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# **Flight**

*An Existential Conception  
of Buddhism*

***Stephen Batchelor***



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## An Existential Conception of Buddhism

by

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# Preface

The following essay is an attempt to express a Buddhist response to certain aspects of our human condition in a contemporary language and way of thinking. Some of the terminology and concepts I have used are loosely based upon sections of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, in particular his explanations of 'falling' (das Verfallen), anxiety and death. Moreover, the present text seeks to elaborate on several themes introduced in my book *Alone With Others: Outlines for an Existential Approach to*

Buddhism (New York: Grove Press, 1983).

I would like to thank both Bhikkhu Bodhi and Michael Roehm (Srāmaṇera Khema) for their assistance in bringing this text to publication.

Stephen Batchelor  
(Gelong Jhampa Thabkay)  
Song Kwang Sa  
Korea, 1982

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# Flight

## I. A Description of the Problem

How much of our life is spent in avoiding what we really are? Yet in a quiet corner of ourselves, do we not secretly recognise the deceptive strategies of such avoidance? How often do we find ourselves happily indulging in some trivial pursuit, even though a deeper awareness is whispering to us of its futility? How often do we observe ourselves engaged in serious conversation while another part of us silently acknowledges our words to be a vain attempt to uphold a comfortable illusion that we do not really believe

in? Even as we try to turn our thoughts inward to confront ourselves, how much of that time is passed in uncontrolled eruptions of recollections and fantasies? In each of these cases we can perceive the phenomenon of flight. This perception gives rise to the following questions: What is flight? What are we fleeing from? Why are we fleeing? Does such flight have any real value or meaning? If not, how can we come to terms with it and reduce its hold over us?

## Fear

When faced with danger, an animal will instinctively react in one of two ways. If possible, it will flee; if not, it will fight. In both cases, though, the response is provoked by fear. However, flight is usually the initial reaction. It seems preferable to standing ground and fighting. Perhaps because fleeing affords an immediate sense of escape from what is feared, whereas in standing to fight, the fear is compounded with and augmented by aggression. In similar situations of danger, human beings respond in a like manner. But being endowed with superior intelligence they can resort to a wider range of tactics to avoid or defeat their foe. Nevertheless, the basic pattern of reaction is the same: fear resulting in either flight or fight.

Animal fear is an instinctive reaction to a threatening object or set of circumstances present within the horizons of the immediate environment. Something is seen, heard, scented or bodily felt through the physical senses. Such sense

perceptions then trigger a signal of danger which automatically gives rise to fear. Although human beings are also subject to such fears, in addition they are subject to fears of another order. This is so because human consciousness is not restricted to the horizons of an immediate environment. Human consciousness is distinguished from animal consciousness through having access to concepts and words which enable it to transcend the environmental boundaries of the senses. As human beings we no longer live merely in an environment but in a world. Our world is spatially broader than our environment thoughts inclusion of places not immediately present. These places extend from a neighbouring town, to other countries, to the planet as a whole, and even to the solar system and the universe. Furthermore, the world we live in embraces the transphysical realms of social, economic and political structures, religion, philosophy, law and so forth. Likewise our world is extended through time: it reaches back into a past composed of personal memories and a collective history, and it stretches forward into a future of plans and possibilities.

As a consequence of living in a world, we find ourselves faced with a far wider range of dangers. Threatening conditions are no longer restricted to what we can physically perceive in our environment; they have become invisible, inaudible and intangible. Danger is inferred from the behaviour of our enemies in other countries. Difficult times are foreseen in the future. With trepidation we

anticipate the effects of our actions committed in the past. In contrast to animals, fear has ceased to be a thing of the moment for us. It has assumed a far more pervasive quality. The objects of our fear no longer leap at us out of the bushes. They are largely contained within our own minds. They are present in our awareness of ourselves as social beings belonging to certain national, political or religious groups. They are constantly brought to our attention through memory and guilt. They loom ahead of us while we plan for the future.

This particularly human form of fear may be less sudden and violent than the terror of animals, but it is all the more insidious for its abstractness. It can erupt at the mention of a word, or its presence may constantly haunt us no matter where we are or what we are doing. Its objects are always potentially present. They only have to be brought to conscious attention in order for fear to arise.

In dealing with these fears it seems that we resort to a more complex strategy than simple flight or fight. However, one of these two reactions can still usually be traced as the underlying pattern behind our response to the fear. Our fleeing and fighting assume a more psychological character. We can no longer always eliminate such fears by physically running away from the objects that cause them. One can only run beyond the boundaries of an environment; one can never leap over the horizons of a world. Nor can we physically eradicate the objects of our fear. No one can destroy an impending oil crisis, for example. Since the

objects of such fear are not immediately present but exist primarily as contents of the mind, our corresponding responses to the fear, likewise take place primarily in the mind.

To illustrate how we deal with our human fears, let us consider an example. One realises that one's life is threatened by the possibility of a nuclear war. This thought produces fear. To deal with this fear two basic alternatives present themselves. On the one hand one can try the strategy of avoidance. This could take the form of actual flight, emigrating to New Zealand, for example, with the belief that the effects of radiation would not reach that far. Or it could take the form of mental flight, convincing oneself that no nation would be foolish enough to risk starting such a war, that the world leaders are sane, rational beings who would never allow such a horrific thing to happen. Or one could simply discard such fears as irrelevant and turn one's attention to other matters. The second alternative would entail confronting the issue and adopting a strategy that hopefully would lead to the reduction or even the elimination of such a danger. This might take the form of endorsing the anti-nuclear policies of a certain political group. It might entail supporting those in power who believe that only by maintaining the capacity of 'mutual assured destruction' can peace be preserved. Or one might consider that the only real remedy is to practise and encourage the removal of selfishness and hatred, the psychological factors that would motivate the finger to

finally press the button. [1]

These two alternatives of avoidance or responsible confrontation are the human corollaries of the instinctual reactions of flight or fight. However, with either alternative the adopted course of action is never as definitive as it is in the clear-cut responses at the animal level. At any time one may be subject to the sudden re-occurrence of the original fear. Previously unforeseen elements may emerge, causing one's view of the situation to change. Or one may be swayed by the arguments of those holding opinions contrary to one's own. The fears that arise in a human world extending from the past into the future have to be dealt with through the medium of concepts which are ever prone to the vacillations of the human intellect.

With animalistic responses to fear, flight is usually the initial reaction. But in such cases neither fleeing nor fighting can be regarded as in any way morally preferable to the other. The reaction is purely determined by the given external circumstances. If possible, flee, if not, fight. However, in a human world of ethical values and social responsibility, unless confrontation of the fearful situation and the adoption of a course of action designed to eliminate the source of fear seem impossible, avoidance of fear through flight is generally considered to be a sign of moral weakness. Thus here our instinctual nature comes into conflict with our ethical conscience. Instinctively we want to flee but morally we feel compelled to stand our ground and confront the danger.

# Anxiety

Flight, as we have examined it so far, is one of the two basic responses to fear, which, in turn, is a reaction to a danger or a threat. On the animal level flight takes the form of physical escape, whereas on the human level it becomes more of a mental form of escape. However, even as a mental escape in response to fear, the flight is still conditioned to some extent by an objective situation in the outside world. The flight strategy may consist of hiding away in a mental web of explanations, justifications and pretences, but, in most cases, that from which one is fleeing has an actual or possible reality outside of oneself. An exception to this would be the neurotic evasion or repression of unacceptable traits within one's own personality. But even in this case, where the object of fear, the fear itself and the flight are all psychic events, we are still dealing with a particular entity in our world from which we can try to flee or which we can try to confront and eliminate.

It is now necessary to consider an even more basic form of flight. For flight is not only a response to fear, it is also a response to anxiety. Here we move beyond the physical and mental patterns of flight to the level of existential flight. Existential flight is not a response to any particular entity in the world, it is a uniquely human response to our existence as such. It is not motivated by fear of any particular thing; it is motivated by the anxiety which arises in the face of the overwhelming presence of life and death.

As has been pointed out by several existentialist philosophers, fear and anxiety are quite distinct phenomena. Fear always has a particular entity in the world as its object. The sensation of fear can be eliminated either through removing oneself from the object (flight), or through disposing of the object itself (fight). Thus a peculiar characteristic of fear is that its presence is contingent upon the presence of a particular entity—be it a dangerous animal, the possibility of nuclear war, or a neurotic complex—and its absence is contingent upon the absence of that particular entity. It is just a moment within the stream of life.

Anxiety, on the other hand, never has a particular entity in the world as its object. In this sense it is said to be 'objectless.' The sensation of anxiety occurs as a disclosure of the fact that we exist at all. It emerges when we glimpse our life standing out of nothingness, hovering precariously between birth and death. Unlike fear, anxiety cannot be eliminated through removing oneself from its source, for the simple reason that we can never remove ourselves from the fact of our own existence. No matter where we flee we will always be confronted with what we are. Unlike fear, anxiety cannot be meaningfully eliminated through disposing of what provokes it. For to dispose of what provokes it, our existence as such, would entail committing suicide. And unlike fear, anxiety is not simply a moment within the stream of life, rather it is a fundamental way in which we feel ourselves to exist.

Anxiety grasps us in those rare moments when we sense the awesomeness of having been born into the world only to be finally expelled from it at death. We did not choose to come into existence. It is as though we were choicelessly thrown here. We have no recollection of what, if anything, preceded birth. Moreover, we hardly seem well equipped for this phenomenon called 'life.' We find it incomprehensible, bewildering and often painful. And where does it lead? To an irreversible process of ageing and death. With each moment of life, death comes one moment closer. Death is all that we can look forward to with any certainty. Yet the time of its occurrence is utterly uncertain. Beyond death, as before birth, is just an impenetrable wall covered with a confusing array of contradictory speculations.

More than birth, which lies behind us as an inalterable given, our impending death is mainly responsible for precipitating anxiety. Our death should not be regarded as a particular entity in the world, as just one event among many others. Death is a constantly present possibility. Our life is inescapably a movement towards death. Whether consciously or unconsciously, every moment of our being in this world is felt to be overshadowed by the possibility of our not being here at all. In the mood of anxiety occasioned by our death, non-being reveals itself to us. And only against the infinite backdrop of non-being are we able to experience the full extent of our being in its essential finitude.

Such deeply-rooted anxiety erupts into consciousness only

rarely. Its occurrences are likewise not predictable. It can seize us at any time. Habitually it is dismissed as an irrational, ungrounded fear or quickly covered over with our usual screens of mental and verbal chatter. Thus what it reveals to us is seldom brought to the light of articulate clarity. After its departure little remains but a vague recollection of something inexplicable and foreboding. For the most part this anxiety is unconscious and repressed. But it is nevertheless present. In the words of Heidegger, 'It is only sleeping. Its breath quivers perpetually through man's being.' [2]

## Existential Flight

Anxiety, being a fundamental way in which we sense ourselves to exist, likewise evokes an equally fundamental response. This response is what I have called 'existential flight.' Furthermore, since we are normally unconscious of this anxiety, we are also normally unconscious of our response to it in flight. And just as anxiety is constantly present, existential flight is likewise present as a deeply-rooted characteristic of our being.

Flight in the face of anxiety is said to be 'existential' because it constitutes an underlying pattern or structure of our present existence. Such flight is neither a physical nor a mental reaction to a given fearful event within our existence. It causes no adrenalin to rush into our bloodstream and does not provoke the mind into devising

complex strategies of justification or escape. It is not an occasional device that we resort to only under certain conditions. In fact it differs from ordinary flight to the same degree that anxiety differs from fear. It is a deeply-rooted mode of responsiveness that determines the way our existence itself is characterised.

Any state of flight entails there being a threat from which one flees and a place where that threat is absent to which one flees. In the case of flight as a response to fear these two conditions are usually fairly easy to determine. One flees from a dangerous animal to a place of safety such as a tree. One flees from the possibility of nuclear war to a country beyond the anticipated radiation zone; or one retreats to a point of view that explains away such a possibility as highly improbable. One flees from a disturbing psychological problem into an attitude of repression. But where does one flee in the case of existential flight? One, is fleeing from the overwhelming immensity of existence that plunges uncontrollably towards death. This occasions anxiety that causes us to recoil in flight. But where can we find a place to flee where existence itself together with its threat of death are absent?

Existential flight precipitates us into absorption with the particular entities of the world. In this way we are able to divert our attention away from the uncanniness of life and death. We are free to concern ourselves with the much more manageable reality of well-defined things enclosed in limited situations. In the realm of particular entities we

appear to have some control over external events as well as our own lives. We can immerse ourselves in the accumulation of material things, the acquiring of a name for ourselves and the gaining of influence over others. We thus set about to construct a situation of security and permanence. Moreover, this basic attitude to existence is tacitly approved and supported by such anonymous yet respected authorities as 'common sense' and 'public opinion.' Thus any qualms we may have about somehow not being quite true to ourselves are put to rest, and we feel fully justified in our relentless pursuit of things.

Absorption in the world of particular entities is the principal characteristic of existential flight. It provides us with an apparent place of safety where the almost embarrassing realities of life and death no longer seem so threatening. Here we find a realm where the revelatory weight of anxiety is no longer felt. One reason for the effectiveness of such absorption in providing this sense of security is its quality of reducing all phenomena to the level of limited, manipulatable entities. Under its influence even birth, life and death are just seen as particular entities among numerous others. Although we observe them constantly taking place, they seem somehow distant, objectified, and disconnected from our inner selves. We become numb to their significance. They enter our everyday conversation unacknowledged, mingling inconspicuously with the neighbours, the news and the weather.

Existential flight causes us to lose sight of what we really

are. The further we flee from the reality of our existence, the more we become immersed in a fictional existence. Instead of accepting our conditioned, impermanent nature, we resort to the belief in an unconditioned, fixed ego. Absorbed in a world of limited, manipulatable entities, we view ourselves too as limited and manipulatable. We naturally tend to regard others in a similar way. In fact the world as a whole in which we become absorbed confronts us as an expanse of independent, unrelated entities, all of them potentially available merely for use and manipulation.

It must be borne in mind that existential flight is not really comparable to flight in the usual sense of the word, i.e. as a movement from a threatening situation in one place to a secure situation elsewhere. In existential flight we do not actually turn away from birth and death and retreat into a world of particular entities elsewhere. A world of particular entities is not, as it were, waiting somewhere for us to flee into. It is always present, just as our existence as such is always present. The act of flight is perhaps more akin to a Gestalt switch, but one in which we lock into one possible configuration to the exclusion of the other. In the process of flight and absorption we refuse to acknowledge our existence as such and instead insist on the exclusive reality of the world of particular entities. In the very act of insistent absorption we ascribe a mode of being to particular entities that does not properly belong to them. We consider them as ultimate, self-existent realities. In such a domain, amidst predictable, objectified entities, we believe ourselves to be

safe and secure.

Although the origins and consequences of existential flight have been described here in a linear causal sequence, it should not be assumed that thereby a series of events is being portrayed that takes place one after the other, over a given period of time. It is not as though at moment one, anxiety occurs; at moment two, flight; at moment three, absorption in particular entities; and at moment four, the ascribing of self-existence to those entities. In accordance with the temporal character of thinking, we resort, for the sake of description, to the temporal categories of cause and effect. However, anxiety is only logically antecedent to flight, and absorption is only logically subsequent to it. In reality there is no such distinct temporal sequence. These phenomena can never actually be found in isolation from one another. Wherever there is anxiety, there will be existential flight, absorption in particular entities, and the ascription of self-existence. Likewise, wherever there is the ascription of self-existence, there will be anxiety, existential flight and absorption in particular entities. They can only be logically separated in time and placed in sequence; in actuality they are four simultaneous aspects of a single pattern of existence.

Earlier existential flight was spoken of as an 'underlying pattern or structure of our present existence.' Now, if we reconsider this underlying pattern from a more encompassing perspective, we can see that existential flight is just one facet of a more complex structure of existence.

Depending on our intention and vantage-point we could, with equal justification, regard this same underlying pattern as a state of anxiety, or as an attitude of insistent absorption in particular entities, or as a tendency to ascribe to things the quality of independent self-existence. It may be more accurate, however, to speak of anxiety as the mood, existential flight and absorption in particular entities as the dynamic, and ascription of self existence to things as the cognitive attitude of this one underlying pattern or structure of existence. Alternatively, we could consider them as the mood, the dynamic and the cognitive attitude of each other. Thus in the case of existential flight, for example, its mood would be anxiety and its cognitive attitude would be to ascribe self-existence to things.

For the simple reason that one can never succeed in escaping from one's own existence, existential flight is condemned from the outset to failure and frustration. By its very nature it is futile. However insistently we absorb ourselves in the manipulation of things and situations, we will always be subject to the unpredictable irruptions of anxiety. No matter how firmly we have convinced ourselves that the ultimate values in life are embodied in personal success, the acquisition of wealth, respect and knowledge, the shadow of our own death can suddenly interrupt and declare our beliefs bankrupt. As long as our actions are impelled by flight from the immensity of birth and death, we will be faced with those uneasy moments where all that we have done seems to amount to nothing, where all our

exertions and toil seem to have succeeded in bringing us nowhere. It is as if we are running forever in circles and always finding ourselves back where we started: in an anxious confrontation with our own finite existence.

If we were to acknowledge the phenomenon of existential flight within ourselves, we would thus also be forced to acknowledge the presence of error and confusion. For to live and act as though one could avoid the threat of death is unquestionably erroneous and confused. Furthermore, this error is not without consequences. It causes us to come into frustrating conflicts with reality whenever our illusory world of fixed, self-existent entities fails to live up to our expectations of it as an anxiety-free haven. However, our existential flight is predominantly unconscious and at best only dimly articulated. Even on those occasions when we are shocked into a realisation of its actuality, we are only too eager to forget about it afterwards. Rarely do we make an effort to observe this flight from ourselves in the light of consciousness. Yet such conscious awareness would be one of the first steps in reducing the negative hold it has over us.

As was indicated at the beginning of this essay, there are moments when probably most of us have observed this flight in one form or another. On occasions a quiet inner awareness allows us to glimpse—often just fleetingly—our own frenzied absorption in some trivial concern. We may have noticed how we sometimes feel ill at ease and try to shy away from the subject when death is dwelt upon in conversation. At times we may even have been

unexpectedly seized by an unfamiliar perception of our world that causes us to withdraw from our absorption for a while and contemplate the uncanny phenomenon of people busily forgetting themselves. Most strikingly, we may have attempted to still the mind in meditation only to find that our attention refuses to dwell in the actuality of the present and uncontrollably flees for the security of what has been and what might be. In all of these cases we become conscious, however dimly, of this deepest form of flight—existential flight. For within us there is the possibility of a still, detached awareness that can illuminate and judge even our innermost attitudes and behaviour without being caught up in the uncontrolled frenzy of activity.

Nevertheless, such awareness is usually absent and we are unconsciously swept along in the stream of racing thoughts and events. However, to cultivate and learn to dwell in such a state of detached awareness is a key factor in coming to terms with the compulsive quality of flight. Such consciousness opens the way to a more realistic and fulfilling approach to existence.

Another important point in developing a conscious awareness of existential flight is to recognise clearly that it is not a response to fear but to anxiety. A principal source of the error and futility of existential flight can be traced to the assumption that anxiety is just another aspect of fear and can thus be removed by responding to it as though it were fear. As with fear our initial reaction to anxiety is to flee. This is the primal animal response that we discussed earlier

But being primarily an unconscious reaction, existential flight is not checked either by conscious reflection or moral restrictions—as is the case in a response to fear at the specifically human level. Hence this flight is allowed to continue unimpeded unless we are awakened to a conscious realisation of its futility. But such realisations are usually brushed aside and forgotten. For the alternative to flight in this case, in trying to destroy the object or our supposed fear rather than fleeing from it, would have too many devastating implications. It would imply the destruction of our existence as such. In other words we would be led to entertain the notion of suicide. At such moments we reach an impasse. Our habitual way of living seems futile and senseless, yet we cannot possibly conceive of ending it. The way out of this impasse is to recognise that anxiety is essentially different from fear and cannot be effectively dealt with as though it were fear. Flight or fight, in their grosser and subtler manifestations, may be able to subdue our fears but will only lead us into an insoluble conflict when it comes to dealing with anxiety. To effectively resolve the existential problem of anxiety we need to adopt an entirely different approach.

The following questions may now arise: “Is it actually possible to effect any real change in such basic existential phenomena as anxiety in the face of death and the ensuing flight into absorption with particular entities in the world? Have these phenomena not been described as underlying ‘patterns’ and ‘structures’ of our existence? Is it not our

destiny as human beings to be subject to these things as part of our condition in life?" Although anxiety and existential flight characterise our life as we know it now, this does not imply that they are inherent properties of human existence as such. There is no need to regard them as intrinsic qualities pertaining to some inalterable essence of man. (In fact such a view of inalterable essences is itself indicative of our being under the sway of existential flight and its cognitive attitude of ascribing self-existence to things.) Despite their deeply-rooted character, anxiety and the flight it provokes are nevertheless conditioned responses. As such they can be changed, although such change will require a correspondingly profound re-orientation of our present attitude to existence.

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## II. A Buddhist Response

Up to now I have tried to describe certain aspects of our present situation without explicitly resorting to any concepts that are immediately recognisable as 'Buddhist'. In fact much of the terminology employed here—'anxiety', 'flight,' 'absorption in particular entities'—is not to be found at all in the traditional explanations of Buddhism. My aim has been to give a description of our existential problem in accordance with a way of thinking that is perhaps more

accessible to our present Weltanschauung.

It is always important to have in mind a clear picture of the problem before proceeding to the solution. This is particularly true when the solution is phrased in a language and way of thinking that is in so many respects foreign to us. The teachings of Buddhism need to be approached from 'below,' that is, from the concrete facts of our own existence. There are considerable dangers in approaching them instead from 'above' by starting with the specific doctrines and then subsequently trying to fit them to human existence.

Such an approach from 'below' is especially called for in the present situation where Buddhism is still in the process of finding its feet in a modern secular culture. It is not viable to simply transpose an entire ideology that has developed under conditions quite different from our own into the present moral and intellectual climate. Through unquestioning adherence to a set of alien beliefs there is the danger of becoming isolated from active participation in the concrete situations of life around one. In other words, the adoption of Buddhism can also become just another form of flight from oneself,

This approach from 'below' is itself characteristically Buddhist. It is evident in the presentation of the first and central teaching of the Buddha, that of the Four Noble Truths. Here he pointed out that it is first of all necessary to become aware of the problem—i.e. the first truth of suffering—before proceeding to the remaining truths that

offer a solution to the problem. He then outlined the solution in three stages: understanding the origin of the problem: realising that the problem will cease once its origin ceases; and learning of and following the way that will lead to such a cessation. However, the meaning of the term 'suffering' constantly undergoes shifts in emphasis.

In general, of course, the human condition remains always bound to such sufferings as sicknesses, ageing and death that are the unavoidable consequences of being born. But nowadays, especially in the West, the physical sufferings of this life as well as such things as the fear of hell in the future are for the majority no longer such a predominant worry. Instead people find themselves tormented by sufferings of a more mental or existential nature. These would include such things, as fear and anxiety—as described above—as well as a sense of meaninglessness, alienation, loneliness and despair. Suffering, as it is experienced today, is no longer felt to be solely a consequence of physical existence: it is perceived as a spiritual malaise.

In the preceding pages we have described the specific problems of fear, anxiety and flight. Now let us consider what kind of a response can be elicited from the teachings of Buddhism. Since many of the concepts, such as 'existential flight' are not current in "traditional Buddhist thought, it will be necessary to dig beneath the immediate surface of doctrine in order to unearth the patterns of existence described so far. As I will try to demonstrate, 'existential flight' and its related factors are not such alien concepts as

may at first be imagined. With a little reflection we can see how several of the principal features of Buddhism are intimately connected to these phenomena. In this way not only will we be able to establish a common ground between our own situation and the Buddhist teachings, but we may also be able to shed some additional light on the meaning and practice of Buddhism.

The aspects of Buddhism we will focus on here in order to illustrate the response to the underlying themes of anxiety and flight will be the life story of the historical Buddha, the taking of refuge in the Triple Gem, and the practice of Buddhist meditation. In addition to allowing us to view these three central features of Buddhism from another perspective, the concept of flight will also provide us with a thread with which to connect them together in an existentially significant way.

## The Life of the Buddha

For the first twenty-five or so years of his life it is said that Prince Siddhartha remained immured within four exquisite palaces, one for each season of the year. This lifestyle was imposed upon him by his father, the king, who did not wish him to be distracted from worldly ambition by the disturbing aspects of life outside the palace walls. Although the prince had everything he could desire in terms of sensory enjoyment, he nonetheless became restless in his incarceration and wished to see the world outside. So on

four separate occasions he was allowed to visit the surrounding town and countryside. Beforehand, though, the king ordered that no unpleasant sights, such as people disfigured by sickness or old-age, be visible along the prince's route. But in spite of his father's efforts the prince happened to encounter a sick person, an ageing person, a corpse and a wandering mendicant. These experiences caused him to put into question the values of life that had been instilled within him during his princely upbringing. Each time he returned to the palaces from one of his excursions, he felt more and more ill at ease and less and less able to enjoy the pleasures that surrounded him. Eventually this inner conflict reached a breaking-point and one night he stole away from his home in order to pursue the life of a wandering monk. His search for the true meaning of life led him to a number of different teachers and spiritual disciplines. However, for six years his basic questions still remained unanswered. Finally, determined to resolve his dilemma, he sat down all alone at the foot of a large tree and after several days of unbroken effort experienced enlightenment. Thus he discovered the answer to the questions of life and death that had been troubling him.

Now what bearing does this account of the founder of Buddhism have on our discussion of anxiety and existential flight? On the surface we are presented with a somewhat legendary tale that lacks much reliable scriptural authority and is difficult to ascertain as historical fact. Although this

story has usually been accepted as authoritative in the traditional schools of Buddhism, it has never given rise to much serious contemplation of any meaning other than the literal one. As such it has been used to edify the popular image of the Buddha by demonstrating his exceptional virtues of renunciation, detachment, perseverance and enlightenment. But beyond serving this function it has not, as far as I know, been traditionally used as an object of further reflection. However, if we examine the account a little more closely, we can discover a description, in largely symbolic terms, of anxiety, existential flight and absorption in a world of particular entities. Moreover, the story indicates an alternative way of responding to anxiety: one that leads us beyond the dichotomy of flight or fight.

The prince's condition of being immured in four palaces as part of his father's ploy to keep the distressing realities of existence hidden from him expresses, through the imagery of those times, two important aspects of existential flight. Firstly, absorption in a world of particular entities is depicted in the image of a palatial life where attention is focused exclusively on external sensual pleasures. In such a situation it is impossible to see, i.e. to see the significance of, sickness, ageing and death. One is blind to everything but a relentless pursuit of material wellbeing and personal aggrandisement. Secondly, the king symbolically represents the invisible authority that encourages and acts as a justification for such an attitude. This authority also appears under the guises of 'common sense' and 'public opinion.' It

is an authority that belongs to no one individual but is nevertheless respected and obeyed by each individual.

The tour excursions into the world beyond the palace walls can be understood as four occasions when the reality of his existence as such broke through to consciousness. It would be unrealistic to assume that he had literally never seen sickness, old age, death or renunciates before. Inside the palace walls it is said that he never encountered them. But when we interpret the palace life as a symbol for absorption in a world of particular entities, surely what is meant is that he only encountered sickness, old age and death as particular entities among other particular entities and thus failed to be struck by their existential significance. It was only through going beyond the palace walls, in other words through suspending his absorption in particular things, that he was able to glimpse, for the first time, the deep personal meaning of these facts of existence.

These experiences gave rise to profound anxiety. After each successive encounter he returned to his palaces only to find that they had lost their attraction for him. Thus he began to understand that the realities of birth and death cannot be evaded through flight and absorption in a world of things. The futility of such a life became evident to him. He now experienced a growing sense of anxiety from which he knew he could no longer escape through flight.

So how did the Prince Siddhartha find his way out of this impasse? His anxiety in the face of the overwhelming reality

of life and death dismissed the possibility of his ever regaining any contentment or security through absorbing himself in the palace life. Suicide, too, would have failed to provide a meaningful solution. For the inescapable problem of life and death cannot be solved through one's death; it can only be cancelled. In the final analysis, suicide is revealed to be just another form of flight. When the meaning of life becomes a pressing question, it can only be satisfied by a meaningful answer. No question can be answered merely through the negation of the question. Suicide provides no answers; it merely puts an end to the questions.

Siddhartha's way out of this conflict was to abandon his princely existence in order to devote himself to discovering a solution to the questions of life and death. This decision involved a radical transformation in his previous attitudes. Instead of evading the underlying realities of human existence by absorbing himself in concern with particular things, he courageously faced these realities and absorbed himself in untangling their mystery. Therefore, his actual flight from the palace had as a psychological counterpart the final rejection of the attitude of existential flight as an effective response to anxiety. Although affording him a previously unknown sense of spiritual freedom, this decision cannot have been without its hardships. For instead of temporarily suppressing anxiety through flight, it entailed acceptance of anxiety as an unavoidable component of the spiritual quest for meaning.

Instinctively we recoil from the peculiar uneasiness present

in moments of anxiety. The sensation it produces of 'hovering' in nothingness is interpreted as something purely negative and therefore undesirable and bad. In this way we overlook the special revelatory quality of anxiety. Anxiety is a mood in which our existence as such can be presently felt in its totality and finitude. And it is not the result of mere theoretical speculation; it is a lived concrete experience. It brings us face to face with the question of our own existence. It gives us the chance to secure that question at the starting point for a radically new approach to life. Moreover, it sets the tone for this new approach: namely, it creates a constant inner tension, a combination of uneasiness and urgency that acts as a spiritual catalyst. But this uneasiness and urgency are not at all comparable with the nervous confusion found in fear. 'Anxiety,' remarks Heidegger, 'does not let such confusion arise. Much to the contrary, a peculiar calm pervades it. [3]

After renouncing the palace life Prince Siddhartha spent six years undergoing various meditative and ascetic disciplines until finally he achieved the goal of his quest, enlightenment. As the goal of his quest, his enlightenment must have had a direct bearing on the origins of the same quest. These origins we traced to the existential questions posed to him upon realising the significance of sickness, ageing and death. Through these encounters his existence as such became a question for him. He experienced an inescapable sense of anxiety that could no longer be placated through flight and absorption in a world of things.

This being the case we can confidently assume that his enlightenment came as an answer to the question of his very existence. It revealed to him the meaning of life in the face of ageing and death. Thus his anxiety was dispelled and any remaining tendency towards existential flight and absorption in a world of things was transcended.

It is most important to maintain a clear awareness of the context in which the Buddha's enlightenment took place. As Prince Siddhartha set out on his quest he was not deliberately seeking a specific phenomenon called 'Buddhahood,' 'Arahatship,' or 'Satori.' He was simply seeking an answer to the question of his existence as a human being posed to him through his encounters with sickness, ageing and death. After a great amount of hardship and effort he awakened to the answer. This experience he subsequently referred to as bodhi, which means 'awakening' or 'enlightenment.'

The content of the answer he discovered through bodhi can neither be expressed in words nor conveyed in any way from one person to another. Merely a path that leads to it can be indicated. Its actual realisation depends solely upon the individual's own efforts. However, the context of human existence in which this indescribable experience of enlightenment occurs can be described. Enlightenment is nothing but the answer to the deepest questions of human existence. Thus without a vivid consciousness of these questions how can there really be a genuine striving for enlightenment? Surely the depth of any 'enlightenment' can

only be measured by the depth at which the corresponding questions resound within one. Nowadays concern with these questions is often overlooked in favour of elaborate descriptions of the path to enlightenment and the various stages and kinds of awakening. The danger here is that enlightenment becomes subtly uprooted from the concrete realities of human existence. It comes to be seen as the end-product of a certain technique. But can the mystery of a being as complex, irrational and individual as man be unravelled by the simple application of a technique? By always keeping in mind the fundamental mystery and question of existence, we can prevent the practice of Buddhism and enlightenment from becoming ends in themselves. Instead we will see them as mere means towards the end of providing an answer to that question.

In the mood of anxiety the question of our existence is posed to us. However, our habitual response to that question is to shy away from it in flight and to lose ourselves in a pursuit of things. Furthermore, we concretise and secure our absorption through ascribing self-existence to the objects of our pursuit. In the story of Prince Siddhartha we are shown an alternative response to the question of existence. It is one that does not lead us into frustration, conflict and despair, but accepts the question revealed in anxiety and sets out to discover an answer. The answer is finally disclosed in the experience of enlightenment. In this way I have tried to demonstrate the pre-eminence of an awareness of the questions of life in

determining the course of the path to enlightenment. The practice of Buddhism has been shown to be rooted solely in the patterns of our everyday human existence. Moreover, the life of its founder can now be understood not only as an inspiring story, but also as symbolic depiction of a process that each and every Buddhist must undergo in the depths of his or her being.

From the moment the Buddha decided to try and teach others what he had discovered and set out on his long walk from Bodh Gaya to Benares, the history of Buddhism has been essentially nothing but a continuous attempt to describe the way to enlightenment. Despite its inclusion of the most diverse approaches, ranging from empiricism to metaphysics, from logic to paradox, from scepticism to piety, and from rationalism to mysticism, the central focus of Buddhism has always been the enlightenment experience. Throughout the centuries, in many different countries and cultures, Buddhism has adopted numerous forms. Yet underlying them all is this one truth of enlightenment that the Buddha grasped over two thousand years ago. Each tradition that arose developed its own views concerning the nature of the path to enlightenment and usually highlighted certain features that it considered to be of particular significance. The various schools emerged both as reactions against earlier trends in Buddhist thought, which had become stagnant or had succumbed to extremism, as well as innovative movements designed to remodel the form of the religion in accordance with the prevailing times. Thus, a

rich yet often bewildering array of different practices and philosophies came to be included under the single heading of 'Buddhism.' Now, drawing upon the legacy of this material, let us consider some of the more central aspects of this path to enlightenment, paying special attention to their bearing on anxiety and flight.

## Taking Refuge

At the conclusion of many Buddhist Sutras, especially those recorded in the Pali texts, the person or people to whom the discourse was addressed acknowledge their conversion to the Buddha and his teachings by uttering the threefold formula of refuge:

“I take refuge in the Buddha,  
I take refuge in the Dharma,  
I take refuge in the Sangha.”

The act of taking refuge, as expressed in this formula, is the basis of all subsequent practices included along the Buddhist path. It is sometimes described as the 'gateway' to Buddhism. It is regarded as the decisive moment at which one enters the Buddhist community of faith. Through taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha one thus becomes a Buddhist.

What does it really mean to 'take refuge' in someone or something? Usually we understand this as withdrawing to a place of safety from some danger or entrusting ourselves to

someone for his protection. In a spiritual context it would presumably entail adopting certain beliefs and making certain resolutions in return for an inner sense of security and meaning. But is this all that is implied by taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha? Is it just a preliminary statement of one's confidence in the Buddhist teachings? Or does it, as would be expected of the foundation of all further practices, entail something more?

In the context of this present enquiry the etymology of the word 'refuge' proves to be quite illuminating. It is derived from the Latin word *fugere*, which means to flee. In German this connection between 'flight' and 'refuge' is even more explicit in the words *Flucht* (flight) and *Zuflucht* (refuge). Thus a refuge is a place to which one *flees* in times of danger. Here again we encounter the phenomenon of flight.

In the case of fear we flee to a place of safety: Thus we take refuge in a tree, a country, another person or an attitude that provides us with security and protection. In the case of anxiety we resort to existential flight. As we have already seen, this is an underlying pattern of much of our present lives. Under its influence we flee from the threat of death, for example, to the refuge of absorption in a world of particular things. Thus the act of taking refuge is not something essentially foreign to us. The problem is that our usual refuges are not final. Our refuges from fear are effective only while a certain set of circumstances prevails. And our refuge from anxiety—absorption in a world of particulars—is ultimately unable to provide us with the

security we had hoped to find in it. At any time anxiety may interrupt our complacency, and death, however hard we try to ignore it, will always intervene in the end.

Now, how does taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha compare to our habitual forms of taking refuge from fear and anxiety? In seeking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, what is it that we are seeking refuge from? And in what way are they able to provide us with an effective refuge?

Only when these questions are answered will a clear picture of taking refuge in the Triple Gem emerge. In the writings of the thirteenth century Tibetan Master Tsong Khapa one of the causes for taking refuge is recognised as '*jigs.pa.*', in Sanskrit *bhaya*, a term which is usually translated as 'fear.' However, in traditional Buddhist terminology no explicit distinction is made between fear and anxiety. Hence we should reconsider in this case whether '*jigs.pa.*', denotes a normal state of fear or whether it refers to the more existential condition of anxiety. Tsong Khapa maintains that the object of '*jigs.pa.*' is not some particular entity within the world but the cycle of birth and death itself. This being so, we can safely conclude that here '*jigs.pa.*' should be rendered as 'anxiety' rather than 'fear.' For the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*) does not imply a particular entity in the world, but a certain pattern or mode of existence. Thus the anxiety that motivates us to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha is none other than the anxiety to which we habitually respond by fleeing into a world of particulars.

To take refuge in the Triple Gem is a conscious response to anxiety. It is a radical alternative to the primarily unconscious response of existential flight. If, in accordance with its etymology, we still consider it as a form of flight, then such flight would have to be conceived as a controlled and centred act of the entire person, resulting in integration as opposed to the disintegration that ensues from existential flight. Instead of rejection it entails acceptance of one's human condition in all its overwhelming finitude and perplexity. And it is this total acceptance of oneself that forms the basis for a more meaningful response to one's existence. In addition, such acceptance is first made possible by a realisation of the futility of existential flight.

In contrast to existential flight, taking refuge in the Triple Gem does not lead us into the realm of particular entities external to ourselves. This would perhaps happen if taking refuge were understood as a response to fear as opposed to anxiety. In that case there would also be the danger of regarding the Buddha refuge as merely a particular individual, the Dharma refuge merely as the teachings of such individuals, and the Sangha refuge merely as a community of monks. It is of course true that the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are thus present in the world of particulars. They are embodied in finite persons, doctrines and institutions. Only in this way are they made accessible to the concrete human situation. But it would be a mistake to identify them with their finite representations. Thereby one would miss their true existential relation to one's own

life.

Since anxiety discloses our existence in its totality, a meaningful response to anxiety must likewise take into account this totality. The refuge we seek from anxiety cannot be external or only partially related to our lives. It must stand in a direct dynamic relation to ourselves. Therefore, to be effective objects of refuge, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha must be connected to us in an existentially significant way.

To take refuge in the Buddha does not primarily mean to take refuge in the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. It means to take refuge in Buddhahood, i.e. the mode of being realised initially by Shakyamuni and later on by his followers. Buddhahood is the optimum mode of being that can be reached within human existence. It is a state in which the questions of human life are effectively solved and the possibilities of our existence brought to their highest level of actualisation. Thus Buddha, or Buddhahood, is not a particular entity unrelated to ourselves. It is the optimum mode of being to which we ourselves are capable of evolving. As such it is a living possibility immediately related to our present existence. Only secondarily is refuge sought in the historical Buddha and his followers. For it is through them that Buddhahood is brought into the concrete sphere of human consciousness. By their example Buddhahood is established as a living possibility. Yet to take refuge in Shakyamuni, for example, is not to acknowledge him as possessing any miraculous saving

power. It only acknowledges him as one who indicates the way to Buddhahood through his example and teaching.

Taking refuge in the Dharma is not equivalent to placing one's belief in a certain set of doctrines and dogmas. It involves committing oneself to a process of self-actualisation that culminates in Buddhahood, the optimum mode of being. As such the Dharma refuge is the path of development itself. But this path is not an abstract series of steps from here to Buddhahood. It is comprised of the actual stages of insight and the enactment of that insight in a concrete world of relations that we ourselves have to realise and, as it were, become. It is the Dharma in this sense that provides us with the real refuge, namely, the way out of our present predicament to a state of greater freedom and fulfilment. Thus the Dharma in which we seek refuge is intimately related to our own lives: it is a dynamic pattern of existence that we commit ourselves to actualise.

However, we also take refuge in the teachings and advice given by the Buddha and his followers. These are the verbal and written instructions that describe from personal experience the way to realise the Dharma. In themselves they afford us no refuge. But since they act as the indispensable medium through which we gain the knowledge necessary for our own practice, they are considered as part of the Dharma refuge.

The refuge we find in the Sangha is that of a supportive community of faith. This community is composed of those men and women who are likewise engaged in the

realisation of Dharma in their lives. The faith that unites the community is not mere belief in a set of shared ideals but a shared existential commitment, a shared 'ultimate concern,' to use a term of Paul Tillich. The support received from such a community is derived from standing in a living relation to the unfolding of spiritual experience within that community. Traditionally the Sangha has been embodied in communities of monks that have acted as the core and focus for the Buddhist community at large. However, to take refuge in the Sangha does not mean to simply rely upon and ensure the continuity of monastic communities. To truly find refuge in the Sangha is only possible through one's own active participation in the inner life of the Buddhist community as a whole.

By taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha we move to a place of security and protection from anxiety as well as from the vicissitudes of the cycle of birth and death. But here such security is not a pseudo-security achieved through turning one's back on these phenomena. On the contrary: in such a refuge a sense of security or protection is found only because of our adopting a clearly defined framework within which we can confidently begin to confront anxiety and effectively work to overcome our negative responses to it. The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are essentially three 'principles' that stand in direct relation to ourselves as the objects of our ultimate concern. Buddha is the inner-aim of our existence, Dharma is the process of realising that aim, and the Sangha is the supportive

community within which such a process is made possible. Therefore, we head *towards* Buddha, by means of Dharma, *within* the Sangha. By thus structuring our lives around these three principles, we are able to adopt a mode of living that fully accepts the finitude and conflicts of our existence yet endeavours to actualise its potentials to the optimum degree.

Taking refuge involves a particular existential commitment that is completely opposed to existential flight. This form of commitment is not merely an intellectual acceptance of a certain world-view supported by a belief system. Neither is it an emotional upsurge of pious conviction. It is a commitment that demands the participation of one's *entire* being; not just one individual faculty, such as the intellect, the will, or the emotions. It is in this sense that it is said to be 'existential.' Such commitment confronts us firmly and consciously with the full reality of our existence as opposed to the unconscious evasion of responsibility for our destiny that is characteristic of existential flight. It then proceeds to pattern our existence according to a definite set of norms and possibilities. We commit ourselves to a certain course of thought and action with a specific aim, specific guidelines and a specific communal setting. The commitment involved in taking refuge is a 'centred personal act' concerned with our life in its totality as it is given to us from the past, as it is in the present and as it could be in the future. Therefore, taking refuge is more than just an initial statement of belief and resolve. It involves a complete transformation of our

approach to human existence as such.

## The Practice of Buddhism

The account of the Buddha's life, when understood as a paradigm of spiritual development, confronts us with the basic questions of human existence and inspires us to search for their answers. The Buddha's own enlightenment likewise serves as an inspiration that gives us confidence that such answers can be found. Through taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha we are provided with a more formal framework within which to secure and pursue our quest. But the taking of refuge is only the foundation which helps us to effectively engage in spiritual growth. It does not *solve* the problem of anxiety, it merely *responds* to it in a constructive way. It does not automatically eliminate the phenomenon of existential flight, it merely gives us the impetus to move in a more meaningful direction.

In order to actually resolve the problem of anxiety and overcome the tendency to flight, it is necessary to put the Dharma into practice. This entails not only knowing and accepting oneself but also *changing* oneself. This is easier said than done. It is a process that affects the whole of one's life: behaviour, thinking and awareness. It involves a discipline composed not only of meditation, but also of a new social awareness and ethical conduct.

Throughout the practice of Buddhism we are faced with the task of counteracting the tendencies of existential flight and

absorption in a world of things. These tendencies reveal themselves in our overall attitude to life and death, under conditions of difficulty and suffering, as well as on a moment to moment psychological level. Their hold over us can be effectively reduced through the various methods of contemplation and meditation prescribed in the Buddhist teachings.

Initially it is important to cultivate a conscious awareness of the basic realities of birth, sickness, ageing and death. Such awareness can be brought about through systematic and regular contemplation of these topics. Developing a consciousness of death is particularly valuable in this regard. Here one is encouraged to reflect repeatedly on the facts that death is certain; that the time of death is uncertain; and that only Dharma will have any meaning when death occurs. The overwhelming significance of death and the omnipresence of its possibility is only equalled by the compulsiveness of our attempt to ignore them and continue living as though they did not exist. By means of such contemplation, however, an awareness of death gradually penetrates into consciousness and actually begins to alter the way we feel ourselves to exist. It has the effect of making us more conscious of the fact that we are alive at all. Thus the questions of life and death become ever more predominant, reinforcing the quest for meaning through the path of Dharma. By focusing our attention on the phenomenon of death—as well as birth, sickness and ageing—the mind's exclusive preoccupation with particular things

is weakened. The tendency to flight is thereby diminished and we become more rooted in an awareness of our existence as such.

A similar effect is also achieved through systematic contemplation of the meaning of the Buddha's life and the taking of refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Without repeated reflection on these subjects there is the danger that they will degenerate into mere theory and ritual. Only by constantly bringing them to mind will their meaning be able to remain alive and existentially significant. As soon as the account of the Buddha's life becomes just a story, and the taking of refuge becomes just the mechanical repetition of formulae, then they will no longer be able to serve their dual purpose of countering existential flight and offering us a new perspective on life. Instead, they too will dissolve into particular things alongside other particular things and their real meaning will become lost to us.

The tendency to existential flight is not only characteristic of our overall attitude to life and death, but can also be observed as a psychological reaction occurring momentarily. Usually we are unaware of this phenomenon. It is often only when we make a conscious effort to concentrate the mind in meditation, for example, that we realise how little control we actually have over our own mental processes. As we try to focus our attention on a specific object, such as the breath, we discover how difficult it is to keep the mind from drifting off into memories, unrelated thoughts and fantasies. Frequently many minutes

go by before we even notice that we have wandered away from our object of meditation. The more we become conscious of our mental processes, the more we come to realise that what we previously regarded as a coherent and integrated psychic continuum is actually a fragmented and discontinuous entity full of conflicting and contradictory elements. Moreover, it becomes abundantly clear that the mind prefers to dwell anywhere but in the actuality of the present moment. No matter how irrelevant or absurd their content, we feel far more comfortable while absorbed in recollections of the past, speculations on the future, or fantasies about a situation elsewhere. Now, why should this be so?

It seems as though the present moment must appear to us as somehow undesirable or threatening. Otherwise what would be the need to compulsively refuse to dwell in it? Here again the phenomenon of flight becomes quite evident. But in this case what is it that we are fleeing from? In the same way that our existence as such, standing out of nothingness, is disclosed as we survey the full extent of our life from birth to death, likewise our existence as such is revealed in the present moment, standing out of the 'nothingness' of past and future. The present moment is a microcosm of birth and death. It unambiguously shows to us the same inescapable actuality of our existence. Thus this momentary psychological flight from the here and now is essentially a facet of the more deeply-rooted existential flight from our existence as such.

To deal with flight at this subtler level, conceptual reflection alone is not sufficient. It is necessary to develop a heightened state of mindfulness. Such mindfulness should ideally extend not only to our own body-mind complex but also to the total configuration of events present within any given situation. The aim of this mindful awareness is to centre our attention in the present moment, thereby counteracting uncontrolled indulgence in memories, fantasies and projections. Furthermore, it gives us greater control over the unpredictable eruptions of flight, since we are able to perceive these tendencies the moment they arise and can then cut them off before they get out of control. Through a systematic cultivation of such mindfulness, we can gradually learn to overcome the habitual psychological tendency to flight while simultaneously becoming more rooted in an awareness of our existence as such.

Here mindfulness (*smṛti samprajanya*) should be clearly distinguished from concentration (*samādhi*). It is true that the development of concentration upon a single object can effectively reduce and finally put a stop to all uncontrolled mental wandering. But it does not have the effect of inducing a heightened consciousness of the unfolding presence of our existence as such. It merely fixes the mind on one point in a state of passive absorption. Although it thereby removes the symptoms of flight it does not proceed to tackle the root of the problem in order to effect a cure. Mindfulness, however, in addition to containing the element of concentration, also embraces the quality of

insight or wisdom (*prajñā*). It is only through the faculty of wisdom that the meaning of our existence can finally be understood. It is by means of wisdom, in union with concentration, that enlightenment is possible and an answer to the question of life itself can be discovered.

## Wisdom

The heart of Buddhist practice consists in the cultivation of wisdom. It is wisdom that counteracts and thereby overcomes the ignorance which keeps us bound to the frustrating cycle of birth and death, *saṃsāra*. Thus wisdom is the key factor in triggering the enlightenment experience whereby the nature, meaning and purpose of one's existence are clarified.

In order to gain a clear picture of the nature and function of wisdom, it is helpful to understand the nature of what it dispels, namely, ignorance (*avidyā*). In this way we will be better able to describe the transformation it can effect in our lives. In Buddhism ignorance is traditionally regarded as the root problem of human existence. Under its influence we are deceived into assuming that we ourselves, others and the world in which we live exist in a way that does not in fact conform to reality. Ignorance thus distorts our perception and gives rise to erroneous views of the world. On the basis of these views we naturally act in such a way that seems to accord with the manner in which our fictitious reality appears to us. Such actions only lead us into frustration and

conflict, for the simple reason that they are founded on erroneous assumptions that cause us to expect results—that the real world is by nature incapable of producing. Thus as long as we remain oblivious to the distorting effects of ignorance, we will remain bound to a certain course of thought and action that will inevitably result in undesired consequences. Hence ignorance not only distorts the way we see things, but also binds us to a particular pattern of behaviour.

There are three basic erroneous conceptions that characterise ignorance: to regard what is impermanent as permanent; to regard what is unsatisfactory as satisfactory; and to regard what is not self-existent to be self-existent. These conceptions create the illusion that we ourselves and the world are composed of inherently permanent, satisfactory and self-existent entities. Intellectually we may know that this is obviously not true, but, nevertheless, we instinctively react to circumstances and conduct our lives as *though* it were true. It is these deeply-rooted distortions that give rise to the fictitious reality through assenting to which we constantly come into conflict with the actual reality of impermanent, unsatisfactory and non self-existent phenomena.

In the context of ignorance as it has been described here, wisdom can be understood as that which recognises the presence of error and proceeds to dispel it through coming to a veridical cognition of reality. This it is able to achieve by concentrating on the characteristics of impermanence,

unsatisfactoriness and non-self-existence. The deeper an awareness of these aspects of reality becomes, the less will our thoughts and actions be instinctively bound by the dictates of ignorance. Thus as our behaviour begins to conform more and more with a correct view of reality, we will cease to experience the conflict and frustration which arose through our previous distorted conceptions of the world. In this way wisdom does not merely serve to dispel error, but, when integrated into life through the discipline of meditation, also has the effect of liberating us from the bondage to the particular course of action and experience imposed by ignorance.

There is now a certain danger that the foregoing description might give rise to the notion that ignorance and wisdom are solely epistemological categories transpiring within an isolated sphere of 'mind.' However, in lived experience, do ignorance and wisdom really take place in some isolated mental sphere? Or do they not rather extend beyond such boundaries and characterise a fundamental pattern of our existence as such. To raise such questions is not to doubt the significance of their epistemological and psychological character, but to enquire into the nature of their existential dimension. Is the essence of ignorance and wisdom fully grasped by understanding their function as respectively binding and liberating cognitive functions? Not entirely. A fuller picture may emerge by trying to shed some light on the affective and existential elements that accompany them. To do this let us now consider their roles in relation to the

phenomenon of flight.

As was mentioned above, we habitually respond to our basic anxiety in the face of birth and death through existential flight. This form of flight precipitates us into absorption with the particular entities of the world. And in the very act of insistent absorption we consider these entities to be unchanging, self-existent realities. This view then provides us with an impression of security. Now we will recognise this false way of viewing things to be what we have described here as ignorance. Thus, in accordance with the **preceding discussion**, ignorance can be seen to correspond with the cognitive attitude of that pattern of existence, the mood of which is anxiety and the dynamic existential flight and absorption in particular entities.

Alternatively, we could regard anxiety to be the mood of ignorance, and existential flight and absorption in particular entities as its dynamic. Moreover, this pattern of existence we can now understand to be equivalent to the Buddhist concept of saṃsāra—the so-called 'cycle of birth and death.'

In this way the existential dimension of ignorance becomes clearer to us. Ignorance is not merely an isolated cognitive attitude but an inseparable facet of a deeper pattern or movement of existence. This movement does not just take place in the 'mind' but characterises our entire being in the world. However, as a possible pattern of existence, it is one that is unfulfilling and basically frustrating. The price we have to pay for evading the responsibility of what we are through flight is that of committing ourselves to an

endlessly repetitive sequence of dramas and scenarios that only succeed in bringing us back to where we started out. This is characteristic of the 'cyclic' nature of *saṃsāra*. The pattern that flight sets in motion is one that just keeps repeating itself. Hence there is no possibility of growth, of further actualising the potentialities of human existence. One is trapped in a vicious circle of anxiety, flight, absorption in things, confusion and ignorance.

The circle that *saṃsāra* describes is one of estrangement. It is a pattern of existence in which we are constantly one step removed from the immediacy and presence of our being as such. While anxiety and flight propel us away from ourselves, absorption in things and ignorance freeze and fix a separate domain of apparent security apart from the world as it really is. Again it should be emphasised that the 'spatial' imagery being used here "being propelled *away* from ourselves—into a domain *apart from* the world"—is, within the confines of our linguistic framework, unavoidable as a means of description. In actual fact, there is no literally 'spatial' character to this state of estrangement. We are never actually removed from the immediacy of our being as such. It is just that as soon as we seek words with which to describe an awareness of this existential condition, we have no choice but to resort to the predominantly spatial and temporal concepts that make up our lexicon. Thus estrangement is spoken of in terms of 'distance,' when in reality no distance is covered at all. This paradoxical state of affairs is frequently expressed in religious writings. For

example, the Zen Master Ta Hui remarks:

“Just because it’s so very close, you cannot get this Truth out of your own eyes ... But if you try to receive it by stirring your mind, you’ve already missed it by eighteen thousand miles.” [4]

Moreover, when attempting to describe *saṃsāra* by employing the category of time, the expression ‘beginningless’ is used. Although this quality of beginninglessness can be understood as a purely temporal characteristic of *saṃsāra*, it can also be interpreted in a more symbolic sense. *Samsara* can be viewed as beginningless in the same way that all circles are beginningless. To say that it has no beginning could thus also be a way of expressing an experiential quality of its existential structure by means of the category of time. Ignorance, anxiety, existential flight and absorption in things never ‘began’ at a particular moment in time in the same way that other events in our lives began. As far back as we can conceive of our existence they were present as constitutive factors. Their beginninglessness is perhaps more akin to the ‘beginningless’ quality of that kind of guilt which is unrelated to any specific misdeed, as described in Kafka’s novel *The Trial*.

Having outlined the existential dimension of ignorance as consisting of anxiety, flight and absorption in things, we should now be able to trace a comparable dimension for wisdom. As with ignorance, wisdom is essentially regarded

as a cognitive attitude. However, this attitude is not just an isolated phenomenon that merely serves to correct an opposing erroneous attitude. It is also an inseparable act of a particular pattern or movement of existence.

If ignorance is accompanied by flight away from oneself and absorption in a realm of particular things, it follows that wisdom, as the reversal of this process, would be characterised by a return to oneself and an openness to the presence of being as such. Hence, concurrent with wisdom, there is not merely the correction of a cognitive distortion, but a fundamental re-orientation of the way we are in the world with others. The vision of phenomena as they are forever changing and interdependently arising, however fleeting, unfreezes the world of isolated things and brings us back to an immediate, fresh encounter with ourselves, others and the world. Instead of anxiously responding to the perplexity of birth and death through existential flight, we come to feel at home in a calm acceptance of our finitude. And, freed from the compulsive habit of absorbing our attention in particular entities to the exclusion of the whole of which they are but a part, our mind opens to encompass the vast network of relationship that somehow imbues them with meaning.

The image of 'return' occurs frequently in descriptions of religious experience. It is even implied by the etymology of the word 'religion' itself, which means to be 'connected again' (with that from which one has strayed). It is especially evident in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which

speaks of the fall of man from his original state into sin and his subsequent return to God at a higher level of unity. In Buddhism, too, the notion of return can be found, for example, in the writings of the Zen tradition which speak of awakening to one's original nature and discovering one's face before one was born. The inherent danger of a concept such as 'return' is that it comes to be conceived as part of a process that literally occurs over periods of historical time, when it is really describing within the limitations of language the existential experience of 'returning' from a condition of unknowing to an understanding of what one is and has always been.

Through wisdom, in particular through the insight that all phenomena, including oneself, are devoid of being independent, self-existent entities, the mood of anxiety is dispelled and replaced by serenity. It is precisely because we apprehend things as existing in this self-sufficient, unrelated manner, that anxiety is able to occur. We only experience anxiety, as we feel ourselves to be standing out of nothingness, because we cling to the fiction of our being permanent, independent and self-existent. As soon as this fiction is dissolved we are able to glimpse that being and non-being, life and death do not contradict but necessarily complement each other. Anxiety is the product of a mind entrenched in duality, which can only see things in terms of an irreconcilable either-or. When, through wisdom, we grasp the principle of non-duality, it becomes clear that any affirmation implies its opposite and can have no existence

apart from it. Non-duality should not be simplistically interpreted, to mean that there are really no opposites in life and that everything is just 'one.' Opposites are an inescapable component of human existence. However, the problem is not created by the pairs of opposites themselves, but by our clinging to each pole as inherently separate from the other, instead of realising them to be mutually inseparable.

Hence wisdom is the cognitive attitude of an alternative pattern of existence to saṃsāra. This way of being has as its dynamic a sense of returning and opening, and as its mood a feeling of serenity. Furthermore, this experience is felt to be liberating, in contrast to the binding and restrictive character of saṃsāra. But as long as the theoretical content of wisdom remains merely as an object of intellectual speculation, then, no matter how well versed one may be in Buddhism, this existential dimension will be missing. To incorporate the content of wisdom into life, it is necessary that it be continually integrated into one's experience through mindfulness, contemplative reflection and meditation. Otherwise it will persist merely as an alienated and disconnected body of knowledge, devoid of any transforming power.

Moreover, this process is constantly resisted by the habitual counter-force of ignorance, flight and absorption in things: Moments of insight, accompanied by a sense of return, openness and joyous serenity, may flood into one's life only to be suddenly and inexplicably lost again. What was clear a

moment ago again becomes bewildering, what previously revealed a mysterious yet familiar depth reassumes its facade of normality, and what was then quietly reassuring again makes one feel uneasy. The practice of Buddhism is forged, as it were, out of the tension between these two patterns or movements of existence: the one keeping' us bound to a repetitive and painful cycle, the other breaking us out of this cycle along the path of Dharma.

This path is one that no one else can tread for us. At times it seems fraught with hindrances and irresolvable conflicts. And at times it is illuminated with hope and the way ahead seems clear. Yet however insurmountable the obstacles confronting us may appear, we should recall that there is no one hindering our progress but ourselves. For every situation in life offers us the possibility of either succumbing to the familiar force of habit or attempting to transform that moment into the unrepeatable present that it always is.

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## About the Author

Stephen Batchelor (Gelong Jhampa Thabkay) was born in Scotland In 1953. After completing grammar school in England he studied for three years at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, India. He continued his study of Tibetan Buddhism in Rikon Monastic Institute and

Tharpa Choeling, Centre for Tibetan Studies, in Switzerland from 1975–1980. The following year he went to Song Kwang Sa Monastery in Korea to pursue a training in Zen Buddhism. He became a Srāmaṇera in 1974 and received higher ordination in 1977. He has translated and edited Shantideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*), Dharamsala, 1979; Geshe Rabten, *Echoes of Voidness*, London, 1983, and is the author of *Alone With Others*, New York, 1983.

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## Notes

1. Shortly after this passage was written a Gallup poll on nuclear war was published in Newsweek (Oct. 5, 1981). To the question, “Which of these categories best describes you?” the response was as follows:
  - I frequently think and worry about the chances of a nuclear war. 18%
  - While I am concerned about the chance of a nuclear war, I try to put it out of my mind. 47%.
  - I don't think a nuclear war is too likely so I don't worry about it. 32%

- Don't know. 3%.

According to this poll it would seem that the majority of Americans (79%) adopt the strategy of mental flight in the face of the possibility of such a war.

2. Martin Heidegger. *What is Metaphysics?* Included in *Basic Writings*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 108.
3. Martin Heidegger. *op. cit.* p. 102.
4. Ta Hui. *Swampland Flowers: The Letters and Lectures of Zen Master Ta Hui*. Trans C. Cleary, New York; Grove Press, 1977, p. 71.

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