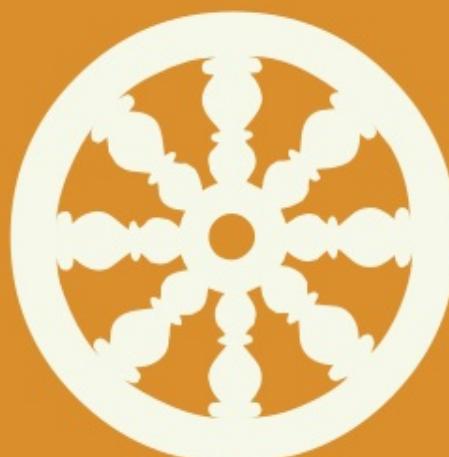


# The Tragic, the Comic & the Personal

*Selected Letters of Nāṇavīra Thera*

**Sāmañera Bodhesako**



# The Tragic, the Comic & the Personal

Selected Letters of *Ñāṇavīra Thera*

Edited, with Foreword and Notes,  
by

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### Pali-English Glossary

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## Foreword

When Osbert Moore and Harold Musson arrived on the shores of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in 1949, they brought with them a shared attitude of open-minded thoughtfulness and a firm determination to devote the remainder of their lives

to seeking understanding by means of the Buddha's Teaching; and this they proceeded to do. Since they had first met during World War II, when they were British officers, they had found a commonality of view about the futility of life, and when Musson happened upon an Italian book on Buddhism and (in order to brush up on his Italian he was an interrogator in Intelligence) decided to translate it, [1] they discovered a mutual attraction towards and sympathy for that Teaching.

Moore, who at his ordination was given the name the Venerable Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu, is well-known to readers of the Wheel series and other BPS publications as an essayist and skilful translator of the Pali Suttas and commentaries. Musson, who became known as the Venerable Ñāṇavīra Bhikkhu, was more solitary. Apart from a few early essays, he has shared his learning and wisdom with a general audience only in his small book, *Notes on Dhamma*, published privately in 1983. But until his death in 1965 (five years after the Ven. Ñāṇamoli's) he also carried on a correspondence with a few laypeople who wished to benefit from his learning.

Now these letters have been collected and edited and, together with the final text of *Notes on Dhamma* (revised somewhat in the last two years of the author's life), they are being issued in a single volume. [2] It is from this volume that the present selection has been made, except for the first two letters, which appear here for the first time. [3] The recipients of the letters include his doctor (with whom the

Ven. Nāṇavīra also discussed the ailments that eventually led to his death), a judge (who became the publisher of *Notes on Dhamma*), a provincial businessman, a barrister, and two British citizens.

Having been born in England in 1920 and educated at Cambridge University, the Ven. Nāṇavīra Thera [4] naturally sought an approach to the Buddha's Teaching via Western thought (see letter 23). After acquainting themselves thoroughly with the Pali Suttas the two friends explored many modes of Western thought—even quantum mechanics!—through reading and discussion. When the Ven. Nāṇavīra moved to a remote section of Ceylon, where he lived alone for the rest of his life, their discussions continued through voluminous correspondence which lasted until 1960, the year of the Ven. Nāṇamoli's death. Increasingly they found that the Western thinkers most relevant to their interests were those belonging to the closely allied schools of phenomenology and existentialism, to whom they found themselves indebted for clearing away a lot of mistaken notions with which they had burdened themselves. These letters make clear the nature of that debt; they also make clear the limitations which the Ven. Nāṇavīra saw in those thinkers. He is insistent that although for certain individuals their value may be great, yet eventually one must go beyond them if one is to arrive at the essence of the Buddha's Teaching. Existentialism, then, is in his view an approach to the Buddha's Teaching and not a substitute for it.

These letters are concerned in part with an approach to the Teaching; but the approach is not the Teaching, and other letters discuss the Teaching itself. Here wherever possible the Ven. Ñāṇavīra offers Sutta references to support his statements; and the careful reader of these letters will easily perceive that their author had a profound veneration for those texts. It is this veneration for the Suttas, and for their profound message, that he tries to communicate.

In this presentation the letters are arranged in a purely chronological order. To indicate the subject matter of each letter they are preceded by a title provided by the editor. Within the letters a few asterisks will be found, referring the reader to editorial notes located at the end of the compilation. Following the editorial notes is a Pali-English Glossary, provided for the benefit of those who may not be familiar with some of the Pali words used in the text. The English equivalents given are those preferred by the Ven. Ñāṇavīra Thera.

Sāmanera Bodhesako

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# Selected Letters of Ñāṇavīra Thera

## 1. Good action (6 August 1956)

It is difficult to live a good life, and the benefits may not be apparent here and now; but if we believe what the Buddha has told us then it is very well worth the effort that it costs *even if it kills us*. Not for the sake of life will a *sotāpanna* break the five precepts. The depressing effects of bad *kamma* done in the past may last for many lives, not just for one; but do not forget that good *kamma* also has its effect for a long time —sometimes for longer than bad *kamma*. And this is important: if we do good *kamma* now we shall be reborn in a position to go on doing good *kamma*, for a man who is rich because of past good *kamma* has the opportunity of doing more good *karma* now than a poor man who has not done good *karma* in the past. And remember also that, although your past *karma* is not good enough to make you rich and successful now, it is none the less very good *karma* indeed, for you have been born a human being during the time of a Buddha's Sāsana. The next time you see a sick dog or a cow dying of thirst, think, "I might have been born as *that*; and if I do wrong now it is probable that I *shall* be born as *that*." It is always better to bear up when misfortune assails us, but *there is nothing else we can do*: we inherit our past deeds.

## 2. Mettā in meditation and in life (10 October 1958)

I have just received your letter. It may be said, perhaps, that *mettā* is recommended by the Buddha for getting rid of anger, and that anger normally arises in our dealings with

other people, and that it is therefore in our dealings with other people that *mettā* is best practised. It is most certainly true that we have need of *mettā* in our dealings with other people; but the trouble is this: before we can be in a position to have *mettā* we have first to know what *mettā* is, and second to have it at our command. Now, just as it is possible to practise *ānāpānasati* in the presence of other people when one has already become skilled in it by oneself, so it is possible to practise *mettā* in the presence of others only when one has practised it a great deal when alone. And just as the worst conditions for practising *ānāpānasati* are the noise and bustle of other people, so it is with *mettā*. Until you are able to practise either *ānāpānasati* or *mettā* in solitude you will never succeed in company—the obstacles are far too great.

For example, suppose there is someone you dislike, and in whose presence you become angry: unless you are already able to prevent anger from arising when you think of him in his absence (which needs much practice), you will have no chance at all of getting rid of the anger that arises when you actually meet him. Once anger takes possession of you there is very little you can do except to stop it from finding expression in words or deeds, and to allow it to subside; it is far too late to start practising *mettā*. But if you thoroughly practise *mettā* before you meet such a person, then it is possible that anger will not arise when you do meet him. Having *mettā* in your dealings with other people consists in having *mettā* before you deal with them, that is, in solitude—

once you start dealing with them you will have little opportunity of attending to *mettā* (or if you do attend to *mettā* it will interfere in your dealings just as attending to your in-and out-breaths takes your mind away from the matter in hand).

You might, however, be thinking that, whereas *ānāpānasati* concerns only myself since it is a matter of watching my own breaths and not somebody else's, *mettā* on the contrary concerns other people, since it is a question of my relationship with other people and of my attitude towards them. And you might think that it follows from this that the presence of other people is either an advantage or even absolutely necessary for the practice of *mettā*. In a certain sense this is true: you cannot practise *mettā* towards other people unless they are in some way present—but the presence of other people does not imply that their *bodies* must be present. I do not mean that their “spirit” is present while their body is absent (which is a mystical confusion of thought), but simply that “other people” is a fundamental structure of our conscious constitution.

Let me give an illustration. It happens to all of us that upon some occasion when we are doing something perhaps rather shameful (it might be simply when we are urinating or excreting, or it might be when we are peeping through a keyhole or something like that) and we believe we are alone and unobserved, we suddenly hear a slight sound behind us and we immediately have the unpleasant idea “I am being watched.” We turn round and look and find nobody there at

all. It was only our own guilty conscience. Now this is an indication that in order to have a relationship with other people we do not need other peoples' bodies: we are conscious of other people (at least implicitly) all the time, and it is this consciousness that we have to attend to when we practise *mettā*.

When we practise *mettā* we are developing and gradually changing our attitude towards other people; and we always have an attitude towards other people whether their bodies are present or not. The only thing a (living) body does when we meet one is to be the occasion for the consciousness, "This is another person." And if we have already been practising *mettā* and have acquired an un-angry attitude towards other people, then when we actually meet another person our attitude towards him will be correct right at the beginning, and no anger will arise. It is only when we are already disposed to anger that we get angry when we meet someone; and if we are disposed to *mettā* (through long practise in solitude, on our consciousness of other people whose actual bodies are absent) we have *mettā* in our dealings with them.

### 3. Addiction (25 May 1962)

I have finished the Beverley Nichols. [5] I think that one question is raised that calls for a detailed reply. B. N. describes how a certain morphine addict became "changed" and, as a result, lost all interest in the drug; and he points out that to give up a drug addiction is one of the hardest

things in the world (with which we may agree). The question, then, is this: What has the Buddha's Teaching to offer a drug addict?

In the first place the Buddha requires intelligence of a man, else nothing can be done. In the second place the Buddha tells us that the taking of intoxicants (which of course will include morphine and so on) leads to the decline of intelligence. Putting two and two together, we find that to give up drugs a man must understand that unless he gives them up he will not be able to give them up, or in other words, to give up drugs one must understand the way to give up drugs, which is to give them up. At first glance this does not seem to be very helpful—"A glimpse of the obvious," perhaps you will say; "of course the addict understands that the way to give up drugs is to give them up: the whole trouble is that he *can't* give them up." But is this just a glimpse of the obvious?

Let me recall my own experience when I gave up cigarettes. I had been smoking forty or more a day for several years when I decided to give them up. Not being able to do things in half-measures I stopped smoking all at once. I remember walking in the park not long after I had finished my last cigarette, and feeling pleased with myself that I had actually taken the decision. (I also felt rather light-headed, which was no doubt a deprivation symptom—this continued for some days.) But the principal thought that assailed me was this: though I had no doubt that I could stick to my resolution, there was one thing that I really needed to

confirm it and to fortify me in my determination not to have another cigarette, and that one thing was... a cigarette. Far from its being obvious to me that in order to give up cigarettes I should give up cigarettes, I had the greatest of trouble to resist the pressing suggestion that in order to give up cigarettes I should take a cigarette.

Let me also tell you of the researches of Dr. Klar [6] when he was in Persia shortly after the war. Dr. Klar, besides being a physician, is also interested in psychology; and he had with him in Persia an ingenious device for reading a person's character and state of mind. (This consists of a number of cards each with about eight pairs of coloured squares pasted on them. The subject is simply required to indicate which colour in each pair he prefers. He "read" us all at the Hermitage, [7] with devastatingly accurate results that did not really please all of us. But this is a digression.) He told us that eighty percent of all Persians over the age of thirty-five (I think he said) take opium (and also that all Persians tell lies on principle—but this is another digression), and with such a wealth of material to hand [8] he was able to do some research. He would give each addict two readings, one before taking opium and one after. The readings all said the same thing: *before* the opium the mental state of the addict was abnormal and disorganised; *after* the opium the mental state was normal and organised. The effect of the opium on the addict was not, as one might think, to disintegrate the personality; on the contrary, the effect was to integrate a disintegrated personality. The opium was

necessary to restore the addict to normal. (I have heard similar observations from another doctor who was for many years a medical missionary in China: if you want to do business with an opium addict, drive your bargain when the effect of his last dose is wearing off.)

What can we conclude from all this? We conclude that, unlike a “normal” person who may take a drug once in a while for the novelty or pleasure of the effect, and who at that time becomes “abnormal,” the confirmed addict is “normal” only when he has taken the drug, and becomes “abnormal” when he is deprived of it. The addict reverses the usual situation and is dependent upon the drug to keep him in his normal integrated state. (This does not mean, of course, that the addict derives *pleasure* from occasional deprivation as the abstainer does from occasional intoxication; quite the contrary: in both cases the drugged state is more pleasant, but for the one it is normal and for the other it is abnormal.) The addict can only do his work efficiently and perform his normal functions if he takes the drug, and it is in this condition that he will make plans for the future. (If he cannot take the drug the only plan he makes is to obtain another dose as quickly as possible.) If he decides that he must give up his addiction to the drug (it is too expensive; it is ruining his reputation or his career; it is undermining his health; and so on) he will make the decision only when he is in a fit state to consider the matter, that is to say when *he is drugged*; and it is from this (for him, *normal*) point of view that he will envisage the future. (Thus,

it was *as a smoker* that I, decided to give up smoking.) But as soon as the addict puts his decisions into effect and stops taking the drug he ceases to be normal, and decisions taken when he was normal now appear in quite a different light—and this will include his decision to stop taking the drug. *Either*, then, he abandons the decision as invalid ("How could I possibly have decided to do such a thing? I must have been off my head") and returns to his drug taking, or (though he approves the decision) he feels it urgently necessary to return to the state in which he originally took the decision (which was when he was drugged) *in order to make the decision seem valid* again. (And so it was that I felt the urgent need of a cigarette to confirm my decision to give them up.) In both cases the result is the same—a return to the drug. And so long as the addict takes his "normal" drugged state for granted at its face value—i.e. as normal—the same thing will happen whenever he tries to give up his addiction.

Not only is the drug addict in a vicious circle—the more he takes the more he wants, the more he wants the more he takes—but, until he learns to take an outside view of his situation and is able to see the nature of drug addiction, he will find that all his attempts to force a way out of the vicious circle simply lead him back in again. (A vicious circle is thus a closed system in stable equilibrium.) It is only when the addict *understands* addiction, and holds fast to the right view that—in spite of all appearances, in spite of all temptations to think otherwise—his "normal" drugged state

is not normal, that he will be able to put up with the temporary discomfort of deprivation and eventually get free from his addiction. In brief, then, an addict decides to give up drugs, and he supposes that in order to do so all that is necessary is to give them up (which would certainly be a glimpse of the obvious were it not that he is profoundly deceiving himself, as he very soon finds out). No sooner does he start giving them up than he discovers (if he is very unintelligent) that he is mistaken and has made the wrong decision, or (if he is less unintelligent) that, though the decision is right, he is wrong about the method, and that in *order to give up drugs it is necessary to take them*. It is only the intelligent man who understands (against all appearances) that both the decision and the method are right; and it is only he that succeeds. For the intelligent man, then, the instruction “to give up drugs it is necessary to give them up,” far from being a glimpse of the obvious, is a profound truth revealing the nature of addiction and leading to escape from it.

I would ask you to pause before dismissing this account as fanciful; this same theme—the vicious circle and the escape from it by way of understanding and in spite of appearances—is the very essence of the Buddha’s Teaching. The example discussed above—drug addiction—is on a coarse level, but you will find the theme repeated again and again right down to the finest level, that of the four noble truths. It will, I think, be worthwhile to illustrate this from the Suttas.

In the 75<sup>th</sup> Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya (M I 506–8) the Buddha shows the vicious circle of sensual desire and its gratification in the simile of a man with a skin disease (*kutṭhi* —a leper?). Imagine a man with a fiercely itching skin disease who, to relieve the itching, scratches himself with his nails and roasts himself near a brazier. The more he does this the worse becomes his condition, but this scratching and roasting give him a certain satisfaction. In the same way, a man with finely itching sensual desire seeks relief from it in sensual gratification. The more he gratifies it the stronger becomes his desire, but in the gratification of his desire he finds a certain pleasure. Suppose, now, that the skin disease were cured; would that man continue to find satisfaction in scratching and roasting himself? By no means. So, too, a man who is cured of sensual desire (an arahat) will find no more pleasure in sensual gratification.

Let us extend the simile a little. You, as a doctor, know very well that to cure an itching skin disease the first thing to do is to prevent the patient from scratching and making it worse. Unless this can be done there is no hope of successfully treating the condition. But the patient will not forego the satisfaction of scratching unless he is made to understand that scratching aggravates the condition, and that there can be no cure unless he voluntarily restrains his desire to scratch, and puts up with the temporarily increased discomfort of unrelieved itching. And similarly, a person who desires a permanent cure from the torment of sensual desire must first be made to understand that he

must put up with the temporarily increased discomfort of celibacy (as a bhikkhu) if the Buddha's treatment is to be successful. Here, again, the way out of the vicious circle is through an understanding of it and through disregard of the apparent worsening of the condition consequent upon self-restraint:

Consider, now, the four noble truths. The fourth of these truths is, "This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering, that is to say, the noble eight factored path"; and the first factor of this path is right view, which is defined as knowledge of the four noble truths. But, as before, the fourth truth is the way leading to cessation of suffering. So we come to the proposition, "The way leading to cessation of suffering is knowledge of the way leading to the cessation of suffering," or "To put an end to suffering one must understand the way to put an end to suffering." And what is this but a repetition, at the most fundamental level, of our original theme, "To give up drugs one must understand the way to give up drugs"? [9]

Not everybody is addicted to morphine, but most people are addicted to sensual gratification, and all except the *ariyasāvakas* are addicted to their own personality (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*) [10] and even the *ariyasāvakas*, with the exception of the arahat, still have a subtle addiction, the conceit "I am" (*asmimāna*). The arahat has put an end to all addiction whatsoever. There is thus no form of addiction that the Buddha's Teaching will not cure, provided the addict is intelligent and willing to make the necessary effort.

## 4. Love and death (4 January 1963)

It is curious, is it not, that whereas, since Freud, the most extravagant fancies in the realm of love are considered to be perfectly normal (a person without them is regarded as a case for treatment), in the realm of death (the other great pole of human life) any strange fancies are still classed as "morbid." The Suttas reverse the situation: sensual thoughts are the thoughts of a sick man (sick with ignorance and craving), and the way to health is through thoughts of foulness and the diseases of the body, and of its death and decomposition. And not in an abstract scientific fashion either—one sees or imagines a rotting corpse, for example, and then pictures one's very own body in such a state. Our contemporaries are more squeamish.

## 5. Positives and negatives (15 January 1963)

Once one recognises that one is totally responsible for all one's decisions and actions, one can no longer hide behind convenient ready-made excuses; and this, though it makes life rather less comfortable by removing one's habitual blinkers, endows one with unexpected self-reliance and resilience in difficult situations. And once it becomes habitual to think in this way, the task of living is discovered to be a full-time job and not merely a drudge to be got through by killing time as best one can. In other words, it abolishes boredom. And, as I mentioned some time ago, it is only in this authentic or responsible attitude that the Buddha's Teaching becomes intelligible.

But people, for the most part, are totally absorbed in and identified with positive worldly interests and projects, of which there is an unending variety. That is to say, although they differ from one another in their individual natures, the contents of their respective positivities, they are all alike in being positive. Thus, although the fundamental relation between positives is conflict (on account of their individual differences), they apprehend one another as all being in the same boat of positively, and they think of men generally in terms of human solidarity, and say “we.”

But the person who lives in the subjective-reflexive mode is absorbed in and identified with, not the positive world, but himself. The world, of course, remains “there” but he regards it as accidental (Husserl [11] says that he “puts it in parenthesis, between brackets”), and this means that he dismisses whatever positive identification he may have as irrelevant. He is no longer “a politician” or “a fisherman,” but “a self.” But what we call a “self,” unless it receives positive identification from outside, remains a void, in other words, a negative. A “self,” however, is positive in this respect—it seeks identification. So a person who identifies himself with himself finds that his positivity consists in negativity—not the confident “I am this” or “I am that” of the positive, but a puzzled, perplexed, or even anguished, “What am I?” Eternal repetition of this eternally unanswerable question is the beginning of wisdom (it is the beginning of philosophy); but the temptation to provide oneself with a definite answer is usually too strong, and one

falls into a wrong view of one kind or another. (It takes a Buddha to show the way out of this impossible situation. For the *sotāpanna*, who has understood the Buddha's essential Teaching, the question still arises, but he sees that it is unanswerable and is not worried; for the arahat the question no longer arises at all, and this is final peace.) This person, then, who has his centre of gravity in himself instead of in the world (a situation that, though usually found as a congenital feature, can be acquired by practice), far from seeing himself with the clear solid objective definition with which other people can be seen, hardly sees himself as anything definite at all: for himself he is, at best, a "What, if anything?"

It is precisely this lack of assured self-identity that is the secret strength of his position—for him the question-mark is the essential and his positive identity in the world is accidental, and whatever happens to him in a positive sense the question-mark still remains, which is all he really cares about. He is distressed, certainly, when his familiar world begins to break up, as it inevitably does, but unlike the positive he is able to fall back on himself and avoid total despair. It is also this feature that worries the positives; for they naturally assume that everybody else is a positive and they are accustomed to grasp others by their positive content, and when they happen to meet a negative they find nothing to take hold of. It quite often happens that a positive attributes to a negative various strange secret motives, supposing that he has failed to understand him (in

a positive sense); but what he has failed to understand is that there is actually nothing there to be understood. But a negative, being a rare bird himself, is accustomed to positives, by whom he is surrounded, and he does not mistake them for fellow negatives. He understands (or at least senses) that the common factor of positivity that welds them together in the “we” of human solidarity does not extend to him, and mankind for him is “they.” When a negative meets another negative they tend to coalesce with a kind of easy mutual indifference. Unlike two positives, who have the differences in their respective positivities to keep them apart, two negatives have nothing to separate them, and one negative recognises another by his peculiar transparency—whereas a positive is opaque.

It happens that, for Heidegger, [12] contemplation of one’s death throughout one’s life is the key to authenticity. As Sartre has observed, Heidegger has not properly understood the nature of death, regarding it as *my* possibility, whereas in fact it is always accidental, even in suicide (I cannot kill myself directly, I can only cut my throat and *wait* for death to come). But death of one’s body (which is always seen from outside, like other people’s bodies) can be imagined and the implications envisaged. And this is really all that is necessary (though it must be added that there are other ways than contemplation of death of becoming authentic).

## 6. Towards realisation of the Dhamma (7 March 1963)

What we call the “self” is a certain characteristic of all experience that seems to be eternal. It is quite obvious that for all men the reality and permanence of their selves, “I,” is taken absolutely for granted; and the eternal “subject” strives to possess the temporal “object,” and the situation is at once both comic and tragic—comic, because something temporal cannot be possessed eternally, and tragic, because the eternal cannot desist from making the futile attempt to possess the temporal eternally. This tragicomedy is suffering (*dukkha*) in its profoundest sense. And it is release from this that the Buddha teaches. How? By pointing out that, contrary to our natural assumption (which supposes that the *subject* “I” would still continue to exist even if there were no *objects* at all), the existence of the subject depends upon the existence of the object; and since the object is manifestly impermanent, the subject must be no less so. And once the presumed eternal subject is seen to be no less temporal than the object, the discrepancy between the eternal and the temporal disappears (in four stages—*sotāpatti*, *sakadāgāmitā*, *anāgāmitā*, and *arahatta*); and with the disappearance of the discrepancy the two categories of “tragic” and “comic” also disappear. The arahat neither laughs nor weeps; and that is the end of suffering (except, of course, for bodily pain, which only ceases when the body finally breaks up).

In this way you may see the progressive advance from the thoughtlessness of immediacy (either childish amusement, which refuses to take the tragic seriously, or pompous

earnestness, which refuses to take the comic humourously) to the awareness of reflexion (where the tragic and the comic are seen to be reciprocal, and each is given its due), and from the awareness of reflexion (which is the limit of the *puthujjana*'s philosophy) to full realisation of the Noble Dhamma (where both tragic and comic finally vanish, never again to return).

## 7. The phenomenological method (15 May 1963)

About Huxley's strange creatures of the mind, though few such experiences have come my way, I have no doubt at all that these curious (and perhaps terrifying) things are to be met with in certain mental circumstances. [13] That weird and fantastic creatures do actually exist, though normally invisible to us, we may gather from the reports (in the Suttas, for example; see the Lakkhaṇa Samy./S II 254–62) of people who have practised meditation and developed the *dibbacakkhu* or “divine eye.” (I am occasionally asked by visitors whether in my meditations I have “had any experiences”—quite an improper question to put to a bhikkhu—and by this they usually mean, “have I seen any devas or other unusual objects?” Fortunately, I am able to assure them that I have not seen any at all, not a single one.) But all these various creatures, whether they exist in their own right—i.e. are independently conscious—or not (and this distinction is not always easy to make simply by looking at them), are of interest only to the lover of variety, to the collector of strange objects. To suppose, as Huxley does (and it is this fidelity of his to the scientific method that

condemns him never to be more than a second-rate thinker), that by collecting and examining the various objects of the mind one can learn something essential about the nature of mind is much the same as supposing that one can learn something about the structure of the telescope by making a list of the great variety of objects one can see through it.

The phenomenological method (of existential thinkers) is not in the least concerned with the peculiarities (however peculiar they may be) of the individual specimen; what it is concerned with is the universal nature of experience as such. Thus, if a phenomenologist sees a duck-billed platypus, he does *not* exclaim with rapture, "What a strange creature! What a magnificent addition to the sum of human knowledge (and also to my collection of stuffed curiosities)!"; he says, instead, "This is an example of a living being," thus putting the platypus with all its duck-billed peculiarities "in brackets" and considering only the universal characteristics of his experience of the platypus. But a dog would have done just as well; for a dog, too, is "an example of a living being"; and besides, there is no need to go all the way to Australia to see one. The phenomenologist does not seek *variety*, he seeks *repetition*—repetition, that is to say, of experience (what it is experience *of* does not interest him in the least), so that he may eventually come to understand the *nature* of experience (for experience and existence are one and the same). And this is just as true of imaginary (mental) experience as of real experience. The Venerable Sāriputta Thera, for all his

proficiency in the practice of *jhāna*, had not developed the *dibbacakkhu* (Th 996). And even so he was the leading disciple of the Buddha, and the foremost in paññā, or understanding. After the Buddha himself there was nobody who understood the Dhamma as well as he—and yet, on his own admission, he was unable to see “even a goblin” (Udāna IV.4/Ud 40). Evidently, then, the seeing of strange creatures, in normal or abnormal states of mind, does not advance one in wisdom.

## 8. Reflexive and immediate experience (19 May 1963)

Your question about *satisampajañña*. *Observing* the particular “doing” or “feeling” is *reflexive* experience. The “doing” or “feeling” itself (whether it is observed or not) is *immediate* experience. But since one obviously cannot observe a “doing” or a “feeling” unless that “doing” or “feeling” is *at the same time present*, there is no reflexive experience (at least in the strict sense used here) that does not contain or involve immediate experience. Reflexive experience is a complex structure of which immediate experience is a less complex part (it is possible that I use the term “reflexive consciousness” a little ambiguously—i.e. either to denote reflexive experience *as a whole* or to distinguish the purely reflexive part of reflexive experience from the immediate part).

Yes: observing the “general nature” of an experience is reflexion (though there are also other kinds of reflexion).

No: in reflexively observing the “general nature” of an experience you have *not* “left out the immediate experience”; you have merely “put the immediate experience in brackets”—that is to say, by an effort of will you have *disregarded* the individual peculiarities of the experience and *paid attention* to the general characteristics (just as you might disregard a witness’s stammer when he is giving evidence and pay attention to the words he is uttering). You simply consider the immediate experience as “an example of experience in general”; but this does not in any way abolish the immediate experience (any more than your disregarding the stammer of the witness stops his stammering).

## 9. Fear of death (7 September 1963)

Feelings of fear and helplessness at times of sickness or danger are very unpleasant, but they can also be very instructive. At such times one may get an almost pure view of *bhavatañhā*, craving for existence. The fear is not fear of anything in particular (though there may *also* be that), but rather of *ceasing to exist*, and the helplessness is an *absolute* helplessness in the face of impending annihilation. I think that it is very probable that these feelings will put in an appearance at any time that one thinks one is going to die (whether one actually dies or not), and it is perhaps half the battle to be prepared for this sort of thing. Once one knows that such feelings are to be expected one can take the appropriate action quickly when they actually occur, instead of dying in a state of bewilderment and terror. What

is the appropriate action? The answer is, Mindfulness. One cannot *prevent* these feelings (except by becoming an arahat), but one can look them in the face instead of fleeing in panic. Let them come, and try to *watch* them: once they know themselves to be observed they tend to wither and fade away, and can only reassert themselves when you become heedless and off your guard. But continued mindfulness is not easy, and that is why it is best to try and practise it as much as possible while one is still living. Experiences such as yours are valuable reminders of what one has to expect and of the necessity for rehearsing one's death before one is faced with it.

## 10. The Laws of Thought and the problem of existence (15 December 1963)

Any proposed solution to the problem of existence that disregards the three Laws of Thought [14] is, in the profoundest sense, *frivolous*. For the *puthujjana* the problem is brought to light by persistent refusal to disregard these laws. It is the merit of the existentialist philosophers that they do in fact bring the problem to light in this way. What happens is this: the thinker examines and describes his own thinking in an act of reflexion, obstinately refusing to tolerate non identities, contradictions, and excluded middles; at a certain point he comes up against a contradiction that he cannot resolve and that appears to be inherent in his very act of thinking. This contradiction is the existence of the thinker himself (as *subject*). This is concisely present in the later part of the Mahānidāna Suttanta (DN

15/D II 66–8), where the Buddha says that a man who identifies his “self” with feeling should be asked *which* kind of feeling, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, he regards as his “self.” The man cannot identify his “self” with all three kinds of feeling at once, since only one of the three kinds is present at a time: if he does make this identification, therefore, he must do it with the three different kinds of feeling in *succession*. His “self,” of course, he takes for granted—as self-identical—“A is A”—that is to say as the *same* “self” on each occasion. This he proceeds to identify in turn with the three *different* feelings: B, C, and D. A is therefore both B and C (not to mention D); and C, being different from B, is not B: so A is both B and not B—a violation of the Law of Contradiction. But whether or not it is with feeling that the *puthujana* is identifying his “self,” he is always identifying it with *something*—and it is a *different* something on each occasion. The *puthujana* takes his existence for granted—*cogito ergo sum*—(which, as Sartre says, is apodictic reflexive evidence of the thinker’s existence)—and is in a perpetual state of contradiction.

So we have the following situation. Assuming the validity of the Laws of Thought, the thinker discovers that the whole of his thinking depends upon an irreducible violation of the Laws of Thought, namely the contradictory existence of the thinker. And this itself is a contradiction. If he tolerates this contradiction he denies the validity of the Laws of Thought whose validity he assumed when he established the contradiction in the first place; there is therefore no

contradiction for him to tolerate, and consequently he is not denying the Laws of Thought; the contradiction therefore exists and he tolerates it ... Or he may refuse to tolerate the contradiction; but if he does so, it is in the name of the Law of Contradiction that he does so, and refusal to tolerate the contradiction requires him to deny the validity of the Laws of Thought by which the contradiction was originally established; he has therefore no reason to refuse to tolerate the contradiction, which, if the Laws of Thought are invalid, is inoffensive; he therefore does not deny the validity of the Laws of Thought, and the contradiction is offensive and he refuses to tolerate it... Or perhaps he neither tolerates the contradiction nor refuses to tolerate it, in which case he violates the Law of Excluded Middle... Most certainly the problem exists!

How is it dealt with? (i) The *rationalist*, by remaining on the level of reason and refusing to look at his premises, asserts the validity of the Laws of Thought, and successfully blinds himself to the standing violation of the Laws of Thought—his own existence. (ii) The *mystic* endorses the standing violation of the Laws of Thought by asserting their invalidity on principle. This obliges him to attribute their apparent validity to blindness or ignorance and to assert a Reality behind appearances that is to be reached by developing a mode of thinking based on the three laws: “A is not A”; “A is both B and not B”; “A is neither B nor not B.” (iii) The *existentialist* says: “Contradiction is the truth, which is a contradiction, and therefore the truth. This is the

situation, and I don't like it; but I can see no way out of it." To maintain this equivocal attitude for a long time is exhausting, and existentialists tend to seek relief in either rationalism or mysticism; but since they find it easier to endorse their personal existence than to ignore it they are more inclined to be mystical than rational.

Obviously, of these three attitudes, the first two evade the problem either by arbitrarily denying its existence or by arbitrarily denying the Laws of Thought upon which it depends. Only the third attitude asserts the Laws of Thought and asserts the existence of the problem. Though the *puthujana* does not see the solution of the problem, he ought at least to see that to *evade* the problem (either by denying its existence or by denying the Laws of Thought on which it depends) is not to *solve* it. He will therefore choose to endure the discomfort of the third attitude until help comes from outside in the form of the Buddha's Teaching, or he himself finds the way out by becoming a Buddha.

## 11. Conceptual thought and reflexion (1 January 1964)

Thank you for Huxley's article. [15] Generally speaking, a concept, an idea, and a thought, are much the same thing, and can be described as an imaginary picture representing some real state of affairs. But this "representation" is not simply a photographic reproduction (in the mind) of the real state of affairs in question. In a very simple case, if I now imagine or think of some absent object, the image that I

have bears some sort of resemblance to the absent object. But suppose I want to think about something like "the British Constitution." I cannot simply produce an imaginary picture "looking like" the British Constitution, because the B. C. does not "look like" anything. What happens is that, over the years, I have built up a complex image, partly visual, partly verbal, and perhaps also with elements from other senses; and this complex image has an internal structure that corresponds to that of the B. C., at least in so far as I have correctly understood it. If, in my studies of the British Constitution, I have consulted faulty authorities, or omitted part of it, these faults or omissions will be represented in this complex image. Whenever I wish to think about the B. C. (or even whenever anybody mentions it) this complex image comes to my mind, and it is with reference to it that I (for example) answer questions about the B. C. This complex image is a concept—it is my concept of the B. C. With luck, it may correspond fairly closely with the original thing, but most probably it is a very misleading representation. (Note that, since the essence of the concept is in the structure of the complex image, and not in the individual images that make up the complex image, it is quite possible to have a number of different complex images, but all with the same structure, to represent the real state of affairs in question. Here, the concept remains the same, though the image is different. Thus, in the world of art, it is possible to express the same idea either in music or in painting.)

Now all conceptual thinking is abstract; that is to say, the thought or concept is entirely divorced from reality, it is removed from existence and is (in Kierkegaard's phrase) *sub specie aeterni*. Concrete thinking, on the other hand, thinks the object *while the object is present*, and this, in the strict sense of the words, is *reflection* or *mindfulness*. One is mindful of what one is doing, of what one is seeing, while one is actually doing (or seeing) it. This, naturally, is very much more difficult than abstract thinking; but it has a very obvious advantage: if one is thinking (or being mindful) of something while it is actually present, no mistake is possible, and one is directly in touch with reality; but in abstract thinking there is every chance of a mistake, since the concepts with which we think are composite affairs, built up of an arbitrary lot of individual experiences (books, conversations, past observations, and so on).

What Huxley is getting at, then, is simply this. As a result of our education, our books, radios, cinemas, televisions, and so on, we tend to build up artificial concepts of what life is, and these concepts are grossly misleading and are no satisfactory guide at all to real life. (How many people, especially in the West, derive all their ideas about love from the cinema or T.V.—no wonder they run into difficulties when they begin to meet it as it is in reality!) Huxley is advocating a training in mindfulness (or awareness), *satisampajañña*—in thinking about life as it is actually taking place—instead of (or, at least, as well as) the present training in purely abstract thinking. In this way, so he

maintains—and of course he is quite right—people will be better fitted for dealing with life as it really is.

## 12. Revolt with intelligence (4 March 1964)

The attitude you speak of, that of cursing the world and oneself, is, in a sense, the beginning of wisdom. Revolt is the first reaction of an intelligent man when he begins to understand the desperate nature of his situation in the world; and it is probably true to say that nothing great has ever been achieved except by a man in revolt against his situation. But revolt alone is not enough—it eventually contradicts itself. A man in blind revolt is like someone in a railway compartment trying to stop the train by pushing against the opposite seat with his feet: he may be strong enough to damage the compartment, but the damaged compartment will nevertheless continue to move with the train. Except for the arahat, we are all in this train of samsāra, and the problem is to stop the train whilst still travelling in it. Direct action, direct revolt won't do; but something, certainly, must be done. That it *is*, in fact, possible to stop the train from within we know from the Buddha, who has himself done it:

I, monks, being myself subject to birth, decay, and death, having seen the misery of subjection to birth, decay, and death, went in search of the unborn, undecaying, undying, uttermost quietus of extinction (nibbāna), *and I reached the unborn, undecaying, undying, uttermost quietus of extinction.* (MN 26/M I 167)

Revolt by all means, but let the weapons be intelligence and patience, not disorder and violence; and the first thing to do is to find out exactly what it is that you are revolting against. Perhaps you will come to see that what you are revolting against is ignorance (*avijjā*).

### 13. Western thought; impermanence (15 March 1964)

The passage on Western philosophy that you quote from Lin Yutang is partly justified, but it must be remarked that it refers only to speculative (or abstract) philosophy, in other words the classical Western philosophies. Existential philosophy, as its name implies, is concerned with *existence*, and Lin Yutang could hardly complain that Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Marcel—to name only three—did (or do) not live in accordance with their philosophies (even though he would scarcely agree with them—they do not regard life as a “poem”). Certainly it is futile to look to speculative philosophy for guidance on how to live; and to follow such a philosophy is to be like one of the blind men of the Sutta in the *Udāna* (V I,4: 68–9) who were shown an elephant and told to describe it—one grasps a small fragment of the truth abstracted from the whole, and fondly imagines that one knows all. On the other hand, a study of such philosophies, in certain circumstances, may not be a waste of time. Shortly before his Parinibbāna, the Buddha told Māra that he would not pass away before there were disciples who were capable of correctly refuting any outside views that might spring up, and this argues that for those who had themselves reached

right view a study of wrong view would be an advantage rather than a disadvantage—that is, when dealing with people who did not accept the Buddha's Teaching. But here, it will be understood, these various speculative philosophies would be studied against a background of right view, with the effect that they would be fitted into their proper place—just as the king, who could see the whole of the elephant, was able to reconcile the widely divergent descriptions of the blind men and put them in the proper perspective. It may also not be a disadvantage to have a fairly wide knowledge of various philosophies when one is in the position of having to understand the Suttas when no trustworthy (i.e. non-*puthujjana*) living teacher is available. If one has to find out for oneself what the texts mean, such a background may—at least for certain people—be a help rather than a hindrance. And finally the development of a lucid understanding of these philosophies—of their virtues and their limitations—may become a real pleasure to the mind.

As a solution to impermanence you suggest that we might forego “an impermanent use of what is impermanent.” Impossible! We are making impermanent use of what is impermanent all the time—and this is as true for the arahat as it is for the *puthujjana*. So long as there is consciousness at all there is the passage of time, and the passage of time consists in the *use* of things, whether we like it or not. The eating of food, the breathing of breaths, the thinking of thoughts, the dreaming of dreams—all are impermanent use

of what is impermanent. Only in *nirodhasamāpatti* does this lapse for any living being. In the last Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya (MN 152/M III 298–9) the desperate expedient is suggested of “not seeing forms with the eye, not hearing sounds with the ear,” but the Buddha ridicules this, saying that this is already achieved by a blind and deaf man. He goes on to indicate *upekkhā*, indifference, as the proper way. The fault does not lie in the impermanence (which is inevitable), but in *attachment to* (and *repulsion from*) the impermanent. Get rid of attachment (and repulsion) and you get rid of the suffering of impermanence. The arahat makes impermanent use of the impermanent, but with indifference, and the only suffering he has is bodily pain or discomfort when it arises (and that, too, finally ceases when his body breaks up).

#### 14. Three kinds of trainees (4 April 1964)

Bradley makes a distinction that seems to have a certain (limited) application to the Dhamma. He speaks of the metaphysicians, on the one hand, who speculate on first principles and the ultimate nature of things; and on the other, of those who are not prepared for metaphysical enquiry, who feel no call towards thankless hours of fruitless labour, who do not care to risk a waste of their lives on what the world for the most part regards as lunacy, and they themselves but half believe in.

(Principles of Logic, p. 340)

(What a cry from Bradley's heart!) This second category

contains those who take principles as working hypotheses to explain the facts, without enquiry into the ultimate validity of those principles (this is the normal practice with those who study special subjects—physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and so on—and who are metaphysicians, if at all, in their own conceit). In brief: those who look for first principles, and those who take things on trust because they work in practice. In the Suttas, too, we find something of this distinction between those *sekhas* who are *dīttipatta* (“attained-through-view”) and those who are *saddhāvimutta* (“released-through-faith”). The former have heard the Buddha’s Teaching, reflected on it, and accepted it after considering the ultimate principles on which it is based. The latter have heard the Teaching and reflected on it (as before), but instead of seeking its first principles, have accepted it because it inspires them with trust and confidence. Both of them have practised the Teaching, and both have attained to *sotāpatti* or beyond, but one puts *paññā* foremost, and the other *saddhā*. But there is also a third kind of *sekha*, the *kāyasakkhi* (“body-witness”), who is quite without any corresponding category in Western philosophy: he is one who puts *samādhi* foremost—he develops mental concentration and gets all the *jhānas*, and needs not so much *paññā* or *saddhā*. In AN 3:21 / A I 118–20 the Buddha is asked which of these three is the best, but he declines to discriminate between them, saying that any one of them may outdistance the other two and arrive first at the final goal.

It is actually on this question of *samādhi* that Eastern thought is at its greatest distance from Western; and the latter can certainly be charged with sterility on this score (and this will include the existentialists). The trouble seems to be this. Western thought has a Christian background (its individual thinkers can almost all be classed as pro-or anti-Christian, and rarely, if ever, as neutral), and, since the practice of meditation is normally connected with religious beliefs (in a wide sense), all states attained through such practices are automatically classed as Christian (or at least as Theist or Deist), and therefore as essentially *mystical*. Now, no philosopher who respects the Laws of Thought can possibly find a place for the mystical in his scheme of things, since mysticism is an act of faith in the principle of noncontradiction (i.e. that the Law of Contradiction does not hold)—in other words, God (who is, one might say, self-contradiction personified, and, being the Ultimate Truth, is therefore no contradiction). [16] So samatha practice (*ānāpānasati*, for example), even were it known in the West (which it is not), would first be misunderstood as mystical, and then, on the strength of this, would be banished from the philosopher's system (except, of course, on Sundays).

## 15. The Suttas and outside philosophies (12 April 1964)

I am always pleased when I find a connection between the Suttas and outside philosophies: it is not, to be sure, that the former can be reduced to the latter—the Dhamma is not just *one* way of thinking amongst others—but rather that the

Buddha has seen all that these philosophers have seen, and he has *also* seen what they could not see; and to discover this is extraordinarily exhilarating. Nobody can say to the Buddha, “There is this or that that you have not taken into account”: [17] it is all taken into account, and still more. The Suttas give not the slightest pretext for the famous “sacrifice of the intellect”—Ignatius Loyola and Bodhidharma are strange bedfellows, indeed. Certainly there is more to the Dhamma than intellect (and this is sometimes hard for Europeans to understand), but there is nothing to justify the wilful abandonment of the Principle of Identity.

## 16. The Law of Identity (14 July 1964)

The Principle (or Law) of Identity is usually stated as “A is A” which can be understood as “Everything is what it is.” Bradley (*Principles of Logic*, p. 141) remarks that, in this form, it is a tautology and says nothing at all:

It does not even assert identity. For identity without difference is nothing at all. It takes two to make the same, and the least we can have is some change of event in a selfsame thing, or the return to that thing from some suggested difference. For, otherwise, to say “It is the same as itself” would be quite unmeaning.

In referring to Loyola and Bodhidharma in my last letter, I had in mind two “wilful abandonments of the Principle of Identity.” (i) Loyola: “In order never to go astray, we must always be ready to believe that what I, personally, see as *white* is *black*, if the hierarchical Church defines it so.” (ii)

Bodhidharma (or, rather, a modern disciple of his, in an article in *The Middle Way*): [18] “The basic principle of Zen is ‘A is not A.’” A great deal of modern thinking, including mathematics, is based on a deliberate rejection of one or another of the Laws of Thought, of which Identity is the first. This may be all very well in poetry or physics, but it won’t do in philosophy—I mean as a fundamental principle. Every ambiguity, for a philosopher, should be a sign that he has further to go.)

## 17. Mindfulness; Huxley’s Island (6 August 1964)

*Sati*, in a loose sense, can certainly be translated as “memory” but memory is normally memory of the *past*, whereas in the eight-factored path *sati* is more particularly concerned with the *present*. In so far as one can speak of memory of the present, this translation will do, but memory of the present—i.e. calling to mind the present—is less confusingly translated as “mindfulness.” Here are two Sutta passages illustrating these two meanings of *sati*: in the first passage *sati* is “memory,” and in the second it is “mindfulness.” The passages can be translated as follows:

The noble disciple is mindful, he is endowed with the highest mindfulness (memory) and prudence, he remembers and recalls what was done and what was said long ago. (SN 48:50 / S V 275)

Here, monks, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body... feelings in feelings... the mind in the mind... ideas in ideas, ardent, aware, mindful,

having put away worldly covetousness and grief.  
Thus, monks, is a monk mindful. (SN 36:7/S IV 211)

I have been sent Huxley's last novel—*Island*. It is a most unsatisfactory book. Since Huxley had visited Ceylon shortly before writing the book, and since the inhabitants of the Island are Buddhists, it has been thought that the Island is Ceylon. But this is clearly a mistake. The Island is undoubtedly Bali (Huxley calls it Pala), from its geographical and political environment. Besides, the people are Mahāyāna Buddhists (Tantric to boot) with a strong admixture of Shiva worship. The book is a kind of *Brave New World* turned inside out—it describes a Utopia of which he approves. It is based almost entirely on *maithuna* (sex) and mescalin (one of the characters quotes a Tantric Buddhist saying that Buddhahood is in the *yoni*—a very convenient doctrine!), which in combination (so it seems) are capable of producing the Earthly Paradise. The awkward fact of rebirth is eliminated with the statement that the Buddha discouraged speculation on such questions (whereas, in fact, the Buddha said quite bluntly throughout the Suttas that there *is* rebirth: the speculation that the Buddha discouraged was whether the Tathāgata [or arahat] exists after death, which is quite another question). And precisely the worst feature of the book is the persistent misinterpretation (or even perversion) of the Buddha's Teaching.

It is probable that Huxley picked up a certain amount of

information on the Dhamma while he was in Ceylon but, being antipathetic to Theravāda (this is evident in his earlier books), he has not scrupled to interpret his information to suit his own ideas. We find, for example, that according to Freudian doctrine Mucalinda Nāgarāja (Udāna II 10) is a phallic symbol, being a serpent. So “meditating under the Mucalinda tree” means sexual intercourse. And this in complete defiance of the verses at the end of the Sutta:

Dispassion for worldly pleasure, getting beyond sensuality, putting away the conceit “I am,” —this indeed is the highest pleasure.

In short, the book is a complete misrepresentation of the Buddha’s Teaching in a popular form that is likely to be widely read. Huxley, of course, is sincere in his views and no doubt means well; but that does not make the book any the less unfortunate.

## 18. Meditations a non-mystical practice (18 May 1964)

R. C. Zaehner (in his *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane*) admits he doesn’t know much about Pali Buddhism, but what he does say is wrong in two respects. (i) In the first place, he more or less identifies the *anattā* (“not-self”) doctrine with Advaita Vedānta, and he does this with more than a suspicion that neither Buddhists nor even the Buddha himself would allow this. [19] Though this identification is quite gratuitous, [20] there is some excuse for it in view of

certain books published in Europe which hold this view (Coomaraswamy in England, Georg Grimm in Germany). No doubt you will gather that I certainly do not hold the view that the object of the exercise is to get rid of my temporal “self” in order to attain the permanent “Self” behind it. (ii) In the second place, Zaehner appears to assume that all experience attained in the practice of meditation (I use the word here in the widest sense) is of the mescalin/manic-depressive type, or at least that one has to pass through this state to reach the “Beatific Vision.”

Now, whatever the case may be with the Christian mystics, or with the Mohammedan Sufis, or with the Hindus—or even with Mahāyāna and Zen Buddhists—about none of whom am I well informed (and, still less, practised in their disciplines), I can quite definitely assert that (to speak only of the practice of concentration—*samādhi*) the effect of practice according to the Theravāda tradition (details in the *Visuddhimagga*—*Path of Purification*) is quite different from anything Zaehner has described. I am quite familiar with the low-level results of this practice. There is a gradual and increasing experience of calm and tranquillity as the object of meditation (in my case, the in- and out-breaths) becomes clearer and more definite, and at the same time distracting thoughts about other matters become less. Of one *does* turn one’s attention to such matters, they are seen much more clearly and steadily than at normal times.) As one proceeds, one’s capacity for practice increases, and one may be able to continue (with interruptions for meals, etc.) for many

hours; [21] and also one positively dislikes any outside interruption, and necessary breaks are most unwelcome. In all this there is, right from the start, no sign at all of elation and depression (or expansion and contraction—Zaehner, pp. 85ff.), and no experience of “one-ness” (with nature, with Self, with God, or with anything else). There is nothing one could possibly call “ecstatic” about it—it is pleasurable, and the more so the more one does it, but that is all. To begin with, certainly, one may be attacked either by sleepiness or by mental agitation (i.e. about other matters), but with persistence, and particularly when the object of meditation begins to appear clearly, these things no longer arise; but sleepiness is not depression and mental distraction is not manic exultation. About the higher states (called *jhānas*), in the descriptions of these attainments in the Suttas there is, once again, nothing that corresponds to what Zaehner describes; and, in particular, these practices *alone* do not lead to “liberation” in the highest sense—nibbāna—though Zaehner seems to assume that they do (pp. 155–6). Moreover, it is by no means necessary to reach the highest stages of concentration in order to attain nibbāna—first *jhāna* (minimum) is sufficient.

I have wearied you with all this only because it seems possible that, in denying that there was anything “mystical” about the Buddhism of the Pali Texts, I might have given you the impression that there was (in my opinion, at least) no *practice of meditation*. This, however, would be a mistake. In denying that Pali Buddhism was mystical, all I intended

to convey was that (i) the practice of meditation (or, more specifically, concentration—*samādhi*) that it teaches cannot in any way be described as *mystical* (though certainly its effects are, to begin with, *unusual*—because few people practise—and eventually, *supernormal*—they can lead to mastery of *iddhi* powers: levitation, clairvoyance, memory of past lives, and so on); and (ii) that eventual liberation—*nibbāna*, extinction, is not a mystical union with the Deity, nor even absorption in a Higher Self (both of which cover up and intensify the fundamental ambiguity of the subject [“I”, “myself”, etc.]), but rather the attainment of the clear understanding and comprehension (*paññā*, *aññā*) about the nature of this ambiguity (which, when combined with suitable *samādhi* actually causes—or, rather, *allows*—the ambiguity to subside once for all).

There are many world-views against which as a background the Buddha's Teaching is wholly incomprehensible—indeed, the Buddha himself, upon occasion, when asked about his teaching, would answer, “It is hard for you, having (as you do) other teachers, other persuasions, other views, to understand these matters.” Zaehner's *Weltanschauung*, for example, is hopeless.

## 19. Ignorance and reality (2 August 1964)

The world's relativity (or variety) stubbornly resists all our efforts to reduce it to a single Whole. “The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia” (Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 11). Three quotations

will perhaps illustrate this. Here, first, is Jean Grenier (*Absolu et Choix*) [22] on the Hindu *māyā*:

The world may be the product of a sort of dream, not the dream of a spirit but the dream of a power inherent in the world. That would be the case of this illusion that the Vedantists call *māyā*. For Indians; *māyā* is *shakti*, which is to say a power from (and of) Brahma, through which the latter takes a perceptible appearance... The Vedic hypothesis of *māyā*, a hypothesis that would better be called a postulate, because of its generality and indemonstrability, consists in supposing that the world is the product of a cosmic illusion, a modification of Brahma. This modification would be apparent only, like the rope one thinks to be a snake but which nevertheless remains a rope. The absolute would not be more easily reached through it than the desert through the mirage.

Second, here is a passage from the Prajñāpāramitā on the Mahāyānist *avidyā*:

Objects exist only insofar as they do not exist in reality. Insofar as they do not exist they are called *avidyā*, which means "non-knowledge." Common and ignorant people are attached to these things because they do not receive guidance (teaching) on this subject. They picture to themselves all these objects as existing, whereas in reality no one (no thing) exists.

Finally, a verse from the Pali Suttas:

Thought and lust are a man's sensuality, Not the

various things in the world; Thought and lust are a man's sensuality,  
The various things just stand there in the world;  
But the wise get rid of desire therein. [23] (AN 6:63 / A III 411)

For the Hindu, then, the variety of the world is *illusion*, and for the Mahāyānist it is *ignorance*; and in both cases the aim is to overcome the world, either by union with Brahma or by attainment of knowledge. Unlike the Hindus and the Mahāyānists, the Pali Suttas teach that the variety of the world is neither illusion (*māyā*) nor delusion (*avidyā*) but perfectly real. The attainment of nibbāna is certainly cessation of *avijjā*, but this leaves the variety of the world intact, except that *affectively* the variety is now uniformly indifferent. *Avidyā*, clearly enough, does not mean to the Mahāyānist what *avijjā* does in the Pali Suttas.

## 20. Desire to end desire (31 August 1964)

As to that Sutta you mention (AN 4:159 / A II 144–7): a bhikkhunī sends for the Ven. Ānanda Thera, being infatuated with him and hoping perhaps for sexual intercourse. The Ven. Ānanda understands the situation and gives her a suitable Dhamma-talk. He tells her (i) that this body is a product of food and that, depending on food, food is to be given up (a bhikkhu's body is made of food, but he must go on taking food to keep alive and practise the Dhamma if he wishes to give up food in the future by not

being reborn); (ii) that this body is a product of craving and that, depending on craving, craving is to be given up (a bhikkhu, having been born on account of craving in his previous life, hears that so-and-so has become an arahat and, craving that for himself, sets to work to get it; and in course of time he succeeds, his success being, precisely, the giving up of all craving); (iii) the same with *māna* or conceit (the bhikkhu, hearing that so-and-so has become an arahat, thinks “I’m as good as he is, and if he can do it, so can I,” and sets to work; and in due course, prompted by conceit, he puts an end to conceit); (iv) that this body is a product of copulation, and that the Buddha has said that (for monks) copulation is absolutely not to be practised. In (ii), the bhikkhu *craves* for arahatship since he thinks in terms of “I” or “self” (“When shall *I* attain that?”), and all such thoughts contain *bhavatañhā*, though of course here there is no *sensual* craving (*kāmatan̄hā*). But anyone who thinks “When shall *I* become an arahat?” is *ipso facto* failing to understand what it means to be an arahat (since being an arahat means *not* thinking in terms of “I”). So, on account of his craving for arahatship, he sets out to get it. But, since he does not understand what arahatship is, he does not know what it is that he is seeking; and when, in due course, he *does* come to know what it is he is seeking, he has *ipso facto* found it (or at least the first instalment of it). It is by making use of *bhavatañhā* that he gives up *bhavatañhā* (and *a fortiori* all other kinds of *tan̄hā*). It is *because* of *bhavatañhā* that, with the Buddha’s help, we make an attempt to recognise *bhavatañhā*

and succeed in doing so, thereby bringing *bhavatañhā* to an end.

## 21. Sending good wishes (20 September 1964)

Your question about the propriety of sending good wishes (“Is not wishing desire, and so to be shunned?”) can be answered, though not in one word. There is desire and desire, and there is also desire to end desire. There is desire that involves self-assertion (love, hate) and desire that does not (the arahat’s desire to eat when hungry, for example), and the former can be either self-perpetuating (unrestrained passion) or self-destructive (restrained passion). Self-destructive desire is bad in so far as it is passionate, and therefore good in so far as, translated into action, it brings itself to an end. (By “translated into action” I mean that the desire for restraint does not remain abstractly in evidence only when one is not giving way to passion, but is concretely operative when there is actually occasion for it, when one is actually in a rage. To begin with, of course, it is not easy to bring them together, but with practice desire for restraint arises at the same time as the passion, and the combination is self-destructive. The Suttas say clearly that craving is to be eliminated by means of craving; and you yourself are already quite well aware that nothing can be done in this world, either good or bad, without passion—and the achievement of dispassion is no exception. But passion must be intelligently directed.) Since an arahat is capable of desiring the welfare of others, good wishes are evidently not essentially connected with self-assertion, and

so are quite *comme il faut*.

I hope that your leave is passing pleasantly for you—that is, I do not hope that it is *passing*, but that it is *pleasant* in its passing: whether I hope or do not hope, it will pass, alas! like all good things, save one. But that one thing—again alas!—is not to be had simply by wishing.

In creatures subject to birth, ageing, and death, friends, there arises such a wish as “O that we were not subject to birth, ageing, and death! O that birth, ageing, and death might not come nigh us!” But that is not to be attained by wishing; and in this, too, not to get what one wishes is to suffer. (DN 22 / D II 307)

With all best wishes, including this (that is, if you would wish it for yourself).

## 22. Dhamma and socialism (23 November 1964)

I enclose a press cutting about Sartre. [24] The view that he is expounding here (“A writer has to take sides . . .”) finds no justification at all in his philosophy. If, therefore, he holds this view, he does so simply because he finds it emotionally satisfactory. This view, of course, is quite familiar to us—it is the socialist argument we sometimes hear, that since one cannot practise the Dhamma if one is starving, therefore food comes first; and therefore food is more important than the Damma; and therefore it is more important to produce food than it is to behave well; and therefore any of violence or deceit is justified if it helps to increase food production.

As Sartre puts it, it seems plausible—it is better to feed the poor than to entertain the rich. But when we look at it more closely we see that certain difficulties arise. To begin with, it assumes (as all socialists, Sartre included, do assume) that this life is the only one, that we did not exist before we were born, and shall not exist after we die. On this assumption it is fairly easy to divide mankind into two groups: the rich oppressors, and the poor oppressed, and the choice which to support seems easy. But if this is not the only life, how can we be sure that a man who is now poor and oppressed is not suffering the unpleasant effects of having been a rich oppressor in his past life? And, if we take the principle to its logical conclusion, should we not choose to be on the side of the “oppressed” inhabitants of the hells, suffering retribution for their evil ways, and to condemn the fortunate ones in the heavens, a privileged class enjoying the reward of virtue, as the “idle rich”? And then this view ignores the fact that our destiny at death depends on how we behave in this life. If bad behaviour in this life leads to poverty and hunger in the next, can we be sure that bread is more important than books? What use is it providing the hungry with bread if you don’t tell them the difference between right and wrong? Is metaphysics so unimportant if it leads men—rich and poor, no matter—to adopt right view and to behave accordingly?

Of course, the very fact that Sartre’s philosophy does not have anything to say about the hungry and oppressed is a blemish on his philosophy; and it might be argued that

Sartre is therefore better occupied standing up for the hungry and oppressed than in propagating his metaphysical views; but that still does not justify the principle. And, in the last analysis, the Buddha's Teaching is for a privileged class—those who are fortunate enough to have the intelligence to grasp it (the Dhamma is *paccattam veditabbo viññūhi* (MN 38/M I 265)—“to be known by the wise, each for himself”), and they are most certainly not the majority! But Sartre’s attitude is symptomatic of a general inadequacy in modern European thought the growing view that the majority must be right, that truth is to be decided by appeal to the ballot-box. (I read somewhere that, in one of the Western Communist countries, it was decided by a show of hands that angels do not exist.)

### 23. Interpreting the Canon (29 November 1964)

Mr. X remarks that I explain too inductively, that I tend to look for my ideas in the Canon instead of *deducing* from the passages what *they* mean. This criticism, however, supposes that we are, in fact, able to approach the Canon with a perfectly virgin mind, equipped only with a knowledge of Pali and a sound training in logic. But this is precisely what we cannot do. Each of us, at every moment, has the whole of his past behind him; and it is in the light of his past (or his background or his presuppositions) that he interprets what is now presented to him and gives it its meaning. Without such a background nothing would ever appear to us with any meaning at all—a spoken or written word would remain a pure presentation, a bare sound or mark without

significance. But, unfortunately, each of us has a different past; and, in consequence, each of us approaches the Canon with a set of presuppositions that is different in various ways from everybody else's. And the further consequence is that each of us understands the Canon in a different sense. We try to discover our personal ideas in the Canon because there is nothing else we can do. It is the only way we have, in the first place, of *understanding* the Canon. Later, of course, our understanding of the Canon comes to modify our ideas; and thus, by a circular process, our later understanding of the Canon is better than, or at least different from, our earlier understanding, and there is the possibility of eventually arriving at the right understanding of the *ariyapuggala*. Certainly we can, to some extent, deduce from the Canon its meaning; but unless we first introduced our own ideas we should never find that the Canon had any meaning to be deduced.

For each person, then, the Canon means something different according to his different background. And this applies not only to our understanding of particular passages, but also to what we understand by the Buddhadhamma as a whole. (I) We may all agree that certain passages were spoken by the Buddha himself and that they represent the true Teaching. But when we come to ask one another what we understand by these passages and by the words they contain we often find a profound disagreement that is by no means settled simply by reference to other Sutta passages. (ii) Since everybody already has his own ideas (vague or precise) of

what constitutes happiness, he will naturally look to the Buddha (that is, if he has placed his *saddhā* in the Buddha) to supply that happiness, and he will interpret the Dhamma as a whole in just that sense. Later, of course, he may find that the Dhamma cannot be taken in the sense that he wishes, and he will then either change his ideas or else abandon the Dhamma for some other teaching. But, in any case, there is no reason at all for supposing that two people (unless they have both ceased to be *puthujjanas*) will be agreed on what it is, precisely, that the Buddha teaches.

So, in the present case, I do not find that Mr. X's view of the Dhamma—so far as I can grasp it—has any very great resemblance to mine; and that difference evidently reflects the difference in our respective backgrounds against which we interpret the Dhamma. He may (perhaps) say that he reads and understands the Suttas without any reference to a background, and (if so) I have no wish to argue the point; but I know that, for my part, I never come without a background (in a sense I *am* my background) when I consider the texts, even though that background is now very different from what it was when I first looked at a Sutta. And if he disagrees with what I am saying, that disagreement will itself be reflected in the way each of us understands the nature of the Dhamma.

## 24. Numinous experience (8 December 1964)

You speak of “feeling the incarnating of God in ourselves so that we realise that we are of the very stuff of God,” and

then you go on to say, “Oh, I know how you will react to any such statement....” Well, how do I react? I say that to take what we call “experience of God” as evidence of the existence of God is a mistake: But there are mistakes and mistakes, and it is perhaps worth looking a little more closely.

Observe, to begin with, that I do not *deny* that we may have “experience of God.” Numinous experience is just as real as romantic love or aesthetic experience; and the question that must be answered is whether these things are to be taken at their face value as evidence of some kind of transcendent reality or whether the eternity they point to is a delusion.

Certainly in sexual love we do seem to experience eternity; and this is often taken as religiously significant (by the Hindus, for example, with their Shivalingam, not to mention their temple eroticism). But what a derisory eternity it is that lasts for a few seconds or minutes and then leaves us wondering what all the fuss was about! As an advertisement for eternity, sex is a joke. In romantic love, true, we manage to live in a kind of eternity for months and perhaps years: every love-affair lasts forever—while it lasts. Our past loves can be absolutely dead, even when we meet the loved one again. And so with aesthetic enjoyment, the transcendental sense of Mozart’s G Minor Quintet, his Adagio and Fugue, the late Beethoven, Bartok’s quartets, Stravinsky’s Octet for Wind Instruments, so evident to me before I joined the army—where was it when I got back home after the war?

When we come to more specifically numinous experience the situation is more delicate. In its grosser forms, certainly—awe in a cathedral, panic fear in a thunderstorm—it can come and go, and we oscillate between eternity and transience; and even if transience can be eternal, eternity cannot possibly be transient. But a more subtle approach is possible. For Karl Jaspers the world has a three-fold aspect. There is “being-there,” “being-oneself,” and “being-in-itself.” The first is everything that can be an object for me, thoughts as well as things. The second is personal existence, or *myself*. This transcends the first, and can be apprehended, though not wholly, in an act of self reflexion. The third transcends the second as the second transcends the first, and is Transcendental Being. This is the ultimate sense or meaning of the other two, but it can never be directly apprehended. All we can do is to approach it. And Jaspers here develops his doctrine of “cyphers”: a cypher (which is quite unintelligible to abstract reason) is an experience that is apprehended as incomplete—but only as pointing to a reality that is “present but hidden.”

Although Jaspers distinguishes various kinds of cyphers, the important point is that *anything* can be read as a cypher if we care to make the effort of “existential contemplation.” Since anything can indicate Transcendental Being, there is at least the theoretical possibility that one might pass the whole of one’s life reading one’s every experience as a cypher, and in such a case we should perpetually be approaching Eternity. This attitude is less easy to dismiss,

and Jaspers has taken care to tie up all the loose ends with an ultimate cypher. Although we can perpetually approach Being, we can never actually reach it, and this inevitable failure and frustration of our efforts may be a temptation to despair. This temptation to despair, says Jaspers, should spur us on to "assume" the cypher of frustration. But it must be emphasised that the assumption of this cypher is an act of faith in Transcendence and without such faith we can never make the necessary jump—indeed, they are really one and the same thing.

So, then, Jaspers leads us to the point where everything indicates Transcendence and nothing reveals it, and thence to despair; and despair is an invitation to jump to the conclusion that Transcendence (or Eternity, or God) exists. But different attitudes are possible in the face of this invitation. The theists, of course, accept the invitation with many thanks. Jaspers himself is inclined to accept it in spite of the difficulties involved. Sartre explains away the invitation, too easily dismissing what is a real problem. Camus accepts the invitation to Transcendence in a contrary sense—as evidence of the non-existence of God.

And what, then, about the Buddha's Teaching—how does it tell us to deal with the question whether or not God exists? The first thing is to refuse to be bullied into giving a categorical answer, yes or no, to such a treacherous question. The second thing is to see that the answer to this question will depend on the answer to a more immediate question: "Do I myself exist? Is my self in fact eternal, or is it

something that perishes with the body?" And it is here that the difficulties begin. The Buddha says that the world is divided, for the most part, between the Yeas and the Nays, between the eternalists and the annihilationists, and that they are forever at each other's throats. But these are two extremes, and the Buddha's Teaching goes in between. So long as we have experience of our selves, the question "Does my self exist?" will thrust itself upon us: if we answer in the affirmative we shall tend to affirm the existence of God, and if we answer in the negative we shall deny the existence of God. But what if we have ceased to have experience of ourselves? (I do not mean reflexive experience as such, but experience of our selves as an ego or a person.) If this were to happen—and it is the specific aim of the Buddha's Teaching (and of no other teaching) to arrange for it to happen—then not only should we stop questioning about our existence and the existence of God, but the whole of Jaspers' system, and with it the doctrine of cyphers, would collapse. And what room, then, for despair? For the arahat all sense of personality or selfhood has subsided, and with it has gone all possibility of numinous experience; and *a fortiori* the mystical intuition of a trans-personal Spirit or Absolute Self—of a Purpose or an Essence or a Oneness or what have you—can no longer arise.

## 25. A good life and a good death (30 December 1964)

I myself started thinking about the unpleasant business of dying, perhaps three or four years ago. Up to then, like most

people, I had not given it much thought. But I was struck by the statements of two doctors on the subject. The first said that if we overeat we tend to die earlier than if we take less; and that since death is more painful when one is still young (because the body has stronger resistance) than when one is old and decrepit, it is advisable to eat less and live as long as possible. The other doctor was commenting (in a medical journal) on a proposal to institute voluntary euthanasia for people who had reached the age of sixty. He was in favour of the proposal because, he said, as a doctor he was well aware of the horrible diseases that are liable to attack us in the seventh and eighth decades of our lives. So there you are you die young you probably have a difficult death because your body is strong and if you keep alive into old age you run the risk of dying unpleasantly from some frightful affliction. And, after that, I was struck by the obsessive thought of death that runs right through Dr. Axel Munthe's book *The Story of San Michele*. In the Suttas, whenever the Buddha speaks of severe pain, it is always "pain like that of dying."

In Camus' long novel *La Peste* ("The Plague") a character declares, "The only concrete problem that I know of today is whether it is possible to be a saint without God." In the Christian tradition, of course, one is good, one becomes a saint, in order to please God or to fulfil his will. But when (as is largely the case in Europe today) people no longer believe in the existence of God, is there any reason (apart from the police) for continuing to behave well or for

aspiring to sainthood? This character in *La Peste* has seen human suffering, and has seen that much of this suffering is due to the cruelty or thoughtlessness of human beings themselves; and the question that he asks himself is whether a belief in God is necessary before one can live a good life, or whether a concern for other people's welfare is enough, and whether this will give a man final peace. Actually, in one of the Suttas, the Buddha more or less answers this question by saying (in effect) that *so long as one believes in God it is not possible to become a saint*. And the reason is quite simple if God exists, he is responsible—since he created us—for all our actions, good or bad; and so, if I believe in God, I shall not myself feel responsible for my actions, and so I shall have no motive for behaving well rather than badly. (The question of God's responsibility for evil is one that perpetually torments Christian theologians, and they have never found an adequate answer.)

One of the conclusions that this character of Camus arrives at is that if one is going to live well, one can never afford to be distracted. In other words, one must always be mindful. And one of the striking things in the book is the contrast between the deaths of the ordinary victims of the plague, who are indeed no more than, in Huxley's expression, "moaning animals," tossing about on their beds "with no more thoughts, but only pain and vomiting and stupor" between these and the death of this one character who aspires to sainthood and practises mindfulness. Like the others, he dies of plague; but the whole time he is dying

(according to Camus' description) he gives the impression of being intelligent and retaining his lucidity right up to the last. He *knows* that he is dying, and he is determined to have "a good death." Naturally, this is only a death in a novel, and we can't take it as necessarily true of real life (did Camus, I wonder, ever see a man trying to die mindfully?); but I myself am rather of the opinion that, if one is *really* determined to make an effort, a great deal can be done towards remaining intelligent at the time of one's death. But I don't suppose that it is very easy unless one has already made a long habit of mindfulness.

## 26. The autonomous mood (1 January 1965)

A pleasant surprise to get your letter! But how hard it is to communicate! Kierkegaard held that direct communication was impossible, and said (with Dostoevsky) that the surest way of being silent is to talk. I have been reading your letter and trying to grasp its meaning (the words and sentences, of course, are quite clear)—trying, in other words, to get the feel of it, to seize upon its Archimidean point.

Your reference to the autonomous mood in the Irish grammar can perhaps be turned to account, particularly since you yourself go on to suggest that a linguistic approach to the deeper questions of life might be rewarding. There is, in fact, a Sutta in which all the five aggregates (the factors present in all experience) are defined in this very way.

Matter is what *matters*; [25] feeling is what *feels*; perception is

what *perceives*; determinations (or intentions) are what *determine* (or intend); consciousness is what *cognizes*. (SN 22:79/S III 86–7)

The ordinary person (the *puthujjana* or “commoner”) thinks, “*I feel; I perceive; I determine; I cognize*,” and he takes this “*I*” to refer to some kind of timeless and changeless ego or “self.” But the arahat has completely got rid of the ego-illusion (the conceit or concept “*I am*”), and, when he reflects, thinks quite simply, “*Feeling feels; perception perceives; determinations determine; consciousness cognizes*.” Perhaps this may help you to see how it is that when desire (craving) ceases altogether “the various things just stand there in the world.” [26] Obviously they cannot “just stand there in the world” unless they are felt, perceived, determined and cognized (Berkeley’s *esse est percipi* is, in principle, quite correct); but for the living arahat the question “*Who feels, perceives, determines, cognizes, the various things?*” no longer arises—the various things are felt by feeling, perceived by perception, determined by determinations, and cognized by consciousness; in other words, they are “there in the world” *autonomously* (actually they always were, but the *puthujjana* does not see this since he takes himself for granted). With the breaking up of the arahat’s body (his death) all this ceases. (For other people, of course, these things continue unless and until they in their turn, having become arahats, arrive at the end of their final existence.)

A further point. When an arahat is *talking* to people he will

normally follow linguistic usage and speak of “I” and “me” and “mine” and so on; but he no longer (mis)understands these words as does the *puthujana*. There is a Sutta (in verse) which I translate (prosaically) as follows:

—A monk who is a worthy one (*arahat*), his task done,  
His cankers destroyed, wearing his last body—  
Is it because this monk has arrived at conceit  
That he might say “*I say*,”  
And that he might say “They say *to me*”?

—For one who is rid of conceit there are no ties,  
All his ties of conceit are dissolved;  
This wise man, having got beyond conceiving, Might  
say “*I say*,”  
And he might say, “They say *to me*”:  
Skilled in worldly expressions, knowing about them,  
He might use them within the limits of usage. (SN  
1:25/S I 14)

It would be unfair on my part to allow myself to suggest, even by implication, that the Buddha’s Teaching is easier to understand than it is; and still more unfair to lead you to suppose that I consider myself capable of benefiting you in any decisive manner. All I can do is to plant a few signposts in your way, in the hope, perhaps, of giving a certain orientation to your thinking that might stand you in good stead later on.

## 27. Ulysses: a glimpse of futility (7 April 1965)

Your reaction to *Ulysses* (a feeling of sadness) is appropriate and shows that you have not misread the book; but surely the sympathy you feel for the ageing Molly Bloom should be extended to Mr. Bloom himself (and, in a lesser degree, to most of the other characters)? Actually, when I first read the book it was not so much the ageing of the characters that affected me as the ultimate meaninglessness and futility of all their actions and aspirations. They are busy, all of them, seeking their immediate satisfactions, and avoiding their immediate discomforts; and everything that they do—whether it is making money, making music, making love, or simply making water—is quite pointless—in terms, that is to say, of an ultimate purpose or meaning in life. At the time I read it—when I was about twenty—I had already suspected (from my reading of Huxley and others) that there *is* no point in life, but this was still all rather abstract and theoretical. But *Ulysses* gets down to details, and I found I recognised myself, *mutatis mutandis*, in the futile occupations that fill the days of Joyce's characters. And so I came to understand that all our actions, from the most deliberate to the most thoughtless, and without exception, are determined by *present* pleasure and present pain. Even what we pompously call our "duty" is included in this law—if we do our duty, that is only because we should feel uncomfortable if we neglected it, and we seek to avoid discomfort. Even the wise man, who renounces a present pleasure for the sake of a greater pleasure in the future, obeys this law—he enjoys the present pleasure of knowing

(or believing) that he is providing for his future pleasure, whereas the foolish man, preferring the present pleasure to his future pleasure, is perpetually gnawed with apprehension about his future. And when I had understood this, the Buddha's statement, "Both now and formerly, monks, it is just suffering that I make known and the cessation of suffering," (MN 22/M I 140) came to seem (when eventually I heard it) the most obvious thing in the world—"What else," I exclaimed, "could the Buddha possibly teach?"

## 28. Humour (18 May 1965)

Yes, this existence of ours is no laughing matter, and yet we laugh. And the great laughers are not those who least see the grimness. Perhaps, then, laughter is something less simple than the sigh of pure innocent bliss. When do we laugh most spontaneously, with the least affectation? Is it not, possibly, when we have been threatened by some horrible menace and have just escaped by the skin of our teeth? The experience is familiar enough, and we may well take it as a starting point. It seems to suggest that laughter is in some way connected with fear. We are threatened; we fear; the threat passes; we laugh. Let us pursue this idea.

A few weeks ago, at the Hermitage, an unwanted young dog was dumped on the island from the mainland. I watched it, lying on its belly in front of one of the long-resident old curs there, whining and laughing (baring its teeth as dogs do when they are pleased) for all it was worth.

Why? Because it actually was pleased? Because it was delighted to meet a new acquaintance? Far from it. There was every probability that it was extremely nervous and apprehensive about its reception by the other dogs, and was doing its utmost to placate them. But why should it laugh? In order, simply, to show the others and to persuade itself that *no danger was threatening*. Its laughter was a mode of conduct, a kind of charm, to keep danger at a distance. Since we laugh when danger passes, danger passes when we laugh—or that, at least, is the idea. The ingratiating grin that some people wear on their face (perhaps we all do at times) is simply to prove to themselves that they are not nervous—when, of course, they are shaking in their boots. So far, so good.

But why do we laugh at jokes? Let us ask, rather, why we tell one another jokes. Might it not be so that we can enjoy the pleasure of escaping from *imaginary* dangers? Most of our jokes, surely, are about somebody else's misfortune, are they not? So-and-so has some unfortunate, humiliating or ridiculous experience, an experience that *might* have happened to us but *actually* happened to somebody else; and the relief we feel that the discomfort was *his*, not *ours*, takes the form of laughter. (Compassion, of course, may inhibit laughter; but some of our jokes are pretty heartless.)

We laugh, then, when fear passes; we laugh as a charm to make fear pass; and we entertain imaginary fears to make ourselves laugh. Now, according to Kierkegaard we laugh when we apprehend a contradiction. Might it not be that a

contradiction is something to be feared—that it is, in some way, a *threat*?

Heidegger tells us that we normally exist in a state of “falleness.” By this he means that most men hide from themselves by identifying themselves with the anonymous “one” or “they” or “the Others” and people in general. This kind of existence Heidegger calls “in-authenticity”; and it is what Sartre calls “serious-mindedness”. It is the inauthentic, the serious-minded, the solemn, who are your non-laughers. Or rather, they do laugh—but only at what the “they” have decided is funny. (Look at a copy of *Punch* of a hundred, or even fifty, years ago; you will see how completely the fashion in humour has changed. The “sick joke” was quite unthinkable in Victoria’s days—“one” simply did not laugh at that sort of thing, it was “not done.”) The inauthentic, absorbed by the world like ink by a blotter, [27] accept their views and values ready made, and go about their daily business doing whatever “is done.” And this includes their relaxations. To be “serious-minded” is to go to see comic films and laugh at whomever “one laughs at,” and see tragedies and have one’s emotions purged by the currently approved emotional purgative—the latest version, perhaps, of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Now if we agree with Kierkegaard that both comedy and tragedy are ways of apprehending contradictions, and if we also consider how much importance people attach to these things, we shall perhaps suspect that contradiction is a factor to be reckoned with in everyday life. But all this is on

the inauthentic level, and to get more light on the question we must consider what Heidegger means by “authenticity.”

Our existence, says Heidegger, is *care*: we are concerned positively or negatively for ourselves and for others. This care can be described but it cannot be accounted for—it is primordial and we just have to accept it as it is. (Compare here the Buddha’s statement [AN 10:62/A V 116] that there is no first point to *bhavatāñhā*, “craving for being.” The difference is that whereas Heidegger sees no way of getting rid of it, the Buddha *does* see the way and has followed it.) Care, says Heidegger, can be “lived” in either of two modes: authentic or inauthentic. The authentic man faces himself reflexively and sees himself in his existential solitude—he sees that he is *alone* in the world—whereas the inauthentic man takes refuge from this disquieting reflexion of himself in the anonymous security of people-in-general, of the “they.” The inauthentic man is fleeing from authenticity—from *angst*, that is to say, or “anxiety”; for anxiety is the state of the authentic man (remember that Heidegger is describing the *puthujana*, and he sees no way out of anxiety, which, for him, is the mark of the lucid man facing up to himself). But the normally smooth surface of the public world of the “they” sometimes shows cracks, and the inauthentic man is pierced by pangs of anxiety, recalling him for a moment or two to the state of authenticity. Chief amongst these is the apprehension of the possibility of death, which the inauthentic man suddenly realises is *his* possibility (death, of course, is certain: but this simply

means that *at any moment it is possible*). He is torn from his complacent anonymity and brought up against the hard fact that he is an *individual*, that he himself is totally responsible for everything that he does, and that he is sure to die. The hitherto friendly and sheltering world suddenly becomes indifferent to him and meaningless in its totality. But this shattering experience is usually fleeting, and the habitually inauthentic man returns quickly enough to his anonymity.

At this point let us see what the Suttas have to say about *angst* or anxiety (*paritassanā*). In the Alagaddupama Sutta (MN 22/M I 136–7) a monk asks the Buddha, “Can there be anxiety, lord, about objective absence?” The Buddha says that there can be such anxiety, and describes a man grieving about the way his possessions slip away from him. Then the monk asks, “Can there be anxiety, lord, about subjective absence?” and again the Buddha says that there can. In this case we have a *sassatavādin*, holding himself and the world to be eternal, who hears about extinction (nibbāna) and apprehends it as annihilation. These two aspects, objective and subjective, are combined in the Uddesavibhaṅga Sutta (MN 138/M III 227–8), a passage from which I translate as follows:

And how, friends, is there anxiety at not holding? Here, friends, an uninstructed commoner, unseeing of the nobles, ignorant of the noble Teaching, undisciplined in the noble Teaching, unseeing of good men, ignorant of the good men’s Teaching, undisciplined in the good men’s Teaching, regards matter (feeling, perception, determinations,

consciousness) as self, or self as endowed with matter (... consciousness), or matter (... consciousness) as belonging to self, or self as in matter (... consciousness). That matter (... consciousness) of his changes and becomes otherwise; as that matter (...consciousness) changes and becomes otherwise, so his consciousness follows around (keeps track of) that change of matter (... consciousness); anxious ideas that arise born of following around that change of matter (... consciousness) seize upon his mind and become established; with that mental seizure, he is perturbed and disquieted and concerned, and from not holding he is anxious. Thus, friends, there is anxiety at not holding.

This, you will see, fairly well confirms Heidegger's view of anxiety; and the more so when he makes the distinction that, whereas fear is shrinking in the face of something, anxiety is shrinking in the face of—nothing. Precisely. We experience anxiety when we find that the solid foundation upon which our precious and familiar self rests—upon which it *must* rest—is *not there*. Anxiety is shrinking in the face of a contradiction—or rather, not *a* contradiction, but *the* contradiction. *This* is the contradiction that we fear; *this* is the contradiction that threatens us in our innermost being—the agonising possibility that, after all, we have *no* being, and that we *are not*. And *now* we can see why all the seemingly little contradictions at which we laugh (or weep) in our everyday life are really veiled threats, sources of danger. These are the little cracks and fissures in our complacent serious-minded existence, and the reason why

we laugh at them is to keep them at a distance, to charm them, to exorcise them, to neutralise them—just as the young dog at the Hermitage laughed at the older one to ward off danger.

Anxiety—shrinking before nothing—is the father of all particular fears—shrinking before this or that. (Heidegger emphasises that the prior condition to all fear is anxiety. We *can* fear only because we are fleeing from anxiety.) And the contradiction between our *eternal* self and its *temporal* foundation is the father of all particular contradictions between this and that. Whether we laugh because we have just crawled out unscathed from a car smash, or wear a sheepish grin when the boss summons us to his office, or split our sides when we hear how Jones had his wife seduced by Smith, or smile when we see a benevolent tourist giving a few cents out of compassion to an ill-dressed but extremely wealthy *mudhalali*—it can all be traced back to our inherent desire to fly from anxiety, from the agonised recognition that our very being is perpetually in question. And when we laugh at a comedy or weep at a tragedy what we are *really* doing is busying ourselves repairing all the little crevices that have appeared in our familiar world in the course of the day or the week, which, if neglected, might become wider and deeper, and eventually bring our world crashing down in ruins about us. Of course, we don't actually admit to ourselves that this is what we are doing; and the reason is that inauthentic existence is a *degraded* mode of existence, where the true

nature of things is concealed—or rather, *where we conceal the true nature of things from ourselves*. Obviously, the more serious minded one is, the less one will be willing to admit the existence of these cracks and crevices in the surface of the world, and consequently one will take good care not to look too closely—and, of course, since laughter is already a tacit admission of the existence of such things, one will regard all kinds of levity as positively immoral.

Without leaving the sphere of the *puthujana*, let us turn to the habitually authentic man—one who is anxious, and lucid in his anxiety, who keeps perpetually before him (though without being able to resolve it) the essential contradiction in human existence. Once one has accepted anxiety as one's normal and proper state, then one faces the contradiction, and this, *granted* the anxiety, neither as plain tragic nor as plain comic, but as tragi-comic. This, of course, can be put in several ways (you can do it yourself). This is perhaps as good as any: it is tragic that we should take as meaningful a world that is actually meaningless, but comic that the world we take as meaningful should actually be meaningless.

Man is a discrepant combination of the *infinite* and the *finite*. Man, as he looks at himself, sees himself as pathetic (“pathos” in the sense of “passion,” as in “so-and-so is passionately interested in his work”) or as comic, according as he looks towards the eternal or towards the world. The tragicomedy of the human (*puthujana's*) situation as apprehended by the authentic man in his lucid anxiety is

the source of all tragedy and comedy on the purely everyday level. And, whereas the inauthentic man laughs or weeps without knowing why he does so—in other words, *irresponsibly*—the authentic man, when he laughs or weeps, does so *responsibly*. The authentic man, when he laughs at something (it will very often be at the serious-minded man, who is both *very* comic and *very* tragic), will always have the other side of the picture present to mind, as the shadow of his comic apprehension. (And when he weeps, the comic aspect of the situation will be there outlined on the background.) He laughs (and weeps) *with understanding*, and this gives his humour a depth and an ambiguity that escapes the inauthentic man. In consequence of this, the authentic man is able to use his humour as a screen for his more *authentic* seriousness—seriousness, that is to say, about the human, or rather the existentialist paradox (he is looking for the solution and concluding, again and again, that the solution is that there is no solution; and this is the limit of the *puthujana*'s field of vision.) This sort of thing allows the authentic man to indulge in a kind of humour that horrifies and outrages the inauthentic.

It is obvious enough that there can be no progress in the Dhamma for the inauthentic man. The inauthentic man does not even see the problem—all his effort is devoted to hiding from it. The Buddha's Teaching is not for the serious-minded. Before we deal with the problem we must see it, and that means becoming authentic. But now, when we consider your original question about the relation of

humour to the Buddhadhamma, a certain distinction must be made. There is a cardinal difference between the solution to the problem offered by the Buddha and that (or those) offered by other teachings; and this is perhaps best illustrated in the case of Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard sees that the problem—the essential contradiction, *attā hi attano n'atthi* (“He himself is not his own”), Dhp 62—is in the form of a paradox (or, as Marcel would say, a mystery: a problem that encroaches on its own data). And this is quite right as far as it goes. But he does not see how to resolve it. Further, he concludes (as I have suggested above) that, in this temporal life at least, the solution is that there is no solution. This itself is a reduplication of the original paradox, and only seems to make the problem more acute, to work up the tension, to drive man further back into himself. And, not content with this, he seizes upon the essential Christian paradox—that God became man, that the Eternal became temporal—which he himself calls “absurd,” and thus postulates a solution which is, as it were, a kind of paradox cubed, as one might say—(paradox)<sup>3</sup>. But as we have seen, the original paradox is tragi-comical; it contains within its structure, that is to say, a humorous aspect. And when the paradox is intensified, so is the humorous—and a joke raised to the third power is a very tortuous joke indeed. What I am getting at is this: that in every teaching where the paradox is not resolved (and *a fortiori* where it is intensified), *humour is an essential structural feature*. Perhaps the most striking case

is Zen. Zen is above all the cult of the paradox. (“Burn the scriptures!”, “Chop up the Buddha image for firewood!”, “Go listen to the sound of one hand clapping.””), and the old Zen masters are professional religious jokers, sometimes with an appalling sense of humour. And all very gay too—but the Buddha alone teaches the resolution of the original paradox, not by wrapping it up in bigger paradoxes, but by *unwrapping* it.

If humour is, as I have suggested, in some way a reaction to fear, then so long as there remains a trace of the contradiction, of the existential paradox, so long will there remain a trace of humour. But since, essentially, the Buddha’s Teaching is the cessation of fear (or more strictly of anxiety, the condition of fear), so it leads to the subsidence of humour. Not, indeed, that the arahat is humourless in the sense of being serious-minded; far from it; no—it is simply that the *need* he formerly felt for humour has now ceased. And so we find in the Suttas (AN 3:105 / A I 261) that whereas excessive laughter “showing the teeth” is called childishness, a smile when one is rightly pleased is not out of place. Perhaps you may like to see here a distinction between inauthentic and authentic humour.

You ask also about play: Sartre observes that in play—or at least in sport—we set ourselves the task of overcoming obstacles or obeying rules that we arbitrarily impose upon ourselves; and he suggests that this is a kind of anti-serious-mindedness. When we are serious-minded we accept the rules and values imposed upon us by the world, by the

“they”; and when we have fulfilled these obligations we feel the satisfaction of having “done our duty.” In sport it is we who impose the obligations upon ourselves, which enables us to enjoy the satisfaction of fulfilling them, without any of the disadvantages that go along with having to do what “they” expect us to do (for example, we can stop when we are tired—but you just try doing that when you are in the army!). In sport, we play at being *serious*; and this rather suggests that play (sport), like plays (the theatre), is really a way of making repairs in a world that threatens to come apart at the seams. So there probably is some fairly close connection between play and humour. Certainly, we often laugh when we are at play, but I don’t think this applies to such obviously serious-minded activities as Test Matches.

## 29. Laughter and fear (24 May 1965)

Reflecting on what I wrote a few days ago about humour, it occurs to me that I might have brought out certain aspects of what I had to say rather more clearly—in particular the actual relationship between laughter and fear. I think I merely said that laughter is “in some way a reaction to fear.” But this can be defined more precisely. To be “authentic” is to face the existential paradox, the essential contradiction, in a state of lucid anxiety, whereas to be “inauthentic” is to take refuge from this anxiety in the serious mindedness of the anonymous “they.” But the contradiction is tragicomic; and this (I suggested) is the source of all tragedy and comedy in the everyday world. It follows from this that the inauthentic man, in hiding in his

serious-mindedness from the anxiety of contradiction, is actually hiding from the two aspects of existence, the comic and the tragic. From time to time he finds his complacent unseeing seriousness threatened with a contradiction of one kind or another and he *fears*. (The fearful is contradictory, and the contradictory is fearful.)

Pain, of course, is painful whether it is felt by the *puthujjana* or the arahat; but the arahat, though he may avoid it if he can, does not fear pain; so the *fear* of the inauthentic man in the face of physical danger is not simply the thought "there may be pain." No—he fears for his physical existence. And this is the tragic aspect of the contradiction showing itself. And when the threat passes, the contradiction shows its other face and he laughs. But he does not laugh because he *sees* the comic aspect (that may happen later), his laughter *is* the comic aspect (just as his fear is the tragic aspect): in other words, he is not *reacting to* a contradictory situation, he is *living* it. Tragedy and comedy, fear and laughter: the two sides of a contradiction. But he may be faced with other contradictions to which, because they are less urgent, he *is* able to react. He half-grasps the contradiction *as a* contradiction, and then, *according to the way he is oriented* in life, either laughs or weeps: if he finds the tragic aspect threatening he will laugh (to emphasise the comic and keep the tragic at a distance), and if he finds the comic aspect threatening he will weep. (A passionate woman, who finds life empty and meaningless when she is not emotionally engaged in love—or perhaps hate—and fearing the comic as

destructive of her passion, may weep at the very contradiction that provokes laughter in a man who has, perhaps, discovered the ghastly boredom of being loved without loving in return and who regards the comic as his best defence against entanglements.) Laughter, then, is not a so much *reaction* to fear as its *counterpart*.

Another question is that of the *sekha* and anxiety. Granted that he is now fairly confidently authentic, by nature does he still experience anxiety? To some extent, yes; but he has that faculty in himself by means of which, when anxiety arises, he is able to extinguish it. He knows of another escape from anxiety than flight into in-authenticity. He is already leaving behind him both laughter and tears. Here is a passage from SN 22:43/S III 43:

Having come to know, monks, the impermanence, changeability, absence of lust for and ceasing of matter (feeling, perception, determinations, consciousness), and if matter (...consciousness) formerly was as it is now, then all matter (...consciousness) is impermanent, unpleasurable, of a nature to change. Thus seeing as it actually is with right understanding, whatever is the arising of sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair, they are eliminated; these, eliminated, there is no anxiety; not having anxiety he dwells at ease; dwelling at ease, this monk is called extinguished.

### 30 (a). Investigation of laughter (2 June 1965)

Certainly, I quite agree that we often, and perhaps mostly,

laugh when no fear is present. But then (though I may not have made myself clear) I did not really want to maintain that fear *is* always present—indeed, I would say, precisely, that we laugh when fear is *absent*. Whenever we laugh—I think you may agree—there is always some contradiction or absurdity lurking in the situation, though this is not usually *explicit*: we laugh in a carefree way, then we may pause and ask ourselves “Now, why did I laugh then?” and finally we see (if we have some reflexive or introspective facility) that what we laughed at was some incongruity—or more precisely, that our laughter was our mode of apprehending that incongruity. What I had in mind, when I associated laughter with fear, was rather this: that every contradiction is essentially a threat (in one way or another) to my existence (i.e. it shakes my complacency); and that fear and laughter are the two alternative modes in which we apprehend a threat. When the threat is advancing and may reach us, we *fear*; when the threat is receding or at a safe distance, we *laugh*. *We laugh when there is no need to fear.*

Children, as you rightly observe, laugh and laugh; and this—as I see it—is often because the child lives in a world where there are grown-up people, and the function of grown-up people—in a child’s eyes—is to keep threats at a distance. The child is *protected* from threats; he knows that they will not reach him, that there is nothing to fear, and so he laughs. The sea can be a dangerous thing; but if it is calm, or there is a grown-up about the place, the child can splash about and *play* with this danger because it is merely

potential. He pits his puny strength against the vast might of the ocean; and this is a contradiction (or incongruity), which he can apprehend in one of two ways, fear or laughter. If the ocean has the upper hand, he fears, but if he is getting the best of it (he plunges into the sea and emerges unharmed, he splashes, he kicks it, and the sea does not resent it) then he laughs: his laughter shows that “there is nothing to fear,” that fear is absent. But it does *not* show that fear is non-existent; merely that it is not there *today*.

You ask, rhetorically, if superiority feelings, “self” feelings, are not at the root of all guilt complexes. Certainly they are. But with guilt goes anxiety (we are superior—or we just “are”—and we are unable, to justify our superiority, our existence, and so we are anxious. Pride goes before a fall—and this is true right back as far as *asmimāna*, the conceit “I am”). And anxiety is anxiety before the essential contradiction, which shows its un-funny aspect. So, as you say, our feeling of superiority inhibits laughter. But it does not necessarily follow that when we lose the superiority we shall laugh along with everybody else. A practised yogin, certainly, particularly if he has been doing *karuṇā* (compassion) is not in the least superior; but it may well be that, by his practice, he has put fear so far from him that he has lost the urge to laugh.

How far our investigation of humour tends to destroy it in the act of investigating it (like atomic physicists when they “observe” an electron), depends principally upon the method used. If we adopt the scientific attitude of

“complete objectivity”—actually an impossibility—then we kill it dead, for there is nobody left to laugh. This leads to the idea that jokes are funny in themselves—that they have an intrinsic quality of funniness that can be analysed and written about in a deadly serious manner. The other way is to watch ourselves as we laugh, in a reflexive effort, and then to *describe* the experience. This is the phenomenological (or existential) method of “going direct to the things themselves.” Of course, this needs practice; and also it *does* modify the original humour (for example, it tends to bring into view the tacit pathetic background, which is normally hidden when we laugh in the immediate, or inauthentic, mode). Nevertheless, the humour, though modified, is still there, and something useful *can* be said about it—though what is said will be very unlike what is said by the serious-minded university professor who writes his two scholarly volumes. Kierkegaard is insistent upon the principle, *Quidquid cognoscitur, per modum cognoscentis conosciatur*, “Whatever is known is known in the mode of the knower”; and he would say that a serious-minded person is inherently incapable of knowing anything of humour. If we are going to find out what is funny in this or that joke, we must allow ourselves to be amused by it and, while still amused, *describe* our amusement:

### 30 (b). Existentialist Idiom and Sutta idiom (2 June 1965 (contd.))

Yes, the existentialist idiom is difficult, until you get the feel of it. The difficulty arises from the phenomenological

method that I have just been talking about. The scientist (or scholar) becomes “objective,” puts himself right out of the picture (Kierkegaard is at his best when he describes this “absent-minded” operation), and concerns himself only with *abstract facts*; the existentialist remains “subjective” (not in the derogatory sense of being irresponsible), keeps himself in the picture, and describes *concrete things* (that is, things in relation to himself as he experiences them). This radical difference in method, naturally enough, is reflected in the kind of language used by the scientist on the one hand and the existentialist on the other—or rather, in the difference in the way they make use of language. I was struck, when I first read Sartre, by the strange sort of resemblance between certain of his expressions and some of the things said in the Suttas. Sartre, for example, has this:

...we defined the senses and the sense-organs in general as our being-in-the-world in so far as we have to be it in the form of being-in-the-midst-of-the-world.  
*(Being and Nothingness p. 325)*

In the Suttas (e.g. SN 35:116/S IV 95) we find:

The eye (ear, nose, tongue, body, mind) is that in the world by which one is a perceiver and conceiver of the world.

Now whatever the respective meanings of these two utterances [28] it is quite clear that despite the twenty-five hundred years that separate them, Sartre’s sentence is closer in *manner* of expression (as well as in content) to the Sutta

passage than it is to anything produced by a contemporary neuro-physiologist supposedly dealing with precisely the same subject—our sense organs and perception of the world. This remarkable similarity does not oblige us to conclude that Sartre has reached enlightenment, but simply that if we want to understand the Suttas the phenomenological approach is more promising than the objective scientific approach.

Although the existentialist philosophers may seem close to the Buddha's Teaching, I don't think it necessarily follows that they would accept it were they to study it. Some might, some might not. But what often happens is that after years of hard thinking, they come to feel that they, have found the solution (even if the solution is that there is none), and they lie back resting on their reputation, or launch themselves into other activities (Marcel has become a Catholic, Sartre is politically active); and so they may feel disinclined to re-open an inquiry that they have already closed to their satisfaction (or dissatisfaction, as the case may be). Besides, it is not so a easy to induce them to take up a study of the Dhamma. Even translations of the Suttas are not always adequate, and anyway, they don't practise *samatha bhāvanā*.

I don't want to be dogmatic about the value of a familiarity with the existential doctrines; that is, for an understanding of the Dhamma. Of course, if one has a living teacher who has himself attained (and ideally, of course, the Buddha himself), then the essence of the Teaching can sometimes be conveyed in a few words. But if, as will be the case today,

one has no such teacher, then one has to work out for oneself what the Suttas are getting at. And here, an acquaintance with some of these doctrines can be—and, in my case, has been—very useful. But the danger is, that one may adhere to one or other of these philosophers and fail to go beyond to the Buddha. This, certainly, is a very real risk—but the question is, is it a justifiable risk?

You say, “Questions that strike a Sartre or a Kierkegaard as obvious, urgent, and baffling may not have ever occurred to Bāhiya Dārucīriya.” I am not so sure. I agree that a number of “uneducated” people appear, in the Suttas, to have reached extinction. But I am not so sure that I would call them “simple.” You suggest that Bāhiya may not have been a very complex person and that a previous “Sartre” phase may not have been essential for him. Again I don’t want to be dogmatic, but it seems to me that your portrait of him is oversimplified. Your quotation of the brief instruction that the Buddha gave Bāhiya is quite in order as far as it goes; but—inadvertently, no doubt—you have only given part of it. Here is the passage in full (Udāna 10: 8):

Then, Bāhiya, you should train thus: “In the seen there shall be just the seen; in the heard there shall be just the heard; in the sensed there shall be just the sensed; in the cognized there shall be just the cognized”—thus, Bāhiya, should you train yourself. When, Bāhiya, for you, in the seen there shall be just the seen... cognized, then, Bāhiya, you (will) not (be) that by which (*tvaṁ na tena*); when, Bāhiya, you (shall) not (be) that by which, then, Bāhiya, you (shall) not (be) in that

place (*tvam na tattha*); when, Bāhiya, you (shall) not (be) in that place, then, Bāhiya, you (will) neither (be) here nor yonder nor between the two: just this is the end of suffering.

This is a highly condensed statement, and for him simple. It is quite as tough a passage as anything you will find in Sartre. And, in fact, it is clearly enough connected with the passage that I have already quoted alongside a passage from Sartre: “The eye (etc.) is that *in the world by which* one is a perceiver and conceiver of the world.”

Let us now try, with the help of Heidegger’s indications, to tie up these two Sutta passages. [29]

(i) To begin with, “I—here” is I as identical with my senses; “here,” therefore refers to my sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and also mind). The counterpart of “here” is “yonder,” which refers to the various things in the world as sense-objects. “Between the two” will then refer (though Heidegger makes no mention of this) to consciousness, contact, feeling, and so on, as being dependent upon sense organ and sense object—“Dependent upon eye and visible forms, eye-consciousness arises; the coming together of these three is contact; with contact as condition, feeling,” etc. (SN 35:107/S IV 87)

(ii) In the second place Heidegger says that “here” and “yonder” are possible only in a “there”; in other words, that sense-organs and sense-objects, which are “amidst-the-world,” in Sartre’s phrase, are possible only if there *is* a world for them to be “amidst.” “There,” then, refers to the

world. So the “here and yonder” and the “there” of the Bāhiya Sutta correspond in the other Sutta to the “eye (and so on)” as “that in the world....”

(iii) But Heidegger goes on to say that there is a “there” only if there is an entity that has made a disclosure of spatiality as the being of the “there”; and that being-there’s existential spatiality is grounded in being-in-the-world. This simply means that, in the very act of *being*, I disclose a spatial world: my being is always in the form of a spatial being-there. (In spite of the Hindus and Hegel, there is no such thing as “pure being.” All being is limited and particularised—if I *am* at all, I am in a spatial world.) In brief, there is only a “there,” a spatial world (for senses and objects to be “amidst”), if *I am there*. Only so long as *I am there* shall I be “in the form of being-amidst-the-world”—i.e. as sense-organs (“here”) surrounded by sense-objects (“yonder”).

(iv) But on what does this “I am there” depend? “I am there” means “I am in the world”; and I am “in the world” in the form of senses (as eye... mind). And Heidegger tells us that the “here” (i.e. the senses) is always understood in relation to a “yonder” ready-to-hand, i.e. something that is *for* some purpose (of mine). I, as my senses, “am towards” this “yonder”; I am “a being that is de-severant, directional, and concerned.” I won’t trouble you with details here, but what Heidegger means by this is *more or less* what the Venerable Ānanda Thera means when he said that “The eye (and so on) is that... by which one is a perceiver and a

conceiver of the world." In other words, not only am *I in the world*, but I am *also*, as my senses, that *by which* there is a world in which I am. "I am there" *because* "I am that by which there is an I-am-there"; and consequently, when "I shall not be that by which," then "I shall not be there." And when "I shall not be there," then "I shall neither be here nor yonder nor between the two."

(v) And *when* shall we "not be that by which"? This, Heidegger is not able to tell us. But the Buddha tells us: it is when, for us, in the seen there shall be just the seen, and so with the heard, the sensed, and the cognized. And when in the seen is there just the seen? When the seen is no longer seen as "mine" (*etam mama*) or as "I" (*eso'ham asmi*) or as "my self" (*eso me atta*): in brief, when there is no longer, in connection with the senses, the conceit "I am," *by which* "I am a conceiver of the world."

So, although it would certainly be going too far to suggest that Bāhiya had already undergone a course of existentialist philosophy, the fact remains that he was capable of understanding at once a statement that says more, and says it more briefly, than the nearest comparable statement either in Heidegger or Sartre. Bāhiya, I allow, may not have been a cultured or sophisticated man-of-the-world; but I see him as a very subtle thinker. Authenticity may be the answer, as you suggest; but an authentic man is not a *simple* person—he is *self-transparent* if you like, which is quite another matter.

## 31. Who judges? And with what as standard? (2 July 1965)

About your query—the “Q.E.D.” at the end gives it rather a rhetorical air, and it looks as if it might have been aimed at me as a knockout punch. Let me see if there is anything left for me to say.

**Query:** If all things are adjudged as characterised by *dukkha*, who does the judging? And with reference to what criterion or norm? A *subject* (immortal soul) with reference to an objective *sukha*, no? Q.E.D.

You ask “Who does the judging?” This question takes for granted that judging is done “by somebody.” But this is by no means a foregone conclusion: we are quite able to give an account of judgement (or knowing) without finding ourselves obliged to set it up as “a relation between subject and object.” Knowledge is essentially an *act of reflexion*, in which the “thing” to be known presents itself (is presented) *explicitly* as standing out against a background (or in a context) that was already there implicitly. In reflexion, a (limited) totality is given, consisting of a centre and a periphery—a particular cow appears surrounded by a number of cattle, and there is the judgement, “The cow is in the herd.” Certainly, there is an *intention* to judge, and this consists in the deliberate withdrawal of attention from the immediate level of experience to the reflexive; but the question is not whether judgement is an intentional action (which it is), but whether there can be intention (even

reflexive intention) without a subject ("I", "myself") who intends. This, however, is not so much a matter of argument as something that has to be seen for oneself.

Of course, since knowledge is very commonly (Heidegger adds "and superficially") defined in terms of "a relation between subject and object," the question of the subject cannot simply be brushed aside—no smoke without fire—and we have to see (at least briefly) why it is so defined. Both Heidegger and Sartre follow Kant in saying that, properly speaking, there is no knowledge other than intuitive; and I agree. But what is intuition? From a *puthujjana*'s point of view, it can be described as immediate contact between subject and object, between "self" and the "world." This, however, is not yet knowledge, for which a reflexive reduplication is needed; but when there is this reflexive reduplication we then have intuitive knowledge, which is (still for the *puthujjana*) immediate contact between *knowing* subject and *known* object. With the arahat, however, all question of subjectivity has subsided, and we are left simply with (the presence of) the *known thing*. (It is *present*, but no longer present "to somebody.") So much for judgement in general.

But now you say, "If all things are characterised by *dukkha*..." This needs careful qualification. In the first place, the universal *dukkha* you refer to here is obviously not the *dukkha* of rheumatism or a toothache, which is by no means universal. It is, rather, the *saṅkhāra-dukkha* (the unpleasure or suffering connected with determinations) of this Sutta

passage:

There are, monks, three feelings stated by me: sukha feeling, dukkha feeling, neither-dukkha-nor-sukha feeling. These three feelings have been stated by me. But this, monk, has been stated by me: whatever is felt, that counts as dukkha. But that, monk, was said by me with reference just to the impermanence of determinations.... (SN 36:11/S IV 216)

But what is this *dukkha* that is bound up with impermanence? It is the *implicit* taking as pleasantly-permanent (perhaps “eternal” would be better) of what actually is impermanent. And things are implicitly taken as pleasantly-permanent (or eternal) when they are taken (in one way or another) as “I” or “mine” (since, as you rightly imply, ideas of subjectivity are associated with ideas of immortality). And the *puthujjana* takes *all* things in this way. So, for the *puthujjana*, all things are (*saṅkhāra-*) *dukkha*. How then—and this seems to be the crux of your argument—how then does the *puthujjana* see or know (or adjudge) that “all things are *dukkha*” unless there is some *background* (or criterion or norm) of *non-dukkha* (i.e. of *sukha*) *against* which all things stand out as *dukkha*? The answer is quite simple: he does *not* see or know (or adjudge) that “all things are *dukkha*.” The *puthujjana* has *no* criterion or norm for making any such judgement, and so he does not make it. The *puthujjana*’s experience is (*saṅkhāra-*) *dukkha* from top to bottom, and the consequence is that he has no way of knowing *dukkha* for himself; for however much he “steps

back” from himself in a reflexive effort he still takes *dukkha* with him. The whole point is that the *puthujjana*’s non-knowledge of *dukkha* is the *dukkha* that he has non-knowledge of; [30] and this *dukkha* that is at the same time non-knowledge of *dukkha* is the *puthujjana*’s (mistaken) acceptance of what seems to be a “self” or “subject” or “ego” at its face value (as *nicca/sukha/attā*, permanent/pleasant/self).

And how, then, does knowledge of *dukkha* come about? How it is with a Buddha I can’t say (though it seems from the Suttas to be a matter of prodigiously intelligent trial-by-error over a long period); but in others it comes about by their hearing (as *puthujjanas*) the Buddha’s Teaching, which goes *against* their whole way of thinking. They accept out of trust (*saddhā*) this teaching of *anicca/dukkha/anattā*; and it is *this* that, being accepted, becomes the criterion or norm with reference to which they eventually come to see for themselves that all things are *dukkha*—for the *puthujjana*. But in seeing this they cease to be *puthujjanas* and, to the extent that they cease to be *puthujjanas*, [31] to that extent *saṅkhāra-dukkha* ceases, and to that extent also they have in all their experience a “built-in” criterion or norm by reference to which they make further progress. (The *sekha*—no longer a *puthujjana* but not yet an arahat—has a kind of “double vision,” one part unregenerate, the other regenerate.) As soon as one becomes a *sotāpanna* one is possessed of *aparapaccaya-ñānam* or “knowledge that does not depend upon anyone else”; this knowledge is also said to be “not

shared by *puthujjanas*,” and the man who has it has (except for accelerating his progress) no further need to hear the Teaching—in a sense he *is* (in part) that Teaching.

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## Pali-English Glossary

*anāgāmitā*—non-returning

*ānāpānasati*—mindfulness of breathing

*anattā*—not-self

*aññā*—the arahat’s knowledge

*arahat*—one who is worthy (usually untranslated)

*arahatta*—worthiness

*ariyapuggala*—noble individual

*ariyasāvaka*—noble disciple

*asmimāna*—the conceit “I am”

*attā*—Self

*avidyā* (Sanskrit)—ignorance

*avijjā*—nescience; ignorance

*bhavataṇhā*—craving for being

*bhikkhu*—monk

*bhikkhunī*—nun

*deva*—deity

*dibbacakkhu*—divine eye

*ditṭhipatta*—attained through view

*dukkha*—suffering, unpleasure

*iddhi*—accomplishment; power (usu. supernormal)

*jhāna*—meditation (more specifically, four levels of meditation attainable (by an accomplished meditator)

*kāmatanhā*—craving for sensuality

*kamma*—action

*karuṇā*—compassion

*kāyasakkhi*—body-witness

*maithuna* (Sanskrit)—sex

*māna*—conceit

*māyā*—(Sanskrit)—illusion

*mettā*—friendliness

*mudhalali*—(Sinhalese)—shopkeeper

*nibbāna*—extinction

*nicca*—permanent

*nirodhasamāpatti*—attainment of cessation (of perception and

feeling); an attainment available to certain arahats and anāgāmins

*paññā*—understanding parinibbāna—complete extinction

*paritassanā*—anxiety

*prakriti*—(Sanskrit)—nature

*purusha*—(Sanskrit)—the person

*puthujjana*—commoner; an unenlightened person

*saddhā*—faith; trust

*saddhāvimutta*—released through faith

*sakadāgāmita*—once-returning

*sakkāyaditṭhi*—personality-view (the view that there is a self to be found)

*samādhi*—concentration

*samatha*—calmness; mental concentration

*samathabhāvanā*—development of calmness

*samsāra*—running on (from existence to existence)

*saṅkhāra*- determination

*sāsana*—advice; usu. used today in the sense of “the Buddha’s Dispensation”

*sassatavādin*—one who holds that self and the world are eternal; opposed to the *ucchedavādin*, who holds that both are non-eternal

*sati*—mindfulness

*satisampajañña*—mindfulness-and-awareness

*sekha*—trainee; one in training (to become an arahat)

*shakti* (Sanskrit)—power

*sotāpanna*—stream-attainer

*sotāpatti*—attaining of the stream

*sukha*—pleasure

*tanha*—craving

*upekkha*—indifference

*yoni*—vagina

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## Notes

1. *The Doctrine of Awakening*, by J. Evola (Luzane, 1951).
2. *Clearing the Path: Writings of Nāṇavīra Thera* (Colombo: Path Press, 1987).
3. The essay “Mindfulness and Awareness”—also originally a letter and included in *Clearing the Path*—was first published by the BPS as a Bodhi Leaf (**BL 60**).

4. *Thera* (elder) is a monastic honorific appended to one's name upon completion of ten years as a bhikkhu (monk).
5. Nichols is prolific. The book discussing opium addiction has not been identified; but in a later book, *Father Figure*, he discusses the instant cure of his father from lifelong alcoholism, albeit not by "faith in God" but rather through "loss of faith in inheritance."
6. Dr. Helmut Klar is a well-known German Buddhist. The test described here sounds like the Lüscher Color Test, popularized in the 1970's by a paperback book of that title.
7. The Hermitage is the Island Hermitage, Dodanduwa, Sri Lanka, where both the Ven. Nāṇamoli and the Ven. Nāṇavīra lived for many years.
8. In Persia, evidently, opium is the religion of the masses.
9. The rationalist, who would not for a moment dream of practising the Buddha's Teaching, can *never* understand that this is anything else than a glimpse of the obvious. Arthur Koestler, on first meeting the Buddha's Teaching, exclaimed "But it's all tautologous, for Heaven's sake!"
10. Below this point, though the essential structure of addiction remains the same, it is no longer possible to get an outside view of it by voluntary effort. In other words, one cannot give up *sakkāyaditṭhi* (and become a *sotāpanna*) as simply as one can give up tobacco, merely by deciding to do so and sticking to the decision. Indeed, it is so

difficult that it takes a Buddha to find out about it and tell others.

- 11.** Edmund Husserl was the founder of the phenomenological school in the early years of this century. This school has been very influential on the European continent, though less well-known in English-speaking countries. Husserl's article "Phenomenology" in the 14th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was praised by Ven. Nāṇavīra as a lucid summary of its methodology. Among Husserl's well-known disciples were Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre; hence phenomenology and existentialism are frequently linked.
- 12.** Heidegger's major work is translated into English as *Being and Time*; Sartre's is *Being and Nothingness*. Because the Ven. Nāṇavīra read French but not German the latter book had a greater influence upon him; but when the former book was eventually translated and a copy reached him, he remarked that where the two disagreed, it was generally Heidegger who was in the right.
- 13.** The book being discussed is The *Doors of Perception & Heaven and Hell*. Huxley had a strong influence on the Ven. Nāṇavīra in his youth; later their views diverged considerably.
- 14.** Identity—"A is A;" Contradiction—"A is not both B and not B;" Excluded Middle—"A is either B or not B."
- 15.** The Huxley article was a newspaper clipping the

correspondent had passed on to the Ven. author.

16. Some philosophers take advantage of this situation: they develop their system as far as possible, carefully avoiding self-contradictions; but when they encounter one that they cannot explain, instead of confessing defeat they proudly declare that they have proved the existence of God.
17. Cf. AN 7 55/A IV 83.
18. The *Middle Way* is the journal of the Buddhist Society of Great Britain.
19. "...the Buddha saw something that did not change, over against *prakriti* he saw *puruṣa* though he would not have formulated it thus." And again, "Moreover the Hindus, overwhelmingly, and the Buddhists when they are off their guard, speak of this eternal being as the 'self'...."
20. There is one text (at least) that directly opposes the idea that *nibbāna* (extinction) is *attā* (self).
21. In the Suttas, the Buddha and others continue for a week at a time "without changing their sitting position," and this is, to me, perfectly credible.
22. *Absolu et Choix* was published by Presses Universitaires de France in 1961. The quotation was sent in French. The translation used here is provided by the editor, from pp. 53-55 of Grenier's book. The Prajñāpāramitā quotation was also sent in French, and would seem to be quoted

from an essay, “Le Bouddhisme d’après les Textes pālis,” by Solange Bernard-Thierry on p. 608 of *Présence du Bouddhisme*, the Feb.-June 1959 issue of the journal *France Asie*, published in Saigon. The quotation seems to be from one of the more recent strata of the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra. The English translation is by the editor.

23. *Saṅkapparāgo purisassa kāmo Na te kāmā yāni citrāni loke  
Saṅkapparāgo purisassa kāmo Titthanti citrāni tath'eva loke  
Ath'ettha dhīrā vinayanti chandam.*
24. The article was entitled “Bread Before Books.”
25. I.e., is afflicted or breaks up—the phrase *ruppatī ti rūpam* is untranslatable into English. {long ‘i’}
26. See letter 19.
27. Cf. the Khajjaniya Sutta (SN 22:79/S III 87–8) where it is said that we are normally “devoured” by matter, feeling, perception, determinations, and consciousness.
28. Where the Sutta says “the eye is that in the world...,” Sartre says that we (as our sense-organs) are “amidst-the-world”; and where the Sutta says “one is a perceiver and conceiver of the world,” Sartre speaks of “our being-in-the-world.”
29. Part of the letter not included among these selections includes a discussion of *Being and Time*,\* pp. 169-172, particularly of a passage on page 171:

The entity which is essentially constituted by Being-in-the-

world is itself in every case its ‘there’. According to the familiar signification of the word, the ‘there’ points to a ‘here’ and a ‘yonder’. The ‘here’ of an ‘I—here’ is always understood in relation to a ‘yonder’ ready-to-hand, in the sense of a Being towards this ‘yonder’—a Being which is severant, directional, and concerned. Dasein’s existential spatiality, which thus determines its ‘location’, is itself grounded in Being-in-the-world. The “yonder” belongs definitely to something encountered within-the-world. ‘Here’ and ‘yonder’ are possible only in a ‘there’—that is to say, only if there is an entity which has made a disclosure of spatiality as the Being of the ‘there.’ This entity carries in its ownmost Being the character of not being closed off. In the expression ‘there’ we have in view this essential disclosedness. By reason of this disclosedness, this entity (Dasein), together with the Being-there of the world, is ‘there’ for itself.

(\* *Being and Time*, a translation by J. Macquarrie and E. S. Robinson of *Sein und Zeit*, by Martin Heidegger (London: SCM Press, 1982; New York: Harper and Row, 1962).)

30. In one Sutta (MN 44/M I 303) it is said that neither-*dukkha-nor-sukha* feeling (i.e. in itself neutral) is *dukkha* when not known and *sukha* when known.
31. Strictly, only those are *puthujjanas* who are wholly *puthujjanas*, who have nothing of the arahat at all in them. But on ceasing to be a *puthujjana* one is not at once an arahat; and we can perhaps describe the intermediate

(three) stages as partly one and partly the other: thus the *sotāpanna* would be three-quarters *puthujjana* and one-quarter arahat

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