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Concept and Meaning

Two Essays

Charles F. Knight
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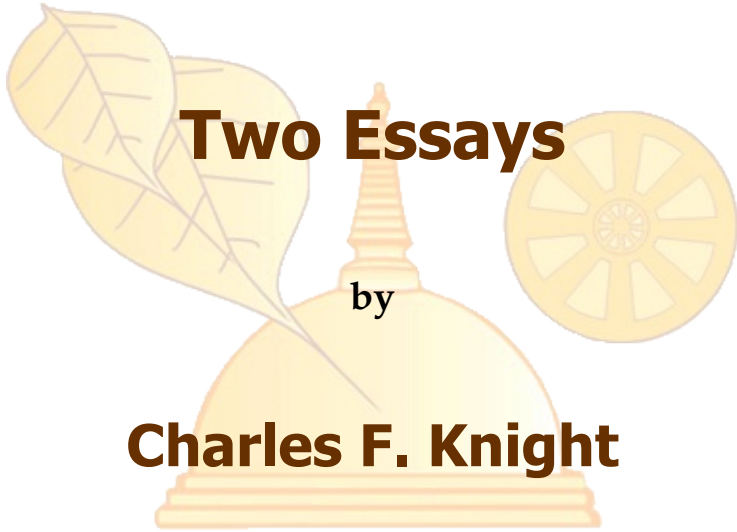

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by

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The Delusive Concept

C. F. Knight

Few people realise to how great an extent their whole lives and thought-processes are dominated by concepts. The concept is a general notion or idea arising through one or more of the senses, which is then reduced to terms of language after a mental classification.

We are confronted with a phenomenon, and through one or more of the senses it is noticed as an object. The mind receives the sense-impression, proceeds to investigate it, and comes to a decision in regard to it which may lead to impulsive non-volitional action, or to deliberate volitional action, and then the incident is registered as a memory and sinks down into the subconscious—and so a concept is born. In future, a word or words will be used to describe the experience.

Suppose that in our travels we come upon a mass of water confined by its banks. The senses react to the object. Through visual-consciousness its presence is impressed on the mind. The mind investigates it visually, and if it is flowing, we say it is a river, or if so surrounded by its banks

that it cannot flow, we say it is a pond. Both "river" and "pond" are conceptual expressions to convey our sense impressions and experience, and to differentiate between flowing water and confined water. "River" and "pond" have become concepts of a mass of water under different conditions, and imply a permanently fixed identity of that particular phenomenon. Even when during drought the "river" no longer flows, the concept of "river" still holds good—it is not a "pond" or a "waterhole,"

But the concept is superficial and has no relation to reality. It is at best delusive, deceptive, unreal and disappointing, in the light and knowledge of reality. As an enduring, unchanging, entity the "river" is non-existent! You might say: "What about the Nile? It has been there for thousands of years." But the Nile of today is not the Nile of yesterday, let alone the Nile of the Pharaohs. It is ever in the process of arising and passing away. Its banks are eroding here and building up elsewhere. Its bed is being scoured out here and shallows formed there. Its waters change from moment to moment. The concept of "the River Nile" is reduced to a convenient conversational phrase empty of reality—its name no more than a label given to a part of a process which is in a continual state of flux and impermanency.

Even the names we give to our concepts are merely designations in common use amongst our particular language group. Our senses register a phenomenon and we say "I saw a cat," or "I saw a cow," "I bought a vegetable-marrow," or "I ate a banana." If we were to ask a Japanese, a

German, a Malay, or Hindu, what they were, none would reply with our conceptual label. Each would have their own label for the same phenomenon common to all.

A child might have a Meccano set and today so assemble the bits and pieces as to build a crane. Again, we get a concept from the arrangement of the parts which we label "a crane." Tomorrow, with the same bits and pieces, he assembles them in the form of a building, and we say he has built a "house," another conceptual label for a different arrangement of the parts that yesterday we called a crane. Next he assembles them as a table and chairs—more labels. While the toy was a crane it was neither a house nor furniture. While it was a house it was neither a crane nor furniture. While it was a table and chairs it was neither a crane nor a house. The concept and name only applies to the form of the moment, and has no relationship to reality—in this case a box of links and ties. Spread them out on the table and they are neither crane, house, nor furniture.

At one time an inquirer who was troubled as to the reality of past and future lives asked of the Buddha if past, present, and future personalities were all real to a man, or only one of them. The Buddha questioned him: "If people were to ask you thus: "Were you in the past'? Will you be in the future? Are you now?'—how would you answer them?"

"I would say I was in the past; I shall be in the future; I am now', said Citta.

The Buddha continued: "If they rejoined, 'Well, that past

personality that you had, is that real to you, and the future and present unreal?' (and so with the other two variations), how would you answer?"

"I would say that the past personality was real to me at the time when I had it, and the others unreal, and so also with the other two cases," replied Citta.

"Just so, Citta, when any one of the three modes of personality is going on, then it does not come under the category of the other two.

"Just as from a cow, comes milk, from milk curds, from curds butter, from butter ghee. When it is milk it is not called curds, butter, or ghee, and when it is called curds, it is not called by any other name.

"Just so when any one of the three modes of personality is going on, it is not called by the name of the other. These are merely names, expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world, and of these the Tathāgata makes use indeed, but *is not led astray by them.*

To Citta the concept of personality, past, present or future, was real, or would be real, at the time he had it, but it was no more stable as a reality than milk, curds, butter, or ghee. To speak of "personality," whether past, present, or future, is merely a designation in common use in the world, a name to be used for conventional purposes when referring to the particular part of a process of arising and passing away of an unstable flux. The Buddha was not led astray by such terms or expressions, he even used them at times for

conventional purposes, knowing them for what they were—merely turns of speech.

However, unlike the Buddha, many *are* led astray by them, failing to see the reality behind the appearance, for appearances are proverbially deceptive. That this should be so is rather remarkable in the sense that we readily accept the progressive concepts of a baby, a child, a youth, a young man, an old man, and finally a corpse. Yet, denying the evidences of our senses and lacking in insight, we persist in the concept of 'personality' as an ego-entity, a stable reality. To revert to our concept of a river, and use it as an analogy, we would stop its flow and create a pond!

So then, our concepts of material and physical phenomena obscure the reality underlying them. We are deceived by either the rapidity, or the imperceptibility of the constant change they are undergoing, but at least the river, the pond, the crane, the house, the table and chairs, or the human body have the *appearance* of stability, which lays the basis for incorrectly assuming their permanency.

When we come to concepts of a mental, or abstract nature, however, we are more than ever prone to be deceived, for these are of our own mental construction. They have, as it were, a built-in pattern of our own making, and man is loathe to admit self-deception.

We arrive at some of these concepts by a method of deduction. Morality and immorality, happiness and sorrow, good and evil, actions which are worthy or unworthy,

characteristics to be proud or ashamed of, are to a great extent very personal concepts. Apart from early training and instruction we each have our own concept of what is 'right' and what is 'wrong', of what will bring us happiness and what will bring us sorrow, and so on. Morals are very largely geographical, and what would pass for conventional behaviour in one place or country has a different moral value in another. Few individuals subscribe entirely to any set pattern of behaviour common to their community. We deduce from the resultant sense-pleasure or dissatisfaction as to whether a thing is right or wrong, and our concept of happiness is based on our concept of the cause of happiness. That these concepts can be illusions is well illustrated by the failure of most people to realise the all-pervasiveness of Dukkha. To such the pursuit of sense-pleasures is the ultimate happiness, and the true serenity that comes with detachment has no appeal for them. Their concept of happiness is an illusion as time proves.

Then again, man has been endowed with the faculty of imagination—another prolific source of concepts. Imagination is a creative faculty of the mind enabling it to form images not present to the senses, and having no real existence, but assumed to exist for a special purpose. Gods and devils, heavens and hells, are concepts created by imagination, endowed with suppositional powers for a specific purpose. Not understanding the natural phenomena of nature, such as thunder and lightning, earthquakes and hurricanes, eclipses of the sun and moon, etc., man

conceived a supernatural being as the author or agency responsible for the phenomena, to be appeased or supplicated in times of need or distress. From this concept grew up a multitude of other concepts. There was the benign god and the malicious devil. There were their respective abodes, heaven or hell under different names and of different conceptual structure. John of Patmos in the Book of Revelations gives a detailed conception of the Christian heaven, which is as different from the Norse abode of Wodan as it in turn is from the Paradise of the Moslem, but all of them are mental concepts assumed to exist, but born of the imagination of man. In time the faculties and functions of the god gradually became personified concepts, and the result was trinities and an expansion to a pantheon of lesser gods and goddesses—all on a no more substantial basis than the fertile imagination of man. Thus we have concept on concept, and concepts of concepts!

The most persistent concept that lingers on when many others have disappeared under the light of science and reason is the concept of the "soul." With the conceptual creation of gods and heavens, devils and hells, it was a natural progression to the conceptual creation of a disembodied spirit to reap the rewards and punishments according to its deserts. Here again the concepts are as varied as the religions which hold to the existence of a "soul," and its origin is equally wrapped in mystery. Of all the concepts of a "soul" the ancient Indian concept of it being a spark or fragment of the Godhead, from which it

came and to which it eventually returned, was the most plausible. The least plausible, that held by many, that an indestructible eternal 'something' is 'created'—having a beginning but no end! Perhaps it is for these reasons that many Westerners who have rejected orthodoxy have turned to Vedanta, therein finding a more logical basis on which to build their concept of a "soul."

However, again, once more, in the Indian belief we come up against the concept of a "soul" or supramundane "self" being derived from the concept of a Godhead—as before, one concept giving birth to another concept.

In the third volume of the Saṃyutta-Nikāya there are many extracts from the Buddha's teachings where he is at great pains to make clear that the aggregates of existence -that is, the body, feelings, perception, mental activities, and consciousness—are impermanent and liable to suffering. Of them he says:

"What is impermanent, that is suffering. What is suffering, that is not the Self'. What is not the Self, that is not mine, that am I not, that is not the Self of me." The translators give us "Self" with a capital "S," inferring "soul" or "ego-entity."

Of the untaught, undiscerning, unskilled, and untrained, the Buddha says, such regard the body as the Self; or maybe regard the Self as possessing body; or the body as being in the Self; or the Self as being in the body; or he regards the feelings, perceptions, mental activities, and consciousness in the same four ways; or regards the Self as existing separate

and apart from the aggregates of existence.

But, says the Buddha, suffering still exists, and what is suffering cannot be the Self. "But whosoever holds not views of this sort about the impermanent body, the sorrow-fraught, the unstable, feelings, perceptions, activities, and consciousness, what are they but seers of what really is." They are those who have destroyed the concept of a "Self" or soul, and through insight, see things as they really are.

In the Dīgha-Nikāya is the story of Poṭṭhapāda. He had been listening to learned Brahmins discussing and disagreeing as to the how, when, and whereabouts of this soul in which they believed, and Poṭṭhapāda had his own concept regarding what he regarded as his soul. The Buddha gave him a lengthy discourse in refutation of the opinions of the Brahmins, some of whom had contended that it was consciousness that was a man's soul. At last Poṭṭhapāda , who apparently had not fully understood the Buddha when he had shown that consciousness could not be the soul, asks whether, then, consciousness is one thing and the soul another, for the Brahmins held that when the soul comes into a man be becomes conscious, and when his soul leaves him he becomes unconscious.

There is almost a note of exasperation in the Buddha's rejoinder: "But then, Poṭṭhapāda, do you really fall back on the soul?" (after all that I have just explained.)

Poṭṭhapāda assures the Buddha that he does have the concept of a material soul, which he takes for granted.

But if there were such a soul, Poṭṭhapāda, then even so your consciousness would be one thing and your soul another. Suppose you did have a soul, some ideas and states of consciousness would arise and others pass away, so that consciousness which is impermanent must be one thing and the soul another."

Poṭṭhapāda changes his ground and hypothesis, or concept. If he has not a material soul, maybe he has a soul made of mind. The Buddha reminds him that mind, too, is impermanent, and therefore it cannot be the soul.

For the third time Poṭṭhapāda postulates a soul, this time a soul with form made of consciousness, and again the Buddha replies that the same previous arguments would apply.

In final desperation Poṭṭhapāda asks if it is possible for him to ever understand the soul, and the Buddha replies:

"Hard it is for you, Poṭṭhapāda, to grasp this matter, holding as you do different views, other things approving themselves to you, setting different aims before yourself, striving after a different perfection, trained in a different system of doctrine!"

And that brings us right up to date with many people it the West who know "Where the Buddha erred," or where the many millions of his followers have failed to understand his doctrine of "no-Self" (Anattā). These products of a different system of doctrine, holding different views, maybe even striving after a different perfection, have a closed mind to

any doctrine that threatens their concept of a soul. To them their concept is a reality, and no one is going to be allowed to shake their faith in its existence. When even the Buddha was defeated by Poṭṭhapāda's inability, or unwillingness, to see any view but the one in which he was trained, we can take heart and realise that until such people are ready to let go of their preconceived concepts, and open their minds to the Dhamma, argument or discussion will be of no avail. We can but offer the Dhamma, as did the Buddha, hoping that some point made some day will destroy the false concept and lead them to being "seers of what really is."

In the Saṃyutta-Nikāya the Buddha has this to say:

'This world usually bases its views on two things: on existence and non-existence. Everything exists: this is one extreme. Nothing exists: this is the other extreme. Overcoming these two extremes the Tathāgata teaches you the Doctrine of the Middle Way." This is a continual becoming and passing away. Where all is changing from becoming to passing no constant entities can be found.

Once more referring to the Scriptures, this time to the Majjhima-Nikāya, the Buddha is discoursing on false views, and says:

"An ordinary uninstructed person who takes no account of the wise teachers, unskilled and untrained in the Dhamma, lives with his mind obsessed by a false view as to 'own body', overcome by it he does not comprehend the escape, as it really is, from the false view that has arisen. That false

view of his, resistant, not dispelled, is a fetter binding him to the hither shore. He lives with his mind obsessed by perplexity, obsessed by clinging to rites and customs, obsessed by attachment to sense-pleasures, obsessed by malevolence. These are fetters binding him to the hither shore.

And what is the way, what the course for getting rid of these five fetters? By aloofness from clinging, by getting rid of the unskilled states of mind, by allaying every bodily impropriety, aloof from pleasures of the sense, aloof from unskilled states of mind, he enters and abides in the first meditation which is accompanied by initial thought and discursive thought, is rapturous and joyful. Whatever there is of material shape, feeling, perception, mental activities, and consciousness—he beholds these things as impermanent, suffering, a misfortune, an affliction, as decay, empty and not-self. He turns his mind from these things. He focuses his mind on the deathless element, thinking: "This is real, this is the excellent, the tranquillizing of all the activities, the casting out of all clinging, the destruction of craving, dispassion, stopping, Nibbāna."

Ānanda, to whom the Buddha had been speaking, then asked:

"If this is the way, revered sir, the course for getting rid of the five fetters, then how is it that some there are who have found freedom through knowledge, and others there are who have found freedom through intuitive wisdom?"

The Buddha replied: “As to this, Ānanda, I say there is a difference in their faculties.”

This closing statement of the Buddha’s is most interesting, for there are some who claim that insight can only be won by meditation. It is true that learning cannot take the place of insight, because learning affords only more concepts and still more concepts, but learning can lead to knowledge, and knowledge can lead to perceiving the unreality of the concept. Nevertheless, of primary importance is the purifying of the mind if insight is to be won. Then there must be the desire for knowledge of reality. There also must be the preparation of the mind in order to gain insight, and there must be the patient and persistent endeavour to analyse the concept till its unreality is perceived by initial, or original, and discursive thought.

If we are to become “seers of what really is,” then we must destroy the false concepts that are blinding us, must see them as figments of our own most fertile imagination behind and beyond which Reality exists.

From *Metta* (Australia)

The Search for Meaning

Carlo Gragnani

> Man is dominated neither by the will-to-pleasure (Freud) nor by the will-to-power (Adler) but by the will-to-meaning."
>
> (Victor Frankl)

I look into the distance, I can see something, but what is it? It seems that I cannot be satisfied with the "it" that I can see: I want to know the "what," that is to say, the meaning. The knowledge of the meaning puts a stop to my curiosity; at least temporarily, since meanings are fathomless; there is always a deeper meaning.

But what is, really, a meaning? Whatever it is, it belongs to a constellation in which concepts, ideas, objects, words participate.

A concept is a group of elements which particular entities have in common—chair, table, pain, pleasure, honour, democracy and what not, are concepts. "Chair" for instance evokes an infinite number of objects, each one having

distinctive features which make it unique, nevertheless sharing with all others, common characteristics.

Concepts allow man to think and to talk in general without making reference to any single object. If concepts did not exist, I couldn't even ask for a steak in a restaurant. It is true that sometimes the waiter brings me something which barely resembles a steak; and this is tantamount to saying that frequently concepts have no well defined boundaries. But it would be stretching the point too far if, having ordered a steak, I found the sole of a shoe on my plate.

The group of elements which certain objects have in common, and which constitute a concept, points to the fundamental, to the basic use these objects are put to. For example, the fundamental use of certain types of objects called chairs is to sit on them. Certainly, I can sit on many other objects, on the step of a stair, for instance. But in these cases I would not utilise these objects for the main purpose they have been made for. In their turn, chairs, although made to sit on, may be used for a variety of purposes, even for hanging oneself.

Now, to say fundamental *use* is tantamount to saying fundamental *meaning.* The meaning is nothing else than the use we put things to. A gift I received recently was meaningless as long as I was unable to discover its usefulness; eventually I found out that it was a pepper-grinder (in disguise) and immediately it became meaningful for me.

We have seen that objects may have other uses apart from the fundamental one, that is to say that an object may have many meanings; the fundamental meaning of a car is to be a means of communication—to be fit for transporting people or goods is what is required from an object in order to be classified under the concept *car*. But the car of Mr. Brown has for him also the meaning to create envy in his neighbours. And this meaning may be so important as to override the fundamental one. He may even go so far as to buy a second or third-hand car, very imposing, although barely mobile, just to display it, highly polished, in front of his house.

Another aspect of "meanings" is that they may exist in the abstract or in the concrete. They exist in the abstract when we think or talk about them without any object being present, (void meanings). We may have a conversation about music, democracy, love, religion in general. But for a meaning to exist in concrete, an object must be present: a melody to be heard, a house to be seen . . . The meaning is fulfilled, so to speak, by the presence of the object.

The fulfilment of a meaning asks for conditions. To experience a melody it is necessary that the succession of sounds be neither too fast, nor too slow. Besides, the hearer has to be at an appropriate distance from the source of the sounds. Similarly, to see a house, one should be neither too near nor too distant from it. Space and time conditions are therefore necessary, or, in other words, one must be in focus for a concrete meaning to appear.

Even when the object of a meaning is as intangible as a feeling, one must be in focus for the meaning to appear. For an insulting word to be *concretely* insulting to me, I have, so to speak to be attuned to this. If I am not in a receptive mood, the word misses the target, that is actual offence.

Concepts, objects, meanings do not need words to exist. They are present even at the pre-verbal level. Words are not necessary in order to come into contact with objects and meanings. A dog knows very well what is the meaning of signs, as forerunners of events. However, words are necessary to convey concepts, meanings, to talk about them in the abstract, in general.

But the function of words goes far beyond their being a means of communication: they also make concepts and meanings much more determined, articulated. They isolate, and cut into the flux of reality much more distinctly than it is possible to do at the pre—verbal level: they go much further in the process of solidification and abstraction. In fact, this process may be realised in different degrees. To be sure, even in a perception I crystallise the very rapid succession of visual sensations into an object—let us say a tree. But when I think or say the word "tree" as a void meaning, I realise the most abstract and remote solidification, because I am really disconnected from any sensory impression.

So, words fix what is instantaneous, fugacious, into something clear, articulate, rational, understandable,

communicable, but highly abstract. The lived process is transcended and transformed at the topmost level. Let us take as an example the following words: "the battle of Waterloo." I can make any sort of reasoning about that: the meaning of the battle, its causes, its effects, how it put an end to an historical era, and so on and so forth. But in fact the so-called battle of Waterloo was nothing else than a conglomeration of single, atomic events; a congeries of people running and shooting. The real battle of Waterloo was probably what Fabrizio Del Dongo (the hero of *La Chartreuse de Parme* by Stendhal) saw of it: a series of episodes having neither head nor tail. Only, we give them unity; we organise them.

Certainly we are bound to use words if we want to communicate. I have just written many words—I cannot do otherwise. Man seems to be condemned to meanings, as Merleau-Ponty used to say.

Nevertheless, if words solidify, they may also have the contrary function. There are words which do not define, rationalise, indicate clear-cut entities, but allude, evoke, stimulate, suggest. We can see this particularly in poetry, where words lose their corporeality, creating between-the lines fluid 'moods of the soul'. This is also the function of religious words, sacred words, magic words.

To consider words only in their capacity of communicating concepts, ideas, meanings, is certainly a great limitation. Words are the most common but also the most mysterious

things in life. They characterise the human species. But to deal with words in general is not the purpose of this article.

Reverting to the connection between words, on the one hand, concepts and meanings, on the other, it is to he noticed that meanings expressed by words are, generally, stable, but not invariable. Probably we would not recognise as tables or chairs what centuries ago were known under these names. Some time ago I was attracted by the title of an article in a daily paper; it read: "The Defence of the Territory." Being born in a period of intense nationalism, this title evoked in me army problems, menaces of war and the like. Since these questions did not seem to be topical, I started reading the article with curiosity. Then I realised that pollution was its subject. Until the 15th century, the word "courtesan" meant a dignified lady living at the court of a king. Some change in the meaning has intervened since those days!

Meanings change not only in time, but in space. Eastern democracy is not the same as Western democracy. The fact is that meanings are social entities, they have social utility. It is not by chance that Eskimos have 30 odd names to denote what we, more generically, call 'snow." Besides, single meanings do not stand by themselves. A meaning is related to many other meanings, each one influencing the others. The meaning of 'marriage," for instance, is different according to whether in a particular social setting there is or is not the possibility of 'divorce." In the latter case, "marriage" alludes to an indissoluble link; in the former,

this characteristic is not present.

The meaning of a word depends also on that of similar words that the speaker or the writer has not selected. If among a series of synonyms I choose one of them, the meaning of the chosen one can be negatively defined as not being that of the words I have discarded.

If I say: "That actress in that film is very *pretty*" the meaning of pretty is established indirectly by my having discarded such synonyms as "lovely," "beautiful," "attractive," "delightful," "pleasing," "charming"…

She is pretty, (and *not* lovely or beautiful etc)

Besides, a meaning is a sediment of previous meanings. As said before, meanings change through time, but in this historical process, something of the old meanings remains in the new ones. We receive meanings from preceding generations, charged with various strata of significances. Before we reach the age of reason, words are already there, centuries old. So, if meanings are the work of Man, Man is also the work of meanings. We are hardly aware of all the meanings of the words we use. This is why, as often as not, what we say is not exactly what we have the intention to say. Sometimes our own words reveal new meanings, even to us. This is particularly the case of the works of art, where more is found than the artist has consciously put into them.

(If, at this point, the reader asks himself in desperation "but what is the meaning of this meaningless talk about meaning?" he would have a glaring, on the spot evidence of

the strength of his drive towards meaning).

So we are constantly looking for meanings. More precisely, we are not satisfied with any meaning, but we try to pass from—so to speak—less meaningful meanings to more meaningful ones. What is that I can see from afar? It is a big dark spot, (which is a meaning, after all),

But I do not stop at that; I approach that dark spot until I recognise a tree, (a meaning much more articulated than "a dark spot"). What is it that I now hear? A noise (poor meaning); I approach and I can hear the voices of two people having a conversation (more articulated meaning); I get nearer and I can hear what they say. (still more articulated meaning). And so on,

We spend our life in search of meanings, including the meaning of life itself.

Meanings are the furniture of the mind. Or, if you like, they are tools we have inherited from our predecessors. Old things, although we have modernised them occasionally. And with these old tools we try to deal with the new—what is going on here and now.

Being in contact with symbols, man is in contact with what is far, and not with what is near. For instance, when man has a desire, he is having a contact with the object of his desire, and not with the desire itself, which after all, is the only present reality. If I stretch out my arm to get something, the stretching of my arm passes unnoticed, my attention being focused on the object to he attained, or even

further, on the state of happiness I expect to emerge from the possession of the object.

So man is bent forward towards a more and more distant future, less and less defined. In the meantime, he does not know where he is putting his feet.

Suppose we pay attention to where we put our feet. Suppose we are aware of the "here" instead of the "there"; of the "it" and not of the "what." Suppose we have an inquisitive mind about the living flux, as it presents itself. Suppose we succeed in letting the past be the past, and the future be the future. Suppose we stop trying to solidify what is not solid. Suppose we see the present as such, and not as a creation of the past or an anticipation of the future. Wouldn't we feel less the need for security? Wouldn't we speculate less about what will come next in this, or another life? Wouldn't we know a bit more about reality? Wouldn't we be less "we"? Then the "it" of "what is it?" would not be overlooked while searching for its "what," of its meaning. We would not be condemned to the proliferation of meanings which are prisons of our own making. But, alas, the most insurmountable barriers are those which do not exist. As long as we voluntarily accept to be the victims of ourselves, there is no salvation. Who or what binds us? What prevents us from being attentive to what we are doing? Why do we not watch our steps?

Being attentive to what we are doing, watching our steps are—the reader would have discovered by now—only

metaphors standing for Buddhist meditation.

Reduced to its essentials (and perhaps simplifying the matter too much) meditation can be defined as *mindfulness* applied to the *that* which happens *now.*

It may be worthwhile to dwell a little on these three words.

To be mindful is to be full of mind, awake, aware, attentive to a presence: the *that*; it is noticing the *that,* acknowledging the *that* and not speculating on it. It is simply feeling, tasting, savouring it; to be alert on how it arises, stays, and disappears giving rise to something else.

The *that* is what happens in the *now*, and these two refer to one another, since the *now* points to the *that* which happens at that very moment.

Of course the *now* is the only time which can be lived. Our life is a succession of *nows.* I can breathe only the now—breathing and not any breathing before or after that. To be sure I can think of my yesterday—breathing and my (presumed) tomorrow-breathing, But this, of course, is not breathing now; it is remembering now and foreseeing now. So, if I pay attention to the now, to each now, it becomes easy for me to come in contact with the correlative *that*; I cannot be mistaken about the *that* (which is very often the case if the now is neglected). For instance, if I am fearful of an atomic war, the *now* tells me that what is present is fear and not the war itself.

But the *now* is paradoxical; in fact, on the one hand we

cannot live but in the *now*; on the other hand, the *now* has no temporal thickness; the present moment slides easily into the past and projects itself into the future. Every meditator knows by experience how difficult it is to catch the immediate present. In fact it is never caught. Just because one tries to catch it, one cannot. The moment one stops trying…

But it is not for these "technical" difficulties that meditation does not come easily.

In fact, the reluctance to meditate is to be found in our disliking to contact the *now* and the connected *that*.

We do not like to be aware of the inescapable fact that we cannot live but in the present. We live in the *now*, of course, but we avoid to be aware of that. The Ego, from its point of view has all the reasons for escaping the *now* which reveals that reality is impermanent, unsatisfactory and devoid of self. The life of the Ego is a continuous escape from that; an unsuccessful escape, to be sure, but an attempt always renewed. And this is the case not only when the *that* is suffering (in the common, empirical sense), but also when it is (supposed) to be agreeable. The Ego is incapable to enjoy anything; as soon as a desired goal is attained, either the pleasure is undermined by the fear of losing the object or the latter becomes duller and duller.

We live our life waiting for something to be over or, like Mr. Micawber, for something to turn up. We would like the present moment to stay (and it doesn't) or to be non-existent

(but here it is).

King Midas couldn't eat because everything he touched was immediately turned into gold. Similarly, man has the greatest difficulties in being aware of the most immediate reality; as soon as his senses come into touch with it, he glides over it, or better, he transforms it into concepts, ideas, something which has a meaning. His primary experiences are, in this way, crystallised, solidified. Man succeeds in making even movement immobile by freezing it into fixed algebraic formulae. Surrounded by rigidities of his own making, man makes himself rigid too. Solidity, rigidity are not only space characteristics: they imply also a temporal connotation, since what is solid is usually durable.

This process does not go without inconveniences, because neither man nor what is around him are stable entities. And it is not easy to fix a flux, nor to make durable what is perishable. If, nevertheless, this feat (doomed to failure) is attempted, there must be some serious reasons. They are nothing else than the desire for security. Security asks for solidity and duration in the widest sense of the words: something to lean on, materially or spiritually.

I would not feel secure in a kaleidoscopic world where nothing would repeat itself. I want to recognise things, I want to identify people and myself too; I want to be sure that what I believe in is true, the Absolute Truth. In short, I want to be an "I," since only under these conditions there is an "I."

The “I” is desire to exist; therefore the “I” is careful to protect itself and it fears to be annihilated. So I worry. Yes; I exist now, but what about tomorrow? In this way I project myself forwards, oblivious of the present, bent on the future, running towards death; the death which I would like to avoid, but nevertheless anticipate, in leading such a deadly existence.

The “I” dislikes death. Would the “I” be happy with an endless time at its disposal? Sometimes it seems that this is the case. But it is because it does not consider the implication of it. If it did, it would be even more appalled at the prospect than at its destiny to be a mortal being.

So, not pleased with either prospect, man believes in another life. A life much better than, but not so very different from this one as to become a “life of another”

A life, therefore, not too much disembodied, not too much angelic, in a place where we would meet our parents, relatives, friends, who however, would be much nicer than they were here. A life without quarrels, without negative feelings, a life which it is better to leave in the vague. If we tried to outline its features in detail, we would run the risk of seeing boredom appear in the background.

So man believes, hopes… But he who hopes, doubts, suffers. What a pretty predicament! It seems that man is his own problem: an impossible problem with a strong desire to solve it.; and that goes on and on until he discovers the real nature of desire, never satisfied, never extinguished,

promising Paradise, leading to Hell.

We have seen what is the meaning of meanings, concepts, words; how man utilises all these "tools" (or language at large) in order to satisfy his impossible desire to be lasting, durable, amongst other lasting, solid, durable entities; how he can discover and be aware of his delusion and why he encounters resistance on the way of this discovery.

From all that we should not jump to the hasty and unarticulated conclusion that language is the demon which keeps man ignorant, whereas the wise man is untainted by that evil.

Against this exceedingly simplified version of reality, it is to be said that language is one of the essential prerogatives of a human being. Language, in all its articulations such as thinking, categorising, distinguishing, is obviously unavoidable in any however primitive human life. Even certain animals have memory, recognise, distinguish this from that, in a word possess a kind of rudimental thinking.

But it is true that under the influence of desire, man, through language, sees reality in a distorted way; in a way which conforms to what he would like it to be.

When reality is properly experienced as in meditation (including awareness of any event which manifests itself in daily life) reality speaks for itself. Then man listens. He listens with all his being, so to speak. He may feel an unpleasant aspect of that reality. But he must accept the LAW which is beyond or above himself. Accepting the

LAW is understanding the LAW in the full sense of the word.

Of course, meditation is not thinking, in the sense of being involved a chain of thoughts. It is awareness. If, for instance, the *that* in the *now* is a bodily pain, to be aware of that is to attend, to feel that sensation and also to acknowledge it by a mental notation: this is "pain"; or simply: "pain" (whereby naming, categorising, thinking, language in short, come into play). That means to stay with pain as long as pain stays with you, to follow its ups and downs. But it is frequent that one goes off at a tangent and thinks: "I have always suffered during my life; how unhappy I have been!." However, supposing that this thought comes into the mind, he who exercises awareness does not indulge in it or try to chase it away, but, instead, he acknowledges the appearance of a thought, noticing its mental essence, the connected feelings and so on.

Such are the complex interconnections between meditation, awareness and language.

One can name truth or phantasms. Words can be faithful symbols or deceptive ones.

But words of truth are not awareness of truth. Reciting the Four Noble Truths and the Law of Dependent Origination is not to perceive them in one's innermost, not to be penetrated by them, which is the matter of awareness.

To say that existence is characterised by impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and absence of self is to express ideas,

concepts, meanings, to put words into use. This is not necessarily tantamount to live accordingly. But for him who lives in accordance with them, those words, concepts, ideas emerge from reality as he experiences it.

So, the problem is not to be for or against language. This is a false dilemma; false because crude. There is much more to be said on that. And if the wise man is silent, that is because the foolish man is too often talkative. And still there are plenty of Suttas! And how many meanings, concepts, words in them!

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