


THE CULTURAL EVOLUTION OF BUDDHISM

A watercolor illustration in shades of brown, tan, and white. It depicts a white bull and a white horse in a stylized, abstract landscape. The bull is on the left, facing right, and the horse is on the right, facing left. The background consists of various washes of brown and tan, suggesting a natural setting. The overall style is soft and artistic.

HENRI VAN ZEYST

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Foreword

This is an attempt at shaking our Buddhist people out of the slumber of snug self-complacency in which they continue to dream of the great revival of this beautiful world-religion since the magic year 2500. That year was to have brought about a “great leap forward” and, among the many trophies, we can point out the substitution of the Sunday by the Moon-day, the abolition of horse-racing, the take-over by the State of Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools alike, the abolition and re-introduction of capital punishment, all pointing to a “cultural revolution” which fortunately has not assumed the vociferous and militant support, which in a cultural revolution elsewhere has caused the eye-brows of the world to be raised. Instead of culture one rarely meets with civilisation even, the decorations of the Buddha’s teaching are taken for essential, revolution is preached as necessary to evolution, and moral standards have become baseless and senseless, notwithstanding the daily repetition of the observance of the *pañca sila*.

What is necessary, is not a reform, but an awakening, a fresh approach to the ever new problems of the always young world with its growing conflicts. The wounds of society are deeper than ever and we all bear the scars, the abiding effects of our problem-childhood. But worst of all, we refuse to grow up, we refuse to awaken, we refuse to be cultured.

In the following pages no ready-made solution is offered,

but a challenge to be at least aware of our illusions, for in the awareness of an illusion lies the solution of the problem.

Henri yan Zeyst,
Kandy, 30 July, 1969

Can Buddhism Make Us Cultured?

After so many centuries of Buddhism we may be expected to know what we mean when speaking of Buddhism. And I trust it to be known that Buddhism is not a set of dogmas, not a chain of rituals, not a standardised truth, but something very much alive in each individual, something that quivers for liberation, which drives us on, not towards some ulterior and exterior goal, but towards the setting free from all bonds and fetters which are the results of mechanised civilisation and organised religion, of political isolation and economic exploitation. We know it, though we cannot define it. And we cannot define it, because it is something living which refuses to be bound by limitations, to be petrified by either moral codes or sacrificial rites, to be killed by definitions.

Can we say in the same way that we know what we mean when speaking of culture? The very frequency wherewith we interchange the terms “culture” and “civilisation” clearly shows that, far from being able to define either, we are not even able to distinguish one from the other. Civilisation indicates the progress of man out of barbarism; it points to man as citizen, i.e., as a member of a community which is in a progressive state of social development. Community life, or social life, is a life of relationship with others in the same environment. Such a constant contact with others has a naturally refining influence, just as the constant

flow of water polishes the rough stones in the river-bed. Thus, civilisation brings with it the connotation of refinement, which is frequently mistaken for culture. A polished surface is not really refined, for the stone preserves its own original hardness, notwithstanding its outward smoothness. Similarly, civilisation has made life easier: it has increased life's comforts; it has lessened a certain amount of friction by friction itself; it has made man more accommodating, without however changing his nature. All that is civilisation; but it is not culture.

Culture is cultivation in rearing and producing, but not machinelike; it is cultivation as growth which comes from a creative urge within, and hence it is a transformation of one's being; it is thought become flesh. Hence it cannot be given to another; it cannot be taught; it cannot be learned; it cannot be copied; it cannot be revived. It must always be new, always original, always creative. Only when art ceases to be imitation, i.e., when it is understood, is it a sign of culture; only when science ceases to be mechanical, i.e., when it becomes an art, is it a sign of culture. The work of a craftsman may be mere skill in the use of his instruments. And it makes very little difference whether his instruments are the brushes of a painter, the feet of a dancer or the steel tools of a mechanic; they are not signs of culture yet; they are the mere combination of force and brain, and that is civilisation which leads to utilitarianism and exploitation. But culture requires another factor, it requires the whole man; physical force, intellectual force and emotional force; muscles, brain and heart; body, intellect and feeling; objective understanding, subjective comprehension ...and love.

Whether a country or a nation has a real culture or mere civilisation cannot be tested by the standard of its progressive material way of living, not by its arts and sciences, not even by its philosophy, perhaps, for these are all achievements of civilisation, which will be found in culture, but may not be produced by it. Not even by philosophy, I said, for that is more the achieve-

ment of a very few individuals, of independent thinkers, than the achievement of the community, the country, the nation.

Culture is some intrinsic force of growth which must be discernible not only in the few elect, but in the everyday man in his everyday life, i.e., in life shorn of all its non-essentials. Thus, decorative architecture is not an expression of culture, nor of the lack thereof; but the way of living is. House-building is a means towards the end which is a certain way of living. The nests of birds, the caves of jungle-beasts and primitive men, the modern housing system of many-storied flats, are only expressions of that striving for living together.

True culture will be found in the internal relationship between the members of a family, colony or nation. Culture, therefore, is dependent on the quality of men and women. And whatever they produce in the fields of art, science, philosophy, etc., will only be the reflection of their inner culture.

But even if this is not expressed, it is not a sign of the lack of culture, but only of the absence of the opportunity or of the need to express. And thus, there may be culture in the simple mud-hut, while what passes for culture in the highest circles of civilised society is frequently nothing but snobbery.

Culture is indeed a plant growing from a tiny seed which is an individual. But that individual seed can never grow up and produce the fruits of culture, unless it be rooted in an environment from which it can draw inspiration. On the other hand, the individual should also be loose from the soil of his origin, in order to grow up high above the past. The so-called religious founders and reformers were cultured in this sense, though perhaps not well versed in the sciences of the day. But they saw, felt and understood the real need of the world in which they lived; and that need became for them a call and a challenge which brought about that directness of understanding which can only express itself in immediate action. In this immediate necessity of action which is truly creative, there is no conflict and no problem. Truth is always simple; and surrender to truth must always be unconditional.

CAN BUDDHISM MAKE US CULTURED? If true culture must come from within, Buddhism, as a system, as an organised religion, cannot give us that culture. But it can and does give that stimulus to feeling, that challenge to thought, that call to awakening, which may become the fertile soil in which the germ of culture may find its nourishment.

Buddhism does not dogmatise; and thereby it becomes a stimulus to creative and independent thinking. It is only faith which is in need of dogmas, which are doctrinal theses which cannot be proved. As soon as a teaching can be understood, it becomes an object which can be seen; from that moment, faith and belief make place for knowledge. Faith, therefore, is a symptom of ignorance even though it poses as a divine virtue. It is just as a lamp which is sometimes taken as a symbol of wisdom, but which in reality is only a symptom of prevailing darkness, for we need not light a lamp in broad daylight.

According to Buddhism there is only one imperfection (we avoid the word "sin" intentionally). And that imperfection is ignorance. From lack of understanding have arisen all conflicts, all problems, all sorrows. Though sorrow or conflict is said to result from craving, craving itself is the product of ignorance. The whole teaching of Dependent Origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*) is but a scholarly elaboration showing how conflict ultimately arises dependent on ignorance, and how conflict can cease only through the cessation of ignorance. From this alone already it is evident that faith, which can never lead to knowledge, can have no place in Buddhism at any stage.

This antagonism to faith deprives man of one of his strongest crutches, his reliance on external authority. It forces him thereby to rely on himself to obtain knowledge and understanding within himself. It forces him to cultivate the powers and faculties he has within himself, thereby making him truly independent and free. And that is indeed culture which through creative thinking finds its own liberation: the Culture of Philosophy.

Buddhism does not lay down a positive law of morality, but

remains throughout negative in its denial and rejection of the false, whereby the ground is cleared for true and naturally pure living.

In Buddhism, the sections of the Noble Eightfold Path which deal with right conduct in word, action and life, follow after the sections on right understanding and right thinking. When there is right thinking, an untruth will be recognised as false and the abstinence from lying words comes then through right understanding. For, to understand the false as false, that is truth. When there is the right understanding of life, not as the opposition of one individual against another which can only produce conflict and war, but as an interdependence in which the individual becomes the whole, then the abstinence from harmful living and exploitation follows from that understanding as a necessity.

Morality which is positive, which gives standardised ethics, is only a monument for the dead. Morality, which is dealing with life, cannot do more than reject the false whenever it shows itself. There are no standards required for the recognition of the false. Pretension, hypocrisy, egoism, self-isolation, exploitation, suppression, sublimation, envy, double-dealing, treachery, etc., etc. are such obvious imperfections and contradictions, that they are essentially false and can never be true. The moment one truly understands and intensely feels their falseness, they simply disappear; they cannot exist in the light of true understanding. But when it becomes necessary to show reasons why one should not pretend to be better than one is, it proves a complete lack of will to understand, it proves the existence of a strong wall of self-defence which like armour-plate protects all one's sensitive spots.

Dogmatic morality, standardised ethics, framed rules of conduct, codes of behaviour, are all of them walls of self-protection which prevent direct contact with and immediate perception of what is true. Hence Buddhist morality exists in the breaking down of those walls, in the loosening of those fetters, which will clear the ground for true and naturally pure living; and then the

liberating truth will speak for itself. That indeed is the freedom which comes with the Culture of Ethics.

Buddhism does not theorise with speculations based on supernatural revelations, but is content to face facts which are within the physical and psychical experience of everybody. And thus it is neither a speculative, idealistic philosophy, nor a supernatural theology. Its system is a scientific deduction from facts which are within the reach of everyone, though perhaps very few have recognised the psychological importance of those facts. Hence, those deductions stand out as discoveries of truths which were and still are generally not known and understood. Thus we see the seed of a simple fact develop into the mighty tree of life itself. But though this development can be pointed out by a teacher, each individual himself has to go through that whole process of development to come to real understanding. And then alone can mere knowledge or information become true culture and self-discovery.

The fact of sorrow, or disharmony, of conflict, is so alarmingly simple, that it appears to be a truism. And so it is, as long as it is seen as a fact by the intellect. Then there will be a discussion about bringing the problem to a solution. To stamp out diseases like smallpox we have compulsory vaccination. There is compulsory education to stamp out illiteracy, compulsory insurance to protect the man on the road, the worker in the factory, etc. Districts and whole countries are laid "dry", i.e., deprived of the liberty to take alcohol in any form, which amounts to compulsory temperance, to protect man against himself. But none of these measures has solved the problem, because they were intellectual approaches. The driving powers behind those schemes have never set out to find the causes of poverty, ill-health, illiteracy, craving for low gratifications, etc.

These problems, or in one word: the problem of conflict, were merely forced into shape, just as a collapsing house is propped up with a few beams from the outside. But the cause of the inner decay is left untouched, out of fear that the whole structure of

civilisation might crumble down. And there is indeed reason for such fear, if we understand why we have constructed and how we have built up this present society. Civilisation is the outcome of the apprehension of conflict and friction, as something to be avoided; hence the individual has fortified himself with self-protecting walls, expanded his circle of influence, increased his limited power through amalgamation with other individuals, so as to be stronger in his isolation, which, however, is still in opposition and based on fear. The mere apprehension of sorrow has thus in civilisation only led to escape without cure.

Buddhism does not do that. It makes the individual comprehend conflict, i.e., not only in intellectual apprehension, but in complete comprehension through which one becomes fully aware to the fact of conflict, and its cause, with thought and feeling, in oneself. Disharmony is not seen anymore as some disturbing factor like a cyclone, but it is seen and felt to have its root in every action of ours. It is seen and felt and understood, how even our very acts of virtue are prompted by our utilitarian view of life, how our very acts of charity are acts of sheer exploitation, how all our reforms are but patches, how all our striving is for the improvement of others but not of ourselves. Naturally, when it is truly understood that the cause of disharmony and conflict is in myself, I cease reforming others, and start with myself. That is the beginning of culture, the Culture of Comprehension.

Buddhism does not educate by giving information, which at the most can give knowledge and civilisation; but it points to the way of self-discovery through constant enquiry, analysis and investigation, which stimulate both thought and action, through which alone culture can arise.

It will have to be admitted that, even though the seed of truth be hidden within each of us, it will not always find it easy to germinate. This should be done by education, which, therefore, is not the passing on of information, but rather the stimulant which awakens what is dormant.

And this is exactly the way of Buddhism, which is also known

by the name of the teaching of analysis (*vibhajja-vāda*), in which investigation of the teaching (*dhamma-vicaya*) is an essential factor of enlightenment, where enquiry about the “self” is the essential preliminary to all progress, where the blind acceptance of a teacher’s word is condemned, where the value of sacred books is said not to be relied upon, where the Teacher refuses to be a saviour and does not accept any further responsibility than that of a sign-post. In Buddhism, therefore, we find the highest stimulation to independent thinking, to reflective meditation, to spontaneous action, which are the true signs of the Culture of Education.

Finally, Buddhism does not bind by means of ritualistic observances, by authority or through fear, but it liberates from all those fetters, and thereby makes man realise the truth within himself. Civilisation binds by its conventions and tradition. Religion binds by its dogmas and observances. Society binds by its authority and laws. Logic binds by its definitions and principles. Morality binds by its codes and standards. And all these restrictions prevent the unfolding of life.

But Buddhism denies the value of tradition, condemns the attachment to ritualism, rejects the acceptance of a truth on authority, refutes the value of definitions, refuses to be bound by standards of morality. On the contrary, Buddhism encourages social life based on mutual understanding and love; it shows the way to self-realisation in which each man has to make his own religion; it makes of man’s understanding his highest law and authority; it rises beyond the sophistry of distinction and opposites; it solves man’s problems by spontaneous action and creative thinking. And all that is culture in the highest sense. For thereby it stimulates the creative faculties in man, makes him realise his inborn interdependence and his oneness with all, which are at the same time the germ and the fertile soil which form that living culture, which is so often repressed by civilisation, by organised religion, by political schemes, by economic reforms, by social conventions; but which is always ready to burst forth

when the obstructions are removed. As Buddhism is mainly the breaking down of those obstructions, hindrances and fetters, it is Buddhism indeed which can make us cultured. Not Buddhism as a religion which as a system is as dead as any other, but Buddhism as living in each one of us which has the real germinating power of life, giving meaning to life through its philosophy and ethics, its comprehension and action. And the expression of all that in ideas and feelings, in mind and heart, in thought, word and deed, that is real culture. Any particular culture is but a stage in development; and to regard that stage as final can only be an attempt to impose it upon others. But when younger minds are opened up to receive it, just as a flower drinks the morning dew, then truly it may become for them also a stage of still further development. And that is the real culture which is to be found in Buddhism, not in the sacred books, but in the wise one for himself (*paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*).

The Doctrine of Evolution

The doctrine of evolution, in its widest sense as a doctrine of development, should get its most comprehensive application in the teaching of the Buddha, where everything is shown in a process of becoming.

The Darwinian theory of the evolution of the species merely touched the fringe of the actual problem, which he never even attempted to solve. For the admission, and even the proof, that one species in the course of the ages has evolved from another species, does not throw its light far enough back to discover how it all began, even allowing for the possibility of all the varieties of species having descended from a common genus.

The commonest argument in favour of an ultimate beginning, an argument based on the empirical fact that nothing has originated which was not caused by something else, is the argument from causation. This something else, of course, had also its beginning somewhere, at some time, from something else. And so the chain of causation can be followed back and back, link by link. Now the argument goes that, if every link is dependent for its very existence on the immediately preceding link, which was its cause, there must be ultimately a fixed point from which the entire chain is suspended, an ultimate cause, which or who is the original creator of all things caused, and yet not caused himself.

But, even if there were no other explanation forthcoming,

are we justified in concluding from this explanation of cause and effect to an ultimate beginning? If we consider existing conditions carefully, we shall find it impossible to discover anything *at all* which had a beginning. Everything made by man was made from something else; man only changed the form: e.g. a tree was cut down and planks were formed into a table. Also things not made by man do not have a beginning either, for they too developed, grew into something else by a process of absorption and assimilation. The earth itself on which we live is but a chip torn off from the sun in a process of evolution which is being renewed in the vast spaces of the universe, constantly.

In the same way, as we cannot discover a beginning of anything, so we are not able to destroy anything either. Here again, we can alter form and composition: we can burn wood and we will be left with ashes; scientists have disintegrated matter and have set free the energy of the atom. In fact, the two actions of creation and destruction are but one single act of alteration, a thing we are doing all the time, a thing which happens constantly in our minds and in our bodies.

When we see therefore, that nothing has a beginning, the statement that "everything must have a beginning" has lost its force. But that is not all. For he who still maintains that everything must have a beginning, should apply his rule without exception also to a first cause. And also follow it up to its finale; for, if everything must have a beginning, then everything must have an end, too. One cannot postulate a beginning in time in the past, called creation, and at the same time postulate for the future an eternity without time, without ending. If, on the other hand, existence can be conceived to continue for ever in an infinite future, then, what is the objection to this same existence to have existed forever in the past? If one is unthinkable, so is the other. And that is exactly the term used by the Buddha: *acinteyya*, unthinkable, unimaginable.

Now, leaving out imagination, the Buddha's viewpoint is that a process of change is always at any stage both beginning

and ceasing. As this element of change or impermanence is the inherent nature of any process there is no need for an extrinsic ultimate cause. Such an ultimate cause, moreover, implies a contradiction in itself. For, to produce an effect involves a change in the cause itself, as *without* an effect, or *before* the effect, there is no cause. An individual becomes a father only at the birth of his child; and thus it is the child that makes him father. Similarly, it is the effect that makes the cause. And if there were an ultimate cause existing from eternity without being caused, there must have been also a co-eternal ultimate effect, without which there could have been no cause. And this involves an infinite chain of causes and effects, the very thing which is considered impossible.

The Buddhist view of causation takes a completely different stand. As the doctrine of impersonality and insubstantiality (*anatta*) does not admit the existence of any kind of entity in a process of change, the view of an ultimate cause is rejected. In fact, the very idea of causation in the sense of production and creation is rejected, as these concepts involve a certain stability in dynamics, which is contradiction. In Buddhism we have the doctrine of simultaneous or combined dependent origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*), which is a direct consequence of the theory of universal momentariness. The effect merely arises in functional dependence on certain activities. A result appears under the operation of certain conditions, and with the change of such conditions the result also changes. It is not a process of evolution in which eternal matter changes its forms, for matter itself is denied all substantiality; it is evolution in which new forms appear in dependence on the cessation of old forms.

This origination, dependent on conditions, applies to the origination of conscious function as well as to the origination of material activity. Moreover, where a doctrine of causality would not be able to account for dissimilarity of its effects, in the doctrine of conditional evolution even material conditions are acknowledged to influence the arising and cessation of mental phenomena. As regards influence, it is a mistake to form any definite conception

of influence, being let loose from the cause and passing over into the effect, in which the cause is all action and the effect is pure passivity. Action is so much part of its reaction, that it even could be considered as being "caused" thereby. For, an action occurs when provoked or invited by suitable conditions which are found in the reaction: fire burns only when the flame can feed on combustible material, which attracts the flame. It is for this reason that the Buddha spoke of simultaneous dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). And thus, instead of retracing the origin of things to a first creative cause, he analyses an individual event in its process of becoming and finds therein itself all the factors which condition its arising.

An ultimate beginning obviously does not lie within the scope and sphere of any investigation. But, if an investigation has to be made, the obvious fact from which an enquiry as to the nature and origin of this state of affairs can begin is the omnipresent fact of conflict (*dukkha*). For, it is in conflict alone that we look for the cause of trouble.

The so-called Noble Truths provide the shortest formula: conflict is a universal fact; conflict arises through craving; conflict will cease with the cessation of craving. This is worked out in slightly greater detail in the often repeated formula of dependent origination. Here too, a beginning is made with the actual present conflict in life and the problem of death. No supernatural explanation is offered, but death is seen as the most prosaic result of being born. Just as all that is composed is subject to decomposition (*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*), so all that is born is liable to die (*jāti-paccaya jarāmaṇam*). But then comes the great step back into the past: What is the cause of birth? A mere reference to a copulative conjunction would not suffice here, as this mechanical explanation does not provide an answer to the discrepancies at birth, not accounted for in a physiological act. Hence pre-natal conditions are held responsible. But as responsibility cannot be fixed onto purely material causes, a volitional link between past and present is necessary. This is established by the doctrine of

karma and rebirth, of which we shall hear more later. This link is one of action and reaction, of action in the past becoming a reaction in the present or in the future, without the necessity of an entity as a soul transmigrating from life to life. Thus, birth in the present is conditioned by action in the past. It is this process of action, this action-in-the-making (*kamma-bhava*), which forms the transition of one life to the next, in the same way as it forms or conditions a reaction in the present. The entire division of time, a mental concept, into past, present and future, is artificial and only conducive to giving a sense of duration to the I-concept. But our mental make-up has become so warped that it is extremely difficult to keep thoughts free from these categories. In actuality there is only the present moment which arises in dependence on conditions which have either preceded it or are concomitants. Past action, reborn in the present reaction, can be said to continue therein, although no entity or substance of any type exists.

Although ignorance is shown as the root-condition of all conflict (*dukkha*), as the basis of greed (*lobha*) and hate (*dosa*), as the final fetter (*samyojana*) and obstacle (*nīvaraṇa*), yet it is never made to appear as an ultimate cause in the original beginning of things. First of all, this entire doctrine of dependent origination is meant to disclose the annular nature of the process of existence which has no original beginning in creation, nor ultimate ending in the attainment of a goal. Moreover, ignorance (*avijjā*), so far from being an ultimate cause, is not an entity which by itself produces the effect, but a psychological condition which is entirely negative, again not in the absence of knowledge, but in the absence of comprehension and insight (*ñāṇa-dassana*). Such a lack of understanding cannot be counteracted by knowledge through learning which is informative. Hence, no *positive* action can break through this magic circle, which courses round and round its orbit, held in its place by a nucleus wherewith the entire process moves or falls. That core, which links all the spokes of this wheel of Saṃsāra, and which is the hub around which the process of birth and death evolves, that kernel is the empty nave

of self. It is only in self that this movement acquires meaning; and it is only in the understanding of no-self that this perpetual movement loses its meaning and its impetus ...and ceases. Once more, therefore, it will be seen that the doctrine of impersonality, of insubstantiality, of soullessness (*anatta*) forms the very foundation of the teaching of the Buddha. As long as this doctrine of *anatta* is not thoroughly comprehended, the root of ignorance will remain with all the results conditioned thereby. Even an actual conviction that there is no "I" would not mean that the truth thereof has been realised.

As long as one performs intentional, volitional, purposeful actions, one sows the seed for conflict-producing consequences. This will-to-act can only disappear in the full comprehension of transiency and of non-I. For, with that understanding must disappear not only the volition and the love of life, but also the possibility of willing, of volitional activity and hence the *possibility* of consequences, which is the ending of the process of evolution.

This entire process of evolution, with its many links forming one individual chain, in appearance a unit, is in fact a composition. It has for its formation and dependence no cause, in the ultimate sense, but only the seed of origination through conditionality, just as the failure of the harvest or produce of the land brings about an increase in the value of old stocks. Thus, conditions may arise in war-time or in famine, when enhanced values are attached to wretched goods which ought to be rejected on their own independent merit. The need or demand, therefore, has created a value which is not proportionate to the intrinsic worth. Only a thorough comprehension of this worth will be able to discard those superimposed values which have reconditioned need into greed.

The process of origination, apart from its dependence on conditions, is viewed in Buddhism as a relative process which is to be regarded as evolution and involution at the same time. Evolution (*vivaṭṭa*) is the unrolling, the development of the world, which

is often mistaken for renewal, for progress, or even for a new beginning. Involution (*samvatta*) is the rolling up, the dissolution, the passing-away-aspect of the process. Together they complete the cycle, and are essentially not different; but as two aspects of one process they present two different views of the one course of transience, in which there is neither an absolute beginning or creation, nor an absolute cessation or annihilation, but only a continuous proceeding of changing activity. The origination of one movement can only be brought about by the cessation of another. And thus, beginning is ceasing, as in the rolling of the waves in the ocean.

But, because Buddhism is not interested in material progress which is mainly inspired by self-seeking, which is a delusion, it concentrates its attention on the evolution and involution, the arising and the cessation of conflict (*dukkha, dukkha-samudaya, dukkha-nirodha*). This conflict being psychological, it is but natural that great attention is being paid to the process of evolution of the mind. Consciousness itself is a process of evolution (*samvattanika viññāṇa*); and moral responsibility for an action is not attributed to a thought until and unless it is fully grown in awareness and intention. But as we are not dealing now explicitly with morality, a few words will suffice on evolution in ethics.

The Buddha's code of morality appears to be like medical prescriptions which do not create an obligation except to one's own well-being. These rules are based on the need of living together in society, and appear therefore to be expressions of a utilitarian stand. "I undertake the precept to abstain from taking life", represents the right of every living being to live, and the duty to respect life in others. Likewise with property and with matrimonial relationship. But such prescriptions do not sanctify their objects, for life remains a symptom of craving, property a hindrance to freedom, matrimony a legislation of lustful craving. Moral good is not a virtue to be developed. It is just a means to an end, and should be discarded, as a raft is left behind by one who has crossed the river. Thus, morality is a burden which makes for

self-complacency, and which finds no place in the teaching of no-self. The highest, the only true virtue is that of understanding, of comprehension of insight, which alone can conquer the delusion of self. Both good and evil lead to rebirth and are therefore fuel to the process of revolution, oil on the flames of conflict.

This process of evolution and involution, this continued cycle of birth and death and rebirth, is called Samsāra, the ocean of existence, into which flow the individual streams and from which rise again the forces of vapour and mist to feed with rain and snow the springs which make the rivers flow again. With our limitations of understanding it is difficult to see the entire process at once. Only section by section manifests itself without revealing its origin and its end.

Thus, in the absolute sense, in the absence of “being”, or existence, the question about the beginning of a process cannot be raised. This should apply also to its ending. A process which is evolving and involving has neither origin nor goal. But yet, as the continued movement is dependent on conditions, a cessation is possible in this sense, that, if the conditions cease to operate, the movement of the process itself will cease. And thus, although the process is a circular movement without beginning or end, it is always beginning dependent on conditions, and it is always ending dependent on the cessation of those conditions. This can only be understood within the framework of the doctrine of non-entity (*anatta*). There is no creation of an entity and no annihilation either. But there is an ever beginning movement conditioned by innumerable factors, which constantly change in composition and hence in strength of cooperation and opposition. And thus, while the movement appears to continue, it is actually ceasing all the time together with the composition of factors which conditioned its arising; cessation of those conditions, therefore, provides a cessation of being that is freedom, the great deliverance, called Nibbāna.

Nibbāna, therefore, does not come within the structure of the process of evolution. It is the only unconditioned (*asankhata*),

uncreated and unproduced. It is the extinction of the fires of lust and hate, through the cessation of delusion. It cannot be generated or evolved, because it is never involved or included as a consequence. It can only be discovered in so far as it was covered up by ignorance. When the conditions for ignorance cease to arise, there will be natural insight into the actual nature of the process of becoming (*yathā bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*). This comprehension of the insubstantiality of all conditions and of the unreality of conflict opens up a sense of relief and freedom which can be experienced but not described. It is through a positive understanding of this deliverance that Nibbāna is described as bliss eternal, but it remains a freedom from all hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*), a deliverance from all fetters (*saṃyojana*), a solution of all problems, a cessation of all conflict (*dukkha-nirodha*); the end and the ending of all striving and of evolution.

Essentials of The Buddha's Teaching

The most outstanding feature of Buddhism is probably the absence of supernaturalism in its doctrine. There is no foundation of mystery or faith. That does not mean that everything is perfectly self-evident; but it would be so, if our process of thinking were not so prejudiced. Thus, in order to obtain a clear picture of the general view of life as presented in Buddhism, one has to dispossess one's thoughts of all preconceived ideas, and meet the world and world-events as they are, or rather as they present themselves. For my conception of world-events is the actual fact which constitutes my life. Whether this conception is right or wrong, I am not in a position to say just now; but it is that conception which determines my attitude towards life.

In general, man does not consider human existence as an end in itself, but rather as a stepping stone towards a more perfect ideal. The ideal may differ for many types of idealists. E.g., the ideal may be the improved conditions of material existence, in which there will be sufficiency for all in a democratic world of equality. Or it may be a supernatural ideal of union with the Supreme. It may also be the ideal of perfect egoism, of comfort and security for self in this life, without scruples and worries about others, or about a life-to-come. Vastly different as they are, they all have one thing in Common: they are ideals, i.e., they are a conception of a model of perfection. And just because such an

imaginary standard has no actual existence, it is referred to as an ideal.

Ideals are not facts, but it is a fact that we have ideals. And as Buddhism deals with actuality, we are interested in the fact that we have ideals, but not in the ideals themselves, at least not primarily. The most obvious conclusion, almost a truism, which one can derive from the fact of having ideals, is the fact that such an ideal has not been attained. In other words, an ideal involves striving towards a goal of greater perfection which has not been reached. An ideal, therefore, is an admission of non-attainment and of a desire to attain. And that is life for the individual, as well as for the entire human race. Any striving for the attainment of the ideal is a refusal to accept the fact of being inferior to one's ideal. This is not the time to discuss whether such refusal of acceptance is morally right or wrong, as now we are only interested in fact-finding, not in fault-finding.

The fact is that striving for an ideal of perfection is a refusal to accept the fact of life as we find it. It is this refusal to accept what is, and this attempt to attain what is not, which form the basis of the essential conflict within human nature.

Conflict is essential to human nature, as movement is essential to life. This conflict was discovered by the Buddha as a universal characteristic in all that has arisen in dependence on conditions. On this foundation of universal conflict, disharmony, unsatisfactoriness, restlessness, sorrow, suffering, woe, called *dukkha*, the Buddha has built up his teaching of actuality. The conflict is between the actual nature of experience which flows by as a stream, and the ideal nature of an experiencer who wants to preserve the experience, without which there is no experiencer. The "self" must find a permanent footing, or perish. The endeavour to establish such a permanent footing in the midst of the ever-flowing current of experience constitutes the friction of conflict.

If we have followed this carefully, it will be seen that in the position of the problem lies also its solution. For, conflict is there

because of the opposition between the ideal and the actual. The ideal is there only in opposition, because it has no place in the actual, and is, therefore, an escape from the actual.

The Buddhist attitude to this conflict is an explanation which dissolves the conflict as non-existent. This is made possible by the perception of impermanence (*anicca-saññā*), by the perception of conflict in impermanence (*anicce dukkha-saññā*) and by the perception of the unreality of this conflict (*dukkhe anatta-saññā*). Opposition to universal impermanence has given rise to a misconception of individuality, which causes a natural friction, which is misery in conflict, felt as instability and insecurity. This feeling of instability cannot be overcome, and should not be endeavoured to be overcome, as this very endeavour creates further conflict. Instability is nature and does not constitute a conflict, except in opposition. In the absence of individuality there is no opposition, except in a deluded mind. And thus conflict arises only in a deluded mind.

And so, Buddhism does not introduce an unknown factor, but solves the problem by mere analysis. Conflict is opposition. Opposition is between the self and other-than-self. But there is no self. Hence, there is neither opposition, nor conflict. *Dukkha* is then a delusion, and the cessation of this delusion is Nibbāna.

If, therefore, the actual is accepted without an ideal escape being sought, the opposition and the conflict will also cease. In other words, there is no conflict, except that created by the ideal. There is no conflict in experience, but conflict arises in the endeavour to capture that experience. Because this tendency to grasp and to cling is so essential to the maintenance of the delusion of a "self" that without it it would collapse, the delusion of individuality (*sakkaya-dit̐thi*) has become the strongest of all fetters and the denial of such delusion the chief characteristic and essential teaching of Buddhism.

Thus we see how the three chief characteristic teachings of the Buddha are linked together. Life is impermanent (*anicca*), but permanency is wanted to continue living in the past experiences,

as the present does not provide a footing; hence a conflict arises (*anicce dukkha*) from the desire to remain permanent as an "ego" (*atta*) in the stream of impermanence. This conflict is then based on the misconception of a "self"; and the right understanding of no-self (*anatta*) will dissolve the conflict and dismiss it as void (*dukkhe anatta*).

Right understanding of no-self is indeed the pivot on which the entire teaching of the Buddha revolves, and apart from which all religious beliefs and practices drive one deeper into the wilderness of ignorance. It is on *anatta*, therefore that we have to concentrate.

The Buddha's teaching of no-self is a direct denial of the individual as an abiding entity, person, or substance, a denial of a permanent principle of life as an individual soul or being, a denial of an actor apart from action or actuality. It is not a denial of existence, which, however, is recognised only as a process of action, of becoming.

The Buddha rightly refused to accept an abstract behind the concrete, a substance behind the action, a soul behind expression, an essence behind existence. It is the action which makes the actor, and not, *visa versa*, the actor who performs the action. This is admittedly a difficult point to grasp; and the Buddha himself is said to have doubted the feasibility of preaching such a doctrine to the masses.

The method employed by him, leading to the conclusion of insubstantiality and impersonality in the ultimate sense, is the method of analysis. Already in the second discourse after his enlightenment the Buddha analysed for the benefit of his first five disciples the physico-psychical composition of the human body and mind; and of each of the five aggregates of body, sensation, perception, ideation and consciousness he remarked that that was not the self; for, if it were self, it would not go to decomposition. Thus, from the impermanent nature of the body and of every stage of mental development the conclusion is drawn that this cannot be the permanent self. It is the antithesis of the affirmation of

Vedanta “Thou art That”, for here the formula runs to the contrary: neither in body, nor in mind is there anything which could be styled the Ātman. If man were the self or God or Brahman, he would not be subject to suffering, to change, to impermanence; and his body and mind would be his obedient instruments and act as he wanted them to do.

With these three signs well recognised, we can venture to investigate the essential structure of the Buddha’s teaching, for in actuality what we have seen and discovered up to now is applicable to everything, everyone, and every condition. It is a universal foundation on which the Buddha built his teaching.

The most concise form of the Buddha’s doctrine is found in the Four Noble Truths. The truth of suffering is based on the fact of suffering, which was found by the Buddha to be an inherent characteristic of every conditioned state of existence. It is the universality of this fact which makes it a basic truth. We have already seen that this suffering, or conflict, is inherent in all that is impermanent, as it is the nature of all that is composed to become decomposed. The truth of conflict is, therefore, not an inference from many facts, not a generalisation from particulars, but a deduction from the analysed nature of the impermanent composite. Thus, there is not only sorrow and suffering at death, but birth itself is woe, and the entire process of life is but one of conflict. Joy, pleasure and happiness turn into sorrow by the mere reflection on their impermanence.

This should not be construed as pessimism, for there is also a solution to the problem, as we shall see further. But before coming to a solution, we must first understand the problem. Unless we fully understand that everything is conflict, there will be no solution to it, but merely a tentative escape therefrom.

Why should everything that is impermanent become a source of conflict? The answer to this is the second Noble Truth, the truth of the origin of conflict. Impermanence leads to conflict, not as the cause thereof, but as a condition. The real cause of conflict is a misapprehension of impermanence. This misapprehension

is called craving (*taṇhā*). It is grasping of and clinging to the impermanent which is the cause of the conflict. And this grasping and clinging is due to the misconception of a permanent self. This second Noble Truth about the origin of conflict has later been expanded into the formula of Dependent Origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*) with its twelve links from ignorance to conflict.

The third Noble Truth follows as a direct conclusion from the preceding ones: if everything is impermanent and in conflict, and if conflict is caused by craving for the impermanent, then conflict will cease with the cessation of craving. It not only seems quite simple, but it is quite simple too. And yet it is misunderstood so frequently. The cessation of craving is the end of the conflict, but not the end of impermanence. With the extinction of craving the process of impermanence ceases to be an object of conflict. But when it is thought that the ending of craving will bring an end to sorrow and therefore initiate a utopian era of everlasting bliss, that striving to overcome craving will merely lead to a sublimation of the problem but not to a solution. In other words, craving cannot be terminated by striving for non-craving, for all striving is impelled by a desire for attainment; and the concept of attainment is based on the I-concept.

Up to this stage Buddhism is pure philosophy, a logical system with proper deductions derived from analytical truths and empirical facts. When a method is asked for how to obtain such results, religious system would have to be introduced. The final Noble Truth is the answer, but whether this Noble Eightfold Path, which is the way which leads to the cessation of conflict—whether this constitutes a religion or not, is open to dispute and depends on one's definition of religion. It is a path of understanding and practice, a culture of intellect and will. It is not given as a path leading to some eternal bliss, but as a path leading out of conflict and confusion; and that is deliverance from sorrow.

On the side of understanding and culture of insight we find right understanding, right intention, right mindfulness and right concentration. It is noteworthy that right understanding occu-

pies the foremost place. It is the correct understanding of the problem at issue, namely, the problem of conflict, its origin and its cessation. It is this psychological approach to the problem which makes Buddhism so appealing in our modern times. Through psychoanalysis the patient is made to see the hallucinatory condition of his complaint, in which discovery the psychological problem is solved and the physical symptoms are on their way out. Thus, the conflict which is life—when seen as an attempt to resist the impermanent flow of life by means of an artificially built-up resistance of an ego, believed to be permanent—is immediately dissolved on the recognition of this hallucination. But this kind of understanding is mostly lacking to such extent, that even when the reasoning of all this is admitted, the frequent question will arise: What then remains on the dissolution of this hallucination? The question itself shows that the I-concept has not been abandoned, and that still some kind of permanent footing is sought.

It is the lack of this understanding which is the chief cause of all evil. Ignorance (*avijjā*) is shown as the foundation of the dependent origination of Saṃsāra; it is the primary root of all immoral thoughts and deeds, as even greed and hate find their root in ignorance and delusion. It is the final fetter (*saṃyojana*) to be broken before the attainment of deliverance; and it is mentioned among the mental intoxicants (*āsava*), the evil tendencies (*anusaya*) and the hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) to perfection.

Thus, right understanding justly takes the foremost place in the Noble Eightfold Path, being as it were both the first step on that path, and the most essential one. It is only in the light of right understanding that progress on the path can be expected, that right can be distinguished from wrong.

The more practical aspects of this culture of understanding are found in the application thereof in the culture of will and the practice of morality. By will should not be understood some independent faculty or entity, of which knowledge is a phase, neither a totally pre-determined course of action which cannot be modified or influenced even by changing circumstances. Will

and volition can be acquired and developed as taste, and, therefore, culture is possible. It is through will-culture that speech is purified, that action is righted, that living is perfected, that effort is controlled.

Now the obvious question arises: Where does this path lead to? And the answer is well known: Nirvāṇa. But that does not satisfy, first of all because the nature of Nirvāṇa has been left too indefinite to make a worthy goal, and further because its concept does not seem to fit in with the general scheme of philosophy. Correctly speaking, the path leads nowhere, for the path is truth and life, all in one. There is no walker on the road, said Buddhaghosa in his *Visuddhimagga*, in the sense that the two are not separate. The actor is not separate from his action. Hence the question: Where does the path lead to? is incorrect, for it is based on the desire of a self to attain the goal, whereas the goal of Buddhism is the discovery that there is no self and hence no attainment of a self. And that is exactly Nirvāṇa.

Joy and sorrow have only relative value as individual experiences. As such they are dependent on conditions, impermanent, unsatisfactory and insubstantial. As experiences they arise and cease, only to be grasped at by a deluded mind and retained in memory to feed the misconception of a self. When this delusion with its accompanying greed and hate has been discovered, in the literal sense of uncovered and stripped of all its deceiving devices, it will have vanished as the flame of a candle which was extinguished. Any question about the location or the existence thereafter reduces itself to an absurdity. What had no existence before, but only is becoming and ceasing in the actual present, that cannot have an existence thereafter. The actual process of becoming and ceasing is kept alive in a constant movement of renewal. It is this process of rebirth which is interrupted in the comprehension of that which kept the process going. When, therefore, this chief condition is removed, the process comes to an end (*bhava-nirodha*). That is Nirvāṇa, the deliverance of the delusion. And that is the end of the path.

The Buddha denied that his teaching implied the destruction and annihilation of a being, for the plain reason that his teaching is based on the truth of non-entity (*anatta*). How could he teach the annihilation of something the very existence of which he denied? But he taught the annihilation of ignorance, the destruction of craving, the cessation of becoming. As this is a cessation of the delusion of individuality it is the cessation of an individual process, which cannot be communicated.

Existence has no purpose, for existence is a symptom. It is sorrow because of the inner conflict. When the conflict has been dissolved and the cause of the conflict removed, the symptom itself will disappear, as the after-glow goes with the setting sun. Such is the essence of the teaching of the Buddha, who himself said: "One thing only do I teach: Woe, and how its end to reach".

Ethics in Buddhism

In spite of the centuries devoted to the study and reform of various codes of morality, formulated by philosophers, founders of religion and reformers of society, ethics is still a subject about which there is an immense amount of difference of opinion, notwithstanding the basic harmony which is apparent.

For instance, killing is considered wrong by all and everybody. But the reason why it is wrong is far from uniform. And even under certain circumstances, killing is not only condoned as in the case of self-defence, but even legalised, as in the case of capital punishment, or court martial; it may even be considered one's duty to kill, e.g. in war-time, failing which duty a soldier may be punished for not killing. We do not seem to have advanced much from the time when the eating of one's enemy was considered a religious rite.

With such a divergence of opinion on such an essential and fundamental issue of life and death, it is not surprising that many opposing views on ethics were, and still are, able to hold their own, each as it were based on some solid foundation of right and righteousness.

There is the spiritualist's morality which is based on a supernatural law, which to obey is the highest virtue resulting in the highest reward. This law being supernatural is promulgated by a supernatural authority; and thus the entire system is one of faith. If one's faith breaks down, there would be no motive for being moral.

The idealist's morality is based on his particular view of the goal of life, which need not be supernatural. His goal may be a perfect society or a classless society, but it remains an ideal, that is, an idea, a concept. Striving for such an ideal concept, the aim becomes purposeful, even if the aim remains imaginative; and thus the system becomes utilitarian. Morality is good, because it is thought to lead somewhere. But with the crumbling of the concept, the purpose will have lost its meaning.

On the other extreme there is the materialist's morality, for whom life itself is the supreme good. For him, survival is an obligation and the struggle for life a moral duty and a virtue. In his struggle for life there is a struggle for power, as it is only the fittest who will survive. Where strength is virtue, there might is right, and weakness a Sin.

A more reasonable stand is taken by the rationalist's morality, which is based on his understanding of the functional need of co-operation and co-existence, and is therefore, utilitarian in outlook, although aimed at a goal very different from that of the idealist's morality.

Then there is the realist's morality which is based on actual relationship as found in nature, in society, in the family. It is neither inspired by ideals, nor inflexible under changing conditions and relations. It has no absolute foundation and is, therefore, contingent in character, while at the same time necessary for the maintenance of relationship.

We see that all these various types and systems of ethics have some purpose or motive. One is supposed to behave according to some moral code, to obey God, to attain the ideal state, to keep alive, to live in harmony, to maintain a cordial relationship, etc.; and such moral behaviour pays its dividends and profits either in this life in the form of material comfort or in the form of spiritual consolation, or in some future existence in various forms of bliss.

Essentially, we are asked to be good in order to become better, to do away with imperfection in order to become perfect. With this ideal of perfection in mind, we are asked to bear up with pain,

to conquer suffering, to tolerate what we cannot master, to endure what we cannot cure; and in the meantime strive for the attainment of the ideal, adjust our words, thoughts and deeds more and more according to the ideal concept of perfection, accumulate virtue and merit, which may provide the exchange wherewith to purchase an eternity of bliss.

Frequently, this utilitarian outlook is camouflaged by other motives, some of a supernatural character, which, however, still remain based on an individualistic concept of the supernatural, others of a social nature, which may be more a distraction from the actual conflict in hand and thus provide an escape under the guise of virtue.

The ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, already admonished us that ethics is not an exact science; and indeed, no study is more vulnerable to the distortions of passions, or falls more easily victim to the lapses of logic. Ethical systems are largely concerned with laying down rules to the effect that certain ways of acting are generally or always right, and others generally or always wrong, or with giving lists of things which are good and others which are evil, without trying to answer philosophically more general and fundamental questions in order to discover a general characteristic which belongs to all right actions, or to discover the reason why a thing is good. But among the experts about these fundamental, ethical questions there is no consensus of opinion. The probable reason for this disagreement may lie in the fact that it is hardly possible for a positive proposition to be strictly and absolutely true.

If that were the reason, it might be worth while attempting to approach the problem in a negative way. In fact, negative thinking is always safer than making a positive statement. For a positive statement of a single fact does not contribute to an increase of factual knowledge, and a positive statement of a general nature would be of an inductive nature which is not sound logic. Negative thinking, on the other hand, is an analytical deduction

which assists in the understanding of the nature of the problem by means of elimination.

A positive approach would be based on preconceived ideas of good and evil, and on inherited dogmas about sin. The most that a system of philosophical ethics and natural morality could do is to confirm and perhaps validate the laws which are spontaneously recognised by conscience. But here already we have introduced two words, "law" and "conscience", which need explanation, understanding and definition, for their meaning varies with the contexts in which they are used in various schools.

A negative approach, then, would be the analysis of a positive proposition (e.g., to lie is a sin), of the basis of such proposition (i.e., Why is it a sin?), which may ultimately reveal the very nature and incompatibility of virtue and sin, of truth and untruth, not so much by defining truth, but by discarding what has been discovered as untruth. To see the false as false, that is truth in itself.

The actual problem in morality is the problem of evil, for the so-called "good" never poses a problem. When we mentally conceive and classify a thing, an object or an event, as good, it is accepted without difficulty. But when something is recognised as evil from a certain aspect (e.g., smoking is bad, because it causes lung-cancer), that is by no means the end of the appreciation, but marks only the beginning of a conflict. For several answers could be lodged in objection to this statement, e.g., smoking provides a suitable distraction to an overworked mind, a stimulus for thinking, a pungent sensation, an outlet for one's over-sensitivity, a feeling of manliness etc. It is clear that when values are brought in to bear on the issue in order to decide on a definite action, the question of good and bad is raised. But evil does not possess an independent power. A thing is called evil because of an undesirable reaction. Unripe fruits are bad only, when they are eaten raw, for they cause indigestion. It is thus rather the effect, the indigestion, which is bad, and not the object, the unripe fruit, nor the cause, the eating thereof. Similarly, in ethics, the evil

of an action is determined by the effect (*vipāka*) of a voluntary deed, word or thought. When the effect is undesirable, the act is unwholesome (*akusala*).

The desirability or not of a certain act constitutes now the standard of morality. And that poses a *real* problem, for there is no standard of desirability, except that *all desire is evil*. It is childish and less than elementary to say that desire is evil because it cannot ever be satisfied and always leads to greater desire. One could just as well advocate the stoppage of all eating and drinking, because one gets hungry again. Then, why did I say that *all desire is evil*? It is a general statement which cannot be verified through the application of a test to this and that desire, but only through analysis of the nature of desire. A desire is a longing, a wish, a craving to obtain or to become. At the moment of desire, its object has obviously not been achieved, for the essence of desire is striving for the unattained. But the unattained is the future, is the ideal, which exists only as a mental concept, as an extension of the ego, a projection into the future. It is also indicative of dissatisfaction with the present, with the actual, and thereby is not only *born* of conflict, but *is* conflict in essence and nature, in action and reaction.

There are three ways of looking at an object or an event from an ethical point of view: it is good or bad, desirable or repugnant, right or wrong. These three views are far from identical. The view which calls a thing good or bad is generally understood to be but a certain mental attitude, and a thing's goodness is then only a subjective appreciation and has no ethical value at all. A machine is called good if it performs well and answers the purpose for which it was made, but nobody will attribute any righteousness to it. A good piece of work refers to its performance and completion, but not to its ethical value. And even if it is good, it may not be desirable.

The desirability of an object, on the other hand, does not depend so much on the object itself or on its perfection and performance. For an object may be desirable for a quite different

reason, e.g., for its beauty. Then its value is not ethical either, but entirely subjective. Modern art appeals to some and not to others. What is desirable for some, may be repugnant to others. Thus, when the difference between good and bad is functional, the difference between desire and repugnance is emotional. And only the difference between right and wrong is ethical. When do we call an action right? When is it thought to be wrong? If a father gives his incorrigible son a good caning, it was certainly not desirable, at least not by the son, and not by the father either, unless he derived some sadistic satisfaction from meeting out such severe punishment. Yet it is called good, if the caning was not just a mild application without hurt to anyone. But, whether the action was right or wrong depends on whether the intention of the father was right, whether his judgment in choosing this form of correction was right, whether the results of that action were right as anticipated. In other words, the righteousness of a deed is intrinsic.

A right action is a direct action which has no side motives, but which follows immediately from the understanding of a necessity; whereas an action which has other motives, an action which does not directly and immediately follow from understanding, but which is the result of some desire which is alien to this action—that would be a crooked action, not direct, but twisted, wrung; and that is wrong.

And so we arrive at something which is intrinsically evil, being the cause of conflict (*dukkha*), without the formulation of a law or a precept. No distinction can be made between good desires and evil desires, as desire in any form is essentially evil. And whatever is marked as immoral, is rooted in desire.

But why then do we have desires, if we know them to be essentially evil? The obvious answer is that our knowledge is very superficial, something like mere book-knowledge. If our knowledge would be perfect comprehension (*sammā-ditṭhi*), we would be walking on the *ariya magga*, the correct path towards deliverance from conflict. But in the unconscious we are holding

ourselves back from this kind of discernment. We are afraid to take even the first step out of this protective enclosure, because we feel a lack of security, a lack of self-assurance, if we would allow a breach in the self-made fences within which alone a “self” can be maintained.

What is my position if there is no “I”? Obviously there is *no* position, and therefore no relation of what is “mine” to the “I” which is non-existent. Without position and without relation there are no values; and with that, the entire structure of a moral society collapses. Any idea of collapse is distasteful, for it is associated with disaster, a forcible or accidental removal of order and protection, of stability and security. And we have made ourselves accustomed to think of stability and security as something good, as the best that social order can afford us. This has come to pass because it is the only way in which it is possible to provide (at least for the moment) a continued safeguard for the impermanent, a stable footing for a drifting concept of “self”, a deception of permanency and substantiality in a conflict of delusion. And in that false security we are caught with rules of conduct, within patterns of behaviour, within the bounds and bonds of society.

We do not dare to make ourselves free, for we do not dare to stand aloof, to be alone, to be a non-entity. Our whole being is propped up by ideas of caste and race, of religion and ideology. We have to belong to something, for otherwise we are afraid we shall not be. We live for an idea, we work for others, we think with others; and we are never alone, never independent, never free.

And yet, to be free from all bonds is the greatest ecstasy, the purest experience, the highest bliss, which perhaps only an arahant can realise. To be so free is only possible when actions cease to be mere reactions following the well-known path of tradition, when sensation is no longer an occasion for learning from experience, or a treasure to be hoarded with other dead memories, but when each action is an immediate and direct response to a new challenge, when the living unknown is not met with the

known of dead knowledge, but is understood in its own arising and conditioning. Only then is there the freedom of realisation, the freedom of thought, the freedom of action, which is not in need of being bound by rules of morality.

Thus, the Buddha, by his denial of a soul, a “self”, a substance, an ego, an “I”, removed the very basis of ethical value. Purpose and goal—those sublimated and gilded images of base desires—lose their intrinsic meanings. Striving and achievement become but hollow slogans of a political creed, and the salvation and emancipation of a super-self, a mere creation of imagination.

“Then, how didst thou cross the flood of saṃsāra”? the Buddha was asked; and he replied: “Unstayed and unstriving; for, when I tried to keep myself steady, then truly I sank; and when I strove hard, I was whirled about; and thus, without stay and without effort (*appatiṭṭham, anāyūham*) did I cross the flood”.

This is not a doctrine of gay abandon, a careless letting oneself go, but one of great application of mindfulness, awareness and watchfulness over the senses and their reactions, over thoughts as they arise and pass, over lurking intentions and even physical movements. The body and its actions are but the expressions of the movements of thoughts, frequently too subtle and too quick to be understood. But a slowing down of the physical reactions by means of attentive watchfulness may provide a glimpse of the inner working of volition. Thus, in the understanding of the motives of an action, action itself may be controlled, not by intention which would be a positive check, but by understanding which, in a negative approach, removes the foundation of such action.

For the Buddha there is a transcending the moral order rather than discarding it; the ethical is reduced to a position of relativity, and from an absolute viewpoint there is no relative. Moral conduct will be there, but neither through obedience to a law, nor in conformity with tradition, however universal. Morality is not a categorical imperative; it is not a pure abstract, not a universal

idea, not a supernatural or divine law. It is just the way nature works, as long as it is not interfered with in ignorance.

Ignorance (*avijjā*), then, is the great “sin”, although not as a transgression or an offence; it is the unprincipled, unskilled, unwholesome act (*akusala kamma*) against nature. It is, therefore, the understanding of nature (*yathā-bhūta-nāṇa-dassana*), the knowledge of right human action, derived from the understanding of basic natural principles, which constitutes ethics in the true sense. It has no basis in the supernatural, in the ideal, in the ideological, in the metaphysical; it is not moving in the field of speculation of the cause of morality as an external authority. But it is the middle path between these general views, which is to be found in the understanding of the basic natural principles involved: whatever is component is transient (*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*), whatever is complex constitutes a conflict (*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*), whatever is (even the non-component and un-formed) is unsubstantial (*sabbe dhammā anattā*). In particular, the doctrine of the unsubstantiality of the problem of conflict, arising from the experience of impermanence, throws a fresh light on the principles and foundations of morality. This enables an enlightened one to formulate a moral science without rules of conduct.

Although the keeping of a promise, the repayment of a debt, the telling of truth, are such commonplace acts of social morality, that they are not even debatable, yet history has shown that even the most solemn international undertakings have been repudiated as a mere scrap of paper, without the slightest consideration of the basic moral principles involved, only because of the dictates of a stronger political or racial consciousness, which were, rather, the dictates of the inner urge to survive.

In the conflict between self and other-than-self the issue is always decided in favour of the survival of self, without any understanding of the basic fallacy underlying the problem. But with the understanding and complete comprehension that there is no “self”, and hence, no other-than-self, the conflict ceases as a delusion. And action without conflict is the only kind of ethics

which is neither idealistic, nor utilitarian, neither spiritualistic, nor materialistic, morality which is not a reaction of submission or obedience, but which is spontaneous, creative and complete.

About the Author

Henri van Zeyst was born in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in 1905. Educated throughout in Catholic schools and colleges, he spent his final years of studies in philosophy and theology and the first year of his priestly ordination in an Italian monastery near Florence. At the age of 31 he was sent to London to be in charge of a new foundation of his Order, where he was also teaching Dogmatic Theology to the scholastics of Christus Rex Priory in North London. An intensive course of comparative religion brought him in contact with Buddhism. Within a year of his coming to Sri Lanka he was ordained a Buddhist monk there in 1938 under the name of Bhikkhu Dhammapāla. From 1956 to 1968 he worked at the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism at the University of Ceylon in Peradeniya of which he was in the final years of that period the Senior Assistant Editor and Administrative Officer. During the last stages of his life he was residing in a meditation centre at Nilambe, Kandy, giving instructions to those who came to him for guidance on meditation.

He died on September 15th in 1988.