Bodhi Leaf Publication No. A9

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BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

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Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka

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It is in no wise an exaggeration to claim that of all the religions it is Buddhism that gives the greatest importance to mind in its scheme of deliverance. That is to say, Buddhism is the most psychological of religions. Even ethics and logic in Buddhism are studied from the psychological standpoint. This remains a fundamental characteristic of Buddhism throughout all its stages of historical development. There are some who believe that this trait is confined to the Abhidhamma Piṭaka and the subsequent literature, but no serious student of the subject can agree with such an opinion. The principal doctrines regarding the nature of man's mind are to be found already in the early discourses, ascribed to the master himself, as preserved in the major books of the Sutta Piṭaka, such as the Dīgha and Majjhima Nikāyas. In fact it may be asserted without the slightest fear of contradiction, that the later Buddhist books show no idea that is fundamental to the religion, which is not found in the early Nikāyas. They are the very main-spring of all that Buddhism is, whether in the psychological, ethical, or generally philosophical

aspect.

This importance of psychology in Buddhism is well brought out by Mrs. Rhys Davids in one of her earlier works. All serious departures in religion and ethics, she points out, have striven to cope with the tendency to let life be swallowed up in the quest of sensuous gratification. And, among the remedies sought, have been pure ascesis, or the suppression to the utmost limit consistent with life, of the channels of sense-impression, and again the cultivation of the object-world apart from sense-pleasure, namely, in relation to ethical and intellectual interests. A third course is so to study and regulate the subject-world, or mind, that we can regard it as one object among other objects. Now, the extent to which the Buddhist initiated and developed this third course is a notable and practically unique feature in the Buddhist religious culture.

Early Buddhism and Asceticism

In Early Buddhism asceticism, as such, is clearly rejected. In the very first Sermon ascribed to the Buddha, he declared his method to be a middle way (*majjhima-paṭipadā*) between asceticism and self-indulgence. In another Dialogue he is reported to have asked a young man called Uttara, a pupil of a Brahmin teacher, whether and how Pārāsariya, his master,

taught a method of disciplining the senses. “Yes,” was the student’s reply, “one does not see sights with the eyes nor hear sounds with the ear. This is his method.” “On that basis,” rejoined the Buddha, “the blind and the deaf would have their senses the best under control.” Then he proceeds to show this Brahmin student how his own method of spiritual training differed. According to him, the sense-impressions are to be consciously discriminated psychologically, as agreeable or disagreeable or neither, and then the resultant attitudes of loathsomeness or unloathsomeness towards them are to be discarded, and finally replaced by equanimity accompanied by mindfulness. Man must study his own mind, cognize and analyse his mental components, and learn to dictate to his own feelings. By this method the trainee would acquire two results: control over sense and impulse on the one hand, and on the other insight into the compound and conditioned nature of the mind itself, which appears to the ignorant to be a unitary Ego, unchanging and abiding in experience.

“Psychological Ethics”

Thus we see that the main task of the Buddhist, as he commences his spiritual training, is to study and analyse his own mind, to observe its inner nature and

how it works; and how good and bad ethical states arise therefrom. That is why in Buddhism so much emphasis is laid on the psychological aspect of ethics. In fact, it is perfectly correct to describe the Buddhism of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka as "psychological ethics." The motive of Buddhist psychology is not just a scientific curiosity having no bearing on living, but the ultimate desire to cultivate the good mind, avoiding all evil psychological states. The mind has to be made wholesome by a particular method, which is seven-fold, according to the Sabbāsava Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya. Both in its method and in its purpose of bringing about peace and harmony of mind, Buddhism agrees far more with modern psycho-analysis than with any system of theoretical psychology. While, however, Buddhism is the most psychological of religions, it is not a mere system of psychology, but a perfect scheme of deliverance. Now it should be clear that the concept of mind that is found in early Buddhism forms a most important factor in the whole religion. But what exactly does one mean by using the English word "mind" with reference to Buddhism? It does not need much reflection to realize that the word is used in several senses in English. The best way to get even a rough idea of the Buddhist use is first of all to see what the Pali terms are for the English word "mind."

Students of Buddhism will know that there are several terms in Pali that have been translated in some context or other by the English word "mind," the three common ones being *mano, citta,* and *viññāṇa.* Each of these terms may sometimes indicate in Pali what may be called the "nonphysical factor" in man and other living beings, as is implied in the Dīgha Nikāya, when it condemns the erroneous opinion of some metaphysicians that: "Whatever there is to be called citta or mano or viññāṇa, that is the soul, permanent, constant, eternal, unchanging, etc." This shows that in the common usage of the times these three terms were applied more or less synonymously for the "mind." But the more technical applications of these, in the psychological parts of the Canon, reveal significant differences in their use in certain contexts. Mano is employed generally in the sense of the instrument of thinking, that which cogitates, and, sometimes, in the sense of that which purposes and intends, citta has more or less the sense of "heart" (*hadaya*), the seat of feeling, and refers to the affective aspect of mind as experiencing. The term viññāṇa, usually taken as cognitive consciousness, has also a deeper connotation than the other two, and in certain contexts indicates the psychic factor, which is the cause for the rebirth of an individual after death. One may say that these particular shades of meaning are typical of these three

terms in the early Discourses. There is no doubt that they all indicate some aspect of the inner, immaterial or subjective nature of man, and as such, they are all included in the Buddhist concept of mind, using that English word in a general sense.

Analysis of Man

Buddhism analyses the whole of man into five aggregates, the *pañcupadānakkhandhā,* namely, the aggregate of material form (*rūpa*), the aggregate of feelings and sensations (*vedanā*), the aggregate of perception (*saññā*), the aggregate of disposition (*saṅkhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). It will be seen that in this scheme the last four are non-physical factors in man, which are generally implied by the word "mind." In Pail these five aggregates are said to be the *"nāma-rūpa"* (body and mind) comprising an individuality, which shows that the last four, viz. vedanā, saññā, saṅkhāra and viññāṇa are collectively regarded as "nāma" which is generally rendered "mind." Of these four nāma components, it is to be pointed out that the first two, vedanā and saññā, are phenomena that arise depending on rūpa, or the material basis of individuality, which alone determines the duration of their continuous rise and passing away. That is to say, feeling and perception

(or cognition) can take place only where there are senses (*indriyas*) and these exist only in the physical body. But the other two, saṅkhāra and viññāṇa, are rooted deeper in the flux of *bhava* or *saṃsāric* continuity, and they are in some sense the cause for that continuity. This is seen in the two famous postulates of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* formula namely, [1] *Saṅkhāra-paccayā viññāṇaṃ, viññāṇa-paccayā nāmarūpa*. Thus we must understand the two terms, saṅkhāra and viññāṇa, as occurring in the *pañcupadānakkhandhā* analysis, in the narrow sense of those dispositions and acts of consciousness, which manifest themselves only so long as the body and mind are together. But they have a deeper significance in the formula of dependent origination. It is their saṃsāric aspects that receive emphasis in that context. That is why the formula says: *"viññāṇa-paccayā nāmarūpaṃ,"* that *nāmarūpa* arises depending on viññāṇa, and hence in a passage in the Aṅguttara Nikāya both saṅkhāra and viññāṇa seem to be grouped under the term *bhava* which means "becoming" or continuity of the flux of saṃsāric life. In view of these considerations it will not be difficult to understand now the significance of the important idea that occurs in the Dīgha Nikāya that the nāma-rūpa depends on viññāṇa and viññāṇa depends on the nāma-rūpa. In modern terms this would mean that the individual as a compound of

body and mind is dependent on the presence of the (individual) psychic-factor for his continued existence, and the psychic-factor in turn, has to depend on a body-mind compound to have any empirical existence.

Students of modern philosophy will not fail to see how close this analysis of the individual approaches the "Compound Theory" of Professor Broad, the Cambridge philosopher, as put forward in his famous treatise on The Mind and its Place in Nature. "Might not what we know as a 'mind'" he writes, "be a compound of two factors, neither of which separately has the characteristic properties of a mind. … Let us call one of these constituents the 'psychic factor' and the other the 'bodily factor'. The psychic factor would be like some chemical element which has never been isolated, and the characteristics of a mind would depend jointly on those of the material organism with which it is united." It must be remembered that Professor Broad uses the term "psychic factor" exactly as a Buddhist would use the word for viññāṇa when referring to the factor in man which causes saṃsāric continuity, that is to say, becomes the cause for a new birth after death.

A Complex Concept

Now, it would be clear that the Buddhist concept of mind is a far more complex one than the notion of Western psychologists, who understand by it what are generally called the affective, cognitive, and conative functions in man. Like the modern schools of psycho-analysis Buddhism regards mind as both conscious and unconscious in its working. Such concepts as *saṅkhāra* and *bhavaṅga,* occurring in the early Pali literature, show that the Buddhists knew of the existence of unconscious states of the mind long before the West. An analysis of the term saṅkhāra will clearly establish this point. The Buddhism of the Pali Canon is largely devoted to the examination and analysis of the mind, both in its conscious and unconscious aspects. This examination, which is in this case self-examination and introspection, is held to be fundamentally important in the practice of the religion. The importance of self-examination, the correct observation of how the mind works and the good and evil mental states arise, are necessary if we are to practise the Noble Eightfold Path. Right effort consists in suppressing the rising of evil mental states, in eradicating those which have arisen, in stimulating good states and perfecting those which have been brought into being. Thus, as Professor Radhakrishnan has pointed out, the Buddhist has to consider that "the habit of self-observation is an effective way to deal

with the underworld of the human mind, to root out evil desires and craving, to maintain an equilibrium between the conscious mind and the other part of our equipment, the complicated psychic and physical apparatus." In fact, the whole of Buddhist psychology is meant for this purpose. This is the sole motive of the Abhidhamma analysis.

Man Slave to Mind

Man is by nature more a slave of his own mind than its master. As Mahā Moggallāna once explained to Sāriputta one must have the mind under control (*cittaṃ vasaṃ vatteti*) and not allow the mind to get the better of one (*cittassa vasena vattati*). The great optimism of Buddhist psychology, unlike for instance the Freudian system, is that man can restrain, curb and subdue his mind by his own mind (*cetasā cittaṃ abhiniggaṇhāti*), and thus check and eliminate evil propensities by himself, without necessarily going to an analyst. It has to be remembered that the will in Buddhism, though an aspect of the mind, can yet act as the controller of the mind, both in the conscious and the unconscious spheres. This is possible because as the Aṅguttara Nikāya says the mind if cultivated is the most pliable (*kammanīya*) thing to handle. By 'cultivated' (*bhāvita*) is here meant the process of

mental culture which is called *bhāvanā* in Buddhism. This is possible because Buddhism holds that causation is as true of the mind as of external things.

Hence the fundamental ethical teaching of the Buddha is that the mind must be trained and cleansed of evil propensities. "To purify one's mind" (*sacittapariyodapanaṃ*) is said to be the sum-total of the Buddha's ethical teaching. The Abhidhamma takes up and enlarges upon this teaching of psychological ethics. For instance, there the immoral mental states are said to be fourteen, viz., dullness, impudence, recklessness of consequences, distraction, greed, error of judgment, conceit, hate, envy, selfishness, worry, sloth, torpor and perplexity. These have to be suppressed and eliminated. Among the nineteen psychological properties said to be good and therefore to be cultivated are the following: Confidence, mindfulness, prudence, discretion, disinterestedness, amity, balance of mind, calming of the bodily impulses, buoyancy of these, etc.

Mind No Permanent Entity

But the greatest good that comes to the practising Buddhist by this self-examination and analysis of his own mind, is the uprooting of that heresy (*micchādiṭṭhi*), which regards the mind or any of its

derivative states as a Self or Soul, that is to say, as an abiding and permanent, subject or entity. Buddha does not deny a subject-object relationship in experience but this subject (whose innermost being is simply the flux of viññāṇa) is not in any sense a permanent and unchanging Soul. Buddhism even asserts the activity or agency of the subject (*attakāra, purisakāra*) but it is not simply "the mind as man" which Mrs. Rhys Davids held to be the same as Upanishads soul or *ātman,* in her later writings. Buddhism does not say that ideas and feelings are just scattered about the world as loose and separate existences, to use a phrase of the psychologist McDougall, but for Buddhism just as for McDougall they cohere in systems each of which constitutes a mind. The difference between the Buddhist and most other psychologists pertains to the real nature of this mind or the individual psychological unit. As I have attempted to show in this essay the individual mind does not consist of such solid metaphysical stuff as the Self or Soul of certain religions and philosophies is made of. It is whether conceived as citta or mano or viññāṇa just an aspect of those dynamic Vital Impulses (*saṅkhāra*) which are categorically stated in Buddhism to be *anicca,* impermanent, *dukkha,* subject to ill and pain, and *anattā,* void of any abiding substances. To the Buddhist, mind is only a flux, a

derivative ripple on the surface of the stream of becoming (*bhavasota*). The Buddhist can, therefore, in no way entertain the belief that the mind in any sense can be an unchanging entity, a permanent ego. And this indeed is the most important lesson taught by the Buddhist analysis of the concept of mind.

Notes

1. See **The Wheel No. 15: *Dependent Origination*** (Paticca Samuppada) by Piyadassi Thera. **[Back]**

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