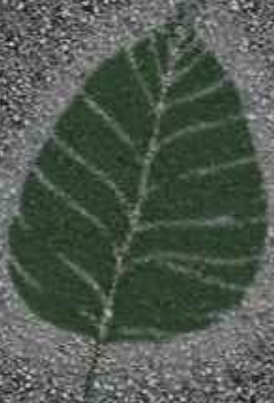
Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 49

Samsara & The Way of Dispassion

Two Essays by Francis Story



BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

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Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka

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Saṃsāra

In Buddhism *saṃsāra* means literally "revolving in the cycle of rebirth." This cycle of rebirth ranges over the whole of the manifested universe, comprising thirty one abodes of beings with the various forms and degrees of consciousness appropriate to their condition. Technically it is not associated either with *rūpa* (form) or *arūpa* (formlessness) since it includes both conditions. Therefore its material factors are not an essential part of saṃsāra; it does not mean either the world, or the physical universe, as those terms are commonly understood. They are terms relating to a part or aspect of saṃsāra but are not synonymous with it.

Saṃsāra is a condition; but a "condition" ordinarily implies a "something" which is subject to the condition, and which can assume fresh conditions from time to time. The philosopher Bergson maintained that change is the only reality, and this agrees so closely with the Buddhist view of the spatial and temporal universe that we can take it as our first definition of saṃsāra. The only reality of saṃsāra, then, is change—the state of impermanence (*anicca*). There is, let us say, a reality of change which

corresponds to the relative reality of the universe considered from the standpoint of conventional truth (*sammuti sacca*). On this level we deal with things as they appear to us in association with other things. If we try to isolate any particular object from its surroundings we find that we cannot do so. There is nothing that can be predicted about the object except in relation to other objects or ideas in the context of which it has its existence. If we say, for instance, that the object is square, we are dealing with its shape in relation to other shapes known to us. If we say that it is hard we are comparing its tactile effect with that of other objects which are softer. If we say that it is green we are contrasting its colour with that of other objects which produce a different sensation in our visual consciousness. The whole of our knowledge of the object is, is this sense, subjective. We can never know the object itself, but only its reflection in our own consciousness through the six doors of sensory cognition.

Can we be certain, then, that there is any object in reality? If there is, it must be a thing distinct from our knowledge of it. But we can find no proof of the existence of such a thing. A man who is red-green colour blind will see our green object the same colour as a red one. Now, supposing the green object we are examining is a leaf. In course of time the green leaf

withers and becomes red. In the process its shape, texture, colour and other qualities will undergo transformation, yet we call it the same leaf although we cannot find any factor of identity between the red, withered leaf and the green, fresh one. In other words, we cannot find an object called a "leaf" which has changed; all we can discover is the process of change.

This can be applied to all the phenomena of the universe, not excepting human personality. There is the process of change, but no "thing" that changes. This is the Buddhist concept of *anattā*; but it was also noted by Plato, who pointed out that we cannot have any certain knowledge of qualities which are fluctuating and relative, because the thing which possesses those qualities cannot truly be said to be anything at all, since it is always half-way on the road to becoming something else. Plato was compelled to take the Buddhist view that the familiar world must be regarded as a world of becoming, rather than as a world of being, since it never truly is anything at all. He therefore concluded, in complete agreement with Buddhism, so far as he went, that we cannot have certain knowledge of the familiar world which is manifested to us through our sense-experience, precisely because that world is not wholly real. In Buddhism there is no word corresponding to "existence;" the Pali word *bhava* means "becoming,"

not “being.”

Plato was driven to the desperate expedient of splitting his concept of the universe into two aspects, transcendence and immanence. These, in Platonic philosophy, divided the universe into two halves, between which it is impossible to establish any connection. Plato could not define in what way the real was related to the unreal, which is not surprising, since by its very nature the real cannot be related to anything. In the same way, the Vedantic idea of the *paramātman*, the eternal, unchanging soul of things, cannot be in any way connected with the phenomenal attributes of human personality such as body, mind, character, disposition, emotions and other psychic factors. It is clear that if there were any such eternal, unchanging soul, it would bear no relationship whatever to the impermanent, ever-changing human personality. It is therefore vain to imagine that this phenomenal ego possesses a soul-factor which identifies it with the paramātman. The phenomenal ego, just like the leaf or any other object of the familiar world, is *anattā* —devoid of any essential being or reality. What we call the “leaf” is a causal process of change, but no “thing” that changes.

“The world is imperfect; it is, indeed, shot through with evil and suffering. Moreover, being filled with change and decay, it cannot, as Plato insists, be wholly

real." Thus writes Prof. C. E. M. Joad in his book, *Philosophy* (English Universities Press). Here is the doctrine of anicca, *dukkha* and anattā coming from one who, on his own statement, had never studied Indian philosophy. Now, saṃsāra is known by these three qualities: impermanence, suffering and absence of essential reality. They are qualities, but like the process of change we have been examining, they are qualities without any substratum of a "thing" to possess them. Just as there is change, but nothing that changes, so there are these qualities without any "thing" to support them.

Idealism claims that there is no existence of the phenomenal world whatever, but that it is solely an idea. Materialism maintains that the material world is the only reality, and that mind and consciousness, discrimination and volition are only its by-products. Both theories involve the same contradiction as Plato's doctrine of transcendence and immanence, in that each ignores the gulf it creates between the known world and the world of reality. Materialism cannot be true because we have already seen that there is by definition nothing essentially real in physical phenomena or material substance. Idealism equally cannot be true because it ignores the fact of a common standard of agreement concerning knowledge of the universe. If Berkleyan idealism were true it would

mean that each individual lives, like a lunatic, in a world of his own mental creation with his own laws, and there would be no basis of agreement between one man's view of it and that of another. Idealism attempts to overcome this difficulty by holding that the existence of other individuals is itself only an idea; in other words, that when we take leave of our friend and he goes out of our sight and hearing he ceases to exist. But we know that he continues to exist independently of our knowledge of him, because when we next meet him he can tell us all that happened to him in the time between. If he ceased to exist when we parted we should have to assume that we too ceased to exist the moment we were outside his field of cognition; but we know very well that we continued to exist and that our current of experience, like his, carried on in the interim.

Buddhist philosophy avoids these two extremes of idealism and materialism, though it leans, if anything, towards the idealist position. The Buddhist position is anti-substantialist; there is no eternal self-existing matter. Similarly there is no eternal self-existing quiescent substance known as mind, having a prior existence, which is merely stimulated into activity when brought into contact with the sense objects by means of the sense organs. Mind, according to Theravada doctrine, is rather a product brought into

being by the interaction of the *indriya* and *visaya* (the psychic faculties and their range of activity). The word *mano* (mind) is derived from the root *ma*, to measure. It therefore signifies the act of calculating, evaluating and judging. Technically it may be rendered "reason"; but it can also mean simply "mind" in the same sense as *citta*. The Mahāyānists, however, who maintain that the whole universe is but the creation of mind, and that nothing exists outside the mind, [1] use in this connection the word citta, not mano. Occasionally the word *viññāṇa* is used in place of citta.

The three principal schools of Buddhist thought from which all the later sections developed were the Stḥaviravādins (Theravādins), Madhyamikas and Yogacarins. The first believed in the existence of the external world and its constituent parts, the *dhammas*. The second categorically denied the existence of the world and the dhammas, and did not even trouble to classify the dhammas. This school came nearest to Berkleyan idealism. The third believed that the universe, though an eject or reflection of the consciousness, has yet a relative existence and that, in fact, the dhammas are but stages of the mind's unfolding.

It is this last school which most successfully avoids the pitfalls of the extremes, and which comes most into line with present day knowledge of the universe.

The dhammas, primary elements of the familiar world, exist independently of our knowledge of them, yet the energy that sustains them through the four stages of arising, maturing, decay and disappearance is a mental force, and their existence is only transitory and relative. Thus, the object of the familiar world which we recognise by sense-cognition may not necessarily bear any relationship to the external series of events which produces the impression in our consciousness; yet, nevertheless, the series of events is actually taking place. There is, in fact, a discrete and logically connected sequence of such events taking place all the time in the spatial-temporal complex of saṃsāra.

Sammuti sacca, relative truth, as opposed to *paramattha* s*acca*, ultimate truth, has its basis in *avijjā*, or nescience. In the sense of sammuti sacca the universe, as the Sthaviravādins claimed, is real; in the sense of paramattha sacca it has no existence whatever, and the Madhyamikas are right. To get a full grasp of truth, both these standpoints have to be taken into account, for both are "one" on their own level. Where all are in agreement is that thought and volitional action are the cause of the arising of the dhammas both as units and as aggregates. The qualities are present though they may be interpreted differently by individuals, and there is a common level

of relative consciousness on which they compose a logical pattern. But neither philosophy nor science can lift human consciousness out of the network of saṃsāra to be able to view that pattern as a whole and understand its origin. Buddhism frankly admits that this can only be achieved through meditative insight; it makes no claim that ultimate truth can be discovered by dialectics.

For ages philosophers have disputed among themselves concerning the nature of the universe without coming to any conclusion. The Greeks had philosophy, but did not know what to do with it; their transcendental speculations always remained a rather uncomfortable appendage to their real religion, which was a warm and sensuous love of life itself. The scholiasts of the Middle Ages wrangled about theological points that today only raise a smile. And if it should seem that the Buddhist concept of sammuti sacca and paramattha sacca is only another way of expressing Plato's idea of transcendence and immanence, carrying with it the same difficulties and objections, the answer is that in Buddhism philosophy is only an intellectual exercise, a game with logical rules played out in the sphere of relative truth. Buddhism shows a higher way towards realisation: the way of direct insight, free from the fetters of conceptual thinking. Buddhist philosophy analyses

the components of the phenomenal universe very precisely, and in accordance with methods used by the best minds throughout the ages; but it does not pretend that this method will do anything more than exhibit the transitory, painful and illusory nature of saṃsāra. "This," says Buddhist philosophy in effect, "is saṃsāra, the round of existences created by ignorance. It is relatively true, but to discover that which is absolutely true, the *asaṅkhata dhammā*, you have to destroy the relativities of thought and speculation, and the only way to do so is by training the mind, tranquilising its restlessness and putting an end to its cravings."

The Way of Dispassion

Gautama Buddha, the Lord of compassion, incomparable Teacher of gods and men, praised and exalted the holy life of purity, and commended the virtuous disciples who practised self-renunciation. In many ways he showed his mercy to the world, setting forth the noble doctrine of emancipation, so that all

beings, hearing his gentle voice, were uplifted and inspired. Himself the greatest exponent of renunciation, who through many births had perfected the Ten Pāramis of a Bodhisatta, he gave the fruits of his virtue freely and ungrudgingly to the world, and taught the Truth for the welfare of all.

When he descended from the Tusita Heaven into his mother's womb for the last birth, he came into a world sunk in the threefold misery of *lobha, dosa* and *moha*. Then, as now, men harboured in their hearts delusion and hatred; they were led away by wild and inordinate cravings, and under their influence perpetrated deeds of cruelty and violence towards one another. They held in light esteem the claims of others to justice and benevolence, and thought only of their own material advantage. Their minds were aflame with craving, and passion was the arbiter of their lives.

Nowhere could they find happiness, for the satisfaction they sought could never be attained in a life governed by the three characteristics of anicca, dukkha and anatta. Yet they desperately strove to make their pleasures permanent, thinking that by repeating the momentary sensation over and over again, or by pursuing fresh experiences when the old ones grew stale, they could live perpetually in the enjoyment of the senses.

But rich or poor, strong or feeble, they were subject to the infirmity of the flesh, to sickness, old age and death; and the delights they hankered after, and for the sake of which, they brought ruin upon themselves, became as nothing, swallowed up in the jaws of time, the destroyer of all compounded things.

Then came the Buddha, proclaiming:

> Passion and hatred arise from the self:
> Evil thought, delight and horror also arise therefrom.
> Arising, they torment (the mind) as boys (torment) a crow.
>
> Suciloma Sutta

The Enlightened One perceived that the self was the cradle of all the passions, and it could only be by surrender of that false, deceptive ego that peace and tranquillity could enter the mind. Looking with infinite compassion on all sentient beings, he saw them without distinction of good or bad, high or low. All are actuated by the same self-motive, and it is under that primal delusion that beings return again and again to the round of existence, drawn back irresistibly by their attachment, to work out their self-imposed destiny in accordance with their *kamma*.

Foremost among the virtues that tend towards

conquest of self the Buddha proclaimed *dāna*, or universal charity. To put the needs of another before one's own is but the first step in the practice of dāna: its consummation and final flowering is to realise that there is no individual self—that whatsoever one does to another is done, as it were, to oneself. At that point even self-sacrifice ceases. There being no self, there is no sacrifice—only the all-comprehending benevolence of Buddhahood, that permeates the universe of living creatures with love, above, below and in all quarters. Fear and hatred, deception and greed cannot enter the mind that is released from self (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*), nor can the darkness of ignorance obscure it. Luminous and serene, the light of the Arahant shines forth; even in the flux of impermanence he finds the changeless eternity of Nirvana.

> Being untainted by the world, delighting in charity, established in the precepts and virtues, practising renunciation of the world, and obtaining excellent knowledge, may I be replete with strength and power!
>
> "The Aspiration of Buddharakkhita"
> *Jinālaṅkāra* 248.

Disinterested charity therefore is essential to spiritual progress, and must be cultivated by whosoever would aspire to the bliss of Nibbāna. It extinguishes the

grasping tendencies that are the cause of rebirth and suffering, and makes renunciation a habitual attitude of mind. The Bodhisatta gave his possessions and even life itself for the welfare of others. Such sacrifice can be possible only when it has ceased to be sacrifice as we understand it and has become instead the expression of a complete reorientation in thought. Expounding the principle of the non-self, the Vajracchedikā Sutra says: "And, O Subhūti, the *pāramī* of the highest perfection of endurance (*khanti*) belonging to the Tathāgata, that also is no pāramī. And why? Because, O Subhūti, at the time when the king of Kāliṅga cut my flesh from every limb, I had no idea of a self, of a being, of a living being, or of a person; I had neither an idea nor no-idea. And why? Because, O Subhūti, if I at that time had had an idea of a self, I should also have had an idea of malevolence."

The Sutra continues concerning dāna thus: "A Bodhisatta, after putting aside all ideas (concepts based upon phenomena), should raise his mind to the highest perfect knowledge, he should frame his mind so as not to believe in (depend upon) form, sound, smell, taste or anything that can be touched For what is believed is not to be depended upon. Therefore the Tathāgata preaches: A gift should not be given by a Bodhisatta who believes in (depends upon) anything: it should not be given by one who believes in form,

sound, smell, taste or anything that can be touched."

Here the Yogācārin psychology is clear. It is to the effect that for the complete perfection of dāna *pāramitā* all idea of giver and recipient must be abandoned, as also all belief in the thing given—that is to say, as to its essential reality. The significance becomes transferred entirely to the action (kamma): it has no egocentric reference whatever.

The Buddha's Way of Dispassion leads to complete integration of the psychic faculties: it gives the penetrating vision that sees directly into the nature of causality, and beyond it, to the uncaused and uncompounded. That having been attained, no external events, no happenings in the realm of relative reality can give rise to sorrow, resentment or desire. The mind is finally liberated, poised on the wave crest of the ocean of saṃsāra, never to be submerged beneath the seething waters.

> Knowing this body to be as foam and understanding its mirage-like nature, one will escape the tight grip of the King of Death, having destroyed the power of Māra.
>
> Dhammapada

No longer is there friend or foe for him who is thus liberated. Those who ignorantly consider themselves

his enemies he enfolds with loving compassion, protecting them from their own evils, striving only to prevent them from harming themselves. Against their malevolence he puts up his dispassion, neutralising their hatred as water neutralises a corrosive acid, and overcomes them with the weapons of harmlessness and purity.

The state of sublime equanimity is to be reached through understanding the nature of the five- *khandha* -process—that it is impermanent, lasting no longer than an instantaneous flash of light, that it is a mere aggregate of physical form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and states of consciousness, and that it is without any persisting ego-entity. A continual unfolding of empty phenomena, conditioned by antecedent tendencies, it cannot form any basis for happiness: it can only give rise to new and ever unsatisfied desires. In ignorance we desire pleasure, but our real quest is for the self that enjoys the sensations. Since that self is nowhere to be found we remain unhappy, unable to perpetuate the present moment or anchor it to any firm ground of reality. The essence of the experience eludes us: in the moment of grasping it is gone.

We are urged to relinquish this hopeless effort to find satisfaction in the world of anicca, anatta and dukkha, and instead, to fix the mind steadfastly on the

state of *virāga*, dispassionateness. In some texts the word virāga is used almost as an equivalent for Nibbāna (*tanhakkhaya virāga nirodha nibbāna*). This virāga consists in the extinction of attachment to sense-objects, the giving up of the concept "I" as the performer of actions and the ground of merit and demerit. It differs from suppression of selfhood, in that it cuts deeper than the mere inhibition of desires and reactions by any effort of will. The Tathāgata condemned forceful exertion of will-power in austerities. They are only a different expression of violence—violence directed against the unreal—in place of violence against the equally unreal not-self. The practice of such austerities in an extreme form serves only to divert the current of self-consciousness or to dam it, thus increasing its pressure. The psychological tension mounts, and instead of being extinguished the ego becomes magnified. The hold on self must be relaxed, not tightened, and this it to be brought about gradually and naturally by creating an opposite impulse, a tendency that manifests in disinterested activity for the welfare of others.

Benevolence as taught by the Buddha is an active principle that directs to one goal the purposes of heart and mind. By its cultivation the mind is freed from the *asavas* and the heart is made capable of a love that is universal and dispassionate, without attachment to

ideas or objects. The mind of an Arahant who has attained this beatitude of selfless, dispassionate benevolence, shines in the darkness of saṃsāra clearly and steadily, like the flame of a lamp in a sheltered place; and when the fuel is exhausted, for him there is no rebirth.

Notes

1. McGovern, W.M. 1968. *An Introduction to Mahayana Buddhism*. **[Back]**

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