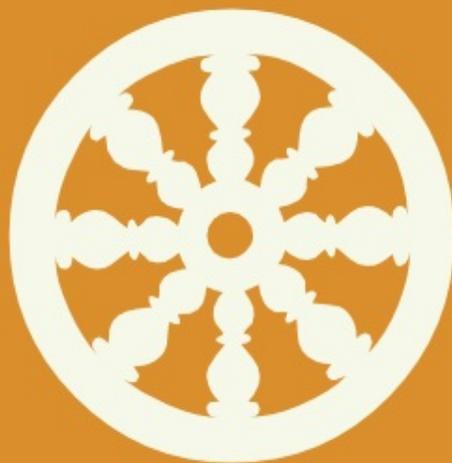


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# **Aspects of Reality**

as Taught  
by Theravada Buddhism

*Dr. G. P. Malalasekera*



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## as Taught by Theravada Buddhism

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# Aspects of Reality as Taught by Theravada Buddhism



In regard to the question “What is ultimate reality?” the different schools of philosophy or systems of thought seem to fall into two main divisions. Some of them say that the ultimate reality is one: they believe in a permanent unity behind all the variety and change of the world. They are the monists, theists, animists, eternalists, traditionalists, fideists, dogmatists, ontologists, realists, idealists, and energists. All these schools, though distinct among themselves and even opposed to each other on many points, nevertheless have this in common: they accept an ultimate reality as an entity in the metaphysical sense, whether that entity be called substance, or soul, or God, or force, or categorical necessity, or whatever other name may yet be invented. They may be said to follow a subjective method, molding reality on concepts. Hence theirs is mostly a method of conjecture. The other schools say, some of them not very explicitly but still implicitly in their doctrines, that the ultimate reality is plural. They follow an objective method, molding their conceptions on observations. They generally deny a unity behind or within nature’s plurality. These are the dualists, pluralists, atheists, nominalists,

relativists, rationalists, positivists, phenomenologists, annihilationists, occasionalists, transformists, progressivists, materialists, and so on. Here again, all these schools, though differing among themselves on many points, have this in common: they reject a metaphysical entity.

Now, what is the place of Buddhism among these different “isms”? The answer is that it does not belong to either group. The ultimate reality of the phenomena in the universe (the chief phenomenon around which all others centre) being the “I,” the self, is, according to Buddhism, neither plural, nor one, but *none*. In religion and philosophy, as well as in metaphysics, the words “real” and “reality” express more than one aspect of things: the actual as opposed to the fictitious; the essential as opposed to the accidental; the absolute or unconditioned as opposed to the relative or conditioned; the objectively valid as opposed to the ideal or the imagined; that which ultimately and irreducibly is opposed to that which by means of various names signifies the mind’s stock of knowledge. It must be admitted that in the suttas, or discourses, attributed to the Buddha we do not find any terms exactly corresponding to “real” and “reality,” but all the above antitheses do occur and find expression in a variety of ways. The Buddha’s teachings are more deeply and directly concerned with truth and the pragmatic importance of things, more with what might be called “spiritual health” than with theories. There are certain facts regarding spiritual health, however,

about which it is necessary to have right views in order that action may be taken accordingly. These are the actualities; other things are of very much less value. The true is, therefore, the actual, that which is. It is expressed by the Pali word *sacca* (Sanskrit, *satya*), which means “the fact” or “the existent.”

It must always be borne in mind that Buddhism is primarily a way of life and, therefore, that it is with the human personality that it is almost wholly concerned. Various metaphors are used to describe the essential nature of the personality. [1] They are meant not so much to indicate the ontological unreality of objects and sense impressions (like the *māya*, or illusion, which we come across in the Vedānta) as to express a repudiation of permanence, a sense of happy security, a superphenomenal substance or soul underlying them. They are also meant as a deprecation of any genuine, satisfying value in spiritual life to be found either in “the pride of life” or in the lust of the world.

At the time of the Buddha there were in India views similar both to those of the Parmenidean school of Greater Greece (that the universe is a plenum of fixed, permanent existents) and to that other extreme field by Gorgias and the Sophists (that nothing is). In all things the Buddha’s teachings represent what he terms the Middle Way (*majjhima paṭipadā*), the doctrine of the golden mean, the theory of conditioned or casual becoming, the most succinct statement of which is to be found in the Saṃyutta-Nikāya: “‘Everything is’: this, Oh Kaccāyana, [is the first] extreme.

'Everything is not': this, is the second extreme." [2] The Tathāgata (that being the term which the Buddha used when speaking of himself), not accepting these two extremes, preaches his doctrine of the Middle Way.

The followers of the first extreme were known to the Buddha as eternalists (*sassatavādino*). Some of them stuck to the old sacrificial religion which promised blissful existence in heaven after death. Others favoured a monistic view of the universe and believed in the attainment of a supreme bliss which consisted in the dissolution of personality in an impersonal, all-embracing Absolute. There were others who held the idea of an eternal, individual soul, which, after many existences, would return to its genuine condition of free spirit as a result of accumulated merit. These various views are described in the Brahmajāla Sutta of the *Dīgha-Nikāya*. [3] It is interesting to note from these descriptions that the various schools of idealism, which later appeared in the West, had their counterparts in the India of the Buddha, e. g., subjective idealism (which holds that it is the "I" alone which exists, all the rest being a modification of my mind), objective idealism (which holds that all, including the "I," are mere manifestations of the Absolute), or the absolute idealism of Hegel (which informs us that only the relation between the subject and object is real). All these varieties of idealism the Buddha held to be "painful, ignoble, and leading to no good, because of their being intent upon self-mortification." [4] Idealism, according the Buddha, has but one reality, that of thought, and strives for but one end, the

liberation of the thinking self. Addiction to self-mortification is merely the practical side of the speculations of idealism, in which the “self” is sublimated, with the natural consequence that the “self” must be liberated from matter, the “soul” must be freed from the bonds of the body. The passions of the body must be subdued even by force. Body becomes the eternal enemy of the spirit, to be overcome by prayer, fasting and other austerities.

The followers of the second extreme, who denied any survival of the individual after death or any retribution for moral and immoral deeds, the Buddha called annihilationists (*ucchedavādin*). The annihilationists, too (or, as they came to be called later, the materialists), had many varieties of belief in ancient India. Some, like the Epicureans, denied any external Agency as the cause of matter and maintained that the highest good was pleasure. Others, very much in the manner of Hobbes, Comte, or John Stuart Mill, held that only the sensuous could be an object of knowledge. But all of them saw only one origin, matter, and strove only for one end, material well-being. Increase of comfort, said the Buddha, only leads to desire for still more, and the desire for more leads, and will always lead, to conflict and conquest. He, therefore, condemned materialism as “despicable, vulgar, ordinary, base, and leading to no good. [5]

In the Buddha’s view, both idealism and materialism, though theoretically opposed, converge both in their starting-point and in their goal, for “self is their beginning

and satisfaction their end." Between these two extremes, therefore, of materialistic self-indulgence and idealistic self-denial (not as a compromise, but, "avoiding both"), the Buddha formulated the Middle Way, "the way of knowledge and wisdom," not in the wavering of speculation, or in the excitement of discussion, but "in tranquillity of mind and penetrative insight, leading to enlightenment and deliverance, enlightenment with regard to the real nature of things and deliverance from suffering and its cause." [6]

In following the middle course the Buddha borrowed from the eternalists their doctrine of the gradual accumulation of spiritual merit in a series of existences, but rejected their doctrine of an eternal spiritual principle. He saw contradiction in assuming an eternal, pure, spiritual principle which for incomprehensible reasons became polluted with the filth of mundane existence only to revert later to original purity. With the annihilationists he denied every permanent principle. The Buddha's originality consisted in denying substantiality altogether and converting the world process into a progression of discrete, evanescent elements. His position was not an easy one because he had also to find a theoretical basis to establish morality. He was faced with the contradiction of a moral law without a personality on whom the law was binding, salvation with nobody to reach the goal. How he solved the problem will appear in the sequel. The shortest statement of the Buddha's doctrine is contained in a formula which has come to be regarded as the Buddhist credo: "Whatsoever

things proceed from a cause, the Tathāgata [i.e. the Buddha] has declared the cause thereof; he has explained their cessation also." This is the doctrine of the recluse. It declares, in other words, that the Buddha has discovered the elements and their casual connection, and a method to suppress forever their active efficiency and secure their quiescence.

The Buddha claimed that his was a practical teaching: its object was to show a way of escape from the ever-revolving round of birth-and-death, which constitutes *saṃsāra* and which is considered a condition of degradation and suffering (*dukkha*). This way of escape was meant primarily for human beings. True to this central conception, therefore, as stated above, the Buddha started with a minute analysis (using "analysis" in its strictest sense of "dissolution") of the human being into the elements of which his being is composed. Analysis has always played a very important part in Buddhist teaching; in fact, one of its names is the doctrine of analysis (*vibhajjavāda*).

In this analysis, the human being was found to consist of two parts, *nāma* and *rūpa*, (loosely translated as mind and matter), *rūpa* representing the physical elements and *nāma* the mental ones. Matter is composed of the four elementary qualities of extension, cohesion, caloridity (*tejo*), and vibration. The relative qualities of hardness and softness and the occupation of space are due to the elementary quality of extension (*paṭhavi*). It is the element of cohesion (*āpo*) which makes the many parts adhere intrinsically and

to one another, and this prevents an aimless scattering about or disintegration, thus giving rise to the idea of a “body.” Caloricity depends on vibration (*vayo*), for by increased vibration the temperature rises and when the temperature is lowered the speed of vibration is reduced. Thus do gases liquify and solids solidify. [7] The mental elements are similarly divided into four groups: feelings or “receptions” (*vedanā*), ideas or “perceptions” (*saññā*), what is variously translated as “mental activities” or “complexes” (*saṅkhāra*), [8] and cognition or “conception” (*viññāṇa*). *Rūpa* (matter), and these four mental groups are called *khandha* (aggregates or groups). The whole, in brief, is an analysis of the “I” or “personality” (*sakkāya*). The apparently unitary “I” is broken up into a number of layers, as in a burning flame a number of layers of colour can be distinguished. But the layers of colour in a flame are not parts laid out after the fashion of pieces in mosaic, alongside one another. So also is it with the five *khandha* or groups. They are a continuous, unbroken process of action, of which it is expressly said that they are “burning.”

In all of them an arising and a passing away are to be cognized. They are not parts of a whole but forms of action, a process of mental-corporeal “nutrition” or “sustenance,” in which the corporeal as well as the mental forms of grasping (*upādāna*) [9] fall together into one conceptual unity. They are different modes in which the “I” enters into relation with the external world, lays hold of it, “seizes” it. The relationship is not an immediate relation with the

external world in which a metaphysical “I” is endowed *a priori* with the power of cognizing, nor is it the mediate relation of a purely physical process in which the “I” only builds itself up *a posteriori* on the basis of continued experiences.

The external world with which the human being comes into relationship is also analyzed into its component elements. This relationship is one of cognition, and in discussing how this cognition is established mention is made of cognitive faculties (*indriya*) and their objects (*visaya*). There are thus six cognitive faculties or senses: the senses of vision, audition, smell, taste, touch, and the faculty of intellect or consciousness. [10]

Corresponding to these as objects of cognition are, respectively, colour and shape, sound, odour, savours, tangibles, and non-sensuous objects. These twelve factors (the cognitive faculties and their objects) are called *āyatanāni*, or bases of cognition. The term *āyatana* means place, sphere, entrance, or point of support, and is used to cover both organ of sense (internal or *ajjhattāni āyatanāni*) and sense object (external or *bāhirāni āyatanāni*), the meeting of which constitutes cognition (*viññāṇa*). This cognition, which results from the meeting, can be divided into six classes, according to the cognitive faculty concerned and the sense object, such as eye-cognition (*cakkhuvīññāṇa*), and so on.

In the case of the sixth cognitive faculty (*manas*),

consciousness itself (i.e., its preceding moment) acts as a faculty for apprehending non-sensuous objects. The three constituents that comprise a cognition, sense faculty, sense object, and resultant consciousness, are classified under the name *dhātu* (element). We thus get eighteen *dhātu*: the six sense faculties, their six sense objects and the six varieties of resultant consciousness. This consciousness is the experience of the unity between concept and object; it is not something that is, but something that *becomes*. It is not an object of knowing, but knowing itself, an ever-repeated new becoming, new up-springing out of its antecedent conditions. As such it resembles what the physicist calls living-force, vital energy. It is formed, en fleshed, in *nāma-rūpa*, (mind-form, i. e., mind and body). Mind-form is the antecedent condition of consciousness, on the basis of which the next new up-springing of consciousness will assume new individual value.

Consciousness is actuality as action, which means something that is not but which, in order to be present, first must ever spring up anew. Between mind-form and consciousness exists the same ceaseless, quivering, leaping play which exists among the ever-repeated, new moments of combustion of a flame and its external shape. Without sufficient cause (*aññatra paccaya*) no consciousness can arise. [11] Just as for consciousness to be present, it must ever and again spring up anew, similarly the antecedent conditions upon the basis of which it springs up must also be present. It is from the friction of the living contact of

senses with things that consciousness is born. It is thus a process of nutrition, of grasping, which embraces itself in its grasping, a process of growth, in which one moment is neither the same as the next, nor yet another, but in which every moment becomes another, passes into that other, just as one moment of a flame is neither the same as the next, nor yet another, but becomes the next.

The human personality, and the external world with which it enters into relationship, are thus divided into *khandha*, *āyatana* and *dhātu*. The generic name for all three of them is *dhamma* (plural *dhamma*), which is translated as “element of existence.” In Buddhism these *dhamma* are the only ultimate reality. Broadly speaking, the *dhamma* are divided into two classes, *saṅkhata* (conditioned, i.e., subject to various conditions) and *asaṅkhata* (unconditioned).

According to Theravada, Nibbāna is the only *asaṅkhata-dhamma*: all other *dhamma* are *saṅkhata* (conditioned). The *saṅkhata* (conditioned *dhamma*) have four salient characteristics: they are non-substantial (*anattā*), evanescent (*anicca*), in a beginningless state of commotion (*dukkha*), and have quiescence only in a final cessation (*nirodha*).

It must always be recalled that the basic idea of this analysis is a moral one. Buddhism is defined as a religion which teaches defilement and its purification (*saṅkilesa* and *vodāna*). Purification or salvation lies in *nibbāna* or *nirodha*, which is cessation from saṃsāra. Thus, when the elements of being are analyzed, they are divided into purifying and defiling elements, good and bad (*sāsava* and *anāsava*),

propitious to salvation and averse to it (*kusala* and *akusala*). Purifying, good, and propitious factors are those elements, those moral factors, that lead to *Nibbāna*; their opposites lead to or encourage *saṃsāra*.

This analysis was part of the Buddha's attempt to find answers to the great, primary questions which lie at the bottom of every religious system, which form the seed of religious development. Upon these answers depend the nature of any religious philosophy, viz. Whence am I? Whither do I go? What happens to me after death? How do I know myself? How does this world enter into me, into my consciousness? To the Buddha's way of thinking, all these questions have one great fallacy, that of begging the question, *petitio principii*. His view was that there should be another question prior to all these inquiries, upon which depends the very possibility of further questioning, namely: Is there anything at all which deserves the designation "I"? Here was a problem which the Buddha felt could not be solved by argument or mere logic (*atakkāvācāra*), for in logic, one has to presuppose the reality of the thinking subject as standing outside the process of thinking, as a witness or, rather, as a judge. Only one kind of logic, he said, could help here: the logic of events, because it is beyond sophistry. Actuality can be understood not by argument but by analysis (*yoniso manasikāra*). [12]

As a result of such analysis, the Buddha discovered that the individual, conventionally called "I" or the "self," is a mass of physical and psychical elements without any permanent

entity behind them to keep them together, without any “soul” inhering in them, the elements themselves being a mere flux (*santāna*), a continuity of changes. In postulating a mythical, unchanging entity as the possessor of changing qualities, one merely assumes, he said, the existence of that which has to be proved. The conviction that men hold that, though thought and actions change, the thinker and the doer remain the same, was a delusion, for it is exactly by thought that we change our minds, by actions that we change our lives. Actions cannot exist apart from the doer, cannot exist freely as such. If the action changes, the so called actor must change at the same instant. Thus, the “I” must be identified with action. It is only the “I” which can walk and sit and think and eat and sleep. But that “I” is not a permanent, unchanging entity; it is identified with the action and is the action itself, and thus changes with the action. “I” cannot stay at home while “I” go out for a walk. It is the conventional language (*sammuti*) which has spoiled the purity of conception (*paramattha*—ultimate sense, the supreme-thing-meant), though, in some cases, language does remain pure enough, as when we say, “It rains.” Who rains? Simply, it rains, meaning, there is rain. Likewise, the concept should not be: “I think,” but “There is thinking.” This is the teaching which came to be known as the doctrine of anattā. In this doctrine, the Buddha went counter to the three main systems of philosophy that were current in India in his day: the teaching of the Upaniṣads, of the Sāṅkhya. Briefly stated, the Upaniṣadic teaching is a kind of monism,

where a real being, Brahman, is assumed to be something eternal, without beginning, change, or end, and man's soul (*ātman*) is assumed to be an integral part of that Being, Atman and Brahman being one. The Jains had a highly developed theory of moral defilement and purification and a theory of spiritual existence extending even to plants and inanimate, non-organic things, which are also supposed to possess souls. The sāṅkhya taught the existence of a plurality of souls, on the one hand, and of a unique, eternal, pervasive, substantial matter, on the other. Buddhism is opposed to all three systems. Forsaking the monism of the Upaniṣads, it declares that there is no real unity at all in the world. Everything is discrete, separate, split up into an infinity of minute, impermanent elements, without any abiding stuff. It agrees with Jainism in opposing the monism of the Upaniṣads and in maintaining that being is joined to production, continuation, and destruction, but disagrees with the Jain doctrine which ascribed to a kamma a physical nature. To the dualism of sāṅkhya the Buddha opposes the most radical pluralism, converting the world process into an appearance of evanescent elements, and calls the eternal pervasive matter, which is imagined as their support or substratum, a mere fiction.

The term *anattā* (Sanskrit, *anātman*) is usually translated as "no soul," but, strictly speaking, *atta* is here synonymous only with a permanent, enduring entity, ego, self, conscious agent, etc. It is the permanence that is denied in *anattā*. The underlying idea is that, whatever may be designated by

these names, it is not a real, ultimate fact; it is a mere name for a multitude of interconnected facts which Buddhist philosophy attempts to analyze by reducing them to real elements (*dhamma*). Buddhism does not deny the existence of a personality or a “soul” in the empirical sense. What it does deny is that such a “soul” is an ultimate reality, a dhamma. The Buddhist teaching of *anattā* does not proclaim the absence of an individuality or self; it says only that there is no permanent individuality, no unchanging self.

Personality or individuality is, according to Buddhism, not an entity but a process of arising and passing away, a process of nutrition, of combustion, of grasping. Man’s personality is conceded as being something real, a fact (*sacca*) to him at any given moment, though the word “personality” is only a popular label and does not correspond to any fixed entity in man. In the ultimate constituents of conditioned things, physical and mental, Buddhism has never held that the real is necessarily the permanent. Unaware of this anticipation, modern philosophers like Bertrand Russell are asking modern philosophy to concede no less.

The Buddhist term for an individual, a term which is intended to suggest the Buddhist view as opposed to other theories, is *santāna* (stream), viz. the stream of interconnected facts. It includes the mental elements as well as the physical, the elements (*dhamma*) of one’s own body and external objects, as far as they constitute the experience

of a given personality.

The representatives of the eighteen classes of *dhātu* mentioned earlier combine to produce the interconnected stream. Every combination of these elements represents a nominal, not an ultimate, reality. The number of psychical elements at any given moment is variable. It may be very considerable, because undeveloped, dormant faculties are also reckoned as actually present. Some dhamma are constant, present at every moment, others only under certain conditions. Elements which combine at any moment vary both in number and in intensity. In any individual, at a given moment, a certain element may predominate. All mind at every moment is an assemblage of mental faculties (*sāṅkhāra*) or elements. Two elements, which are constantly present, are most precious: *samādhi* (power of concentration) and *paññā* (insight). If they become predominant they change the character of the individual and his moral value. The predominant element in ordinary men is ignorance (*avijjā*), which is the reverse of *paññā* and not merely its absence. It is a separate element, present at the same time with dormant *paññā*. But it is not constant, and can be cast out of the mental stream.

There is a special force of kamma, sometimes called *prapti*, that holds these elements in combination. It operates only within the limits of a single stream and not beyond. The stream of elements kept together is not limited to the present life but has its source in past existences and its continuation in future ones. This is the Buddhist

counterpart of the soul or self in other systems. From the denial of substance follows the denial of every difference between the categories of substance and quality. There is no “inherence” of qualities in substance; in this respect all real elements (*dhamma*) are equally independent. As separate entities they then become “substances” *sui generis*. All sense data are also substances in the sense that there is no stuff they belong to. We cannot say that matter has extension, cohesion, temperature, and vibration, but that matter is extension, etc., and that without these qualities there is nothing called matter. Matter is thus reduced to mere qualities and forces which are in a constant state of flux, in which there is no entity to support the qualities or to be the possessor of attributes or, as substance, to stand under them all, to uphold them all, and to unite all the phenomena associated with it. Independent of attributes, there is no substance, no substratum, not even the idea, because the idea is dependent on certain conditions.

When science bends more and more to the view that all matter is merely a form of energy, a grouping and re-grouping of forces, as advocated by scientific materialism (or, as some would prefer to call it, energism), it is only admitting in different words the unsubstantiality of matter, which the Buddha declared more than two thousand years ago.

The same principle applies to the mental sphere. Mind is not an entity but a function. Consciousness is thought, and it arises when certain conditions are present. Thought does

not arise as the action of a “thinking subject,” but is conditioned by, originates from, is dependent on, other states. As such, it will again be the condition, the origin, the *raison d’etre*, of further states. When it ceases to be it passes on its momentum, thus giving the impulse to new arising. Yet the individuality of consciousness is not a mere physical process either. It is a process of grasping and will last only as long as grasping lasts. Just as a fire can burn only as long as it lays hold of new fuel, so the process of individuality is a constant arising, an ever-renewed laying hold of the objects of its craving. It is craving that causes the friction between sense objects and sense organs, and from that friction leaps forth the flame of new kamma which, because of *avijjā* (ignorance), will not be extinguished, but in grasping lays hold of fresh material (thus keeping alive the process of burning).

Thus the universe, with all that is in it, represents an infinite number of discrete, evanescent elements, in a state of ceaseless activity or commotion. They are only momentary flashes of efficient energy, without anything perdurable or stable, not in a condition of static being, but in a state of perpetual becoming. Not only are entities such as God, soul and matter denied reality, but even the simple stability of empirical objects is regarded as something constituted by our imagination. The empirical thing becomes a thing constructed by a process of synthesis on the basis of sensations. Reality does not consist of extended, perdurable bodies, but, of point-instants (*khana*) picked up in

momentary sensations and constituting a string of events. Our intellect, then, by a process of synthesis, so to speak, puts them together and produces an integral image, which has nothing but an imagined mental computation. A single moment of existence is thus something unique, unrepresentable and unutterable. In itself, set loose from all imagination, it is qualityless, timeless and spaceless (indivisible); timeless not in the sense of an eternal being, spaceless not in the sense of being ubiquitous, motionless not in the sense of an all-embracing whole, but all these in the sense, respectively, of having no duration, no extension, and no movement. It is a mathematical instant, the moment of an action's efficiency. A representation and a name always correspond to a synthetic unity, embracing a variety of time, place and quality, but this unity is a constructed unity, constituted by an operation of the mind, a chain of moments cognized as a construction on the basis of some sensation. Actions take place in time and space, as the expression of the pure simultaneousness of things, and time as the pure successiveness of the process, but there is no space or time apart from their being correlatives of the concept. [13] There are thus two kinds of reality: the one, ultimate or pure reality (*paramattha-sacca*), consisting of bare point-instants (*khaṇa*), without definite position in time or space and with no sensible qualities. And the other, empirical reality (*sammuti-sacca*), consisting, of objectivized images, endowed by us with a position in time and space and with all the variety of sensible and abstract qualities.

How, then is the illusion of a stable, material world, and of perdurable personalities living in it, produced? It is in order to explain this that the Buddha put forward the doctrine of Dependent Origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). Just as the Four Noble Truths (of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the Way thereto) form the heart of the Buddha's teaching, so does the doctrine of *paṭicca-samuppāda* constitute its backbone. According to this doctrine, although the separate elements (dhamma) are not connected with each other either by a pervading stuff in space or by duration in time, there is nevertheless a connection among them. It is this: their manifestations are subject to definite laws, the laws of causation (*hetu-paccaya*). The flow of evanescent elements is not a haphazard process (*adhicca-samuppanna*). Every element, though appearing only for a single moment, is a "dependently-originating-element", i.e., it depends for its origin on some other preceding element or elements. Thus, existence becomes dependent existence (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), and this is expressed by the formula, "If there is this, there comes to be that" (*asmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti*). Every momentary entity springs into existence or flashes up in coordination with other moments. Strictly speaking, there is no causality at all, but only functional independence, no question of one thing producing another, since one momentary entity, disappearing as it does at once, cannot produce any other entity. The relation is one of "consecution", in which there is no destruction of one thing and no creation of another, no influx of one substance into another, but only a constant,

uninterrupted, infinitely graduated change.

Thus, the formula, "If there is this, there comes to be that" came to be supplemented by another formula: "Not from itself, not from something else, nor from a combination of both, nor by chance, does an entity spring up." It is coordinated, not actually produced. There is neither *causa materials* (continuing substance) nor *causa efficiens*. This view of causality, that the law of causality is rather the law of coordination between point-instants (*khaṇa*), is not strange to modern science and philosophy. The world of Buddhism is like the world of the mathematician: the world dies and is born afresh at every instant. It is evidently the world that Descartes was thinking of when he spoke of "continuous creation."

The fact that the Buddha declared the *khandha* to be completely free from any unchanging, undying essence does not mean that Buddhism taught annihilation of body and mind at death. For, besides the doctrine of transience (*anicca*) and soullessness (*anattā*), there is also the doctrine of kamma, or the transmitted force of the act, bodily and mental. A living being is a *khandha*, complex, ever changing, but ever determined by its antecedent character, and ruled by kamma. The long-drawn-out line of life is but a fluctuating curve of evolving experience. Man, even in this life, is never the same, yet ever the result of his pre-existing self. Action, which is another word for kamma, will be present as long as there is existence, because existence is not something static but a process. A process must proceed and

this is done by activity, the activity of the senses. Just as a flame cannot exist without consuming, its very nature being combustion, so also the senses cannot exist without activity. But this is not the same as the psychological determinism of Leibniz and Herbart, for kamma is not fatalism. "If anyone says," declares the Buddha, "that a man must necessarily reap according to all his deeds, in that case no religious striving is possible, nor is there an opportunity to end sorrow." [14]

How is the doctrine of rebirth to be reconciled with that anattā? The question, "What is reborn?" is based on ignorance of the selfless process of kamma. Kamma is not an entity that goes from life to life, like a visitor going from house to house. It is life itself, in so far as life is the product (*vipāka*) of kamma. In each step we take now in full-grown age lie also the feeble attempts of our babyhood. The present actuality, which expressed itself as the result of all the preceding processes, carries in its very action all the efforts which went into the making of the previous actions. When a seed becomes a sprout this is done by the last moment in the seed, not by those moments when it lay placidly in the granary. Yet, it is also true in a sense that all the preceding moments of the seed are the indirect causes of the sprout. Every moment in the phenomenal world has its own totality of causes and conditions owing to which it exists. What we regard as a break in the continuity is nothing but the appearance of an outstanding or dissimilar moment. Death is but one such moment.

When a man dies, the component elements of his new life are present from its very inception, though in an undeveloped condition. The first moment of the (apparently) new life is called conventionally *viññāṇa*, "conception." Its antecedent is kamma, which in the formula of the doctrine of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) is designated saṅkhāra (pre-natal forces). These saṅkhāra, which through conception (*viññāṇa*) find continuity in the new life, contain latent in them the anusaya, which is the name for the resultant of all the impressions made on the particular flux (*santāna*) of elements in the whole course of its faring (*saṃsāra*). It is these latent factors that the psychoanalyst, for instance, finds as so much refuse and slag in a man's mind when he penetrates into it. They are his heritage of action (*kammadāyāda*), brought down through countless lives and not inherited by him, as is sometimes stated, as the heritage solely from the past of his race. Life is kinetic; rebirth in Buddhism is nothing but a continuity of impulse, *kamma-santati*.

It is sometimes said that the doctrine of anattā takes away moral responsibility and that with it goes overboard the whole fabric of social morality. But it will be seen from what has already been stated that there is no contradiction at all between the denial of an unchanging entity and the fact that former deeds engender a capacity for having a consequence. In fact, the doctrine of anattā enhances the idea of responsibility, for there is here no Saviour or Redeemer to

intercept the unfailing consequence of one's action. Likewise, the statement that the doctrine of anattā is inconsistent with free will is also due to a misconception. If nothing arises without a cause, if everything is of "dependent origination," can there be free will? That is the question. There is a tradition that the doctrine of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) itself was established by the Buddha in defence of free will and against a theory of wholesale determinism. The Buddha singled out for special animadversion the doctrine of his contemporary, Makkhali Gosāla, who maintained that all things are unalterably fixed and that nothing can be changed. The Buddha called this the "most pernicious" of doctrines. [15] On the other hand, the Buddha declared himself to be an upholder of "free action" (*kiriya-vādī*). The law according to which a moral or immoral deed must have its fruition is the law of kamma, but in order to have a consequence the action must be produced by an effort of the will. The Buddha declared, "Will alone is kamma." (*cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi*). [16] It must also be remembered that free will really means "strong will," for the possibility of choosing shows the presence of two or more opposites. If there were no attraction or motive, equilibrium would have been established already and no choice would be necessary. When inducement or coercion is not absent, it is a contradiction to speak of free will. Will is thus only a milder term for craving, and craving exists only in dependence upon feeling. Our real freedom lies, therefore, not in the will but in being without will. How is

the cessation of this round of birth-and-death, which is “transient, sorrow-fraught, and soulless,” brought about? By following the path laid down by the Buddha. There are two factors that help a man to get started on the path: the one is right reflection (*yonisomanasikāra*) and the other is friendship with the good (*kalyāṇamitta*). The Buddha is man’s best friend. That is why the appearance of a Buddha in the world is an event of such significance. The cessation of suffering is called *nirodha* or Nibbāna. Nibbāna has so often been discussed that there is no need to say much here. Only when the grossly wrong views regarding personality are disposed of is the path entered upon which leads to final deliverance. Nibbāna consists of two stages. When, by treading the Noble Eightfold Path, the process of the arising of craving has come to a stop, the grasping of the “aggregates” (*khandha*) which form the individual will cease also. When the lust for life has ceased, no further rebirth will take place, and the highest state, that of a saint (*arahant*) is attained. But when the lust for life has ceased, life itself will not disappear simultaneously. Just as the heat in an oven, produced by fire, will remain for some time even after the fire is extinct, so the result of the craving which produced rebirth may remain a while even though the fire of the passions be extinct. In this state of sainthood or arahantship which is called Nibbāna with residue (*saupādisesa-nibbāna*), neither act nor thought can be regarded as moral or immoral. The arahant’s apperception is ineffective. His actions are not influenced by craving and do not, therefore

produce kamma. They are free from tendencies, from likes and dislikes. Where no new kamma is produced no results follow. But, when the result of previous kamma is exhausted and the arahant's life comes to an end, this state is called Nibbāna without residue (*anupadisesa-nibbāna*). In this final emancipation, all suffering (*dukkha*) ceases. Nibbāna is where lust, ill will, and delusion are not. In Buddhism, life is a process which has its sufficient cause neither in something metaphysical, like God, nor in something physical, like parents. It is a process which is destined to come to an end and awaits the moment of coming to an end. Ignorance (*avijjā*), i.e., ignorance about life itself, is the beginningless starting point from which life ever and again springs forth, as from some hidden source that never dries up as long as it remains undiscovered. Life is begotten of ignorance; what keeps it going is grasping or clinging, which is prompted by craving (*taṇhā*). In life, grasping is the only activity, and there is only one actual object of this grasping, that which is conventionally called personality. Personality is the object in dependence upon which grasping exists, and, at the same time, is that which exists in dependence upon grasping. It is grasping that gives life its nutrition (*āhāra*). Through this nutrition, through the power of maintaining itself, life proves itself to be life. But to say this is not to say that grasping is the cause of life; that would be like saying that the cause of a flame is the fuel there present. Fuel creates no flame; it only maintains the flame. To understand this, to realize this, to live it out is, in

the deepest sense, Buddhism. Ignorance is destroyed by knowledge, by insight. The first step is insight into the real nature of conditioned things (*sammasana-ñāṇa*), as having the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and soullessness. He who perceives suffering only, but not the transiency thereof, has only sorrow, but when the unreality of life is understood, the unreality of suffering will also be perceived. From this understanding will ensue insight into the nature of all things as processes (*udayabbaya-ñāṇa*), the knowledge that there is nothing but a process of becoming. The next step is insight that becoming is ceasing (*bhaṅga-ñāṇa*).

Becoming and ceasing will be seen as two aspects of one process. This is followed by knowledge of the dangers that have to be feared (*bhaya-ñāṇa*) and the understanding of the perils inherent in clinging (*ādīnava-ñāṇa*), together with the reasons for being disgusted with such an empty show (*nibbidā-ñāṇa*). Thereupon arise the desire to be set free and the knowledge thereof (*muñcitukamyata-ñāṇa*), which will grow into recontemplation (*paṭisaṅkhāna-ñāṇa*), that is, contemplation of the characteristics of transiency, sorrow and soullessness, but with increased insight as seen from a higher plane. This will be followed by even-mindedness regarding the activities of life, which is due not to lack of interest but lack of self-interest. The climax of discernment is reached with the insight of adaptation (*anuloma-ñāṇa*) which is the gateway to emancipation (*vimokkha-mukha*), where the mind is qualified for final deliverance.

The basis of all this is renunciation. Renunciation cannot be learned; it must grow, like the dawn. When it is night we can admire the millions of stars, but all their beauty (and the glory of the moon too) fade with the first rays of the sun. Renunciation begins when one learns to distinguish between the value a thing has because one wants it and the value it has apart from one's desire. The value of a thing is regulated by one's desire for it; if one wants to know its real value one must give up one's desire for it, but then it will be seen at once that it has lost all value. To be carefree is the secret of happiness, but not to be careless. This freedom from care is the result of forgetting the self, the result of self-renunciation. When pleasures vanish of their own accord, they end in keen anguish of the mind; when relinquished by one's own will, they produce infinite happiness, proceeding from tranquillity. Just as darkness can be experienced only when all light is extinguished, so also Nibbāna can be realized only when all attachment has been destroyed.

The realization of this truth is attained by the threefold practice of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. *Sīla* is discipline of both body and mind, whereby the defilements that cloud wisdom are removed. But mere morality is not enough; it must be accompanied by mental development. All morality which strives to perpetuate the self is a subtle kind of selfishness. The more subtle and sublimated it is, the more rationalized and idealized, the more dangerous. *Samādhi* is the stilling of thought, the perfect equilibrium of mind, which is attained by the *jhāna* (Sanskrit: *dhyāna*), the so-

called “trances.” They constitute the first taste of the happiness of Nibbāna. It is the joy of having found a possibility of escape from the round of birth, suffering and death. The increase of this joy becomes sheer delight, which then gives place to serene tranquillity, and then to a sense of security and equilibrium, the bliss of well being (*susukha*), which is the very opposite of insecurity and unbalanced striving. In that state of tranquillity not disturbed by likes and dislikes, not made turbid by passions, not hazed by ignorance, like sunlight that penetrates a placid lake of clear water, there arises the supreme insight (*paññā*) that “All birth and death have ceased; the noble life has been lived; what had to be done has been accomplished, and beyond this there is no more.” This is the supreme moment of illumination when the saint (arahant) sees the whole universe with the vividness of a living reality. It is described as a double moment, a moment of feeling as well as a movement of knowledge. In sixteen consecutive thought-instants, the arahant has been through the whole universe and has seen it in the four stages of its evolution toward quiescence. This supreme moment of illumination is the central point of the teaching regarding the path to deliverance.

Such is nibbāna, where the insight of non-self has taken the place of delusion and ignorance; where being will be seen as a mere process of becoming, and becoming as ceasing; where the spell that has kept us in bondage will be broken; where the dream-state will vanish into reality, and reality

will be realised. This reality is not the eternalization of a self but the escape therefrom, not the deliverance or the salvation of the self but the deliverance and salvation from the self, from the misconceived “I.” And with this, the last word has been said. Where craving has ceased, the process of becoming, which is grasping, has ceased also. Where there is no more becoming, there is no more birth, with all its concomitants of sorrow, decay, and death.

Is Nibbāna annihilation? Yes and no. Yes, because it is the annihilation of the lust for life, of the passions, of craving and grasping, and all the things that result therefrom. But on the other hand, where there is nothing to be annihilated, there can be no annihilation. That which constantly arises and is arising is nothing but a process of change and in changing also constantly ceases. That cannot be said to be destroyed; it merely does not arise again. Nibbāna is thus best described as deliverance, surpassing all understanding, above all emotion, beyond all striving, the non-created, the non-conditioned, the non-destructible, which all may attain through insight and realization. It is the culmination of the Buddha’s teaching: “Just as, O monks, the ocean has but one taste, the taste of salt, so the doctrine and the discipline have but one taste, the taste of deliverance.” [17]

“Hard is the infinite to see; truth is not easy to see; craving is pierced by him who knows; for him who sees, naught remains.” [18]

# Notes

1. E. g., “To regard the body as something of worth would be like taking frescoes to be real persons.” Or again, “As one would view a bubble, as one would view a mirage, so should the world be looked at.” (Dhammapada verse 170.) “The world is like a dream.” (*Samyutta Nikāya*, S III 141).
2. *Samyutta Nikāya*, S II 17. See Mrs. Rhys Davids trans., in F. L. Woodward, *Kindred Sayings* (London: Oxford University Press 1926), Vol. IV, p. 13.
3. The first discourse of the *Dīgha Nikāya*. See T. W. Rhys Davids, trans., *Dialogues of the Buddha* (London: Oxford University Press, 1901), Vol. I.
4. *Samyutta Nikāya*, S IV 330f. *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*. See Lord Chalmers, trans. *Further Dialogues of the Buddha* (London: Oxford University Press 1926).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. For a very good exposition of this and what follows, see Th. Stcherbatsky, *The Central Conception of Buddhism* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1923).

8. *Saṅkhāra* is a very difficult term to translate, since it means various things in various contexts. Etymologically, it means “what is put together as a composite thing.” See T. W. Rhys David and W. Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary* (Pali Text Society), s. v.
9. “Form, O monks, is burning” (*rūpaṃ bhikkhave ādittaṃ*) and so on with the other khandha.” *Samyutta Nikāya*, S IV 21. See F. L. Woodward, *Kindred Sayings* (London: Oxford University Press. 1927), Vol. IV.
10. For an excellent exposition of this point, see Paul Dahlke’s *Buddhism* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1927), pp. 129 ff.
11. See the Majjhima Nikāya Sutta No. 38, Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta.
12. For an explanation of this very significant word, see *Pali-English Dictionary*, s.v.
13. The Buddhist conception of time and space is given in *Samyutta Nikāya*. See Woodward, *Kindred Sayings*, Vol. I.
14. *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, A I 237. See F. L. Woodward, *Gradual Sayings*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), Vol. I.
15. *Ibid.*, I 33.
16. *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, A III 415.
17. *Ibid.*, IV, 201.
18. *Udāna*, 8.2. See F. L. Woodward, Trans. *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon*, Pt. II (London: Humphrey

Milford Oxford University Press, 1935).

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