Wheel Publication No. 417/418

The Message in the Teachings of Kamma, Rebirth, & Saṃsāra

A Gateway to Deeper Understanding

Ashin Ottama

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Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka

The Wheel Publication No. 425/427

Published in 1998

ISBN-955–24–0162–3

Digital Transcription Source: BPS Transcription Project

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Preface

This essay is a revised and expanded version of a talk I gave to three American psychologists in March 1995 at the Mahāsi Training School in Yangon. To this written form of the talk I have added the sections on "solidity" and "objective matter" as well as some concluding reflections.

The essay is intended to preserve the direct and informal tone of a listener-oriented, interactive talk; hence doctrinal expressions are reduced to the minimum. Passages representing my own thoughts are clearly introduced as such. My explanations are supported by many parallels, comparisons, and analogies from daily life as well as from science. My predilection for examples from physics should not give the impression that I am an expert in the subject. I assure the reader I am not.

As the background to this essay I rely on the original Teaching of the Buddha and on the Theravāda Abhidhamma. I sometimes distinguish between the "original Teaching of the Buddha" and the Theravāda. When I make this distinction, by the former I mean the teachings found in the main Nikāyas of the Pali Canon, which were part of the general Buddhist heritage; by the latter I refer to the specific mode of interpretation found in the Pali Abhidhamma and the Commentaries. For people

not yet familiar with the Buddha's doctrine I have included some basic information from the ancient texts. The doctrinal points, however, are not my main concern here.

My object in discussing the three themes of the ancient Teaching is to invite all sincerely, seriously investigating people to question deeply the so-called "given realities" of our lives and to reflect thoroughly on the nature and predicament of our existence.

My thanks goes to all those who helped to make this booklet a reality, especially Bhante U Vijjobhāsa, Dhammācariya Dīghabhānaka; Kaba-Aye Saya U Chit Tin; and Richard Jessup, Anna Maclachlan, and Zoë Schramm-Evans.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ajahn Tiradhammo, Bhikkhu Ñāṇāloka, and Bhikkhu Bodhisāra gave me very substantial and helpful feedback, which led to numerous improvements in the original essay. In some instances, however, I stuck pertinaciously to my own ideas, and therefore, for any inaccuracies or errors that remain, responsibility falls on my head alone. Many thanks also goes to the spellchecker of the Compaq computer at the Mahāsi Meditation Centre! As English is my third language, I ask the reader to please be indulgent when perusing the following pages.

I hope the reading of this essay will be an inspiring and stimulating experience for you. You may regard it as an imaginary discussion between us. We can grow when our minds touch. The theme of the essay is not an easy one, but I have tried to lighten the tone with touches of humour. This

smiling, however, is meant quite seriously.

Ashin Ottama
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Yangon, Myanmar
March 1996

A Small Glossary

In this glossary I have briefly explained a few basic Pali terms that often occur in the essay. There are no suitable equivalents for these expressions in the English language. Moreover, by now most of these words have become so familiar in the West that any attempt to translate them would only cause misunderstanding. The less familiar Pali terms are given in italics.

Abhidhamma—"The Higher Teachings," the third part of the Pali Canon. A highly abstract, detailed analysis of the four ultimate realities (materiality, consciousness, mental factors, and Nibbāna). Though abstruse, it is very helpful for deeper understanding of the Teaching, as it describes and explains the nature of mind-and-matter and Nibbāna from the standpoint of deep insight.

Arahat—a fully liberated being who has successfully followed the path shown by a Buddha and uprooted all mental defilements.

Bhikkhu—a Buddhist monk.

Buddha—a perfectly self-enlightened being, the "Awakened One." According to the teachings, the Buddhas occur very rarely in the course of countless aeons. The last Buddha lived in northern India 2500 years ago under the name

Siddhattha Gotama.

Concept—mental construct, denotation; a name we give to things, actions, characteristics, etc. Concepts do not express the actual reality of the things, but are their mere representation, interpretation, reflex.

Dhamma (Sanskrit "Dharma")—the truth, the way things are, the underlying law of the universe; the Buddha's Teaching that leads to the peace and freedom of Nibbāna.

Dhamma, practice of—the practice of the Buddha's "Noble Eightfold Path," the application of the principles of the Buddha's teachings to life; establishing of constant mindfulness, endeavour to keep open, unbiased, fully present, with a noting mind. From this training results a deeper understanding as well as a more open, attentive, and sensitive approach to one's own life and to other beings.

Dukkha—all kinds and types of unpleasantness, unsatisfactoriness, discomfort, and suffering; one of the three universal characteristics inherent in all conditioned things and phenomena (the other two characteristics are impermanence (*anicca*), and impersonality (*anattā*)).

Jhāna—mental absorption, which has several levels; high attainments in concentration-meditation (*samatha*).

Kamma (Sanskrit "karma")—volitional action, or more precisely, the volition which motivates our intentional activity. These volitional impulses leave behind a latent kammic potential, which can accumulate. When the

circumstances are favourable this kammic force will bring about a corresponding result or will influence the unfolding of some situation. Kamma does not produce any fixed fate. It manifests rather as a spectrum of dispositions and predilections. Generally, kamma influences the mental as well as the physical side of a being and has an impact even on the course of our lives. The result of kamma is called vipāka.

Nibbāna (Sanskrit "Nirvāṇa")—the ultimate unconditioned reality; the highest freedom, peace, and happiness; the highest purity and health; the cessation of ignorance, craving, and attachment, which are the basis for all unsatisfactoriness and suffering; release from the round of rebirth.

Pali—the language of the oldest Buddhist canon, very close to the language spoken by the Buddha. In this essay I have used the Pali terms, though the Sanskrit counterparts are more familiar. In this way I am expressing my affiliation to the Buddha's original Teaching. Sanskrit is the language generally used in the later expressions of the Buddha's doctrine, where we find noticeable shifts in the meanings of some words as well as the final aim.

Samatha—practice of concentration; a type of meditation aiming at steadiness, tranquillity, and purity of mind. The meditator focuses and fixes his awareness on a single object of meditation until he reaches the state of absorption (*jhāna*, see next).

Saṃsāra—the cycle of rebirth, the endlessly recurring round of birth and death in various planes of existence. In an extended meaning the term "saṃsāra" refers to all spheres of existence, the whole of the manifested reality, the "allness" in the endlessness of time.

Sutta—a discourse of the Buddha.

Theravāda—"The Teaching of the Elders," the Buddhist school that has adhered most closely to what the Buddha originally taught. It is the only one of the eighteen early Buddhist schools to have survived. Theravāda is found today mainly in Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, and is also taking root in the West.

Tipiṭaka— (literally "Three Baskets"), also called the "Pali Canon." It is the oldest recension of the Buddha's teachings. It was written down about 80 BC in Sri Lanka. It consists of three "baskets" or parts: the Vinaya Piṭaka, or "basket" of monastic discipline; the Sutta Piṭaka, or collection of the Buddha's discourses; and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka (see next).

Vipassanā—deep insight into reality, into the character of our experience, into the mode of our existence; a type of meditation that aims at seeing the true nature of mind and body, the true nature of all conditioned things. The culmination of the path is the elimination of all mental defilements (such as craving, attachment, ignorance, etc.), which are the main causes of unsatisfactoriness and suffering in our life. The practice of vipassanā meditation is

the process of detachment, opening up, and purification. In a more advanced stage the overall detachment enables the meditator to see the workings of the mind, where it makes mistakes, how it creates its own world. The direct insight into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and impersonality of all conditioned phenomena corrects and heals our mistaken perception, dispels ignorance, and ultimately leads to the realisation of Nibbāna.

If We Wish to Understand…

If we wish to understand the Buddha's Teaching in its original dimension—in its undiminished magnitude and significance—we require a proper understanding of three basic principles which form the framework of the Teaching: kamma, rebirth, and saṃsāra. For most Asian Buddhists these are just three realities of life. For most Westerners, however, they are quite often three big question marks.

It is not that we have no idea at all of what they mean. I think we all have at least an inkling of what these words point to. The concept of "saṃsāra" may be less familiar, but thinking in terms of "kamma" and "rebirth" has at times become almost a fashion. What is common, however, to many people today is a nagging sense of uncertainty, hesitancy, ambivalence, and doubt about the actual validity of the teachings of kamma, rebirth, and saṃsāra. "To what extent," you may have asked yourself, "do these teachings belong to the categories of metaphor and parable, archetypal myth, or skilful tools of ethical education, and to what extent are they the actual, real, operative principles of our life and universe? Are these theories to be taken literally, or are they just the remnants of an ancient religious paradigm no longer relevant to human beings in this post-modern age?"

In the following chapters I intend to offer you some explanations and personal observations on the meaning of these three principles of the Buddha's Teaching. I do not want you to accept the ideas I present here passively. My aim, rather, is to stimulate you to clarify your own understanding, to work out your own answers to these vitally important and far-reaching questions. I am not going to present a flood of proofs and amazing stories to coerce you into accepting the law of kamma and rebirth. I think enough has already been done along this line already, and to tell you the truth I am not especially enthusiastic about that approach. In my view, these reports about past-life recollections encourage a somewhat narrow and one-sided picture of rebirth, and I doubt that they give many people a deeper insight into the mystery of life and death.

Let me illustrate my point by an example: If we were to approach people on the street of any European city and bluntly ask them, "Do you think you are going to be reborn after you die?", perhaps a third would say "No," another third—including those who believe in a mainstream religion—would say "Yes," and a third would hesitate to give any answer. If we take the Buddha's Teaching as our point of reference, then all three groups are to some extent right and also to some extent wrong.

According to the Teaching, at death the mind and body dissolve and the same mind and body will never appear again. On this point the first group appears to be correct. But the accumulated living forces, the particular kammic

potential accompanied by the craving for existence, will bring into being a new mind and body, and a new being will appear. Hence the second group seems to be correct. However, according to the Buddha's Teaching, there is no real lasting "I" to be reborn. The question itself is wrongly formulated. In this respect the third group, which did not take any definite stand, may have responded in the most appropriate way.

From the above example we can see that the binary "yes-or-no" approach to complex spiritual problems usually misses the point. The square black-or-white attitude may not be fine enough to encompass and express the deeper levels of reality. It is just too rigid and simplistic. What will prove more helpful in penetrating to the truth is to attend to the actual nature of things with a careful, unbiased, sensitive mind. In this essay I would like to show you the way to a new dimension in understanding our life and death, our whole existence.

Although our worldview has undergone many drastic changes, the Western mind is still strongly committed to the belief that mind is a by-product of brain function, and thus that the death of the body means a definite end to the continuity of life and the flow of conscious experience. This belief sounds plausible, simple, logical; perhaps a little too simple, as it induces people to think: "Just get the best out of your present life and to hell with the consequences." The Buddha rejected this materialistic outlook and said it is not in accordance with reality. Moreover, we can easily be

misled by this theory. When we adopt the erroneous view that our good and bad actions have little or no impact on the quality of our life, this view may bring us to ruin.

The materialistic theory is not inherently "bad" or "evil." For all we know, the materialists of the Buddha's time might have been fairly reasonable and modest people. The problem with this philosophy lies in the fact that it describes the inexpressible, ineffable nature of the universe in such a narrow and one-sided way that we can speak of it as a real distortion of reality.

An uncomfortable feeling of apprehension or uneasiness may arise when we reflect upon the teachings of kamma, rebirth, and saṃsāra from the perspective of our own existence: these themes point directly to our life and death, and to what follows. To face up to our death, and to decipher the mystery of what lies behind it, is a difficult area for all of us. We sense—with inner disquietude—that we do not have much control over this process. Some people try to sidestep these topics just to avoid the anxiety and bewilderment that overcomes them when they reflect on them. Yet such an attitude is similar to that of a dental patient who continuously takes painkillers instead of going to the dentist.

For the Buddha a clear vision of his own past lives in saṃsāra, and an extensive vision of the workings of kamma in the endlessly recurring process of rebirth, were the two preparatory realisations that he experienced on the night of

his enlightenment. These two knowledges triggered the final one, the awakening to the Four Noble Truths, culminating in the overcoming of the "cankers" (*āsava*) and the attainment of full deliverance, the achievement of Buddhahood.

Our motivation to practise the Dhamma and our confidence in the validity of the Buddha's message is often relative to the degree to which we comprehend kamma, rebirth, and saṃsāra. We can benefit greatly from a deeper understanding of this part of the Buddha's doctrine. Therefore I will try to present these three themes here in an undogmatic way from the standpoint of Western culture, using the language of a Western-structured mind. Although the three principles are closely intertwined, for my purposes in this essay I will attempt to introduce them separately as far as that is possible.

Kamma

The principle of kamma is nothing completely foreign to us, nothing that we do not intuitively know to some extent already. It is the law that every action has some effect. Moreover, our actions affect the quality of our mind; each of our actions has an impact on our mind, and thus the quality of our mind has a direct influence on the quality of our life. We know these relations. The teaching of kamma, however, goes much deeper and gives a more thorough explanation of the whole process. In our culture we are accustomed to measure the quality of actions predominantly by the impact they have on our surroundings. In the teaching of kamma we instead focus on the effects our various actions have on ourselves as agents of action.

All actions of body, speech, and mind are kamma. But more precisely, kamma is the volition or intention (*cetanā*) behind the action. These kammic volitions have the inherent potential to bring about a corresponding kind of result, a vipāka. The volitions are like seeds, the results they bring forth are like fruits. In colloquial usage, by kamma we often mean the whole accumulated potential of all present and past volitions which have not yet produced their results.

A Parallel from Physics

The teaching of kamma is analogous to the physical law of the preservation of matter and energy. This rudimentary law of classical physics tells us that things do not disappear tracelessly. In our relative universe only physical or chemical transformations take place but nothing utterly vanishes. You cannot destroy even a drop of water. If it dries or evaporates, it will later re-condense; if it freezes, it will one day melt again. You might decompose it with electrolysis into hydrogen and oxygen, but if you put a match to this gaseous mixture there will be a little puff, and on the walls of the container moisture will appear as the "ash" from the fire. (Do you still remember the physics classes where the experiments always went a little wrong?)

If we disintegrate the atoms of the water drop, we would get a terrifying amount of energy: E = mc2 (energy = mass of water drop x speed of light squared)! Energy can "crystallise" back into matter as we can witness in high-energy accelerators, but it is much more likely that it would change into another kind of energy. Solar energy is a good example. On the sun atoms of hydrogen fuse into helium. This nuclear fusion releases energetic radiation into the cosmos so that we have sunshine on our earth. The green chlorophyll of plants absorbs the light and the trees grow.

You cut down a tree and make a fire. The stored energy of the sun will cook your meal on the camp fire. Again, fossil fuel explodes in the cylinders of the engine. The ancient energy of our primaeval sun gets activated and your car goes very fast up to the next red light. You press the brake and transform the kinetic energy of your car into the heat of the brake.

We can live happily unaware of these complex physical and chemical processes, but we cannot deny their existence. The teaching of kamma might be considered an extension of this universal law—the law of the conservation of energy—from the visible realm of matter into the more subtle dimension of mind. Here too, mental impulses do not disappear tracelessly. Rather, each of our volitions leaves behind an imprint or bud of energy in our minds, and when these kammic impulses ripen under suitable external conditions, they will bring forth some result. Don't be mistaken: mental processes are not weak or insignificant. Do you think the new aircraft was designed by Boeing's workshops and ateliers? The aircraft was first created by mind: by the thoughts, concepts, and ideas of Boeing's engineers and craftsmen. Truly, the mind is the forerunner of all actions, the architect of our entire civilisation.

Water Seeking the Sea

The Buddha describes Nibbāna as the Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed (Udāna 8:3). From this standpoint anything and everything disrupts the primal unoriginated peace and "healthiness" of the Unformed, and thus some phenomenon becomes manifest. On the macroscopic level, by our volitions we depart from the equipoise of the unmanifested "zero-balance" and we do. In relation to the primordial peace any volition, good or bad, is a perturbation, a kind of "debt" that needs to be "paid back," an imbalance that seeks the restoration of equilibrium. The lost or broken equipoise has the inherent tendency to heal itself and thus restore the original balance.

Ven. Nārada Mahāthera wrote: "As surely as water seeks its own level, so does kamma, given the opportunity, produce its inevitable result." The result, or vipāka, is the ripening of kamma, the "payback," the occasion when a particular kammic potency discharges its energy in the form of a result. One small part of the primal wholeness has been reinstalled.

This model of kamma is just a rough sketch, and I admit that in many respects it is inaccurate. On the whole, however, I think it is good enough to convey the point that I'm trying to get across: that the "born" or "formed" is

something intrinsically out of balance, something inherently broken and fractured.

The analogy of water reaching sea-level may give the impression that before we can attain final liberation each and every kamma has to produce its result. In the Buddha's Teaching this is not the case at all. It is possible that some old kamma will have to bring forth fruit, but certainly not all one's old kamma needs to fructify before one can attain enlightenment. In the Buddha's Teaching there are four levels of enlightenment, each divided into the two stages of "path and fruit" (*magga-phala*). Each level of attainment purifies or deactivates a certain portion of one's accumulated unwholesome kamma. The first and second eliminate the grosser forms of unwholesome kamma, which can cause rebirth in the lower realms. The third stage cuts off kamma that might produce rebirth in sense-sphere existence. The fourth uproots all those kammic forces that can cause any type of rebirth. However, even the arahat, the liberated one, still has some kamma left, which sustains his mind and body until his death.

Only the final climax of the practice of Dhamma, *parinibbāna*, the passing away of the arahat, completely invalidates, nullifies, and deactivates the accumulated kammic potential. Along the way, however, as a general instruction, the Buddha clearly encourages the performance of wholesome actions: "Abstain from all evil, do good deeds, purify your mind" (Dhp 183). In the Aṅguttara Nikāya (AN 7:58) he unequivocally urges his followers to

perform wholesome actions.

The "Granny Mary" Gastronomic Parallel

Imagine you are living with your enormous, elderly grandmother. She does the cooking for you. Because of her age she cannot go out shopping and therefore depends on the provisions you bring home every day. But she has a huge deep freezer in the kitchen. On the whole, Granny Mary is quite reliable, but you have some serious problems with her: she is deaf, and is quite disinterested in any kind of communication. Therefore she ignores your own gastronomic wishes. She cooks in her own style, following her own recipes.

The only way you can guarantee a good diet for yourself is by bringing home good foodstuff. Your grandmother will prepare good meals if you provide good victuals. Wouldn't it be foolish to expect delicious meals if the only edibles you bring home day after day are rotten sausages, a bag of chilli peppers, and smelly eggs? In our simile, if you cannot eat the dish, you can get up and go to a restaurant. In our life, however, when our past kamma brings forth its fruit, we have to swallow everything that comes.

These analogies are just different illustrations for the relationship between kamma and its result. In reality, the

law of kamma does not work in a rigid, mechanistic way. The unfolding of kamma is a very dynamic process, and its sheer complexity befuddles all attempts to represent it as just a gigantic piece of clockwork.

The events of our lives do not occur accidentally or at random. Events have their cause, or better, a variety of causes. However, it would be a mistake to think that everything that happens to us occurs exclusively through the operation of kamma. Theravāda Buddhism regards the teaching of kamma as just one aspect of the complex, multifaceted law of cause and effect. The Abhidhamma enumerates twenty-four modes of conditional relations, among which kamma and vipāka are merely two. They are, however, a very important two, for their functioning is largely responsible for the share of happiness and sorrow in our lives.

The system of twenty-four conditional relations is intended to cover all happenings in the domains of mind and matter. We can say that the teaching of kamma-vipāka, together with the six roots (*hetu-paccaya*), [1] is the ethical part of it. They refer to the basic dichotomies of "good and bad," "wholesome and unwholesome," "beneficial and harmful," "right and wrong," "meritorious and demeritorious"; they also indirectly concern the pairs "wise and foolish," "skilful and unskilful," "freeing and binding," "blameless and blameworthy," "virtuous and unvirtuous," etc.

The Gap

Do you know why some actions are good and others bad? I'm not joking! Please tell me—for you personally—why is good good and bad bad? You may think this is a school-child's catechism, but I am often surprised at just how many people are perplexed about such a basic matter. We may quote some ethical maxims or juggle with philosophical abstractions, but in the end we usually have to admit that we simply don't know. To give a shining example of such a fundamental gap in ethical orientation, let me tell you that I was already over thirty when it first became clear to me: "Good is good because it leads to happiness and freedom of the heart. Bad is bad because it leads to suffering, misery, and bondage." Simple, isn't it? But it's not at all easy. This ethic is not a matter of opinion or philosophy.

If we become sensitive enough, we will be able to see how the quality of our mind changes with each mental, verbal, or bodily action, especially when we make an important decision. But this is only a slight validation of the above principle, a foretaste of a deeper insight that might emerge later as a result of practise. To understand the workings of this principle fully, we need to consider rebirth, to see our existence as a process not limited by a particular lifespan but continuing on indefinitely into the future. At this level

the principle becomes identical with the law of kamma itself.

Indeed, this is the basic meaning of the law of kamma. The Buddha calls "wholesome" all those volitions and actions which ultimately issue in the different kinds of happiness and freedom: sensual happiness, the happiness of the fine-material level of consciousness, the refined bliss of the immaterial absorptions. Wholesome kamma can even help us to realise the sublime happiness, peace, and freedom of Nibbāna. He calls "unwholesome" all those volitions and actions which ultimately bring undesirable fruit—frustration, suffering, and bondage.

Imaginary Examples

1. A neighbour runs into a burning house to save a schoolgirl, but he suffocates on the fumes and dies there.

Death is like the turning of a page in a large dictionary. That man continues somewhere else in saṃsāra, probably under very fortunate conditions. Even if the switch of death activated some stored-up unwholesome kamma and the man is reborn in a miserable state, his life span there will probably not be very long. Inevitably, the wholesome kamma generated by his selfless action will bear fruit and lead to long-lasting lightness and happiness.

2. Mr. A knows about sudden financial troubles in the family of his friend Mr. B. Mr. A wishes to help Mr. B with a donation, but he offers him the money in an unskilful way. Mr. B feels insulted in front of his family and the friendship is broken.

Compassion without wisdom often has undesirable consequences. However, the quality of an action depends on the intention. Mr. A feels miserable, but he created wholesome kamma. Moreover, he has learned a lesson: if one wishes to help others, one must be extremely sensitive and careful. Mr. B's financial troubles seem to have a deep kammic cause. He could not accept the help offered to him

and even became angry with his would-be benefactor. He may be experiencing the fruit of some previous act of stinginess, a fruit not yet exhausted.

3. An entrepreneur donates a large sum of money to the local mental hospital. One of his motives is to be classified in a lower income bracket. His donation is appreciated by the municipality and he rises in social standing. Because of his skilful trick, the following year he can get away with a lower income tax.

This may be an example of mixed kamma, of charity combined with greed and cunning. The result of such kamma will also be mixed. Again, the social uplift has no direct kammic link with the monetary gift but is probably a result of some previous kamma; perhaps in the distant past the man had rejoiced in the success of his colleagues.

As to the effects of the different types of donations, the intensity of wholesomeness is dependent not so much on the need of the recipient but on three factors involved in the act: the purity of the giver, the purity of the recipient, and the value of the gift (AN 6:37). This rule applies to all kinds of service and support, when we offer our time, skills, advice, care, protection, etc.

Throughout history, civilizations and cultures have adopted different moral codes, standards of behaviour, and scales of ethical values. The law of kamma does not belong in this category. Here we are discussing neither the conventions of social life, nor the correctness of some particular code of

justice. The law of kamma mirrors actuality itself; its operations are discerned by direct insight into the functioning of reality. The workings of kamma may not correspond with our opinions about right and wrong or match our feelings about justice. They are, rather, the expression of something deeper: the actual universal laws underlying saṃsāric existence.

The Buddha understood that everyone seeks happiness, but he saw that most people do things that inevitably lead to suffering and misery (see DN 20.2). This was one reason he finally decided to teach. While ultimate liberation from suffering is the main goal of his teaching, the Buddha also pointed out what is beneficial and what is harmful at the level of ordinary life. By following his guidance practically anybody can avoid activities and mental attitudes that lead to suffering and distress.

For an easy orientation we find in the scriptures different enumerations of right and wrong actions. The most common list of wrong deeds is the ten unwholesome "courses of action":

> By body: (1) killing, (2) stealing, (3) sexual misconduct.
>
> By speech: (4) lying, (5) slander, (6) rude speech, (7) vain talk or gossip.
>
> By mind: (8) covetousness, (9) ill will, (10) wrong views.

There are two standard lists of wholesome actions. The first

is simply the diametric opposite of the ten wrong actions. From this list is derived the Five Precepts, the basic moral code for lay people: abstinence from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and the use of intoxicants. These simple rules for proper living protect the trainee from the grossest forms of unwholesome kamma.

Another set of guidelines to righteous conduct is the ten "bases of meritorious deeds":

> (1) generosity, (2) morality, (3) cultivation of the mind by meditation, (4) reverence, (5) service, (6) sharing one's own merits with others, (7) rejoicing in the merits of others, (8) learning the Dhamma, (9) teaching the Dhamma, (10) straightening out one's view.

If you have difficulty accepting the given standards of "good" and "bad" from the scriptures, as an exercise you can try to discover what is good and bad yourself. Call "good" those actions that you have found lead to pure happiness and freedom of heart, and "bad" those actions that lead to bondage and distress. This exercise won't work with fools, but it offers a lot of insight to consistent and sensitive people. It will help to develop wisdom and humility.

It lies in our personal interest to find out how nature works. If my own attempts to discover the real principles and relations governing life fail, and I am wise enough to

acknowledge this, I will probably be more inclined to place confidence in the insight of someone who can see it all much more clearly than I can.

And here is the precise definition of what is good and what is bad: If the volition behind an action is governed by greed, aversion, or delusion (*lobha, dosa, moha*), the kamma is unwholesome, which means that it will bring forth unsatisfactory, undesirable, unpleasant results. On the other hand, if our volition is governed by non-greed (generosity, selflessness), non-hatred (kindness, friendliness), and non-delusion (clear understanding, insight, wisdom), then the kammic force will be wholesome, bringing forth happiness and other desirable results.

Shabby Passenger

In a bus somebody steals the little purse from my bag. This may be the result of some theft I committed in the past; perhaps I was once a pickpocket myself. The old kamma may have invited the present incident to happen. I can react to this event in different ways:

(a) I still remember the shabby man sitting next to me. Anger and hatred arise in my mind, "He did it!" This is negative kamma based on greed and hatred. When this kamma ripens, it will bring about an unpleasant result in proportion to the intensity of my greed, hatred, and delusion at the time I generate that kamma.

Another type of response is as follows:

(b) I remember the indigent man with the thought: "He might have taken it. Some people are quite poor. The $20 cannot help him for long. If I see him again, I will inform him about the social welfare programme. He may not know about it." In this case I have created wholesome kamma based on non-attachment, care, and friendliness.

We can certainly feel how the way we deal with such situations affects the quality of our lives. If we always react blindly, as in the first example, our minds will become dry, selfish, and grim; while if we develop kindness, openness,

benevolence, and equanimity, as in the second example, our lives will become light, bright, and meaningful.

There is also a third type of response—that of an enlightened, fully liberated being:

(c) a completely open, non-reactive mind, equanimous, clearly aware of the situation, sometimes followed by an appropriate response based on wisdom and compassion, sometimes not followed by any reaction at all.

This kind of freedom, detachment, spaciousness of mind, and wise equanimity is hard to emulate. In the second example we can see the equanimity of "heavenly" balance which still creates a kind of wholesome kamma. The last example represents the highest equanimity born of overall purity and detachment. The difference between (b) and (c) is subtle and difficult to distinguish from the outside. Though the actions of the arahats can sometimes be quite strong, their minds are always "wisely balanced," free of all negativities and turbulent emotions. Because their selfless, impersonal responses will be in harmony with wisdom and their own inward nature, they will not produce the usual type of kamma at all.

Nose Touching the Window

The non-creation of kamma is not the main objective of vipassanā or insight meditation. The practice of insight meditation teaches us not to react to our experience with desire or aversion. It is a training in detachment from all mind-objects, from all mind-states, from all our experience. In vipassanā we do not interfere with our experience; we learn primarily to acknowledge everything that appears on the screen of our mind as it is. We note it clearly, we remain closely mindful of its nature. It is a little like watching television, but instead of being lost in the programme we start to perceive the reality of the TV set and the screen; we start to see a television which is just switched on. When we are clearly mindful of an object in this way—even if only at scattered moments—at that time we are neither attached to the object nor repelled by it. Such detachment is the necessary precondition for seeing everything in an undistorted way.

We practise vipassanā in order to develop insight, to know our own minds, to see how the mind works, to realise its true nature, to experience ultimate reality, to free ourselves from the causes of bondage, unhappiness, and misery. For this we need to gain a healthy distance from all the topics and objects of our consciousness. When we are touching the

window-pane with our nose and are absorbed in the life on the street, we cannot see the window!

No Bananas on Apple-trees

As long as we live on the level of relative reality we are subject to the law of cause and effect. The kamma-vipāka relations operate and influence our life all the time. Often we would like to see the connections between the effect and the cause, to know the exact cause of some particular effect. Sometimes we have a hunch about the cause, but generally we don't. Our mind lacks the capacity needed for this task.

The workings of kamma are so complex that only a Buddha can trace out the kammic links in the life-dramas of particular beings. The Buddha declared kamma and its results to be one of the four "inconceivables" (*acinteyya*), one of the four areas practically impenetrable by the ordinary human mind (AN 4:77). Kamma does not ripen in any mechanical, linear, predictable way, nor according to any preset time frame. The interaction of many supporting and obstructive factors makes it difficult or almost impossible for us to pinpoint the connections between events.

The Buddha did not explain the law of kamma in all its details but he gave a number of practical hints about how the law works. In a famous sutta (MN 135) he outlined fourteen connections between kammic causes and their likely results:

(1) The killing of living beings, if performed repeatedly, leads to rebirth in wretched circumstances, even in realms of high density. If one is reborn as a human being, the kamma will cause a short life. (2) Abstinence from killing, the protection of life, brings rebirth in higher realms of light and happiness. If one is reborn as a human being, the wholesome kamma will support long life.

(3) One who is cruel, who causes pain and hardship to living beings, will suffer in turn and will be susceptible to illness. (4) One who abstains from harming beings over a long time may expect happiness and health.

(5) Anger, hatred, and ill will cause an ugly physical appearance. (6) Patience and forbearance bring beauty as their result.

(7) Frequent envy causes general loss of influence. (8) Not being envious but rejoicing in the success of others is the basis of great influence.

(9) Stinginess strangles the access to fortune and drives people into poverty. (10) Generous people acquire wealth easily.

(11) One who is arrogant, harsh, and disrespectful should expect rebirth in a low family. (12) Those who are humble, gentle, and respectful may expect rebirth in high families.

(13) One who never inquires about the truth or about what is beneficial and harmful is heading towards increasing stupidity and ignorance. (14) One who investigates such

matters gains in knowledge and is paving the way to the acquisition of wisdom.

You may disagree with the law of kamma, but you cannot deny the evident fact that our actions have some influence on our mind, that they affect our life. You may think the Buddha was wrong because you can present many counter-examples: e.g., you know a very nice old man who used to run his own butchery all his life; or you know a family that has been very rich for at least two generations, and all of them are very miserly; or you remember your mother—so caring, loving, and kind—who suffered many illnesses throughout her life and finally died of a terrible kind of cancer.

Some of the apparent discrepancies in the functioning of kamma can be understood if we recognise that everybody has three faces: the face as we perceive him, the face as he perceives himself, and the face as he really is. When we speak about kamma and its results we are concerned mainly with the "second face," how a person experiences himself. There is a significant difference between the way people appear to us and the way they feel about themselves. Many rich people cannot enjoy their wealth and actually feel poor. Many smiling, successful people come home and, from sheer misery, weep on their pillows. Don't be fooled by deceptive appearances. Consider how you present yourself to your colleagues, how you try to cover up and hide the embarrassing side of your personality.

It is true, however, that if you examine the workings of kamma from the perspective of a single lifetime, the relation of kamma to its fruit will appear fuzzy and indistinct. You may then question the validity of the kamma theory, and think the many irregularities and exceptions you can call to mind belie the claim that it is a natural law.

We can see some perceptible indications of the workings of kamma in our everyday life. Our environment is a little like a mirror: what we send out is likely to be reflected back to us. When we have had a good day, things go smoothly, everybody is nice and friendly; when we have a grudge on our shoulder people get angry with us for no reason. Our good mood will make even the stones smile; when we are in a rage, we will hit our head on an open window.

Watch what happens to your mind when you do something against your principles: The very moment your mind gets weak, the world turns ugly, you start to smile and behave like a ninny for a while. On the other hand, if, because of some extraordinary astrological constellation, you jump over your shadow and clean all the stairs in your house, you will probably keep your serious face but your mind will be in a celebrative mood, suffused by a very special kind of joyful energy. We can call this “instant kamma.” Try to remember what was in your mind when you bit your tongue.

Within this present life we can also perceive some deeper kammic relations: If you do wholesome, selfless, intelligent

deeds, you feel good, your heart opens, you feel connected with others. If you care for people, if you are honest and kind, people will naturally help you; they will join you and you will have many friends. But if you habitually take advantage of people, grudge their success, lie, and behave dishonestly, people will keep a distance from you and you will become isolated. If you do stupid, cruel, evil things, you will experience a lot of tension, anxiety, and conflict, and you will have to face many hardships in your life. Even if you get rich, you will feel miserable. Those who systematically work on their limits will have large horizons; those who go to bed whenever they feel a little tired can expect a pretty dull life. The understanding of these relations in life is the aim and basis of any good education. I will call it the "middle range" kammic perspective.

To understand why people are so different, why they are endowed with such different dispositions, to understand the twists of fate, the life tragedies, illnesses, mental distortions and accidents, to see why some succeed easily and others, despite their effort, repeatedly fail, we need to bring in the "full-scale" perspective. We can understand the law of kamma satisfactorily only if we take into account the other two themes of this essay, rebirth and saṃsāra. The numerous past-life stories in the scriptures suggest that to get a clear picture of the kammic process we would have to trace the links between kamma and its results in thousands or millions of lives. Only then will we be in a position to recognise it as a governing law; only then will kamma

display its really frightful face. Why is this so? The succession of cause and effect, the order in the ripening of kamma, is unpredictable, and the effect of kamma may become manifest only after many aeons.

The Laboratory of Dhamma

The teachings of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka and its Commentaries describe the kamma-vipāka relations in greater detail than the Sutta Piṭaka. The suttas, the Buddha's sermons, are always direct, "pragmatic" expositions of the Dhamma intended to guide and edify those to whom they are addressed. Here the Buddha often speaks from the standpoint of his unenlightened listeners. The Abhidhamma, on the other hand, while theoretical and abstract, analyses mind and matter from the viewpoint of ultimate reality, describing all phenomena from the position of full enlightenment. In this way we have two different perspectives on the Teaching. While these complement and support each other, it is not advisable to mix them inappropriately.

Ven. Nārada Mahāthera illustrates the relationship between the two modes of teaching with an analogy: In our ordinary life we say that we drink water, wash our hands with water, use water for many different purposes; but when we enter a laboratory we perform our experiments exclusively with H2O, and we understand water in a very different way. The Abhidhamma is like the Dhamma-laboratory, explaining the structure and nature of the mind and the workings of kamma in minute detail.

The Commentaries go even a step further and explain human experience as a rapid sequence of mind-moments. These extremely brief moments of consciousness occur in fixed sequences, which we might regard as the "molecules" of the mind. The typical sequence consists of seventeen mind-moments, a mind-moment being an "atom" of mind. It is said that billions of mind-moments can flash by in a second.

Each of these seventeen moments has its function. Eight are vipāka, moments of resultant consciousness. These are the occasions when some old kamma finds the opportunity to give its result. Two moments are considered kammically neutral. Kamma itself is produced by the seven moments called javana, which belong to the active side of the mind. Only a small portion of the kamma we create now brings results in this present life, and from this little only a fragment becomes manifest immediately. Another small portion of the kamma created will give results in the next existence. The time for the ripening of the remaining kamma is not fixed. That means that the greater portion of kamma we are producing now will be inherited by "ourselves" in the distant future.

If we simplify and generalise the Abhidhamma's intricate explanations of the functioning of kamma and vipāka, we can say:

(i) what we live in (= our "world"),
(ii) what we experience in our life, and

(iii) how we experience it,

are largely influenced by our past kamma. But how we react or respond to our experience is the making of new kamma; that is how we prepare, influence, and tailor the reality of our future. (Do you see the perpetuum mobile? Do you see our responsibility for our actions and attitudes?)

Be careful, more is coming: What is happening to us now—in its general contours—is the expression of our past kamma. We can choose and try many things in our lives, but what will actually happen and how it will happen is highly dependent on the kind and quality of our accumulated kammic potential. For example, which spouse we can live with, the job we can do and keep, the people we connect with, the way people treat us (!), our successes and failures and accidents—all these waves and ripples of fortune need to be supported by our kamma to happen as they happen; indeed, even to take place at all they need the input of our kammic dispositions. Without sufficient backing from our kammic resources, they may still occur but they will affect us only superficially.2

The Abhidhamma points out that even becoming aware of an object is vipāka. From the multitude of phenomena around us, those we notice, how we experience them, and the aspects that grip our attention are functions of our past kamma. Generally speaking, our kamma determines our rebirth, shapes our character and dispositions, outlines our limits, and conditions the main episodes of our life.

According to the more precise outlook of the Abhidhamma and its Commentaries, the whole of our life is nothing more than a flow of "mental and material formations" (*nāma-rūpa*) rapidly arising and passing away. We might imagine these formations as "mental sequences" arising along with their respective objects. The constant ripening of past kamma in every "mental sequence" is the resultant or passive side of this process. How we react and respond to this life experience is the active part, the creation of new kamma, either good or bad.

We cannot influence the ripening of past kamma directly, but we can take precautions to mitigate the ripening of bad kamma and to aid the ripening of good kamma. If we are mindful of greed, hatred, and delusion as they arise, these unwholesome factors will not get an opportunity to take deep root in our mind, and unwholesome kamma will have much less chance to ripen. Moreover, we are capable of effectively influencing the way we respond to our experience. This is the pivotal element of free will, which enables us to change the direction of our life, to actively form and reform our future. But do not expect changes to happen at one stroke. The ancient patterns of kamma and vipāka have enormous inertia, an inveterate tendency to repeat themselves over and over. Our kamma, which is the potential of our past actions, is like a fully laden horseless waggon running downhill: it won't stop or change when you kick it. However, if you are really serious, if you reorient your mind and strive persistently, you can give

new direction and deeper meaning to your life. It is theoretically as well as practically within your power. Don't doubt it. Do it!

A Rucksack Full of Kamma?

While discussing these topics with one of my Abhidhamma teachers I intentionally touched on the old conundrum: "Where is kamma stored?" Saya U Chit Tin responded with a counter-question: "These days people speak so much about human rights. Everybody has human rights, no? But where do they keep these human rights? In their pocket? In their heads? On their shoulders? Do they have to carry them in a rucksack from yesterday to today?"

The ancient teachers illustrated this point with the simile of a tree: When the time comes, the tree bears fruits—apples, oranges, or mangoes—but we cannot say that the fruits were stored somewhere in the trunk, the branches, or the leaves. Another example is a matchbox and fire: we cannot locate where the fire is stored, but when certain conditions are fulfilled the fire appears.

And what about genetics? Don't the chromosomes or nucleotides contain the programme for the whole body together with the features and dispositions which are usually ascribed to kamma? Today we know more about the mysterious DNA molecules; we have some idea of how this blueprint for the entire organism is copied and handed down with each division of the cells. From the point of view of this essay the hereditary material is mainly considered

the gate or entry for a being to the human or animal plane of existence. How a particular kammic potential connects at birth with a particular "DNA-house" and then inhabits it for a whole lifetime will be touched on in the next chapter.

Some teachers say that the kammic potential is contained in the flow of consciousness, or in the "life continuum"; others say it is included in the mental factor called "life faculty."

I personally believe that the whole kammic potential as well as all mental defilements are passed down through the conditional relationship between successive mind-moments. In fact, I would say that kamma and the defilements are the conditioning process itself. Some teachers might say this is very unlikely, even impossible, as we have so much past kamma, but I do not think the "total" kammic imprint need be extremely complicated. Consider, for example, that we can achieve all the colours of the world just by mixing the three primary colours.

Many people assume that a particular being comes into existence at conception with the fertilisation of the ovum, which gradually develops, through its own chemical and physical powers, into a mature person and finally, after seventy or eighty years of active life, dissolves into nothingness at death. This is how the life of an individual appears to us when we examine it with our bare sense faculties and their technological extensions. If, however, we are willing to admit that our senses provide us with a very limited and one-sided view of reality, we might become

more humble, more open to other channels of information, more receptive to the messages coming from the sages.

According to the Dhamma, the fertilised cell is only the biological component of conception. For conception to take place at all a mental component is needed as well. This is the stream of consciousness from the preceding life, directed towards the new life-conditions by the power of kamma. Our parents provide the physical components of our life, but first of all we are born of our kamma. Kamma is our true inheritance. We exhaust old kamma, but also add new kammic potential all the time. The kamma we create now is the real womb from which we will be born into our future life.

This brings us to the second topic of this essay.

Rebirth

What happens when a being dies? To the fleshly eye, the material and mental constituents of a "person" disintegrate. Okay. But is that all? In reply to this question different views of arise. According to the Buddha's Teaching, the potential of kamma, the impulse of craving, does not simply disappear at death. The scriptures explain that the stream of mind-moments, driven forward by craving, continues in a new form, and thus a new life comes into being. In the ultimate sense, our present life is a series of mind-moments rapidly arising and passing away, based on a single physical organism. After death this series of mind-moments continues, finding support in a new physical organism. The last moment of life is followed by rebirth in a new existence. One sutta (AN 3: 76) illustrates this process with a beautiful simile: kamma is like the nourishing field, craving is like moisture, and consciousness is like the seed which will germinate and grow in the field. In this way a being is reborn.

Is it me who will be reborn or is the being in the next existence someone else? Before we attempt to answer this question, we need to understand more clearly the nature of the "me" around which the question revolves.

A Little Exercise

Please compare the baby you were in your first year of life with the person you are now: Is it the same person or not? "Certainly not," you will say. Okay, now take yourself at the age of five and at present. At five you could speak, but that small boy or girl was someone quite different, wasn't it? What about at ten years? At that age some of your present character traits may have already been apparent, but your interests and aptitudes were still very childish. So let's consider you at twenty. The person you were at twenty and the person you are now: Are they the same person or not? It's getting hard to say. But you'll probably think the two aren't the same. Compare last month and now. What about yesterday? An hour ago? In fact, when you started to read this essay you were not exactly the same "I" that you are now. From moment to moment we are not the same, yet neither are we entirely different. This is exactly what rebirth means: The being of the last existence, the being of this life, and the one due to arise in the future—they aren't quite the same, but also not entirely different.

The ancient commentators illustrate the rebirth process with the simile of a seal. The seal and its impression are not the same thing, but also not completely different. Rather, they are connected by the cause-and-effect relation. Nothing is carried over, but a causal influence acts. Similarly, the past life is not the same as the present one, yet they are not

utterly distinct, for they are linked by direct causal influence.

In Buddhism a "person," the "I," has only relative reality; it does not belong to the category of ultimate truth. The notion of "self" can sometimes be so clear, strong, and convincing; but if we turn the spotlight of our awareness on it, suddenly it steps back, disperses and dissolves, and relocates elsewhere.

What Is This "Me"?

In the Buddha's Teaching the "I," the idea of "ego," the notion of "my self," is a misconception, one of the most powerful expressions of ignorance and craving. The texts describe two different levels of the notion of "self." The first is conceit, which in its subtlest and most tenacious form is the bare notion "I am" (*asmimāna*). The coarser types of conceit arise when we compare the illusory "I" with our images of other people. This comparative, competitive attitude always results in one of three possible scores: "I am better," or "I am worse," or "I am equal."

It is worth noting that not only the haughty "I am better," but also the self-demeaning "I am worse," as well as the mistaken idea "I am equal," are all modes of conceit. The error in the "I am better-worse-equal" attitude is not that I am not really better or worse or equal, but that there is no

real, truly existent "I" which can be better or worse or equal.

The second level of the "self"-illusion is called "personality belief" (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*): the view that in the mind and body there is a lasting, essential "self," a single, steady "I," an indwelling soul. There are many variants of this "personality belief." Some people assume that their mind-body complex, or some part of it such as consciousness, volition, perception, etc., is the "I" or "me." Others think in the opposite way: that the "I" has a mind and body. For some people the mind and body are the seat of the soul. The materialist believes that the "I" is a product of the mind-body complex. Some people may imagine their "self" or soul to be something apart from the mind-body organism, etc. Sometimes people identify predominantly with the body, sometimes with the mind and mental functions. All these beliefs revolve around the erroneous ideas, "This is 'I,' this is mine, this is my self."

The idea of "self" is strongly rooted in our mind; we are extremely attached to it. When our life is in real danger, the instincts take control—nature looks after itself. But when our "I" or "ego" is in danger we burst into emotions.

The concept of "I" is a great burden, a useless burden. To free ourselves from this affliction does not mean we must become personally and socially impotent, as some people incorrectly assume. An arahat is free from all attachment to any kind of self-image, from all misconceptions of an "I," yet he is known to have "a mind like a diamond."

From the ultimate point of view everything appears very differently from the way we ordinarily conceive things; the whole of reality is seen to have quite a different mode of existence than we commonly assume. Without personal meditative experience, however, it may be difficult for us to grasp even the shadow of this statement, not to mention to understand it fully. When the life of a person is seen with deep insight, it reveals itself to be merely an extremely rapid arising and vanishing of consciousness along with its objects. Together we call this impersonal, ever-changing process of mental and material formations nāma-rūpa, "mentality-materiality." I know this is very hard to grasp, but please try to follow me. If you were to look at your own finger through a powerful microscope, you also would have a hard time believing what you saw!

At the ultimate level of reality we do not (and cannot) speak about apples, people, mountains, ice cream, AIDS, and galaxies. Mundane concepts such as "yesterday," "the environment," "Paris," "a problem," "a woman" have no entry here. At this level there is no "person," "I," or "self."

As we slowly descend to the level of conventional reality, the level of relative truth, we experience the quick succession of mental and material phenomena as the knowing of various physical and mental objects. The first notion of "I" comes into being with the recognition of these objects by perception. This is the stage where our experience splits into two parts: "the perceiver" and "the perceived," a subject experiencing an object. This is the cradle of duality.

From the experiential point of view the concept of “I” has many levels and intensities. For my present purposes let me divide the spectrum of different “I“-delusions into two groups: the “me” and the “Me” (“My self”). The aforementioned very basic sense of a “subject” gradually blends into more “solidified” intensities of “I” with increasingly distinct boundaries between “me” and the “world.” Here the idea of a separate personality and personal identity appears, with the notion of its belongings and possessions.

There is no problem with the functional sense of “self,” which is frequently used even by fully enlightened beings. To get along in daily life we need to use the expressions “I” and “mine.” Fully realised beings, however, are not attached to such ideas and drop the sense of “I” as soon as they no longer need it. This ability sharply distinguishes them from ordinary people.

Suffering Proper

Higher up on this scale of the ego illusion is the self-reflecting, self-referring "Me," "My self," the sense of self nourished by competitiveness and emotional fervour. This form of the ego illusion is very self-concerned, accompanied by a strong sense of ownership and authorship. For this reason it is also highly vulnerable. The self-centred, individualistic sense of "Me" arises often in our private reflections. It becomes even more intense when our personality is exposed and threatened, strengthened or weakened, on account of success or failure, praise or humiliation, victory or defeat.

This so-called "ego" is like the trademark of crystallised ignorance and attachment in our life; it is the first-hand, ever-ready, inexhaustible source of high-quality suffering. However, please keep in mind that though this sense of "self" is the source of suffering, it is not the cause of suffering. The cause of suffering is our attachment to the image of "My self." The "Me" is like a balloon which can be inflated or deflated; it can burst, but a new bubble will quickly replace it.

In the Buddha's Teaching we do not approach the practice with the idea of dissolving the "ego" or the "I." Such an attitude would actually strengthen the wrong idea of self by

suggesting there is a self that needs to be dissolved. The Teaching is not preoccupied with the "self," but points, rather, directly to the "non-self." In the practice of vipassanā meditation we learn to see that what we call our "self" is only a play of impersonal mental and material phenomena. As with other insights, the insight into selflessness (anattā) can occur at different intensities with the progressive development of vipassanā meditation. As our practice matures we perceive with increasing clarity the self-vacant, uninhabited nature of mind and body. The Buddha's Teaching does not deal with the multitudinous expressions of ignorance individually, but focuses directly on cutting off the roots of all the various sorts of ills. "Personality belief" and conceit are only two of the ten "fetters." For full liberation all ten must be overcome.3

Vipassanā meditation is the highest stage of Dhamma training, and also a very difficult stage. Some people practise insight meditation to readjust the proportion of happiness and sorrow in their present lives. This is proper in its place, but we should be careful not to degrade the Buddha's Teaching into a kind of therapy. We can purchase a first-class, hi-fi stereo set for $10,000 just to listen to the morning weather report, but that is not the purpose for which such a sensitive instrument has been made.

Beside the supramundane benefits of vipassanā meditation, the Dhamma also offers easier types of training for achieving worldly benefits and blessings, practices which can bring happiness into our present life even more directly,

for example, keeping the basic standards of ethical conduct (the Five Precepts), developing loving kindness, practising generosity, showing due respect, offering selfless service, restraining sensual desire, etc. These are not only the nurturant conditions for a prosperous, meaningful life, but also the all-important prerequisites for higher meditative training.

The heaviest form of the delusion of "self" is blind egotism. This too can assume different forms. Some people, obsessed by this kind of insensitivity, experience their environment as a barren, desolate moonscape inhabited either by allies or enemies. Usually, they perceive people as either useful or threatening objects. The fixed idea of constant threat is countered by aggression. Others may be completely lost to sensual craving, even to the extent of total enslavement.

The Impersonal "I"

It may appear paradoxical that the notion of "I" or "me" is in itself a fully impersonal phenomenon in the minds of beings, created by a play of impersonal mental factors. The personification of mind, the identification with its components, concomitants, or objects (as well as the workings of kamma-vipāka and even the so called "free will")—all these are basically self-less, ownerless processes occurring in the stream of experience. Due to lack of insight, however, we do not perceive ourselves in this way. Due to ignorance and attachment we fail to see the impersonal nature of our being.

The "I" is not an entity, not something really existing on its own credentials. In the unenlightened person the basic idea of "self" arises along with every perception, as an inherent aspect of the perceptual process, but the reflexive, possessive "Me" arises only occasionally, when the sense of ego needs to reinforce its belief in its own reality. This form of the self-delusion serves to cover up the self-less reality of our life, to revitalise the sense of "My self," to refresh and reaffirm the dwindling sense of self-identity. In this way we succeed in keeping intact the illusion of a continuous individual "I," which then assumes the title role in our life story. Identification with this "Me" gives us the feeling that

I am the “doer,” “thinker,” “perceiver,” “experiencer,” “possessor.” In all these degrees and gradations the idea of “self” is responsible for the principal distortion of our experience. The strong gravitational pull of self causes the basic deep deformation of reality throughout our perceptions, thoughts, and feelings.

In many spiritual traditions one can develop and expand the sense of individual selfhood until it transcends its inherent boundaries; the separate self dissolves into an experience of Oneness and boundlessness, an experience of an unchanging, eternally blissful, supreme Self. This, no doubt, marks a very high achievement in concentration-meditation, but if we examine it from the standpoint of the Buddha’s Teaching we would have to make a notoriously recurring diagnosis: lack of full detachment, lack of deep vipassanā insight. The experience, though extremely pure in a way, is still composed of “mental bricks”; it is created by mind in the mind; it is “painted.” This experience, as overwhelming as it may be, is still built upon a subtle delusion.

The Micro-Level of Rebirth

The process of repeated birth and death is analogous to the constant arising and passing away of mind-moments that occurs continuously within a single life. The striking similarities between the two are clear not merely to theoretical reflection, but especially through actual experience in the advanced stages of vipassanā meditation. The notion of "self," being mind made, can of course arise only within these "popping up" mind-moments, but has no referent apart from them. Thus the arising and passing away of the mind can be experienced—under the magnifying lens of strong concentration—as a quick succession of real births, lives, and deaths. There are even little gaps between the moments of mind!

At the macro-level, i.e. in the succession of lifetimes, as well as at the micro-level, i.e. in the succession of moments, the main features of the process are virtually the same. At both levels:

1. There is the resultant side (*vipāka*) and the active side (*kamma, javana*)
2. There is no lasting entity—no "I" or soul—underlying the process
3. Nothing transmigrates from the preceding stage to the

following stage

4. The only link connecting the successive events is the law of cause and effect

Many years ago I saw on television an exhibition of falling dominoes. A team of youths had set upright some 50,000 dominoes in a long row. Before the TV cameras the team-leader gave a slight push to the first domino so that it fell against the second one. The second piece then fell against the third, the third against the fourth, and the performance had started. It lasted over five minutes. The curved lines of falling dominoes—very carefully and cleverly arranged—created such impressive images on the floor that the hundreds of spectators often broke out into applause and shouts of exhilaration.

This memorable feat illustrates the seeming continuity of our life at both levels: moment after moment within a single life, and life after life in the succession of rebirths. None of the dominoes changed its place, no part of the preceding domino passed over to the next one. Strictly speaking we cannot even say that the initial impulse travelled along the row of falling dominoes. The impulse acting between the first and the second dominoes was in no way the same as the impulse between the second and the third. There was only a relationship of cause and effect, always fresh, operating between the adjacent dominoes all along the way.

Certainly, no matter from the dying body passes over to the new life. But we should also realise that in the ultimate

sense no part of the mind—no "I" or soul—transmigrates from the old life to the new one. The being in the new existence will again develop its own idea of "self." There is rebirth but nobody is reborn.

What connects the past existence with the present one is the same link that connects yesterday and today. It is not a real "I," but the lineage, the sequence, of cause and effect.

The Yellowish Photograph

The Buddha taught the middle way, the way which avoids extremes. This is often misunderstood. The middle way is not the easy way of concession and compromise. Because of our weakness, our mind falls easily into excess, extremes, disproportion, into "this or that" one-sidedness. It is difficult to keep to the middle way of the wise.

Right view, or right understanding, is the first factor of the middle way, the Noble Eightfold Path leading to Nibbāna. One of the most important steps in developing right understanding is a deep experience of the impersonality of all mental and material phenomena (*anattā*). A poet would express this insight with the words "there is nobody home." As Ven. Nyanatiloka stressed, without understanding the self-less nature of life one will always tend to fall into an erroneous theoretical sidetrack. For example, when people reflect on Nibbāna, they usually assume that it is either a state where one exists eternally, or the annihilation of a real "I." Both views equally misrepresent the simple but ungraspable reality of Nibbāna. There is no "I" to live eternally, there is no "I" to get annihilated. Nibbāna is much simpler than that: just the cessation of all craving, the cessation of becoming. Nibbāna is very real, attainable anytime, anywhere. However, it is by definition unthinkable

and unimaginable.

People give rise to various misconceptions even more often when they reflect on rebirth. They imagine, “I will be reborn,” or “my soul will be reborn,” or “I will die and vanish into nothing,” or “the being in the future life will be somebody else,” or “the self will completely dissolve at death,” etc. All these views err because they assume, directly or indirectly, the existence of a self to be reborn or annihilated.

In our daily life we have to use concepts, including the concept of “I,” “you,” “he,” “person,” etc. If you tell your friend, “Last month this causal succession of phenomena constituting the apparent being called ‘I’ spent two weeks on holiday in Mallorca,” instead of asking what your holiday was like he might suggest that you see a shrink. At the level of conventional reality we acknowledge our personal identity for a number of good reasons. The attachment to the “I,” however, being the source of misery, is always superfluous and counterproductive.

Just as we entered this life with a more or less distinct character outline—with patterns of predispositions and inclinations—similarly, in the next life, “someone” will be born “out of the blue” with a configuration of pronounced tendencies and dispositions, subject to the results of “somebody’s” previous actions. Just as in our present existence we do not understand why we are the way we are, so too the being in the future life will also not remember the

kammic connections and relations that could explain his life. We all reap the fruits of the kamma generated in the whole lineage of our "kammic ancestors."

Imagine the following: Your close friends come for your birthday party. After the cake, you open your family album and comment on the old yellowish photograph on the first page, "You see, that's me when I was three weeks old"—and everybody starts to laugh. Just as we accept our personal identity of yesterday and of previous years, so on the practical, conventional level we should also acknowledge our causal connectedness with our past and future lives. Even more—and this is the most important point of this entire essay—we need to develop our mind to take full responsibility for our whole existence.

As an aid to understanding, we might imagine the ongoing rebirth of a particular being as the rolling on of a separate stream of impersonal vital force or energy. In this way we can conceive of rebirth without bringing in the idea of a personal "self" as the being that is reborn. To think that the being in the previous life was "me" is just as inaccurate as to think it was someone else. Neither position is quite correct. At the level of conventional reality, however, even the Buddhist texts use the language of personal identity: "In that existence the Bodhisatta had been reborn as the king of the monkeys." But though you may decide not to call your kammic forebears in previous lives "me," be kind to the being who will follow your kammic lineage tomorrow and in the next life. Take responsibility for what you do, for how

you think, for how you respond to the happenings around you. In order to find happiness even in this present existence, we have to live our lives in the best way possible, and most importantly, to cultivate wisdom.

The Buddha often spoke about life after death and censured those who believed otherwise. However, when someone was too inquisitive about this topic, he usually responded in an indirect way. On one occasion, when faced with people who were not ready to make any clear commitment to the idea of rebirth, the Buddha did not argue with them but, with a smile, displayed his wisdom in a very pragmatic way: "If you do good and there is no life after death, you will still see many good results in your present life and wise people will praise you. If there is life after death, in addition to all those good things, you will go to heaven, and thus you will win on both sides."

The Buddha did not teach the doctrine of kamma and rebirth to encourage speculative fantasies about the past and the future, but to show the principal laws of conditioned existence. He formulated his Teaching in order to make known the unsatisfactory, even dangerous situation of all beings in saṃsāra—dangers that stand out starkly when we consider the workings of kamma. In this way he provided a very powerful incentive for Dhamma practice.

Though the teaching of kamma-rebirth-saṃsāra does not go into full detail, it mirrors and explains the nature of reality in a very profound and encompassing way. I would not

insist that it is the only possible way of viewing and understanding actuality; in a multidimensional or "non-dimensional" reality the law would have to be given a distinctly different format. However, as long as we live on the level of duality and perceive time as a linear sequence of events, I consider the principle of kamma-rebirth-saṃsāra, in general outline, to be a valid law governing our existence.

Kamma influences our existence in many important ways but it should never be understood as a kind of unchangeable fate. The most important and far-reaching result of our past kamma is rebirth itself, rebirth in a particular plane of existence. In the case of human life, it refers to the place of birth, the country, the family, the parents: these crucial, practically unalterable circumstances of our life occur in accordance with our past kamma.

The arising of mind and body at the moment of conception as well as during the course of life is called the "round of results" (*vipāka-vaṭṭa*), i.e. the results of our past volitions. More particularly, the given realities of our life—our mental and bodily features, our personality traits, propensity towards health or illness, beauty or ugliness, the quality of our sense faculties, our intelligence, popularity, social status, and skills—all these are rooted in our past actions. So, too, our educational aptitude, ability to connect with certain people rather than others, success in getting a job or running a business, ability to make and retain money, etc.—these conditions too are, in large measure, assigned to us through our kamma. Of course, our circumstances in turn

further influence our ways of response and reaction, our preferences and aversions, our attitudes and behaviour.

However, only a portion of the things that happen to us are direct results of past kamma. We cannot distinguish easily between those events that are due to kamma and those that stem from other causes, and thus we always have to try our best to achieve our aims. But looking back over our life, we may suddenly recognise the distinct influence of past kamma and feel the power with which it operates.

A number of our predispositions are embedded in the DNA genetic material which we receive from our parents. Many of our mental tendencies already appear in early childhood and lead, through our interaction with our parents, to the formation of persistent behavioural patterns that have an impact on our whole life. However, genetics and psychology do not contravene or conflict with the law of kamma. According to the Buddha's Teaching, it is the kamma of the new being that has drawn it towards the appropriate parents; it is, in a sense, kamma that has "chosen" the genetic endowment—and not otherwise!

Today science is working hard to develop a new paradigm, a new way of understanding reality. However, the incomplete and fragmentary picture it has so far devised bears no comparison with the depth of insight of the ancient sages. The type of scientific knowledge we can acquire at this time is rather burdensome. Science still has a long way to go before it arrives at the knowledge that liberates.

Perhaps in the next centuries science will become not only more and more knowledgeable but also wise. Let us hope so.

Saṃsāra

Saṃsāra means the "round of rebirth," or more literally, "the wandering around continually," an expression which conveys the sense of aimlessness and futility, of being trapped. Saṃsāra is the beginningless process of birth and death, occurring on different levels of mental and material reality. To use the classical terminology, we would say that saṃsāra extends over manifold worlds (*loka*) and involves rebirth into various planes of existence (*bhūmi*). The meaning of these terms will become clearer as we go along.

To grasp how rebirth can occur into different planes, one should first understand that mind and matter occur in different "densities" and at different "frequencies." There are various frequencies of mind closely followed by various frequencies and densities of what we call "matter." Most of us have had at least some fleeting experience of different levels and kinds of consciousness, but very few of us would be able to report experiences of different levels of materiality.

The kind of consciousness that arises just prior to death determines the plane of existence into which the next rebirth will occur. I do not know if the dying person meets the bony fellow with the scythe, the Buddhist god Yama, or St. Peter with his big book of our sins. From the perspective of the

Dhamma death is rather like a postman who delivers the letters at the destination written on the envelope. This "address" is the kammic sign occurring in the consciousness at the time of death. It may be created by a powerful wholesome or unwholesome action we performed during our life, or some action we have done repeatedly, or some memory that becomes manifest during the death process. According to the kammic quality of this dying consciousness, death will be followed by rebirth in one of the planes of saṃsāric existence—by rebirth into a light, mixed, or heavy type of reality in the new life. The kammic potential of the dying person is the "letter," craving the stamp, and the rebirth-consciousness the delivery. We may even imagine the letter to be an "E-mail" reaching its destination almost instantaneously.

Rebirth depends on one's own kamma, and external influences do not change the direction. Once some people asked the Buddha to perform a ceremony for a dead relative in order to help him be reborn in heaven. The Buddha did not send them away, for in his compassion he wanted them to understand the laws of reality. He thus gave the sorrowful mourners an unusual order: "Mix stones and ghee (liquified butter) together and throw this mixture into a pond." When the surprised relatives had done this, the Buddha instructed them: "Now call the priests and ask them to pray: 'May the stones come up and float on the surface, and may the ghee sink down to the bottom!'" The people then began to understand that in the round of

rebirths one rises or sinks according to one's deeds, not through the power of prayers and rituals.

Theravāda Buddhism recognises thirty-one planes of existence, including the human realm. Some planes are close to the human realm, others are very distant. The animal realm is our closest saṃsāric neighbour. We share our material abode with them, though our minds work on different mental frequencies. Buddhist cosmology, with its unbounded perspectives, envisions many world systems throughout the universe stratified into various planes, including the human.

The Range of Human Experience

We gain access to the "external world" through our five sense faculties, and perhaps occasionally through our underdeveloped intuition. These are the channels through which we receive data about our bodies and the environment. From these sensory inputs our minds assemble the image of our bodies and "the world out there."

If we reflect deeply on the range and character of reality, it seems utterly improbable, even from a strictly scientific standpoint, that our sense organs and perception can discern all that exists, that they can correctly determine the limits of the real. When, for example, we consider the early stages of life on this planet and how the sensory apparatus of primaeval creatures gradually developed, it seems clear that our sense organs fulfil a biologically predetermined purpose: they can detect only a very narrow band along the full spectrum of reality, the segment that must be known to enable us to survive. Beyond that narrow band lie dimensions of reality that our sense organs can never apprehend, a hidden mystery, dark and tantalising, which we can approach only through the blind gropings of inference and speculation.

The best illustration for our situation can be found in physics: electromagnetic waves. For those unfamiliar with

this subject, let me briefly sum up the subject. The various kinds of electromagnetic waves are very different, but they all have certain common features: they all travel at the speed of light, are susceptible to interference, etc. Starting with the lowest frequencies, the electromagnetic waves include AM-radio waves, TV waves, FM waves, radar, microwaves, infrared light, visible light, ultraviolet light, X-rays, gamma-radiation, and cosmic rays. The main quantum by which they are distinguished is wavelength, which can vary from over half a kilometre in the case of the longest radio amplitudes, to around 0.0005 millimetre for visible light (the middle range), down to 0.0000000000000001 millimetre for interstellar radiation. And how sensitive are human sense faculties to all these waves? We cannot perceive either radio or TV broadcasts, even though the voices, music, and pictures of a thousand shows literally penetrate our heads every second of our lives. Our senses register neither radar nor cosmic rays. We notice ultraviolet light only when we get a sunburn. We do not even feel the deadly doses of radiation or X-rays. Of the entire spectrum of electromagnetic waves, the only portion we can directly perceive is the extremely tiny range of visible light, with its wavelengths of 0.0004–0.0008 mm, and the neighbouring infra-red heat in the range of approximately 0.0008–0.3 mm. Isn't that incredible?

I understand the different planes of saṃsāra as just different "frequencies" of reality. Like electromagnetic waves of certain invisible frequencies, other planes of existence pass

right through us without even making us blink. According to the Buddhist texts, and the observations of those endowed with unusual sensitivity, we share this earth with many invisible beings from our saṃsāric vicinity: with ghosts and "earth-bound deities," with goblins and demons. Children's fairy tales and reports of UFOs are perhaps not so much fiction and fantasy as veridical records of saṃsāric diffusion. Our ancestors were probably much more open, receptive, and sensitive—but also more vulnerable—in this respect than we are. Today, even if these phenomena cross our senses, we rarely register them, and if we do take note of them we have no handy conceptual scheme for making sense of them. In this epoch our minds are too intensely and narrowly directed to the "earthy," purely material frequencies of reality.

It is extremely unlikely that we and the animals are the only conscious inhabitants of the "all." According to the Buddhist scriptures, our human reality is at the low end of the saṃsāric scale. The only realms below us are the animals, ghosts, a class of fallen demons, and various hells. Our neighbours in the upward direction are the six sense-sphere heavens. All the abodes under the human world, the human plane itself, and the two lowest heavenly realms are said to be the usual range where our rebirth takes place. In the course of death and rebirth beings often change their plane of existence, in accordance with the kamma that becomes active at the time of death. The Buddhist texts suggest that even rebirth into the lower heavens is not easy

to achieve, so how much rarer is rebirth into the higher planes!

The sixteen "fine-material" divine realms, situated above the heavens, are described in the texts as quite different realities from those normally known to us. In those planes matter is considerably less dense, and the coarser types of material phenomena do not appear at all. The sensory equipment of these beings is designed to pick up only subtle visual and auditory impressions, while their mental functions are much more refined than our own. Their lifespans are counted in aeons. The four immaterial or formless spheres, located above them in the cosmological spectrum, are even more refined. As the name suggests, here there is no materiality at all. The sublime beings who exist there consist solely of mind, without any admixture of body. When we speak about the various realms of existence in saṃsāra, we always refer to both a particular kind of mind and the corresponding type of materiality, partial exception being made of the four formless realms, where there are minds but no material formations, and one "non-percipient abode," where the beings have bodies but no minds.

Within saṃsāra time is a very relative factor, flowing at different rates in different planes. In all the spheres above our human plane the lifespan increases exponentially at each level, but it is impossible for us to know how those beings perceive time. Perhaps there is a direct relationship between the (relative) speed of time and the density of mind

and matter. It appears that the subtler the plane of existence, the slower is the perceived flow of time. Some passages in the scriptures indicate that the experience of time in those realms differs enormously from our own: in the Tāvatiṃsa heaven a hundred human years are said to be just a single day.

The lifespans in the formless spheres are the longest; they are said to range between 20,000 and 84,000 great aeons (*mahākappa*). One great aeon is the time it takes for our own physical universe to evolve and dissolve. If we wish to express the lifespan of the highest formless gods by a contemporary idiom, we might call it a time-cyclicity of 84,000 "big bangs." Nibbāna, however, is not included in the scale of time, for Nibbāna is timeless, without a past and without a future.

If we go through the whole spectrum of saṃsāric realms from "bottom" to "top," that is, from the hells up to the immaterial spheres, we are moving in the direction of increasing purity, refinement, and subtlety of mind and matter. As we enter the immaterial plane, the level of being becomes too subtle even to sustain matter; here there is only mind. This is also the direction of progress in samatha meditation, the development of deep concentration and one-pointed absorption. Samatha meditation leads to a number of sublime experiences, such as the transcendence of sensuality, the transcendence of the sense of individual ego, a feeling of being one with all in all, a sense of the endlessness and boundlessness of consciousness, etc. The

"ontological counterpart" of these experiences is existence in the fine-material and immaterial spheres.

At this point I should mention that this is not the direction pursued in the practice of vipassanā or insight meditation, where purity and refinement of mind are not the crux of the system. Insight meditation does require a certain degree of mental calm as the foundation, but deep absorption is not essential. Vipassanā has to penetrate not only the layers of concepts and the numerous veils of subtle mental creations beyond concepts, but at its peak must penetrate through the three curtains of ignorance: the illusion of permanence, the illusion of real saṃsāric happiness, and the illusion of any true lasting "self-entity," such as the "I," a soul, the "higher self," etc. The condition for this realisation is not deep tranquillity and mental absorption, but complete detachment from every grade of experience. Its fruit is the eradication of every trace of craving.

Solidity

We are all deeply conditioned to perceive matter as solid and substantial. In what follows I will quite deliberately "bend" our understanding in the opposite direction to highlight the insubstantiality of matter. The Theravāda Abhidhamma leaves open the question of whether or not matter, in the ultimate sense, is substantial. With the maturation of insight, the meditator sees reality as a dynamic process of mental and material phenomena constantly arising and passing away. To call the materiality at this stage either substantial or insubstantial would not express very well the actuality of the experience. Nevertheless, in my opinion the "immaterial" vision of materiality is closer to the mark and expresses more adequately the indescribable nature of matter. Knowledgeable teachers will agree that matter is the visible manifestation of invisible qualities and forces.

The Buddha would certainly discourage excessive concern with this type of reflection, as the rational mind cannot satisfactorily encompass the deeper levels of reality. I have included this little digression here, not for intellectual amusement, but because an exposé of the insubstantial side of matter allows me to make more intelligible, to the sceptical scientifically trained reader, the Buddhist view of

the material face of manifold, multifarious saṃsāra. Have a good excursion!

The question may arise: How far are the other planes of existence "solid," "substantial," "compact"? Are the beings there perhaps a little transparent? And if they also have legs, wouldn't they accidentally walk through one another? I think the experience of matter in the other planes is in principle no different from that in our own. The density of our world does not stem from any real solidity of matter itself but from our subjective impression of its solidity. By our birth into the human world we are attuned to a particular "frequency" of mental and material phenomena. Through our inherent illusion of solidity, we experience objects as solid and substantial.

Our world appears to us to be so real. We can build houses with bricks and the houses don't fall apart; we can cross a river on a bridge and we don't fall into the water. In the same way, the inhabitants of other abodes perceive their own worlds as real, hard, solid, material.

When Thorwald Dethlefsen gave his lectures to the German public he used to question the substantial reality of our world. He pointed out that in dreams we also have a strong sense of material reality, even though we do not think of it in that way. In a dream, when we are pursued by enemies we run up the stairs, and the stairs don't collapse under our feet. When we are locked in a room without escape, we can't get out! Then we wake up and try to laugh it off: "Oof, it

was only a dream!" Maybe so, but what about the sweat-soaked pyjamas?!

Unlike many of the esoteric teachings, Theravāda Buddhism does not hold that our body and physical environment are just some kind of collective hallucination. The "style" of the Buddha's original teaching is always pragmatic and avoids the theoretical pitfalls in which one can easily pass one's life. The Theravāda tradition takes the world to be real while recognising that there are different levels of reality. I use the dream simile only to demonstrate how the apparent substantiality of the material world is relative to our consciousness.

Experiments in nuclear physics have taught us that atoms, the building blocks of matter, are enormously empty. If an atom of iron were to be blown up to the size of a sports stadium, its nucleus would be much smaller than a football; perhaps it would be the size of a peanut! The whirl of electrons around the nucleus is practically immaterial—not much more than a dynamic pattern of energy. Even in the nucleus itself physicists can barely find anything truly solid and material. It's pretty difficult to bring together this image of atomic emptiness—of one nuclear peanut every 300 metres—with a hammer that we use to drive nails into a wooden plank, isn't it?

In advanced meditation, as mindfulness intensifies, matter is experienced more accurately. The conventional experience of material objects "sharpens" into four primary

elements (*mahābhūta*), whose names symbolise four types of material characteristics. The concept of an object "steps back" or even dissolves, and the meditator experiences the primordial reality of materiality as hardness, softness, heaviness, lightness, extension, texture (= "earth"); fluidity, cohesion (= "water"); heat, coolness (= "fire"); and pressure, movement, distension (= "air"). A number of secondary qualities such as colour, odour, etc., may also be experienced.

These "material properties" are the ultimate reality of matter, but in themselves they are all insubstantial: there is nothing solid or substantial in "hardness" or "heaviness." In the highest sense there is nothing solid even in the notion of solidity, nothing material in the notion of materiality. It is our perception, our conceptual mind, that creates out of these bare sensory impingements the image of a substantial material body, of material objects around us, of a solid universe.4

At the level of ultimate reality, matter is perceived as a mere aggregation or "swarm" of clusters of material qualities. This direct experience of matter differs radically from our everyday perception of things and objects. As insight deepens, the experience of materiality shifts along with it, disclosing deeper aspects of matter that cannot be gleaned by mere thinking. What changes first in the perception of matter is the proportion of concept overlaying the pristine experience. Concepts are mental constructs created by our mind. They include all the mental representations of things,

objects, processes, actions, qualities, etc. They are like pictures or photos of ultimate realities; they are not ultimate realities themselves. In our ordinary life the bare reality of the pure sensory input is almost entirely covered over by the proliferation of interpretative concepts and ideas. One of the main functions of vipassanā meditation is to remove these layers of conceptual overpaint from the actual experience so that we can see things more and more clearly, more and more as they really are.

Concepts have two layers or levels: first, the layer of language—words, names, thoughts; and second, the layer of meaning—the ideas of things signified by words and expressions, the meanings conceived in our minds. The verbal and non-verbal levels usually arise together, one supporting the other. Sometimes, however, they may also occur separately. When inner verbalization stops, this does not necessarily put an end to the concepts. Even without words, our minds may meander in the domain of conceptual meaning, perceiving things in terms of their familiarity, applicability, usefulness, function, and desirability, and in terms of their outstanding features such as shape, size, locality, weight, mutual relations, etc. In the Abhidhamma even the notion of time is classified as a concept.

If, in our meditation, we overcome our preoccupation with concepts and fine-tune the process of perception, our experience of matter (as well as all other objects of consciousness) will "unroll," disassemble into "mental

tastes" and notions (dhammas) momentarily arising and dissolving. There are many intensities and stages of this "unrolling," this "falling apart" of the gross experience into the microscopic perception of the basic constituents of reality. Though the flow of experience continues, the mind stops creating the usual wreaths of mental constructs around the impingements, tastes, and notions; it stops grasping and identifying with the experience. We then recognise these notions as the basic "mental bricks" of our apparent reality. At this stage solidity too is seen as a mere notion which causes things to be perceived as substantial and material.

To make things appear as solid is just one of the functions of the so called "earth element." Only when the assembling and constructing activity of our mind is temporarily brought to a halt can the mental "tastes" and notions become sufficiently distinct. They then resemble the different colours on the artist's palette, ready to be used to paint the next picture, the next scene of our relative world. At the mundane level we speak about our body, material objects, our environment, the cosmos; at the ultimate level we refer to bare material phenomena only. I think you can feel the difference.

To show you even more distinctly the fundamental shift from conventional to ultimate reality, let me bring in once again the simile of the TV programme. There is a life story constantly going on in our minds, a story in which we are fully absorbed, just as we are absorbed in the TV show. The

aim of vipassanā meditation is to see reality as it is; in terms of our simile, this means to understand the work of the movie producer, the film director, the screenwriter, the actors, the cameramen, the light technicians, the editors. As our understanding and insight advance, we ascribe less and less significance to the story itself; the shadowy pictures on the screen lose their fascination and we start to perceive the switched-on TV set itself. Gradually we notice the TV tube and perhaps even the dots of light dashing in lines over the screen.

The true reality of a TV movie is so slight! The whole story is only a work of fiction written by the author; the killed lovers of the drama are still very much alive. The roles are all simulated by professional actors; the dialogue springs from the scriptwriter's mind; a variety of special effects are used to enhance the illusion in order to beguile the spectators completely. While we are watching the movie we may get excited or be grief-stricken, be elated or appalled, but all that is real are the magnetic impulses on the videotape in the studio, the TV waves being broadcast through the air, the switched-on TV set, and the flickering dots of light rushing over the screen. Even more drastic is the shift from mundane to ultimate reality.

However, we should not think that the mundane sphere is entirely unreal. Wrong understanding exists. Errors and mistakes are facts. Actions bring forth results; the law of cause and effect is functional. Misconceptions also have their reality and, should we fall for them, we'll eventually

have to face the consequences. It is delusion that keeps us trapped in saṃsāra, not ultimate reality. Correct perception is identical with vipassanā insight.

There is one more subject we have not yet dealt with, namely, the so called:

"Objective Matter"

By "objective matter" I mean that "something out there" from which our senses receive impressions and signals. There is no doubt that our mind interprets all its sensory impingements in its own way, according to the level and frequency of reality it is attuned to. But what are these "objects" that impinge upon our senses? Are they anything objective? If so, how far are they objective?

In the previous pages we dealt with the experience of "objective matter" that changes in accordance with the level of penetrating insight. Although the classical Theravāda Buddhist texts never discuss the issue quite in these terms, we might still draw a distinction between, on the one hand, the impulses and notions out of which our mind creates its picture of the material world, and on the other, "objective matter" as it is in itself.

Many questions surround this idea of "objective matter": Does this "matter" exist independently? Can it exist without

the knowing mind? Does it exist at all? Is it "out there" or only in my mind? Is it the same for all of us or do we each dwell in our own private world?

While the Theravāda Abhidhamma takes matter to be one of the paramattha-dhamma or ultimate realities, it does not provide any direct answer to the question of how faithfully or how distortedly our sense perceptions represent "objective objects," nor does it even explore the question whether they represent any "objects out there" at all. The Abhidhamma leaves it to the learner's own stage of insight to work out the implications and consequences, or to lay such questions aside as irrelevant to the aim of liberation.

The idea of "objective matter" fully transcends our understanding. We cannot imagine materiality without any layer of concepts. The only reasonable thing we can say about it is that it is not what it appears to be: not in the sense that a chisel would really be soft or a hammer light, but in the sense that its mode of existence would be utterly different from anything we could even remotely imagine. Material objects would be just bundles of oscillating magnetic fields or different disturbances in the primordial wholeness.

We can never experience matter directly, as it is "in itself," but only as an object of consciousness. Therefore its appearance in our mind will always be closely linked to the type and level of the perceiving mind. In fact we can experience only reflections of "objective matter" on the

sensitive parts of our sense faculties, where these stimuli cause physical or chemical changes: in the retina of our eyes, on our ear drums, our olfactory receptors, our taste buds, our tactile nerves. These impulses are then transmitted to the brain, where they are "translated" into sense impressions that become the objects of sense perception. Thus there is a long distance between the "bottle" in my mind and the particular formation of "objective matter" to which this notion refers.

The Abhidhamma acknowledges the existence of materiality "outside" my mind, and sometimes even as independent of a knowing mind, but always treats it within the framework of causality.

Matter—or rūpa, to use the more precise Pali word—consists of the four primary elements (*dhātu*): earth, water, fire, and air, along with various kinds of secondary or "derived" matter (*upādārūpa*). When we study the Abhidhamma more deeply, we see that these elements are not basic substances but material qualities or modes of energy: hardness/softness, fluidity/cohesion, temperature/maturation, and motion/distension. The Abhidhamma Commentaries teach that *rūpa* is composed of sub-microscopic entities, comparable to atoms, arising and vanishing in unimaginably rapid succession. These entities are called kalāpa, "bundles" or clusters, a term which indicates that even these so-called elementary particles are themselves composite. Each kalāpa is constituted by a combination of the four primary elements and various types

of secondary qualities, the minimum being the four: colour, odour, taste, and nutritive essence. Just as we can create the entire spectrum of colours by mixing the three primary colours, so all the diversity of the material world arises from the various combinations of the four primary elements. Even these elements are not simple bits of matter, as commonly understood, but “crystallizations” of energy. If we think of matter in these terms, this will remind us that the way we perceive our world is not the only possible way and certainly not the ultimate one.

The Solidity of Ghosts

Reflection on the "solidity" of other planes of existence brings us to a deeper understanding of our own reality. If the human world as we know it is ultimately built up of "material notions" and concepts, so too are the other planes. Our world and our life are totally relative; so too, the "reality" of the other planes is totally relative as well. But please be very careful about this: relative as our world may be, for us the things and happenings in our lives are real, and our actions have their full consequences. For those who are caught in saṃsāra suffering is fully real.

The colours with which the Buddha depicts saṃsāra are indeed grim, sometimes even horrifying: all the higher abodes of existence are sparsely inhabited; most beings are packed into the lower realms. Human life is a period of saṃsāric "holiday." For most people, it is said, existence after death continues in one of the subhuman realms, while a heavenly rebirth is won only by the virtuous few.

Throughout history traditional spiritual teachers could successfully use the descriptions of hells as a suitable means to motivate people for spiritual practice. Outside traditional Buddhist lands, people today feel inspired by the Dhamma primarily through its positive values and moral ideals, such as truth, purity, wisdom, and compassion. Nevertheless one

of the issues of this chapter remains—hold your head with both hands—that hell seems real!

I do not know to what extent you accept the teaching of kamma-rebirth-saṃsāra, and to what extent you doubt it or disagree with it. Even if you entirely disbelieve what almost all the great world religions and spiritual traditions proclaim one way or another, do pause for a while and try to imagine how it would be if the religions were right. You don't need to believe it all. Just try to imagine it in detail, together with the consequences this would have for you.

We can approach the "outer world" through our fives senses and mind—that is all. In meditation we might come to perceive it as a room with five small windows. It may take us quite some time to realise that the room has no door, that we can never get out. At that point we begin to understand the real nature of saṃsāra: we see that we are trapped, desperately trapped, imprisoned! The Buddha taught the Dhamma for the clear purpose of showing us the way out of prison. Only in Nibbāna does the prison of saṃsāra, along with the prisoner, cease to be.

Some More Words...

An understanding of kamma-rebirth-saṃsāra is not an absolute requirement for the practice of vipassanā meditation. Nevertheless, it is a very useful basis and help for our development along the path. It is the "frame" of the Teaching.

In recent times, many Dhamma teachers have introduced innovative interpretations of the Dhamma which focus almost exclusively on the present life and leave the past and future existence more or less out of the picture. They draw the full attention of the students to the present life; for, after all, the predicament of saṃsāric anguish and that of the present life have basically the same roots. In these new interpretations of the Dhamma the teachings of kamma, rebirth, and saṃsāra naturally assume a fairly different role. Kamma is viewed from its "instant" and "middle range" perspectives; not the full results but the tendencies for certain types of results are shown as imminent. Rebirth is usually explained as the arising and dying of each mind-moment, sometimes as the arising and passing away of the reflective sense of "my self."

The stratified planes of saṃsāric existence are taken to represent different states of mind. Hate and aggression are the fires of hell; obsessive greed and sensual hunger are like

a temporary rebirth into the abode of ghosts. When dullness and stupidity prevail in our minds it is as if we have been reborn for a while into the animal kingdom. A mixture of good and bad mental states is the typical condition among human beings. When we are envious and competitive and feel driven to dominate others, at that time we have been reborn as demons. Subtle and lofty pleasure, illuminated by bright intelligence, is comparable to a period spent in heavenly realms. The sublime states of meditative absorption are presented as the qualities of mind symbolised in the ancient texts by the flowery descriptions of the blissful realms of the gods.

This pragmatic, rational interpretation of the teachings on kamma, rebirth, and saṃsāra is no doubt logical and coherent, and for many Westerners (and even some Asian Buddhists) has facilitated access to the Dhamma. Being "practical" and "down to earth," such an approach requires only a minimum of faith and has therefore proved an effective "skilful means" for newcomers to Buddhism as well as for all those closed to the spiritual dimension of the mind.

I do not want to play down the value and significance of this new perspective. In the Western world it has helped many, many people discover an immediate relevance in the Dhamma, thereby leading them to the study of the teachings and to the practice of vipassanā meditation. However, we should also be aware of the limitations of this approach. This perspective does not represent the whole of

the Buddha's Teaching. It focuses, rather, only on selected parts of the doctrine, which are adapted for a special purpose. The inspiration and urge for practice that we might acquire from the new pragmatic approach in no way measures up to the inspiration we can derive from the original "full-scale" perspective. For me personally the original formulation of the Buddha's Teaching has been very helpful, and even today it remains the supportive framework of my practice.

There are still more reasons for respecting the original and undistorted formulation of the Teaching. If we disregard the reality of endless rebirth we lose sight of the long-term relations and kammic implications of our actions. The law of kamma will be understood indistinctly, and we will come away with an incorrect, incomplete picture of the extent of our saṃsāric affliction. We will wrongly diagnose our situation in saṃsāra and may consequently choose an inadequate remedy for our malaise.

If we do not take into account the time scale posited in the original Teaching, we may fail to appreciate the differences between the various types of liberation offered by the different spiritual traditions. For example, in jhānic absorptions the mind becomes elated and refined; one experiences an extraordinary inner freedom and the sense of separate "selfhood" may seem to lose its boundaries. The feeling of oneness that results may then be perceived as the unio mystico, the mystical union with God, which may lead the practitioner to believe that he or she has achieved final

and definitive release from saṃsāric misery.

According to the Buddha, even the highest saṃsāric states of mind are still limited in many ways. They are conditioned; they do not grant full insight into the nature of the mind, body, and world; they do not fully penetrate through the folds of ignorance. In the Buddha's vision of the total immensity of time spread out over countless aeons, the so-called "eternal" existence of deities in the divine realms is recognised as just an extremely long lifespan, which, of course, is in the end followed by a new rebirth.

The outcome of rebirth is almost always uncertain (see Jātaka No. 318). If lofty kamma is exhausted or heavy kamma becomes activated, the being is bound to plunge into low states of existence, into states of real misery. As long as the process of death and rebirth continues, there is no real end to the saṃsāric predicament.

I think you know what I am driving at. If the problem of unsatisfactoriness and misery concerned only the present life, and perhaps the next, there would be many solutions at hand. Almost any deep, sincere, spiritual tradition could offer definitive guidance and active help. There would hardly be any compelling reason to take up the strains and pains of vipassanā practice and to work for liberation along the Buddha's way.

Many Peaks on Mount Analogue

Western students who have been exposed to various spiritual disciplines often come away with the impression that all serious spiritual paths lead to the same goal. This idea, however, is hard to justify. Not only is it hard to justify from a theoretical perspective, but it is not supported by actual experience. If, after looking at a few flowers, you come to the conclusion that all flowers are the same, the bees and the girls wouldn't agree with you.

It may be true that, at the outset, practitioners in many different spiritual traditions go through similar initial difficulties. They must overcome the same hurdles in practice and have to pass through similar stages of purification. The distortions in people's minds are more similar than we think. However, in the higher stages of practice at least, the ways differ considerably, and it is also likely that some of these differences are already implicit in the initial stages. The different paths lead to different realisations, different types of liberation, different results.

We may compare the process of spiritual development to the climbing of a huge, convoluted mountain, with different elevations, ravines, clefts, and peaks. When we view it from a distance it seems to us to be just one big mountain, but if we come closer we'll perceive more clearly its diverse

details. Also, it looks quite different from each direction and the peak on our side always appears higher than the other peaks—even if it isn't really so. This is the law of perspective. The spiritual landscape is so enormous and multifarious!

The different religions and spiritual directions are always partial; they do not give the picture of the whole mountain. Even the Buddha quite purposefully did not reveal everything. However, his Teaching reflects the widest view ever made known. It considers the widest range of dimensions, from subatomic components to countless galaxies; it also gives us the most detailed account of time, ranging from inconceivably short-lived mind-moments up to aeons, periods of cosmic expansion and dissolution. It depicts the finest distinctions among the various types and "frequencies" of saṃsāric existence, from the coarsest to the subtlest. And most importantly, it shows the way from the state of utter ignorance to the achievement of the highest wisdom, penetrative insight into ultimate reality and the realisation of Nibbāna.

In this paramount vision the underlying principles of the whole are made apparent. The Buddha recognised that unsatisfactoriness is universal, an intrinsic characteristic permeating every kind and level of existence in saṃsāra. While it is easy to see the suffering in coarser types of consciousness and the anguish of the lower forms of existence, it takes extremely purified insight and profound vision to see the subtle suffering hidden even within the

sublime meditative absorptions and the blissful realms of the highest gods.

My objective in writing this booklet has been to help dissolve certain blockages, to loosen certain biases, and to clear away common prejudices in order to open up, for the post-modern reader, the original scope of the Buddha's Teaching just as he taught it. Compared with the "new pragmatic approach," this is really an entirely different dimension. To heal the predicament of one's saṃsāric existence is not the same as to achieve a healthy and successful life from the perspective of modern psychotherapy.

Our motivation for the practice of Dhamma involves different types of inspiration. Sometimes we are moved by the beauty of wisdom, by the challenges of the spiritual path, by the purity of its ultimate goal. We can consider the inspiration coming from these impulses as a "pulling" force. At other times we are impelled by fear of the sufferings in life, by the terrors of saṃsāra. The inspiration coming from these impulses can be seen as a "pushing" force. The different types of inspiration do not occur at the same time, but it is wise to open ourselves to all of them so that we can move steadily along the path.

The essence of the Buddha's Teaching is so extremely fragile. When I first met the Dhamma some twenty-seven years ago I could not believe that this subtle teaching had survived in peoples' hands over such a long time. People

usually twist, change, and deform the truth even the same day. And here was a span of twenty-five centuries! There may be a need to adjust the Teaching to our time, to explain it by adapting its principles to the mental setup of the students or the level of the audience. But it is of crucial importance that the essential message of the Teaching remains unaltered.

It isn't easy to find the way out from the madness of saṃsāra. To do so means that we must often be prepared to go against the stream, to kick against the very grain of this world. If one is to follow this path to its proper end, one must truly be ripe, resolute, and earnest.

Full realisation of the Dhamma, accompanied by complete liberation and total detachment of heart as described in the ancient suttas, is without doubt very, very rare indeed. But it still exists. Until today a stanza from one of the rare Sayādaws reverberates deep in my mind:

"When you regard even the highest sublime spheres of existence,
the forms of elated, radiant intelligence as a spittoon—
then you are ready for Nibbāna."

Notes

1. The six roots are greed, hatred, delusion, non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion.

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