

Wheel Publication No. 23

**The Nature and Purpose
of the Ascetic Ideal**

Ronald Fussell



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by

Ronald Fussell

Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka

The Wheel Publication No. 23

First Edition 1960

Second Edition 1983

The Wheel Publication No. 23

BPS Online Edition © (2008)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS Transcription Project

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Arthur Schopenhauer

**In commemoration of the centenary of his
death**

21st September 1860

Arthur Schopenhauer, one of the greatest German philosophers, lived from 1788 to 1860. His first major philosophical work, *The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, was published when he was only twenty-five. His whole life was devoted to working out his great philosophical system, the main statement of which is in *The World as Will and Representation*. He followed on from Kant in Western philosophy, but acclaimed the first works of Hinduism and Buddhism that were beginning to reach Europe. He said that the 19th Century in Europe would be remembered as noteworthy because of this new influence. Because of his great understanding and reaffirmation of Buddhist teaching, some people think he must have been a re-incarnated Buddhist.

He said, "If I were to take the results of my philosophy as a yardstick of the Truth, I would concede to Buddhism the pre-eminence of all religions in the world."

Ronald Fussell

The Ascetic Ideal



One of the most remarkable developments connected with the inner side of the religious life in the nations of Asia and Europe has been that of asceticism and the monastic life. Its understanding can be of great value in the understanding of Buddhism, indeed of religion as a whole. Though appearing in the most diverse races and ages and clothing itself in the forms of different traditions, there is an impressive unanimity of spirit and purpose in the lives and experiences of the men and women concerned; so much so that no one can deny its importance as expressing the very essence and meaning of the spiritual life without putting himself out of court.

Schopenhauer, writing on this subject in 1810, commented, "Unless we are made eye-witnesses by an especially favourable fate, we shall have to content ourselves with the biographies of such persons. Indian literature, as we see from the little that is so far known to us through translations, is very rich in descriptions of the lives of saints, penitents, *Samanas*, *Sannyāsis*, and so on."

The position in Europe is more favourable than this now. Not only is the literature much more extensive, but many of

us have had contact with Buddhist Bhikkhus, either from Eastern countries or from Europe itself and thereafter know something of their lives. In addition to this, Buddhism, by its great frankness and fearless facing of the fact of suffering leads the thoroughgoing Buddhist, if not to become a monk, at least to understand the aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path that appears as renunciation.

The questions that the lives of such men pose, illustrate the deepest problems of philosophy, i.e. of life. An insight into these questions is the same as an insight into philosophy itself. An attempt is made to deal with them here under the following headings:

- (1) Why do men take up the ascetic path?
- (2) What is its purpose?
- (3) What are its results?

Men take up the ascetic path because there develops in them 'a strong spirit of renunciation,' as Shri Rāmakrishna so often called it when it manifested in his disciples. This renunciation is based on the development of an insight whereby 'self' and the 'world' come to be seen in quite a different way from their superficial picture in the minds of the ignorant. Buddhism teaches that such insight arises dependent on an ethical life, on the practice of the ethical section of the Noble Eightfold Path along with the practice of meditation and the development of insight. Buddha gained enlightenment because his efforts were based on

moral excellence, not the other way round. Therefore, it is to be assumed that such men have trodden the path in previous lives and so, as Buddhism would say, they have but “little dust of ignorance in their eyes.”

Insight sees the element of Illusion (*māyā*), of Ignorance (*avijjā*), of Misapprehension (*vipallāsa*) in the world accepted by the ignorant. Moreover, the very nature of this world-illusion is seen to produce suffering, nay to *be* suffering, whether regarded as the unquenchable thirst of a separative self or the impermanence of a phenomenal universe. Realizing they are caught in an illusion, there arises a great longing to find out the truth of things; feeling that they are in prison there is a great urge for freedom. Buddhists would say that insight has arisen into the First Noble Truth of Sorrow.

The Buddha was supremely frank, as Schopenhauer witnesses, in putting this fact right in the forefront of his teaching. Whether we accept it, decides whether we are thoroughgoing Buddhists or whether we are still clinging to some form of self-affirming and world-affirming optimism. Optimism, in the philosophical sense, means that we hope to get the fulfilment of desire. Pessimism means that we see the only final freedom from desire in the extirpation of desire. This is *Nirvana*. The basic clash between the views of optimism and pessimism is the most important in all philosophy. Only if we accept the latter can we enter on the path.

Incidentally, it would be worth while for anyone, Buddhist or Christian, to read (or re-read) the New Testament, if only to see how near to Buddhism it is in spirit (though, needless to say, there are many an important differences).

It is the same, with the great Christian mystics. “If we turn from the forms, produced by external circumstances, and go to the root of things, we shall find generally that Sākya Muni and Meister Eckhart teach the same thing; only that the former dared to express his ideas plainly and positively whereas the latter is obliged to clothe them in the garment of the Christian myth, and to adapt his expressions thereto. In the same respect, it is noteworthy that the turning of St. Francis from prosperity to a beggar’s life is entirely similar to the even greater step of the Buddha Sākya Muni from prince to beggar, and that accordingly the life of St. Francis, as well as the order founded by him, was only a kind of *Sannyāsi* existence. In fact, it is worth mentioning that his relationship with the Indian spirit also appears in his great love for animals, and his frequent association with them, when he calls them his sisters and his beautiful ‘Cantico’ is evidence of his inborn Indian spirit through the praise of the sun, moon, stars, wind, water, fire, and earth.” [1]

It has, in fact, been forgotten by most Christians that in the New Testament ‘world’ is used as a synonym for ‘evil,’ that the ‘prince of this world’ is the ‘devil’ and that Christ said, clearly enough “my kingdom is not of this world.” It is because some men begin to see for themselves what this means that they seek the ascetic path.

Schopenhauer's philosophy gives two remarkable keys for the clearer understanding of Buddhist teaching. Having penetrated deeply into Buddhism by his own genius, he makes what may appear as abstruse to us, because of its unfamiliar forms, into the most clear of commonsense. He follows Plato in placing the beginnings of philosophy in man's awakening wonder at himself. This is a thing no being but man can do. No cat, or dog, or elephant can do just this. Whether we are evolutionists or not we can see that the great difference between man and the animals is the preponderance of intellect. It is his intellect that makes birth as a man such a great opportunity.

The other key, unique in Western philosophy, was Schopenhauer's observation and explanation of the "will-to-live." Its nature is identical with the *tanhā* of Buddhism—an unquenchable thirst. Philosophically, it is a direct intuition into the one being we can know in this way—our 'self.' It answers the problem posed by Kant as to the possibility of knowledge of the 'thing-in-itself' (*Ding-an-sich*).

Man's intellect, then, comes to know his inner nature as "will-to-live" (*tanhā*). The form of this 'will-to-live,' appearing in time and space, is mere phenomenon—body. Conversely, the body is the visible aspect of the 'will-to-live' or desire. Desire seeks satisfaction in time, for time is a form of our very consciousness. But, by definition, this satisfaction must be temporal and so pass away. Fresh desire arises continually. So *Samsāra* comes to be, and we are *Samsārins*, i.e. wanderers in the phenomenal universe, in

space and time.

This comes to be dimly perceived by the man in whom insight is awakening. The knowledge comes to him through his intellect, but when he decides to seek the 'final emancipation' from this state of affairs he must deal with the will or desire. This is where the ascetic path starts; and it ends where its goal is reached: in the ending of desire, *Nirvana*.

Irving Babbitt, who was Professor of French Literature at Harvard University, made a translation of the Dhammapada, and appended to it an essay on "Buddha and the Occident." He has this profound comment on Nirvana:

"No religious teacher was ever more opposed than Buddha, in his scheme of salvation, to every form of postponement and procrastination. He would have his followers take the cash and let the credit go—though the cash in this case is not the immediate pleasure but the immediate peace.

"The peace in which the doctrine culminates is not, the Buddhist would insist, inert but active, a rest that comes through striving. In general the state that supervenes upon the turning away from the desires of the natural man is not, if one is to believe the Buddhist, a state of cool disillusion. One may apply to it, indeed, the term enthusiasm, though the enthusiasm is not of the emotional type with which

we are so familiar, but rather of the type that has been defined as 'exalted peace.' Buddha himself seems to speak from an immeasurable depth of calm, a calm that is without the slightest trace of languor."

[2]

Nevertheless, the same writer had realized for himself the danger of trying to define Nirvana positively:

"Negatively, Nirvana is defined as 'escape from the flux,' positively as the 'immortal element.' Strictly speaking, what is above the flux cannot be defined in terms of the flux, and 'mind' is for Buddha an organ of the flux. Anyone, therefore, who demands at the outset a firm intellectual formulation of Nirvana has, from the Buddhist point of view, missed the point." [3] Buddha was, therefore, very wise when he stated over and over again, "One thing alone I teach: sorrow and the ending of sorrow." For this is the way of experience. At the outset of this article it was stated that men enter this path because of the arising of a new view of life. If this view is the true one, then what was held before must have had a basic error or inconsistency in it. This basic error is put very clearly by Schopenhauer as the belief that we exist *in order* to be happy. This is the optimistic view. It means that we expect our desires to be satisfied in this world, and that we are disappointed if they are not, envious of others who appear to be happy and ready to act

selfishly and even cruelly to get our desires. This is all part of the egoistic illusion.

Conversely, both the Buddha and Schopenhauer have been charged with 'pessimism.' Understood as the emotional reaction of shallow people this is one thing, but understood in its deep metaphysical meaning it is quite another. It is true of their teaching just as it is of Vedanta and of New Testament Christianity. It should be accepted as a term of praise and not of abuse, as may be seen by its result. It means that a man who professes such a view sees through the illusions of optimism, does not expect a selfish happiness for himself, feels compassion for the suffering of others, and is ready to enter on the spiritual path. Many people are in fact naive realists or disguised Christians while professing to be Buddhists, but this question is the touchstone of their sincerity.

If however, the terms optimism and pessimism are understood in their conventional sense, it must be said that Buddhism is neither optimistic nor pessimistic but realistic. In the Majjhima Nikāya (Further Dialogues of the Buddha Vol. I. Dīghanakha Sutta), the Buddha, in answer to a questioner, rejects both emotional generalizations: the optimistic view ('all is satisfactory') and the pessimistic view ('all is dissatisfactory'). But the Buddha says that the latter, the pessimistic view, "is allied to passionlessness and freedom, aloof from pleasure, attachment and clinging," while the optimists, those who find everything satisfactory,

hold a view that “is allied to passion, to bondage, to pleasure to attachment and clinging.” Nevertheless, both these one-sided views of optimism and pessimism are said by the Buddha to lead to dogmatism and to conflict. This remarkable Discourse ends with teaching that the abandonment of those one-sided views is effected by a growing detachment from body and feelings which is a salient feature of the Ascetic Path. Such statements are, of course, likely to bring up the charge that the Buddha was an annihilationist. It was expressly denied by him that he was either an annihilationist or an eternalist; nevertheless Nirvana remains a puzzle and an intellectual mystery. It can, however, be shown why Nirvana must be, from the intellectual point of view, a negation or a mystery, though not what Nirvana is.

Again to quote Irving Babbitt, “Nirvana is, in its literal meaning, the ‘going out’ or extinction of (these) desires—especially of the three fires of lust, ill-will, and delusion. The notion that what ensues upon this extinction is mere emptiness is not genuinely Buddhist. The craving for extinction is the sense of annihilation or non-existence (*vibhava-taṇhā*) is indeed expressly reprobated in the Buddhist writings.” [4]

Schopenhauer had such a profound intellectual grasp of the nature of Nirvana and was at the same time so much in sympathy with Buddhism that some people have considered him to be a re-incarnated Buddhist. It should be remembered that when he wrote *The World as Will and*

Representation in 1818, the first translations of Buddhist books had only just reached Europe and he read the Dhammapada in Latin.

“The moral virtues are not really the ultimate end, but only a step towards it. In the Christian myth, this step is expressed by the eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and with this moral responsibility appears simultaneously with original sin. This original sin itself is in fact the affirmation of the will-to-live; on the other hand, the denial of this will, in consequence of the dawning of better knowledge, is salvation. There, what is moral is to be found between these two; it accompanies man as a light on his path from the affirmation to the denial of the will or, mythically, from the entrance of original sin to salvation, through faith in the mediation of the incarnate God (*Avatār*): or, according to the teaching of the Veda, through all the rebirths that are the consequence of the works in each case, until right knowledge appears, and with it salvation (final emancipation), *Moksha*, i.e. reunion with Brahmā. But the Buddhists, with complete frankness, describe the matter only negatively as Nirvana, which is the negation of this world or of *Samṣāra*. If Nirvana is defined as nothing, this means only that *Samṣāra* contains no single element that could serve to define or construct Nirvana.” [5]

“To free it from this (*Samṣāra*) is reserved for the

denial of the will-to-live; through this denial, the individual tears itself away from the stem of the species, and gives up that existence in it. We lack concepts for what- the will now is; indeed, we lack all data for such concepts. We can only describe it as that which is free to be or not to be the will-to-live. For the latter case, Buddhism describes it by the word Nirvana ... It is the point that remains for ever inaccessible to all human knowledge precisely as such." [6]

“Philosophy has its value and virtue in its rejection of all assumptions that cannot be substantiated, and in its acceptance as its data only of that which can be proved with certainty in the external world given by perception, in the forms constituting our intellect for the apprehension of the world, and in the consciousness of one’s own self common to all. For this reason it must remain cosmology and cannot become theology. Its theme must restrict itself to the world; to express from every aspect what this world *is*, what it may *be* in its innermost nature, is all that it can honestly achieve. Now it is in keeping with this that, when my teaching reaches its highest point, it assumes a *negative* character, and so ends with a negation. Thus it can speak here only of what is denied or given up; but what is gained in place of this, what is laid hold of, it is forced ... to describe as nothing; and it can add only the consolation that it

may be merely a relative, not an absolute nothing. For, if something is no one of all the things that we know, then certainly it is for us in general nothing. Yet it still does not follow from this, that it is nothing absolutely, namely that it is nothing from every possible point of view and in every possible sense, but only that we are restricted to a wholly negative knowledge of it; and this may very well lie in the limitation of our point of view. Now it is precisely here that the mystic proceeds positively, and therefore, from this point, nothing is left but mysticism." [7]

If these quotations are lengthy and if I have repeated myself somewhat I offer no apology; it is done deliberately for the subject is so important that we cannot deal with it too thoroughly or too exhaustively.

The nature of Saṃsāra, the path that leads from it and the inner change which that path means in our psychology have all been clearly expounded by Schopenhauer also. Saṃsāra is the will-to-live expressed as the phenomenal world in the forms of time and space. The path to freedom from Saṃsāra appears in his teaching as the "Doctrine of the Denial of the Will-to-live." This is expounded in the *World as Will and Representation*, Vol. I. Bk. 4, and Vol. II. in the chapter with the above title.

As a commentary on these two important subjects I would like here to quote from a volume of unpublished letters by

K. J. Tarachand, an Indian Buddhist and a deep student of Schopenhauer:

“The relation of the will-to-live to the will-not-to-live may be studied from different standpoints—intellectual, moral, spiritual, emotional, aesthetic, or medical. If intellectually the will is error and ignorance, morally it is sin, spiritually it is exile, and emotionally it is suffering; then aesthetically it is ugly and from the medical standpoint it is diseased ...

“We must never lose sight of the fact that the will-to-live is exile from Nirvana, and all its strivings have only one object—a return to its true home, to Nirvana. Thirst for knowledge, search for truth, the sense of right and wrong, the insatiable desire to be happy and free from stress, strain, and suffering, the love of beauty, and the quest for health—all these represent temporary homes. We attain them with great effort only to lose them after a time; for we live in time and nothing therein can be permanent and abiding ...”

It may be seen from this, how, desiring ceaselessly, finding abiding satisfaction nowhere, we are brought at last to the Buddha’s teaching and see in his Noble Eightfold Path the Fourth Noble Truth, the Way that Leads to the Ceasing of Sorrow. One subsidiary, but valuable element of the experience of some men was pointed out by Schopenhauer as a foretaste of the nature of Nirvana. It is the experience of

'pure aesthetic contemplation.' This arises in the perception of the artist at the moment of creation or in the mind of the man who appreciates the work of art. At such moments the will (desire) is still; and part, perhaps the most important part, of the experience, is the deep sense of peace that accompanies it. Thus beautiful natural phenomena may induce this state of mind. When I gaze at the landscape or the moon in the mood of the artist I may know it, but if I am planning to build a housing estate on the landscape or land a rocket on the moon I will not.

"To desire Nirvana" is a statement that, of course, involves a contradiction. It is often posed as a catch-question to Buddhists. "If you desire Nirvana how can you be said to end desire?" The answer is that the question is wrongly put. Nirvana is desirelessness. By putting an end to all desires, to the very will-to-live that manifests as desire, Nirvana comes to be. This brings us to the psychological aspect of the path, to the methods used, to why they are used, and to a consideration of what takes place between Saṃsāra and Nirvana, between the state of the 'worldling' and that of the *Arahat* or *Jnāni*.

All moral systems imply that some improvement is necessary in the characters of the people following them. Many such systems are, however, merely conventional; under some form of orthodoxy many gross forms of egotism may flourish unchecked. Ultimate problems are neither faced nor solved. The paths of the great religions, on the other hand, put before us the necessity of a change so

fundamental that both the self and the world will be radically altered. This great change is the true 'conversion,' the 'salvation' of Christianity, the 'inconceivable transformation-death (*acintya-parināma-cyuti*)' of the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra. [8]

The *Bhikkhu*, Ascetic or *Sannyāsi*, then, sets out to conquer the will-to-live, in himself. He takes upon himself voluntary rules of chastity, poverty, humility and obedience. Though they may be taken as vows and embodied in monastic rules, it is in the first place a voluntary act by which he accepts them. The rules are so well known that almost any educated adult could repeat them. They refer to the strongest forms of affirmation of the will-to-live, which they seek to deny. By denying each aspect of the will, that will is in the end entirely extirpated and Nirvana is reached.

In sex is seen the most vehement expression of the will-to-live, for it has as its objects the preservation of the species. Many people, speaking as advocates of the will, object that the ascetic path would mean the end of the human race *if everybody went in for it*. This is purely hypothetical. Though for thousands of years ascetic orders have existed, the human race is now increasing so rapidly that there is danger of food scarcity. Seeing what the race has achieved in that time it might not be a great loss if it were to end. But it can only end if everyone becomes an Arahāt (a Saint, in the Buddhist sense), surely 'a consummation devoutly to be wished.'

Possessions are bound up with *ahaṃkāra* and *mamañkāra* (I-ness and My-ness), two deceptive forms of the will appearing as 'self.' The ascetic is even advised not to sleep too often under the same tree in case he develops too much attachment to it.

Humility and obedience strike at the deep root of *māna* (pride) in the will, which, according to Buddhism, is the last fetter to be cast off.

'Love' that was looked on as such a spiritual quality in the West was in fact compassion (*agape*), and compassion is taught in Buddhism, as the great complementary virtue to wisdom, for, as I have explained above, compassion arises through the realization of the inevitable suffering which the will-to-live imposes on all beings. On this Irving Babbitt comments, "How many persons, for example, exalt the 'love' of St. Francis who, in their total outlook on life, are almost inconceivably remote from the humility, chastity, and poverty from which, in the eyes of St. Francis himself—the love was inseparable." [9] Even in the confines of a monastic or ascetic life it is, indeed, not easy to live consistently a life based upon the principles of love, compassion and unselfishness.

The entry upon the Ascetic Path is obviously a very serious undertaking and needs unusual qualities, if there is to be any hope of success.

If we cannot, however, accept the ascetic life we may find some comfort in the words of Schopenhauer, who advocates

the acceptance of the inevitable suffering of our own life as 'the next best course.'

“Life then presents itself as a process of purification, the purifying lye of which is pain. If the process is carried out, it leaves the previous immorality and wickedness behind as dross, and there appears what the Veda says: “Whoever beholds the highest and profoundest has his heart’s knot cut, all his doubts are resolved, and his works come to nought.” [10]

It should not be forgotten that Gotama, even on the threshold of Buddhahood, spent a great part of his six years’ search in great austerities. The famous *Buddha-rūpa* of him in his emaciated state gives a vivid impression of what this entailed. When he founded his order he advocated a less stringent set of rules, but, as we shall see, what he did lay down were extreme by our standards. He was still charged by the Hindus with a dangerous relaxation of standards, for many of them had carried asceticism to the point of self-torture. If the principle be understood as denial and reversal of self-will, a criterion is at once established for what does and what does not conduce to this. The ascetic, or even the householder, may guide his conduct by the light of reason.

The Christian term 'self-naughting,' Schopenhauer's 'denial of the will-to-live,' and the Buddhist 'Path to the Ceasing of Sorrow,' are all negative definitions and may impress people with the negative aspect of the path only. Why negative definitions are used has been partly explained

above, but the path may be seen in another aspect that is both more positive as a definition and that may illustrate some of its positive results.

The path is a healing process, leading from the 'dis-ease' of Saṃsāra to the health, wholeness of Nirvana. The Buddha refers to himself in the Itivuttaka and many other Suttas as the 'Incomparable Physician and Surgeon.'

“Buddha aims at wholeness, a type of wholeness that is hard for us to grasp because breadth is for us something to be achieved expansively and even by an encyclopedic aggregation of parts; whereas the wholeness at which Buddha aims is related in fact, as it is etymologically, to holiness and is the result of concentration. To define the quality of concentration that Buddha would have us put forth psychologically—that is, by his own method—is to go very far indeed in the understanding of his doctrine.” [11]

“This (effort of concentration) is in all its aspects a will to refrain and in its more radical aspects a will to renounce. What the Buddhist renounces are the expansive desires. Nirvana is, in its literal meaning, the going out or extinction of these desires—especially of the three fires of lust, ill-will, and delusion. The notion that what ensues upon this extinction is mere emptiness is not genuinely Buddhist.” [12]

This example of one Buddhist practice is valuable as illustrating the path as a whole. Just as the 'Three Fires' and the 'Five Hindrances' are temporarily renounced, left behind and escaped from in meditation, so this happens permanently in Nirvana, but this, of course, necessitates that reversal of our whole nature to which I have already referred. Just as joy at this freedom arises together with peace of mind, so these are the eternal nature of Nirvana—the 'peace that passes all understanding,' because it is beyond mental activity. Those who think that anything of permanent value has been renounced should consider the nature of the 'Five Hindrances' mentioned above, for they are the creators of the external world, as may immediately be seen by observation.

**... separation between himself
and others ...**

Psychologically, the effect of the reversal of our inner nature may be explained thus: The egoist is deeply involved in the phenomenal illusion of his own body and his own 'self.' This being so, he feels the separation between himself and others acutely and is intensely concerned with his own well-being and happiness, even to the point of inflicting injury on others. He, therefore, feels himself surrounded by hostile phenomena. This feeling reflects the truth of the impermanence and insecurity of his life, but because of *avijjā*, is not related to its true cause, but to other people,

towards whom aversion and vindictiveness is felt. Desire and aversion almost completely dominate him and greater and greater suffering may be his lot.

The man who begins to tread the path begins to see through the illusion of 'self.' He does not cherish the error of *sakkāya-dit̥ṭhi* (personality belief). In one scripture the Buddha is credited with the statement on the night of his enlightenment, "Blissful is he who has rid his mind of the conceit of self." Such a man makes less distinction between 'self' and others than is usually made. Consideration for their weal and woe affects him as much as his own. Compassion for their sufferings leads him to unselfish actions. His interest, spread over a number of people, increases his *mettā* (loving-kindness) and lessens his fear or pain at his own misfortune. He feels himself surrounded by friendly phenomena. The very height of this achievement is embodied in Buddha's 'Parable of the Saw,' and, indeed, in Buddha's search for truth on behalf of all mankind,

"Who cast away my world to find my world."

It is also seen to perfection in the example of Christ on the cross who prayed for his executioners, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

In such examples may be seen the phenomenal appearance of that process known only negatively as 'denial of the will-to-live.' The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra describes it positively in the language of mysticism thus: "Before they had attained

realization of Noble Wisdom they had been influenced by the self-interests of egoism, but after they attain realization they will find themselves reacting spontaneously to the impulses of a great and compassionate heart endowed with skilful and boundless means and sincerely and wholly devoted to the emancipation of all beings.” [13]

This is the nature of the Enlightened One, the *Jīvanmukta* (he who is liberated in this life)—the Arahāt. It may be seen that the path to that state appears as a process in time, though this is a part of the illusion, for how can a process in time lead to a timeless, eternal state. The experience of this process is one of progressive awakening (intellectual element), progressive compassion (feeling element), and progressive goodness (ethical element). The culmination of these is in the life of the Bhikkhu whose example may be truly said to be the most sublime this world has to offer.

It has often occurred to me that the lines of Shelley on the death of Keats (“Adonais”) might be applied to such a one:

“No, No! He is not dead, he does not sleep,
He has awakened from the dream of life,
'Tis we, oppressed by stormy visions, keep
With phantoms an unprofitable strife,
And in blind trance strike with our spirit's knife
Invulnerable nothings; we decay
Like corpses in a charnel, fear and grief
Convulse us and consume us day by day
And cold hopes swarm like worms within the living

clay.”

But He, “He has outsoared the shadow of our night!”

Asceticism

Selected Passages from Arthur Schopenhauer's The World as Will and Representation

Translated by E. F. J. Payne

If we consider the will-to-live as a whole and objectively, we have to think of it ... as involved in a *delusion*. To return from this, and hence to deny its whole present endeavour, is what religions describe as self-denial or self-renunciation *abnegatio sui isuis* (denial of ones own self); for the real self is the will-to-live. The moral virtues, hence justice and philanthropy, if pure, spring, as I have shown, from the fact that the will-to-live, seeing through the *principium individuationis* recognizes itself again, in all its phenomena; accordingly they are primarily a sign, a symptom, that the appearing will is no longer firmly held in that delusion, but that disillusionment already occurs. Thus it might be said figuratively that the will already flaps its wings, in order to fly away from it. Conversely, injustice, wickedness, cruelty are signs of the opposite, that is, of deep entanglement in

the delusion. But in the second place, these moral virtues are a means of advancing self renunciation, and accordingly of denying the will-to-live.

For true righteousness, inviolable justice, that first and most important cardinal virtue, is so heavy a task, that whoever professes it unconditionally and from the bottom of his heart has to make sacrifices which soon deprive life of the sweetness required to make it enjoyable, and thereby turn the will from it, and thus lead to resignation. Yet the very thing that makes righteousness venerable is the sacrifices it costs; in trifles it is not admired. Its true nature really consists in the righteous man's not throwing on others, by craft or force, the burdens and sorrows incidental to life, as is done by the unrighteous, but in his bearing what has fallen to his lot. In this way he has to endure undiminished the full burden of the evil imposed on human life.

Justice thereby becomes a means for advancing the denial of the 'will-to-live,' since want and suffering, those actual conditions of human life, are its consequence; but those lead to resignation. Caritas, the virtue of philanthropy which goes farther, certainly leads even more quickly to the same result. For on the strength of it, a person takes over also the sufferings that originally fall to the lot of others; he therefore appropriates to himself a greater share of these than would come to him as an individual in the ordinary course of things.

He who is inspired by this virtue has again recognized in

everyone else his own inner nature. In this way he now identifies his own lot with that of mankind in general; but this is a hard lot, namely, that of striving, suffering, and dying. Therefore, whoever, by renouncing every accidental advantage, desires for oneself no other lot than that of mankind in general, can no longer desire even this for any length of time. Clinging to life and its pleasures must now soon yield, and make way for a universal renunciation; consequently, there will come about the denial of the will.

Now since, according to this, poverty, privations, and special sufferings of many kinds are produced by the most complete exercise of moral virtues, *asceticism* in the narrowest sense, the giving up of all property, the deliberate search for the unpleasant and repulsive, self-torture, fasting, the hairy garment, mortification of the flesh; all these are rejected by many as superfluous and perhaps rightly so. Justice itself is the hairy garment that causes its owner constant hardship and philanthropy that gives away that which is necessary provides us with constant fasting. For this reason Buddhism is free from that strict and excessive asceticism that plays a large part in Brahmanism, and thus from deliberate self-mortification. It rests content with the celibacy, voluntary poverty, humility, and obedience of the monks, with abstinence from animal food, as well as from worldliness [14] .

Quietism, i.e. the giving up of all willing, asceticism, i.e. intentional mortification of one's own will, and mysticism, i.e. consciousness of the identity of one's own inner being

with that of all beings, or with the kernel of the world, stand in the closest connection, so that whoever professes one of them is gradually led to the acceptance of the others, even against his intention. Nothing can be more surprising than the agreement among the writers who express those teachings, in spite of the greatest difference of their age, country, and religion, accompanied as it is by the absolute certainty and fervent assurance with which they state the permanence and consistency of their inner experience. They do not form some *sect* that adheres to, defends, and propagates a dogma theoretically popular once adopted; on the contrary, they generally do not know of one another; in fact, the Indian, Christian, and Mohammedan mystics, quietists, and ascetics, are different in every respect except in the inner spirit and meaning of their teachings.

A most striking example of this is afforded by the comparison of Madame de Guyon's *Torrens* with the teaching of the Vedas, especially with the passage in the *Oupnekhat*, Vol. I. p. 63. This contains the substance of that French work in the briefest form, but accurately and even with the same figures of speech, and yet it could not possibly have been known to Madame de Guyon in 1680. In the *German Theology* (the only, unmutilated edition, Stuttgart, 1851), it is said in Chapters 2 and 3 that the fall of the devil as well as that of Adam consisted in the fact that the one, like the other, had ascribed to oneself I and me, mine and to me. On page 89 it says, "In true love there remains neither I nor me, mine, to me, thou, thine, and the

like.” In keeping with this, it says, in the *Kural*, translated from the Tamil by Grauh, p. 8, “The passion of the mine directed outwards and that of the I directed inwards cease” (cf. verse 346).

And in the *Manual of Buddhism* by Spence Hardy, p. 258, the Buddha says, “My disciples, reject the idea that I am this or this is mine.” If we turn from the forms, produced by external circumstances, and go to the root of things, we shall find generally that Sākya Muni and Meister Eckhart teach the same things; only that the former dared to express his ideas plainly and positively, whereas the latter is obliged to clothe them in the garment of the Christian myth, and to adapt his expressions thereto. This goes to such lengths, that with him, the Christian myth is little more than a metaphorical language, in much the same way as the Hellenic myth is to the Neo-Platonists; he takes it throughout allegorically. In the same respect, it is noteworthy that the turning of St. Francis from prosperity to a beggar’s life is entirely similar to the even greater step of the Buddha Sākya Muni from prince to beggar, and that accordingly the life of St. Francis, as well as the order founded by him, was only a kind of *Sannyāsi* existence [15] .

If we go to the bottom of things, we shall recognize that even the most famous passages of the Sermon on the Mount contain an indirect injunction to voluntary poverty, and thus to the denial of the will-to-live. For the precept to comply unconditionally with all demands made on us (Matth. V. 40 Seq.), to give also our cloak to him who will

take away our coat, and so on; likewise (Matth. vi, 25–34) the precept to banish all cares for the future, even for the morrow, and so to live for the day, are rules of life whose observance inevitably leads to complete poverty.

Accordingly, they state in an indirect manner just what the Buddha directly commands his followers to do, and confirmed by his own example, namely, to cast away everything and become Bhikkhus, that is to say, mendicants. This appears even more decidedly in the passage Matthew X, 9–15, where the Apostles are not allowed to have any possessions, not even shoes and staff, and are directed to go and beg. These precepts afterwards became the foundation of the mendicant order of St. Francis (Bonaventura, *Vita S. Francisci* c. 3). I say therefore that the spirit of Christian morality is identical with that of Brahmanism and Buddhism. In accordance with the whole view discussed here, Meister Eckhart also says (*Works*, Vol. I. p. 492): “Suffering is the fleetest animal that bears you to perfection.” [16]

“All these considerations furnish a fuller explanation of the purification, the turning of the will, and salvation, which were denoted in the previous chapter by the expression ‘the next best course,’ and which are brought about by the sufferings of life, and are undoubtedly the most frequent; for they are the way of sinners as we all are. The other way, leading to just the same goal by means of mere knowledge and accordingly the appropriation of the sufferings of a whole world, is the narrow path of the elect, of the saints,

and consequently is to be regarded as a rare exception. Therefore, without that first path, it would be impossible for the majority to hope for any salvation. But we struggle against entering on this path and strive rather with all our might to prepare for ourselves a secure and pleasant existence, whereby we chain our will ever more firmly to life.

"The conduct of ascetics ...

is the opposite of this, for they deliberately make their life as poor, hard, and cheerless as possible, because they have their true and ultimate welfare in view. Fate and the course of things, however, take care of ourselves better than we ourselves do, since they frustrate on all sides our arrangements for a Utopian existence, whose folly is apparent enough from its shortness, uncertainty, emptiness, and termination in bitter death. Thorns upon thorns are strewn on our path and everywhere we are met by salutary suffering, the panacea of our misery. What gives our life its strange and ambiguous character is that in it two fundamental purposes, diametrically opposed, are constantly crossing each other. One purpose is that of the individual will, directed to chimerical happiness in an ephemeral, dreamlike, and deceptive existence, where, as regards the past, happiness and unhappiness are a matter of indifference, but at every moment the present is becoming the past. The other purpose is that of fate, directed

obviously enough to the destruction of our happiness, and thus to the mortification of our will, and to the elimination of the delusion that holds us chained to the bonds of this world.

“... If we put this purpose in the complete reversal of this nature of ours ... a reversal brought about by suffering, the matter assumes a different aspect, and is brought into agreement with what actually lies before us. Life then presents itself as a process of purification the purifying lye of which is pain. If the process is carried out, it leaves the previous immorality and wickedness behind as dross, and there appears what the Veda says: ‘Whoever beholds the highest and profoundest, has his heart’s knot cut, all his doubts are resolved, and his works come to nought’.” [17]



The inner spirit and meaning of genuine monastic life, as of asceticism generally, are that a man has recognized himself as worthy and capable of an existence better than ours and wants to strengthen and maintain this conviction by despising what this world offers, casting aside all its pleasures as worthless, and now awaiting calmly and confidently the end of this life that is stripped of its empty allurements, in order one day to welcome the hour of death as that of salvation. The *Sannyasis* have

exactly the same tendency and significance, and so too have the Buddhist monks. Certainly in no case does practice so rarely correspond to theory as in that of monasticism just because its fundamental idea is so sublime; and *abusus optimi pessimus* (The worst is the abuse of the best). A genuine monk is exceedingly venerable, but in the great majority of cases the mere mask behind which there is just as little of the real cowl is monk as there is behind one at a masquerade.

From *Parerga and Paralipomena* § 168. Translated by E. F. J. Payne.

Epilogue: The Happiness of Renunciation

Sayings of the Buddha

There are two kinds of happiness, O monks: the happiness of the householder and the happiness of the ascetic. But the greater of the two is the happiness of the ascetic.

There are two kinds of happiness, O monks: the happiness of the senses and the happiness of renunciation. But the greater of the two is the happiness of renunciation.

Aṅguttara-Nikāya, Duka-Nipāta

The wise man will give up a lesser happiness to obtain a greater happiness.

Dhammapada, v. 290

Ah, happily we live, hateless among haters;
Amidst men of hate, hateless we dwell!

Ah, happily do we live healthy among those ailing;
Amidst ailing men, healthy we dwell!

Ah, happily do we live, greedless among the greedy;
Amidst greedy men, greed-free we dwell!

Ah, happily do we live, free of impediments!
Feeders on joy shall we be even as the Radiant Gods.

Dhammapada, vv. 197–200.

Happy is he contented in solitude,
Seeing the Truth he has learned,
Happy is he, who abstains from harming,
Living restrained towards all that lives.
Happiness true is freedom from passion,
If senses' cravings are left behind.
But highest happiness is his
Who has removed the self-conceit.

Udāna, II. 1

Notes

1. *The World as Will and Representation*, by Arthur Schopenhauer, Vol. II. p. 614
2. *Buddha and the Occident* p. 98
3. Ibid. p. 96
4. *Buddha and the Occident* p. 96
5. *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. II. p. 608
6. *The World as Will and Representation*, p. 560
7. *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. II. p. 612
8. *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra (LKS)* p. 129
9. *Buddha and the Occident* p. 100–101
10. *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. II. p. 639
11. *Buddha and the Orient* p. 83
12. Ibid. p. 96
13. LKS p. 105/106
14. 1958. With kind permission of the translator and The Falcon's Wing Press, Indian Hill, Colorado, USA.
15. *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. II. p. 606/7
16. *The World as Will and Representation*, p. 613/4
17. *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. II. p. 633

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