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Foundations of Buddhism

The Four Noble Truths

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by

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By walking thou canst not the world's end gain;
Nor, if ye win it not, be freed from pain.
But truly, he whose wisdom is profound,
Who rightly sees the world—by him 'tis found.
He that has lived in holiness shall know
With mind serene the ending of life's round,
Nor to this world nor other long to go.

Samyutta Nikāya, 1. 87
Verse translation by the author

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The Four Noble Truths



Man kind, pondering and disputing, has been engaged for so long in trying to find an answer to the enigma of existence, and so many first-class minds have been devoted to the task, that had the problem been open to solution by the intellect alone we should certainly have been furnished with the definitive blueprint of our being, beyond all doubt or conjecture, many centuries ago. From the time when prehistoric myth became merged into an attempt to give a rational account of the universe the questions, 'What is life? How did it originate? Has it a purpose, and if so, what is it?' have haunted the imagination; yet still for most people they remain unanswered. Reason has offered a wide range of ingenious possibilities from the speculations of the Eleatics down to the more sophisticated theories of the modern epiphenomenalists, but so far it has failed to provide any reasonable explanation that is not open to equally reasonable objections. And whilst reason has failed, its alternative, supernatural revelation, has shown itself equally contradictory and inconclusive, and has suffered an even worse defeat. Its historical record has weighed heavily

against it because of the disastrous influence it has often exerted in human affairs. The private revelations of mystics, by their exclusively subjective nature, can never offer more than an insecure foothold for faith in those who have not directly shared them, and a doubtful faith is the father of fanaticism.

The record of man's speculative thought down the centuries has come to resemble a maze of tracks in a boundless desert. The tracks can be identified by their characteristics; they are the tracks of religion, of philosophy, and obliterating many of these, the more recent tracks of science. For the most part the tracks of religion go round in circles. Beginning as myth they continue as myth hardened into dogma, and so go over the same ground in endless repetition. Other tracks wander along aimlessly, drawn in this direction and that by new theories, new discoveries and new contacts, their path variable as the wind. These are the tracks of philosophy, the imprints of man's restless, inquiring mind—a mind which, despite its courage and adventurousness, has only the old material to work over and so is reduced to combining ideas in endless permutations, seeking to reconcile the irreconcilable and always failing to reach an end. Then, superimposed upon these there are the imprints of scientific thought, which has invaded philosophy to an ever-increasing extent, but which at the same time discourages any concern with ultimate issues, or with questions of value and purpose. Time and again the older tracks of philosophy and religion are seen to have crossed one another, and

where they met there are signs of a scuffle. Too often, there is blood on the sands of history.

So it has been ever since man emerged as an animal capable of abstract thinking. Now we have entered a phase in which supernaturalism has given way almost entirely to scientific knowledge, and the approach to the problem is somewhat different. Yet science has not brought us any nearer to the answers. The tracks of thought still remain indecisive, their beginning a mystery, their end a mark of interrogation.

Present day knowledge with its unprecedented accumulation of facts concerning the physical universe and the constitution of living organisms, has provided philosophers with a vast stock of new material to take into account, but so far the result has only been to give the mind more than it can handle. Far from clarifying the general picture, the effect has been to overcrowd the canvas. To correlate the various specialized branches of knowledge is a stupendous task, and one that is further complicated by the areas of uncertainty in each of them. The non-specialist is seldom in a position to be able to separate theory from established fact in the scientific disciplines, and this is particularly so in the case of those which relate to the life-processes, such as genetics and biochemistry, and are therefore the most relevant to the inquiry.

Besides this, the facts that science presents often seem to point to opposite conclusions. Despite the great advances that have been made in physics, technology is still working to a great extent with factors that are not completely

understood, or even satisfactorily defined. There are, for example, certain radiations forming the basic structure of the universe which appear both as waves and as particles, although logically they cannot be both at the same time. It is not even certain whether the expression 'at the same time' has any meaning in a universe where events can hardly be said to be simultaneous at all, and where the image of a star seen from a distance of many thousands of light years may be nothing more than the ghost of something that ceased to exist in space before man appeared on the earth. Expanding knowledge tends to cut us adrift from the apparent security of empirical facts, and in many ways the nature of thought itself has been brought into question.

There are people who entertain the hope that at some time in the not-too-distant future we may be able to get final answers to questions that have tormented men for generations by feeding all the relevant data into an electronic brain. But that hope is founded on two very large assumptions: first, that all the necessary data will eventually become available, and secondly that man can devise a machine more capable than its creator. So far, the most advanced electronic computer has not been able to do more in the field of mathematics than a human mind can do. It only does it more quickly. Even there it adds nothing new; there have been abnormal human brains that could extract cube roots with the same speed and accuracy. If a new and basically different mode of thinking is needed it must be sought for elsewhere than in electronic machines.

Does this mean that we shall never know any more about the ultimate things than we do now? The conclusions to which science moves at present are, in regard to the older beliefs, chiefly negative. They tell us what is no longer believable, but do not suggest alternatives or encourage any positive inferences. Yet in the quest for truth science contributes something of greater value than the facts it provides. It offers a method of inquiry, a disciplined use of the facts at hand, which is more productive than the pursuit of random theories. It indicates a method by which the data of experience, no matter how limited they may be, can be taken as starting points for a journey into unknown territory, and how from a few observed facts a general principle can be deduced. Furthermore, it includes as an important part of its method the readiness to discard whatever theory is found to be in disagreement with the observed phenomena, and this iconoclastic function of science points to a truth of the highest significance, namely, that in the search for reality what is most essential is not the gathering and tabulating of facts, but the understanding of those facts in their true relation to one another, and the preliminary stripping away of hitherto accepted ideas until we are left with nothing more than the bare bones of experience, but that experience of the most fundamental and universal kind. Science works on theories, certainly, but is prepared to abandon them when they fall flat; it does not build model cosmologies from selected materials.

This method, which has been responsible for everything we

can claim to have derived from our knowledge of the physical universe, is the only profitable one to follow when we seek to enlarge our understanding beyond the world of immediate sensory perception. And it is towards the possibility of such an extension that the psychological sciences are now turning. There is an increasing recognition of the truth that the world of external phenomena is only a part—and by no means the most important part—of man's total experience. What goes on within ourselves, in our psychological responses and motivations, and also on the intuitive levels of the mind, is being given the same analytical scrutiny as that which is turned on the objective features of the universe. For the first time, scientists are making a serious study of the mental processes, conscious and unconscious. They are giving equal attention to the paranormal aspects of the mind, such as the phenomena of telepathy, clairvoyance and the recollection of previous lives. From this may develop an entirely new approach to the problem of being.

A new one, that is, so far as the West is concerned. But nothing in mental science, or in philosophy, is really new. More than six hundred years before the Christian era, the tracks of speculative thought had reached a stage of the utmost complexity, in India. There we find the familiar arguments of mysticism versus rationalism, of empiricism, pragmatism, logical positivism, the opposing views of 'eternalism' and 'annihilationism', and of so many intermediate doctrines that it can be safely said that later

philosophers have been able to produce nothing that was not a duplication or variant of one or the other of them. When we examine the sixty-two *ditṭhis* or theories regarding the nature of life and the universe, which were current in the time of Gotama Buddha and described by him in the Brahmajāla Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, we find there the seeds of all later thought, the archetype of every idea that has appeared in philosophy between Plotinus and Kierkegaard. That some of them were the doctrines of established schools which had been in existence long before the birth of the Buddha is evident from the accounts of the Buddha's own search for illumination, for on renouncing the world the prince-ascetic Siddhattha first placed himself under two teachers from among the many sects that were already laying claim to ultimate knowledge. Those teachers, Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, were not logicians but exponents of yoga. As such they had their philosophy, but its final vindication was to be sought in the subjective realm, in an intensified perception outside the scope of formal reasoning. By the practice of *jhāna*, or mental absorption, they had in fact succeeded in raising consciousness to a higher power.

But great as were the achievements of these two eminent yogis, the ascetic Gotama did not find the full enlightenment he sought in their systems. Neither did he reach it by way of the extreme asceticism to which he turned later. He found, on the contrary, that an entirely new mode of approach was needed if he were to break through the

tangle of conceptual thinking on the one hand, and sublimated consciousness on the other. By the traditional yogic methods, he had gone beyond the world of forms, but not beyond that of ideas or the mere suspension of ideas. He found that the degree of illumination these methods gave was far from that of absolute knowledge and liberation. Thrown back on his own resources, with no longer any guiding principle except what he might find within himself, he returned in thought to the original impulse of his quest. Its beginning, significantly enough, lay in a very early experience he had known, of an intuitive kind. He had been sitting watching his father, the king, carrying out the ritual of the spring ploughing. His attention had been caught and held by the flocks of birds that followed in the wake of the plough; they were eagerly scratching in the newly-turned furrows for worms and insects. Driven by hunger, the all-demanding hunger that is ever present in nature, and excited by the sight of their living prey, birds of all kinds were quarrelling and fighting one another, a noisy, turbulent mass of feathered bodies, striking and tearing with beak and claw, unmercifully.

A common enough sight, and one that carries no special meaning for most people. But to the young Siddhattha, it had been a troubling experience. So indeed it should be to anyone who believes in an overruling power, a Creator, whose chief attribute is love. Birds—among the most delicate and beautiful of nature's offspring, creatures so light and ethereal that when man thinks of spiritual beings

it is with the wings of birds and something of their morning ecstasy that he pictures them—those same birds that have been the poet's inspiration and the nature lover's joy, at close quarters are seen to be fully as rapacious and as cruel towards smaller creatures and to their own species as the most ferocious of the larger animals. By such a slight transformation the winged angel becomes the winged tiger.

Yet, as the young Siddhattha saw even then, it could not be otherwise. Birds had to satisfy the urge to live, and for their food they had to prey on others and compete with others. So it was throughout nature, and from whatever particular the generalization was drawn it expanded into the same universal truth. Not only is nature indifferent to cruelty and pain, but it actually imposes them upon all living creatures as the condition and price of their existence. To inflict or to suffer; or both to inflict and to suffer—that is the law of life.

The peculiar insights of childhood, which often have an extraordinary clarity and depth, are too commonly lost when we become submerged in the world's incessant and implacable demands. As we accumulate knowledge we lose percipience; we know the fact, but its true inner meaning is estranged from us. So, regardless of the moral indifference of nature, men build and try to maintain systems of ethics, in the comfortable belief that in some way they harmonize with natural law and an underlying principle of goodness, call it God or what you will. But while doing so they are walking a tightrope stretched across a mocking abyss of negation. Woe to him who looks into that dark gulf and tries

to find there the features of an omnipotent, all-merciful ruler of the universe! If he sees anything of the sort it will be only in his imagination, the reflection of an idea instilled into him by tradition. If he sees nothing, he risks losing his balance. Unless he is strong enough to face this void, it is better for the tight-rope walker to keep his gaze fixed elsewhere, on some defined point in the sphere of action, and trust solely to the labyrinth organs, his own interior instruments of balance. His innate sense of right and wrong must be his support. It is not always a trustworthy sense, but for most intelligent people today it is all that is left. As for the theologian, in order to remain on good terms with the birds, he has to forget their private lives and admit only the idealized convention; let the angels have their wings, but not the beak or claws.

To most thinking people now, there is no longer any question of reconciling theology with reality. Not many, however, have the courage to face the facts and say, with the Existentialists, that 'the universe is absurd, because there is no reason for it to exist—no God has created it to declare his glory or serve as a dwelling-place for his creatures—and because nothing in it has any specific function to fulfil. Man has no destiny or privileged position, and not even the consciousness, which he has of himself, can save him from the universal absurdity of all created beings.' [1] That disquieting knowledge lies like a cancerous growth in the background of man's mind, driven inwards yet injecting its poison into all that he says and does and believes in.

Rationalism, humanitarianism and all the other substitutes that have been devised in place of the spiritual life lost to mankind are all essentially meaningless in face of the futility man feels, his sense of utter helplessness in an alien world. The Egyptians found no difficulty in worshipping a dead god, but modern man can only worship life.

When Siddhattha arrived at the most critical point of his quest, when all the traditional paths had been followed to their uttermost limits and still the truth beyond all truths had not been found, he recollected his early experience and what it had revealed to him. He remembered too that it had led him to another experience, on a different level of consciousness. At that time he had delved for the answer to the problem into the deepest layers of his being, for he knew instinctively that what he was seeing in nature was a true reflection of his own condition as a living, sentient organism doomed, like all others, to unceasing conflict. Each of us stands alone with each one's destiny, yet in another sense each is deeply involved with all others. If the solution to the world mystery was to be found anywhere it must be in the fullest, most intimate understanding of one's own nature.

So he turned his mind back to that incident in early life which had shown him his true path, to the glimpse he had had of a knowledge he possessed before creed and tradition claimed him. After his Enlightenment, the Buddha described it in these words:

"I recalled how once I was seated under the shade of a

jambu tree while my father, Suddhodana, was ploughing the royal furrow, and having put aside desires and impure states of mind, yet cognizing and reflecting in the bliss born of detachment, I attained the first mental absorption. Could it be that this was the way to realization? With that thought the clear consciousness came to me: ‘Yes, indeed, this is the way to realization.’”

Now the first mental absorption (jhāna)

is reached by purifying and tranquillizing the mind,

which can be done by the practice of *ānāpāna-sati*, contemplation of the breathing. The state of tranquillity is accompanied by joy and rapture, and in this jhāna refined and calmed thought-conception and sustained thought are still present though no longer engaged with a multitude of objects, but exclusively in the subject of meditation. Having risen from that Absorption, the mind will be calm and concentrated, and being no longer disturbed by desires of the more active kind, it becomes able to examine the factors of experience with detachment, and so enjoys a new clarity of perception. It is as though the rippled surface of a pool were to become smooth and still. When that happens two things follow: the surface reflects external things more accurately, and at the same time it becomes possible to see

through the surface to the depths below.

This is only the initial stage of the jhānic consciousness, which is progressive; but it opens the way to the succeeding levels. In these, the second, third and fourth absorptions, consciousness becomes more and more refined as the sensations of joy, the bodily perceptions, the reflex-perceptions and the remaining elements of self-awareness are discarded step by step. When the ascetic, Siddhattha, seated under the Bodhi Tree, remembered his first jhānic experience, he at once applied himself to inducing it once more, starting from the point of the first jhāna that he had reached spontaneously on that occasion. Then, having attained tranquillity, he went on to apply mental concentration to the analytical examination of his own interior world—the body, the mind and the mental objects. The technique of making the mind tranquil, known as Samatha bhāvanā, is the prelude to the cultivation of direct insight, or *vipassanā-bhāvanā*. It is in the latter form of meditation that the mind finally penetrates the Four Noble Truths and so comes to distinguish reality from illusion. The ultimate truth is then seen ‘face to face’. From being descriptive truths, that are merely grasped intellectually, the Four Noble Truths become known and understood and felt as certainties, on a new level of realization. In a quite indescribable way they become *experienced*, just as we experience the sensations within our own bodies, our thoughts and emotions—indeed, with an even greater force and reality than these.

Thus it was by intuitive penetration that Siddhattha attained Buddhahood after all other means had failed. He stood outside the limitations of the consciousness centred in an illusory self and was able to see through and beyond the cosmic processes, past the boundaries of space and time. At last, after those six years of arduous, agonizing and fruitless austerities, he was able to say, “I discovered that profound truth, so difficult to perceive, difficult to comprehend, tranquilizing and sublime; *which is not to be grasped by mere reasoning*, and is visible only to the wise (Majjhima Nikāya 26).

The truth he had penetrated was the fourfold division of knowledge, the basis of all that is comprehended in the term *ñāṇadassana*, insight-wisdom. Expressed as the Four Noble Truths, it comes first in the Buddha’s teaching and summarizes everything that follows. Concerning the first declaration of these truths, the Buddha said:

“The Perfect One, O Bhikkhus, the Fully Enlightened One, has established at Isipatana the supreme Kingdom of Truth, which none can overthrow—neither ascetic nor Brahman nor heavenly being nor fiend, nor god nor anyone whomsoever in the universe—by proclaiming, pointing out, revealing, setting up, explaining and making clear the Four Noble Truths.

And what are these Four Noble Truths? They are the Truth of Suffering, the Truth of the Cause of

Suffering, the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering, and the Truth of the Noble Path that leads to the Cessation of Suffering.”

Now these truths, as we shall see, are something quite different from the usual bases of religious belief; so different, in fact, that it has been questioned whether Buddhism is a religion at all. It has been disputed whether it is a philosophy, a code of ethics, a religion or a science. The fact is that it contains all of these and transcends them. Superlatively, it is the science of the mind. The Four Noble Truths crystallize the uniqueness of Buddhism and of the Buddha, for as the Teacher said:

“So long, O Bhikkhus, as the absolutely true knowledge and insight as regards these Four Noble Truths were not quite clear to me, so long I was not sure whether I had attained that Supreme Enlightenment which is unsurpassed in all the world ... But as soon as the absolutely true knowledge and insight as regards these Four Noble Truths had become perfectly clear to me, there arose in me the assurance that I had attained to that supreme, unsurpassed Enlightenment.”

Dukkha Ariya Sacca

The Noble Truth of Suffering

The Buddha formulated the first truth in the following words, which run like a recurring theme through the Buddhist scriptures:

“What, Bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of Suffering? Birth is suffering; decay is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering. To be separated from the pleasant is suffering; to be in contact with the unpleasant is also suffering. In short, the five aggregates of Existence connected with attachment are all suffering.”

This is often interpreted as a fundamental attitude of pessimism, even of despair, in the Buddhist outlook. It does so appear, for instance, in the use Schopenhauer made of oriental ideas in his philosophy. There is a tendency to see it as being in opposition to the vigorous, life-affirming attitudes of the West.

If the first Noble Truth were the whole of the Buddha's

message there would be ground for the objection. And if it is insisted that Buddhism should fit into one or other of the pessimistic or optimistic, life-denying or life-asserting categories of thought there would, on this truth alone, be little choice as to which it should be. But in the Buddhist view there is no justification for preferring one pole of thought to another; what is required is that the view of life should be objective, unbiased and realistic.

The first Truth is drawn from a critical examination, not only of the human predicament but of all aspects of the life of sentient beings. Its acceptance involves a correction and readjustment of the usual perspectives. It then appears as the recognition of a universal symptom, one that is normally disregarded only because it is a chronic condition. The Buddhist emphasis on it is the essential preliminary to diagnosis and treatment; it is the stage at which the physician tells the patient that he is ailing.

But it is not to be supposed that the first truth as formulated denies the existence of joy and laughter. It stresses the evils of life to counteract man's natural inclination to dwell on the pleasant and ignore and forget everything disagreeable—that psychological device by which the will to live is maintained despite the most discouraging experiences. At the same time it is a reminder that whilst at any given moment we may personally be enjoying what we call happiness there are incalculable numbers of sentient beings that are in misery, a reminder of which most people are continually in need. And in speaking of happiness it is

useful to remember that while many people feel reluctant to admit the overwhelming preponderance of suffering in life, comparatively few are capable of true happiness on their own account. Their only refuge from reality is in pleasure.

The Buddha said that he himself had known both pleasure and pain in their most extreme forms. If life were unrelieved misery, no one would feel desire to continue with it, while if it were unalloyed happiness, there would be no need for the remedy which religion seeks to provide. It may be added that in a world of ideal happiness and security, one of the hypothetical Utopias that men have dreamed of and which, incidentally, each dreamer constructs according to his own peculiar ideas of perfection, so that scarcely any two of them have features in common, there would be no incentive for effort of any kind. It is only where the adverse conditions of the world, as we know it, prevail, where good and evil, virtue and vice are in perpetual conflict, that man's noblest endeavours could be born. It is only in such a world, in fact, that these opposites could exist at all. And so far as the Utopias are concerned, human beings exhibit such a diversity of tastes, inclinations and desires that it is rather childish to suppose that any ideal society, which must necessarily be uniform, could ever confer happiness on all its members.

We hear much today about anxiety-neuroses as a part of modern, urban civilization, and they are real enough, but there is another side of the picture as well. Man's nature, balanced between the primitive and the civilized, needs the

alternation of states of consciousness. Even too much freedom from anxiety is alien to human nature, as the so-called affluent societies are beginning to show. The increase in crime, and particularly juvenile delinquency, the outbreaks of racial persecution and revolt against the established order are due as much as anything to the fact that the affluent society gives too much leisure to those who do not know how to use it, too much security to those whose natures demand risk and excitement, and too much orderliness to those who can express themselves only in violence. All these conditions are unnatural to perhaps the majority of men; the teenage boy, who joins in mass hooliganism, converts the highways into racing tracks or plays chicken with automobiles and trains, is only giving outlet to the primordial urge to face danger and assert himself against it. His self-esteem cries out for the thrill of conflict and the hazards that a too protective society denies him.

For the most part, man is still a primitive fighting animal; if it were not so, war would automatically have been abolished long ago. Augustine of Hippo said that all men desire peace, but all desire it in their own way. He was only partly right; all men want peace, but they also want it to be a kind of war. That is the unrecognized, 'unadmitted' fact behind all the talk of world peace at international conferences and in intellectual humanist circles: in the realm of his unconscious, man craves for the triumphs and pains of conflict.

The unrelieved boredom of eternal heavenly bliss would not suit man as he is now constituted. If suffering did not exist he would be obliged to invent it. Recognizing this fundamental fact of human personality, Buddhism attaches no importance to heavenly states, for it acknowledges that while the elements of personality with all their necessary imperfections continue to exist, an eternity of happiness would be insupportable. Without its opposite, happiness would have no meaning.

It is a worthy aim to strive for the improvement of worldly conditions and the perfection of the welfare state; yet there is a point beyond which it cannot be carried without leading either to internal disruption or some form of totalitarianism. The notion that a perfect human society can be evolved has taken the place of the hope of heaven which formerly prompted men to labour for their own perfection; and it has already given birth to more persecution and suppression of liberty than ever came out of the Inquisition. A perfect society cannot be fashioned by man who is imperfect; and if such a society were possible, man as he is would not fit into it. The historian and the anthropologist know that this is so, but unfortunately the demagogues are stronger. In a world ruled by the most vociferous elements, political and commercial, the individual is given little opportunity to seek one's own salvation. The only self-development he knows is the process of acquiring information which today goes by the name of education.

The implications of the Buddhist truth of suffering are

considerably more than appear in the bare words of the formula. That birth (or as Buddhism defines it, the perpetual process of arising) is painful, and that mental and physical decay, with their culmination in death, are unavoidable evils, is a self-evident fact. But their evil is not only in their actual occurrence; it extends beyond it, for at every stage of life, man is overshadowed by the thought of them, as he is by the threat of sickness, accidents, bereavements and other misfortunes of greater or lesser likelihood. Whatever attitude of disregard he may adopt towards these threats to his peace of mind, it can never be anything more than a very fragile shield against possibilities that are too disturbing to contemplate. These vicissitudes are inseparable from life, and one who tries to ignore them is the true escapist. To be positively life-affirming it is these facts above all others that we must be prepared to assimilate into our Weltanschauung.

The realistic philosopher of today has good reasons for his pessimism. His mechanistic universe has no place for human values, for hopes of individual fulfilment. He takes the same direct and disillusioned view of life as that presented in the Buddhist truth of suffering, but he knows nothing of the remedy. For him there is no assurance of any higher truth, no relief from the oppressive actualities that surround him in a cosmos apparently hostile, or at best indifferent, to man and his aspirations. A certain pride in his heroic despair may sustain him, and yet in his heart he may envy those who can still make the choice of faith against

reason, and like Kierkegaard, believe in a religion that is impossible because it is impossible.

Buddhism accepts the scientist's comfortless picture of the universe, but with a difference. In the Dhamma, both a higher truth and the means of realizing it are present as vital and knowable facts, and it is this which lifts the realistic outlook into the realm of hope. The dialogue between Buddhism and scientific thought is only just beginning, and as it develops it may result in a number of new and significant interpretations.

So far as the ordinary man is concerned, the loss of faith in traditional religious systems has left a spiritual vacuum which can be filled only by preoccupation with material improvements, or else by the never-ending struggle for some cause or other—the kind of struggle in which so often what is right and just becomes imperceptibly twisted into injustice, and the means become unworthy of the goal. For those who have seen the pitfalls there is nothing left but a resigned submission to whatever the world may impose. Yet man cannot endure a life that is entirely without values; if they are not to be found in nature he is under a compulsion to create them artificially. This is seen even in science where, as Conant has pointed out, [2] value judgments intrude themselves at every turn. When we are forced to apply these value judgments to life itself, it is disconcerting to find that while the general scheme is apparently as devoid of ultimate purpose as it is of moral imperatives, the pain and misery with which it is fraught

having no discernible end to serve, it is just those unpleasant features that predominate in man's total experience. An optimistic philosophy on late nineteenth century lines is hardly conceivable today. Even the possibility of one that is pragmatically constructive becomes more remote as humanity drifts helplessly from triumph to triumph in the conquest of nature. In the grip of nuclear politics and on the verge of gaining possession of the moon, most people find it best not to ask themselves what the word progress really means.

Literature and the arts tend to reflect the same bleak mood as contemporary philosophy. It is true that after *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot came to terms with religion, and Aldous Huxley's brittle and erudite wit turned to syncretic mysticism, but the note that had been struck continued to echo in their work and that of others. A later school of writers tried to find a substitute for the lost religious spirit in political attitudinizing, producing a certain effervescence but scarcely anything of real depth or enduring value. For the most part, literature at present has little to offer to mitigate the unpleasant aspects of life that it presents.

Formerly, the stock lament of the poet that joy quickly turns to grief, and the Elizabethan dramatist's concern with the night side of the soul were bearable, because they contained no foreboding of a final oblivion. For the effectiveness of his soliloquy it was necessary for Hamlet to picture death as the bourn from which no traveller returns—but he had in fact just seen his father return from it. Thus there was sadness,

and a great deal of sheer horror in classic tragedy, but not the chill at the heart, the twentieth century shudder at the stark futility of life, which the nihilism of today has given us. When man felt that suffering had meaning he could endure it; his suffering then provided the great underlying fact of all the finest art and literature, the truth that gave it depth and meaning. It is in the tragic that we recognize man's being, his commitment to the total human situation and his identification with all involved in it.

“There are three kinds of suffering,” the Buddha said. “They are intrinsic suffering of mind and body (*dukkha-dukkhatā*), the suffering of the aggregates (*saṅkhāra-dukkhatā*) and the suffering of transience (*viparināma-dukkhatā*) (Dīgha Nikāya 33). The statement is comprehensive, for it goes beyond the experiential modes of suffering into suffering as a cosmic necessity. Mental and physical suffering is the pain that is known in its most obvious form, but the ‘suffering of the aggregates’ lies in the state of disease, unrest and instability which is inherent in the arising and passing away of the momentary phases of existence, of which we are normally unaware, but which is present all the time. The suffering of transience comes from the impermanent nature of happiness; in the inevitability of its end, happiness, contains both the potentiality and realization of pain.

Of these three aspects of suffering it is the second alone that calls for a special understanding of the Buddhist world view. The aggregates here spoken of are the five *khandhas*, or groups, which constitute a living, sentient being. They are:

rūpakkhandha, the visible, tangible body of form, the physical aggregate; *vedanākkhandha*, the aggregate of sensations derived from the six sensory organs—eye, ear, nose, tongue, tactile organs and mind; *saññākkhandha*, the perceptions arising from these organs in contact with their objects; *saṅkhārakkhandha*, the mental properties including intellection, imagination, memory and volition, and lastly *viññāṇakkhandha*, which is the sum content of consciousness at any given moment. All of these aggregates are compounded, conditioned and impermanent; they are in a constant state of change—that is to say, of arising and passing away—so that there is nothing in the nature of a stable, persisting entity to be found in them.

Since they are no more than a flux of conditionality they cannot contain any self-existing, immutable core of personality; the conscious being is in reality a cause-effect continuum flowing through space and time, his existence in the moment of conscious awareness a cross-section of an eternal process. The suffering of the aggregate is inherent in their mutability; the process of coming to be which never attains the fulfillment of perfect being.

The problem of identity-in-change can be understood only by viewing identity as a relationship of cause and effect. So we find in the series of transformations undergone by the protozoa, which present no clear distinction between plant and animal life, a highly complicated pattern of individuality. It can hardly be said that a protozoon at one stage of its career is the 'same' protozoon as that which

existed before or that which will exist subsequently. Yet the protozoa do not arise independently; each transformation is the consequence of those that preceded it, and each is dependent also on external conditions. The closer we get to the basic structures of life the more evident this principle becomes.

In the case of human personality we find, on analysis, no mental or physical constituents beyond these five aggregates; for this reason personality is devoid of anything that can be called a self-entity. The ego is a conditioned subjective phenomenon, the psychic life a series of mental events. All that goes to make up a human being is comprehended in the 'three signs' (*ti-lakkhaṇa*) of all phenomena: impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and soullessness (*anattā*). By *anattā* (Skt: *anātman*, void of soul) is meant the absence of any permanent, unchanging essence of being.

At the same time it is these aggregates of personality, which arise by way of antecedent and co-incidental conditions, both mental and physical, that are the cause of clinging to life. In their function of sustaining and perpetually renewing the life-urge they are called grasping aggregates (*upādānakkhandha*). They are the grappling hooks with which beings fasten themselves, willingly, to suffering.

Like all other organisms, man is conditioned to respond to irritation, for the principle of irritability plays a leading role in organic evolution. It is not surprising, therefore, to find

that there are forms of suffering which he enjoys, and that pleasure and pain, as forms of stimulation, overlap one another and at times become indistinguishable. Bodily excitement moves from pleasure to pain by excess; aesthetic stimulation likewise crosses the border between joy and sadness. The beauty of a sunset can disturb and trouble the mind, yet no one avoids it on that account. Masochism is regarded as abnormal, yet perfectly 'normal' people go to the theatre to have their hearts moved to pity and terror by a great tragedy. Apart from this, pleasure in its very essence is a source of pain. While it lasts it is a disturbance and an agitation; when it ceases it leaves us dissatisfied and filled with longing for its continuation or repetition. The individual's personal reactions towards the experiences he finds pleasurable also involve some degree of suffering, as do the hazards he encounters in seeking them. Those who have a strong inclination towards luxury and sensual pleasures suffer when they are denied them, and find it difficult to practice restraint in their enjoyment of them. Yet the consequences of unbridled self-indulgence are likely to be even more painful, and of longer duration, than the pains of self-restraint. And this does not apply only to the grosser physical pleasures, even the most refined intellectual or aesthetic pleasures can become an obsession, and immoderate surrender to them may take the form of a spiritual orgy, destructive in its psychological effects. From whatever point it is viewed, pleasure either involves suffering as part of its function as an irritant, or brings

suffering about as its result. Considered in the ultimate sense, as an irritation, all sensation is suffering; its desirability or otherwise depends upon a purely subjective distinction.

Buddhism makes a further fourfold classification of dukkha into unmanifested, manifested, indirect and direct suffering. 'Unmanifested' suffering is that in which the suffering and its cause do not appear, as in the tribulation of mind accompanying anger, passion and lust; or where they are not visible externally, but take the form of inward physical pain. 'Manifested' suffering is that in which both the pain and its cause are visible, as in suffering under torture. 'Indirect' suffering is that which contains in itself, as do the sensual pleasures, seeds of subsequent pain, while direct suffering is the pain as immediately experienced.

In its cosmological aspect suffering has an existence independent of man's awareness, for, as we have seen, it is one of the three signs of being, the characteristics of all phenomena. Since everything in the universe is subject to arising and passing away, the three characteristics, Impermanence, Suffering and 'Essencelessness' are found in all compounded things, material and immaterial.

Matter is made up of four Great Primaries (*mahā bhūtā*), representing the categories in which it manifests. For convenience they are defined as the 'elements' of solidity, cohesion, temperature and motion. Space is sometimes added as a fifth. For philosophic purposes this is an

adequate description, denoting as it does the varied transformations as well as the functions of the atomic units (*kalāpa*) of matter. These atoms and their components are in a continuous state of movement and change, a process in which energy assumes the sensible aspect of solid physical substance. That this is nothing more than an appearance is fully confirmed by modern physics, for as Bertrand Russell has pointed out, "In pursuit of something that could be treated as substantial, physicists analyzed ordinary matter into molecules, molecules into atoms, atoms into electrons and protons. But now electrons and protons themselves are dissolved into systems of radiations by Heisenberg and into systems of waves by Schroedinger. The two theories amount mathematically to much the same thing. And these are not wild metaphysical speculation; they are sober mathematical calculations accepted by the great majority of experts."

Since matter has resolved itself into energy, whether it be as radiations or waves, all phenomena are seen as a succession of events in the space-time continuum, not as static entities. To be properly understood they must be observed as processes bearing the unitary characteristic of all forms of energy, that is to say, perpetual movement and transmutation. Here again the problem of individuality obtrudes itself, for like the protozoon the atom has no real identity from one moment to another in the phases of its hectic existence. The basic structure of the universe itself is energy, something which can only be described as an

unceasing restlessness and agitation.

In analyzing the five aggregates of personality the Buddha began with the gross components of the physical body and of all other matter as being made up of the four Great Primaries, enumerating and classifying them according to whether they are internal or external, existing in one's own body or in the objective world. Thus, solidity (*paṭhavī*), whether it be of one's own body or of external objects, is all of one order; it belongs to the same category of phenomena and is subject to the same laws of arising and dissolution wherever it is found. The same is true of the factors of cohesion, temperature and motion, all of which are found internally and externally. Each classification ends with the assertion: "Now, whether it be the internal element, or whether it be the external element, both are one in their nature. This, one should understand according to reality and true knowledge—that this element does not belong to me; this is not 'I', this is not my 'Self.'"

Wherever it may be found, physical substance is in fact of one kind in its fundamental structure. Instead of dividing matter into three classes, solid, liquid and gaseous, Buddhist cosmic analysis defines it by group characteristics, as *lahutā* (lightness, buoyancy), *muditā* (softness, plasticity) and *kammaññatā* (activity). Since in physics there is nothing that can be called absolutely solid, gaseous or liquid, but each partakes in some degree of the nature of the others, the Buddhist classification serves its philosophic purpose by referring all to the four Great Primaries. The purpose of

applying the knowledge specifically to the body, and of establishing a universal principle embracing all matter is to disabuse the mind of any belief that the human body is a supernatural organism distinct from other, material objects, and to counteract the tendency to regard the body as the 'Self' or as integral to the self.

In like manner the Buddha deals with the four immaterial or mental aggregates. Sensation, perception, volitional activities and consciousness are all causally conditioned factors. Their 'life' consists of thought-moments (*cittakkhana*) which arise and pass away with inconceivable rapidity. The real term of a being's conscious existence is no longer than the duration of one of these point-moments of consciousness which are strung, as it were, on the thread of cause and effect to give the illusory sense of self-identity.

So, in the Buddha's summary, "All aggregates are transient; all aggregates are subject to suffering, all things are devoid of self-entity. Body is transient; sensation is transient; perception is transient; mental aggregates are transient and consciousness is transient. And that which is transient is (necessarily) involved in suffering; and of that which is involved in suffering and change one cannot rightly say, "This belongs to me, this is 'I', this is my 'Self'. Therefore, whatever constitutes bodily form, or sensation, or perception, or mental aggregates or consciousness, whether it be gross or subtle, exalted or low, far or near, one should understand according to reality and true knowledge, "This does not belong to me, this is not 'I', this is not my 'Self.'"

In its fullest sense the word *dukkha* is to be understood as including all degrees of mental and physical uneasiness, from wild dissatisfaction to despair, mild discomfort to acute agony. The living organism, being impermanent in all its parts, is subject to that form of suffering which is inherent in its restless, ever-changing nature, the suffering that is inseparable from the process of coming-to-be which never reaches the state of true being. In the mental aggregates the characteristic of restlessness takes diverse forms, such as irritability, frustration, anger, worry, conflicting desires and emotions, all distressful states which are rightly to be understood as *dukkha*. Seen in this light, even what we know as happiness is not free from the *dukkha* of agitation. 'Happiness' exists only in contrast to its opposite mode of restlessness which we call 'sorrow.' Since pleasure and pain are merely relative states, neither of which can be experienced without its opposite, Buddhism denies the possibility of a perfect, unchanging and unalloyed happiness where the conditions of conscious life prevail. The reasons for this will become more apparent when we examine the second Noble Truth, which deals with the source and origin of suffering.

Dukkha Samudaya Ariya Sacca

The Noble Truth of the cause of suffering

If this life were the only one through which we have to pass, if death were the end of joy and grief, alike, the existence of pain would have no special significance. The problem would be restricted to the practical means of alleviating it, so far as that might be possible. At the same time there would be no place for moral values in a life which originated fortuitously and pursued its course through a series of meaningless events to an equally meaningless end. The abstract concepts of good and evil, right and wrong could be discarded in favour of whatever artificial and arbitrary standards happen to suit the needs of the moment. In such circumstances it is conceivable that compassion itself would not rank very high in the scale of human values; for, logically the highest achievement would be personified by the individual who was most successful in avoiding suffering himself, even though he did so by

inflicting it on others.

But mankind on the whole has never accepted this view. Although the conditions of nature are of a kind that outwardly at least give very little reason for assuming a moral order in the universe, man in principle has always behaved as though there were in fact some absolute values to be taken into account. He has an innate conviction of the reality of right and wrong, and even in violating the law he has acknowledged it. It is this instinctive belief in moral order that prompts us to seek a cause, conformable to our notions of justice, for the ills that afflict the world of sentient beings.

Buddhism takes for granted a system of moral law which requires a continuation of the life-process. It is a continuation by way of cause and effect, the cause being *kamma*, or volitional actions, and the effect *vipāka*, the pleasant, unpleasant or hedonically neutral experiences that follow from them. The moral equilibrium is maintained by the operation of an impersonal law which produces good results from morally wholesome thoughts, words and deeds, and bad results from those that are morally unwholesome. The succession of lives which the term 'rebirth' signifies is not the reincarnation of a soul-entity. It is an individual current of relationships in a cause-effect continuum, expressed as 'That having been, this comes to be.' Identity from one birth to another derives solely from this causal relationship, as it does in a single life-course when the child becomes the adult, the adult the

octogenarian; its analogy is that of milk turning to curd, and curd to cheese. It is the purely conventional 'identity' that is found in the different phases of the protozoon and the atom.

In teaching that there is continuity after death in the form of a succession of rebirths Buddhism does not stand alone, but in agreement with many of the oldest religious traditions of East and West. The difference—an ontologically important one—lies in its treatment of the phenomenal personality, in which no single element of the five aggregates survives, but all are incessantly renewed in accordance with the universal rule that where a cause has existed a result must follow from it. The doctrine of rebirth in Buddhism is frequently criticized on two grounds: that it is inconsistent with the principle of *anattā* (soullessness), and that it is a dogma at the root of a system which claims to be undogmatic. In regard to the first objection, a proper understanding of identity by way of causal connection as it appears in biological, psychological and even purely physical processes shows that the Buddhist dynamic concept of personality is the true one, and that it does not preclude the kind of identity which we commonly accept when we speak of the 'self.' [3]

The second criticism on closer scrutiny is found to be quite unjustified. Leaving aside man's intuitive feeling that some part of his subjective awareness, of his individualized cognitive experience, if not his total personality, will survive death, and also the more important consideration that if there is indeed any principle of justice and moral order in

the cosmos it can be found only in a law of moral retribution extending beyond the present life, there is a great and increasing mass of evidence to show that rebirth is a reality, and that it is possible in certain circumstances (for instance in hypnotic trance) to remember previous lives. The doctrine of rebirth is far from being an unsupported assumption. It is a truth which is accessible to us in two ways: by reason of its necessity on teleological grounds, and directly through personal knowledge or the evidence provided by others. The sole 'common sense' objection to it—that one cannot personally remember a previous existence—falls to the ground when we consider the limitations of memory and the various circumstances which may impede and inhibit it. So far as heredity and other genetic considerations affect the question, they are not at all inconsistent with rebirth as it is understood in Buddhism. On the contrary, they provide a necessary part of the process by which mental energy produces organic life out of inorganic matter, and at the same time preserves the identity of species. Much that is still obscure in biological processes, such as the actual means by which hereditary characters are transmitted through substance that has only chemical properties, requires an additional factor to make it explicable. So too does an allied group of phenomena, the type of behaviour in animals, and to some extent in human beings, which is called instinctual. The persistence of such characters, for which biology provides no adequate explanation, becomes more intelligible when it is related to

the Buddhist concept of a rebirth-continuum. Life is the outcome of two orders of causality the physical and the mental, and in the Buddhist view the genetic patterns through which hereditary characters are transmitted are the physical media of the mental energy conditioned by past kamma. [4]

It was in the light of this knowledge of the continuity of existence that the Buddha looked for the origin of suffering not only in the current life but in former states of being. He discovered it in a primordial urge, the thirst (*taṇhā*) for sentient existence:

“What now is the Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering? Truly it is that Craving which gives rise to fresh rebirth, and conjoined with pleasure and lust, finds gratification now here, now there. It is of three kinds: sensual craving (*kāmatāṇhā*), craving for existence (*bhavataṇhā*) and craving for self-annihilation (*vibhavataṇhā*).”

Sensual craving, which is generated by contact of the organs of sense with their objects, is sixfold: craving for pleasurable sights, sounds, odours, tastes, tactile sensations, and mental impressions. These are known as the fields (*āyatana*) of sense-perception. The craving for existence takes three forms, corresponding to the spheres in which life manifests; that is, craving for existence in the sensual spheres (*kāmaloka*), in the fine-material spheres (*rūpā-loka*) and in the formless spheres (*arūpā-loka*) or mental planes. The craving

for self-annihilation is the group of desires that accompany the erroneous view that the aggregates of phenomenal personality constitute a soul, which is annihilated at death. [5]

In another classification craving is considered under two heads: *vaṭṭa-mūla-bhūta-purima-taṇhā*, the primordial craving which is at the root of rebirth, and *samudācārataṇhā*, craving manifested in conduct. The first is the craving which promotes and sustains the round of existences, as it appears in the formula of Dependent Origination. There, “Conditioned by ignorance (of the true nature of existence) arise the kamma-formations (*saṅkhāra*); [6] conditioned by the kamma-formations arises consciousness (in the special sense of rebirth-linking consciousness, the mental impulse which like an electric spark bridges one life-continuum to another); conditioned by consciousness arises mind and body (of the new life-sequence); conditioned by mind and body arise the six fields of sense-perception; conditioned by the six fields of sense-perception arises contact (between organ of sense and sense object); conditioned by contact arises sensation (*vedanā*), conditioned by sensation arises craving; conditioned by craving arises grasping (confirmed and habitual craving), from grasping arises becoming (the life-impulse); from becoming arises birth once more and from birth come decay and death,” thus closing the circle. The formula of Dependent Origination in this way summarizes the causal relations of three cycles, a past, a present and a future life, with craving as the motivating

factor.

“Thus it is, Ānanda, that craving comes into being because of sensation” (Mahā Nidāna Sutta). But for the sensation to exist there must already be mind and body, and that mind and body itself must have been brought about by prior craving, so that the sequence of cause and effect extends infinitely into the past. This is precisely the idea which Dependent Origination presents; it is a system of related conditions rather than of temporal sequence, and actually stands for two modes of causality, serial and contemporaneous. The divisions of past, present and future may be placed indifferently at either of the two points where a new arising takes place; that is, at ‘mind and body’ or at ‘birth’. But the points at which it can be brought to an end are, as we shall see later, the two dominant psychological factors, ‘craving’ and ‘ignorance’, which are contemporaneous and mutually supporting.

The question of a First Cause does not enter into the Buddhist view of the cycles of becoming (Saṃsāra), nor of the universe. When the process of incessant arising and passing away is seen as a complex of interrelated conditions, any theory of a primal cause becomes irrelevant. In the logic of causality there can be no absolute beginning, for each cause is seen to be the effect of a preceding cause. So a Creator God must himself have had a creator; if he had not, the argument for his existence on the basis of causality collapses. The idea that there must have been a beginning in the ultimate sense rests upon a defect in human

understanding, as certain modern philosophers have pointed out. We are brought to the position stated in the *Visuddhimagga*, that:

“No God nor Brahma here is found,
Creator of Saṃsāra’s round;
Empty phenomena flow on
Subject to cause and condition.”

From another standpoint it can be said that the act of creation is taking place from moment to moment, as in the Bergsonian system of creative evolution. The prime mover is the craving impulse, which may be regarded as the basic energy of the universe.

This does not mean that the universe in its present form had no beginning. It came into existence in accordance with natural law (*niyāma*), but it did not originate out of nothing. It is not the first or only system of its kind, but is one of an infinite cyclic series, of which no beginning can be found. As one cosmic system comes to an end another one comes into being.

Science offers several tentative theories as to how the present universe began, the two most widely accepted being based on the expanding universe hypothesis and the steady state cosmology respectively. Its ‘beginning’ can be placed with a fair amount of certainty at about 5,000 million years ago. But whether it started with a tremendous cosmic explosion or in some other way, Buddhist cosmic analysis

holds that the matter, or energy, of which it is formed, derives from that of a previous universe, and that it was set in motion by the kamma of the beings belonging to that former system. The evolution (*samvatta*) and devolution (*vivatta*) of world systems follow a course parallel to the process which governs sentient life. When a cosmic system comes to an end, the matter of which it was composed disintegrates and its atomic units become dispersed or compressed in space in a uniform distribution. For aeons it lies dormant, but in course of time the suspended energy becomes active once more, and the physical laws of attraction and repulsion come into play. Clots of matter begin to form, and from them the island universes emerge and take shape. After a further lapse of time, organic evolution begins, and runs its course to the end of the cycle, when the cosmic structure again disintegrates and the entire process is repeated. In this fashion evolution and devolution follow one another in a ceaseless round, all the time bound up with the kamma, or volitional energy, generated by living beings. And since all willed action is motivated by desire it is in literal fact the force of craving that perpetually renews and sustains the process.

Concerning the genesis of craving, the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* VIII.I says:

“Through ignorance a being fails to understand the impermanent and ‘substanceless’ nature of existence as it truly is. He enjoys the things of the world, taking them to be real and lasting, and so creates a craving

for them. On account of his cravings he seeks to obtain one and avoid the other. This leads to the continuity of his life-process, a chain of struggle for living. His craving and grasping do not end with the destruction of the physical body, but keep the struggle on in another birth.

His good and bad activities (*saṅkhāra*) of one life determine the type of his birth, his mental disposition and all his resultant consciousness in the subsequent one. This gives rise to the mental and physical aggregates in the new life according to its own nature. Depending on the mental and physical aggregates he acquires the six fields of sense-cognition. Depending on the six fields of sense-cognition he gets contact with the object of sense. The contact produces sensation; the sensation gives rise to craving, and craving to grasping. Grasping continues the life-processes. It does not cease with the death of the being, but flows on in the next birth. Thus he starts a new life again; he becomes old and dies, experiencing all kinds of grief, lamentation, suffering, anxiety and despair. Perpetually he moves on and on in the round of birth and death so long as he is in the bondage of ignorance."

Man's failure to comprehend the universe is due to the primal nescience (*avijjā*) which to a greater or lesser degree governs all conceptual thinking. Since *avijjā* is linked with

taṇhā it deepens as the mental defilements caused by craving increase, lessening as they are reduced. It is an invariable rule in the Buddhist system of causal relations that two or more factors are required to produce a given result. As we have seen, in the genesis of a living organism the mental energy produced in a past life combines with the physical processes of biology to form a sentient being. Similarly, in the genesis of world systems the total thought-energy of beings from the past activates the physical substance of the universe to bring about a new cycle of evolution. All these processes, therefore, are partly mechanistic ones, to the extent to which they depend upon purely physical laws, and partly are subject to variability through their dependence on mental causes and the intervention of will. To will is to desire, and so desire is really the chief determining factor; if it were not present at all the automatic processes of nature would take control and the universe would run its course to the end as a lifeless mechanism.

The constant pattern of interdependence is shown in the arrangement of the factors in Dependent Origination, where those that are conditioned by past causes alternate with others that are subject to modification by the act of willing. Thus, in the section relating to past causes, Ignorance gives rise to volitional thought and action (*saṅkhāra*), the Ignorance factor being a continuing influence on the thought and action. Then, at the time of death a thought-moment arises which constitutes the rebirth-linking

consciousness, its nature being determined by the volitional thought and action which preceded it. So past kamma shapes future tendencies, the rebirth-linking moment of consciousness carrying these tendencies into a new life just as the germinal seed carries in its chemistry the pattern of the future plant—a pattern that may, however, be altered in some respects by subsequent events. The new mind and body thus brought into being is naturally equipped with the sensory apparatus and the fields of sensory perception appropriate to it. From these come its contacts with the external world and the sensations accompanying them. So far, the connections have represented two belonging to the order of past causality, Ignorance and the Volitional Mental Formations, and five which are their resultants, from Rebirth-linking Consciousness to Sensations. These last five, therefore, are conditioned by the kamma of the past.

But at this point the element of free will comes into play, for while sensations are predetermined as to their nature, the mental responses to them are not. Although ordinarily the response to a pleasant object is desire, which may prompt some action, if the moral sense tells us that the action is a bad one, the will can prevent it. Even the desire itself can be reduced, suppressed and controlled by an act of will or by diverting attention to something else. Consequently, the dependent connections which follow from this point, that is, Craving, Grasping and Becoming are not predetermined. They represent the active side of the picture, in which man shapes his individual destiny. It is necessary to stress this

point because it is often mistakenly believed that the doctrine of kamma is fatalism. Nothing could be further from the truth; Buddhism emphasizes above everything else the moral responsibility of the individual and the power that is his to create his own destiny. So in the last two connections, birth (rebirth) and decay and death, we find summarized the future resultants of the causes generated in the Craving-Grasping-Becoming series.

Considered from the standpoint of temporal sequence, Dependent Origination is thus divided into three sections, relating to past, current and future life. These three have two major divisions: the active order of becoming (*kammavaṭṭa*), in which causes are generated, and the passive order (*vipākavaṭṭa*), which stands for the results of those causes. Ignorance and volitional mental formations belong to the active order, whilst Birth and Decay and Death belong to the order of passive resultants. The middle section, that which deals with the current life, includes both the passive and the active orders. The five links from consciousness to sensation are passive resultants; but the remaining three, craving, grasping and becoming, represent the active, and creative process.

Again, at the beginning, ignorance and volitional mental formations are a summary of the active and causal process in the past; at the end, decay and death summarize the passive resultant series as it follows in the future. Thus the circle closes on itself in perpetual, self-sustaining operation, a cause-effect complex, the links of which can be considered

either as a temporal sequence or as existing concurrently in the form of mutually supporting factors.

Understood correctly, the process of Dependent Origination does not postulate either absolute causal determinism nor absolute freedom of will. It describes an interplay of conditions which is ultimately subject to the individual's freedom of choice between good and bad courses of action. It is by this choice—the anguish of decision, which is itself a form of dukkha that life imposes on all morally responsible beings—that each individual determines for himself and by himself the nature of his rebirth. Whether it shall be in a state above the human condition or in one below it, or, if it is a human rebirth, whether it shall be a happy or an unhappy one, depends entirely on the actions—of body, speech and mind—that are being performed here and now. It depends, in short, on the degree to which craving is brought under control. And, as we shall presently see, Buddhism offers a means whereby craving can be entirely eradicated, and the process of Dependent Origination brought to an end for good. [7]

But before moving on to the third stage of the inquiry, which is concerned with the possibility of escape from the round of rebirths, another function of craving is worthy of notice: that is, the part it plays in organic evolution.

We have already noted that apart from the Buddhist interpretation, life appears to be devoid of ethical values and purpose. Yet in the evolving pattern of organic

structures it seems to display a strong directional trend. From extremely simple unicellular organisms nature has evolved highly complex forms, equipped with delicate sensory apparatus and a brain capable of rational thought. But this has been accomplished only over a long period of trial and error involving many failures, and by employing methods that are both wasteful and productive of the most extreme suffering, such as would have been eliminated in a better designed plan. So on a general survey the system seems to be in a certain sense directed, yet at the same time blundering and inept. There is sufficient order to suggest a creator; but an omnipotent and benign Intelligence could certainly have accomplished the work in better style.

Science fights shy of teleological theories and concentrates attention on the means by which natural effects are produced; and so we have hypotheses such as that of natural selection, backed up by the observed facts of genetics, bio-chemistry and kindred sciences, which go some way towards explaining the *modus operandi* of evolution but do not offer any suggestion as to the 'why' of the process. The moving force behind or within it remains a mystery, and the paradox of a plan, apparently well conceived as to its biological results but very badly executed, and without any purpose except that of evolution for evolution's sake, has come to be considered so insoluble as to discourage further speculation.

An entirely fresh light is thrown on the problem, however, by recent studies that have been made of the electrical

activity in the brain, as registered by the electroencephalogram. These have established definitely that the neural impulses and the processes of cognition are associated with electrical impulses.

Now if the brain functions by means of electrical energy—or, what is equally likely, by some other form of energy that acts in the same way as electricity—and is able to move the mechanism of the electroencephalogram solely by impulses generated in the brain cells, we have strong reason for supposing that mental activity is capable of spreading from its source in much the same way as do radio waves. It is in fact a radiating energy comparable to others that are perceptible to us, such as light and sound, and others—imperceptible, such as cosmic radiations. This would at once explain such diverse phenomena as hypnotism, telepathy and various forms of extra-sensory perception. But the possibilities it opens up become still wider when we apply the hypothesis to organic evolution, and clearer still when we connect it with the Buddhist concept of craving as an actual force, generated by the mind and capable of operating on and through the physical substance of the universe. [8]

The psychology of behaviourism holds that desire, manifesting as the 'will-to-live,' is the basic motivating urge in all forms of life that have analyzable mental reactions. The desire may be unconscious, revealing itself in instinctive patterns of behaviour, or it may be fully present to the conscious mind. When it lies beneath the surface of

consciousness it functions as the Freudian 'id' and the 'libido' of Jung; that is, as the energy resident in all instincts. It may also be called the primordial life-urge; but whatever name may be given to it, in reality it is the force of craving—precisely that *tanhā*, which the Buddha declared to be the root cause of rebirth.

Every volitional act is motivated by some kind of desire; consequently, thought itself is practically inseparable from desire in the mind still dominated by ignorance. And it is the thought-impulse that radiates outwards in the last moment of consciousness which gives rise to another psycho-physical organism, thus renewing the sequence of cause and effect in a fresh life-continuum. Throughout the creative process the urge that maintains this perpetual renewal of energy is the desire to experience conscious life, 'seeking, now here, now there,' for satisfaction.

In the first stages of evolution the individualized yet impersonal currents of craving, generated in the past, operate upon the physical substance of the universe and out of inorganic matter give birth to the first single-cell protozoa. From there the life energy proceeds to build up and elaborate, by the familiar trial and error methods we have noted, more and more complex and specialized forms, the craving-impulse being transmitted through the currents of 'rebirth' and the laws of genetics by parallel and complementary processes. Wherever the necessary chemical constituents of life exist together with the suitable conditions, life in some form manifests itself; and this

principle obtains, as Buddhism has always taught, throughout the innumerable worlds that exist simultaneously in the universe.

So out of material from various sources, we are able to construct a picture that is teleologically satisfying and fully in conformity with the known facts. To summarize: it was under the domination of the craving-urge that the rudimentary forms of life evolved into the complex structures of the higher animals and man. More and better sensory organs were needed to satisfy the unconscious craving for sense-experience, and so the vital urge worked through the processes of biological evolution to produce them. Life is not the work of a conscious creator, with his object fully in view; it is the result of a blind, groping force, transmitted from one living being to another in the course of rebirth. Hence the many 'mistakes' thrown aside in the course of evolution—animals, which, through over-specialization or some other cause, became unfitted to their environment and consequently died out.

Science as yet has no valid theory to account for the purposive factor in evolution, nor for the persistence of instinctive behaviour patterns in those birds and animals which perform quite complicated operations such as nest-building, seasonal migrations and so forth, without the necessity of learning. Neither can it decide the much-disputed question of whether acquired characters are genetically transmitted, many geneticists feeling compelled to deny it, against the evidence of observation, solely on the

ground that no biological mechanism can be found answering to the requirements of such transmission. Here again Buddhist doctrine comes to the rescue, for it shows how both instinctive behaviour and acquired characters can be transmitted by the re-arising again and again of the same current of identity—that is, 're-birth'—within the same species, the same ethnic or cultural group and even the same family. For whatever tendencies are acquired and cultivated in one life, whether of animal or human being, will make themselves apparent in subsequent lives, until some fresh impulse of kamma diverts the life-current into a new channel.

Buddhism teaches that the distinction between human and animal life is not one of kind, but of quality, Man is not a distinct and special creation; he merely represents

the highest peak to which organic life has reached on this planet. Man alone has the power of moral choice, whilst animals are merely suffering passively the results of past activities dominated by lust, ill-will and delusion. In other words, they are the products of former bad kamma. Their individual life-currents remain on a low level until the particular mental tendencies that produced them have run their destined course. When the results of the bad kamma are exhausted some residual good kamma from a former human life, of which all beings have a latent unexpended potential (*katattā-kamma*), comes into play and the life-current emerges on a higher level once more. This process can be understood only by discarding the idea of an

individual self-entity, call it soul or what one may, and thinking instead in terms of the current of 'becoming' which Buddhism insists is all that constitutes the rebirth-continuum. By thus bridging the gulf that appears to exist between the human and animal worlds, the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth and kamma gives to life that organic unity which scientific thought demands. At the same time it shows that the universe, despite its seeming purposelessness, is in reality the manifestation of moral and spiritual law.

Thirty-six streams of craving are recognized in Buddhist psychology; eighteen of them internal (*ajjhatta*), depending upon subjective concepts, and eighteen external (*bāhira*), associated with subject-object relationships. [9] But every type and degree of craving contributes to the sum total of the grasping which fastens living beings to the wheel of rebirth. This is especially true of the lower forms of craving connected with the unwholesome mental concomitants: lust, ill-will and delusion. So we find in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (III, 33): 'Where so ever beings spring into existence, there their deeds will ripen; and wherever their deeds ripen there they will gather the fruits of those deeds, be it in this life, or be it in the next life, or be it in any future life.'

And in the *Samyutta Nikāya* comes the solemn affirmation:

'There will come a time when the mighty ocean will dry up, vanish and be no more. There will come a time when the mighty earth will be consumed by fire,

perish and be no more. But yet there will be no end to the suffering of beings who, fettered by ignorance and ensnared by craving, are hurrying and hastening through this round of rebirths.'

Dukkha Nirodha Ariya Sacca

The Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering

The Buddha's Enlightenment was attained in three stages. In the first watch of the night he acquired the knowledge of previous states of existence, the memory of which arose as the fruit of intense mental absorption (*jhāna*). In the second watch he obtained the knowledge of the manner in which beings pass from one state of existence to another in accordance with their deeds. At this point he had discerned the truths of suffering and of moral causality as it operates through kamma. At the conclusion of the last watch he penetrated to the knowledge of the underlying causes of existence, the process of Dependent Origination. He then understood both the origin of conditioned existence, with its root in craving and ignorance, and the means by which the process could be brought to an end.

And in the last watch of the night, out of compassion for living beings, by fixing his mind on Dependent Origination and meditating on it both in order of becoming and in order of cessation, at sunrise he obtained supreme Enlightenment.

And then he uttered these words of triumph, such words as countless myriads of Buddhas have spoken in the past:

Vainly have I wandered through many births, seeking the builder of this house. Painful indeed is repeated birth. Now, O Builder of the house, you are seen! Never again shall you build. All your rafters are shattered, the ridge pole cast down. My mind has attained the unconditioned; the cravings are extinguished.

(Dhammapada Comm. and Dhammapada vs. 153-4)

The house is the body; the builder is craving, passions are the rafters and the ridge-pole is ignorance.

‘For, through the complete fading away and extinction of craving (*taṇhā*), clinging to existence (*upādana*) is extinguished; through the cessation of clinging the process of becoming (*bhava*) is extinguished; through the extinction of becoming, rebirth (*jāti*) is extinguished, and through the extinction of rebirth, decay and death, grief, lamentation, suffering, sorrow and despair are extinguished. Thus comes about the extinction of this entire mass of suffering.’

‘And thereby comes the cessation and overcoming of bodily form, of sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness; this is the cessation of

suffering, the end of disease, the overcoming of decay and death.'

(Saṃyutta Nikāya, 12)

The cessation of suffering is Nibbāna, in Sanskrit Nirvāna, a word formed from the negative prefix *nir* added to the root *vā*, which has the original meaning 'to blow.' In its Buddhist sense Nibbāna means the cessation of the process of becoming, as when a fire goes out from lack of fuel or because of ceasing to blow on it. The fire is the threefold conflagration of lust, ill-will and delusion; when it ceases to burn because the fuel is withheld, the life-affirming impulses come to an end and there is no more rebirth. As experienced by the Arahāt during the remainder of his natural life term it is *saupādisesa-nibbāna*—the state of Nibbāna in which the mental and physical aggregates still exist, but are no longer associated with clinging. It is absolute peace, tranquility and fulfillment:

'No anguish is there for him who has ended his journey and is freed from all grief, who is emancipated in every way and has destroyed all attachments. There are no more wanderings (in saṃsāra) for such a one, who like the earth, has no resentment, is firm in character like a city gatepost and as pure as a deep pool free from mud ... Calm is the mind, calm the speech and calm are the actions of him who, rightly understanding, is wholly liberated and at peace.'

(Dhammapada, Arahatta-vagga)

When the Arahāt reaches the end of his life, the final cessation of his life-process (*samuccheda-maraṇa*), he attains *anupadisesa-nibbāna*; that is, the absolutely unconditioned Nibbāna in which none of the factors of individualized personality remain. It is not the annihilation of a being, because in the true sense no being has ever existed; there has been only a process. Nibbāna is the cessation of the process, the extinction of the aggregates of clinging that formerly gave rise to the phenomenal life-continuum. It is the only state in which suffering cannot find a foothold.

In the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta the Buddha declares:

‘This, Bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of ill: the complete cessation, giving up, abandonment of that craving, complete release from that craving and complete detachment from it.’ [10]

Here, in the basic statement of Nibbāna from the Buddha’s first Discourse, we have the psychological state presented in terms that are ethically meaningful; they relate to an attitude towards the world and towards the contents of sensory perception. But what of the *nibbānadhātu*—that is to say, Nibbāna considered in its own nature?

In that, its ultimate aspect, it is defined as *asaṅkhata-dhātu*, the Unconditioned, because it is not subject to change or conditionality; it is unitary, in the sense that it is not

compounded, as are all phenomenal things. But to give it a precise definition in positive terms is not possible. All the terms of reference we use in thought and communication are founded upon things and ideas belonging to the realm of conditionality, so that we have no means of formulating an idea that is not related, by comparison or contrast, to some other idea. The whole content of our experience is a complex of relationships. Thought swings continually between the opposites—light and dark, heat and cold, good and bad. All these are relative values representing oppositions or degrees of contrast, none of which has any real meaning apart from that relatedness. Since nothing in the world of sense-experience has any character except in relation to something else, the only way to regard the sensible world is as a sphere of merely relative reality. It is certainly real on one particular level of awareness, the one on which consciousness normally functions (although, it must be noted, its nature as to details is not altogether the same for any two individuals), but on other possible levels of consciousness it must of necessity be quite unreal perhaps even non-existent. The physicist sees the universe in terms of electronic forces, the mathematician reduces it to mathematical formulae; and while both have to deal with the world as though it really is what it appears to the ordinary man, their picture of it on the level of their work is something quite different. They have to live simultaneously in a world of the senses, taking it to be just as their sensory faculties report it to be, and in another world of the intellect,

in which they know that the sensory picture is not a true one. The information we receive has a kind of validity, but in the ultimate sense the picture formed from it is a product of sensory legerdemain. The 'solid' objects we see and feel consist more of space than of matter. This fact is demonstrated by the structure of the smallest atom known, that of hydrogen. In the hydrogen atom the distance of the electronic orbit from the nucleus is, relative to its size, twice the distance of the earth from the sun a matter of 96,000,000 miles. On comparison, 'solid' matter contains more space than our solar system. What we cognize through the senses, therefore is not the 'thing as it is' but a relative aspect of it—relative, that is, to our own particular mode of consciousness. To say that the physical world as it appears to us is unreal or false, because it exists as a fact in our consciousness, but to say that it is real, as an external and objective reality, is even further from the truth.

This being so, it is clear that any thinking about Nibbāna must be done without concepts, if such thinking were possible. The fact that it is not possible has given rise to some unfortunate misunderstanding. Because he consistently refused to give any positive definition of Nibbāna, and also declined to commit himself on such points as whether the world is eternal or not eternal, and whether the Arahant continued to exist in Nibbāna or not, the Buddha has been called an agnostic. His reply to such questions was that they were wrongly put. They are in fact based on misconceptions regarding the reality or non-reality

of the objects discussed and the terms of reference used in respect of them. Any reply given in positive or negative form would be about equally misleading. If this life were 'being' in the true sense, Nibbāna would be non-being—annihilation. But that is not the case. On the other hand, if this life were utterly unreal it would amount to non-being, in which case Nibbāna would be absolute Being. If anything, this comes somewhat nearer the truth; yet it is not quite true. This life is not 'non-being,' for, the experience of suffering is real; and Nibbāna cannot be called Being because it is not characterized by any of the features which we associate with 'being', such as the awareness of individual identity. It is devoid of selfhood. The other questions are open to similar objections; they are inadmissible because they refer to states and predicates that have no real validity. The Buddha refused to answer them not because he did not know, but because he did not wish to falsify. One important point, however, is very definitely maintained: there is no place in the system for a Creator-god. The Buddha expressly condemned the idea of an overruling power, as leading to fatalism and inaction.

The questions that are called 'undetermined' (*avyākata*), as well as that concerning the 'undeclared' (*anakkhāta*) nature of Nibbāna, are placed in their correct perspective by the Buddhist recognition of two kinds of truth; that is to say, conceptual or relative truth (*sammuti-sacca*) and absolute truths (*paramattha-sacca*.) Conceptual truth embraces the sphere of relativity, its validity being conditional upon

accepted modes of relationship, and also to a great extent on the laws of semantics. Thus when the Buddha said: (*attāhi attano nātho*) 'Self is the lord of self' (Dhp 160), he was using the word 'self' (*attā*) in its indispensable semantic role, as a word without which no thought of phenomenal personality can be expressed. In somewhat similar fashion we are constrained to say 'It is raining,' although we should find it difficult to define whether by 'it' we mean a cloud, the sky, or the sum of meteorological conditions. The personality, since it is a compound of ever-changing aggregates, a current of transition, has no noumenal existence. In the ultimate (*paramattha-sacca*) view, it is descriptively a current of events in the space-time continuum; while beyond the realm of description it does not exist in any sense. It is a merely conventional reality. It is necessary to reiterate this point because upon it hangs not only the Buddhist view of life but the concept of the ultimate goal.

It follows that a question framed in terms of relative reality cannot be answered in the same terms to give an answer that embodies absolute truth. In the ultimate sense, *paramattha-sacca* cannot be expressed at all; even the analytical descriptions of phenomena are only approximations to it, arrived at by eliminating the cruder misconceptions belonging to relative truth. It is that kind of 'descriptive' *paramattha-sacca* which is contained in the Buddhist ethico-psychological system, the Abhidhamma, where states of mind are dealt with, unattached to any concept of a persisting entity, in a manner that

foreshadowed the trends of present-day dynamic psychology. There we find thought without a 'thinker' and action without an 'actor', both thought and action being no more than aspects of the life-flux of consciousness, just as they are in the philosophy of Henri Bergson.

Nibbāna cannot be described; it can only be realized. And in its realization the problems connected with it, and with the nature of being in general, are not so much answered, as found to have been really non-existent all along. They are unreal constructions, born of the mistaken belief that ultimate truth can be understood through conceptual thinking bound to the realm, and the terms, of sense-data. It is for this reason that the brave attempts of philosophers, profound and intricate though they may be, have never succeeded in giving a final and completely satisfying account of reality.

Notwithstanding the essentially incommunicable nature of the nibbānic experience, however, there are a great number of descriptive words applied to it in the Pāli texts—words that have easily-understood value meanings and which convey the ideal of release from saṃsāric conditions in non-philosophical language charged with the poetry of aspiration. Nibbāna, besides being the Deathless is the Further Shore (*para*), the Ageless (*ajara*), the Happy (*siva*), the Permanent (*dhuva*) and so on. But finally and always it is *anakkhāta*, the Undeclared, and *asaṅkhata*, the Unconditioned. Seeking for the cause of cause we find only effect. The final Nibbāna is the point at which cause and

effect become identical, and by cancelling one another out, annihilate space, time and all the categories of thought.

‘O Bhikkhus, of all the states, compounded or uncompounded, Liberation is the best—namely, the expulsion of pride, the relief of thirst, the uprooting of attachment, the cutting off of the round of birth and death, the extinction of craving, emancipation, cessation, the going out of worldly desire.’ (A. II, 34.)

There is no lack of positive affirmation as to the reality of Nibbāna. It is found wherever the Buddha contrasts the timeless and unchanging *asaṅkhata-dhātu* with the world of birth, decay and death, as he does in these words from the Udāna:

O Bhikkhus, there is an Unborn, Unmade, Unoriginated, Unformed. Were there not such a state, Unborn, Unmade, Unoriginated, Unformed, there would be no escape from that which is born, made, originated, formed. But since, O Bhikkhus, there is indeed this, state of the Unborn, Unmade, Unoriginated and Unformed, there is truly an escape from the born, made originated and formed.

It is in such assurances as this that the reality underlying the third of the Four Noble Truths—the cessation of suffering as a positive goal—is brought most vividly before the mind.

Dukkha Nirodha Gāmini Patipadā Ariya Sacca

The Noble Truth of the Way to the Cessation of Suffering

‘And what, O Bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of the way that leads to the cessation of suffering? It is the Noble Eightfold Path, namely, Right Understanding, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.’

The fourth Noble Truth outlines the practical means by which Nibbāna is to be realized; but before announcing it the Buddha cleared away certain misconceptions which were current at the time and which had proved a serious hindrance to the quest for truth. In the first discourse after his Enlightenment, that delivered to the five disciples who had deserted him when he abandoned the path of self-

mortification, he explained that there are two extreme courses to be avoided: on the one hand, that of sensual indulgence, which is “base, low, vulgar, impure and unprofitable,” and on the other, the practice of extreme physical asceticism, which is “painful, impure, vain and unprofitable.” In contrast to these stands “The Middle Path, which the Enlightened One has discovered; the Path which enables one to see and to know, which leads to peace, to discernment, to full knowledge, to Nibbāna. Free from pain and torture is this Path, free from lamentation and anguish; it is the perfect path” (Saṃyutta, 56).

From the standpoint of modern psychology the Buddha’s condemnation of extreme ascetic practices goes deeper than appears in the actual words he used. In certain forms of yogic asceticism still practised today there is an element of pathological self-hatred, perhaps also a masochistic pleasure in the experience of pain. Whatever the motive may be, such practices result in an inordinate preoccupation with the body, which instead of releasing the mind only fastens it more securely to its physical base. Around these manifestations of inverted sensuality there tend to gather constellations of obstructive ideas, such as that of a soul or spirit-entity distinct from the body and warring against it, the belief that the flesh is the enemy of the spirit and therefore a fit object of hatred, for which the spirit must be continually devising fresh tortures to bring it into subjection. Much the same attitude is found in the flagellations, the hair shirts, the prolonged fastings and the

courting of martyrdom in early Christian asceticism. The body was the ever-present enemy; but an enemy is someone important, especially when one cannot get away from him. By being so regarded the body took on an independent life, and that a malignant one. Very often it hit back, with unpleasant psychological consequences.

But Buddhism eschews violence, to oneself as much as to another. The body must be brought under control, certainly, but by different methods. It is not itself the seat of the passions, but only the vehicle for them. It is in the mind that the citadel of craving must be stormed, not in that poor ox, the body, which only obeys its driver.

The Noble Eightfold Path, therefore, is a way of life that begins with the mind and ends with the mind transcended. Its first requirement is Right Understanding, which means an intellectual grasp of the nature of existence. 'What now is Right Understanding? Truly, it is to understand suffering, the cause of suffering, the extinction of suffering and the Way to its extinction' (Dīgha Nikāya 22). Elsewhere it is explained that it also means the understanding of the law of moral causality, the roots of meritorious and demeritorious action. In the Saṃyutta Nikāya it is also said that 'When one understands that body, sensation, perception, the mental aggregates and consciousness are all impermanent (and hence subject to suffering and devoid of selfhood), in that case also one possesses Right Understanding.

'What now is Right Intention? Truly it is intention that is

free from greed and lust, free from ill-will, free from cruelty.’ It is of two kinds: Right Intention concerned with the things of this world, which expresses itself in good actions bringing good worldly results; and Right Intention directed towards the higher path of purification, which has Nibbāna as its fruit.

‘And what now is Right Speech? Truly it is to avoid lying, and adhere to the truth; to abstain from tale-bearing and to promote harmony instead of dissension; to abstain from harsh language and cultivate gentle, courteous speech; and to avoid vain, irresponsible and foolish talk, speaking always in reasoned terms on subjects of value, such as the Dhamma of the Enlightened One.’

‘And what now is Right Action? Truly it is to avoid the taking of life, to avoid theft and misappropriation, to avoid sexual intercourse with women under the protection of father, mother, brother, sister or relatives, married women, women under the ban of the king, engaged women and women who are the temporary wives of others. Now avoidance of killing, of theft and sexual intercourse with the prohibited classes of women is called mundane Right Action; it results in good worldly results (in this life or another). But the turning away from these things, the complete rejection of them with a pure mind intent upon the Path to deliverance—that is called transcendental Right Action and has its results in the paths and the fruits of purification.’

‘And what now is Right Livelihood? Truly it is to reject wrong means of livelihood and to live by right means.’ Here, wrong livelihood means gaining a living by slaughter or any other way detrimental to the welfare of sentient beings.

‘And what now is Right Effort? Truly it is the Four Great Efforts (*sammappadhāna*): the effort to avoid, the effort to overcome, the effort to develop and the effort to maintain.’ The first is the effort to avoid the arising of evil, demeritorious states that have not yet arisen; that is to say, the arising of attachment on the presentation of sense-objects to the consciousness, from which greed and sorrow result. The second is the effort to overcome evil and demeritorious states that have already arisen through such causes. The third is the effort to develop good and beneficial states of mind conducive to enlightenment. The fourth is the effort to maintain these states when they have arisen, by perseverance, energy and endeavour.

‘And what now is Right Mindfulness? Truly it is the contemplation of the Body, of Sensations, of the Mind and of Mind-objects. There, the disciple dwells in contemplation of the Body, of Sensation, of Mind and Mind-objects, ardent, clearly conscious and attentive, putting away worldly greed and grief.’ This refers to the Four Stations of Mindfulness which is described as ‘the only way that leads to the attainment of purity, to the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, to the end of pain and grief, to the entering upon the right path and the realization of Nibbāna.’ (Mahā

Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta).

‘And what now is Right Concentration? Truly it is the absorption of the mind, the fixing of the mind upon a single object; this is Right Concentration.’ The objects of concentration are the Four Stations of Mindfulness, and its prerequisites are the Four Great Efforts. ‘The practising, developing and cultivating of these things constitute the development of Concentration.’

Each of the eight sections of the Path has a very precise meaning, a meaning that is related logically to the Buddhist philosophical and psychological system as a whole. Thus, Right View is something more definite than simply ‘having good thoughts.’ It stands for an intelligent grasp of the realities of life, in outline if not in detail. At the other end of the Path we come to Right Concentration, which signifies the transcendental state of consciousness, in which the truths that were formerly apprehended only by the intellect, and imperfectly, become the object of direct intuitional experience. It is only when this is attained that Right View itself is perfected. The eight sections of the Path are not to be taken seriatim or progressively, but are to be cultivated together, for the perfection of one can come only through the simultaneous development of each. Just as in the case of the links comprising the formula of Dependent Origination, the members of the Eightfold Path do not stand in a solely temporal cause-effect relationship to one another; they are to be considered as mutually-supporting factors also. Right Concentration develops and lifts on to a higher plane the

knowledge that started as Right Understanding, and so the end is adumbrated in the beginning.

The path is conventionally divided into three parts: Sīla (Morality), Samādhi (Concentration) and Paññā (Wisdom). Right Speech, Action and Livelihood belong to Sīla. Right Effort, Mindfulness and Concentration to Samādhi, and Right Understanding and Intention to Paññā. A detailed discussion of Buddhist ethics is not possible in the compass of this work; it is sufficient to note that morality in Buddhism springs directly from the central concept of its philosophical system, the ultimate non-reality of self. The 'bad' or unwholesome deed is one that is self-centred and self-regarding, and so governed by greed or lust, animosity and delusion. The 'good' and meritorious is that which is selfless and inspired by benevolence and insight. Buddhist morality is not an arbitrary code of behaviour, tenuously attached to a theological system of doubtful worth, and subject to the exigencies of time and circumstance; it is rooted in principles that are universal and undeviating because they belong not to the changing world of events but to the inner world of psychological motive, which is a constant of human nature.

Where do craving and attachment come to an end? The Buddha's reply was that they come to an end where they arise—in the contact between the organs of sense and their respective objects, the things seen, heard, smelt, tasted, touched and conceived in the mind. When sensations are observed as bare experience, as empty phenomena having

no relation to an experiencing 'self' and without awakening the discriminative responses, desire for them is cut off at its source. A process of dissociation takes place. So, in 'Contemplation of the Body' bare attention is directed to the body, considering it impersonally as a compound of physical elements unattractive in themselves as for instance, a hair in a dish of food. By analyzing its constituents and dispassionately noting their repulsive aspects, attachment to the body is weakened and sooner or later, according to the degree of concentration achieved, it is eliminated. The body, instead of being viewed as an inferior and inimical 'self' is in this way seen to be precisely what it is: matter in momentary process of decay and corruption, the product of physical laws and past kamma.

The subjects of meditation, or more properly mental cultivation (Bhāvanā) are of various kinds suitable for different temperaments, but they all have one object, the realization of the voidness of phenomena, the essential voidness of the observer and the thing observed, which can only be arrived at by intense mental absorption. Now this voidness (*suññatā*) becomes fully comprehended when the jhānas, or states of absorption, have themselves been transcended:

'No longer giving attention to that (jhānic) consciousness he should now advert repeatedly in this way: 'There is not', or 'Void, void', or 'Secluded, secluded', and so give his attention to it, contemplate it and strike at it with thought and with applied

thought.’ Thus, ‘The Bhikkhu who is devoted to the defining of the four Great Primaries immerses himself in voidness and eliminates the perception of living beings. Since he does not entertain false notions concerning (different kinds of beings), because he has abolished the perception of such beings, he conquers fear and dread, delight and aversion; he is not exhilarated by agreeable things nor depressed by disagreeable ones; and as one having great understanding he either attains the deathless or secures for himself a happy rebirth.’

(Vism. XI. 117.)

Between the state of delusion bondage and suffering and that of complete release lie the paths and fruits of attainment, marked by the progressive elimination of ten fetters. They are: 1. the delusion of selfhood, 2. doubt, 3. belief in the efficacy of ritual observances for deliverance, 4. sensual craving, 5. ill-will, 6. craving for form-existence, 7. craving for formless existence, 8. conceit, 9. restlessness, 10. ignorance. One who has destroyed the first three is known as a Stream-winner; he has entered the current of emancipation and his destiny has become fixed. He cannot be reborn in any sphere lower than the human, and if he does not attain full emancipation earlier he is bound to do so within the course of seven lives at the most. When, in addition, the next two fetters are weakened he becomes a Once-returner, who will not have to endure more than one

rebirth in the sensuous sphere. At the time of completely destroying all the first five, which are known as the grosser fetters, he becomes a Non-returner, who will not be born again in the spheres of sense. [11] With the breaking of all the ten fetters he attains the state of Arahāt. He has then realized the paths and fruit of the holy life, and for him the painful round of rebirth has come to an end. These four stages of the Noble Person (*ariya puggala*) are sometimes separated by intervals, sometime they follow immediately after one another but at each stage the 'fruit' or attainment follows instantly upon the realization of the path in the series of thought-moments. When the thought-moment of insight flashes forth, the meditator knows beyond all doubt the nature of his attainment and what, if anything, still remains to be accomplished.

When, by the total eradication of lust, hatred and delusion (*lobha-kkhaya*, *dosa-kkhaya*, and *moha-kkhaya*) the arahāt gains Nibbāna, he obtains with it the type of enlightenment known as *sāvaka-bodhi* (the Disciple's Enlightenment), that goes with his attainment. That is, he fully understands the causes of existence and how they have been counteracted, and he experiences an extension of his faculties consequent upon the breaking down of the delusion of selfhood, which normally acts as a barrier to the mind, isolating it in the personal realm of sensory experience. But the enlightenment of a Supreme Buddha is of a higher order and of illimitable range. Over and above the knowledge pertaining to Arahātship he acquires *sabbaññutā*, the perfect

understanding of all things. This, he gains, as the result of his determination formed in a previous life and realized through the cultivation of transcendent virtue, to become a Fully Enlightened One, a World-teacher for the welfare of all beings; for without that completeness of knowledge he could not set in motion the Wheel of the Law. But by the nature of things, the greater part of his knowledge is not communicable to others. Nor is there need to communicate it. In speaking of natural phenomena the Buddha used the language and ideas of those whom he was addressing, and to whom any other ideas would have appeared bizarre and incredible. One does not speak of the general theory of relativity to a person who can barely understand Euclid. When he was questioned as to whether he had taught all he knew to his disciples the Buddha replied with a simile. Taking a pinch of dust on his nail he asked which was greater—the pinch of dust he was holding or the remainder of the dust on the ground. The obvious answer was given, whereupon he said: ‘Just so much greater is the knowledge of the Tathāgata than that which he has taught.’

From this, attempts have been made to prove that the Buddha had an esoteric teaching which he reserved for a select body of disciples. But the meaning is made clear by what follows: ‘Nevertheless, everything necessary for complete emancipation the Tathāgata has taught.’ And again, ‘The Tathāgata has taught the Dhamma without making any distinctions of esoteric and exoteric doctrine. The Tathāgata has not the closed fist of a teacher who keeps

some things back.’ The things the Buddha knew but did not teach were such as did not conduce to liberation, and had no bearing on the task of guiding others across the ocean of Saṃsāra.

He did not encourage metaphysical speculation, knowing it to be profitless. He did not offer theories. ‘The Tathāgata holds no theories’ is a phrase that occurs frequently in the texts. Having ‘seen the truth face to face’ he had discarded views based on mere reasoning and imperfect knowledge. Reason is a good guide—none better so far as it goes—and certainly nothing that is contrary to reason should be accepted as true; but the point of departure for the ultimate destination is where reason unaided can carry us no further. It is there that the Adhi-citta or higher mind takes over and completes the journey. Until such time as it is allowed to do so the ratiocinations of the discriminating, conceptual mind remain to some extent a hindrance.

Yet knowledge can be pressed into the service of wisdom, and today we are perhaps in a better position to understand the truths the Buddha taught than were our ancestors in the days before science anatomized the physical world. The scientific method, the mental discipline of relating thought to known facts, has its value. The Buddha was the first to apply it to the search for absolute truth. Beginning with the observed fact of suffering he sought out its causes and their antidote by analysis of the factors of existence. The result was the Four Noble Truths which summarize the Dhamma. And just as science offers its discoveries for empirical

verification, so the Buddha offered his teaching, not as a theory, a religious dogma or a visionary's dream, but as a demonstrable truth which anyone can verify for oneself. When he opened the gate of the Deathless he did not give the key to one man or any group of men. He left it wide open to all, for each to enter by one's own effort.

Unquestionably, the Dhamma is 'profound, subtle, discernible only by the wise', but in the language of the Buddha wisdom does not mean academic learning. It means the ability to see things clearly. In this, a child is often wiser than a philosopher. It was a childhood experience of meditation that gave the Buddha the first glimpse of the way he was to take. Age, experience, erudition—these things may be accompanied by wisdom or they may not. The innocence of childhood may be just a simple, animal ignorance, or it may be accompanied by insights brought from former lives. But at any age, the man who is in full possession of his faculties, whether he be learned or illiterate, has the means by which he can find out the true nature of life and can tread the path to Nibbāna. For him the gate of the Deathless stands open still.

Notes

1. Jean-Paul Sartre: *A Literary and Political Study* by Philip Thody, 1960
2. *Modern Science and Modern Man* by James B. Conant
3. “To deny plumply that ‘consciousness’ exists seems so absurd on the face of it—for undeniably ‘thoughts’ do exist – that I fear some readers will follow me no further. Let me then immediately explain that I mean only to deny that the word stands for an entity, but to insist most emphatically that it does stand for a function.” William James, *Does Consciousness Exist?*, 1904. The reader is invited to contrast this with the static concept of Descartes’ “*Cogito ergo sum.*”
4. For a fuller treatment of this subject the reader is referred to *The Case for Rebirth*, **Wheel Publication 12/13**
5. T. W. Rhys Davids, following Spence Hardy, takes *vibhava-taṇhā* to be ‘the love of the present life, under the notion that existence will cease therewith, and that there is no future state,’ therefore, ‘craving for success (in this present life).’—*Buddhist Suttas*, ‘Sacred Books of the East’ Vol. XI, n. In the Commentaries, however, the emphasis is laid on the desire for self-extinction which accompanies

the belief that there is a self-entity which is annihilated at death.

6. *Saṅkhāra*: In the context of Dependent Origination this term is adequately rendered as ‘kamma-formations’, on the analogy of ‘habit-formations’ as denoting a pattern of mental activity. Here the emphasis is on those volitional activities (*kamma*) which produce rebirth.
7. For a proper understanding of this important subject the reader is recommended to study **Wheel Publication No. 15**, *Dependent Origination* by the Ven. Piyadassi Thera
8. Over fifty years ago the late U Shwe Zan Aung wrote: “To recognize that thought is a radiation is, I submit, a great thing in itself. Who can say that this may not one day lead some discoverers to devise an instrument exploiting some substance, yet unknown, which is sensitive to thought, and so to measure our thought ‘waves’ and their duration?” (*Compendium of Philosophy*, p.284.)
9. A full exposition of the thirty-six streams is to be found in the *Khuḍḍakavatthu Vibhaṅga*
10. Soma Thera's translation from *The Buddha's First Discourse*, **Bodhi Leaves No. 1**.
11. The sensory spheres (*kāma-loka*) are the planes of existence which include the human world

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