Let flesh, sinew, and bone atrophy. Let body and blood dry up. Yet energy shall not remain static until that is achieved which can be achieved through manly strength, manly energy, manly striving." (MN 70/M I 481 = SN 12:22/S II 28 = AN 2:4/A I 50)

But without mindfulness energy can have no function. Mindfulness is paying attention. We wish to pay attention to the dilemma of faith: our inability to found our lives on knowledge, and our inability to abandon the effort to do so. For, of course, only when a problem is attended to is there the possibility of understanding it. Only then can energy be properly utilized. Among the many similes the Buddha has offered to illustrate the purpose of mindfulness is that of the bowl of oil (SN 48:20/S V 170).

Suppose, monks, that a great crowd of people should gather, [crying:] "The district beauty! The district beauty!" And that district beauty is the finest performer of dance and song. And, monks, a yet-greater crowd might gather, [crying:] "The district beauty dances and sings!" Then a man might come along who wishes to live, not to die, who wishes pleasure and is averse to pain. They might say to him: "See here, fellow! Here's a bowl brimful with oil. You must carry it round between the great crowd and the district beauty. Following behind you is a man with raised sword. Spill the merest drop, and your head is off!"

And thus we stand, caught between the allures, the enchantment of the world and the immediate possibility of our own death. If we

lose mindfulness, if we spill the merest drop, we die. For in this training, to fall away from awareness of our situation is to die.

And so too, concentration is necessary. One-pointedness of mind, one-pointedness of purpose, is an obvious requisite for piercing the veil of ignorance. But learning about these things—energy, mindfulness, concentration—is not the sort of learning that proceeds merely on an intellectual level, as is, for example, the study of classical Western philosophy. One can emerge from the study of such philosophy unscathed by it. If, on the other hand, we wish to learn to drive a car, we cannot do so by merely memorizing the instructions and then parroting them. We must actually involve ourselves in driving. We learn to drive by doing it. So too with this Teaching. Investigating its purpose is not different than applying it.

So, then, when the Teaching is retained there remains the simple task of applying it. "Oh, but it's not so simple!" some will say. Ah, but it is. What it is not is *easy*. But that is quite a different matter. Indeed, it is precisely because of its simplicity that the Teaching is so difficult. Unlike, say, classical Western philosophy, the Teaching is not difficult because of its complexity. A complex idea might indeed require a great intellect to comprehend it. But like any truly great idea the Buddha's Teaching is simple—profoundly so. But this is not to say that it is either shallow or easy, for it is neither. What is required to comprehend it is not a great intellect but a great abandonment.

What must be abandoned is our own wilfulness, our determination to perceive the world as we would have it be. However, experience will demonstrate that we cannot simply abandon all modes of perception. If we succeed in freeing ourselves from one perspective we find that we have already acquired another. Here acquiescence proves its value. To acquiesce to the Buddha's Teaching means to accept that Teaching's perspective in preference to our own. At such a time we do not yet see the Teaching directly, for when there is direct perception we are beyond the need to put aside our own view. Our own perspective is then the same as that of the Teaching. However, when we acquiesce, although we do not as yet see for ourselves, also we do not hold to any mode of understanding which is at odds with the Teaching. This is a position which can be precarious and from which we can fall. It is therefore not yet attainment of the direct perception that "Whatever is of a nature to arise, all that is of a nature to cease."

At SN 55:24 & 25/S V 375–80 the Buddha distinguishes between an individual who has attained to this direct perception and one who has achieved acquiescence to introspective teachings.[12] The former is endowed with a level of total confidence (*aveccapasāda* in 24, *abhippasanna* in 25) in the Buddha, in his Teaching, and in the Order. The latter does not achieve this level of confidence. And yet, even the latter (let alone the former) has already acquired the five faculties—the faculties, that is, of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and understanding. And, too, he acquiesces to the introspective teachings made known by the Buddha and he has a measure of understanding. Neither are liable to rebirth in a state lower than human. However, one with direct perception is totally free from the possibility of such a rebirth. This freedom is not ascribed to one endowed with acquiescence. We may understand this as meaning that should such an individual fail to go beyond acquiescence to direct perception, and should he fall away from that state of compliance to the Teaching, he could then become liable again to a rebirth lower than the human plane.

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12. The phrase in MN 95 is *dhamma nijjhānaṃ khamanti*. *Nijjhāna* is *ni*, a prefix indicating 'downwardness', + *jhāna*, 'meditation'. Hence, 'introspective'. *Khamanti* means 'to give in to'. The equivalent noun, *khanti*, is often translated as 'patience'. This, however, is but a peripheral meaning. Its central significance is 'acquiescence', and such an understanding usually yields a more meaningful translation of *khanti* than does 'patience':

> Compliance, of austerities, is chief.
> 'Extinction is supreme,'
> the Buddhas say.
> No ascetic causes others grief,
> no recluse does oppress in any way. Dhp 184

Even a hen, brooding on a nest of eggs, can be patient. Yet such patience leads to nothing higher than itself. But compliance with right view can lead to the abandonment of wrong view. Acquiescence is the chief austerity because by means of compliance one can transcend the level of austerities, the level of action, and enter upon the realm of the deathless.

Editorial Note

This essay was left uncompleted and in draft form at the time of the author's death. The interested reader is invited to try his/her hand at completing the sequence set out in the Cankī Sutta for him-/herself.

VI

Being and Craving

Upon the actual the possible perpetually casts its shadow. It is in this darkening that the actual discovers itself as bleakness.[1]

I. Introduction

THE purpose of this paper is to exemplify an approach to the Buddha's Teaching and, in so doing, to indicate a method of thought which will prove of greater use in dealing with the problem with which that Teaching is concerned—the problem of suffering—than other approaches (scientific, rationalistic, scholastic, logistic, mystic, idealistic, and so on) which have repeatedly failed to resolve the problem. Although by way of introduction and contrast the familiar interpretations of *taṇhā* (craving) are discussed briefly, this paper is not a polemic and therefore no detailed discussion of the various approaches is provided. The reasons why they (necessarily) fail, however, will become evident as our approach is described.

This paper, then, will not merely disagree with the traditional interpretations of a particular term of basic significance to the Dhamma, but will illustrate a way in which both this and other equally basic aspects of the Teaching may be investigated; for, ultimately, it is the method of approach that will define and qualify the nature of our understanding. The method to be illustrated, then, may require not a minor adjustment of one's understanding but a complete reorientation of one's mode of thinking.

The problem of suffering, with which the Buddha's Teaching is concerned, is a problem within the realm of experience, for outside of experience it is meaningless to speak of suffering. If we are to

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1. This essay, never published nor prepared for publication, was written during the period of the author's first monk's period. Found amongst his papers following his death, it is here published for its intrinsic value. (Editor.)

investigate suffering (in the belief that our increased knowledge of its nature will better equip us to do something about it) we must investigate it where it occurs, which is in (or *as*) experience. And since all the experience we can know of is our own experience—for if we know of it it is part of our experience—we must, of necessity, concern ourselves with our own experience of suffering.

Experience, moreover, is an organized phenomenon—that is to say, it is structured. It may be expected, then, that a description of it will attempt, firstly, to recognize the particular elements which, together, constitute an individual experience; secondly, to recognize which of these elements are essential for there to *be* any experience and which are gratuitous, or inhere only in *this particular* mode of experience; and thirdly, to describe the structure of the essential elements—that is to say, that way in which the elements are put together in order for experience to be what it is.

This paper will proceed, then, by taking a particular term of basic import to the Buddha's Teaching—*taṇhā,* or craving—and will examine it in the context of experience itself, in order to exhibit (in part) the *structure of experience,* or the relationship between those elemental components of an experience that are essential, without which there could not *be* experience.

II.The Traditional Interpretation

THE traditional interpretation of *taṇhā* is expounded in the *Visuddhimagga,* Chapter XVII. It is there pointed out, first, that craving arises through the medium of one of the various senses, and then it is said that the Buddha has stated three kinds of craving: *kāmataṇhā, bhavataṇhā,* and *vibhavataṇhā,* here tentatively translated (so as not to beg the question) by the more familiar terms, sensuality craving, craving for being, and craving for non-being, respectively. Taking the example of craving as it occurs through the medium of the eye, the *Visuddhimagga* goes on:

"When the craving for matter [i.e. what is seen] manifests itself as a sensual delight, relishing the [visual] object that has come within the range of the eye, that is called sensuality craving. When that [craving] occurs with the eternalist view, 'Lasting, eternal', as basis, that is called craving for being, for it is the lust accompanying the eternalist view that is called craving for being. And when that [craving] occurs with the annihilationist view, 'Breaking up,

perishable', as basis, that is called craving for non-being, for it is the lust accompanying the annihilationist view that is called craving for non-being." [Vis. pp. 567–568]

Reference is here made, then, to the 'eternalist view' and the 'annihilationist view', defined in the Suttas[2] as the views that the world (and the self: *so loko so attā*, as the world, the self) is, in the first case, eternal and everlasting, and in the second case that it is, in one way or another, subject to annihilation. The *Visuddhimagga* then tells us that when one holds the eternalist view his craving is of the mode called craving for being; that when one holds the annihilationist view his craving is of the mode called craving for non-being; and that when one holds neither (or possibly both: the point is not made explicit) of these views his craving is of the mode called sensuality craving.

There can be no craving without a 'thing craved' (even though that thing may not always be readily identifiable), so let us take a specific example. Suppose three people, each representing respectively one of these three views, see a plate of chocolates, and that all of them experience craving for the chocolates. One of them (the 'eternalist')—according to the traditional interpretation—will experience 'craving for being' for the chocolates, the second (the 'annihilationist') will experience 'craving for non-being' for the chocolates, and the third will experience 'sensuality craving' for the chocolates. We are at once lost in incomprehensibility. We can, perhaps, understand what sensuality craving for the chocolates is: in this example it would involve sweetness, creaminess, a particular odour, a texture of smoothness, etc.—all the particular sensual perceptions we identify with "eating chocolate", plus a craving for this set of particulars. This seems clear enough. But what are we to make of the other two terms? Between the view that 'the world is eternal' (or non-eternal) and the desire for a piece of chocolate what relationship *can* be established that is not wholly gratuitous? For it is not denied that a relationship *could* be established—indeed, in the *assertion* of a relationship a relationship *is* established; what is denied is that there is any *essential* or *meaningful* connection between these

2. See Brahmajāla Suttanta, DN 1. For the eternalist view (*sassatavāda*) see pp. 14–16; for the annihilationist view (*ucchedavāda*) see pp. 34–35. Although it would involve a more complicated analysis, the traditional views regarding these two terms are subject to investigation by the same method used here to investigate *taṇhā*. see, in particular, Khandha Samy. 81.

views and the craving. What is objected to is that such an identification does not advance our understanding of craving.

But this is not all: we are told only the individual holding neither the annihilationist nor the eternalist views experiences sensuality craving. But we learn from the Suttas that no one less than the *sekha*—one who has attained direct vision of the Dhamma—is free from these two views (the *sekha* has *sammādiṭṭhi*), and that the *puthujjana*, the commoner, who does *not* have direct vision of the Dhamma, *always* holds one or the other of these views (see, e.g., Mūlapariyāya Sutta, MN 1/M I 1). Are we to conclude, then, that only the *sekha* is capable of *kāmataṇhā*? And still further, since the *sekha* is *not able* to hold the eternalist and annihilationist views (for his personal and direct knowledge of the Dhamma shows him, if he tries to hold either of these views, that the views are based upon misunderstanding), is he, then, incapable of experiencing craving for being and craving for non-being? And is the *puthujjana* equally incapable of experiencing sensuality craving? The Suttas, at any rate, give no indication that this is so. The difficulties raised by the *Visuddhimagga's* account of craving are, in fact, insoluble and its account may be dismissed as unmeaningful.

Indeed, the Commentarial view is so evidently absurd that it seems to be deliberately ignored (or, perhaps, it is largely unknown) by those modern commentators who by and large follow the traditional views on most other points. In its place an alternative explanation has been advanced, which has been widely accepted and which may therefore be called the 'popular' interpretation. This view, in fact, is so prevalent that it seems to be assumed by most modern writers to represent the traditional interpretation and has therefore not been fully expounded in any recent major work on the Dhamma, but lies within these works as an implicit assumption.

III. The Popular Interpretation

THIS view is to the effect that there is sensuality craving, of which craving for chocolates (regardless of any views the craver might or might not hold) is one example; there is craving for being, which is the craving for one's own continued existence (in its grosser formulations it is often called 'lust for life'), and there is craving for non-being, which is the craving for one's own non-existence ('I wish I were dead'). This interpretation is, at any rate, less incomprehensible

than that which the *Visuddhimagga* sets forth. Certainly we may agree that we experience sensuality craving *at various times*, certainly we *sometimes* experience the craving for continued existence (as, for example, when we feel fear of our existence being terminated), and—if we are honest with ourselves—we can admit to having known on occasion a craving for our non-existence. What, then, is wrong with all this? The answer is simple: it is wholly gratuitous.

Thus, we may look at a plate of chocolates and observe our experience. It will consist of a number of different items, some of which—such as intention, perception, and consciousness—are absolutely necessary for there to be any experience whatsoever, while others—such as chocolates, odour, whiteness—are no less certainly gratuitous and do not occur in all experience. The necessary items are structurally related in a way in which the gratuitous items are not (if they were not structured they could not be essential); and if we are to understand the nature of experience (and hence the nature of suffering) we must understand the structure of the essential components of experience.

Thus, it is not merely a relationship which is sought (for a relationship, even of essentials, can be itself gratuitous) but rather a structure which is essential in order for the various elements comprising that structure to interact as we can observe within our experience that they do in fact interact. But the three items, *kāmataṇhā*, *bhavataṇhā*, and *vibhavataṇhā*, as presented by the popular interpretation, are neither necessary nor structured; there is no *essential* relationship between them. We might select *any* three items and treat them in exactly the same way. Thus, we might discover a craving for happiness, a craving for cleanliness, and a craving for dirtiness, and go on to point out, exactly parallel to the popular interpretation of *kāmataṇhā*, *bhavataṇhā*, and *vibhavataṇhā*, that these three experiences are common, that we often feel a desire to be happy, that we sometimes wish we were cleaner, and—if we are honest with ourselves—we all might sometimes enjoy a good roll in the mud (though we may never indulge the desire).

But after this, what can we do except to shrug our shoulders and reply, 'All right; but so what?' And what more can we do with the popular interpretation of *taṇhā*? To what, we may ask, does it lead? For it is inherently impossible, after such a beginning, that the popular interpretation of *taṇhā could* go on to exhibit any structure essential to experience; for besides exhibiting a gratuitous

relationship (dependent upon the chance coincidence of all three forms of craving within the same experience), the item *kāmataṇhā* is craving for something that is—according to this interpretation—external and is, in a fundamental sense, *not* me, while the items *bhavataṇhā* and *vibhavataṇhā* are directed inwards towards something which is identified by me on a fundamental level as (inseparable from) my self.

There is, then, a chasm separating the object of *kāmataṇhā* from the object of *bhavataṇhā* and *vibhavataṇhā* which precludes any possibility of a synthesis which might yet lie within the sphere of experience. (It is possible that it was the recognition of this fact that persuaded the *Visuddhimagga* to adopt an interpretation wholly involved with craving from one side—unfortunately.)

IV. Definitions of Kāma, Bhava, and Vibhava

HAVING briefly described the difficulties met with by the traditional and the popular interpretations, we may now proceed to an investigation of the meaning of the three terms, *kāma, bhava,* and *vibhava*.

A. *Kāma*

Kāma, sensuality, will be discussed more fully later. Here it will be sufficient to note that 'sensuality' should not be confused (as it sometimes is) with 'of the senses'. All craving, whether or not it is *kāmataṇhā*, is directed towards an object, and therefore will always come within the province of one (or more) 'of the senses'. Later it will be shown that sensuality, far from meaning merely 'of the senses', refers to the *intensity,* or *quantity,* of craving, as opposed to the *type,* or *quality,* of the craving, which is either *bhavataṇhā* or *vibhavataṇhā*.

B. *Bhava*

Bhava has been variously translated, and it is clear at once that 'being' is not its only English equivalent; 'existence' is also a completely unobjectionable translation; for if I *am,* then I *exist*. It is impossible to assert the one without at the same time asserting the other. But we are concerned here with experience. If, then, I assert 'this is' or 'this exists', I can only do so because it is *present*. If it were not present such an assertion would be meaningless. It may be

objected that—for instance—it is possible to assert that 'this pelican exists' even though a pelican is in no way present to me. And at this point we arrive at a major distinction which may require, as indicated earlier, a readjustment of one's entire mode of thinking. To maintain that something exists which is not present to me may, of course, have validity in certain modes of thought—scientific thought, for example—and, within the limitations of that mode it may be meaningful. But, as pointed out, we are concerned with experience; and since experience, being personal and not subject to observation by more than one individual, lies outside the sphere with which all objective modes of thought are concerned, including the scientific mode, we cannot admit such modes of thought into our considerations without at once abrogating our original intention to investigate experience. Therefore we must limit ourselves to statements which are subjective. (This is not to suggest, of course, that we are to abandon precision and allow prejudices into our considerations. A subjective statement can be just as precise and unprejudiced as an objective statement. The statement, 'I am thinking of a cow', for example, is as precise as any statement the objective disciplines can offer, and as unprejudiced.)

In our considerations, then, to say that 'this pelican exists' while not having some perception of 'pelican' is invalid. I can, of course, assert that I am thinking *of* a pelican; but then it is not the pelican whose existence is asserted but the *idea* (or *image*) of the pelican. In existential terms, then, to assert the presence of a thing is to assert its existence; to assert its existence is to assert its presence and thus we have *presence* as a third term which might serve as a translation of *bhava*. And, in fact, there are a number of other words which could also be considered; but we have arrived at the one which we are seeking, as will become clear.

C. *Vibhava*

Let us proceed to *vibhava*. This word is usually translated as 'non-being'. But the negative participle in Pali is '*a*', and not '*vi*'; we might expect, therefore, if we were to speak of non-being in the sense of being totally non-existent, to find the word *abhava* rather than *vibhava*; but in fact nowhere in the Suttas does *abhava* occur in opposition to *bhava*. The word is certainly possible: it is used in the Commentaries[3] in the sense of non-existence or annihilation; and there are words similar to *abhava* to be found—not opposed to

bhava—in the Suttas themselves,[4] so the construction seems to be etymologically unobjectionable. Furthermore, when the non-existence of something is asserted—as, e.g., the non-existence of *lobha*, *dosa*, and *moha* in the *arahat*—the term *vibhava* is *never* used in connection with such a description.

Why, then, we may ask, does *abhava* not occur? And what, then, is the distinction between it and *vibhava*? The prefix '*vi*' has the meaning of 'apart from', or 'separation', which is close to (i.e. is *not*) a negation.[5] Etymologically, then, *vibhava* would seem to mean 'apart from *bhava*', apart from being, apart from existence, apart from presence: dis-presence. And if something is apart from presence does not this mean that it is *absent*? And is not absence similar to (i.e. not the same as) non-existence? Could it not be, then, that the Sutta usage of *vibhava* rather than *abhava* in this formal definition is due neither to careless choice of words nor to a quirk of language but, rather, that it is a careful distinction made on ontological rather than etymological grounds? Let us investigate and see if this is so.

V. Presence and Absence

If we see a chair we can say, 'That chair is present; it exists; it is.' If we see no chair we might say, 'That chair is not present; it is absent,' but we cannot say that it does not exist, that it is utterly and absolutely *not* for exactly the same reason that we cannot assert, when we do not see the chair, that it definitely and positively *is*: to assert that the chair is *absent* is to assert that it is *not here now*. This is a statement about what is present: we survey what *is* here, what is present, and find that none of those things that are present is that chair. If, however, we assert that the chair therefore does not exist

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3. At, e.g., Abh 1103; 1165; Abhidh-av 11; Dhp-a III 1; III 453; Sv I 121; Pv-a 9; 17; Mogg-v III 2; Sadd 885–6.

4. E.g. *abhāvita* at Dhp 13, Th 133, A I 5; V 299; S II 264, etc; *itibhavābhava*, being and non-being, DN 1/D I 8; *nābhavissa* at A I 233, etc. See also the frequent use of *asati*, 'is not', D II 33 etc. etc. in opposition to *sati*, 'is', as well as *atthi/natthi* and other forms elsewhere.

5. In the later Pali of the commentaries the prefix '*vi*' is made to do service for other meanings as well; we need not here concern ourselves with them. '*Vi*' is sometimes equivalent to the English prefix 'dis' and Pali '*a*' to English 'un': cover, discover, uncover; joined, disjoined, unjoined; placed, displaced, unplaced; etc.

(or that it does exist but is not present) we are making a statement which does not involve our experience,[6] a statement which is, ultimately, speculative, and which is therefore invalid in this investigation. While the assertion that, if something is present (or *experienced*) it exists is not merely valid but, strictly, tautologous, it by no means follows that to assert that if something is absent it does not exist, for—again—we are going beyond the limitations we have set for ourselves and, therefore, leaving experience out of account.

Let us take another example. I am sitting with a pen in my hand. *I* am present to my experience as *being* seated-with-a-pen-in-my-hand. Being-seated-with-a-pen-in-my-hand is present; of all possible arrangements of my world, *that* particular arrangement *is*, it *exists*, it is *present*. There are an infinite number of possible arrangements which are *absent*; e.g. being-seated-without-a-pen-in-my-hand; lying-down-with-a-book-in-my-hand, stand-up-with-an-itch-on-my-left-ankle, etc. None of these possibilities is *present*, and so I may assert their absence: they are not here-now. But while these possibilities are not here-now, I cannot say that they are non-existent, for it is evident at once that they do, in fact, exist *as possibilities*. I can, at any moment I choose, lay down my pen or change my bodily position or both, and therefore the possibility is constantly present to me. And precisely in order to maintain it as a *possibility* I must constantly intend to *not* do it; for if I *do* lay down my pen, stand up, and stretch my arms, then the possibility of doing so vanishes and becomes, instead, an actuality, something that is present; and the present thing, i.e. sitting-with-a-pen-in-my-hand, is no longer present, but absent. But it has not vanished utterly; it, in its turn, has become a possibility—for, after stretching it is possible that I will sit down and pick up the pen again.

To be absent, then, is not to be non-existent, but to be possible. *An absent is a present possibility*, and something truly non-existent could only be an *absent* possibility, or, in other words, an impossibility—something which does not present itself to us as possible. But if something which does not present itself to us as possible it does not present itself to us *at all*; for even the most

6. So, too, the Buddha does not say that there is no self, but rather that the self is not to be found, and that all things are not-self. To assert either self or not-self is to go beyond one's experience into the realm of speculation: it is here that there is valid application of the terms *ucchedavāda* and *sassatavāda* (see footnote 1).

remote and unlikely thing that we can think of is never a *logical* impossibility (we can at this moment begin to make plans to go to the moon), and, indeed, we may indulge ourselves, if we wish, in the most fanciful and extravagant daydreams involving the most wildly unlikely circumstances, and, *while we indulge them*, they will appear to us as valid images. It is only when we investigate them reflexively, by taking a step away from them, so to speak—an observing of them rather than an existing of them—that we will recognize their unlikelihood and, perhaps, dismiss them. We cannot ever speak, then, of a *true* non-existent, of an *absent* possibility; for as soon as we do so it ceases to be an absent possibility and presents itself to us as a present possibility.

We have made here a crucial distinction. As mentioned previously there are other words that might be used for *bhava/ vibhava*. Now we are no longer restricted to the simple dichotomy of is/is-not, but instead we have a trichotomy between:

bhava	**vibhava**	**abhava**
present	*absent*	*non-existent*
certain	*possible*	*impossible*
being	*becoming*[7]	*non-being*
real	*imaginary*	*unreal*
central	*peripheral*	*?*
positive	*negative*	*null*
here-now	*here-then*	
(diṭṭhe va dhamme)	*there-now*	*nowhere*
	there-then	

to name a few of the possible choices.

It may be objected that in some cases 'present' is not a suitable translation for *bhava*. 'What about *bhava paccaya jāti*?', we may be asked. 'Certainly *bhava* cannot here be translated as "present", as opposed to "absent": it means "being", or "existence", and includes *both* what is present to experience as present and what is present as possible, does it not?' It does. The point is that in *bhava paccaya jāti,*

7. Note that 'becoming' must be considered as equivalent not to *bhava* (for which it is sometimes used as an English equivalent) but to *vibhava*!

bhava stands alone, whereas in *bhavataṇhā/vibhavataṇhā* it is *opposed* to *vibhava*. Where *bhava* stands by itself, as 'being', it clearly *includes both* present *and* absent: the word is not used with the same equivalence in both cases: Pali is a language, not a set of symbols like mathematics, and words, in any language, have varied meanings in different contexts. To assume that any word (let alone a word as difficult to handle as *bhava*) must always have the same meaning in all contexts is to assume an attitude that will prevent any understanding. (For a specific example, notice the two distinctly different uses of the word 'assume' in the preceding sentence.) What *is* maintained here is that when *bhava* is used in opposition to, or in conjunction with, *vibhava*, then it *must* be understood as 'present' (real, central, positive, etc.) in some sense in order for *vibhava* to have any real significance at all. And in such a case the word 'non-existence' will have no valid use, nor need it have.

VI. The Three Modes of Craving

A. Quality: *bhavataṇhā* and *vibhavataṇhā*

We have, through examination of the nature of experience and the use of specific examples, found ontological meanings for *bhava* and *vibhava*, and also found etymological justification (which is, however, of no more than confirmatory value—etymology will not by itself suffice to *derive* the meanings of technical terms). We have now to return to our experience to seek the meaning of the complex terms *bhavataṇhā* and *vibhavataṇhā*. We may now translate these as:

bhavataṇhā	**vibhavataṇhā**
*craving for present (experience)**	*craving for absent (experiences)*
craving for certain (experience)	*craving for possible (experiences)*
craving for being (experience)	*craving for becoming (experiences)*
craving for real (experience)	*craving for imaginary (experiences)*
craving for central (experience)	*craving for peripheral (experiences)*
craving for positive (experience)	*craving for negative (experiences)*

as we choose. [* The parenthetical expressions may be used throughout this paper.] Each possibility will have its own particular emphasis; each will illustrate a different facet of the same structure;

but though the shades of meaning differ the basic concept remains intact. It will be convenient for our present purposes to retain, generally, the translations 'craving for presence' and 'craving for absents'. Any of the other terms, however, may be substituted throughout this paper to examine how the various nuances which will be revealed compare with one another.

To begin with, we may note that presence is singular while absents is plural. Experience demands this distinction, for in our experience there is always only one total present experience but many total absent experiences. Thus, at this moment what is present is a complex entity which may be partially described as 'sitting at a desk writing a paper'. The sitting, the desk, the writing, and so on, are not separate entities but integral parts of a single composite whole: the present experience. The absent, or possible, experiences, however, are manifold: I *could be* standing or lying; at a table or beneath a tree; scratching, pondering, or talking; holding a pencil, a book, a pose, or nothing at all. I could be seeking, sighing, or sweeping. Many of these things are exclusive of each other (I cannot be simultaneously standing and sitting) but, one and all, they have the characteristic of being what I might do, of being possible, and, as possible, they infect and determine the actual (the sitting at a desk, etc.) for what it is; for at each moment that I remain seated I do so only because I *choose* to remain seated, and I can only choose to remain seated if there are other things I *might* choose but in fact do not. Being seated at a desk, however, is only one experience: it is singular, while the possible (absent) experiences are manifold.

Craving for presence. Now we have introduced the notion of choice. We can observe that any experience we are (presently engaged in) we are (so engaged) because we are (*choosing*) it. We have at any moment many possible things we might do (or be, or have) and we choose one of them. The choice is made, always, because, *as a totality* our present experience is the most satisfactory (or, at minimum; the least unsatisfactory) available choice.[8] Certainly a carefully reflexive attitude will reveal soon enough that we have

8. It is true, of course, that we sometimes refrain from choosing an experience which might bring us the greatest possible *immediate* satisfaction; but we are then experiencing a *reflexive* satisfaction; we savour, we anticipate, the future benefit to be derived by foregoing the immediate pleasure, and this anticipation is part of our total (present) experience.

chosen *this* particular experience out of all *possible* experiences because it is the one we most crave. And this is craving for presence: the craving for our present experience as being the most desirable of all experiences possible to us. Indeed, if we did *not* crave our present experience we would not have (or be) that experience; and if we craved no experience we would not be (any experience) so that by a careful examination of the negative character of intentionality we can see clearly, through practice of reflexion, that craving for presence is a *structural necessity*. So understood, there is nothing gratuitous about craving for presence: if it were not, there could be no experience whatsoever.

Craving for absents. If, however, we were to have *only* craving for presence there could never be the choice of any experience other than our present one, for it is only through intention that we alter (our experience); we must choose that which is as yet only possible, or absent, for it to become actual or present. Thus, I am now choosing to be seated-writing-this-paper. If I could experience only craving for presence I could never wish to be doing anything other than being seated-writing-this-paper, and I should never do anything else for all eternity.[9] But in fact I *can* put my pen down, stand up, and stretch; and I can do so whenever I wish (or intend) to do so. But I am not *now* doing so; if I do do so it will only be to satisfy a craving for what is *not* my present experience. This, however, is craving for only one particular absent; it is not structural because any one absent could vanish, become no longer even possible (i.e. no longer considered in any degree) so that I could no longer crave it (or, conversely, it may become actual, present, no longer merely possible, in which case I could not crave it *as an absent*), and yet the structure of experience would remain. Craving for an absent is not essential; it is not craving for absents.

If we examine our experience more closely, we will find that at any moment we have certain inclinations: I *might* stand up to stretch; in fact I am on the point of doing so; but—no, it's too much trouble. Perhaps I will lie down and read a book? I consider the possibility; that is to say, I pay more attention to it; it looms larger in

9. Strictly speaking, if there were no choice there would not even be time (thus the Dhamma, realization of which involves cessation of intention, is described as *akālika*, non-temporal), and it would be incorrect to speak of eternity, time, doing, or—for that matter—experience.

my sphere of thought, obliterating other possibilities, then I reject it—and so on. We are constantly faced with an infinite number of possible modes of being; we have chosen our present mode of being because it is the most satisfactory; but it is not *all possible* satisfaction; and we constantly "examine" other possible modes, seeking one that is more satisfactory. There is, then, an *inherent unsatisfactoriness* in our present (most satisfactory) experience: namely, that it is not *wholly* satisfactory; it is not *all possible* satisfaction. Sometimes it is so slightly satisfactory that we pay very little attention to it, and pay relatively more attention to various other possible experiences: this is either boredom or anxiety according to the specific nature of the experience. Sooner or later a "switch" will occur: one particular absent experience will be found to be more desirable than our present experience; and we will intend the absent experience which, in the act of intending it, will become the present experience, while our (former) present experience will now be absent, or possible.

All of this describes the method of choosing a present experience; that is to say, it describes craving for presence. But we have not yet got to craving for absents. We have noted that at any time our present experience, while the most desirable of all possible *individual* absent experiences, is not *wholly* desirable. Examining each *individual* absent experience, none will be more desirable than our present experience. (If it were more desirable, it would be our present experience.) But we also have an awareness of the *total potential* desirability of *all* absent experiences *as a whole*, and *this* is craving for absents. Most of the time the total desirability of all absent experiences combined will be greater than the desirability of the particular present experience. But though we crave that absent totality (for it is desirable), we cannot grasp it in its totality; so we feel a 'lack', an incompleteness: there is pleasure which presents itself as possible but which we cannot grasp, and in the face of this impossible possibility we flit from one particular absent experience to another, 'tasting' them, trying to retain them as we grasp simultaneously towards other possibilities which we envisage. In the nature of things we cannot experience all possible worlds. Thus, craving for absents takes the form of being an unattainable goal.

Since there are always more than one absent modes of being available, and since we always have some degree of awareness of them as possible, this awareness of their desirableness is always

present to experience: it is structurally involved in experience; for were it not, there could not be the phenomenon of *choice* with which we are constantly faced ('Should I do this, or that, or that, or that?'). If we were only conscious of one absent it would *always* be absent, for we would already have determined our present experience as being more desirable than that one absent experience. There must be a multiplicity (and an infinite multiplicity) for choice to have any meaning, for without such a multiplicity it would be impossible to account for the observed fact of *change*. And since intention is bound up with choice (we intend something: we choose it), intention (*cetanā*) could not *be* were there not this craving for absents as we have described it.

It seems, then, that we have arrived at an understanding of *bhavataṇhā* and *vibhavataṇhā* as they are involved in experience which shows them to be always present and structurally necessary for experience to be what it is. We have already come a long way beyond the traditional and the popular interpretations, which succeed in doing neither. Our description could be carried further in several directions (a few indications have been given); but we are not yet finished. There is a third aspect of craving which is also ontologically essential—*kāmataṇhā*, or sensuality craving.

B. Quantity: *Kāmataṇhā*

The most essential feature of the relationship between *bhavataṇhā* and *vibhavataṇhā* is that of *opposition*. We crave, on the one hand, the most desirable of all possible experiences—our present experience—and on the other hand all possible desirability—our absent experiences. We crave, on the one hand, to retain what is, and, on the other hand, to obtain all that is not. We seek to resolve this perpetual conflict; and there are two ways in which we may seek this resolution: quality and quantity.

The quality, or *type* or experience, involves such adjectives as 'happy', 'peaceful', 'anxious', 'anticipatory', 'repulsive', and so on. By quantity is meant the *intensity* of a particular experience. At any moment we can attend to just so much. We can divide this attention any way we choose: I can pay a great deal of attention to my present experience of writing, much less to, say, my in-and-out breaths, and hardly any at all to the chirping of birds outside my window. Also, if I choose, I can pay more attention to my breathing, to the sound of the bird, or to any other aspect of my present experience. I will

continue to be aware of all aspects of this present experience; but the *degree* of awareness of any particular aspect may vary according to my intention.

It can be observed that one aspect of any experience is essentially different from all other aspects: I can, in a very real sense, experience the absent experiences as part of my present experience: they are present *as absents*. I am aware of them as potential, for if I were not, it would be impossible for me to make any of them present as actual. If, for example, I were not aware that I could stand up and stretch then it would be inherently impossible for me to do so. I am aware of the experience 'standing-up-and-stretching' as possible, as absent. It has an essentially negative character; and it is negativity which is at the core of intention. Part of my present experience of writing, then, is the awareness of the possibility 'standing-up-and-stretching'.

All possible experiences are present as absent; and in some degree, however slight, I am aware of them all (for if I were not aware of them they would not be possible, or absent, but impossible, or non-existent). I can pay as much attention to them as I choose. If I pay a great deal of attention to one absent, it will "loom larger" in my present experience; it will become a less distant horizon. And all the various aspects of that absent experience—the idea of putting down my pen, the idea of the pleasure of stretching, the idea of not-doing-my-task, etc.—all of these aspects will take up a relatively larger share of my attention. Whatever desirability there is in that absent aspect of my present experience will also appear more clearly: not that the absent aspect itself will appear more desirable, but rather that the desirability is *more intensely presented*. And the same holds true of the present aspect of experience: if I attend more carefully to what I am (doing) and pay little attention to what I might be (doing), there will be as much less awareness of the desirability of the absent aspects of experience as there is less awareness of the absent aspects of experience themselves. Their desirability will not present itself as less, but as less present. And, correspondingly, the desirability of the present aspect of experience will appear more prominently (more presently: we can see here why there must be *degrees* of absence) and I will be less likely to intend a different experience.

VII. Intensity

We are at the cinema. The audience is silent; the only sound is the background music, tense and discordant. We see on the screen the silhouette of a man; it is night: he is dressed in dark clothing. Stealthily he walks towards the open lighted window of a house. Inside the house we see the hero talking quietly, earnestly, to the heroine, both of them unsuspecting of the intruder. The stranger takes a pistol from his pocket; we know, from the plot, that he is going to try to murder the hero: he is going to try to murder us, for we have been identifying ourselves throughout the film with the hero. We are tense, expectant: will he succeed? Will we be, vicariously, murdered?

Suddenly the film stops, the lights go on, and a voice from the projection room calls out: 'Anyone who wants to leave the theatre can do so now.' Will we leave? Will *anyone* leave? If anyone does go it could only be because he was not experiencing the threat, the thrill, of (vicarious) assassination. Certainly we will stay: we *want* to experience the danger, the excitement, the intensely stimulating experience of the expectation of death. We know, of course, that the hero will not, after all, be done away with: the film is only half-finished, the hero is never done away with, and besides, even if he were, we could escape death by merely ceasing to identify with him; these facts, however, do not lessen our fear.

But: *Is this pleasure*? Can we truly tell ourselves that the expectation of death, even vicariously, is a *pleasurable* experience? It may be *desirable* (it *must* be desirable, for we will go to a great deal of trouble to seek the experience), but 'pleasurable' is hardly an appropriate word for our feelings. We may be nervous, we may be tense; we may be scared silly (if it is a particularly good film); but we could never describe our experience in terms of *pleasure*. The word which most adequately describes our feelings is *intensity*. Whatever it is that we actually feel, we do so, in this most dangerous moment, with the greatest possible intensity we can muster. Our attention is fixed firmly upon the screen; the stopping of the film and the subsequent announcement, far from being welcome relief from the expectation of death, were sufficient to make us angry, because the particular intense experience we were involved in had been shattered.

Again, we will wait in long lines to get a chance to ride a roller coaster. Do we do so because the experience of plummeting at

incredible speed down an unbelievably steep incline, and the expectation that we shall be derailed and smashed to pieces at any moment (for during the descent itself we have no doubt that there is no other possibility) is *pleasurable*? Of course not: we do so because the experience is *intense*. So too, the hedonist, the masochist, the sadist, and similar types of individuals can be readily understood if it is once seen that the goal of their activities is not pleasurable experience (which is quality) but intensity of experience (quantity). And, of course, many examples of a more subtle nature could be adduced as well, examples taken from the daily routine of our lives, for if we observe our experience closely enough we will see that (for most people most of the time) what is normally sought is not pleasurable experiences but exciting ones.

Now we may ask: Why do we seek experiences of intensity? And the answer seems to be: the more intense our present experience is—the more attention we are paying to it—the less attention we have available to attend to the modes of experience which present themselves as absent. The less attention we pay to those absent modes, the greater, in comparison, will seem the desirability of our present experience. In fact, if we could ever succeed—to postulate an impossibility[10]—in paying full attention to our present experience, then the absents would cease to exist as such and with them would cease to exist the awareness of their desirability-not-realized.

In seeking intense present experience we attempt to come as close as possible to this goal of an experience which contains all desirability. This is why people will go far out of their way for experiences which in themselves—the expectation of vicarious death, as in our previous examples—cannot be called pleasurable in any sense of the word (not to deny, of course, that some experiences may be *both* intense *and* pleasurable: this makes them all the more desirable—see the Cūlavedallasutta, Majjhima 44/M I 299, where quality and quantity (delight and lust) are specifically associated with *taṇhā* as leading to the arising of the person (*sakkāya*). These experiences have a certain positive value (for we know that the hero will not be killed; and we know too that even if he were we should lose not our lives but no more than that which is involved in identifying ourselves with him; we know that the roller coaster

10. An impossibility, however, which lies at the root of the conception of 'heaven' in Judeo-Christianity as well as many other traditions.

really won't be derailed, etc.); we anticipate (in the above examples) the feeling of *having-cheated-death*; and it is *this* feeling (and not the expectation of death, which is what is experienced intensely) which may be considered as containing an element of pleasure (in addition to other elements, both positive and negative); and this is desirable to us.

Whatever desirability there may be in an intense experience, however slight, is magnified to our awareness. When we hold our hand before our eyes we can block out the sun; and yet we are told that the sun is 'in reality' (in a sort of 'reality' which is of a totally different nature from the reality of experience) billions of times larger than our hand. Yet the nearness of our hand and the distance of the sun make our hand loom larger to our awareness than the sun. So too, the intensity of an experience can be so great that the desirability of that experience looms larger to our awareness than the perhaps much more desirable but very slightly attended to totality of possible experiences.

This craving for intensity is *kāmataṇhā,* sensuality craving. It is in the realm of sensuality that intensity occurs: with reflexion we can observe that the experience in the cinema was almost entirely sensual in nature. And the more sensual an experience, the more intense it will be. Certainly an orgasm is one of the most intense experiences we know. Thus *kāmataṇhā,* sensuality craving, is the component of our experience which is the craving to make our present experience more intense.[11]

VIII. Pleasure

It may be asked at this point: Why does the Buddha not speak of a craving-for-pleasure? Is there no '*sukha-taṇhā*'? There is, but it is certainly not structural, or essential, in character. There can be experience which does not involve craving for pleasure.

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11. Perhaps it may be asked what we are to make of the unique passage at DN 33/D III 216:

> Three cravings: sensuality craving, craving for present, craving for absents.
>
> A further three cravings: sensuality craving, craving for matter, craving for non-matter.
>
> A further three cravings: craving for matter, craving for non-matter, craving for ceasing.

Pleasure, we may note, is a widely misunderstood term. It is qualitative in nature, yet it is often incorrectly identified with intensity, which is quantitative. Intensity is, in its nature, difficult to examine, simply because examination requires reflexion, and reflexion robs an experience of some of its intensity: we must attend to the immediate (intense) experience, which removes part of the total experience from immediacy and thus from the intensity. The more we reflect, the less intense an experience can be. Our observation of intensity is self-limiting. Pleasure, on the other hand, is difficult to perceive because it is a very *quiet* feeling. In fact, it may be *equated with* quietness. By 'quietness' is meant simply the *lack* of intensity, or, we might say, the 'detensity'. It is only by seeking out detense experience and then practicing reflexion on such experience that we can arrive at an understanding of pleasure. But since this sort of experience (one mode of which is *meditation*) is in conflict with *kāmataṇhā*, few people take the trouble to develop it to the extent necessary for adequate observation.

An indication of the nature of pleasure may be taken from the Suttas, however. *Nibbāna* is defined (at SN 12:68/S II 117) as *bhavanirodha*, cessation of being. This, it would seem, is as far as one can go in detense experience; in fact, it is so detense that it is reduced to zero ('it is tensionless', we might say) and one cannot properly speak of it as 'experience' at all, which must always have *some* intensity. Let us turn, then, to AN 9:34/A IV 415: "The Venerable Sāriputta said this:—"It is extinction (*nibbāna*), friends, that is pleasant! It is extinction, friends, that is pleasant!" When this was said, the Venerable Udāyi said to the Venerable Sāriputta,—"But what herein is pleasant, friend Sāriputta, since herein there is nothing felt?"—"Just this herein is pleasant, friend, that herein there is nothing felt."[11] If there were a structurally necessary '*sukha-taṇhā*' we should all have attained *nibbāna*.

Part of the difficulty in working towards this cessation of being may be accounted for by the fact that '*sukha-taṇhā*', craving for pleasure, for lack of experience (or, in the ultimate form, cessation of being) is purely gratuitous, so that in developing it one must oppose it to its structurally necessary counterpart, *kāmataṇhā*. The 'turning down' of *kāmataṇhā* is a gratuitous event, for there is no structural reason why it *should* be turned down, while there is structural reason for it to try to maintain itself. For if it disappears completely experience can no longer be possible, and—since ontologically experience *is* being—we arrive at cessation of being, or *nibbāna*.

IX. Conclusion

Now we have examined the three aspects of craving in terms of experience, let us summarize our results. We have craving for our present experience, which is structurally necessary for our present experience to exist. We have craving for absent experiences, which is structurally necessary for change to occur. These two cravings are in conflict—the one tending towards stability and the other towards change—and we attempt, with sometimes more and sometimes less success, but never with total success, to resolve them by intensifying present experience so that there is to our attention less absent experience for which to crave. All three aspects of craving can be observed by reflexion in our experience at any moment, and their structural necessity may (under proper conditions) also be observed.

Similes, like razors, are dangerous instruments when applied overzealously or pushed too far. A simile can never be a proof; it can only serve as an illustration of what has already been evinced. And even so one may be led astray if the parallel is followed too far. With these precautions the following simile is offered as an aid to working with the central concepts already presented.

A radio, we all know, has two control knobs, usually labeled 'tuning' and 'volume'. By use of the tuning knob we can switch from the 'station to which we are now listening' to any of the 'absent' stations, as we will. There is never more than one waveband tuned in at a time, but the other wavebands are not, therefore, non-existent, but simply not present, not tuned in. The correspondence to *bhava/vibhava* is obvious: we can only listen to the 'present' station, and however many good things (we think) are being broadcast by the many other stations, it is inherently impossible to attend to more than one of them at a time (though that does not stop some from trying—see footnote 10).

The other dial, 'volume', corresponds to *kāma*, in the sense of intensity: many people have their 'volumes' turned up full in their search for excitement, intensity; but however loud the broadcast (however intense the experience) it does not thereby become enjoyable—merely loud. Therefore there is constant use made of the tuning knob in the attempt to find a pleasurable broadcast. The normal principle is, then: keep the volume high and switch from station to station rapidly (keep the experience intense and seek as much variety as possible).

The Buddha, of course, reverses this principle: by the practice of *samatha bhāvanā*—development of calmness—one 'turns the volume down', while concentration on one's subject of meditation is analogous to keeping tuned to the same station. Only by staying tuned to one station can one begin to understand what is being broadcast (the best example, in literature, of this constant 'switching stations' is the internal monologue of Molly Bloom, the last chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*), and only by first turning down the volume will one be in a position to be able—given certain other conditions as well—to switch the knob to 'off'. And 'off' is *bhavanirodha*, cessation of being, *nibbāna*.

Finally, it may be said: 'This is all very well, this detailed description of *taṇhā*, but in practicing the Buddha's Teaching is it really *necessary* to make such detailed analyses? Do all *arahats*, for example, prepare themselves in such wise?' The answer is, of course, that such a detailed description is not necessary. What *is* necessary is that one *could* describe one's experience in some detail (this ability is acquired through the practice of reflexion, without which there is no practice of the Dhamma). But for certain people, at certain times, describing to themselves what they observe (by reflexion) may be of great use, and these people may find that actually committing their thoughts to paper—to make sure that they are not omitting, in their thinking, any essentials—may well prove worthwhile. For these individuals the making of detailed descriptions, even beyond what is found in any individual Sutta, may prove to be of value in their practice of the Buddha's Teaching and a help to them in their progress.

The present is never merely present: it is always pregnant—about to give birth to—with the possible.

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