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Six Essays

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# The Buddhist Conception of the Universe



he early Indians and Greeks speculated about the nature, origin and extent of the universe.

Anaximander, a Greek thinker of the 6th century B.C. is supposed to have contemplated the possibility of “innumerable worlds” successively coming out of (and passing away) into an indefinite substance. About a century later, the Greek atomists, Leucippus and Democritus, who postulated the existence of innumerable atoms and an infinite void, conceived of worlds coming-to-be and passing away throughout the void. These speculations were the product of imagination and reason and the “worlds” they talked of were mere reproductions of the earth and the heavenly bodies such as the sun, moon and the stars.

The contemporary Indian speculations prior to Buddhism were on the same lines, except for the fact that some of them were claimed to be based on extra-sensory perception as well. Here there appears to have been even a wider variety of views than to be found among the Greeks.

The early Buddhist texts summarise their views according to the Buddhist logic of four alternatives. With regard to the

extent of the universe, the following four types of views were current: (1) Those who held that the universe was finite in all dimensions, (2) those who held that the universe was infinite in all dimensions, (3) those who held that the universe was finite in some dimensions and infinite in others and (4) those who rejected all the above three views and held that the universe was neither finite nor infinite.

This last view was held by thinkers who argued that the universe or space was unreal. If so, spatial epithets like “finite” or “infinite” cannot be applied to the universe. So the universe is neither finite nor infinite.

Similarly, with regard to the origin of the universe, there were thinkers who put forward all four possible views viz. (1) Some held that the universe had a beginning or origin in time, (2) others that it had no beginning in time, (3) still others that the universe had in one sense a beginning in time and in another sense no beginning in time. This would be so if the universe had relative origins, its substance being eternal while it came into being and passed away from time to time; (4) finally, there were those who put forward the theory that since time was unreal it did not make sense to say that the universe had an origin in time or no origin in time. For this last group of thinkers the universe was “neither eternal nor not eternal.”

It is with original Buddhism that we get for the first time in the history of thought a conception of the universe, which can in any way be meaningfully compared with the modern

picture of the universe as we know it in contemporary astronomy. This is all the more remarkable when we find no other such conception, which foreshadowed or forestalled modern discoveries in ancient or medieval thought of the East or West.

## “The Universe”

Before we describe the essential features of the Buddhist account of the universe or cosmos, it is necessary to clarify what we today mean by the term “universe” for it did not mean what it means today at all times.

The conception of the universe in the West until the end of the medieval period was geocentric. It was mainly Aristotelian in origin. The earth was deemed to be the fixed centre of the universe and the moon, the planets, the sun and the stars were believed to move with uniform circular velocity in crystalline spheres around it. The universe was also finite in spatial extent. Apollonius and Ptolemy made some minor adjustments in an attempt to account for some of the movements of the planets but the basic conceptions remained the same.

This finite geocentric universe was later considered to be the orthodox theological view of the cosmos and attempts on the part of thinkers to change it were clamped down as heresy. A change came with Copernicus who was led by observational findings and the suggestions of early Greek thinkers like the Pythagorean Philolaus and Aristarchus of Samos to conceive of the sun as the centre of the universe.

The “universe” was now the solar system (i.e. the sun with the planets going round it), encircled by the stars.

With the construction of larger telescopes since the time of Galileo, the next advance was made by Herschel in the late eighteenth century. His observations convinced him and others that the unit of the universe was not the solar system but the galaxy or galactic system composed of clusters of stars, the blazing sun that we see being only one among such stars. On the basis of his observations of stars and the calculation of their distances, he was the first to make a map of our galactic system or “island universe” (as he called it), known as the Milky Way.

He too placed our sun at the centre of the disc, though today we know that the Sun is about halfway between the centre and the edge of this huge galaxy. Astronomical distances are so large that they are measured not in terms of miles but in light-years. Light travels at the rate of about 186,000 miles per second. It is held that light, travelling at this speed would take about 100,000 years to travel across the diameter of the Milky Way. In other words, our galactic system has a diameter of 100,000 light-years.

It was left to modern astronomy with its more powerful telescopes, aided by radio telescopes, to delve deeper into space and to make more accurate observations of relative locations and shapes of these galaxies.

In the light of these findings we know that the ten billion galaxies found in space are not found in isolation but in

clusters. So when we survey the universe, the units we have to deal with are the galaxies. They are now classified as regular and irregular galaxies on the grounds of shape, the regular galaxies being elliptical, round or spiral. The commonest of all galaxies (i.e. about three-fourths of them) are spiral. The majority of these galaxies are called “dwarf galaxies” because they contain about a million stars.

The progress of astronomy has thus resulted in a gradual development of the concept of the “universe.” The earliest conception was the geocentric, the “universe” being the earth and the celestial bodies around it. Next, the heliocentric conception concentrated on the solar system. The real advance was made in the next stage when the solar system was conceived as one of many such systems in an “island universe” or galaxy. Following this there was the concept of the cluster of galaxies and the present conception of the universe as consisting of a number of such clusters of galaxies.

## Buddhist Conception

In the Buddhist texts the word used to denote the “world” or “cosmos” or the “universe” is *loka*. Its uses are as various as the English word “world.” It would be tedious to enumerate them here since we are concerned only with the sense in which it is used to denote “the world in space.” This is called *okāsa-loka* or the “space-world” (i.e. the world in space) in the Commentaries, which illustrates this sense by reference to a relevant passage in the *Visuddhimagga*

(VII.37), it is said that in the passage, “As far as these suns and moons revolve, shining and shedding their light in space, so far extends the Thousand-fold Universe” (*sahassadhā loko*, M I 426)—the word *loka* is used to denote “the world in space.”

In one context of this passage, the universe is described in three tiers or stages. The smallest unit of the universe is here called *sahassī-cūlanikā-loka-dhātu*, i.e. the Thousand-Fold Minor World-System. This is defined as follows: “As far as these suns and moons revolve, shining and shedding their light in space, so far extends the thousand-fold universe. In it are thousands of suns, thousands of moons? thousands of Jambudīpas, thousands of Aparagoyānas, thousands of Uttarakurus, thousands of Pubbavidehas?” (A I 227, V 59). Jambudīpa, Aparagoyāna, Uttarakuru and Pubbavideha are the four inhabited regions or the continents known to the people of North India at the time. From descriptions given about them, it appears to have been believed that these peoples had different temperaments and ways of living.

So it is as if one were to say today that there were “thousands of Indias, thousands of Arabias, thousands of Russias and thousands of Chinas.” Its significance is that there were thousands of inhabited places or planets since the earth was associated with one sun and one moon.

This *cūlanikā-loka-dhātu* or Minor World-System, which is the smallest unit in the universe though it contains thousands of suns, moons and inhabited planets, can only

be compared with the modern conception of a galaxy, the majority of which have about a million suns.

Most modern astronomers believe that the chances are that there could be life of the form to be found on earth, in planets of other solar systems in this as well as other galaxies. Professor Harlow Shapley says, after making a most conservative estimate, "We would still have after all that elimination, ten billion planets suitable for organic life something like that on earth." (*The View from a Distant Star*, New York, London, 1963, p. 64). Another well known astronomer, Dr. Ernst J. Opik, states, "Many planets may carry life on their surface. Even if there were only one inhabited system in every million, there would be 10,000 million million abodes of life in the universe. What a variety of forms and conditions this implies!" (*The Oscillating Universe*, New York, 1960, p. 114).

## Clusters of Galaxies

The next unit in the universe according to the early Buddhist texts is described as consisting of thousands of minor world-systems. This is called a "Twice-a-Thousand Middling World-System" (*dvisahassī majjhimikā-loka-dhātu*). It would correspond to a cluster of galaxies according to modern conceptions.

This notion of a cluster of galaxies is a fairly recent one in modern astronomy. As Professor A. C. B. Lovell, Director of the Jodrell Bank Experimental Station, said in his *B B.C. Reith Lectures* in 1958: "Some years ago we thought that

these galaxies were isolated units in space, but now we believe that the galaxies exist in great groups or clusters. In the same way that the earth and planets are bound to the sun and move as a unit through space, so, on an inconceivably vaster scale we think that the galaxies are contained in clusters as connected physical systems. The local group contains the Milky Way system, the Andromeda Nebula and perhaps two dozen others. It is not very populated compared, for example, with the Virgo cluster of galaxies, which contains at least a thousand visible galaxies, although occupying only about twice the space of the local group." (*The Individual and the Universe*, Oxford University Press, London, 1958, pp. 6-7).

In the opinion of Professor Bonnor, "The Milky Way is one of a small cluster of galaxies called the Local Group, which includes all galaxies within about two million light-years from the Earth, and contains about twenty members. Beyond this distance one would have to travel about ten million light years before coming across another galaxy. Other galaxies too show a distinct tendency to cluster. The clusters may be small like the Local Group, or may contain several hundreds or even thousands of galaxies." (William Bonnor, *The Mystery of the Expanding Universe*, New York, 1964, p. 32).

We find that here "thousand" is practically the upper limit since many of the clusters of galaxies contain less. On the other hand with reference to the "Thousand-fold Minor World-System", "thousand" appeared to be too little. Since

the Dhamma is summed up in stereotyped formulas (which recur in the Pāli Canonical Texts) for easy memorisation, it is possible that “thousand” was selected as a convenient common number to describe the hierarchy of units.

However, elsewhere in the Canon smaller numbers of such “thousand-fold minor world-systems” to be found in clusters are referred to.

In the *Saṅkhārupapatti Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the basic unit is again the thousand-fold world-system (*sahassī loka dhātu*, M III 101). But there is a reference to two, three, four ... up to hundred such world-systems grouped together (e. g. *sata-sahassī-loka dhātu*, *ibid.*).

Of frequent occurrence is the *dasa saḥassī-loka-dhātu*, which should be translated as “the Ten of Thousand-fold World-Systems.” It is used with reference to the local group of galaxies, which consists of about 20 in all, of which about 10 cluster relatively close together. One text in fact refers to “the ten nearest island universes” (Rudolf Thiel, *And There Was Light*, New York 1957, p. 355).

## Cosmos

While the Middling World-Systems consisted of a few up to a hundred or even thousand galaxies, the next unit is the whole cluster of Middling World-Systems. For it is said that thousands of Middling World Systems (i. e. clusters of galaxies) go to form the vast universe or the Major World-System (*mahā lokadhātu*), which some texts on astronomy refer to as the meta-galaxy.

Although some astronomers wonder whether there is a hierarchy of clusters of clusters of galaxies within the universe, the general opinion is against this. As Professor Bonnor points out, “One may ask whether clusters of galaxies are the last in the hierarchy. As stars aggregate into galaxies, and galaxies into clusters, do clusters aggregate into super-clusters and so on? Although astronomers are not quite unanimous, it seems that the clusters are the largest individual entities, and we should not be justified in speaking of clusters of clusters. Thus we have at last reached the unit of cosmology—the cluster of galaxies. In practice the galaxy is usually taken as the unit because galaxies can be recognized more easily than clusters.” (Op cit. p. 32).

The modern astronomical descriptions of the universe as well as those of the early Buddhist texts stop here. The modern accounts stop because there is a limit to observability on the part of the telescopes. If, as is inferred to be the case, the galaxies further and further away are receding at greater and greater speeds from us, then as they approach the speed of light, they would pass beyond the range of theoretical observability. So the theoretically observable universe is also limited and what happens beyond this would have to be pure speculation even according to science.

The early Buddhist texts too do not state that the Major World-System is all there is, in the universe, for the question as to whether the world is finite or infinite (*ananto*) in extent

is left unanswered (*avyākata*).

The later commentarial tradition however goes a step further. One of the synonyms for a “world-system” or *loka-dhātu* is *cakkavāla*, a word of uncertain etymology meaning a “wheel”, “circle” or “sphere.” The *Pali Text Society Dictionary* commenting on *loka-dhātu* (s.v.) says that it means “constituent or unit of the Universe”, “a world, sphere” and adds that *loka-dhātu* is another name for *cakkavāla*.

Calling a galaxy a “sphere” or a “wheel” is certainly appropriate for as we know from modern astronomy a galaxy is like a huge Catherine wheel revolving round a centre or hub. But the commentary states that these galaxies or spheres (*cakkavāla*) are infinite in number (*anantāni cakkavāḷāni*, A-a II 342). This is certainly going beyond the standpoint of the early Buddhist texts, which is uncommitted on the question of the origin or extent of the universe. While the later tradition of the Sarvāstivāda and Theravāda suggest that the number of galaxies or world-systems is infinite in extent, the Mahāyāna texts hold that the universe is infinite in time, stating that “the universe is without beginning or end” (*anavarāgra*).

Here again the standpoint of original Buddhism was merely to state that the universe was “without a known beginning” (*anamatagga*). The Buddha, it is said, could see worlds without limit “as far as he liked” (*yāvata ākañkheyya*, Nidd II 356). He could also probe into the past without limit, for the further back that he looked into the past, there was the

possibility of going back still further. But to say that the world or universe is infinite in time and space, is to go beyond the stand of early Buddhism and give an answer to an “unanswered question” (*avyākata*).

While all schools of Buddhism retained the general picture of the universe as given in the early Buddhist texts, their detailed accounts and elaborations are not always to be trusted. The Sarvāstivāda accounts given in the *Abhidharmakoṣa* differ from those of the Theravādins. The reason for this is that the simple but stupendous conceptions of the early Buddhist view of the universe got mixed up with popular mythological geography and cosmogony in the commentarial traditions of the schools.

The Mahāyāna texts, for the most part, retain the early view of the galactic systems spread out through space. We only notice that “thousand” is replaced by “million.” The *Vajracchedikā*, for example, refers to the universe as “this sphere of a million millions of world-systems.” (XIX, XXIV, XXX).

### Myth and Fact

While the early Buddhist texts are therefore more reliable, we must not forget that the account given of the extent of the material universe exhausts the early Buddhist conception of the cosmos. The passage quoted above from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* goes on to speak of the subtle-material worlds (*rūpa-loka*) or the worlds of higher spirits or gods as being associated with the material worlds or galaxies. They

cannot however be observed by human vision.

Are we going to dismiss this aspect of the universe as belonging to the realm of mythology? Did the Buddha have grounds for belief in the existence of *devas* or was this only a popular belief at the time, which he did not subscribe to? We can see the real attitude of the Buddha by the answers he gives to the Brahmin youth Saṅgāraṇa, who questions him on this subject:

*Saṅgāraṇa*: Tell me, Gotama, are there gods (*devas*)?

*Buddha*: I know on good grounds (*ṭhānaso*) that there are gods.

*Saṅgāraṇa*: Why do you say when asked “whether there are gods” that you know on good grounds that there are gods? Does this not imply that your statement is utterly false?

*Buddha*: When one is questioned as to whether there are gods, whether one replies that “there are gods” or that “one knows on good grounds that there are gods,” then surely the deduction to be made by an intelligent person is indubitable, namely that there are gods.

*Saṅgāraṇa*: Then, why did not the Venerable Gotama, plainly say so from the very start?

*Buddha*: Because it is commonly taken for granted in the world that there are gods.

The significance of this reply is that the Buddha holds that there are devas not because of a popular or traditional belief, which he took for granted, but because he was personally convinced of their existence on good grounds.

On the other hand, the Buddha had to make use of some of the traditional terms and coin others to describe the different types of worlds of these devas. There is other evidence to suggest that the Buddha did not take popular conceptions for granted. In one place he says that ignorant people believe that there is a “hell” (*pātāla*) but asserts that this belief was false. “Hell (*pātāla*),” the Buddha says, is a term for painful bodily sensations (*Samyutta Nikāya*, S IV 206). “Heavens” are better than human forms of existence, where everything one experiences is pleasant (S IV 124) while “hells” are sub-human forms of existence where everything one experiences is unpleasant. The Buddha claims to “see” both these kinds of worlds (S IV 124). The danger of being born in these sub-human states of downfall (*vinipāta*) is that it is difficult to emerge to human level after that. The reason is given: “Because there prevails no practice of the good life, no righteous living, no doing of good works, but just cannibalism: the stronger preying on weaker creatures.” (S V 455).

## Clairvoyance

It is stated that the Buddha’s ability to see these world-systems and the beings in them is due to his clairvoyance. It is said, “The Blessed One with his clairvoyant paranormal

vision can see one world-system, two, three? fifty world-systems, the Thousand-fold Minor World-System, the Twice-a-Thousand Middling World-System and the Thrice-a-Thousand Major World System. He could see as far out into space as he likes. So clear is the clairvoyant vision of the Blessed One. In this way is the Blessed One with his clairvoyant vision, one who has his eyes open." (*vivaṭa-cakkhu*, Niddesa II 355).

The clairvoyant power of the disciples both according to texts and the commentaries is not unlimited like that of the Buddha. Anuruddha who was considered the foremost of those who had attained the faculty of clairvoyant vision could see only as far as the "thousandfold world-system": "It is by the fact of cultivating and developing these four arisings of mindfulness that I have acquired the ability to see the thousand-fold world-system." (S V 302).

### Cosmic Phenomena

Some of the casual statements made by the Buddha appear to come from one who has in fact observed aspects of cosmic space. In one place, the Buddha says, "Monks, there is a darkness of inter-galactic space (Woodward has "interstellar space'), an impenetrable gloom, such a murk of darkness as cannot enjoy the splendour of this sun and moon" (S V 455). Modern astronomy would agree with this verdict. We see so much light because we are fortunate enough to be close to a sun.

The uncertainty of life in some of these worlds is sometimes

stressed with graphic descriptions of cosmic phenomena. The Buddha says that there comes a time after a lapse of hundreds of thousands of years when it would cease to rain and vegetable and animal life in the planet would be destroyed. (A V 102). He also speaks of times when seven suns would appear and the earth including the biggest of mountains which appears so stable would go up in smoke without leaving any ashes at all. He speaks as though he has witnessed some of these phenomena. He says, "Who would think or believe that this earth or Sineru, the highest of mountains would burn up and be destroyed except on the evidence of sight." (A V 103). Today we know that suns or stars could become cosmic hydrogen bombs, flare up and explode, burning up its planets, if any, and even affecting neighbouring solar systems. A student of astronomy commenting on this possibility says "Humanity would at any rate enjoy a solemn and dramatic doom as the entire planet went up in a puff of smoke." (Rudolf Thiel, *And There Was Light*, p. 329). These phenomena are called *novae* and *supernovae*, which are observed from time to time in galaxies including our own. Colliding galaxies, of which there is some evidence, could also spell such disasters.

## Time and Relativity

The destruction of the worlds, however, which will cause such phenomena to be manifested in all the world-systems, comes only at the end of an epoch or eon, called a *kappa*. Several similes are given to illustrate what an immensely long period an eon is. One such passage reads as follows:

“Suppose there were a city of iron walls one *yojana* in length, one in width, one *yojana* high, filled up with mustard seed. Therefrom a man were to take out at the end of every hundred years a mustard seed. That pile of mustard seed would in this way be sooner done away with and ended than an eon. So very long is an eon. And of eons thus long more than one has passed, more than a hundred, more than a thousand, more than a hundred thousand.” (S II 182).

The cosmos undergoes two major periods of change in time called the eons of expansion and contraction. The eon of expansion is the period in which the universe unfolds itself or opens out (*vivaṭṭa-kappa*). The other is the one in which the universe closes in and is destroyed (*saṃvaṭṭa-kappa*). Elsewhere they are described as the four stages of the universe: (1) the period of expansion, (2) the period in which the universe remains in a state of expansion, (3) the period of contraction and (4) the period in which the universe stays contracted.

There are several models according to which astronomers try to explain the movement within the universe in time. One of them is the cycloidal oscillating model according to which the universe expands and contracts until, as Professor Bonnor says, “the contraction slows down, ceases and changes to expansion” again. The theory is currently favoured by many astronomers in the light of recent findings.

There is also a reference to the relativity of time in different parts of the universe. But this is a comparison of time on earth with time in the heavenly worlds. A day in one of these different worlds is equated with 50 years, 100 years, 200 years, 400 years and 1600 years respectively on earth. Such in brief outline is the early Buddhist conception of the universe.

# The Buddhist Attitude to God

The word “God” is used in so many different ways and so many different senses that it is not possible to define the Buddhist attitude to God without clarifying the meaning of this term. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines its sense in a theistic context as, “Supreme being, Creator and Ruler of the Universe.” A theistic text (*The Book of Common Prayer*) gives the following description: “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts or passions; of infinite power, wisdom and goodness, the Maker and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible ....” I have left out the rest of the quotation since it concerns the specific dogmas of this particular school of theism.

In this form it would be a definition of the concept of a personal God, common to monotheistic belief with the proviso that the idea of creation varies according to different traditions. According to one tradition God’s creation consists in fashioning co-existent chaotic matter and making an ordered cosmos out of chaos. According to another tradition God’s matter in creation is an emanation or emission (*śṛṣṭi*) from the being of God, while according to yet another tradition God creates matter out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).

Using the word in the above sense of a Personal Creator God, who is a Supreme Being possessed of the characteristics of omniscience, omnipotence and infinite goodness, if we ask the question, “Does God exist?”, there are four possible answers. They are: (1) those of Theists who say “yes” and affirm God’s existence, (2) those of atheists who say “no” and deny God’s existence, (3) those of sceptics or agnostics who say “we do not know” or “we cannot know”, and (4) those of positivists who say that the question is meaningless since the meaning of the term “God” is not clear.

## Atheism

What is the Buddhist answer to this question? Was the Buddha a theist, an atheist, an agnostic or a positivist? The answer is fairly clear. Given the above definition of God in its usual interpretation, the Buddha is an atheist and Buddhism in both its Theravāda and Mahāyāna forms is atheistic.

Some Western scholars have tried to make out that Mahāyāna Buddhism came into being about the beginning of the Christian era and that in it the Buddha is deified. Both these conclusions are false. Mahāyāna Buddhism came into being with the *Mahāsaṅghika* Council when a group of liberals broke away from the conservative elders or the Theravādins about a hundred years after the death of the Buddha and in none of the Mahāyāna schools is the Buddha conceived of as a Creator God.

This does not mean that the Buddha was a mere human being in either the Theravāda or Mahāyāna schools of thought. Some local Buddhist scholars following nineteenth century Western rationalists have said so, but according to the early Buddhist texts, when the Buddha was asked whether he was a human being, his answer was that he was not a human being but a Buddha, although he was a human being who became a Buddha. (AN 4:36) The Buddha as the Tathāgata or “The Transcendent One” is “deep, immeasurable and unfathomable.” His body passes away at death and he becomes invisible to gods and men and it is incorrect to say that he ceases to exist. (MN 72/M I 483ff)

In denying that the universe is a product of a Personal God, who creates it in time and plans a consummation at the end of time, Buddhism is a form of atheism.

### Gosāla's Theism

That Buddhism is atheistic is also clear from its denunciation of the religion and philosophy of Theism put forward by Makkhali Gosāla, one of the six senior contemporaries of the Buddha. It is a remarkable fact that these six teachers put forward prototypes of religious or philosophical theories, which have become widely prevalent in the world.

Makkhali was a theist or an *issara-nimmāna-vādin*, i.e. one who posited the theory that the ultimate cause was God. The others consisted of a materialist, an agnostic, a categorialist (who explained the universe in terms of

discrete categories), a natural determinist and an eclectic.

According to the Jain *Bhagavatī Sūtra* and the Commentary to the *Dīgha Nikāya*, Makkhali is called Gosāla because he was born in a cow-shed (*go-sālā*). In his teaching he denied moral causation and urged that human beings become corrupted or doomed or become purified or saved miraculously, presumably by the will or grace of God. Human beings lacked initiative or freedom and their future was entirely planned out by the will of the creator. All beings evolved in various states of existence under the impact of destiny, circumstance or nature. Eventually fools and the wise alike completed their saṃsāric evolution and attained salvation, making an end of suffering.

It is called the theory of salvation through saṃsāric evolution (*saṃsāra-suddhi*) and in one place in the Buddhist texts it is described as follows: “There is no short-cut to Heaven. Await thy destiny. Whether a man experiences joy or sorrow is due to his destiny. All beings will attain salvation through saṃsāric evolution, so do not be eager for that which is to come.” (J-a VI 229). The same idea is expressed as follows in a theistic text: “Beings originate in the Unmanifest, they evolve in a manifest condition and eventually come to rest in the Unmanifest. So why worry?”

Makkhali explicitly states that “there is no question of a person attaining maturity of character by good deeds, vows, penances or a religious life.” (DN 2.20/D I 54). Man is merely a product of the creation and will of God and his

future is laid out. As Makkhali says, “Just as much as a ball of thread when flung on the ground unravels itself until it comes to an end, so the wise and the fools alike fare on in saṃsāra and eventually attain salvation.”

Makkhali’s theism has several attractive features. Firstly, it is logically consistent. As philosophers have pointed out, God’s omniscience and omnipotence strictly imply a rigid, deterministic universe. God being omniscient sees the entire future in all its aspects and details. It is unlike human foreknowledge, which is only probable. So the future of the creature is strictly mapped out and God can see it as in the reel of a film. God being omnipotent is entirely responsible for it as well, so that a belief in free will on the part of his creatures is merely illusory. Secondly, God is impartial in that he treats all beings alike for as Makkhali says, “there are no high and the low” (*natthi ukkaṃsāvakaṃse*) since all go through the same course of evolution in various stages of existence. Thirdly, there are no eternal hells and beings do not have to burn in an everlasting hell-fire for they all attain salvation. There are three hundred hells (*tiṃse nirayasate*), or rather purgatories, along with seven human worlds (*sattamānuse*) and several heavens to pass through before attaining eventual release.

His theism relieves human beings of the burdens of responsibility, gives them security, solace and the joys of the heavens (mixed with the sorrows of purgatories) before assuring salvation. In this sense, it may be compared with many modern forms of theism, which try to equalise

opportunities for all and are very apologetic about eternal hell-fires.

## Puppet Argument

Yet the theism of Makkhali is severely criticised by the Buddha since it gave a false sense of security to the people and encouraged complacency by denying free will and the value of human effort. The Buddha says that he knows of no other person than Makkhali born for the detriment and disadvantage of so many people and compares him to a fisherman casting his net at the mouth of a river for the destruction of many fish (A I 33). Similarly in the *Sandaka Sutta*, the Buddha (as reported by Ānanda) says that there are four types of religion which are false in this world and four types which are unsatisfactory though not necessarily totally false, distinguishing Buddhism from all eight of them.

Two of the types condemned as false refer to two forms of theism. One is the doctrine that salvation is not due to human effort or the moral causation effected by good or evil deeds but that people are miraculously saved or doomed presumably because of the grace or will of God. The other is the doctrine of predestination or theistic evolutionism.

It would be interesting to see the reasons given for this stand taken against certain forms of theism. There are two main arguments against theism presented in the early Canonical texts. The first may be called the Puppet Argument and is stated as follows: "If God designs the life

of the entire world—the glory and the misery, the good and the evil acts— man is but an instrument of his will (*niddesa-kāri*) and God (alone) is responsible” (J-a V 238).

Theists who do not take a “predestinarian” stand (which is logically consistent) try to evade this conclusion by saying that God has endowed man with free will. But it can be shown that the concept of divine providence is not compatible with a notion of human freedom. To be consistent, one has either to give up the belief in theism or the belief in freedom or confess that this is a mystery that one cannot understand, which is a departure from reason.

Professor Antony Flew, who has made the most recent and most comprehensive analysis of the concept of theism, including the case for and against it, states one of his conclusions with regard to this matter as follows: “The stock image is that of a Supreme Father showing long-suffering tolerance towards his often rebellious children; he has given us, it is said, our freedom; and we—wretched unworthy creatures that we are—too often take advantage to flout his wishes. If this image fitted, there would be no problem. Obviously, it is possible for children to act against their parents’ wishes. It is also possible for parents to grant to their children freedoms, which may be abused, by refusing to exercise powers of control which they do possess. But the case of Creator and creature must be utterly different. Here the appropriate images, in so far as any images could be appropriated, would be that of the Creator, either as the Supreme Puppet Master with creatures whose every

thought and move he arranges or as the Great Hypnotist with subjects who always act out his irresistible suggestions. What makes the first image entirely inept, and the other two much less so, is crucially that God is supposed to be, not a manufacturer or a parent who may make or rear his product and then let it be, but the Creator. This precisely means that absolutely nothing happens save by his ultimate undetermined determination and with his consenting ontological support. Everything means everything; and that includes every human thought, every human action and every human choice. For we too are indisputably parts of the universe, we are among the “all things both visible and invisible” of which he is supposed to be “the Maker and Preserver” (*God and Philosophy*, Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1966, p. 44).

His final conclusion is the same as what I mentioned above. In his own words: “For it is, as we have argued already, entirely inconsistent to maintain: both that there is a Creator; and that there are other authentically autonomous beings” (ibid. p. 54). A careful study of the theistic texts of any tradition will show that often this is directly admitted in certain contexts, despite the contradictions in other places.

According to the Buddhist theory of causation man’s actions are not strictly determined. The Buddhist theory steers clear of both Natural and Theistic Determinism on the one hand and total Indeterminism on the other. Man has an element of free will although his actions are conditioned but not determined by external and internal stimuli. By the exercise

of this freedom along the right lines man can change his own condition from one of anxiety, unrest and suffering to one of serenity and happiness. This is effected not by invoking the grace of God but by human effort and the comprehension of human psychology. In the *Devadaha Sutta*, the Buddha uses the arguments of the theists against them, saying that if theists are suffering psychologically, then according to their own theories it must be because God has withheld his grace from them whereas in his own case (if theism were true) "he must have been created by a good God." (*bhaddakena issarena nimmito*, MN 101.46/M II 227).

### Argument from Evil

The second argument against theism found in the Canonical texts is the argument from evil. It proceeds on the presumption that if the world is created by God, then certain evils are inexplicable. It has several variants but if we take some of them together: "If God (Brahmā) is Lord of the whole world and creator of the multitude of beings, then why (i) has he ordained misfortune in the world without making the whole world happy, or (ii) for what purpose has he made the world full of injustice, deceit, falsehood and conceit or (iii) the Lord of creation is evil in that he pre-ordained injustice when there could have been justice" (J VI 208).

Here again, leading modern philosophers endorse the argument after showing that all the attempts to explain away evil are unsatisfactory. It will not do to say that evil is

negative or unreal; for suffering, ignorance, poverty and ugliness are as real as their opposites. It will not do to say that evils (like wilful injury) are necessary for the existence of higher-order goods (like forgiveness) for there are still many evils unaccounted for in this fashion. Nor will it do to say that the evils in the world are due to the grant of free will to human beings (quite apart from the difficulty of reconciling this with divine providence, as indicated above). For as Professor Flew has shown, “There are many evils which it scarcely seems either are or could be redeemed in this way: animal suffering, for instance, especially that occurring before—or after—the human period” (Ibid. p. 54).

Here again the inability to give a rational explanation leads the theist to a confession that it is a mystery: “The origin of moral evil lies forever concealed within the mystery of human freedom” (J. R. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, Prentice-Hall, 1963, p. 43). So there is the mystery or the incompatibility between divine providence and human freedom as well as the mystery or the contradiction between belief in divine goodness and the existence of certain evils.

The result is that while some of the *Upaniṣads* hold that “the world is enveloped by God” (*iṣāvasyaṃ idaṃ sarvaṃ*), Buddhism held that “the world was without a refuge and without God” (*attāṇo loko anabhissaro*).

## Other Arguments

I have stated only the two main arguments to be found in the Canonical texts, which may be attributed to the Buddha

himself. But the later literature both of Theravāda and Mahāyāna provide an abundance of arguments against the concept of a Personal Creator God (Īsvara). While positive arguments are adduced to show the truth of atheism, there are others which show the fallacies of the theistic arguments for the existence of God.

Even when we take the arguments for theism in a modern context we find that the ontological argument was a mere definition, which mistakenly regarded existence as an attribute. The cosmological argument contradicted its own premise by speaking of an uncaused cause or using the word “cause” in a non-significant sense. The argument from Design, which is superficially the most appealing, flounders when we consider the waste and cruelty of evolution, with nature “red in tooth and claw.” It is impossible to contemplate that a loving God could have created and watched the spectacle of dinosaurs tearing each other to pieces for millions of years on earth.

### **Inconceivable or Meaningless?**

In order to reconcile divine love with the apparent cruelty of nature, a move that is often made by theists is to say that God’s love is inscrutable or is another mystery. A human parent would do whatever he could to relieve the suffering of his child who is in great pain. Would an omnipotent and omniscient being look on without intervention? To say that such a being exists is to equate his love with callousness or cruelty. In such a situation we would not know what

meaning to attach to the concept of “love” considered as an attribute of God. This has led theists to say that God’s attributes as well as his nature are inconceivable. The *Bodhicāryāvātāra* makes a *reductio ad absurdum* of this contention arguing that in such a case the concept of a God or creator is meaningless: “If, as theists say, God is too great for man to be able to comprehend him, then it follows that his qualities also surpass our range of thought, and that we neither know him nor attribute to him the quality of a creator.” It follows that if normal meanings are given to the words all-knowing, all-powerful and infinitely good (or analogous meanings), the evidence points against God’s existence whereas if this is not done, the concept becomes meaningless.

## Fruit Test

Another test that Buddhism applies in gauging the validity of a belief is the “fruit test” or the attempt to see what consequences a belief or set of beliefs, when acted upon, has led to. With regard to theism it may be held that it has given people a sense of security and inspired them to various kinds of activity. This does not prove that the belief is true but suggests that it may be useful. A realistic survey would show that while beliefs in theism have done some good, they have brought much evil in their train as well.

Wars have been fought between the main warring creeds of theism and also among the sects within, each in the name of God. In contrast we may quote the words of Dr. Edward

Conze about Buddhism: "All those who dwell in Asia can take pride in a religion which is not only five centuries older than that of the West, but has spread and maintained itself without recourse to violence, and has remained unstained by religious wars and crusades" (*A Short History of Buddhism*, p. 111). In addition, a careful study of the literature of theism will show that there is hardly a crime or vice which has not been committed or recommended in the name of God.

Hitler thought that he was merely carrying out the will of God and that he and his party were the instruments of Providence. The references are too many to quote and may be found in his "Speeches" (Norman H. Baynes, *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler*, Oxford University Press, 1942, s.v. *God in Index*). For example in 1938, Hitler says, "I believe that it was God's will to send a boy from here into the Reich, to let him grow up, to raise him to be the leader of the nation so as to enable him to lead back his homeland into the Reich. There is a higher ordering and we all are nothing else than its agents" (p. 1458). In 1939, he says, "The National Socialist Movement has wrought this miracle. If Almighty God granted success to his work, then the Party was His instrument" (p. 426). In his *Mein Kampf (My Struggle)* he says, "Thus did I now believe that I must act in the sense of the Almighty Creator. By defending myself against the Jews, I am doing the Lord's work" (London, 1938, p. 36). These thoughts may have greatly relieved his conscience when he ordered the extermination of six million Jews from

the face of the earth.

Some have argued that the concept of the fatherhood of God leads to the idea of the brotherhood of man. At the same time, human inequalities have also been sanctioned in God's name. Such are the concepts of chosen castes, chosen races, chosen nations, chosen classes, chosen creeds, a chosen sex or a chosen individual. As the Buddhist texts say, if God created the world, he would be responsible for the crime and suffering no less than the acts of goodness and self-sacrifice.

## Buddhist Atheism

While Buddhism is atheistic, we must not forget that Buddhist atheism has at the same time to be distinguished from materialistic atheism. Buddhism asserted the falsity of a materialistic philosophy which denied survival, recompense and responsibility as well as moral and spiritual values and obligations, no less than certain forms of theistic beliefs. In its thoroughly objective search for truth it was prepared to accept what was true and good in "the personal immortality view" (*bhavadiṭṭhi*) of theism as well as "the annihilationist view" (*vibhavadiṭṭhi*) of atheistic materialism: "Those thinkers who do not see how these two views arise and cease to be, their good points as well as their defects and how one transcends them in accordance with the truth are under the grip of greed, hate and ignorance ... and will not attain final deliverance." (MN 11.7/M I 65).

## The Divine Life

Buddhism recognises all that is true, good and valuable in certain forms of theistic doctrine. Among the four types of religions which were unsatisfactory but not necessarily false were those based on a revelational tradition (*anussava*). A religion, which granted the truth of an element of free will, of moral causation, of survival and responsibility and the non-inevitability of salvation, had value in it.

Although there is no Personal God with the characteristics of omniscience, omnipotence and infinite goodness, there is the concept of a *Mahā Brahmā* (Mighty God) who is morally perfect and has very great knowledge and power but is not omniscient and omnipotent. Certain forms of theism, it is said, are put forward by teachers who are born on earth after dying from the world of such a being. Born here they lead a homeless life of renunciation and meditation, see the heaven that they came from and teach a religion of fellowship with Brahmā (God). They believe that such a Brahmā is omnipotent (*abhibhū anabhibhūto*), omniscient (*aññadathudaso*), the Mighty Lord (*vasavatti issaro*), Maker (*kattā*), Creator (*nimmātā*), the Most Perfect (*settho*), the Designer (*sañjitā*) and the Almighty Father of beings that are and are to be (*vasī pitā bhūta-bhavyānaṃ*), whose creatures we are.

The Buddha does not deny the existence of such a being; he is morally perfect but not omniscient and omnipotent. He is the chief of the hierarchy of Brahmās who rule over galactic

systems and clusters of galactic systems. He is regent of the cosmos who requests the Buddha to preach the pure and perfect Dhamma to the world, which will otherwise be destroyed. But he too is subject to the judgment of *karma*. According to the Buddha as reported in the *Brahmanimantanika Sutta* and elsewhere, Buddhahood is a state far exceeding the knowledge and power of any Brahmā. As the *Tevijja Sutta* points out, fellowship with Brahmā is not to be attained by petitionary prayers but by cultivating the divine life: “That those Brahmins versed in the Vedas and yet bearing anger and malice in their hearts, sinful and uncontrolled should after death with the dissolution of the body attain fellowship with God who is free from anger and malice, pure in heart and has self-mastery—such a state of things can in no wise be” (DN 13.34–35/D I 248).

It is said that the cultivation of compassion in its purest form is “called the divine life in this world” (*Brahmaṃ etaṃ vihāraṃ idhamāhu*). It is also said that when one lives the moral and spiritual life with faith in the Buddha, then “one dwells with God” (*Brahmunā saddhiṃ saṃvasati*). The Buddha came to establish “the rule of righteousness” or “the kingdom of righteousness” (*dhamma-cakkaṃ, pavattetum*) in this world, which is elsewhere called “the kingdom of God” (*brahmacakkaṃ*). The Buddha and his disciples who have attained *Nirvāna* are said “to abide with self-become-God” (*brahma-bhūtena attanā viharati*). One who has attained *Nirvāna*, it is said, “may justifiably employ

theological terminology” (*dhammena so Brahma-vādaṃ vadeyya*). The old theological terms are given a new meaning and significance in what is comparable to the modern death-of-God theology, which is currently gaining ground in the West with seekers after truth who can no longer with honesty and sincerity accept the old theology and the old dogmas.

## Superfluous

Yet it is unnecessary and to some extent misleading to put Buddhism into a theological cast. Whatever we may mean by “God” and whether we say “God exists” or “God does not exist”, it is a fact that there is physical and mental illness. The right approach is to understand the nature of these illnesses, their causes, their cures and to apply the right remedies. Buddhism provides not palliatives but the right remedies for the gradual and complete eradication of all anxiety, insecurity and the mental illnesses we suffer from until we attain the completely healthy Nirvānic mind. If Nirvāna is God in the sense of being the Transcendent Reality, then those who are using these remedies cannot still comprehend it, while those who attain it do not need to. [1]

# The Buddhist Attitude to Revelation

In the *Saṅgāraṇa Sutta*, the Buddha states that there are three types of religious and philosophical teachers, considering the basis of their knowledge, who prescribe divergent ways of life. First, there are the revelationists (*anussavikā*) who claim final knowledge on the basis of revelation, such as, for instance, the Brahmins of the Vedic tradition. Secondly, there are the rational metaphysicians (*takkī vīmaṃsī*) who claim final knowledge on the basis of their faith in reason and speculation. Thirdly, there are those who claim final knowledge of things not found in the traditional revealed scriptures (*ananussutesu dhammesu*), based on a personal understanding derived from their extra-sensory powers of perception.

It is significant that the Buddha classifies himself as a member of the third group. Referring to this class of religious and philosophical teachers the Buddha says, “I am one of them” (*tesāhaṃ asmi*, M II 211). It would surely be of interest to Buddhists to know something about this last class of religious and philosophical teachers with whom the Buddha identifies himself. It would also be important to

note the difference between the Buddha and the other members of this class. But in order to do this, it would be necessary on the one hand to identify the Buddha's contemporaries and predecessors, who were presumed to belong to this class. On the other hand, it is vital to examine the Buddhist attitude to the other two classes of religious and philosophical thinkers.

This would involve an analysis of the means of knowledge recognised in pre-Buddhist thought. For this purpose it would be necessary to look into both the Vedic and the non-Vedic traditions that preceded Buddhism: The pre-Buddhist Vedic tradition comprises the thinkers who paid some sort of allegiance to the Vedas. From the evidence of the Buddhist scriptures and the Vedic texts, they consisted of the thinkers responsible for the literature from the Ṛgveda downwards up to about the *Maitrāyaṇi Upaniṣad*. The pre-Buddhist non-Vedic tradition would comprise the Materialists, the Sceptics who are called *amarā-vikkhepikā* (i.e. eel-wrigglers) in the Buddhist texts and *ajñānavādins* or agnostics in the Jain texts, the Ājīvikas who propounded theories about time and change and the Jains who had Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta as their leader.

A careful study of the relevant texts of the Vedic and non-Vedic traditions shows that the thinkers who claimed a final knowledge of things not found in the traditional revealed scriptures, based on a personal understanding derived from their extra-sensory powers of perception are to be found in both the Vedic and the non-Vedic traditions prior to

Buddhism. They were none other than those who practised *yoga* and claimed to have acquired certain extrasensory faculties of perception and expansions of consciousness. We shall examine, in a later chapter, the respects in which the Buddha may be compared and contrasted with them.

Here it is relevant to examine the claims of the authoritarian thinkers, who regarded the Vedas as revealed scriptures as well as the claims of the Rationalists, who put forward metaphysical theories about the nature and destiny of man in the universe based on speculative reasoning. It is worth remembering at the same time that the authoritarian thinkers and the rationalists were by no means confined to the Vedic tradition. They are also found in the pre-Buddhist non-Vedic tradition as well. The *Suttanipāta* refers to “the Vedas of the Samaṇas or recluses as well as to the Vedas of the Brahmins” (*Vedāni viceyya kevalāni samaṇānaṃ yāni p’atthi brāhmaṇānaṃ*, Sn. 529) and there is evidence to show that some of the Ājīvikas had their own authoritative religious and philosophical texts handed down by tradition. Besides, there were Rationalists, perhaps the majority of them, in the non-Vedic tradition. The Materialists, Sceptics and many of the Ājīvikas were rationalists who based their findings on reasoning. So we find the authoritarian thinkers, the Rationalists as well as the Empiricists or Experientialists whose knowledge was derived from experience, represented in both the Vedic and the non-Vedic traditions prior to Buddhism.

We shall here examine the authoritarian thinkers of the

Vedic tradition and the Buddhist attitude to them. For, this attitude illustrates the Buddhist attitude to revelation. It was the belief of the majority of the thinkers of the Vedic tradition that the whole of it was the word uttered or breathed forth by the Great Being, who is the ground of existence. A passage in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* reads as follows: "It is as from a fire laid with damp fuel, clouds of smoke separately issue forth, so, too, verily, from this Great Being has been breathed forth that which is *Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda*, (Hymns) of the *Atharvāns* and *Āṅgirasas*, Legend, Ancient Lore, Sciences, *Upaniṣads*, Stanzas, *Sūtras*, explanations and commentaries. From it, indeed, are all these breathed forth" (2.4.10). Since this Great Being (*Mahād Bhūtaṃ*) is conceived as the source of all knowledge and power, these scriptures were an infallible divine revelation. In a later passage in the same *Upaniṣad*, which adds to this list, the entire cosmos is said to be breathed forth by the Great Being. Both passages occur in a context in which the highest reality is said to be non-dual (*advaitaṃ*). This impersonal conception is to be found in other works of this period, where the Vedas are said to be a product of the basic structure of the world (*skambha*), time (*kāla*) or logos (*vāk*).

Very much earlier in the *Ṛgveda* itself, though in a late hymn (RV 10 90), the origin of the Vedas is traced to the sacrifice of the Cosmic Person (*Puruṣa*). This led in the *Brāhmaṇas* to the theory that the Vedas are due to the creation of Prajāpati, the Lord of all creatures. This Prajāpati is often

identified in the *Brāhmaṇas* with Brahmā, who according to the Buddhist texts is considered by the theistic Brahmins to be the creator of the cosmos. In the *Upaniṣads*, Prajāpati, or the Lord of creation, sometimes continues in his role as the creator of the Vedas (Ch. 4 17 1 2). But Brahmā often gains prominence as the creator of the Vedas, although they are actually revealed to mankind by Prajāpati. The *Chāndogya* says, “This did Brahmā tell to Prajāpati, Prajāpati to Manu and Manu to human beings” (8 15). Very much later in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, Brahmā is still “the first of the gods and the maker of all’, who eventually reveals both the higher and lower forms of Vedic knowledge to mankind.

On the internal evidence of the Vedic tradition itself, we therefore find that the claim was made at a certain stage in its history that the texts of the Vedic tradition were divinely revealed. The later Vedic tradition, therefore, considers the *ṛṣis* who composed the Vedic hymns as “seers” in the literal sense of the term, who “see the Vedas by means of extra-sensory perception” (*atīndriyārtha-draṣṭarāḥ ṛṣayah?*).

Radhakrishnan gives expression to this traditional point of view when he says that “the *ṛṣi* of the Vedic hymn calls himself not so much the composer of the hymns as the seer of them” but it is a theory that was put forward as early as the *Brāhmaṇas*.

It is because the Vedic thinkers believed their texts to have been divinely revealed that they looked down with scorn at the claims of certain religious and philosophical teachers to have personally verified the truths of their doctrines by

developing their extra-sensory powers of perception. In the *Subha Sutta*, the Buddha criticises some of the ethical recommendations of the *Upaniṣads* on the ground that neither the Brahmins at the time nor their teachers up to several generations nor even the original seers claimed to know the consequences of practising the virtues referred to by verifying the fact with their paranormal perception. Subha, the Brahmin student, is enraged at this and quotes the views of one of the senior Brahmins, who treated such claims to verify these facts in the light of paranormal perception with contempt, considering them ridiculous (*hassakaṃ*), for it is impossible for a mere human being (*manussabhūto*) to claim such knowledge. The point here is that Vedic knowledge is divinely revealed in contrast with the knowledge of the Buddha, which was merely human and therefore of lesser worth.

It is the same criticism that is sometimes levelled against Buddhism by some of its theistic critics on the basis of the theistic presuppositions. It is said that the knowledge of the Buddha was merely human, whereas the knowledge allegedly contained in their respective theistic traditions is divine, implying thereby that it was more reliable.

We may examine the value of this criticism. But let us first assess the value of the Buddhist criticisms of the Vedic tradition in their historical contexts. In the above context, the Buddha criticises the acceptance of certain statements merely on the ground that they are contained in an allegedly revealed text without their being verified as true.

It may be stated here that verifiability in the light of experience is one of the central characteristics of truth according to Buddhist conceptions.

In the *Sandaka Sutta*, Buddhism is contrasted with four types of false religions and four types of religions, which are unsatisfactory though not necessarily false, by claiming that the statements of Buddhism have been verified by the Buddha and many of his disciples and were, therefore, verifiable in principle by anyone with the requisite competence. A statement can be reliably accepted as true only when it is repeatedly verified and not because it is dogmatically declared to be the truth on the grounds of revelation. In the *Caṅkī Sutta*, the Buddha says: “There are five things which have a twofold result in this life. What five? A belief based on faith (*saddhā*), one’s likes (*ruci*), on revelation (*anussava*), superficial reflection (*ākāra-parivitakka*) and agreement with one’s preconceptions (*ditṭhinijjhānakkhanti*)? For even what I learn to be the truth on the ground of it being a profound revelation may turn out to be empty, hollow and false, while what I do not hear to be a truth on the ground of it being a profound revelation may turn out to be factual, true and sound” (MN 95.14/M II 170–1). The Buddha goes on to say that one safeguards the truth, by accepting a statement from revelation as such a statement, without dogmatically claiming it to be true, which is unwarranted. This means that it is spurious to claim as knowledge the truth of a statement in a revealed text. It is different with a statement, which has been reliably

verified in the light of one's personal experience. It is noteworthy that the Buddha says that beliefs held on the grounds of faith, one's likes, revelation etc. are likely to have a dual result, namely to be verified as either true or false in this life itself.

In the *Sandaka Sutta*, a similar conclusion is drawn. One of the reasons why a religion based on revelation is "unconsoling" or unsatisfactory (*anassāsika*) is that it may prove to be either true or false and one cannot say what it is for certain. It is said, "Herein a certain religious teacher is a revelationist, who holds to the truth of revelation and preaches a doctrine according to revelation, according to what is traditionally handed down, according to the authority of scripture. Now a teacher who is a "revelationist" and holds to the truth of revelation may have well-heard it or ill-heard it and it may be true or false. At this, an intelligent person reflects thus: this venerable teacher is a revelationist, etc. ..., so seeing that his religion is unsatisfactory he loses interest and leaves it." So even the fact that it has been clearly apprehended as a revelation is no guarantee of its truth, for revelation is no criterion of truth. For, the statements of revealed scripture may turn out to be true or false.

This is one of the central criticisms of revealed religion as found in the Buddhist texts, which reappears in the context under discussion in the *Subha Sutta*. The second criticism that is made is that neither the Brahmins living at that period nor their teachers up to several generations nor even

the original seers claimed to know the consequences of practising these virtues after realising the fact with their higher knowledge, although the Buddha himself could do so.

While the Vedic tradition from the time of the *Brāhmaṇas* onwards, claimed that the composers of the Vedic hymns were in fact seers, who intuited the truths or saw the statements which were revealed to them by their extra-sensory perception, the Buddhists not only denied any higher insight on the part of the seers but quite emphatically asserted that the hymns were in fact composed by them. The original seers (*pubbakā isayo*) are constantly described as “the makers and the utterers of the hymns” (*mantānaṃ kattāro, mantānaṃ pavattāro*, D I 242). The internal evidence of the Ṛgvedic texts proves this for in these texts, the Vedic poets merely claim to make ( $\sqrt{kr}$ ), compose ( $\sqrt{tak}$ ), produce ( $\sqrt{jan}$ ) and utter (*avadannṛtāñī*) the hymns. The Vedic *Anukramaṇāī* merely defines a ṛṣi as “an author of a hymn” (*yasya vākyam sa ṛṣiḥ*). So there is no historical justification for the claim that the original authors of the Ṛgveda had any extra-sensory vision. The Buddhist criticisms were, therefore, realistic and made in the light of objective facts as they saw them. What is true of the origins of the Vedic tradition is true of other revelational traditions, when their historical origins are objectively examined.

The idea that the Buddha was a “mere human being” is also mistaken. For when the Buddha was asked whether he was a human being, a Brahmā (God) or Māra (Satan), he denied

that he was any of them and claimed that he was Buddha, i. e. an Enlightened Being who had attained the Transcendent. This does not however make the Buddha unique for it is a status that any human being can aspire to attain. The significance of this claim is brought out in the *Brahma-nimantanika Sutta*, where it is shown that even a Brahmā eventually passes away while the Buddha being one with the Transcendent reality beyond space, time and causation is not subject to such vicissitudes.

At the same time, the Buddhist criticism of revelation does not imply that revelations are impossible. According to the Buddhist conception of things, it is possible for beings more developed than human beings to exist in the cosmos and communicate their views about the nature and destiny of man in the universe through human beings. All that is said is that the fact that something is deemed to be a revelation is no criterion of its truth and revelation, and therefore, cannot be considered an independent and valid means of knowledge. No book on scientific method today regards it as such and even theologians have begun to doubt the validity of such claims. According to Buddhist conceptions, revelations may come from different grades of higher beings with varying degrees of goodness and intelligence. They cannot all be true. This does not mean that they are all necessarily false. For, they may contain aspects of truth, although we cannot say what these are by merely giving ear to them. This is why Buddhism classifies religions based on revelation as unsatisfactory though not necessarily false.

It is a notorious fact that different revelational traditions and individual revelations contradict each other. If “truth is one” (*ekam hi saccam*) as Buddhism believes to be the case, they cannot all be true though all may be false. There are diverse views on crucial matters even within the same revelational tradition. The *Brāhmaṇas* and the *Upaniṣads*, for instance, contain several creation-myths and divergent accounts as to how life came into existence on earth. The ideas they contain differ from those of the Babylonian myths with which the Western world is familiar.

One such creation myth, for instance, states that in the beginning the world was Soul (*Ātman*) alone in the form of a Person. Human beings are the offspring of *Ātman*, who first creates a wife to escape from anxiety and loneliness. Later the wife assumes the forms of various animals, while *Ātman* assumes their male forms in order to make love to her. It is thus that the various species of animals come into being. This account of creation is in a section of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. The creation-myth in the *Aitareya Upaniṣad* is quite different although this too starts with the story that in the beginning Soul or *Ātman* alone existed and there was no other blinking thing whatsoever. *Ātman* creates the worlds by an act of will and then thinks of creating people to look after them. Then, it is said that “right from the waters he drew forth and shaped a person.” (*Aitareya Up.* I 3). Here man is created not by an act of procreation nor out of clay but out of the waters. The evolutionary account of the origin of life found in a section of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* is still

different. It says that from Ātman or the Soul there progressively emerged space, wind, fire, water, earth, plants, food, seed and then man.

If we compare and contrast the Materialist criticism of the Vedas with the Buddhist one, we see the difference in approach. The Materialists condemned outright the entirety of the Vedic tradition and saw no good in it at all.

According to them, the Vedas were the work of “fools and knaves” or in their own words, *bhaṇḍa-dhurta-nisācaraḥ*, i. e. buffoons, knaves and demons. On the other hand the Buddhists, while holding that the original seers who were the authors of the Vedas merely lacked a special insight with which they were later credited in keeping with historical fact, praised them for their virtue and rectitude. The Materialists categorically repudiated the Vedas as false, self-contradictory and repetitious (*anṛta-vyaghata-punarukta-doṣa*). The Buddhists, while pointing out the contradictions and falsities and repudiating the claims to revelation did not consider all the traditional beliefs in the Vedic tradition to be wholly false. Among the false beliefs the Materialists would point to were the belief in sacrifices, in a soul, in survival, in moral values and moral retribution. The Buddhists, however, criticised the Vedic conception of the sacrifice and denied the necessity for a concept of a soul, but agreed with the Vedas in asserting survival, moral values and moral recompense and retribution, which are among the beliefs which formed part of the right philosophy of life or *sammā diṭṭhi* in Buddhism.

Even with regard to the sacrifice, the Materialists saw nothing but deception and fraud in it. The Buddhists, while condemning sacrifices as involving a waste of resources and the needless destruction of animals, were not averse to the simple sacrificial offerings made in good faith by the earliest Brahmins who killed no animals for the occasion. Just as much as some of the *Upaniṣads* reinterpret sacrifice or *yajña* as the religious life, Buddhism conceives of *yajña* at its best to be the highest religious life as advocated in Buddhism.

The difference between the attitude of the *Upaniṣads* and Buddhism towards sacrifices, despite the similarities indicated, may be described as follows. The *Upaniṣads* as the *Jñāna-mārga* or “the way of knowledge” tended to regard the earlier Vedic tradition in the *Brāhmaṇas*, advocating the *karma-marga* or “the way of ritual” and the associated learning as a lower form of knowledge (*aparāvidyā*), while the thought of the *Upaniṣads* was a higher form of knowledge (*parāvidyā*). But even as a lower form of knowledge, it was not discarded. For to do so would be to deny the authority of the injunctive assertions of the Vedas, which advocated sacrifices, and thereby question and undermine the belief in Vedic revelation. So even where the *Upaniṣads* urge the cultivation of compassion, an exception is made with regard to the sacrifice. Paradoxically, it is said that one should not harm any creatures except at the sacrificial altars (*ahiṃsan sarvabhūtanī anyatra tīrthebyaḥ*, Ch. 8.15.1). So it was the belief in revelation, which is ultimately the basis for the belief in animal sacrifices.

The Materialists, likewise, saw no basis for a belief in revelation since they counted as real only the observable material world. Buddhism on the other hand, did not question the basis of the belief in revelation except for its denial of a personal creator God. It criticised particular claims to revelation and the attempt to regard revelation as a separate valid means of knowledge. In the Tevijja Sutta, [2] the Brahmins claim to have a diversity of paths for attaining fellowship with Brahmā or God. The Buddha criticises these claims on the ground that not one of them have “seen Brahmā face to face” (*Brahmā sakkhidiṭṭho*, D I 238). This was true of the Brahmins present at the time right up to the original composers of the Vedas. So the claim to revelation is without basis. Although Brahmā is believed to be the creator of the cosmos, he is none other than a temporary regent of the cosmos, an office to which any being within the cosmos could aspire. The knowledge of the Buddha, who has attained the Transcendent excels that of Brahmā, who is morally perfect (*asaṅkiliṭṭha citto*) but is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. The Buddha who has held this office in the past and has verified in the light of his extra-sensory powers of perception the conditions required for attaining fellowship with God or Brahmā could state that there is no diversity of paths all leading to such a state but the one and only path consisting in acquiring purity of mind, cultivating compassion and being selfless or without possessions. What is verifiably true is more reliable than a blind belief in a claim to revelation.

The Buddhist attitude to any such revelation would be that of accepting what is true, good and sound and rejecting what is false, evil and unsound after a dispassionate analysis of its contents without giving way to prejudice, hatred, fear or ignorance. The Buddhist criticism of religions based on authoritarian claims is not limited to a criticism of a claim to revelation. An analysis of the sermon addressed to the Kālāmas shows that it is only the first of the grounds for an authoritarian claim, although it was undoubtedly the most important and, therefore, the one to be examined and criticised in detail. The different kinds of claims to knowledge based on authority are seen in the classification of such claims in the Kālāma Sutta, which mentions besides revelation claims made on the grounds of tradition (*paramparā*), common-sense, wide acceptance or hear-say (*itikirā*), conformity with scripture (*piṭakasampadā*) and on the ground of something being a testimony of an expert (*bhavyarūpatā*) or the view of a revered teacher (*samaṇo me garū*). They could not be deemed to be valid means of knowledge and the requirement of safeguarding the truth (*saccānurakkhaṇā*) demands that beliefs held on such a basis be admitted as such instead of dogmatically claiming them to be true. Such dogmatism leads to undesirable consequences for oneself and society—to intolerance, conflict and violence and is a departure from sincerity and truth.

# The Buddhist Conception of Truth

One of the five precepts that a Buddhist has to undertake to observe is that of “refraining from saying what is false.” Stated in its negative as well as positive form, he has to “refrain from saying what is false, assert what is true (*sacca-vādi*), be devoted to the truth (*sacca-sandha*), be reliable (*theta*), trustworthy (*paccayika*) and not be one who deceives the world (*avisaṃvādako lokassa*)” (A II 209).

The necessity for speaking the truth is one of the Ten Virtues (*dasa kusala kamma*) that one has to practise for one’s own good as well as for the good of society. For it is held that a just social order requires that, among other things, the people in it be honest and speak the truth: “Herein, a certain layman rejects falsehood and refraining from saying what is false, asserts the truth whether he be in a formal assembly of people or in a crowd or at home among his relatives or in his office or when he is called to witness in a court of law—disclaiming to have known or seen what he did not know or see and claiming to have known or seen what he has known or seen. Thus, neither for his own sake nor for the sake of others, nor again for some material gain would he state a deliberate falsehood” (*Sāleyyaka Sutta*, M I 288).

Right speech, however, is not limited to the requirement of speaking the truth. It is also necessary that (a) one avoids slander which causes divisions and dissensions among people and confines oneself to statements which bring about social harmony and understanding, (b) one refrains from harsh or foul language and that one be civil and courteous in one's speech, saying what is pleasant and (c) avoid gossip and vain speech and speak at the right occasion and in accordance with the law what is profitable, righteous and true.

An exception is sometimes made in the case of (b), where it is held that our statements even when true may be either pleasant or unpleasant. It is sometimes necessary to say what is true but unpleasant when it is useful, just as much as it is necessary to put one's finger in the throat of a child even when it causes a little pain in order to pull out something that has got stuck there. Thus in the *Abhayarājakumāra Sutta*, it is pointed out that statements may be true or false, useful or useless and pleasant or unpleasant. This results in eight possibilities as follows:

1. True    useful    pleasant
2. True    useful    unpleasant
3. True    useless    pleasant
4. True    useless    unpleasant
5. False    useful    pleasant
6. False    useful    unpleasant
7. False    useless    pleasant

## 8. False useless unpleasant

Of the eight possibilities, it is said, that the Tathāgata, the Transcendent One, asserts 1 and 2 at the proper time. The text reads: “He would assert at the proper time a statement which he knows to be true, factual, useful, agreeable and pleasant to others (i.e. 1) ... He would assert at the proper time a statement which he knows to be true, factual, useful, disagreeable and unpleasant to others (i.e. 2).” Lying is prohibited and the necessity to seek and speak the truth is emphasised because such action promotes one’s personal happiness as well as social progress and harmony. Yet, one incurs moral blame only if there is an intention to deceive and cause disharmony but negligence is also to be avoided so that a Buddhist must act with a high sense of responsibility with regard to what he says, considering its possible social repercussions.

### The Nature of Truth

The statements of Buddhism or the Dhamma are claimed to be true. The central truths of Buddhism, pertaining to its theory of reality and ethics, are asserted in the form of “the Four Noble Truths” (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*). Nirvana is claimed to be “The Truth” (*sacca*), being the supreme truth (*parama-sacca*). It is also interesting to note that the two things which are claimed to be “eternal values” (*sanantana Dhamma*) are Truth and Love. With regard to the former it is stated: “Truth, indeed, is immortal speech—this is an eternal value” (*saccaṃ ve amatā vācā—eso dhammo sanantano*; S I 189).

There is a tendency today to regard what is old as antiquated. This is a mistaken view for all that is verified and established as true is forever modern, irrespective of the age in which these truths were discovered. That the earth was more or less round is a modern view although this was discovered in the past by a Greek thinker in the pre-Christian era, who was ridiculed for holding this view on the part of people who for a long time after that continued to maintain that the earth was flat.

What is the nature of truth? We use the words “true” or “false” normally of statements. We say that the statement “there is a harbour in Colombo” is true while the statement, “there is a harbour in Hambantota” is false. But we also speak of believing, conceiving of and knowing the truth and as such we have experience of truth. Knowledge of truth or even belief in truth helps us to act efficiently in our environment without causing trouble to others. When we know the road to Kandy, it helps us to get there without difficulty and without the necessity for troubling others. Knowledge of causal laws operating in us or in nature helps us to control ourselves or nature for our own good as well as that of others.

When we continue to think of some evil that somebody has done to us, we tend to hate him but if we continue to think of even some good that he has done to us, our hatred tends to disappear. So by understanding the psychology of mental phenomena, we can gradually get rid of our hatred and thereby make ourselves as well as others happy. This is why

knowledge of the truth both with regard to ourselves as well as the environment is important for us, since it helps us to control ourselves as well as the environment for our own good as well as that of others. When we are aware of the truth, we have knowledge (or true beliefs). Knowledge gives us control or power and this can help us develop our personal and social freedom and happiness.

What are the characteristics or criteria of truth?

Philosophers have put forward four main theories regarding this. Some hold that truth is what accords or corresponds with fact. This is called the Correspondence theory. Others hold that truth is what is consistent. This is called the Coherence theory. Yet others hold that what is true is useful and what is useful is true. This is called the Pragmatic theory. Others, again, hold that truth is verifiable in the light of experience: This is called the Verifiability theory of truth.

## Correspondence and Coherence

What is the Buddhist theory? Quite clearly, Buddhism maintains that truth is to be defined in terms of correspondence with fact. A theory or statement is true when it is “in accordance with fact” (*yathābhūta*). It is the object of knowledge—“one knows what is in accordance with fact” (*yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti*, D I 54). In contrast, a statement, theory, belief or conception would be false when it does not accord with fact. As the *Apaṇṇaka Sutta* states, “When in fact there is a next world, the belief occurs to me

that there is no next world, that would be a false belief. When in fact there is a next world, if one thinks that there is no next world, that would be a false conception. When in fact there is a next world, one asserts the statement that there is no next world, that would be a false statement?" (M I 402). On the other hand, true beliefs, conceptions or statements correspond with fact: "When in fact there is a next world, the belief occurs to me that there is a next world, that would be a true belief ..." (M I 403).

Although correspondence with fact is considered to be the essential characteristic of truth, consistency or coherence is also held to be a criterion. In contrast, inconsistency is a criterion of falsehood. In arguing with his opponents, the Buddha often shows that their theories lead to inconsistencies or contradictions, thereby demonstrating that they are false, using what is known as the Socratic method. In the debate with Saccaka, the Buddha points out at a certain stage in the discussion that "his latter statement is not compatible with a former statement nor the former with the latter" (M I 232). Citta, one of the disciples of the Buddha arguing with Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, the founder of Jainism, says, "If your former statement is true, your latter statement is false and if your latter statement is true, your former statement is false" (S IV 298).

This means that truth must be consistent. Therefore, when a number of theories with regard to the nature of man and his destiny in the universe contradict each another, they cannot all be true though they could all be false. So at a time when

a number of different religious teachers and philosophers put forward a variety of theories about man and the universe, the *Suttanipāta* asks, “Claiming to be experts, why do they put forward diverse theories—are truths many and various?” The answer given is, “Truths, indeed, are not many and various ... Truth is one without a second (*ekam hi saccam, na dutiyaṃ atthi*, Sn 884). Consistency or the lack of contradiction is, therefore, a criterion of truth. It is evident from this, that if we take different theories such as Materialism, Theism, Scepticism, Buddhism etc. not all can be true though all may be false.

We must, however, distinguish consistency between divergent theories and consistency within each theory. Two theories may be each internally consistent though mutually contradictory. So consistency is a necessary but not a sufficient criterion of truth. In other words, if a theory is internally consistent but is false, then the fact that it is consistent is not sufficient for us to accept it as true. From the same shreds of evidence, two lawyers may concoct two mutually contradictory theories as to what happened. Each of these theories may be internally consistent but this alone is no criterion of their truth. This was why the Buddha rejected theories based on mere reasoning as unsatisfactory since the reasoning may be valid or invalid and even if valid (in the sense of being internally consistent), it may or may not correspond with fact” (*Sandaka Sutta*, M I 520).

While internal theoretical consistency is a necessary but not a sufficient criterion of truth, Buddhism also holds that with

regard to theories which concern human behaviour, there must also be consistency between theory and practice. The Buddha claimed that “he practised what he preached and preached what he practised” (It 122). He expected his disciples also to follow his example. If I preach against the evils of taking liquor but take it myself, it may imply that I am not fully convinced of the truth of what I say. So if someone asserts a certain theory and acts as if he believes that at least part of it is false, his practice would be inconsistent with the theory he puts forward.

## Pragmatism

What does Buddhism have to say about pragmatism? Does it uphold a pragmatic theory of truth? Evidently, it does not, since it does not maintain that all true statements are useful or that all useful statements are true. As we have seen above, there are useless truths and useful falsehoods according to Buddhism. The pragmatic theory of truth was put forward to accommodate theistic beliefs but Buddhism does not hold that a theory is true because people like to believe it and it is, therefore, of some use to them.

At the same time we have to stress the fact that the Buddha confined himself to asserting statements, which were true and useful, though pleasant or unpleasant, so that the Dhamma is pragmatic although it does not subscribe to a pragmatic theory of truth. This fact is well illustrated by two parables—the parable of the arrow and the parable of the raft. The parable of the arrow states that a man struck with a

poisoned arrow must be concerned with removing the arrow and getting well rather than in purely theoretical questions (about the nature of the arrow, who shot it etc.), which have no practical utility. Certain questions concerning matters beyond empirical verification were not categorically answered by the Buddha because this was “not useful, not related to the fundamentals of religion, not conducive to dispassion, peace, higher knowledge, realisation and Nirvāna” (M I 431).

Even the true statements in the Dhamma are not to be clung to. They are to be used for understanding the world and overcoming it. One should not identify oneself with it by forming a sentiment of attachment (*upādāna*) towards it and make it a basis for mere disputation. The parable of the raft states that a person intending to cross a river and get to the other bank, where it is safe and secure, makes a raft and with its help safely reaches the other bank but however useful the raft may have been, he would throw it aside and go his way without carrying it on his shoulder. In the same way it is said “those who realise the Dhamma to be like a raft should be prepared to discard even the Dhamma, not to speak of what is not Dhamma” (M I 135). The value of the Dhamma lies in its utility for gaining salvation. It ceases to have value to each individual though it does not cease to be true, when one’s aims have been realised.

## Verifiability

The statements of the Dhamma are meaningful

(*sappāṭihāriyaṃ*) and are supported by reason and experience (*sanidānaṃ*) and are hence verifiable (*ehi-passika*). It is the duty of each Buddhist to try and verify his truth in practice. The Buddhist starts with right beliefs (*sammā-ditṭhi*) in his endeavour gradually to eliminate greed and hatred and ends his quest for truth with right knowledge (*sammā-ñāṇa*) and emancipation of mind (*sammā-vimutti*). In the process, each person has to verify the truths of Buddhism for oneself. Verifiability in the light of reason and experience is thus a characteristic of the truths of Buddhism.

## Middle Path

Another characteristic of many of the important truths of Buddhism is that they happen to lie midway between two extreme points of view. Extreme realism, which says that “everything exists” (*sabbaṃ atthi*) because everything comes into existence, is one extreme, while extreme nihilism which asserts that “nothing exists” (*sabbaṃ natthi*) since everything passes away, is the other extreme—the truth is that everything is becoming. Similarly false extreme theories are the doctrines of the eternity of the soul and the doctrine of annihilationism, the doctrine of the identity of the body and mind and the doctrine of the duality of the body and mind, strict determinism (whether theistic or natural) and indeterminism, the doctrine that we are entirely responsible personally for our own unhappiness, and the doctrine that we are not at all responsible for our own unhappiness, extreme hedonism (*kāma sukhalikānuyoga*) and extreme asceticism (*attakilamathānuyoga*). In all these instances, it is

said that the Buddha “without falling into any of these two extremes, preaches the Dhamma in the middle (*majjhena*).” The truth lies in the mean between two extreme views. The middle way (*majjhima paṭipadā*) is thus a mean, both in the matter of belief as well as conduct.

We have shown so far that in the Buddhist texts, truth is defined as correspondence with fact; consistency is a necessary but not a sufficient criterion of truth, while the truths of Buddhism are pragmatic and verifiable.

### Partial Truths

As a result of the correspondence theory, statements which strictly correspond with fact are considered to be “true” and those which do not are considered to be “false.” All statements would thus be true or false. Aristotelian logic is based on this assumption alone but modern logicians as well as ancient Indian thinkers have discovered that without prejudice to our definition of truth, we can adopt other conventions.

We can consider statements which strictly correspond with fact (as the statements of the Dhamma are claimed to be) as absolutely true, while those which do not at all correspond with fact would be absolutely false. In that case, those which correspond to some extent with facts would be “partially true” (or partially false). According to this convention, all statements will be either true, false or partially true. Modern logicians have shown that a system of logic could be constructed on the basis of this fundamental assumption as

well—namely that every statement is either true, false or partially true.

It is on the basis of this convention that the Buddha characterised certain theories held by individuals, religious teachers and philosophers as being “partial truths” (*pacceka sacca*). It is in this connection that we have the parable of the blind men and the elephant (Ud 6.4). The men who are born blind touch various parts of the elephant such as the tusks, ears, forehead etc. and each reports, mistaking the part for the whole, that the elephant was like that part of the elephant which was felt by him. In the same way, the various religious and philosophical theories contain aspects of truth and are based on the misdescribed experiences of the individuals who propounded them, while the Buddha was able to understand how these theories arose as well as their limitations since he had a total vision of reality with an unconditioned mind.

### The Catuskoṭi

When a statement is characterised as “true” or “false,” these characteristics (true, false) are called “values” in logic. So a system of logic which is based on the fundamental assumption that all statements are either true or false is called a two-valued logic. Such a system may have two logical alternatives. We may illustrate this with an example:

First Alternative: 1. This person is happy.

Second                    2. This person is *not*

Alternative:           happy.

We notice that in this two-valued logic of two alternatives, when the first alternative is true, the second alternative has to be counted as necessarily false, while if the second alternative is true, the first alternative would be false. But this system of logic would not do justice to the facts, if the person concerned was partly happy and partly unhappy. In such a situation we cannot dogmatically assert that the first alternative was true because the person is partly unhappy and therefore not wholly happy. Nor can we say that the second alternative is true because the person is partly happy and therefore not wholly unhappy. But according to the laws of logic applicable within this system—namely the law of excluded middle—either the first alternative or the second alternative must necessarily be true.

In order to have a better classification of the facts in situations such as this, the Buddhists adopted the logic of four alternatives, known as the *catuskoti*. This is a two-valued logic of four alternatives. According to it, statements can be made in the form of four logical alternatives of which only one will be necessarily true. Thus, speaking of the happiness or unhappiness of a person, we can say:

- |              |                                     |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| First        | 1. This person is (wholly) happy.   |
| Alternative: |                                     |
| Second       | 2. This person is (wholly) unhappy. |
| Alternative: |                                     |

- |                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Third Alternative:  | 3. This person is (partly) happy and (partly) unhappy.  |
| Fourth Alternative: | 4. This person is neither happy nor unhappy (e.g. if he experiences only neutral sensations of hedonic tone). |

This is one of the examples given in the texts. If we take another historical example, we may state the following four logically alternative possibilities with regard to the extent of the universe:

1. The universe is finite (in all dimensions).
2. The universe is infinite (in all dimensions).
3. The universe is finite (in some dimensions) and infinite (in other dimensions).
4. The universe is neither finite nor infinite (in any dimension). (This last alternative would be the case if space or the universe was unreal. In such an eventuality, the universe cannot properly be described as either "finite" or "infinite")

Now according to Aristotelian logic or the two-valued logic of two alternatives, the logical alternatives would have to be:

1. The universe is finite.

2. The universe is not finite.

Now, if we explain, “the universe is finite” as “the universe is finite” (in all dimensions), the other alternative, “the universe is not finite”, can mean one of three things (as above).

The logical alternatives according to this system of logic, therefore, become vague, ambiguous and not clearly defined and distinguished. The logic of four alternatives or the *catuskoṭi* is thus employed in the Buddhist texts for purposes of classification or discussion, where the subject-matter requires it. Scholars like Poussin, who believed that Aristotelian logic represented the one and only system of logic, failed to understand its significance and thought that the Buddhists or the Indians did not know any logic. But the modern developments in logic have shown that there could be different conventions and that they may be employed according to the needs of the subject-matter to be discussed. Thus the early Buddhist conception of logic was far in advance of its time.

### Conventional and Absolute Truth

Another distinction that is made in the Buddhist texts is that of absolute (*paramattha*) and conventional (*sammuti*) truth. This is because appearances are sometimes deceptive and reality is different from what appearances seem to suggest. In the everyday world of common sense, we not only observe hard objects like stones and tables which do not seem to change their form and structure but also different

persons who seem to continue as self-identical entities being reckoned the “same” persons at different times of their existence. But this appearance and the reasoning based on it, is deceptive and is due partly to the failure to see reality as it is and partly to the failure to understand the limitations of language, which employs static concepts to describe dynamic processes.

Once we see reality for what it is and the limitations of language, we can still employ the conventional without being misled by the erroneous implications of language and the assumptions we make because of our distorted view of reality. So we realise that from a conventional point of view we may speak of persons, who in reality are dynamic processes which change constantly owing to the impact of the physical, social and ideological environment and the internal changes which take place. But from an absolute point of view, there are no such persons, who are self-identical entities or souls which persist without change.

In the same way, modern science finds it necessary to distinguish between the conventional conception of stones and tables as hard, inert objects, which undergo no change, with the scientific conception of them as composed of atoms and molecules, whose inner content consists largely of empty space and whose fundamental elements have such a tenuous existence that they may be regarded as particles in some respects and waves in other respects, if at all it is possible to conceptualise their existence. Still if from a conventional standpoint we need to talk of stones and

tables, there is no harm in doing so, provided we are aware of the false assumptions and misleading implications. As the Buddha would say, “they are expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world which the Tathāgata (the Transcendent One) makes use of without being led astray by them” (D I 202).

# The Buddhist Conception of Matter and the Material World

We are all familiar with the visible and tangible world around us which we call the material world. We contrast it with what is mental and consider it to exist independently of our thoughts. We have learnt much about it from science during the last few decades but hope to learn much more about it in the future. A knowledgeable scientist, [3] who sums up the modern conception of matter in the light of the recent findings of science, says “Matter *is* the world around us; it is everything we see and feel and touch. It seems thoroughly familiar—until we read in the following pages and see what scientists have discovered about it in the within the last fifty years, the last twenty, the last two. The diamond, for example, seems on the face of it resplendently substantial. But as we read on, we find that the diamond is a patterned arrangement of atoms which are themselves mainly empty space, with infinitesimal dabs of electrons whirling around infinitesimal dabs of protons and neutrons. All this we now know to be matter, but we are by no means sure the picture is complete. Within the minuscule heart of the atom—the nucleus—have been found no fewer than

thirty kinds of elementary particles, and no one can say what more will emerge under nuclear bombardment. The further scientists analyse, the less obvious the answers become.

## Buddhist View

The conception of matter that is generally found in the Buddhist tradition, except in the extreme idealist schools of thought (*vijñānavāda*), is essentially the same. The objectivity of the material world is affirmed. It is said that *rūpa* or matter is not mental (*acetasikaṃ*) and is independent of thought (*citta-vippayuttaṃ*).

Such matter is classified into three categories. Firstly, there is the category of matter or material qualities, which are visible (*sanidassanaṃ*) and can be apprehended by the senses (*sappaṭighaṃ*)—such as colours and shapes. Secondly, there is matter which is not visible (*anidassana*) but reacts to stimuli (such as the five senses) as well as the objects of sense which can come into contact with the appropriate sense organs (excluding the visual objects which fall into the first category). Thirdly, there is matter which is neither visible to the naked eye nor apprehensible by the senses but whose existence can either be inferred or observed by paranormal vision. Such, for example, are the essences (*ojā*) of edible food (*kabalīnkārāhāra*), which are absorbed by our bodies and sustain it. Today we call them proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins etc., but in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* the essences (*ojā*) of edible food is classified as subtle (*sukhuma*)

matter, which is not directly observed or apprehended by the sense-organs. The subtle matter of the realm of attenuated matter (*rūpa-dhātu*) would also fall into this last category.

In this same category one would also have to include the atom (*paramāṇu*), which is said to be so small that it occupies only a minute portion of space (*ākāsa-koṭṭhāsika*) as the Commentary to the *Vibhaṅga* (p. 343) states. The Sub-commentary to the *Visuddhimagga* observes that the atom “cannot be observed by the naked eye but only comes within the range of clairvoyant vision” (*maṃsa-cakkhussa āpāthaṃ nāgacchati, dibba-cakkhuss’eva āgacchati*, p. 286), If this is so, then the Buddhist and some of the Indian atomic theories are not the product of pure rational speculation (like those of the Greeks), but are partly the result of extra-sensory perception as well.

Yet what is remarkable about the Buddhist atomic theories as against the other Indian and Western classical atomic theories, is that they were able to conceive of the atom as existing in a dynamic state. As one scholar (Professor A. L. Basham) puts it, “the atom of Buddhism is not eternal as in the other three systems since Buddhism dogmatically asserts the impermanence of all things. [4] Another scholar (Professor Arthur Berriedale Keith) brings out the essentially dynamic conception of the Buddhist theory of the atom when he says that the atom is conceived as “flashing into being; its essential feature is action or function and, therefore, it may be compared to a focus of energy.” [5]

He may compare with it what a modern physicist says of the atom: “The old view of it as simple discrete particles and precise planetary orbits is gone. The physicist now prefers to view the atom as a ball of energetic and uncertain fluff.” [6] We may recall that even the early Buddhist texts compared matter to a “lump of foam” (*pheṇa piṇḍa*).

## Atomic Theory

The atomic theories developed only in the schools of Buddhism which, apart from the general notions that they shared, did not always agree among themselves about the nature of atoms. For example, one school (*Sautrāntikas*) held that atoms have spatial dimensions (*dig-bhāga-bheda*) while their opponents (*Vaibhāṣikas*) denied this, arguing that the atom has no parts and no extension. This dialectical opposition led to a situation in which the Idealists argued that the conception of the atom leads to contradictions. If the atom has some finite dimension, however small this may be, it is further divisible and therefore it is not an indivisible unit or an atom. On the other hand if the atom had no spatial dimension at all, it is a non-entity and material objects having a spatial dimension cannot be composed of them. So the Idealists argued that the atom was a self-contradictory concept and as such atoms could not exist. Since atoms did not exist, there was no material world. So they concluded that the material world was an appearance created by our own minds, like some of the objects in the mind of a hypnotised subject.

The mistake that all these schools committed was to try and prove or disprove the existence of atoms by pure reasoning. As the Buddha pointed out in the Kālāma Sutta, we cannot discover or discern the nature of things as they are by pure speculative reasoning (*takka*). It is only when reasoning is closely tied up with experience that there is a discovery of facts in the objective world. For this reason we have either to follow the method of experimental science which is a matter of controlled observation guided by reasoning or of developing our extra-sensory powers of perception by meditation if we are to understand things as they are.

Judging by results the Theravādins seem to have kept their speculations close to the findings of jhānic or extra-sensory observation. The Vaibhāṣikas spoke of the ultimate element of matter as the *dravya-paramāṇu* or the “unitary atom” and contrasted with this the *saṅghāta-paramāṇu* or the aggregate atom, which we today call a “molecule.” It is significant that the Theravādins conceived of even the atom (*dravya-paramāṇu*) as a complex (*rūpa-kalāpa*) and spoke even of “the constituents of this complex atom” (*kalāpaṅga*) at the same time considering such an atom to be in a dynamic state of continuous flux.

A table given in the Commentary to the Vibhaṅga makes it possible to compare the size of an atom as conceived of in medieval Buddhism with modern conceptions. If we follow this table an average of 36 *paramāṇus* equal one *anu*, 36 *anus* equal one *tajjāri* and 36 *tajjāri* equal one *ratha-reṇu*. A *ratha-reṇu* is a minute speck of dust, which we can barely

appreciate with the human eye. According to this calculation there are 46,656 atoms in such a minute speck of dust. Now modern scientists think that an average of about 100 million atoms placed side by side in a row would amount to about an inch in length. If so, there would be ten million atoms in a tenth of an inch and a two hundredth portion of this would have 50,000 atoms. Although the comparison is to some extent arbitrary, the figures given in the *Vibhaṅgaṭṭhakathā* do not appear to be far divorced from reality.

## Original Buddhism

At the same time we must not forget that it was not the intention of the Buddha to give a detailed account of the nature of the physical world. As the Buddha pointed out in the *Siṃsapā* forest taking a few leaves into his hand, what he taught amounted to the leaves in his hand while what he knew but did not teach was comparable in extent to the leaves in the forest.

If there are priorities in the accumulation of knowledge, one should first and foremost learn more about his own nature and his destiny in the universe rather than about the nature and origin of the universe. A man who is struck with an arrow should try to remove the arrow first before endeavouring to discover the nature of the arrow and who shot it.

Nevertheless, a general understanding of the nature of the physical world is also useful in that it helps us in knowing

the nature of things as they are.

The Buddha himself did not disclose any details of an atomic theory but there are passages in which he points out unmistakably that the minutest portion of matter in the world is in a state of constant flux. On one occasion a monk asks the Buddha as to whether there was any form or kind of matter (*rūpa*) which was eternal, stable, lasting, not subject to constant change and everlasting. The Buddha replies that there is no such matter. He then takes a speck of sand on to the tip of his nail and says “Even such a minute bit of matter is not eternal, stable or lasting, is subject to constant change and is not everlasting.”

What we claim to know with regard to the physical world would not amount to knowledge if it does not reflect the state of things as they are, but such knowledge, once acquired, is to be made use of for one’s moral and spiritual development. The significance of the above statement is that even existence in a subtle-material world (*rūpaloka*) is not everlasting and that we cannot hope to attain final salvation by attachment even to such an ethereal body. So while early Buddhism gives a realistic account of the essential nature of the physical world, this is done mindful of the psychological and ethical impact of these teachings.

### Definition

The totality of matter is classified in the Buddhist texts with reference to time as past, present and future; with reference to the individual as internal and external; with reference to

the nature of matter as gross and subtle; with reference to the value of matter as base and ethereal and with reference to space as near and distant (MN 109.8/M III 16).

At the same time the matter spoken of is not just dead matter but living matter as well. The concept includes both the organic as well as the inorganic realms of matter. In this respect, we must not forget that, according to Buddhist conceptions, life (*jīvitindriya*) is a by-product of matter (*upādārūpa*).

In the Abhidhamma too, we notice in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* that when describing the nature of the totality of matter we find references to the psychological and ethical aspects of its impact. Matter is causally conditioned (*sappaccayaṃ*), impermanent and subject to decay (*aniccaṃ eva jarābhibhūtam*). It is to be found in the gross world of sensuous gratification (*kāmāvacara*) as well as the subtle-material world (*rūpāvacara*). In itself it is morally neutral being neither good nor evil (*avyākata*). But it can be cognised by the six kinds of cognition (i.e. by means of the senses and the understanding) and it is the kind of thing around which sentiments can be formed (*upādāniya*). It is also the kind of thing that can act as a fetter (*saññojaniya*) although the fetter does not lie in matter as such but in the attachment to matter.

In the earliest texts, *rūpa* in its widest sense of “matter” as including the organic body as well as the external physical world is defined as “what undergoes change” (*ruppati*)

under the impact of temperature (such as heat and cold), atmospheric changes (such as wind and heat), organic affections such as hunger which is defined as “heat inside the belly” (*udaraggisantāpa*) as well as thirst and the changes effected by the bite and sting of gnats and snakes etc. The general definition that is adopted in the commentaries is that matter (*rūpa*) is so called because “it undergoes change, i.e. becomes subject to modifications under the impact of cold and heat etc.” (*ruppatīti sīta-uṅhādīhi vikāraṃ āpajjati*).

### Primary Material Forces

If we apply the definition at the level of sense-observation or the empirically observable world, matter is what undergoes change under the impact of temperature, i.e. heat or cold. Since there is no metaphysical substance called “matter” apart from the observable objective states, the primary forms of matter would be the states of matter themselves manifested under the impact of temperature changes.

Water when cooled would eventually become frozen and solid. If the frozen ice is heated, it turns into water and the water, if heated, boils and turns into steam or a gaseous state. All elements or forms of matter subjected to changes of temperature are to be found in the solid, liquid or gaseous states. Until the third decade of the twentieth century, physicists concerned themselves only with these three states of matter. But it was realised that with the further application of heat to matter in the gaseous state a

further state of matter can be brought into being. This is today called the plasma state. If very great heat is applied to steam, the movement of the water molecules becomes so violent that they start smashing themselves into electrically charged ions. This ionisation is the passage to the fourth state of matter or plasma described as a “swarming mass of hot electrically charged particles.” The blazing mass of the sun is considered to be in this plasma state.

The conception of matter as what undergoes changes of state under the impact of temperature is therefore logically and empirically sound. Although there is no mention of the plasma state as such in the Buddhist texts, the primary forms of matter are held to be the solid (*paṭhavi*), the liquid (*āpo*), the gaseous (*vāyo*) and the fiery (*tejo*) such as lightning.

We can make use of these notions to classify the material of the body as well as the external world. There are solid states of matter in our own body such as the teeth, the nails, the hair, the flesh etc. The blood, sweat, tears, bile, pus etc. would be in a liquid state. The air we breathe in inhaling and exhaling, the wind in the abdomen etc. would be in a gaseous state. The heat in the body which transmutes food and drink in digestion comes under the fiery state of matter.

While in a general sense the four states are referred to in the above manner, it was observed that the specific characteristic of each state was to be found in some degree in the other states. Thus the specific characteristic of what is

solid is extension. It is solid in the sense that it extends or spreads out (*pattharatī ti paṭhavī*). The characteristic of the liquid state is that of cohesiveness (*bandhanatta, saṅgaha*), while that of the gaseous state is vibration or mobility (*samudīraṇa, chambhitatta, thambhitatta*). The fiery state is said to have the characteristic of causing changes of temperature or maturation (*paripācana*).

These characteristics, it is argued, are not exclusive characteristics of the different states of matter but are their most prominent characteristics. As general characteristics they are to be found in all the states of matter. What is solid is most obviously extended but liquids, gases and fires do not lack extension, or occupancy of space. Similarly, the matter of what is solid has a certain degree of cohesiveness. It has also a certain degree of dynamism or mobility and has a certain temperature. Extension, cohesiveness, mobility and temperature are thus held to be inseparable but distinguishable characteristics of all material things right down to atoms.

Different kinds of material objects therefore all have these several characteristics in varying degrees. When it comes to atomic theory, Buddhism would have to say that atoms differ from one another according to the presence of these characteristics in varying degrees.

## Derivatives

The four characteristic qualities of extension, cohesiveness, mobility and temperature, which co-exist (*aññamañña*)

*sahajāta*) are the four great material forces or forms of energy. In a gross state the qualities of extension, mobility and temperature can be directly appreciated by the sense of touch but cohesiveness has to be inferred. When we put our hand in water, we can apprehend its resistance or extension, its pressure or mobility as well its temperature but its characteristic of cohesiveness eludes us and the most prominent characteristic of water has therefore to be inferred from observation.

All material things, whether organic or inorganic and certain material concepts like space are said to be dependent on or derived from these primary material forces. But the sense in which they are derived are different. In the case of “space” the derivation is purely logical in the sense that *ākāśa* or vacuous space (not ether) is untouched by the four material forces and is in fact to be apprehended as the locus in which they are absent. In the case of *jīvitindriya* or life, however, it is derivation in the sense of being a by-product of the primary material forces. Other characteristics of matter such as weight, plasticity, “wieldiness”, growth, continuity, decay and impermanence are also by-products of the primary manifestations of energy.

## Realism

The sense-organs as well as the objects of sense are also made up of them. The matter forming the sensitive parts of the eye (*pasāda*), which react to stimuli (*sappaṭigha*) is intimately bound up with our entire psycho-physical

personality (*attabhāva-pariyāpanna*) and is again a by-product of the primary material forces.

The sense of sight, for example, is defined in various ways. (1) It is itself invisible though reacting to stimuli but it is the means by which what is visible and impinges on the eye has been seen, is being seen, will be seen or would be seen; (2) it is the organ on which visible objects which are capable of stimulating it have impinged, are impinging, will impinge or would impinge; (3) it is the organ which has been focussed, is being focussed, will be focussed or would be focussed on visible objects capable of stimulating it; (4) it is the organ on account of which visual impressions as well as ideas, feelings, connative and cognitive activities aroused by these impressions have arisen, are arising, will arise or would arise. The accounts given in some respects forestall and in other respects are not in conflict with the modern findings regarding the psychology or physiology of perception.

In some respects one feels that the modern accounts need to be re-examined in the light of observations made in these texts. For example, textbooks in modern psychology tell us that the primary tastes are the sweet, sour, salt and bitter. But the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, while mentioning the tastes sweet (*sādu*), sour (*ambila*), salt (*loṇika*) and bitter (*tittaka*) also refer to other tastes such as the astringent (*kasāva*) and pungent (*kaṭuka*). Although what we identify as taste is partly due to what we appreciate through the skin senses as well as taste in the interior of the mouth and also partly to odour, it is a

moot point as to whether the astringent taste (*kahaṭa-raha*) is a by-product of these or is a separate taste altogether.

It is quite evident from the descriptions given of the objects of sense as well as the general theory of matter that original Buddhism upheld the reality of the physical world. What we apprehend through the senses by way of colours or shapes, sounds, smells, tastes etc. are all by-products of the four primary material forces, which exist in the objective physical world independently of our perceiving them.

The physical movements of our bodies (*kāyaviññatti*) and our verbal activity (*vacīviññatti*), which are due to our volitional actions are also due to the operations of material factors, though they are concurrently occasioned and accompanied (*citta-samuṭṭhāna, citta-sahabhū*) by mental activity. It is also significant that none of the books of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka included in the Canon mentions the heart as the physical basis of mental activity. The *Paṭṭhāna*, while recounting the role of the organ of vision in generating visual cognition, makes specific mentions of “the physical basis of perceptual and conceptual activity” (*yaṃ rūpaṃ nissaya manodhātu ca manoviññāṇadhātu ca vattati*) and ignores the cardiac theory of the seat of mental activity, which was widely prevalent at this time. [7]

## Physical and Social Environment

While conscious mental activity has a physical basis, what we call a person’s mind is also conditioned by the physical environment, according to Buddhist conceptions. The

physical objects of the external world among other factors stimulate the senses, generate mental activity, feed the mind and motivate one's behaviour. The mind continues to be conditioned by these impacts, which form part and parcel of one's accumulated mental experiences.

It is also the teaching of Buddhism that the economic and social environment also conditions our behaviour. In the *Cakkavattisīhanāda Sutta*, it is stated that the mal-distribution of goods in society produces poverty. This eventually leads to the growth of crime and loss of faith in moral values, which along with a sound economic basis, are necessary to sustain a well-ordered society. However, Buddhism does not teach a theory of physical or economic determinism, for despite the fact that man is conditioned by these factors they do not totally determine his behaviour. Man has an element of freedom, which, when exercised with understanding, makes it possible for him to change his own nature as well as his physical, economic and social environment for the good and happiness of himself as well as of society.

**Note:** One of the best books written about the Buddhist conception of matter is Y. Karunadasa, *Buddhist Analysis of Matter*, Department of Cultural Affairs, Colombo, 1967. I do not, however, agree with some of the conclusions that the author has come to.

# The Buddhist Analysis of Mind

In this chapter I merely propose to give a concise account of the Buddhist theory of mind as presented in the early Buddhist texts, leaving out for the most part the elaborations to be found in the later books of the Theravāda tradition such as the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*. The main reason for doing so is that otherwise there is a danger of losing sight of the wood for the trees.

Another reason for this is that some of the later traditions of Buddhism developed only certain aspects of the original teaching, exaggerating their importance to such an extent as to distort other aspects. Such seems to have been the case with the Idealist (*Vijñānavāda*) schools of Buddhism, which spoke of a universal mind as a vast reservoir in which the individual minds were waves or ripples. In such a universe both the individual minds of various beings as well as the external material world were illusions created by the mind. The entire universe is a creation of the mind (*sarvaṃ buddhimayaṃ jagat*) and physical objects do not exist outside our perceptions of them. In some of the Mahāyāna schools of thought this universal mind was conceived as the ultimate reality or the eternal Buddha, though never as a creator God.

## Realism

Some Western scholars also tried to give an idealistic interpretation to early Buddhism by translating the first verse of the *Dhammapada* to mean “All things are preceded by mind, governed by mind and are the creations of the mind” (*mano-pubbaṅgamā dhammā mano-seṭṭhā mano-mayā*). But the correct interpretation of this stanza, which is also supported by the commentary (*Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*) would be “Conscious states of mind are led by will, are governed by will and are the products of will; so if one speaks or acts with an evil will suffering comes after one like the wheel that follows the beast of burden who draws the cart.”

Besides, it is clear from the early Buddhist texts that original Buddhism was realistic and held that the world of matter existed independent of our mind (*citta-vip̄payutta*) and was not an illusion produced by it. Though our perceptions and our language distorted the nature of reality, this was only to the extent that a dynamic material world in a continual state of flux was perceived as permanent, solid and substantial.

## Attitude to Tradition

The Theravāda tradition, in my opinion, has on the other hand to some extent ignored the conception of the transcendent mind to be found in the early Buddhist texts. This has led to misconceptions on the part of scholars and, perhaps, some Buddhists that Nirvāna was a state of oblivion or annihilation. It is, I think, important that

Buddhists who have been asked by the Buddha not to accept things merely because they are to be found in tradition (*ma paramparāya*) should be prepared to examine their own traditions.

We must not forget that even in the time of the Buddha, some concise statements made by the Buddha regarding matters of doctrine were elaborated and developed by monks and nuns. The Buddha very often commended these expositions of the Dhamma. On the other hand, there were others who made erroneous expositions and came to false conclusions in interpreting the statements of the Buddha. There was Sāti, for instance, who thought that “the consciousness of a person ran along and fared on without change of identity” (*viññāṇaṃ ... sandhāvati saṃsarati anaññaṃ*) like a permanent soul whereas the Buddha points out that consciousness is causally conditioned (*paṭicca-samuppanna*) and changes under the impact of environment etc.

Then there is the case of the monk who argued that the doctrine of *anattā* (no-soul) implies the denial of personal responsibility. It is said that “a certain monk entertained the thought that since body, feelings, strivings (connative acts) and intellect are without self, what self can be affected by deeds not done by a self” (M III 19). The Buddha thought that this was an unwarranted corollary of his teaching since there was the continuity of the “stream of consciousness” (*viññāṇa-sota*) without identity in rebecoming from existence to existence and this was called “the dynamic or evolving

consciousness" (*saṃvaṭṭanika-viññāṇa*). Individuality continues though the person is "neither the same" (*na ca so*) "nor another" (*na ca añño*).

## Characteristics

One of the main features of the Buddhist theory of mind is that barring the mind in the Nirvānic state, all mental phenomena are causally conditioned (*paṭicca-samuppanna*). According to Buddhist tradition causal laws operate not only in the physical realm (*utu-niyāma*) or biological realm (*bīja-niyāma*) but in the psychological realm (*citta-niyāma*) as well. Likewise, mental events are more fleeting than the material events of the body although as a stream of events they outlast the body, whereas the body disintegrates at death. Yet while past phenomena continue to influence and condition the ever-changing present, there is no substratum which can be called a permanent soul. Nor does it make sense to say that the phenomena are in any way associated with or related to such a soul.

The present is conditioned not merely by the past but also by the factors of heredity and environment. Also, conscious mental phenomena have a physical basis. The *Paṭṭhāna* speaks of "the physical basis of perceptual and conceptual activity." There is mutual interaction between the physical basis and the mental activity. The mental phenomena are not mere accompaniments of neural or brain phenomena. The nature of the causal relations that hold among mental phenomena and their relations to the body, the physical,

social and ideological environment are also analysed and the correlations explained in terms of them. In short, we have the earliest historical account of a naturalistic view of the mind.

This knowledge with regard to the mind is to be had by observation and introspection. Introspection is considered to be an unreliable instrument for the study of mental phenomena according to Western psychologists. This is partly because introspection can only tell us about our private mental experiences and since these cannot be checked by others, they cannot be trusted. The Buddhist theory is that introspection can be refined and developed by the culture of the mind. Besides, such mental development results in the emergence of extra-sensory powers of perception, such as telepathy, clairvoyance etc. This development of the mind is said to sharpen our observation and widen its range since with the development of telepathy, direct and indirect, the minds of others become amenable to public observation like physical objects. The elimination of personal bias makes one's observations objective. Jhānic introspection is described as follows: "Just as one person should objectively observe another, a person standing should observe a person seated, or a person seated a person lying down, even so should one's object of introspection be well-apprehended, well-reflected upon, well-contemplated and well-penetrated with one's knowledge" (A III 27).

## Modern Western Psychology

With regard to one's own person, it is true that with the growth of objectivity one's emotions tend to evaporate under the scrutiny of objective observation. As a modern textbook of psychology says, "If affective states are immediately at hand to be observed, their description and interpretation are not easy to come by, for they prove to be remarkably elusive. Try to observe in yourself the turbulent feelings aroused in anger. Ask yourself, "What does anger consist of?" If you are able, in the midst of an anger episode, to get yourself in the frame of mind to ask this question, you are also in a fair way toward dispelling the anger". [8] It is true that watchfulness (*sati*) regarding one's own emotions tends to dissipate them but this too is an important psychological fact. It is a fact that can be made use of to make our minds more stable and serene.

Many modern textbooks of psychology with a behavioural bias have not only completely discarded the concept of a soul but regard psychology as "the science of human behaviour." This is because human behaviour can be publicly observed and measured while human experience cannot. This orientation has its uses. We have learnt a lot about the physiological, biochemical and neural basis of what we call psychological behaviour. As a result we have learnt to some extent to control such behaviour by surgical or biochemical means. But despite these advances in psychology, mental tensions and anxiety have been on the increase in societies in which the tempo and the philosophies of life give no room for intelligent self-

restraint, relaxation, self-analysis and meditation as a means to achieving a healthier mind.

Buddhist psychology, on the other hand, while giving a comprehensive account of the nature of human experience and behaviour also provides the means by which we can understand, control and develop ourselves by a process of self-analysis and meditation, which changes our nature and makes it possible to live happily ourselves and with others.

### Psychophysical Unit

Man, according to Buddhism, is a psychophysical unit (*nāmarūpa*). This, in its nascent state, is made up of three components—the sperm and the ovum which go to make up the fertilised ovum or zygote along with the impact of the stream of consciousness of a discarnate spirit (*gandhabba*) or what is called the re-linking consciousness (*paṭisandhi-viññāṇa*).

The psychic and organic physical components grow and mature in a state of mutual interaction. There is reliable evidence that certain children are born with memories of a previous life, which correspond to those of a real life of a dead person and that they could not have acquired these memories by any social contact with the dead person's friends or relatives in this life. [9] There is also evidence from hypnotised subjects who regressed to a pre-natal period. They give accounts of prior lives which they claimed to have lived and which have been partly historically verified as factual. [10] The above theory can also be

experimentally verified if identical twins brought up in the same environment show some marked differences of character. All such available evidence cannot be plausibly accounted for than on the above theory, although it has not merited the attention of psychologists as a whole as yet.

The belief that the Buddhist doctrine of *anattā* implies a denial of any kind of survival after death rests on a misunderstanding of this doctrine. The doctrine denies a permanent entity or soul which runs through different existences without change of identity but does not deny the continuity of an evolving consciousness. Although the emotionally charged experiences are more fleeting than the changes in the body, their memories registered in the unconscious mind outlast the body and determine its state of re-becoming in different forms of cosmic existence. As the *Samyutta Nikāya* states in one place, “Though this material body of his is devoured by crows and other animals, yet his mind (*citta*) if long-practised in faith, virtue, learning and renunciation moves upward and goes to distinction” (S V 370).

## Mental Factors

The components of the mind are classified into four branches (*khandha*) or groups (*kāyā*) namely, (i) feeling or hedonic tone (*vedanā*), (ii) sense-impressions, images or ideas and concepts (*saññā*), (iii) connative activities and their concomitants (*saṅkhārā*) and (iv) intellectual activity (*viññāṇa*).

Vedanā is the feeling-component, which accompanies our impressions and ideas. They would range from the pleasant to the unpleasant through the neutral. Its source may be physical or psychological. When we cut our finger we feel physical pain. When we hear that a close friend or relative has died suddenly the anguish we experience has a psychological origin. These feelings are classified as six according as they originate in the five senses or in the mind with an idea or concept. Since these may be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, there would be eighteen in all. As associated with one's family life or with a life of renunciation, there would be thirty six, and as past, present or future one hundred and eight in all. Likewise, pleasure may be material (*āmisa*) as being associated with the satisfaction of needs or wants, or spiritual (*nirāmisa*) as being associated with a life of selflessness, compassion and understanding. The pleasures experienced in the mystical states of consciousness, personal or impersonal (i. e. *rūpa* or *arūpa jhānas*) are classified in an ascending scale each one being "higher and more exquisite" (*uttaritarāṃ*) than the lower. Nirvāna is the "highest happiness" (*paramaṃ sukhaṃ*) but the happiness in it is not conditioned. It is not subject to the presence of any conditioned vedanā although the happiness can be positively experienced (*vimuttisukha-paṭisaṃvedī*).

The experience of conditioned pleasant, unpleasant and neutral hedonic tone is associated with the impressions and ideas we have as a result of sense-contacts or the conceptual

activity of the mind in imagining, remembering, reasoning, listening to others, reading books etc. These impressions, ideas and concepts constitute *saññā*.

The last on the list of mental factors is *viññāṇa* which covers knowledge and belief. Knowledge of moral and spiritual matters constitutes *paññā*. This involves greater depth of understanding regarding the nature of reality. The difference between *saññā*, *viññāṇa* and *paññā* is well illustrated in the *Visuddhimagga* by the simile of the coin. When a child sees a coin it is only the colour and shape that interests him. A peasant knows its value as a means of exchange. A master of the mint knows its exact value and nature since he can distinguish between a counterfeit coin and a genuine one. There is a wider sense in which the word *viññāṇa* is used but we shall examine that below.

## Saṅkhāra

We have left out the word *saṅkhāra*, which in a psychological context is used in three senses. Firstly in the sense of volitions, because this is the sense in which it is used in the sentence *avijjā paccaya saṅkhāra*, which means that our volitions are conditioned by our true or false beliefs, which constitute ignorance. We sometimes think rightly and do good, or think wrongly and commit evil. We tread in saṃsāra like a blind man with a stick, who sometimes goes on the right track and sometimes on the wrong track in trying to reach his destination.

In the second sense, *saṅkhāra* is used to denote our connative

or purposive activities. They may be bodily processes and may include reflex actions such as breathing (*assāsa-passāsa*) as well as conditioned behaviour such as habits. They may be verbal activities involving cogitative and discursive thinking in waking life or even in dreams. Finally, they may be purposive thinking or ideation involving impressions, ideas or concepts associated with feelings. These are called *kāya-saṅkhāra*, *vacī-saṅkhāra* and *citta-saṅkhāra* respectively.

We may perform these actions or indulge in these activities aware that we are doing so (*sampajañña*) or unaware that we are doing so (*asampajañña*). We can walk, aware or unaware that we are walking. We can talk aware that we are talking or as in sleep unaware that we are talking. We can think or have trains of thought aware of what we are doing or unaware of what we are doing. The latter would constitute unconscious mental processes.

Likewise, we perform these activities with varying degrees of control. Normally we have no control over our reflexes but it is said that the yogin who has attained the fourth jhāna has them under control. Lastly these activities may be initiated by an internal stimulus (*sayam-kataṃ*) or an external stimulus (*param-kataṃ*).

The third sense of *saṅkhāra* denotes all those factors which accompany conscious volitional activity. If, for example, we are bent on doing a good deed these may be right beliefs (*sammādiṭṭhi*) some degree of awareness (*satindriya*), a quantum of selflessness etc.

## Relations

All these psychological states are causally conditioned. They may be conditioned by contact with one's physical, social or ideological environment, by the physiological state of the body which is itself a product of heredity and by our psychological past consisting of our experiences and upbringing in this life or even by the potentialities of prior lives. At the same time we can decide our goals and ideals and direct our courses of action since despite the conditioning we have an element of free will which we can exercise in our decisions and effort.

The various relations holding between different types of psychological and physical states have also been analysed. Thus, as we have already stated, there is mutual interaction (*aññamañña-paccaya*) between body and mind. The relation between an appropriate stimulus and a sense-organ it can activate is called the object-condition (*ārammaṇa-paccaya*). A dominant purpose that we intend to achieve governs and controls all the subsidiary activity it involves; so the relation between such a purpose and the activity it governs becomes a dominant-condition (*adhipati-paccaya*). A gradual development of awareness (*sati*) about our own activity of body, speech or mind reveals to us these intricate relations.

## The Conscious and the Unconscious

While, as we have stated above, *viññāṇa* was used in the sense of intellectual activity in a specific sense, in the general sense it denoted the entirety of our mental activity,

conscious or unconscious.

We already came across the concept of unconscious mental processes in speaking of ideational activity (*citta-saṅkhāra*), of which we are not aware. In one place it is said that a yogin by observing directly with his mind how “the mental *saṅkhāra* are disposed in the mind of a particular individual” presumably in his unconscious mind, can predict what he will think at the next moment (A I 171). [11] It is also said of a living person that part of his “stream of consciousness” (*viññāṇa-sota*) is present in this world (*idhaloke-paṭiṭṭhitam*) and part in the world beyond (*paraloke paṭiṭṭhitam*) without a sharp division into two parts (*ubhayato abbochinnam*) (DN 28.7/D III 105). This means that a man’s stream of consciousness has a conscious and unconscious component. Our conscious mental activity gradually gets into this unconscious and accumulates in it, continuing to influence our conscious behaviour.

In the unconscious are also the latent tendencies of the mind, called the *anusaya*—the desire to satisfy our senses and sex (*kāmarāgānusaya*), our egoistic impulses (*bhava rāgānusaya*), or aggression (*paṭighānusaya*) as well as the belief we cling to in the unconscious mind (*diṭṭhānusaya*), doubt (*vicikicchānusaya*), conceit (*mānānusaya*) and ignorance (*avijjānusaya*) (A I 9). The goal of the religious life, it is said, is not attained until they are completely eradicated.

There are also several levels of consciousness and the Nirvānic state is distinguished from all of them. There is the

level of normal consciousness (*saññā-saññī*) of the average person. Then, it is possible that one is insane being either a neurotic (*khitta-citta*) or a psychotic (*ummattaka*) and if so one has an abnormal “disjointed consciousness” (*visaññasaññī*). There is also the “developed consciousness” (*vibhūtasaññī*) of a person who has cultivated the personal or impersonal forms of mystical consciousness. The Nirvānic mind is distinguished from all of them as well as from a state of coma or oblivion (*asaññī*). It is attained with the cessation of all conditioned forms of ideation.

## Dreams

Dreams occur when the mind is not relatively quiescent in a state of deep sleep nor fully awake. The mind is in a dynamic state and the Buddha compares it to a fire which smokes by night and flares up during the day. According to the *Milindapañhā*, dreams are of four types, (i) those due to physiological disturbances in the body, (ii) those due to mental indulgence, i.e. wish-fulfilment (*samudāciṇṇa*), (iii) those due to intervention of a discarnate angel’s spirit (*devata*) and (iv) prophetic dreams.

## The Ideal

The Nirvānic state is the ideal to be attained by all, being one of supreme perfection and happiness. Being a state beyond space, time and causation it cannot be conceptually apprehended since all our concepts are derived from the framework of the space-time-cause world.

Yet in an analogical sense it is often described as a state of transcendent consciousness. In one place it is said that the conditioned saṃsāric consciousness ceases to be in a state of “infinite omni-luminous consciousness without distinguishing mark” (*viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbato-pabhaṃ*) (DN 11.85 / D I 223; MN 49.25 / M I 329).. It is this “luminous mind” which is said to be in the case of each one of us “tainted by adventitious defilements” (*pabhassaraṃ idaṃ cittaṃ tañca āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ*, A I 10).

Man is therefore compared to a piece of gold ore, and just as when the defilements of gold ore (*upakkilesa*) are got rid of, it shines with its natural lustre, the mind, it is said, becomes resplendent (*pabhassara*) when its defilements are eliminated. In the case of the mind, the primary “defilements of the mind which weaken intuitive insight” (*cetaso upakkilese paññāya dubbalīkaṇe*, M I 181) are passion and various forms of greed, ill-will, sloth and torpor, excitement and perplexity, and doubt. It is when these and other more subtle defilements are got rid of that the mind becomes relatively perfect and pure (*citte parisuddhe pariyodāte*, D I 76) and acquires its extra-sensory powers of perception and activity. It is the culmination of this process which results in the attainment of Nirvāna, a state “beyond measure” (*atthaṃ gatassa na pamāṇaṃ atthi*, Sn 1076), “deep, immeasurable and unfathomable” M I 487). This transcendent mind is not a soul because it is not personal and is not a self-identical entity. Nor is it a Creator God.

## Theory of Motivation

The ideal state is one in which “the mind is divested of its strivings and has attained the destruction of all desires” (Dhp 154). It is also a state of perfect mental health. Man suffers from mental disease until he has attained Nirvāna.

The goal of Buddhism is therefore therapeutic. We have to start with our present condition in which we are impelled to act out of greed, hatred and ignorance. Greed consists of the desire to gratify our senses and sexual desire (*kāma-taṇhā*) as well as the desires to satisfy our egoistic impulses (*bhava-taṇhā*) such as our desire for possessions, for power, for fame, for personal immortality etc. Hatred consists of our aggressive tendencies (*vibhava-taṇhā*) or the desire to eliminate and get rid of what we dislike. Both greed and hatred are fed by ignorance (i.e. erroneous beliefs, illusions, rationalisations) and vice versa. Indulgence in these desires gives temporary satisfaction but there is a law of diminishing returns which operates in our attempt to find satisfaction through gratification. The process eventually makes us slaves of our desires as in the case of alcoholics, misers, sex-addicts etc.

Our endeavour should be to gradually change the basis of our motivation from greed, hatred and ignorance to selflessness (*cāga, alobha*), compassion (*mettā, adosa*) and understanding (*paññā, amoha*).

## Psychological Types

To do this effectively, we must know what psychological types we are. The earliest historical classification of

individuals into different types is in the book called *Puggala-paññatti* (Human Types) of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. In the later tradition, classifications were based mainly on the degree to which people possessed the traits of greed, hatred and ignorance as well as their opposites. Different meditation exercises are recommended for them to get rid of the evil traits and develop the good traits they have.

There could, of course, be various sub-types. Some greed-types (*rāga-carita*) may have strong sex desires, others the desire for power etc. The general formula applicable to all would be to sublimate greed by desiring to develop restraint and selflessness, compassion and understanding, to sublimate hate by endeavouring to remove greed, hatred and ignorance and to aid this process to adopt right-beliefs (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) in place of erroneous beliefs about the nature and destiny of man in the universe.

# Notes

1. See also The **Wheel No. 47** *Buddhism and the God Idea*, ed. by Nyānaponika Thera; The **Wheel No. 57/58** *The Tevijja Sutta, a Discourse of the Buddha on the Path to God*; and Bodhi Leaves B.4 *Of Gods and Men* by Francis Story.
2. Translated in The **Wheel No. 57/58**.
3. See *Matter, LIFE Science Library*, Time-Life International, 1963, p 7.
4. *History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas*, Lucas & Co., London, 1951, p. 267.
5. *Buddhist Philosophy*, Oxford, 1923, p. 161.
6. *Matter, LIFE Science Library*, p. 158.
7. Anuruddha, *Compendium of Philosophy*, P.T.S. London, 1963, v. pp. 277–279.
8. Frank A. Geldarad, *Fundamentals of Psychology*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, London, 1963, p. 38.
9. Ian Stevenson, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, New York, 1966.
10. Morey, Bernstein, *The Search for Bridey Murphy*, New Edition, 1965; also Dr. Jonathan Rodney, *Explorations of a*

*Hypnotist*, Elek Books, London, 1959 etc.

11. See *Aṅguttara Nikāya. An Anthology*, Part I, p. 41 (The Wheel No. 155–158).

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