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Knowledge and Conduct

Buddhist Contributions to Philosophy and Ethics

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Preface

The Buddhist Publication Society, which is continuing its unremitting service in the worthy cause of the propagation of the Dhamma, deserves the commendation of all seekers of the Truth for the publication of this volume of Buddhist essays as an enlarged issue of the fiftieth number of their Wheel Series. The Society's publications are well known in every part of the world and there is no doubt that this volume will help a large number of readers to probe deeper into the Buddhist attitude to problems of knowledge and conduct—the two essentials of the religion (*sasana*)—traditionally known as *pariyatti* and *paṭipatti* comprehension and practice of the Dhamma.

This number includes two essays dealing with Buddhist thought: the one by Prof. Burtt attempts to outline the four basic ideas which are important for the assessment of Buddhist philosophy, and the other by Dr. Jayatilleke is devoted to a discussion of the Buddhist method of comprehending Truth. The third presents an examination of the moral problems that arise in the practice of the Dhamma. Thus the reader will be fortunate to have within the compass of this single volume a critical treatment of the basic principles and essentials of Buddhist thought and

Buddhist conduct.

A compendium of this nature has been a long-felt need and the Buddhist Publication Society must be congratulated on the initiative shown in bringing out this handy volume to satisfy both the critical student of the subject and the average reader.

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Peradeniya, Ceylon,
February, 1963.

Buddhist Ethics

by

Prof. O. H. de A. Wijesekera

It will be realised by careful students of Buddhism, particularly in its earliest form as preserved in the Dīgha Nikāya, Majjhima Nikāya, Sutta Nipāta, etc., that most of the dialogues are entirely devoted to ethical discussions. This will be found to be especially the case with the Majjhima Nikāya, as well as the Mahavagga of the Suttanipāta, while a good many of the Suttas in the Dīgha Nikāya are also ethical in character. Thus it will be seen that an exhaustive examination of all the data is necessary for a complete study of this important subject, and this has to be said in spite of the useful treatise The Ethics of Buddhism by Dr. Tachibana of Tokyo; for, as it was pointed out in the Introduction to the Colombo edition of that work, he has only classified the moral categories of Buddhism without entering upon any discussion of the main problems of ethics in relation to the Buddhist view. It is hoped that the present discussion will, at least to some extent, indicate the lines

along which such a study must be conducted, and lead students of the subject to a critical appreciation of its main problems.

It is universally recognised that Buddhism can claim to be the most ethical of religio-philosophical systems of the world. No less an authority than Professor Radhakrishnan himself calls it "Ethical Idealism" and says that the Buddha gave an "ethical twist" to the thought of his time. "We find in the early teaching of Buddhism," he remarks, "three marked characteristics: an ethical earnestness, an absence of any theological tendency and an aversion to metaphysical speculation." [1] Even Albert Schweitzer, a leading Western philosopher and one of the most astute critics of Indian thought has not grudged the Buddha the honour of being "the creator of the ethic of inner perfection." He writes: "In this sphere he gave expression to truths of everlasting value and advanced the ethics not of India alone but of humanity. He was one of the greatest ethical men of genius ever bestowed upon the world." [2] Professor T. W. Rhys Davids who spent a life-time in the study of Buddhism has admirably brought out in his *American Lectures* the importance of the study of Buddhist ethics in modern life and thought: "The point I stand here to submit to your consideration is that the study of ethics and especially the study of ethical theory in the West has hitherto resulted in a deplorable failure through irreconcilable logomachies and the barrenness of speculation cut off from actual fact: The only true method of ethical inquiry is surely the historical

method … and I cannot be wrong in maintaining that the study of Buddhism should be considered a necessary part of any ethical course and should not be dismissed in a page or two but receive its due proportion in the historical perspective of ethical evolution." [3] Oswald Spengler, who perhaps ranks as the greatest philosophical student of world culture, believes that Buddhism, which for him expresses "the basic feeling of Indian civilization," and "rejects all speculation about God and the cosmic problems; only self and the conduct of actual life are important to it." [4]

Such statements as these emphasising the ethical importance of the Buddha's teaching can be quoted from numerous other authorities. But to any unbiased and careful student of religion or philosophy it would be needless to stress this importance too much, for, as we shall attempt to show in this paper, Early Buddhism—by which term we generally refer to the doctrines as found in the dialogues of the major Nikāyas—presents a unique synthesis of ethics and philosophy, of morality and knowledge, of action and thought.

To estimate correctly the greatness and the universality of the Buddha's ethics one has to obtain a mental picture of the moral ferment and the spiritual unrest that prevailed in India just before the appearance of the Buddha. Traditional religion as professed by the theologians and the metaphysicians of the Upaniṣads was being undermined by the constant and vehement attacks of materialists and sceptics. Therefore, before we turn to the actual ethical

system of Early Buddhism it is essential to discuss as briefly as possible the development of the moral consciousness during the time of the pre-Buddhist Upaniṣads as well as the attitude to the moral problem of the various heretical philosophical schools such as those promulgated by the numerous *titthiyas* and *ājīvakas*.

There were some Upaniṣadic thinkers who had discovered and formulated the main principles of moral behaviour in conformity with their respective views of life. Earlier, Brahmanism had established a rigid and dreadfully static morality by its insistence on the universality of the ritual act (karma=yañja). Hence the actual morality inculcated did not go beyond what was practically, necessary in the conduct and successful performance of the sacrifice. Thus evolved a conception of "dharma," originally "ritualistic duty" and its ethical correlates such as "śraddha" the faith needed in bestowing gifts (*dakṣinā*) and alms (*dāna*) to the priesthood who were the meditators between man and his gods. Such was the moral code of the ritualistic religion. The earliest Upaniṣads carry out these very moral tendencies and thus it cannot be said that they had completely transcended the ethical externalism of the Brahmanic religion. When Sakalya in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (3.9) asked Yajñavalkya: "And on what is sacrifice based?" "On gifts to the priests," replied Yajñavalkya. "And on what are the gifts to the priests based?" "On faith (*śraddha*), for when one has faith one gives gifts to the priests. Verily, on faith are gifts to the priests based." Similarly, Chāndogya Upaniṣad (2.23)

enumerates three branches of duty: "Sacrifice, study of the Vedas, alms-giving, that is the first; austerity, indeed, is the second; a student of sacred knowledge (*brahmacārin*) dwelling i/ the house of a teacher is the third."

Though Upaniṣadic ethics start with such compromises to ritualism, an attempt is progressively made to conceive a higher kind of morality. For example, the Upaniṣadic thinkers attribute the highest power to truth (*satya)* in contrast to untruth (*anṛta*). Speakers of falsehood were put to the test by the ordeal of the heated axe. Says the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (6.16): "Speaking untruth he covers himself with untruth; he seizes hold of the heated axe and is burned: Speaking truth he covers himself with truth; he seizes hold of the heated axe and is not burned." It is important to observe here that what is true is held to be in conformity with the natural order of things, the cosmic law (*ṛta*), and that what was untrue was what went against that order (*anṛta*). It is to the credit of Indian culture that at a very early period in its history from the cosmological conception of world-order (*ṛta*) they had derived a notion of an ethical order in man. Thus the gradual development of a practical code of ethics is seen in these Upaniṣads. Quarrelsomeness, tale-bearing (*pisunā*), slander (*upavāda)* are regarded as evil traits tending to make people small (*alpāý)* of character. The threefold offspring of *Prajapati* — gods, men, and *asuras* are respectively taught by him (Brh. Up., 5.2) that to restrain (*damyata*), to give (*datta*), and to be compassionate (*dayadhvam*) are the three greatest virtues.

There was also a certain conception of social ethics as is implied in the declaration of Aśvapati Kaikeya:

> "Within my realm there is no thief,
> no miser, nor a drinking man,
> none altarless, none ignorant,
> no man unchaste, no wife unchaste." —(Ch. Up., 5.11).

It is important to students of Buddhist ethics to find the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (8.4,5) condemning to rebirth in the form of small creatures those who commit theft, drink liquor, invade the teacher's bed, kill brahmins, as well as those who consort with them: "Brahmacarya" which generally means "the chaste life of a student of sacred knowledge" is extolled and its goal is set forth as the Brahma-world. In the very next paragraph this life of abstinent religious duty (*brahmacarya*) is said to include all other forms of moral behaviour such as sacrifice, silent asceticism, fasting, and hermit life in the forest.

There are many passages in the Upaniṣads establishing as the highest moral ideal or goal of the spiritual life the Brahma-world which is identified with immortality (*amṛtam*). It is also necessary to point out that the *raison d'etre* of ethics in the Upaniṣads is derived from metaphysics: "Verily, O Gargi, at the command of that Imperishable (*akśarasya praśāsane*) men praise those who give, the gods are desirous of a sacrificer, and the fathers (are desirous) of the Manes-sacrifice" (*Brh. Up.*, 3.8). Further,

according to the Upaniṣads, the criterion of moral judgment is merely conventional, being nothing other than the practice of elderly and learned brahmins: Now, if you should have doubt concerning an act, or doubt concerning conduct, if there should be these Brahmanas, competent to judge, apt, devoted, not harsh, lovers of virtue (*dharma)*—as they may behave themselves in such a case, so should you behave yourself in such a case (*Tait. Up.*, 1,11).

> In the last phase of the development of Upaniṣadic thought morality dwindles into insignificance. This results from the static conception of spiritual life as is inevitable from the identity of the human soul as it is with the highest ideal, Brahman, sometimes referred to as the highest Self (*Ātman*). This metaphysical abstraction naturally removes all urgency and necessity for any ethic, for, if man as he is, is already one with his ideal, what would be the need for spiritual effort, why worry about a moral life at all! "Whoso were to know me (Ātman)," teaches the Kauśītaki Upaniṣad (3.2), not by any action of his can the world be injured; not by murdering his mother or his father, not by stealing or by killing the embryo ..." This over-emphasis of the Ātman-knowledge and the consequent disregard of the moral life discloses the inner weakness of the absolutist pantheism of the Upaniṣads: Two of the most critical Hindu students of Upaniṣadic thought, Ranade and Belvalkar, regard this as the worst trait of the philosophy of

absolutism: "Here, indeed, is touched what may be called the danger line of Upaniṣadic ethics. To say that the *ātman* dies not is legitimate. To say that weapons cannot cut him nor fire burn him is also a legitimate variation of the phrase. But to argue that, therefore, the murderer is no murderer, and there is nobody really responsible for his action is to carry this *śāśvata* or *akriyā* doctrine to a point which, if seriously preached, would be subversive of all established social institutions and religious sacraments". [5]

These considerations not only indicate to us that the absolutism of the Upaniṣads inevitably ended in a kind of amoralism, but also that there could be a dangerous side to religious and spiritual conservatism. It was as a reaction against such dogmatism in philosophy and ethics that there arose several heterodox philosophies which not only denied the authority of the conservative ethics of the Upaniṣads, but even went to the extent of declaring moral scepticism, moral nihilism and moral anarchism. It is significant that our earliest sources for the study of these doctrines are the Buddhist Nikāyas themselves. There was a strong school of philosophical opinion which encouraged a downright ethical nihilism (*natthikavāda):*

"There is no such thing as alms, sacrifice or oblation; good and bad actions bear no fruit or consequence; there is no (distinction between) this world and the

next; there is no (moral obligation towards) father or mother; there are no beings of spontaneous generation, and there are no recluses and brahmins in this world of virtuous conduct who with insight (*abhiññā*) have realised and proclaimed (the true nature of) this world and the next." This moral nihilism was based on a crass materialism in philosophy: "Man as he '*is*' is constituted out of the four elements; when he dies earth combines with earth, water with water, heat with heat and air with air; the sense functions are merged in the ether and all that is left of him are his greyish bones after the cremation; the value of the alms-giving is merely in the imagination of the giver and to affirm the moral consequences of the act is a hollow assertion; both the foolish and the wise are annihilated and completely cut off at death." (M I 515)

This was the doctrine that Ajita Kesakambalī, among others, is reported to have professed.

Then there were others who denied moral causation (*ahetuvadins*). Their main thesis was as follows:

> "There is no cause or reason for the depravity of beings; they become depraved without cause or reason; they become pure without cause or reason; there is no such thing as self-agency or the agency of another or human effort; there is no such thing as power or energy or human strength or human

endeavour; all animals, all creatures, all beings and all living things are without initiative, without power and strength of their own; they just evolve by fate, necessity and fortuitous concatenation of events; and it is according to their peculiar nature as belonging to one of the six classes that they experience ease or pain, and it is only at the end of the appointed period —after one has passed through the 84,00,000 periods of wandering in samsara—that there shall be an end of pain; thus there is no such thing as that one should experience the result of kamma and thereby put an end to it either through virtuous conduct or precept, asceticism or *"brahmacariya"*; consequently there is neither spiritual growth nor decline; neither depravation nor exaltation, inasmuch as in samsara pain and pleasure are determined and circumscribed. As automatically as a ball of thread thrown up rolls along unreeling itself, so do both the foolish and the wise reach their salvation at the termination of their appointed course in *samsara*." (D I 54)

The foremost leader of this school was Makkhali Gosala, and from the importance attached to the refutation of his theories in the early Buddhist books we may infer that he had a large following.

He roundly denied all initiative and choice in man, being rigidly deterministic. The only redeeming feature of this philosophy was its belief in some form of moral ideal,

however wrongly the process of its accomplishment was conceived. Therefore, the Buddhist books disparagingly call this the "purity through samsara" (*samsarasuddhi*), because the theory postulated that purity occurred just by samsaric evolution over which man had no control. This was further condemned as *"akiriyavada"* or "theory of non-action".

Another teacher, Purana Kassapa, held the opinion that the act had no moral consequences, that merit (*puñña)* did not result from good action and demerit (*pāpa)* from bad action; giving, generosity, restraint, self-control, and truth-speaking did not conduce to merit." (D I 52) This doctrine, too, is condemned as *"akiriyavada"* or a denial of the efficacy of the act.

Another school professed a fatalistic pluralism and the most prominent teacher of this doctrine was Pakudha Kaccāyana:

> "The following seven things are neither made nor commanded to be created; they are barren (and so nothing is produced out of them), steadfast as a mountain-peak, as a pillar firmly fixed. They move not, neither do they vary, they trench not one upon the other, nor avail aught as to ease or pain or both. And what are the seven? The four elements—earth, water, fire, air—and pleasure and pain and the soul as the seventh. So there is neither slayer nor causer of slaying, hearer or speaker, knower or explainer. When one with a sharp sword cleaves a head in twain, no one thereby deprives anyone of life; a

sword has merely penetrated into the space between seven elementary substances." (M I 517)

As this doctrine is obviously based on the Upaniṣadic concept of the indestructibility and the unchangeability of the *"ātman"* it has been called *"sassatavada"* or eternalism. In ethics it also leads to an *"akiriyavada"* or amoralism like the previous philosophies.

Then there was the ethical scepticism of the agnostic philosopher, Sañjaya Bellatthiputta, who refused to pass final judgment on any such metaphysical problem as the existence of a future world or on any ethical question. When questioned about the moral consequences of good and bad acts, he would resort to the four-membered formula of prevarication and refuse to set down a definite opinion. (D I 58)

The doctrines of these rival teachers not only led to clashes with the dogmatism and orthodoxy of the Upaniṣadic moralists but also resulted in interminable conflicts among themselves, thus creating that state of moral ferment to which we referred earlier and which characterised Indian religion just before the advent of the Buddha. It was a critical epoch in the history of Indian religion and the Buddha with his principle of the golden mean (*majjhima patipada*) brought sanity and a sense of poise to a society harassed by ideological disturbances and shaken about by heated metaphysical wranglings and ethical disputations.

Apart from these doctrines that led to a moral upheaval, there was the Jaina system of ethics with its rigid formalism and externalism frequently criticised in the Buddhist books. Nigantha Nataputta emphasized the external act in preference to the mental act. (M I 372ff)

In addition to all these ethical doctrines the *Dīgha* and *Majjhima Nikāyas* make constant reference to the inevitable moral upshot of philosophical materialism in general, referred to as the perverted philosophy (*viparita-dassana*) that denied all morality; it is branded as the heresy *par excellence (micchadiṭṭhi*), the evil doctrine (*pāpakam diṭṭhigatam*), and moral nihilism (*natthikavada*). (M I 130, 287, 401; D II 316) This view which is prominently attributed to a prince known as Payasi-rajañña asserted the following three propositions:

1. There is no world beyond;
2. There are no beings reborn otherwise than from parents;
3. There is no result or consequence of good or bad acts. (D II 316, 317)

As opposed to this *micchadiṭṭhi* early Buddhism sets forth *sammadiṭṭhi* or the correct view of life on which it bases its ethics. Let us now turn to an examination of that fundamental philosophical basis of Buddhist morality.

According to Early Buddhism man's appearance in this world is clearly not due to a mere concatenation of physical

factors. Many statements in the dialogues make it clear that a non-physical factor is necessary for successful conception. (M I 265; D II 63) Such concatenation is due to *upadhisankharas* generated by previous samsaric experiences (Sn 728) and it is precisely in this context that it is affirmed that the reborn individual is neither the same nor another (*na ca so na 'ca aññ*o). (Cf. S III 20) It may be observed, that in the latter portion of this statement (*na ca aññ*o) moral responsibility is definitely asserted. Life thus come into being is said to be characterised by several marks (*lakkhana*) such as impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, liability to disease and corruption, extraneousness, subjection to dissolution, voidness, and insubstantiality. (M I 435)

These characteristics are sometimes brought under the three headings of *anicca, dukkha* and *anatta, or anicca, dukkha* and *viparinamadhamma*. (M I 232) Thus is set forth the Noble Truth of the Unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha-sacca*) of samsaric existence (*bhava)*, which is sometimes analysed as threefold *dukkhata (dukkhadukkha, sankhara-dukkha* and *viparinama dukka*). (D III 216)

Such unsatisfactoriness is due to the continuous change or becoming that is samsara. (Sn 742) This very dynamic nature of samsaric life with its self-generated potentialities tends to a continuation of individuality (*nama-rūpa*) or personality (*attabhava*). Thus it is asserted in Early Buddhism that there is a life beyond (*atthi paro loko*), (M I 403) which is proved by the super -normal experience of the Perfect Ones (arahants) who are perceivers of the world

beyond (*paralokaviduno*) by virtue of their having acquired the faculties of recollecting past births (*pubbenivasanussati*) and observing the passing away and rebirth of beings (*sattanam cutūpapatañana*), (D I 82) the latter being also termed the super-normal vision (*dibbacakkhu*). Buddha himself exercised this power on several occasions when requested to explain the rebirth (*gati*) of his departed disciples. [6]

The Early Buddhist conviction of this fact of samsaric continuity is, therefore, beyond doubt and it is no wonder that those who refused to admit a life beyond were dubbed *micchadiṭṭhika*. It is clear then on what foundation the ethical system of Early Buddhism rests. Once this samsaric continuity with all its attendant *dukkha* is granted, the ideal of man's perfection turns out to be the release (*nissarana*) therefrom. This is the Goal of Buddhist ethics which consequently is conceived as the cessation of becoming (*bhava-nirodha*) or the ending of *dukkha,* generally called *Nibbāna*. Thus we discover that the *raison d'etre* of Buddhist ethics is the fundamental fact of samsaric *dukkha*. Hence the essential basis of the Buddhist moral life (*brahmacariya*) lies not in some metaphysical hypothesis conceived by *a priori* reasoning, but, as Buddha pointed out to Malunkyaputta, on the conviction that, "Verily there is birth, there is decay, there is death, etc.," of which the destruction is declared to be possible in this very life. (M I 431)

Thus the mere speculation on metaphysical problems, usually referred to as ten, is condemned as unprofitable.

Similarly, the Buddha tells Udayi that such ultimate questions as those that concern the beginning (*pubbanta*) and the end (*aparanta*) of things, being solvable only by developing the higher faculties (*vijja, abhiññña*) but not by the exercise of mere reason. It becomes imperative for man to accomplish the ethical process which alone could lead to the acquirement of such faculties. (M II 31, 32, 38) Therefore, the importance of the ethical process for the realization of *Nibbāna* is unquestionable, and, as Dhammadinna points out to Visakha, the moral life finds its apex, goal and consummation in Nibbāna. (M I 304)

The foregoing discussion of the fundamental basis of the Buddhist ethic, its *raison d'etre* and its goal, will help the student of Buddhism and the student of ethics to appreciate the important bearing that the Buddhist view of morality has to the burning questions of ethics such as the problem of evil, and the problem of ethical relativity: To an unbiased student of Buddhism it appears that Early Buddhism offers definite solutions to these problems and as such it has a claim to serious consideration in this respect.

Our brief presentation of the philosophical basis of Buddhist ethics will have stressed the extreme urgency of the problem of evil for Early Buddhism as well as its all-embracing and profound nature as indicated by its samsaric context. The concept of evil as discussed by Western thinkers, pertaining as it does to merely this visible life, covers only a minute aspect of the problem, but it can be seen that fundamentally there is no difference between the two issues for as Early

Buddhism viewed it "*dukkha-dukkhata,*" which is defined as man's conflict with his environment is only one aspect of the general unsatisfactoriness of samsaric becoming (*bhava-dukkha*). Thus it is to be expected that a thinking person (*viññu puriso*) cannot but be impressed by the obtrusiveness of evil or *dukkha* around him.

But this was exactly the point on which Professor Joad condemned Buddhism in his book, *Matter, Life and Value* (p. 369, publ. 1929) in which he complained that "for Buddhism as for Job man is born to trouble as sparks fly upward" and declared: "I differ, therefore, from the dominant philosophy of the East in not despising the ordinary life of struggle and enjoyment of effort and reward." It is ironically significant, however, that after the lapse of only thirteen years he was compelled to radically alter his opinion, for in his later book, *God and Evil* (1942), he was forced to admit: "I conclude that attempts which are made to show that evil is not a real and fundamental principle belonging to the nature of things, are unsuccessful." Such coincidence as this between Early Buddhism and Western philosophy on the problem of evil will necessarily remain partial in so far as such philosophers confine their observations merely to the experience of the individual in this visible existence. But as we have attempted to show above, what is specially characteristic of the Buddhist Weltanschaūng (world-view) is the undeniable fact that this short span of a few score of years on earth is not the-whole of one's empirical existence but only a temporary manifestation of a samsaric process that extends

for innumerable lives in the past and may also extend for an indefinable period in the future.

Now, since this deeper significance of the general unsatisfactoriness of samsaric life and also the possibility of release therefrom has to be accepted on the validity of the experiences of the Perfect Ones, Early Buddhism recommends *saddha* or the reliance on the experience of such arahants who have realised the higher vision and on their statements, after adequate investigation, as to their worth. (M I 173) Hence *saddha* is held up to be the basis of the ethical process which ultimately leads to the realisation of the highest truth (*parama sacca)* and therewith the goal. (M II 171) Thus in practical ethics *saddha* comes to be regarded as one of the five good things to be cultivated (*paricaritabbam*), although the definite warning is given that mere faith in the teacher is not sufficient for complete ethical progress. (M II 94) The faith (*saddha)* we have previously referred is considered to be mere blind faith (*amūlika saddha*), and is consequently condemned by the Buddha in a talk with the brahmin Bharadvaja. (M II 170) It is on account of this that *saddha* in Early Buddhism is said to be twofold, the faith that may be empty, void and false in its fruition, and the faith that is bound to lead to genuine consequences. (MN 95) We cannot escape the conclusion that the *saddha* encouraged in Early Buddhism is only the result of an inference from the realisation of arahants as to the possibility of one's own realisation of the goal. Hence the only kind of faith that is advocated, if it could be called faith at all, is what is

designated "logical faith" (*akaravati saddha)*. (M I 401) The conversion of laymen to the belief that it was necessary to lead the higher moral life under the Buddha or his disciples was always prompted by this kind of *saddha*, a fact attested to at numerous places in the Canon.

The layman who thus takes up the spiritual life through his reliance (*uddissa*) on such a teacher is said to have started his career (*patipanna*) along the Path (*magga, patipada*) to *Nibbāna*. This Path is said to consist of three stages or parts usually called the three *sampadas* or the three *khandhas*. The first of these stages is *sila* or ethical conduct, and practical morals have a meaning for the disciple only till such time as he arrives at the fourth stage of the Path, namely, concentration (*samadhi*). But the goal is not reached even then; and a still higher stage of development must be gone through and this is technically known as wisdom (*paññā)*. What is generally believed to be the Eightfold Path in Buddhism is included within these three stages as the learned Dhammadinna explained to Visakha. (M I 301) How far, then, practical morality is of significance to one aspiring for the Buddhist goal becomes clear when it is considered that *sila* forms only the initial stage of such process. In fact, Early Buddhism administers a warning to the aspirant to master morality but not allow morality to get the better of him, and it is clearly laid down that even virtuous conduct has to be transcended at one stage. It need not, therefore, appear paradoxical when it is asserted in the same context that the disciple should try to put a final end to meritorious

forms of good conduct. (M II 27) Thus, for Buddhism morality is not an end in itself. It is considering these features of the Path which, it is obvious, transcend Ethical Perfectionism as is understood by Western moralists, and also the metaphysical perfection implied in the Upaniṣads, that it is claimed that the Exalted One is the originator and proclaimer of a unique Way.

It is to be observed that in the spiritual evolution as indicated in this Path the question of Happiness as the ideal of morality finds a perfect solution. It is said that in the stage of concentration when the aspirant reaches the fourth *jhana* both happiness and its opposite cease to concern him for he becomes indifferent to both pleasurable and painful feeling (*vedana*). Up to that moment the aspirant is to experience inner happiness. This inner form of happiness is clearly differentiated from worldly happiness which is called "low, vulgar, and ignoble" inasmuch as such happiness depends on the senses.

It is expressly stated that this latter form of material happiness is to be shunned (M III 230, 233) and hence to classify Buddhism as any form of Hedonism, as Dr. Pratt has done in his *Pilgrimage of Buddhism* (p. 20), is quite unjustifiable.

Over and above this sensuous happiness which has an erotic basis (*kama)* as well as the inner *jhanic* happiness which is non-erotic (*nekkhamma*) is placed *Nibbāna,* as even this *jhanic* happiness is not final (*analam*), for it is only in the

ultimate state of spiritual attainment (*saññavedayitanirodha*) that happiness assumes its most perfect form. This state, which is the *summum bonum* of Buddhism, can be styled happiness only in an exceptional sense. Yet, Buddha persists in calling it happiness in the face of the criticism of heretics, for, as he once explained to Ananda, he did not regard a state as happy just because of pleasurable feeling, and also because he considered that there could be levels of "happiness" relative to the stage of spiritual evolution. Thus, if in the ideal state of Nibbāna the aspirant transcends the subtlest forms of happiness and is not tinged by them, it would not be quite apposite to identify the Early Buddhist ideal in ethics with that of Eudaemonism. But this does not deny the fact that for Buddhism just as for modern psychology and biology man, as well as other living beings, by nature seeks for pleasure and avoids pain (*sukhakamo dukkhapatikkūlo).*

It can now be seen that there is a sense in which we may assert that the ethical process of Buddhism is intended to release man from the miseries of samsaric existence (*dukkha)* and take him to the ultimate Happiness or the Good (*attha)* that is Nibbāna. In this, Buddhism does not go against the basic psychology of man's nature, but endeavours to bring about its refinement and sublimation until it totally transcends the level at which it is found in samsaric existence. Thus Nibbanic happiness must be considered as the ideal for every living being. Hence is derived also the criterion of moral judgment according to the ethical

philosophy of Early Buddhism which we have attempted to outline above. This criterion of Buddhist ethics is emphasised in several places and seeks to determine whether a particular act would obstruct or not oneself or others in the attempt to win this release (*nissarana*) from *dukkha* or samsaric Evil. In his admonition to Rahula, Buddha makes it perfectly clear that "whatever act tends to the obstruction or harm (*vyabadha)* of oneself and others (on the Path) is to be considered bad (*akusala)* as its upshot is pain and its result Evil." (M I 415) It is significant that the word "*vyabadha"* means both harm to the individual concerned and obstruction to spiritual progress. Therefore; subjectively an act (*kamma)* becomes good (*kusala)* or bad (*akusala)* according as it promotes or hinders spiritual progress, and objectively it is considered to be meritorious (*puñña)* or demeritorious (*apuñña)* according as it is beneficial (*hita)* or harmful (*ahita*) to the similar progress of others. Sir Edward Arnold in his *Light of Asia* has beautifully summed up this idea.

> "Kill not—for pity's sake—and lest ye slay
> The meanest thing upon its upward way."

To inflict pain, for instance, either on oneself or others is to cause distraction of mind by inciting evil and harmful emotions which cannot be but an obstacle on the "upward way." Thus the ethical content of an act is psychological and its source is volitional. Accordingly, Early Buddhism considers as ethical only those acts which are volitional

(*sañcetanika*). (M III 207, cp. I 377) Thus the *Anguttara Nikāya* (III 415) attributes to the Buddha the statement that the real act (*kamma)* as an act of volition (*cetana*). This is natural inasmuch as the intensity of the act depends on the extent to which it is committed deliberately (*sañcicca*). (M I 523, II 103) For instance, it is pointed out that an infant who is not conscious even of his own body cannot commit any sin. In technical language this would mean that all acts are not ethically significant but only those that are voluntary, that is to say, willed by the agent. This being the fundamental sense in which an act is conceived in Buddhist ethics what we do and say have only an indirect ethical significance, whereas what we think or will is directly ethical.

In a conversation with the Jain Dīghatapassī Buddha emphasises the greater ethical importance, of the mental or volitional act (*mano-kamma*) as compared with the verbal (*vaci-kamma)* or the physical act (*kaya-kamma*). (M I 373) Hence the Buddha's emphasis on the elimination of the cardinal evils of attachment (*raga, lobha*), ill-will (*dosa)* and infatuation (moha) for they directly affect the nature of our volitions, while other evil acts such as meat-eating and drinking of liquor, etc., affect the mind only indirectly. Therefore, while the distinction between absolute and relative moral values seems meaningless and unnecessary according to the Buddha, there appears to be some sense in which we may divide voluntary acts or ethically significant acts into *direct* and *indirect* according as they affect the main ethical purpose of leading to the release from *samsaric*

existence.

It thus becomes clear that for the Buddha moral judgments are not to be based on some *a priori* conceptions of objectively real values like goodness, truth and beauty, as is usually held by idealistic philosophers, nor are they to be regarded as subjective or relative from all points of view as asserted by most scientific and materialistic thinkers.

According to Mr. Bernard Russell it would seem that ethics are a mere matter of taste. "If two men differ about values," he says summing up his ethical doctrine, "there is not a disagreement as to any kind of truth but a difference of taste" [7] Similarly, Professor Edward Westermarck, for whom all ethical judgments have an emotional basis, is the leading exponent of a theory of Ethical Relativity, which, however, adds that moral phenomena are not made meaningless just because they happen to fall within the subjective sphere of experience. For him, nevertheless, ethics remain still relative because moral judgments depend on economic, social and psychological (emotional) circumstances. [8] According to the Buddha, however, moral judgments assume a permanent value in so far as they are based on the point of view of the end which, as we have stressed above, is the release from *samsaric* Evil. But we may add that there is a sense in which moral values are relative even for the Buddha, and this derives only from the existence of levels of spiritual experience corresponding to the respective stages of the Path to which we have already referred.

The above discussion should make it clear that the ethics of the Buddha is prompted by one motive, viz., the desire for release and relies on no external sanctions such as God, Church or State, but is pre-eminently autonomous in character. [9] In fact, the desire for release and the psychological observation that attachment, hate and infatuation directly affect the nature of our volitions, sum up the motives and sanctions of Buddhist morality. In this discussion, however, we have taken for granted the most important fact of the freedom of the human will. We regarded man as intrinsically a morally free agent who had within him the power to choose between alternative courses of action. Is this justifiable according to the Buddha's doctrine? Certainly, yes. There is, in fact, no more important conviction in the whole of Buddha's philosophy than the idea that within this individuality (*nama-rūpa*) there is the potentiality of release if only man wills that way. (S I 62) Therefore, in spite of the fact that there is in a sense determinism to the extent that empirical existence is admittedly conditioned and thus is obviously subject to the vicissitudes of birth, decay and death, there is in man the power (*balam, viriyam*) (M I 407) to overcome all this by the strength of will (*chando*). (M I 313) Human life is regarded by the Buddha as in every way the best suited for this effort and birth among the animals, etc., is consequently deprecated, for it is only in man that the power to will exists in such a high degree with infinite capacity to develop higher by self-discipline and meditation.

Early Buddhism does not deny the importance of environmental factors in the moulding of man's conduct, but, on the other hand, it does not in the least subscribe to any theory that man's conduct is merely a set of reactions to external stimuli or unconscious tendencies, or that it is determined by social and economic factors alone, for it would be admitted even by the most adverse critics of the Buddha that no one raised Man and his noblest gift, the human Reason or Will, to such dignity as that greatest of ethical teachers born in the philosophically rife atmosphere of India twenty-five centuries ago.

The Buddhist Conception of Truth

by

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Buddhism is the first missionary religion in the history of humanity with a universal message of salvation for all mankind. The Buddha after His Enlightenment sent out sixty-one disciples in different directions asking them to preach the doctrine for the weal and welfare of mankind. He is said in one of the earliest texts to have been born for the good and happiness of humanity" (*manussaloke hitasukhatāya jāto* (Sn 683). Addressed as "the King of kings" (*rājābhirāja,* Sn 553). He says, "I am a King, the supreme King of Righteousness, with righteousness do I extend my kingdom, a kingdom which cannot be destroyed." (Sn 554).

The era in which the Buddha was born marks a turning point in history for everywhere in the world from Greece to

China we notice a new awakening and a quest for truth. A historian says: This sixth century B.C. was, indeed, one of the most remarkable in all history. Everywhere … men's minds were displaying a new boldness … It is as if the race had reached a stage of adolescence—after a childhood of 20000 years. [10] To the east of India, in China, appeared the great religious teachers Lao Tze and Confucius, the founders of Taoism and Confucianism, respectively. To the west there was Zarathustra in Persia, the founder of Zoroastrianism, Prophet Isaiah in Israel and Pythagoras in Greece. A student of religion observes: "It was in these days, rather than in those which made Bethlehem of Judea famous, that the principle of 'peace on earth, goodwill to men' first began to sweep across the world like a cleansing wind." [11]

Buddhist legends say that at this time the world over people were looking forward to the birth of a Supremely Enlightened One, an event which happens very rarely (*kadāci karahaci*) in history. With an air of expectancy Prophet Isaiah says: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given … and his name shall be called Wonderful, Councellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." It is a strange coincidence that almost contemporaneous with this prophecy [12] was born the Buddha to whom all these titles have been given within a few centuries of his birth, for he has been called the *Acchariya puggala,* the Wonderful Person; *sattha devamanussānaṃ,* the Councellor of gods and men;

Brahmātibrahmā (also *Devātideva*) the God among gods, *Ādipitā*—the eternal Father and *Santirāja*—the Prince of Peace.

In India men prayed and longed for the Truth:

> "'From the unreal lead me to the real!
> From darkness lead me to light!
> From death lead me to immortality!
>
> —Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, *1.3:28 (c. 700 B.C.).*

Thus appeared many sages who claimed to have discovered as many paths to immortality and some of these are described in the Upaniṣads and the scriptures of the Ājīvikas and Jains. Then appeared the Buddha who announced in unmistaken terms.

> "Open to them are the doors of immortality;
> Those who have ears, let them send forth faith".
>
> —M I 169 (c. 528 B.C.).

The Truth of Nibbāna that Buddha discovered is called in the Canon "the Truth" (*sacca*) and the fundamental doctrines that he proclaimed are summed up in the "Four Noble Truths" (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*). We do not propose in this article to describe or explain any of these "truths" but shall concern ourselves with the more prosaic task of examining what is meant by the term "truth." This is a

purely philosophical investigation and the reader may wonder as to what such academic philosophy has to do with the religion of the Buddha.

Here it is necessary to draw attention to another unique feature of the religion of the Buddha, namely that it is the only religion of any religious teacher which is the outcome of a consistent philosophy, which claims to tell us about the ultimate facts of existence and reality. The religion of the Buddha is a way of life resulting from the acceptance of a view of life, which is said to be factual (*yathābhutaṃ*). His philosophy is not without an epistemology or an account of the nature of knowledge. A detailed examination of this epistemology or theory of knowledge is outside the scope of this brief essay [13] and we shall, therefore, take up this problem of what is meant by the term "truth" as explained and understood in the Canonical texts.

We use the term "truth" to characterise statements or more exactly to characterise what is expressed by statements, namely, propositions. To take an example: we say, for instance, that the statement, "There is an artificial lake in Kandy." expresses a truth. Not all true statements have a relevance for religion. The above statement about the Kandy lake has no bearing on religion. But the statement that "life is impermanent and insecure" has a relevance for religion, for the religious quest (*brahmacariyesanā*) or the noble quest (*ariyapariyesanā*) is the quest for security and permanence.

The Four Noble Truths state the following propositions: (i)

life within the Cosmos, being infected with impermanence and insecurity, is subject to unhappiness, however "happy" we may be in a relative sense even for very long periods of time; (ii) this unhappiness is caused by the operation of the unsatisfied desires for sensuous gratification, for selfish pursuits and for destruction, which continually seek satisfaction; (iii) the cessation of these desires, which cannot be brought about by violent means (suicide) but only by self-development, coincides with the realisation of supreme happiness; (iv) the total development of the moral, intuitive and spiritual-intellectual aspects of one's personality culminates in this final real realisation and enlightenment. These propositions which are claimed to be true are also said to be useful (*atthasaṃhitaṃ*) in the sense that they are relevant to our weal and welfare and a knowledge of these helps us to attain the goal of all human (and divine) spiritual development. At the same time there are propositions which do not serve such a purpose and are useless in the above sense. Propositions also may be agreeable and pleasant to hear as well as the reverse. If we tabulate the possibilities in terms of propositions, which may be true or false, useful or useless, pleasant or unpleasant, we get the following possibilities:

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

6. False	useful	unpleasant
7. False	useless	pleasant
8. False	useless	unpleasant.

In the Abhayarājakumāra Sutta, it is said that the Buddha asserts propositions of the types one and two and that he does not assert propositions of the types three, four, seven and eight. The possibilities five and six are omitted, probably, because it was considered that they did not, in fact, exist. The passage reads: "the Tathāgata does not assert a statement which he knows to be untrue, false, useless, disagreeable and unpleasant to others (8). He does not assert a statement which he knows to be true, factual, useless, disagreeable and unpleasant to others (4). He would assert at the proper time a statement which he knows to be true, factual, useful, disagreeable and unpleasant to others (2). He would not assert a statement which he knows to be untrue, false, useless, agreeable and pleasant to others (7). He would not assert a statement which he knows to be true, factual, useless, agreeable and pleasant to others (3). He would assert at the proper time a statement which he knows to be true, factual, useful, agreeable and pleasant to others(1)." (M I 395).

So the Buddha makes assertions which are true and useful and either pleasant or unpleasant. In the Suttanipāta it is said that "one should say only what is pleasant." (Sn 452). This is, no doubt, the general rule, though exceptionally one may say what is unpleasant as well, for the good of an individual, just as out of love for a child one has to cause a

certain amount of pain in order to remove something that has got stuck in its throat (M I 394, 5). Even the truth, it should be noted, should be stated only "at the proper time." We normally make unpleasant statements when we are motivated by anger, jealousy, envy, malice or hatred and we try to rationalise what we do by imagining that our utterances are being made from the best of motives for the good of others. This is the reason why we should be extremely suspicious when we make such unpleasant statements.

What is the defining characteristic of truth? The words commonly used in the Pali to denote "truth" mean "what has taken place" (*bhūtaṃ*), "what is like that" (*tacchaṃ) and* "what is not otherwise" (*anaññatha*). It is the object of knowledge. "One knows what is in accordance with fact" (*yathabhutaṃ pajānāti;* D I 83). These usages suggest the acceptance of what is called in philosophy the correspondence theory of truth. According to this theory, truth is "what accords with fact" and falsity "what discords with fact." True and false beliefs, conceptions, and statements are defined in this manner in the Apaṇṇaka Sutta: "When, in fact, there is a next world, the belief occurs to me that there is a next world, that would be a true belief. When, in fact, there is a next world, if one thinks that there is a next world, that would be a true conception. When, in fact, there is a next world, one asserts the statement that there is a next world, that would be a true statement" (M I 403). Similarly for falsity: "When, in fact, there is a next

world, the belief occurs to me that there is no next world, that would be a false belief ... " (M I 402).

While truth is thus defined in terms of correspondence with fact, consistency or coherence is also considered a criterion of truth. The Canonical texts are quite aware of the principle of contradiction. In one place it is stated that "if p (a certain statement) is true, not-p is false and if not-p is true p is false" (S IV 298–99). But we also find in the texts statements of the following sort:

i. S is both P and not-P., e.g., the universe-is both finite and infinite;

ii. S is neither P nor not-P., e.g., the universe is neither finite nor infinite.

These statements appear to be self-contradictory to people who are acquainted only with Aristotelian logic.

How can a universe be both finite and infinite when according to the law of contradiction it cannot be both finite and infinite? And how can a universe be neither finite nor infinite, when according to the law of excluded middle it must be either finite or infinite? Western scholars completely misunderstood the nature of these assertions and what they misunderstood they attributed to the idiocy of the Indians. The French scholar, De la Vallee Poussin, makes the following observations about this logic: "Indians do not make a clear distinction between facts and ideas, between ideas and words; they have never clearly recognised the principle of contradiction. Buddhist dialectic

has a four-branched dilemma: *Nirvana* is existence or non-existence or both existence and non-existence or neither existence nor non-existence. We are helpless." [14]

Today with the discovery of many-valued logics and the consequent realisation that Aristotelian logic is only one of many possible systems, the significance of this Buddhist logic of four alternatives (*catuskoṭi*) could be better understood. Briefly, this is a two-valued logic of four alternatives, unlike Aristotelian logic, which is a two-valued logic of two alternatives. It is two-valued since it asserts that all propositions are either true (*saccaṃ*) of false (*musā*). Also according to this logic we say that something either is the case or is not the case; there is no other possibility, but in actual conversation in certain situations we make statements of the form "both is and is not" (i.e., "he is both bald and not bald") or neither is nor is not." The Buddhist logic uses these statements as descriptive of these classes of situations. A discussion of the precise nature of this system of logic would lead us into discussions of a technical nature, but an example would make it clear as to what is meant by the third and fourth possibilities, which are logically impossible according to the Aristotelian scheme. If we talk about the extent of the universe we find for instance, that we can think of four and only four possible mutually exclusive alternatives, viz:

i. The universe is finite in all respects, i.e., it is finite and spherical (*parivaṭuma*);

ii. The universe is infinite in all dimensions;

iii. The universe is finite in some, dimensions and infinite in other dimensions; this is what is meant by saying that "the universe is both finite and infinite;"

iv. If the universe was unreal or space was subjective, then we cannot predicate spatial attributes like "finite" or " infinite" of the universe. In such a situation we may say, " the universe is neither finite nor infinite."

We see from the above that the alternatives three and four are not self contradictory, as Western scholars some time back in their ignorance of the true nature of logical systems. According to this four fold Buddhist system of logic, the above four alternative views about the extent of the universe are seen as four possible alternatives (It may also be seen that only one and not more than one alternative may be true). According to the Aristotelian system, on the other hand, we can only make the statements "the universe is finite" and "the universe is not finite." By the latter statement it is not clear whether we are stating that the universe is not finite in all dimensions or in one or some dimensions only (views ii and iii). The fourth alternative cannot even be stated since according to the law of excluded middle the above two are the only alternatives possible and one of them must necessarily be true. The Buddhist four-fold logic makes it possible to state the four alternative theses clearly as mutually exclusive and together exhaustive possibilities. It is no more true or false than the Aristotelian

and its merits should be judged by its adequacy for the purposes for which it is used.

The propositions of a specific or general character which can be thus stated in the form of the-four alternatives belong to the class of statements which concern the events in the space-time-cause world. Statements about Nibbāna or the Super-cosmic which, is a reality that is non-spatio-temporal and unconditioned (*na paṭiccasamuppanna*) fall outside the scope of logical discourse (*atakkāvacara).*

That consistency is held to be a criterion of truth is clear from the fact that the Buddha very often appeals to this principle in arguing with his opponents. He uses dialectical arguments in Socratic fashion to show that some of the theories held by his opponents were false.. He starts with one of the assumptions of his opponents and proceeds step by step until at a certain stage in the discussion he is able to show that "his (opponent's) later statement is not compatible with the former nor the former with the later" ((*na kho te sandhīyati purimena vā pacchimaṃ pacchimena vā purimaṃ,* M I 232). It is assumed that a theory is false unless it was consistent.

In the Suttanipāta, referring to diverse mutually contradictory theories, the question is asked: "Claiming to be experts, why do they put forward diverse theories—is truth many and at variance?" (Sn 885). The answer given is: "Truth, verily, is not multiple and at variance" (Sn 886). In this context the statement is made that "truth is one

without: a second" (*ekaṃ hi saccaṃ na dutiyaṃ atthi;* Sn 884). The presence of logical coherence and compatibility in all the statements of a theory and the absence of contradiction is clearly recognised as a criterion of truth.

Now, although consistency is accepted as a criterion of truth, it need not necessarily be the case that a consistent theory is true. A true theory must be consistent but consistency alone is no infallible or sufficient criterion of truth. Consistency, no doubt, lends plausibility to the truth of a theory but we must not forget that it is also possible for a person to lie consistently and thereby present an appearance of truth. A religious philosophy like that of Spinoza's, which is founded on *a priori* reasoning may appear to be true if it is consistent but it would nevertheless be false if it does not correspond with fact. There could be mutually inconsistent theories each of which was internally consistent.

It is a remarkable fact that the Canonical texts recognise this fact. The *Sandaka* Sutta refers to religions based on pure reasoning and speculation, as being unsatisfactory (*anassāsikaṃ*) and not necessarily true; even when the reasoning is sound. The Buddha says that one should not accept a view on the basis of pure reasoning (*mā takka-hetu*), for there could be either mistakes in logic (*sutakkitaṃ pi hoti duttakkitaṃ pi hoti;* M I 520)) or even otherwise the findings of such reasoning may or may not be true of external reality (*tatha pi hoti aññatha pi hoti;* ibid.). This is, in fact, a very modern view.

But it is important to note that there is another sense of consistency recognised in the Canonical texts. This is the consistency between the behaviour of a person and his statements. In this sense it is claimed that the Buddha "practised what he preached and preached what he practised" (*yathāvādī tathākārī, yathākārī tathāvādī,* It 122). One does not normally speak of this kind of consistency as logical consistency, but when Toynbee says that "the Buddha was an illogical evangelist" [15] and speaks of his "sublime inconsistency" (op. cit. p. 64) or "sublimely illogical practice" (op. cit., p. 73) he is using "illogical" in this novel sense. Toynbee's conclusions are based on a faulty understanding of the Canonical texts and—as we have shown elsewhere—some of his criticisms have already been forestalled and met in the Pali Canon itself. [16]

There is also a reference to "partial truths" (*pacceka-sacca*) in the Canon. Some religious teachers, it is said, comprehend part of the nature of man and his destiny in the universe and mistakenly assume that this is the whole truth. For instance, according to the description given of the origin of a theistic religious philosophy in the Brahmajāla Sutta, a person from the world of Brahma (one believed to be a Personal Creator God) is born on earth, lives a homeless life, practises meditation and sees the heavenly world from which be came but does not see beyond. He concludes that heaven and earth and all in it was created by the person who is adored as "God, the Mighty God, the Omnipotent, the All-seeing, the Ruler, the Lord of All, the Maker, the

Creator, the Most High, the Ordainer, and Almighty Father of beings that are and are to be" (D I 18) This is cited as a typical case where the partial and limited experience of a mystic forms the basis of a generalisation applied to all reality. The conclusions are said to be wrong but the limited value and validity of the experience is not denied. The diversity of religious theories is attributed to the universalisation of limited experiences valid in their own sphere. The parable of the blind men and the elephant is narrated to illustrate this fact. A number of men born blind are assembled by the king who instructs that they be made to touch an elephant. They touch various parts of the elephant such as the forehead, ears, tusks, etc. They are then asked to describe the elephant and each reports mistaking the part for the whole that the elephant was like that portion of the elephant which was felt by them (Ud 68).

So truth is what corresponded with fact and was consistent, although whatever is consistent is not necessarily true; for a pack of lies could very well be consistent. Partial truths had a partly factual basis.

The Buddhist conception of truth has also been called pragmatic. Poussin says: [17] *Nous avons defini l'ancienne dogmatique comme une doctrine essentiallement 'pragmatique'…"* (We have defined the ancient teaching as a doctrine essentially "pragmatic"). But it is necessary to clarify the sense in which it is pragmatic. It is not pragmatic in the narrow utilitarian sense of the word for although in the classification of different types of propositions no

mention is made of propositions which are both false and useful; true propositions could be either useful or useless in the Buddhist sense of the term as being "conducive to one's spiritual welfare" or not.

Man should give ear to true propositions "which are useful in this sense and not fritter away his energies in trying to solve metaphysical questions, pertaining to the origin and extent of the universe, for instance, which have no bearing on the moral and spiritual life. The parable of the arrow illustrates this well when it says that a man struck with a poisoned arrow should be concerned with removing the arrow and getting well rather than be interested in purely theoretical questions (about the nature of the arrow, who shot it, etc.), which have no practical utility. In the *Simsapa* forest, the Buddha takes a handful of leaves and says that what he has taught is as little as the leaves in his hand and that what he knew but did not teach is like the leaves in the forest (S V 43,7). He did not teach these things because "they were not useful, not related to the fundamentals of religion and not conducive to revulsion, passion, cessation, peace, higher knowledge, realisation and Nibbāna." (M I 431). The parable of the raft has the same motive and is intended to indicate the utilitarian character of the truths of Buddhism in a spiritual sense. The Buddha says, "I preach you a Dhamma comparable to a raft for the sake of crossing over and not for the sake of clinging to it …" (M I 134). A person intending to cross a river and get to the other bank, where it is safe and secure, makes a raft and with its help safely

reaches the other bank; but however useful the raft may have been, he would throw it aside and go his way without carrying it on his shoulders; so it is said that "those who realise the Dhamma to be like a raft should discard the Dhamma as well, not to speak of what is not Dhamma" (M I 135). The value of the Dhamma lies in its utility and it ceases to be useful though it does not cease to be true when one has achieved one's purpose with its help by attaining salvation.

While moral and spiritual truths are useful (*atthasaṃhitaṃ*) and truth is not defined in terms of utility, it seems to have been held that the claim of a belief to be true ,was to be tested in the light of personally verifiable consequences. Thus the truth of rebirth is to be verified by developing the memory of pre-existence (*pubbenivāsānussati*). Verifiability in the light of experience, sensory and extra-sensory, is considered a characteristic of truth but what is thus claimed to be true is considered to be true only by virtue of its correspondence with fact (*yathabhutam*). Thus verifiability is a test of truth but does not itself constitute truth.

Many of the important truths of Buddhism are considered to lie between two extreme points of view: Extreme realism, which says that "everything exists" (*sabbaṃ atthīti*) is one extreme and extreme nihilism which asserts that nothing exists" (*sabbaṃ natthīti*) is the other extreme—the truth lies in the middle (S II 76). The view of personal immortality (*sassatadiṭṭhi*) is one extreme and the dogma of annihilationism (*ucchedadiṭṭhi*) is the other (S III 60). Similar

antinomies are the materialist conception that the body and the soul are not different and the dualist conception that they are different (S II 60), the determinist thesis that everything is conditioned by past factors (*sabbaṃ pubbekatahetu*) and the indeterminist thesis that nothing is due to causes and conditions (*sabbaṃ ahetu appaccaya,* A I 173), the view that we are entirely personally responsible for our unhappiness and the opposite view that we are not at all responsible for our unhappiness (S II 20), extreme hedonism (*kāmasukhallikānuyoga*) and extreme asceticism (*attakilamathānuyoga*) (S IV 330). In all these instances it is said that the Buddha "without falling into these two extremes the Dhamma in the middle thus the mean between two extreme views is held to be true. The "middle way" (*majjhimā paṭipadā*), which is mean both in the matter of belief as well as of goal is said to "make for knowledge … and bring about intuition and realisation" (M I 15) That these truths lie in the middle seems to be a contingent fact to be discovered empirically.

A distinction that gained currency in the scholastic period but which has its origin in the Canon itself is the contrast between conventional truth (*sammuti sacca*) and absolute truth (*paramattha sacca*). It is said that "just as much as the word 'chariot' is used when the parts are put together in order, there is the conventional use (*sammuti*) of the term 'being' when the psycho-physical constituents are present" (S I 135). The statement "there is a being" is true in reference to a person only in the conventional sense, for there is no

entity or substance (soul), in reality corresponding to the word "being." Therefore, it would be false, or meaningless, to say "there is a being" in an absolute sense. The reality of the empirical individual is not denied. The Buddha is quite emphatic on this point. In the Potthapada Sutta, where the question is discussed, he approves of his interlocutor's statement: "I did exist in the past, not that I did not, I will exist in the future, not that I will not, and I do exist in the present, not that do not" (D I 200). Only it does not make sense to speak of a substantial soul or entity in the absolute sense since such a soul or entity is not verifiable. We can compare this distinction with the contrast that is sometimes made by scientists between the conventional commonsense point of view and the scientific point of view. As a scientist says, "the kitchen sink, like all the objects surrounding us, is a convenient abstraction." **[18]**

The Contribution of Buddhism to Philosophic Thought

by

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Ten or fifteen years from now, if I am still in the land of the living, I shall hope to write something more substantial on

this topic. To do so would require that one achieve a broad perspective on the history of thought in the West and in the East, and that one adequately assess the long-run significance of Buddhism with its various schools when viewed in such a perspective. What I offer in this paper is my best present surmise as to the main conclusions that more sustained and mature reflection would approve.

In developing this anticipatory surmise I shall sketch four ideas, each of which seems to me highly likely to play an important part in such an assessment. With one partial exception, I believe that these ideas were present in Gautama's own philosophy. And, so far as I can tell, they were original with him in the form in which I shall describe them and in their significant challenge to philosophy. I do not wholly agree with all of them; what I mean in emphasizing them is that philosophers, especially in the West, need to ponder them with utmost seriousness; no philosophy which has failed to understand them and to meet their challenge can hope to stand.

I

The first of these ideas is that philosophy, in its investigations, its analyses, and its explanations, must start from where we are rather than from somewhere else. Now, when expressed in such a general form, this idea is far from

unique with Buddhism. Much Chinese thinking, especially in the Confucian tradition, assumes this principle, and what the West calls "empirical" philosophy has consciously accepted it. One of the questions confidently asked by empiricists through the centuries is: "Where else can we start than from experience?"

But human experience is so defective and untidy in so many ways, that keen thinkers in every age have been sorely tempted to start with something else, something neater, simpler, more rational, more perfect and to conceive experience as the product of this something else. Different schools of thinkers succumb to this temptation in different ways; let us briefly review a few of them.

Religious thinkers wish to begin (and also to end) with God, or Brahman. Convinced as they are that he alone, is eternally real and that all else in existence depends on him, this seems to them the only reasonable conclusion to draw. It is presumptuous, they will admit, for man in his finitude to assume that he can see things from the standpoint of the Ultimate; yet, since an explanation from that standpoint would alone be true, one must make the best attempt that one can. Thinkers who incline toward materialism wish to start with the atoms—the simple units which are the building blocks of the physical universe—together with the modes of their combination. These, they are sure, last forever, while all the experienced-compounds that arise from them sooner or later pass away. Thinkers who find their haven in the realm of logic and mathematics wish to

start with the abstract entities and the fully rational laws there revealed. They do not see how the world of experience can be analyzed or explained in any other way than in terms of this logical structure.

Nonetheless, is there any reason to suppose that experience must submit to any of these demands? It is what it is, and if we wish to understand we must avoid imposing any dubious requirements upon it, however reasonable those requirements might seem to be.

It is at just this point that the Buddha's interpretation of the principle: "Let us start from where we are," is peculiarly challenging. Chinese acceptance of the axiom never quite worked free from limitations due to the Chinese cultural heritage; it was frankly or subtly pervaded by the conviction that experience as we now confront it is a lapse from the Golden Age of Yao and Shun and needs to recover that lost ideal. Western philosophies of experience have been haunted by provincial and transitory notions of what sort of process experience is. Hume—the most influential empirical thinker of the past—thought it must be a temporal sequence of "impressions" and "ideas," as he conceived those mental phenomena. More recent empiricists have reduced experience to "sense data" in their relational patterns, boldly assuming all that is involved in this complex and questionable concept.

As I interpret him, Gautama realized quite clearly that "starting where we are" cannot be a purely passive

principle like that of Western empiricism, but must express an active interpretation of experience. He realized also that if it is to give effective guidance it must be freed so far as possible from any limitations of time or place. Experience must be conceived in universal human terms—in terms of factors that are basic in the daily living of people everywhere and always. What this meant concretely in his mind was twofold. On the one hand, we must approach experience as an uniqualifiedly dynamic affair incapable of being understood in relation to any static goal or any fixed structural forms. On the other hand, we must approach it as a process in which men and women are groping toward the conditions of stable and secure well-being, away from the confused mixture of suffering, numbness, frustration, and transitory happiness in which they now exist. He was confident that sound axioms of analysis and of explanation would grow out of the confrontation of experience in these terms, and in no other way.

I am sure that the challenge of this idea has by no means been fully appreciated, either by the philosophies of the East or by those of the West. So far as the West is concerned, the notion of starting where we are has been so deeply affected by the assumptions of empirical science that attempts to conceive experience in any richer and more inclusive way have faced almost insuperable handicaps. So far as India is concerned, it has been impossible for most of her philosophic minds to escape from domination by the fixed conviction that since Brahman is the only unqualified

reality, experience must somehow be explained or construed in relation to it. Many among them will admit that this quest cannot hope to succeed—all our categories of interpretation apply within the phenomenal world but not to the relation between that world and the transcendent reality. They will also admit that even if it could succeed, the explanation reached would have meaning only to the saints who have realized union with Brahman; but they need no explanation, they have left behind the state in which searching for a logical system to encase the world is an insistent demand. It is not a bold conclusion then that the Buddha's position will continue to exert a profound challenge until both Western and Eastern philosophies have taken its claims more soberly into account than they thus far have.

II

The second of these four ideas is the one usually referred to as Buddha's agnosticism with respect to metaphysical problems—his deep conviction that one should avoid attachment to any particular solution of these issues, and that when we need to refer to what lies beyond present experience it should be in terms of its contrast with what experience discloses rather than in terms of supposedly common factors.

The very provocative challenge of this idea is brought out most sharply when one considers it in relation to the points of view in Western thought that have most nearly filled a similar role—namely, the agnosticism of the last seventy-five years, the skepticisms of earlier philosophy, and the doctrine that in view of the limits of rational knowledge some form of faith is ultimately valid. .

Late nineteenth century agnosticism, as represented by T. H. Huxley, was a consequence of assuming the exhaustive competence of empirical science so far as knowledge is concerned. The only knowledge man can attain (so it was firmly believed) is the knowledge that is verifiable by science; hence in the case of metaphysical and theological questions, that by their very nature lie beyond such verification, the only justifiable position is to hold that we cannot know which answer to them is the true one. The positivism of our century rests on the same foundations, but adopts the more extreme contention that these questions are not merely unanswerable but are even senseless. A question whose scientific verification is impossible is no genuine question; it is just a series of words. As for the skeptics of ancient and of early modern times, they did not restrict their drastic criticism to trans-empirical matters; the more redoubtable among them, at least, believed it possible to undermine any conclusions drawn by reason. And in their case there seems to have been no positive insight to which this devastating criticism was expected to lead. With those who have been eager to limit rational knowledge so as to

leave room for religious faith, there is the necessity of facing a difficult dilemma. Either the faith is entirely discontinuous with the operations of reason, in which case the acceptance of one form of faith, rather than another, would seem to be a purely blind commitment; or also it is continuous with them, in which case the positive relation between faith and knowledge needs to be clearly defined. Religious thinkers in the West have found it very hard to formulate a persuasive position with regard to this dilemma. The Buddha's agnosticism, I believe, is different from any of these viewpoints and avoids the specific difficulties that each of them confronts.

I find no adequate support for the conclusion that Gautama condemned speculative thinking as such. His agnosticism was the expression of three fundamental convictions. First, here was the conviction implied by the major idea above described, that beliefs about questions lying beyond experience are irrelevant to the real problems of life, and if our minds worry about them attention is inevitably distracted from the issues on which we crucially need a solution. We need to understand ourselves in our aspiration to end suffering and to find the dependable conditions of well-being; it will take all the intellectual energy we possess to carry out successfully this task. He was sure, therefore, that he must discourage those whose keenness of mind tempts them into metaphysical speculation from wasting their precious powers in this fashion.

Second, there was the conviction, constantly confirmed by

observation, that those who become attached to this or that metaphysical doctrine tend to make dogmatic claims for it and to engage in argumentative wrangling with those who hold a different position. Now, on the one hand, it seemed to him clear that this unhappy outcome is unavoidable, once one devotes oneself to answering these questions; thinkers will be enticed by different theories about them, and since they are trans-empirical there is no way of establishing objectively one proposed solution as against others. On the other hand, it was clear that this outcome, far from leading toward release from self-centred craving, reveals an unfortunate form of bondage to it. Such a situation shows that metaphysical doctrines are intrinsically incapable of being asserted in serenity and compassion, and if this is the case they should not be asserted at all. Only the truth that can be spoken in love—the truth that ends discord rather than fosters it is really truth.

Third, there was the final conviction that even when these difficulties are avoided any attempt to refer in positive terms to that which transcends our present experience is bound to be misleading, and to show effects which will obstruct our quest for liberation. A person who is fully thinking of starting from where we are, and is also ready to centre his intellectual powers on the real problem of life, finds that at one point he will need to speak of that which lies beyond experience, and to relate it in the most clarifying fashion he can to experience as we now find ourselves immersed in it. He will need a term by which to refer to the

goal toward which spiritual growth is leading; he must answer questions as to what it is that will have been achieved when the process of liberation is complete. But even at this point serious difficulties arise if such questions are answered in positive terms. Shall he say that peace will have been achieved, or joy, or love? To say this would be true, not false. However, to say it would be misleading—and perhaps seriously so. Anyone to whom it is said will inevitably interpret the meaning of these words in the light of his experience to date. But if he is still in bondage to blind and selfish craving the meaning he will give them is infected throughout by that bondage. He will think of peace as the hoped-for quiescence achieved when his longings have been satisfied; he will imagine joy as the pleasurable concomitant of such a state; love will mean his devoted attachment to this or that person whose help he needs in the quest for these satisfactions. The radically different qualities that these words would denote to one who has achieved liberation are completely beyond him. But what would happen if, under these circumstances, he were encouraged to dwell hopefully on these words, and to indulge freely in the images they suggest to his mind? He would try more zealously than ever to satisfy his immature desires and thus to realize these goals as he now pictures them, instead of being inspired to strive toward the superior state that can be achieved only when such desires are laid aside. For this reason the true goal must be described in negative terms—it is *Nirvana*. Not *Nirvana* in the sense of utter extinction, but

Nirvana as the state in which the blind, demanding turmoil that has enslaved the person seeking liberation has been rooted out.

On Buddha's carefully considered presuppositions there is no escape from a thorough-going agnosticism in this form. Perhaps the philosophic world will find that he was right.

III

The third of these ideas grows directly out of this agnosticism. I shall put it in the form of a paradoxical question. Is the only sound philosophy a form of no-philosophy? So far as I can tell, nothing quite comparable to this idea has appeared in the West. The ancient skeptics, who exemplified something verbally similar, did not share the further insight that is essential to this idea in its Buddhist guise; nor does Ludwig Wittgenstein, who in his famous *Tractatus* holds that all one can really do in relation to other philosophers is to wait till they say something and then show that they have actually said nothing. [19] And, so far as I can tell also, this idea was not definitely adopted by Gautama himself. In him we meet an approach to it in the silence that he sometimes maintained in the presence of metaphysical questionings—at least when the meaning of that silence is considered in relation to his readiness to deal with all inquirers on their own ground. This readiness

betokened a remarkable capacity to probe their perplexities in full awareness of individual differences and thus in a way most likely to be helpfully clarifying to each person. The idea comes before us, fully grown and articulate only in the *Madhyamika* Philosophy of Nāgārjuna and his great successors.

Granted the basic Buddhist assumptions, what is the real task of philosophy? It cannot be, of course, what most philosophers have supposed, namely to reach solutions to speculative questions. In general terms the answer is that its function is to contribute, in the way systematic intellectual analysis can, to the guidance of seekers for ultimate liberation. But how should it do this with specific reference to the great issues that philosophers perennially raise? As I interpret the *Madhyamika* thinkers, they are confident that they understand the reason for his way of dealing with metaphysical questions and are revealing it more fully than he did. Their crucial conviction here is a very simple one. It is that the quest for a positive answer to puzzles about the nature of reality is not an expression of the aspiration towards spiritual perfection; however subtle the disguise may be, it is an exhibition of compulsive demands that need to be overcome, not satisfied. These demands are characteristic of intellectually keen minds; they represent the kind of obstruction to the full achievement of liberation to which such minds are peculiarly apt to succumb.

What then should be done about these speculative cravings? Essentially, to discourage those who are seduced by them

from expecting their satisfaction, and to entice them to seek instead the kind of spiritual insight that needs no rational articulation and is, indeed, capable of none. This, of course, cannot be accomplished by a hostile attack on their transcendental searching, so natural to persons of great logical power, nor by a refutation of their major conclusions which rests on some alternative set of theoretical assumptions. Such attacks would only provoke them to a more ardent attachment to the obstructive notions that symbolize and express their enslavement. What this programme calls for is, rather, that one compassionately places oneself within the framework in which one's self-deceptive thinking moves, and show, by a fuller logical unfolding of their premises than because of their bondage they could achieve, that there are inherent contradictions in all the explanatory categories that they confidently employ.

To carry out such a task of internal criticism requires that the thinker pursuing it, on the one hand, shows himself as competent in systematic philosophical analysis as those whom he is criticizing, and that, on the other hand, having attained a deeper level of spiritual insight, so that his radical criticisms may express the loving understanding without which their constructive promise would be lost. And it means also, that, in intent at least, he is setting up no alternative philosophical system in place of the refuted systems of others. Were he to do this he would himself have fallen prey to the temptations that have misled those whose doctrines and hopes he has swept away.

I can think of no more searching challenge to philosophers of the West than is contained in this idea; and thinkers of the East also need to square themselves more profoundly with it than most of them as yet have done.

IV

The fourth of these ideas is one which underlies each of the other three, and hence may be stated quite briefly. This is the idea that theoretical inquiry is not independent of practical action, as keen thinkers are prone to suppose, but is itself one factor in human action—the factor in virtue of which any action can be consciously guided instead of expressing a purely blind urge.

Now the West has produced pragmatic philosophers who have stressed this principle, and Eastern thought has been influenced by it to a very large extent. But I believe that in his way of conceiving it Gautama caught a rather distinctive insight, which not too many even among His own followers have fully shared. The pragmatism of John Dewey, a generation ago in the West, expressed a clear insistence that theory is one aspect of practice, whose role is to give it intelligent guidance, but in Dewey this insight, reflected the limitations of his time and place. Especially was it confined by the orientation of Western empirical science and by the social reforms that in Dewey's mind constitute the only

sound goals of practical action. In the East this kind of limitation has, of course, been absent. Nonetheless, most non-Buddhist modes of thought, and not a few Buddhist ones, have been captive to traditional Eastern notions as to what sort of thing practical action must be and how intellectual inquiry is related to it.

It seems to me that Gautama's insight here included two features, one of which was expressed in clearer and more radical form than his predecessors had given it, and the other was probably original with him. As for the former, I am thinking of the thoroughly dynamic conception of experience, and, therefore, of human action that has already been mentioned. One consequence of this conception was that intellectual searching itself is interpreted in terms of this dynamic framework; far from being the halting expression within finite experience of a changeless transcendent consciousness, it exhibits the interaction of the same combining and separating forces that other modes of action reveal.

As for the latter feature, I believe Gautama must have apprehended a principle whose implications for a theory of truth are, at least, equally radical. Certainly his own compassionate action, in relation to inquirers who came to him, was constantly guided by this principle. It grows out of the recognition that whatever one says to another person, whether one is aware of it or not, has practical effects in the experience and action of that person. In particular, it either has the effect of eliciting his constructive capacities and

fostering his growth toward spiritual freedom, or the contrary effect of confusing his emotions, dulling his aspiration, and stimulating his attachment to deceptive beliefs. Now so far as a speaker has gained liberation himself, he will be alertly aware of these effects, and his dominant motive will be so to speak, in everyone's presence, as to express a compassionate concern for the listener's dynamic growth toward unfettered well-being. All his philosophic thinking and every item in its verbal expression will be guided by this concern; it will be a part of the discovering, exploring, creative action which his whole experience in relation to every living creature will exemplify.

This idea is the most searching and challenging of the four I have sketched. Its drastic implication for philosophy may be succinctly stated in the principle that truth must be a dynamic and loving truth if it is to be truth at all.

In conclusion, I do not feel sure at present what qualification in the case of each of these ideas are needed if they are to enter into the enduring deposit of man's philosophic reflection. But I do feel sure that such qualifications will only be accurately formulated when thinkers, both Eastern and Western, have pondered these ideas with the deepest sensitivity and the most adventurous vision of which they are capable.

Notes

1. *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1 p. 858
2. *Indian Thought and its Development*, p. 117
3. *Buddhism*, pp. 185-186
4. *Decline of the West*, Pt. I, p. 356
5. *History of Indian Philosophy*, IT, p. 399
6. See DN 16, 18, 19
7. *Religion and Science*, p. 237
8. *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas*, pp. 4, 18, 19; *Ethical Relativity*, p. 220
9. See my Introduction to Tachibana's *Ethics of Buddhism* (Colombo 1961, Bauddha Sahitya Sabha)
10. H. G. Wells, *A Short History of the World*, Penguin Books, 1945, p. 90
11. Ed. Robert O. Ballou. *The Pocket World Bible*, London. 1948, p. 3
12. "… Gautama Buddha, who taught his disciples at Benares in India about the same time that Isaiah was prophesying among the Jews in Babylon …", H. G. Wells,

op. cit., p.90

13. The author has made a comprehensive study of the epistemology of Buddhism in a book entitled *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (Motilal Banarsidass, pp. 550).

14. *The Way to Nirvana*, Cambridge University Press, 1917, p. iii.

15. A. Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach to Religion*, O.U.P., 1956, p. 77

16. *Vide* K. N. Jayatilleke, "A Recent Criticism of Buddhism" in *Aspects of Buddhist Social Philosophy*, **Wheel No. 128/129**)

17. *Bouddhisme,* Third Ed., Paris, 1925. p.129

18. Sherman K. Stein, *Mathematics*, W.H.Freeman & Co., San Francisco and London, 1963.

19. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London, 1922, P. 187

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Table of Contents