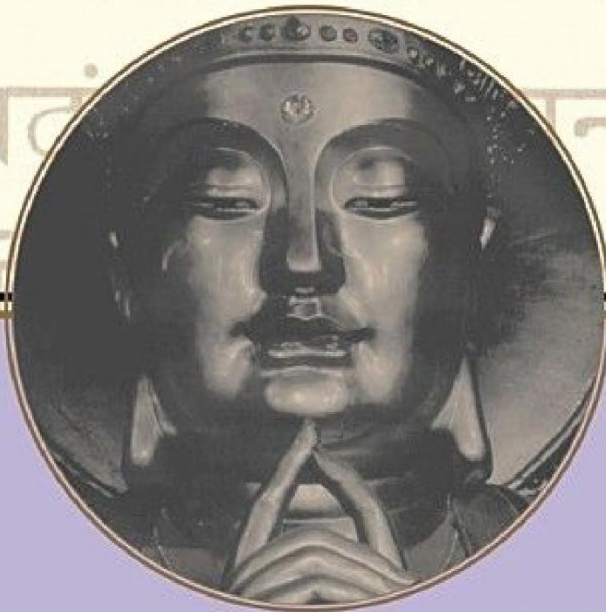
WHAT THE BUDDHA TAUGHT



Revised and Expanded Edition with Texts from Suttas *and* Dhammapada

WALPOLA RAHULA

Foreword by Paul Demiéville

Also by Walpola Sri Rahula

History of Buddhism in Ceylon
The Heritage of the Bhikkhu

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Foreword

by Paul Demiéville
Member of the Institut de France,
Professor at the College de France
Director of Buddhist Studies at the School
of Higher Studies (Paris)

Here is an exposition of Buddhism conceived in a resolutely modern spirit by one of the most qualified and enlightened representatives of that religion. The Rev. Dr. W. Rahula received the traditional training and education of a Buddhist monk in Ceylon, and held eminent positions in one of the leading monastic institutes (Pirivena) in that island, where the Law of the Buddha flourishes from the time of Asoka and has preserved all its vitality up to this day. Thus brought up in an ancient tradition, he decided, at this time when all traditions are called in question, to face the spirit and the methods of international scientific learning. He entered the Ceylon University, obtained the B.A. Honours degree (London), and then won the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Ceylon University on a highly learned thesis on the History of Buddhism in Ceylon. Having worked with distinguished professors at the University of Calcutta and come in contact with adepts of Mahāyāna (the Great Vehicle), that form of Buddhism which reigns from Tibet to the Far East, he decided to go into the Tibetan and Chinese texts in order to widen his œcumenism, and he has honoured us by coming to the University of Paris (Sorbonne) to prepare a study of Asanga, the illustrious philosopher of Mahāyāna,

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whose principal works in the original Sanskrit are lost, and can only be read in their Tibetan and Chinese translations. It is now eight years since Dr. Rahula is among us, wearing the yellow robe, breathing the air of the Occident, searching perhaps in our old troubled mirror a universalized reflection of the religion which is his.

The book, which he has kindly asked me to present to the public of the West, is a luminous account, within reach of everybody, of the fundamental principles of the Buddhist doctrine, as they are found in the most ancient texts, which are called "The Tradition' (*Āgama)* in Sanskrit and 'The Canonic Corpus' (*Nikāya)* in Pali. Dr. Rahula, who possesses an incomparable knowledge of these texts, refers to them constantly and almost exclusively. Their authority is recognized unanimously by all the Buddhist schools, which were and are numerous, but none of which ever deviates from these texts, except with the intention of better interpreting the spirit beyond the letter. The interpretation has indeed been varied in the course of the expansion of Buddhism through many centuries and vast regions, and the Law has taken more than one aspect. But the aspect of Buddhism here presented by Dr. Rahula—humanist, rational, Socratic in some respects, Evangelic in others, or again almost scientific—has for its support a great deal of authentic scriptural evidence which he only had to let speak for themselves.

The explanations which he adds to his quotations, always translated with scrupulous accuracy, are clear, simple, direct, and free from all pedantry. Some among them might lead to discussion, as when he wishes to rediscover in the Pali sources all the doctrines of Mahāyāna; but his familiarity with those sources permits him to throw new light on them.

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He addresses himself to the modern man, but he refrains from insisting on comparisons just suggested here and there, which could be made with certain currents of thought of the contemporary world: socialism, atheism, existentialism, psycho-analysis. It is for the reader to appreciate the modernity, the possibilities of adaptation of a doctrine which, in this work of genuine scholarship, is presented to him in its primal richness.

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Preface

All over the world today there is growing interest in Buddhism. Numerous societies and study-groups have come into being, and scores of books have appeared on the teaching of the Buddha. It is to be regretted, however, that most of them have been written by those who are not really competent, or who bring to their task misleading assumptions derived from other religions, which must misinterpret and misrepresent their subject. A professor of comparative religion who recently wrote a book on Buddhism did not even know that **Ā**nanda, the devoted attendant of the Buddha, was a *bhikkhu* (a monk), but thought he was a layman! The knowledge of Buddhism propagated by books like these can be left to the reader's imagination.

I have tried in this little book to address myself first of all to the educated and intelligent general reader, uninstructed in the subject, who would like to know what the Buddha actually taught. For his benefit I have aimed at giving briefly, and as directly and simply as possible, a faithful and accurate account of the actual words used by the Buddha as they are to be found in the original Pali texts of the *Tipiṭaka*, universally accepted by scholars as the earliest extant records of the teachings of the Buddha. The material used and the passages quoted here are taken directly from these originals. In a few places I have referred to some later works too.

I have borne in mind, too, the reader who has already some knowledge of what the Buddha taught and would like to go further with his studies. I have therefore provided not

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only the Pali equivalents of most of the key-words, but also references to the original texts in footnotes, and a select bibliography.

The difficulties of my task have been manifold: throughout I have tried to steer a course between the unfamiliar and the popular, to give the English reader of the present day something which he could understand and appreciate, without sacrificing anything of the matter and the form of the discourses of the Buddha. Writing the book I have had the ancient texts running in my mind, so I have deliberately kept the synonyms and repetitions which were a part of the Buddha's speech as it has come down to us through oral tradition, in order that the reader should have some notion of the form used by the Teacher. I have kept as close as I could to the originals, and have tried to make my translations easy and readable.

But there is a point beyond which it is difficult to take an idea without losing in the interests of simplicity the particular meaning the Buddha was interested in developing. As the title 'What the Buddha Taught' was selected for this book, I felt that it would be wrong not to set down the words of the Buddha, even the figures he used, in preference to a rendering which might provide the easy gratification of comprehensibility at the risk of distortion of meaning.

I have discussed in this book almost everything which is commonly accepted as the essential and fundamental teaching of the Buddha. These are the doctrines of the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Five Aggregates, Karma, Rebirth, Conditioned Genesis (*Paṭiccasamuppāda)*, the doctrine of No-Soul (*Anatta), Satipaṭṭhāna* (the Setting-up of Mindfulness). Naturally there will be in the discussion

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expressions which must be unfamiliar to the Western reader. I would ask him, if he is interested, to take up on his first reading the opening chapter, and then go on to Chapters V, VII and VIII, returning to Chapters II, III, IV and VI when the general sense is clearer and more vivid. It would not be possible to write a book on the teaching of the Buddha without dealing with the subjects which *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism have accepted as fundamental in his system of thought.

The term *Theravāda—Hīnayāna* or 'Small Vehicle' is no longer used in informed circles—could be translated as 'the School of the Elders' (*theras*), and *Mahāyāna* as 'Great Vehicle'. They are used of the two main forms of Buddhism known in the world today. *Theravāda*, which is regarded as the original orthodox Buddhism, is followed in Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Chittagong in East Pakistan. *Mahāyāna*, which developed relatively later, is followed in other Buddhist countries like China, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, etc. There are certain differences, mainly with regard to some beliefs, practices and observances between these two schools, but on the most important teachings of the Buddha, such as those discussed here, *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* are unanimously agreed.

It only remains for me now to express my sense of gratitude to Professor E. F. C. Ludowyk, who in fact invited me to write this book, for all the help given me, the interest taken in it, the suggestions he offered, and for reading through the manuscript. To Miss Marianne Möhn too, who went through the manuscript and made valuable suggestions, I am deeply grateful. Finally I am greatly beholden to Professor Paul Demiéville, my teacher in Paris, for his

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kindness in writing the Foreword.

W. RAHULA

Paris

July 1958

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To Mani

Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti

'The gift of Truth excels all other gifts'

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The Buddha

The Buddha, whose personal name was Siddhattha (Siddhārtha in Sanskrit), and family name Gotama (Skt. Gautama), lived in North India in the 6th century B.C. His father, Suddhodana, was the ruler of the kingdom of the Sākyas (in modern Nepal). His mother was queen Māyā. According to the custom of the time, he was married quite young, at the age of sixteen, to a beautiful and devoted young princess named Yasodharā. The young prince lived in his palace with every luxury at his command. But all of a sudden, confronted with the reality of life and the suffering of mankind, he decided to find the solution—the way out of this universal suffering. At the age of 29, soon after the birth of his only child, Rāhula, he left his kingdom and became an ascetic in search of this solution.

For six years the ascetic Gotama wandered about the valley of the Ganges, meeting famous religious teachers, studying and following their systems and methods, and submitting himself to rigorous ascetic practices. They did not satisfy him. So he abandoned all traditional religions and their methods and went his own way. It was thus that one evening, seated under a tree (since then known as the Bodhi- or Bo-tree, 'the Tree of Wisdom'), on the bank of the river Neranjarā at Buddha-Gaya (near Gaya in modern Bihar), at the age of 35, Gotama attained Enlightenment, after which he was known as the Buddha, 'The Enlightened One'.

After his Enlightenment, Gotama the Buddha delivered his first sermon to a group of five ascetics, his old colleagues, in

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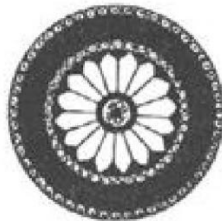
the Deer Park at Isipatana (modern Sarnath) near Benares. From that day, for 45 years, he taught all classes of men and women—Icings and peasants, Brahmins and outcasts, bankers and beggars, holy men and robbers—without making the slightest distinction between them. He recognized no differences of caste or social groupings, and the Way he preached was open to all men and women who were ready to understand and to follow it.

At the age of 80, the Buddha passed away at Kusinārā (in modern Uttar Pradesh in India).

Today Buddhism is found in Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Tibet, China, Japan, Mongolia, Korea, Formosa, in some parts of India, Pakistan and Nepal, and also in the Soviet Union. The Buddhist population of the world is over 500 million.



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CHAPTER I

THE BUDDHIST ATTITUDE OF MIND

Among the founders of religions the Buddha (if we are permitted to call him the founder of a religion in the popular sense of the term) was the only teacher who did not claim to be other than a human being, pure and simple. Other teachers were either God, or his incarnations in different forms, or inspired by him. The Buddha was not only a human being; he claimed no inspiration from any god or external power either. He attributed all his realization, attainments and achievements to human endeavour and human intelligence. A man and only a man can become a Buddha. Every man has within himself the potentiality of becoming a Buddha, if he so wills it and endeavours. We can call the Buddha a man *par excellence.* He was so perfect in his 'humanness' that he came to be regarded later in popular religion almost as 'super-human'.

Man's position, according to Buddhism, is supreme. Man is his own master, and there is no higher being or power that sits in judgment over his destiny.

'One is one's own refuge, who else could be the refuge?'[1] said the Buddha. He admonished his disciples to 'be a refuge to themselves', and never to seek refuge in or help from anybody else.[2] He taught, encouraged and stimulated each person to develop himself and to work out his own emancipation, for man has the power to liberate himself from all bondage through his own personal effort and intelligence.

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The Buddha says: 'You should do your work, for the Tathāgatas[3] only teach the way.'[4] If the Buddha is to be called a 'saviour' at all, it is only in the sense that he discovered and showed the Path to Liberation, Nirvāṇa. But we must tread the Path ourselves.

It is on this principle of individual responsibility that the Buddha allows freedom to his disciples. In the *Mabāparinibbāna-sutta* the Buddha says that he never thought of controlling the *Sangba* (Order of Monks)[1], nor did he want the *Sangha* to depend on him. He said that there was no esoteric doctrine in his teaching, nothing hidden in the 'closed-fist of the teacher' (*ācariya-muṭṭhi),* or to put it in other words, there never was anything 'up his sleeve'.[2]

The freedom of thought allowed by the Buddha is unheard of elsewhere in the history of religions. This freedom is necessary because, according to the Buddha, man's emancipation depends on his own realization of Truth, and not on the benevolent grace of a god or any external power as a reward for his obedient good behaviour.

The Buddha once visited a small town called Kesaputta in the kingdom of Kosala. The inhabitants of this town were known by the common name Kālāma. When they heard that the Buddha was in their town, the Kālāmas paid him a visit, and told him:

'Sir, there are some recluses and brāhmaṇas who visit Kesaputta. They explain and illumine only their own doctrines, and despise, condemn and spurn others' doctrines. Then come other recluses and brāhmaṇas, and they, too, in their turn, explain and illumine only their own doctrines, and despise, condemn and spurn others' doctrines. But, for us, Sir,

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we have always doubt and perplexity as to who among these venerable recluses and brāhmaṇas spoke the truth, and who spoke falsehood.'

Then the Buddha gave them this advice, unique in the history of religions:

'Yes, Kālāmas, it is proper that you have doubt, that you have perplexity, for a doubt has arisen in a matter which is doubtful. Now, look you Kālāmas, do not be led by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, nor by the delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea: 'this is our teacher'. But, O Kālāmas, when you know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome (*akusala)*, and wrong, and bad, then give them up . . . And when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome (*kusala)* and good, then accept them and follow them.'[1]

The Buddha went even further. He told the bhikkhus that a disciple should examine even the Tathāgata (Buddha) himself, so that he (the disciple) might be fully convinced of the true value of the teacher whom he followed.[2]

According to the Buddha's teaching, doubt (*vicikiccbā)* is one of the five Hindrances (*nīvaraṇa)*[3] to the clear understanding of Truth and to spiritual progress (or for that matter to any progress). Doubt, however, is not a 'sin', because there are no articles of faith in Buddhism. In fact there is no 'sin' in Buddhism, as sin is understood in some religions. The root of all evil is ignorance (*avijjā)* and false views (*micchādiṭṭhi).* It is an undeniable fact that as long as there is doubt, perplexity, wavering, no progress is possible.

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It is also equally undeniable that there must be doubt as long as one does not understand or see clearly. But in order to progress further it is absolutely necessary to get rid of doubt. To get rid of doubt one has to see clearly.

There is no point in saying that one should not doubt or one should believe. Just to say 'I believe' does not mean that you understand and see. When a student works on a mathematical problem, he comes to a stage beyond which he does not know how to proceed, and where he is in doubt and perplexity. As long as he has this doubt, he cannot proceed. If he wants to proceed, he must resolve this doubt. And there are ways of resolving that doubt. Just to say 'I believe', or 'I do not doubt' will certainly not solve the problem. To force oneself to believe and to accept a thing without understanding is political, and not spiritual or intellectual.

The Buddha was always eager to dispel doubt. Even just a few minutes before his death, he requested his disciples several times to ask him if they had any doubts about his teaching, and not to feel sorry later that they could not clear those doubts. But the disciples were silent. What he said then was touching: 'If it is through respect for the Teacher that you do not ask anything, let even one of you inform his friend' (i.e., let one tell his friend so that the latter may ask the question on the other's behalf).[1]

Not only the freedom of thought, but also the tolerance allowed by the Buddha is astonishing to the student of the history of religions. Once in Nālandā a prominent and wealthy householder named Upāli, a well-known lay disciple of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta (Jaina Mahāvīra), was expressly sent by Mahāvīra himself to meet the Buddha and defeat him in argument on certain points in the theory of Karma, because

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the Buddha's views on the subject were different from those of Mahāvīra.[2] Quite contrary to expectations, Upāli, at the end of the discussion, was convinced that the views of the Buddha were right and those of his master were wrong. So he begged the Buddha to accept him as one of his lay disciples (*Upāsaka).* But the Buddha asked him to reconsider it, and not to be in a hurry, for 'considering carefully is good for well-known men like you'. When Upāli expressed his desire again, the Buddha requested him to continue to respect and support his old religious teachers as he used to.[3]

In the third century B.C., the great Buddhist Emperor Asoka of India, following this noble example of tolerance and understanding, honoured and supported all other religions in his vast empire. In one of his Edicts carved on rock, the original of which one may read even today, the Emperor declared:

'One should not honour only one's own religion and condemn the religions of others, but one should honour others' religions for this or that reason. So doing, one helps one's own religion to grow and renders service to the religions of others too. In acting otherwise one digs the grave of one's own religion and also does harm to other religions. Whosoever honours his own religion and condemns other religions, does so indeed through devotion to his own religion, thinking "I will glorify my own religion". But on the contrary, in so doing he injures his own religion more gravely. So concord is good: Let all listen, and be willing to listen to the doctrines professed by others'.[1]

We should add here that this spirit of sympathetic understanding should be applied today not only in the matter of religious doctrine, but elsewhere as well.

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This spirit of tolerance and understanding has been from the beginning one of the most cherished ideals of Buddhist culture and civilization. That is why there is not a single example of persecution or the shedding of a drop of blood in converting people to Buddhism, or in its propagation during its long history of 2500 years. It spread peacefully all over the continent of Asia, having more than 500 million adherents today. Violence in any form, under any pretext whatsoever, is absolutely against the teaching of the Buddha.

The question has often been asked: Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy? It does not matter what you call it. Buddhism remains what it is whatever label you may put on it. The label is immaterial. Even the label 'Buddhism' which we give to the teaching of the Buddha is of little importance. The name one gives it is inessential.

> What's in a name? That which we call a rose,
>
> By any other name would smell as sweet.

In the same way Truth needs no label: it is neither Buddhist, Christian, Hindu nor Moslem. It is not the monopoly of anybody. Sectarian labels are a hindrance to the independent understanding of Truth, and they produce harmful prejudices in men's minds.

This is true not only in intellectual and spiritual matters, but also in human relations. When, for instance, we meet a man, we do not look on him as a human being, but we put a label on him, such as English, French, German, American, or Jew, and regard him with all the prejudices associated with that label in our mind. Yet he may be completely free from those attributes which we have put on him.

People are so fond of discriminative labels that they even

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go to the length of putting them on human qualities and emotions common to all. So they talk of different 'brands' of charity, as for example, of Buddhist charity or Christian charity, and look down upon other 'brands' of charity. But charity cannot be sectarian; it is neither Christian, Buddhist, Hindu nor Moslem. The love of a mother for her child is neither Buddhist nor Christian: it is mother love. Human qualities and emotions like love, charity, compassion, tolerance, patience, friendship, desire, hatred, ill-will, ignorance, conceit, etc., need no sectarian labels; they belong to no particular religions.

To the seeker after Truth it is immaterial from where an idea comes. The source and development of an idea is a matter for the academic. In fact, in order to understand Truth, it is not necessary even to know whether the teaching comes from the Buddha, or from anyone else. What is essential is seeing the thing, understanding it. There is an important story in the *Majjhima-nikāya (sutta* no. 140) which illustrates this.

The Buddha once spent a night in a potter's shed. In the same shed there was a young recluse who had arrived there earlier.[1] They did not know each other. The Buddha observed the recluse, and thought to himself: 'Pleasant are the ways of this young man. It would be good if I should ask about him'. So the Buddha asked him: 'O bhikkhu,[2] in whose name have you left home? Or who is your master? Or whose doctrine do you like?'

'O friend,' answered the young man, 'there is the recluse Gotama, a Sakyan scion, who left the Sakya-family to become a recluse. There is high repute abroad of him that he is an Arahant, a Fully-Enlightened One. In the name of that Blessed

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One I have become a recluse. He is my Master, and I like his doctrine'.

'Where does that Blessed One, the Arahant, the Fully-Enlightened One live at the present time?'

'In the countries to the north, friend, there is a city called Sāvatthi. It is there that that Blessed One, the Arahant, the Fully-Enlightened One, is now living.'

'Have you ever seen him, that Blessed One? Would you recognize him if you saw him?'

'I have never seen that Blessed One. Nor should I recognize him if I saw him.'

The Buddha realized that it was in his name that this unknown young man had left home and become a recluse. But without divulging his own identity, he said: 'O bhikkhu, I will teach you the doctrine. Listen and pay attention. I will speak.'

'Very well, friend,' said the young man in assent.

Then the Buddha delivered to this young man a most remarkable discourse explaining Truth (the gist of which is given later).[1]

It was only at the end of the discourse that this young recluse, whose name was Pukkusāti, realized that the person who spoke to him was the Buddha himself. So he got up, went before the Buddha, bowed down at the feet of the Master, and apologized to him for calling him 'friend'[2] unknowingly. He then begged the Buddha to ordain him and admit him into the Order of the *Sangha.*

The Buddha asked him whether he had the alms-bowl and the robes ready. (A bhikkhu must have three robes and the alms-bowl for begging food.) When Pukkusāti replied in the

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negative, the Buddha said that the Tathāgatas would not ordain a person unless the alms-bowl and the robes were ready. So Pukkusāti went out in search of an alms-bowl and robes, but was unfortunately savaged by a cow and died.[3]

Later, when this sad news reached the Buddha, he announced that Pukkusāti was a wise man, who had already seen Truth, and attained the penultimate stage in the realization of Nirvāṇa, and that he was born in a realm where he would become an Arahant[1] and finally pass away, never to return to this world again[2].

From this story it is quite clear that when Pukkusāti listened to the Buddha and understood his teaching, he did not know who was speaking to him, or whose teaching it was. He saw Truth. If the medicine is good, the disease will be cured. It is not necessary to know who prepared it, or where it came from.

Almost all religions are built on faith—rather 'blind' faith it would seem. But in Buddhism emphasis is laid on 'seeing', knowing, understanding, and not on faith, or belief. In Buddhist texts there is a word *saddhā* (Skt. *śraddhā)* which is usually translated as 'faith' or 'belief. But *saddhā* is not 'faith' as such, but rather 'confidence' born out of conviction. In popular Buddhism and also in ordinary usage in the texts the word *saddhā*, it must be admitted, has an element of 'faith' in the sense that it signifies devotion to the Buddha, the *Dhamma* (Teaching) and the *Sangha* (The Order).

According to Asanga, the great Buddhist philosopher of the 4th century A.C., *śraddhā* has three aspects: (1) full and firm conviction that a thing is, (2) serene joy at good qualities, and (3) aspiration or wish to achieve an object in

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view.[3]

However you put it, faith or belief as understood by most religions has little to do with Buddhism.[4]

The question of belief arises when there is no seeing—seeing in every sense of the word. The moment you see, the question of belief disappears. If I tell you that I have a gem hidden in the folded palm of my hand, the question of belief arises because you do not see it yourself. But if I unclench my fist and show you the gem, then you see it for yourself, and the question of belief does not arise. So the phrase in ancient Buddhist texts reads: 'Realizing, as one sees a gem (or a myrobalan fruit) in the palm'.

A disciple of the Buddha named Musīla tells another monk: 'Friend Saviṭṭha, without devotion, faith or belief,[1] without liking or inclination, without hearsay or tradition, without considering apparent reasons, without delight in the speculations of opinions, I know and see that the cessation of becoming is Nirvāṇa.'[2]

And the Buddha says: 'O bhikkhus, I say that the destruction of defilement and impurities is (meant) for a person who knows and who sees, and not for a person who does not know and does not see.'[3]

It is always a question of knowing and seeing, and not that of believing. The teaching of the Buddha is qualified as *ehi-passika*, inviting you to 'come and see', but not to come and believe.

The expressions used everywhere in Buddhist texts referring to persons who realized Truth are: 'The dustless and stainless Eye of Truth (*Dhamma-cakkhu)* has arisen.' 'He has seen Truth, has attained Truth, has known Truth, has

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penetrated into Truth, has crossed over doubt, is without wavering.' 'Thus with right wisdom he sees it as it is (*yathā bhūtaṃ*)'.[4] With reference to his own Enlightenment the Buddha said: 'The eye was born, knowledge was born, wisdom was born, science was born, light was born.'[5] It is always seeing through knowledge or wisdom (*ñāṇa-dassana)*, and not believing through faith.

This was more and more appreciated at a time when Brāhmaṇic orthodoxy intolerantly insisted on believing and accepting their tradition and authority as the only Truth without question. Once a group of learned and well-known Brahmins went to see the Buddha and had a long discussion with him. One of the group, a Brahmin youth of 16 years of age, named Kāpaṭhika, considered by them all to be an exceptionally brilliant mind, put a question to the Buddha:[1]

'Venerable Gotama, there are the ancient holy scriptures of the Brahmins handed down along the line by unbroken oral tradition of texts. With regard to them, Brahmins come to the absolute conclusion: "This alone is Truth, and everything else is false". Now, what does the Venerable Gotama say about this?'

The Buddha inquired: 'Among Brahmins is there any one single Brahmin who claims that he personally knows and sees that "This alone is Truth, and everything else is false."?'

The young man was frank, and said: 'No'.

'Then, is there any one single teacher, or a teacher of teachers of Brahmins back to the seventh generation, or even any one of those original authors of those scriptures, who claims that he knows and he sees: "This alone is Truth, and everything else is false"?'

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'No.'

'Then, it is like a line of blind men, each holding on to the preceding one; the first one does not see, the middle one also does not see, the last one also does not see. Thus, it seems to me that the state of the Brahmins is like that of a line of blind men.'

Then the Buddha gave advice of extreme importance to the group of Brahmins: 'It is not proper for a wise man who maintains (lit. protects) truth to come to the conclusion: "This alone is Truth, and everything else is false".'

Asked by the young Brahmin to explain the idea of maintaining or protecting truth, the Buddha said: 'A man has a faith. If he says "This is my faith", so far he maintains truth. But by that he cannot proceed to the absolute conclusion: "This alone is Truth, and everything else is false".' In other words, a man may believe what he likes, and he may say 'I believe this'. So far he respects truth. But because of his belief or faith, he should not say that what he believes is alone the Truth, and everything else is false.

The Buddha says: 'To be attached to one thing (to a certain view) and to look down upon other things (views) as inferior —this the wise men call a fetter.'[2]

Once the Buddha explained[1] the doctrine of cause and effect to his disciples, and they said that they saw it and understood it clearly. Then the Buddha said:

'O bhikkhus, even this view, which is so pure and so clear, if you cling to it, if you fondle it, if you treasure it, if you are attached to it, then you do not understand that the teaching is similar to a raft, which is for crossing over, and not for getting hold of.'[2]

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Elsewhere the Buddha explains this famous simile in which his teaching is compared to a raft for crossing over, and not for getting hold of and carrying on one's back:

'O bhikkhus, a man is on a journey. He comes to a vast stretch of water. On this side the shore is dangerous, but on the other it is safe and without danger. No boat goes to the other shore which is safe and without danger, nor is there any bridge for crossing over. He says to himself: "This sea of water is vast, and the shore on this side is full of danger; but on the other shore it is safe and without danger. No boat goes to the other side, nor is there a bridge for crossing over. It would be good therefore if I would gather grass, wood, branches and leaves to make a raft, and with the help of the raft cross over safely to the other side, exerting myself with my hands and feet". Then that man, O bhikkhus, gathers grass, wood, branches and leaves and makes a raft, and with the help of that raft crosses over safely to the other side, exerting himself with his hands and feet. Having crossed over and got to the other side, he thinks: "This raft was of great help to me. With its aid I have crossed safely over to this side, exerting myself with my hands and feet. It would be good if I carry this raft on my head or on my back wherever I go".

'What do you think, O bhikkhus, if he acted in this way would that man be acting properly with regard to the raft? "No, Sir". In which way then would he be acting properly with regard to the raft? Having crossed and gone over to the other side, suppose that man should think: "This raft was a great help to me. With its aid I have crossed safely over to this side, exerting myself with my hands and feet. It would be good if I beached this raft on the shore, or moored it and left it afloat, and then went on my way wherever it may be".

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Acting in this way would that man act properly with regard to that raft.

'In the same manner, O bhikkhus, I have taught a doctrine similar to a raft—it is for crossing over, and not for carrying (lit. getting hold of). You, O bhikkhus, who understand that the teaching is similar to a raft, should give up even good things (*dhamma*); how much more then should you give up evil things (*adhamma*).'[1]

From this parable it is quite clear that the Buddha's teaching is meant to carry man to safety, peace, happiness, tranquillity, the attainment of *Nirvāṇa.* The whole doctrine taught by the Buddha leads to this end. He did not say things just to satisfy intellectual curiosity. He was a practical teacher and taught only those things which would bring peace and happiness to man.

The Buddha was once staying in a Simsapā forest in Kosambi (near Allahabad). He took a few leaves into his hand, and asked his disciples: 'What do you think, O bhikkhus? Which is more? These few leaves in my hand or the leaves in the forest over here?'

'Sir, very few are the leaves in the hand of the Blessed One, but indeed the leaves in the Simsapā forest over here are very much more abundant.'

'Even so, bhikkhus, of what I have known I have told you only a little, what I have not told you is very much more. And why have I not told you (those things)? Because that is not useful. . . not leading to *Nirvāṇa.* That is why I have not told you those things.'[2]

It is futile, as some scholars vainly try to do, for us to speculate on what the Buddha knew but did not tell us.

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The Buddha was not interested in discussing unnecessary metaphysical questions which are purely speculative and which create imaginary problems. He considered them as a 'wilderness of opinions'. It seems that there were some among his own disciples who did not appreciate this attitude of his. For, we have the example of one of them, Māluṅkyaputta by name, who put to the Buddha ten well-known classical questions on metaphysical problems and demanded answers.[1]

One day Māluṅkyaputta got up from his afternoon meditation, went to the Buddha, saluted him, sat on one side and said:

'Sir, when I was all alone meditating, this thought occurred to me: There are these problems unexplained, put aside and rejected by the Blessed One. Namely, (1) is the universe eternal or (2) is it not eternal, (3) is the universe finite or (4) is it infinite, (5) is soul the same as body or (6) is soul one thing and body another thing, (7) does the Tathāgata exist after death, or (8) does he not exist after death, or (9) does he both (at the same time) exist and not exist after death, or (10) does he both (at the same time) not exist and not not-exist. These problems the Blessed One does not explain to me. This (attitude) does not please me, I do not appreciate it. I will go to the Blessed One and ask him about this matter. If the Blessed One explains them to me, then I will continue to follow the holy life under him. If he does not explain them, I will leave the Order and go away. If the Blessed One knows that the universe is eternal, let him explain it to me so. If the Blessed One knows that the universe is not eternal, let him say so. If the Blessed One does not know whether the universe is eternal or not, etc., then for a person who does not know, it

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is straightforward to say “I do not know, I do not see”.’

The Buddha’s reply to Māluṅkyaputta should do good to many millions in the world today who are wasting valuable time on such metaphysical questions and unnecessarily disturbing their peace of mind:

‘Did I ever tell you, Māluṅkyaputta, “Come, Māluṅkyaputta, lead the holy life under me, I will explain these questions to you?”’

‘No, Sir.’

‘Then, Māluṅkyaputta, even you, did you tell me: “Sir, I will lead the holy life under the Blessed One, and the Blessed One will explain these questions to me”?’

‘No, Sir.’

‘Even now, Māluṅkyaputta, I do not tell you: “Come and lead the holy life under me, I will explain these questions to you”. And you do not tell me either: “Sir, I will lead the holy life under the Blessed One, and he will explain these questions to me”. Under these circumstances, you foolish one, who refuses whom?[1]

‘Māluṅkyaputta, if anyone says: “I will not lead the holy life under the Blessed One until he explains these questions,” he may die with these questions unanswered by the Tathāgata. Suppose Māluṅkyaputta, a man is wounded by a poisoned arrow, and his friends and relatives bring him to a surgeon. Suppose the man should then say: “I will not let this arrow be taken out until I know who shot me; whether he is a Kṣatriya (of the warrior caste) or a Brāhmaṇa (of the priestly caste) or a Vaiśya (of the trading and agricultural caste) or a Sūdra (of the low caste); what his name and family may be;

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whether he is tall, short, or of medium stature; whether his complexion is black, brown, or golden; from which village, town or city he comes. I will not let this arrow be taken out until I know the kind of bow with which I was shot; the kind of bowstring used; the type of arrow; what sort of feather was used on the arrow and with what kind of material the point of the arrow was made." Māluṅkyaputta, that man would die without knowing any of these things. Even so, Māluṅkyaputta, if anyone says: "I will not follow the holy life under the Blessed One until he answers these questions such as whether the universe is eternal or not, etc.," he would die with these questions unanswered by the Tathāgata.'

Then the Buddha explains to Māluṅkyaputta that the holy life does not depend on these views. Whatever opinion one may have about these problems, there is birth, old age, decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, distress, "the Cessation of which (i.e. *Nirvāṇa)* I declare in this very life."

'Therefore, Māluṅkyaputta, bear in mind what I have explained as explained, and what I have not explained as unexplained. What are the things that I have not explained? Whether the universe is eternal or not, etc., (those 10 opinions) I have not explained. Why, Māluṅkyaputta, have I not explained them? Because it is not useful, it is not fundamentally connected with the spiritual holy life, is not conducive to aversion, detachment, cessation, tranquillity, deep penetration, full realization, *Nirvāṇa.* That is why I have not told you about them.

'Then, what, Māluṅkyaputta, have I explained? I have explained *dukkha*, the arising of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha*, and the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha.*[1] Why,

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Māluṅkyaputta, have I explained them? Because it is useful, is fundamentally connected with the spiritual holy life, is conducive to aversion, detachment, cessation, tranquillity, deep penetration, full realization, Nirvāṇa. Therefore I have explained them.'[2]

Let us now examine the Four Noble Truths which the Buddha told Māluṇkyaputta he had explained.

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CHAPTER II

The Four Noble Truths

THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH: *DUKKHA*

The heart of the Buddha's teaching lies in the Four Noble Truths (*Cattāri Ariyasaccāni)* which he expounded in his very first sermon[1] to his old colleagues, the five ascetics, at Isipatana (modern Sarnath) near Benares. In this sermon, as we have it in the original texts, these four Truths are given briefly. But there are innumerable places in the early Buddhist scriptures where they are explained again and again, with greater detail and in different ways. If we study the Four Noble Truths with the help of these references and explanations, we get a fairly good and accurate account of the essential teachings of the Buddha according to the original texts.

The Four Noble Truths are:

1. *Dukkha*[2]
2. *Samudaya*, the arising or origin of *dukkha*,
3. *Nirodha*, the cessation of *dukkha*,
4. *Magga*, the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha.*

THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH: *DUKKHA*

The First Noble Truth (*Dukkha-ariyasacca)* is generally translated by almost all scholars as 'The Noble Truth of Suffering', and it is interpreted to mean that life according to Buddhism is nothing but suffering and pain. Both translation

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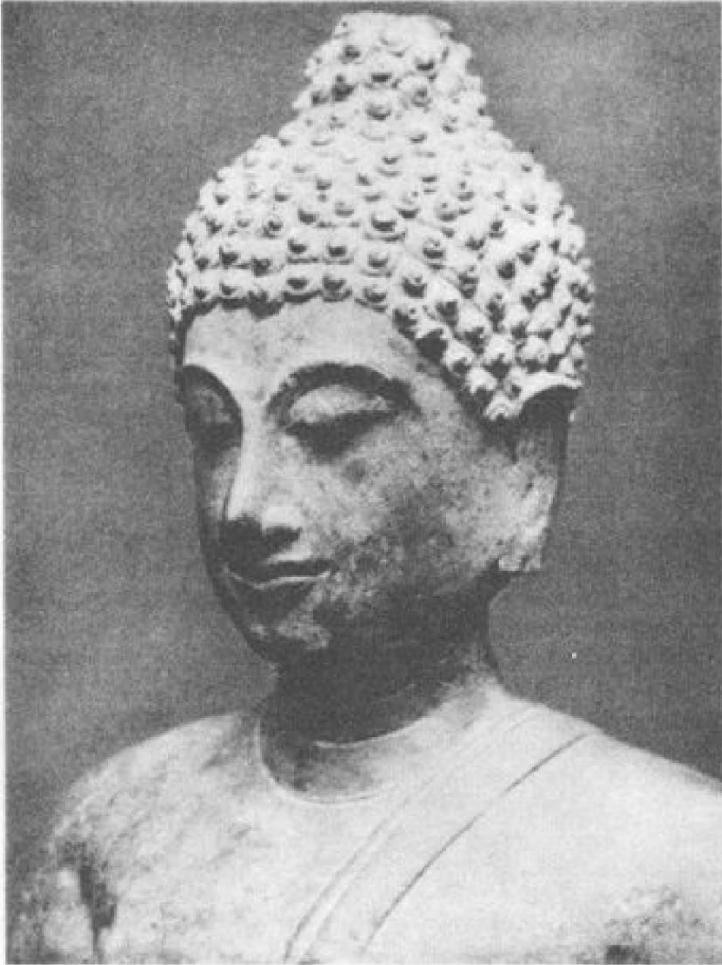
and interpretation are highly unsatisfactory and misleading. It is because of this limited, free and easy translation, and its superficial interpretation, that many people have been misled into regarding Buddhism as pessimistic.



I. The bust of the Buddha—from Thailand

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II. The head of the Buddha—from Polonnaruva, Ceylon

First of all, Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic. If anything at all, it is realistic, for it takes a realistic view of life and of the world. It looks at things objectively (*yathābhūtam).* It does not falsely lull you into living in a fool's paradise, nor does it frighten and agonize you with all kinds of imaginary fears and sins. It tells you exactly and objectively what you are and what the world around you is, and shows you the way to perfect freedom, peace, tranquillity and happiness.

One physician may gravely exaggerate an illness and give up hope altogether. Another may ignorantly declare that there is no illness and that no treatment is necessary, thus deceiving the patient with a false consolation. You may call

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the first one pessimistic and the second optimistic. Both are equally dangerous. But a third physician diagnoses the symptoms correctly, understands the cause and the nature of the illness, sees clearly that it can be cured, and courageously administers a course of treatment, thus saving his patient. The Buddha is like the last physician. He is the wise and scientific doctor for the ills of the world (*Bhisakka* or *Bhaisajya-guru).*

It is true that the Pali word *dukkha* (or Sanskrit *duḥkha)* in ordinary usage means 'suffering', 'pain', 'sorrow' or 'misery', as opposed to the word *sukha* meaning 'happiness', 'comfort' or 'ease'. But the term *dukkha* as the First Noble Truth, which represents the Buddha's view of life and the world, has a deeper philosophical meaning and connotes enormously wider senses. It is admitted that the term *dukkha* in the First Noble Truth contains, quite obviously, the ordinary meaning of 'suffering', but in addition it also includes deeper ideas such as 'imperfection', 'impermanence', 'emptiness', 'insubstantiality'. It is difficult therefore to find one word to embrace the whole conception of the term *dukkha* as the First Noble Truth, and so it is better to leave it untranslated, than to give an inadequate and wrong idea of it by conveniently translating it as 'suffering' or 'pain'.

The Buddha does not deny happiness in life when he says there is suffering. On the contrary he admits different forms of happiness, both material and spiritual, for laymen as well as for monks. In the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, one of the five original Collections in Pali containing the Buddha's discourses, there is a list of happinesses (*sukhāni)*, such as the happiness of family life and the happiness of the life of a recluse, the happiness of sense pleasures and the happiness of

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renunciation, the happiness of attachment and the happiness of detachment, physical happiness and mental happiness etc.[1] But all these are included in *dukkha.* Even the very pure spiritual states of *dhyāna (recueillement* or trance) attained by the practice of higher meditation, free from even a shadow of suffering in the accepted sense of the word, states which may be described as unmixed happiness, as well as the state of *dhyāna* which is free from sensations both pleasant (*sukha)* and unpleasant (*dukkha)* and is only pure equanimity and awareness—even these very high spiritual states are included in *dukkha.* In one of the *suttas* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, (again one of the five original Collections), after praising the spiritual happiness of these *dhyānas*, the Buddha says that they are 'impermanent, *dukkha*, and subject to change' (*aniccā dukkhā vipariṇāmadhammā).*[2] Notice that the word *dukkha* is explicitly used. It is *dukkha*, not because there is 'suffering' in the ordinary sense of the word, but because 'whatever is impermanent is *dukkha' (yad aniccam taṃ dukkha ṃ).*

The Buddha was realistic and objective. He says, with regard to life and the enjoyment of sense-pleasures, that one should clearly understand three things: (1) attraction or enjoyment (*assāda)*, (2) evil consequence or danger or unsatisfactoriness (*ādīnava)*, and (3) freedom or liberation (*nissaraṇa).*[3] When you see a pleasant, charming and beautiful person, you like him (or her), you are attracted, you enjoy seeing that person again and again, you derive pleasure and satisfaction from that person. This is enjoyment (*assāda).* It is a fact of experience. But this enjoyment is not permanent, just as that person and all his (or her) attractions are not permanent either. When the situation changes, when you cannot see that person, when you are deprived of this

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enjoyment, you become sad, you may become unreasonable and unbalanced, you may even behave foolishly. This is the evil, unsatisfactory and dangerous side of the picture (*ādīnava).* This, too, is a fact of experience. Now if you have no attachment to the person, if you are completely detached, that is freedom, liberation *(nissaraṇa).* These three things are true with regard to all enjoyment in life.

From this it is evident that it is no question of pessimism or optimism, but that we must take account of the pleasures of life as well as of its pains and sorrows, and also of freedom from them, in order to understand life completely and objectively. Only then is true liberation possible. Regarding this question the Buddha says:

'O bhikkhus, if any recluses or brāhmaṇas do not understand objectively in this way that the enjoyment of sense-pleasures is enjoyment, that their unsatisfactoriness is unsatisfactoriness, that liberation from them is liberation, then it is not possible that they themselves will certainly understand the desire for sense-pleasures completely, or that they will be able to instruct another person to that end, or that the person following their instruction will completely understand the desire for sense-pleasures. But, O bhikkhus, if any recluses or brāhmaṇas understand objectively in this way that the enjoyment of sense-pleasures is enjoyment, that their unsatisfactoriness is unsatisfactoriness, that liberation from them is liberation, then it is possible that they themselves will certainly understand the desire for sense-pleasures completely, and that they will be able to instruct another person to that end, and that that person following their instruction will completely understand the desire for sense-pleasures.'[1]

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The conception of *dukkha* may be viewed from three aspects: (1) *dukkha* as ordinary suffering (*dukkha-dukkha)*, (2) *dukkha* as produced by change (*vipariṇāma-dukkha)* and (3) *dukkha* as conditioned states (*saṃkhāra-dukkha).*[2]

All kinds of suffering in life like birth, old age, sickness, death, association with unpleasant persons and conditions, separation from beloved ones and pleasant conditions, not getting what one desires, grief, lamentation, distress—all such forms of physical and mental suffering, which are universally accepted as suffering or pain, are included in *dukkha* as ordinary suffering (*dukkha-dukkha).*

A happy feeling, a happy condition in life, is not permanent, not everlasting. It changes sooner or later. When it changes, it produces pain, suffering, unhappiness. This vicissitude is included in *dukkha* as suffering produced by change (*vipariṇāma-dukkha).*

It is easy to understand the two forms of suffering (*dukkha)* mentioned above. No one will dispute them. This aspect of the First Noble Truth is more popularly known because it is easy to understand. It is common experience in our daily life.

But the third form of *dukkha* as conditioned states (*saṃkhāradukkha)* is the most important philosophical aspect of the First Noble Truth, and it requires some analytical explanation of what we consider as a 'being', as an 'individual', or as 'I'.

What we call a 'being', or an 'individual', or 'I', according to Buddhist philosophy, is only a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies, which may be divided into five groups or aggregates (*pañcakkhandha).* The Buddha says: 'In short these five aggregates of attachment are

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dukkha'.[1] Elsewhere he distinctly defines *dukkha* as the five aggregates: 'O bhikkhus, what is *dukkha?* It should be said that it is the five aggregates of attachment'.[2] Here it should be clearly understood that *dukkha* and the five aggregates are not two different things; the five aggregates themselves are *dukkha.* We will understand this point better when we have some notion of the five aggregates which constitute the so-called 'being'. Now, what are these five?

The Five Aggregates

The first is the Aggregate of Matter (*Rūpakkhandha).* In this term 'Aggregate of Matter' are included the traditional Four Great Elements (*cattāri mabābbūtāni)*, namely, solidity, fluidity, heat and motion, and also the Derivatives (*upādāya-rūpa)* of the Four Great Elements.[3] In the term 'Derivatives of Four Great Elements' are included our five material sense-organs, i.e., the faculties of eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body, and their corresponding objects in the external world, i.e., visible form, sound, odour, taste, and tangible things, and also some thoughts or ideas or conceptions which are in the sphere of mind-objects (*dharmāyatana)*[1]. Thus the whole realm of matter, both internal and external, is included in the Aggregate of Matter.

The second is the Aggregate of Sensations (*Vedanākkhandha).* In this group are included all our sensations, pleasant or unpleasant or neutral, experienced through the contact of physical and mental organs with the external world. They are of six kinds: the sensations experienced through the contact of the eye with visible forms, ear with sounds, nose with odour, tongue with taste, body with tangible objects, and mind (which is the sixth

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faculty in Buddhist Philosophy) with mind-objects or thoughts or ideas.[2] All our physical and mental sensations are included in this group.

A word about what is meant by the term 'Mind' (*manas)* in Buddhist philosophy may be useful here. It should clearly be understood that mind is not spirit as opposed to matter. It should always be remembered that Buddhism does not recognize a spirit opposed to matter, as is accepted by most other systems of philosophies and religions. Mind is only a faculty or organ (*indriya)* like the eye or the ear. It can be controlled and developed like any other faculty, and the Buddha speaks quite often of the value of controlling and disciplining these six faculties. The difference between the eye and the mind as faculties is that the former senses the world of colours and visible forms, while the latter senses the world of ideas and thoughts and mental objects. We experience different fields of the world with different senses. We cannot hear colours, but we can see them. Nor can we see sounds, but we can hear them. Thus with our five physical sense-organs—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body—we experience only the world of visible forms, sounds, odours, tastes and tangible objects. But these represent only a part of the world, not the whole world. What of ideas and thoughts? They are also a part of the world. But they cannot be sensed, they cannot be conceived by the faculty of the eye, ear, nose, tongue or body. Yet they can be conceived by another faculty, which is mind. Now ideas and thoughts are not independent of the world experienced by these five physical sense faculties. In fact they depend on, and are conditioned by, physical experiences. Hence a person born blind cannot have ideas of colour, except through the analogy of sounds or some

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other things experienced through his other faculties. Ideas and thoughts which form a part of the world are thus produced and conditioned by physical experiences and are conceived by the mind. Hence mind (*manas)* is considered a sense faculty or organ (*indriya)*, like the eye or the ear.

The third is the Aggregate of Perceptions (*Saññākkhandha).* Like sensations, perceptions also are of six kinds, in relation to six internal faculties and the corresponding six external objects. Like sensations, they are produced through the contact of our six faculties with the external world. It is the perceptions that recognize objects whether physical or mental.[1]

The fourth is the Aggregate of Mental Formations[2] (*Saṃkhārak-khandha).* In this group are included all volitional activities both good and bad. What is generally known as *karma* (or *kamma)* comes under this group. The Buddha's own definition of *karma* should be remembered here: 'O bhikkhus, it is volition (*cetanā)* that I call *karma.* Having willed, one acts through body, speech and mind.'[3] Volition is 'mental construction, mental activity. Its function is to direct the mind in the sphere of good, bad or neutral activities.'[4] Just like sensations and perceptions, volition is of six kinds, connected with the six internal faculties and the corresponding six objects (both physical and mental) in the external world.[5] Sensations and perceptions are not volitional actions. They do not produce karmic effects. It is only volitional actions—such as attention (*manasikāra)*, will (*chanda)*, determination (*adhimokkha)*, confidence (*saddhā)*, concentration (*samādhi)*, wisdom (*paññā)*, energy (*viriya)*, desire (*rāga)*, repugnance or hate (*paṭigha)* ignorance (*avijjā)*,

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conceit (*māna*), idea of self (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*) etc.—that can produce karmic effects. There are 52 such mental activities which constitute the Aggregate of Mental Formations.

The fifth is the Aggregate of Consciousness (*Viññaṇakkhandha*).[1] Consciousness is a reaction or response which has one of the six faculties (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind) as its basis, and one of the six corresponding external phenomena (visible form, sound, odour, taste, tangible things and mind-objects, i.e., an idea or thought) as its object. For instance, visual consciousness (*cakkhu-viññāṇa*) has the eye as its basis and a visible form as its object. Mental consciousness (*mano-viññāṇa*) has the mind (*manas*) as its basis and a mental object, i.e., an idea or thought (*dhamma*) as its object. So consciousness is connected with other faculties. Thus, like sensation, perception and volition, consciousness also is of six kinds, in relation to six internal faculties and corresponding six external objects.[2]

It should be clearly understood that consciousness does not recognize an object. It is only a sort of awareness—awareness of the presence of an object. When the eye comes in contact with a colour, for instance blue, visual consciousness arises which simply is awareness of the presence of a colour; but it does not recognize that it is blue. There is no recognition at this stage. It is perception (the third Aggregate discussed above) that recognizes that it is blue. The term 'visual consciousness' is a philosophical expression denoting the same idea as is conveyed by the ordinary word 'seeing'. Seeing does not mean recognizing. So are the other forms of consciousness.

It must be repeated here that according to Buddhist philosophy there is no permanent, unchanging spirit which

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can be considered 'Self', or 'Soul', or 'Ego', as opposed to matter, and that consciousness (*viññāṇa)* should not be taken as 'spirit' in opposition to matter. This point has to be particularly emphasized, because a wrong notion that consciousness is a sort of Self or Soul that continues as a permanent substance through life, has persisted from the earliest time to the present day.

One of the Buddha's own disciples, Sāti by name, held that the Master taught: 'It is the same consciousness that transmigrates and wanders about.' The Buddha asked him what he meant by 'consciousness'. Sāti's reply is classical: 'It is that which expresses, which feels, which experiences the results of good and bad deeds here and there'.

'To whomever, you stupid one', remonstrated the Master, 'have you heard me expounding the doctrine in this manner? Haven't I in many ways explained consciousness as arising out of conditions: that there is no arising of consciousness without conditions.' Then the Buddha went on to explain consciousness in detail: 'Conciousness is named according to whatever condition through which it arises: on account of the eye and visible forms arises a consciousness, and it is called visual consciousness; on account of the ear and sounds arises a consciousness, and it is called auditory consciousness; on account of the nose and odours arises a consciousness, and it is called olfactory consciousness; on account of the tongue and tastes arises a consciousness, and it is called gustatory consciousness; on account of the body and tangible objects arises a consciousness, and it is called tactile consciousness; on account of the mind and mind-objects (ideas and thoughts) arises a consciousness, and it is called mental consciousness.'

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Then the Buddha explained it further by an illustration: A fire is named according to the material on account of which it burns. A fire may burn on account of wood, and it is called wood-fire. It may burn on account of straw, and then it is called straw-fire. So consciousness is named according to the condition through which it arises.[1]

Dwelling on this point, Buddhaghosa, the great commentator, explains: '. . . a fire that burns on account of wood burns only when there is a supply, but dies down in that very place when it (the supply) is no longer there, because then the condition has changed, but (the fire) does not cross over to splinters, etc., and become a splinter-fire and so on; even so the consciousness that arises on account of the eye and visible forms arises in that gate of sense organ (i.e., in the eye), only when there is the condition of the eye, visible forms, light and attention, but ceases then and there when it (the condition) is no more there, because then the condition has changed, but (the consciousness) does not cross over to the ear, etc., and become auditory consciousness and so on . . .'[1]

The Buddha declared in unequivocal terms that consciousness depends on matter, sensation, perception and mental formations, and that it cannot exist independently of them. He says:

'Consciousness may exist having matter as its means (*r***ū***pup***ā***ya***ṃ**), matter as its object (*r***ū***p***ā***rammaṇa***ṃ**), matter as its support (*r***ū***pa-pati***ṭṭ***ha***ṃ**), and seeking delight it may grow, increase and develop; or consciousness may exist having sensation as its means . . . or perception as its means . . . or mental formations as its means, mental formations as its object, mental formations as its support, and seeking delight

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it may grow, increase and develop.

'Were a man to say: I shall show the coming, the going, the passing away, the arising, the growth, the increase or the development of consciousness apart from matter, sensation, perception and mental formations, he would be speaking of something that does not exist.'[2]

Very briefly these are the five Aggregates. What we call a 'being', or an 'individual', or 'I', is only a convenient name or a label given to the combination of these five groups. They are all impermanent, all constantly changing. 'Whatever is impermanent is *dukkha' (Yad anicca*ṃ *ta*ṃ *dukkha*ṃ*).* This is the true meaning of the Buddha's words: 'In brief the five Aggregates of Attachment are *dukkha.*' They are not the same for two consecutive moments. Here A is not equal to A. They are in a flux of momentary arising and disappearing.

'O Brāhmaṇa, it is just like a mountain river, flowing far and swift, taking everything along with it; there is no moment, no instant, no second when it stops flowing, but it goes on flowing and continuing. So Brāhmaṇa, is human life, like a mountain river.'[1] As the Buddha told Raṭṭhapāla: "The world is in continuous flux and is impermanent.'

One thing disappears, conditioning the appearance of the next in a series of cause and effect. There is no unchanging substance in them. There is nothing behind them that can be called a permanent Self (Ā*tmari)*, individuality, or anything that can in reality be called T. Every one will agree that neither matter, nor sensation, nor perception, nor any one of those mental activities, nor consciousness can really be called 'I'.[2] But when these five physical and mental aggregates which are interdependent are working together in

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combination as a physio-psychological machine,[3] we get the idea of 'I'. But this is only a false idea, a mental formation, which is nothing but one of those 52 mental formations of the fourth Aggregate which we have just discussed, namely, it is the idea of self (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi).*

These five Aggregates together, which we popularly call a 'being', are *dukkha* itself (*saṃkhāra-dukkha).* There is no other 'being' or 'I', standing behind these five aggregates, who experiences *dukkha.* As Buddhaghosa says:

'Mere suffering exists, but no sufferer is found;

The deeds are, but no doer is found.'[4]

There is no unmoving mover behind the movement. It is only movement. It is not correct to say that life is moving, but life is movement itself. Life and movement are not two different things. In other words, there is no thinker behind the thought. Thought itself is the thinker. If you remove the thought, there is no thinker to be found. Here we cannot fail to notice how this Buddhist view is diametrically opposed to the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*: 'I think, therefore I am.'

Now a question may be raised whether life has a beginning. According to the Buddha's teaching the beginning of the life-stream of living beings is unthinkable. The believer in the creation of life by God may be astonished at this reply. But if you were to ask him 'What is the beginning of God?' he would answer without hesitation 'God has no beginning', and he is not astonished at his own reply. The Buddha says: 'O bhikkhus, this cycle of continuity (*saṃsāra)* is without a visible end, and the first beginning of beings wandering and running round, enveloped in ignorance (*avijjā)* and bound down by the fetters of thirst (desire, *taṇhā)* is not to be

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perceived.'[1] And further, referring to ignorance which is the main cause of the continuity of life the Buddha states: "The first beginning of ignorance (*avijjā)* is not to be perceived in such a way as to postulate that there was no ignorance beyond a certain point.'[2] Thus it is not possible to say that there was no life beyond a certain definite point.

This in short is the meaning of the Noble Truth of *Dukkha.* It is extremely important to understand this First Noble Truth clearly because, as the Buddha says, 'he who sees *dukkha* sees also the arising of *dukkha*, sees also the cessation of *dukkha*, and sees also the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha.*'[3]

This does not at all make the life of a Buddhist melancholy or sorrowful, as some people wrongly imagine. On the contrary, a true Buddhist is the happiest of beings. He has no fears or anxieties. He is always calm and serene, and cannot be upset or dismayed by changes or calamities, because he sees things as they are. The Buddha was never melancholy or gloomy. He was described by his contemporaries as 'ever-smiling' (*mihita-pubbaṃgama).* In Buddhist painting and sculpture the Buddha is always represented with a countenance happy, serene, contented and compassionate. Never a trace of suffering or agony or pain is to be seen.[4] Buddhist art and architecture, Buddhist temples never give the impression of gloom or sorrow, but produce an atmosphere of calm and serene joy.

Although there is suffering in life, a Buddhist should not be gloomy over it, should not be angry or impatient at it. One of the principal evils in life, according to Buddhism, is 'repugnance' or hatred. Repugnance (*pratigha)* is explained as

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'ill-will with regard to living beings, with regard to suffering and with regard to things pertaining to suffering. Its function is to produce a basis for unhappy states and bad conduct.'[1] Thus it is wrong to be impatient at suffering. Being impatient or angry at suffering does not remove it. On the contrary, it adds a little more to one's troubles, and aggravates and exacerbates a situation already disagreeable. What is necessary is not anger or impatience, but the understanding of the question of suffering, how it comes about, and how to get rid of it, and then to work accordingly with patience, intelligence, determination and energy.

There are two ancient Buddhist texts called the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā* which are full of the joyful utterances of the Buddha's disciples, both male and female, who found peace and happiness in life through his teaching. The king of Kosala once told the Buddha that unlike many a disciple of other religious systems who looked haggard, coarse, pale, emaciated and unprepossessing, his disciples were 'joyful and elated (*haṭṭha-pahaṭṭha)*, jubilant and exultant (*udaggudagga)*, enjoying the spiritual life (*abbiratarūpa)*, with faculties pleased (*piṇitindriya)*, free from anxiety (*appossukka)*, serene (*pannalomd)*, peaceful (*paradavutta)* and living with a gazelle's mind (*migabhūtena cetasā)*, i.e., light-hearted.' The king added that he believed that this healthy disposition was due to the fact that 'these venerable ones had certainly realized the great and full significance of the Blessed One's teaching.'[2]

Buddhism is quite opposed to the melancholic, sorrowful, penitent and gloomy attitude of mind which is considered a hindrance to the realization of Truth. On the other hand, it is interesting to remember here that joy (*pīti)* is one of the seven *Bojjhaṃgas* or 'Factors of Enlightenment', the essential

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qualities to be cultivated for the realization of Nirv**āṇā**.[3]

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CHAPTER III

THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH: *SAMUDAYA:* 'The Arising *of Dukkha*'

The Second Noble Truth is that of the arising or origin of *dukkha (Dukkhasamudaya-ariyasacca).* The most popular and well-known definition of the Second Truth as found in innumerable places in the original texts runs as follows:

'It is this "thirst" (craving, *taṇhā)* which produces re-existence and re-becoming (*ponobhavikā)*, and which is bound up with passionate greed (*nandīrāgasahagatā)*, and which finds fresh delight now here and now there (*tatratatrābhinandinī)*, namely, (1) thirst for sense-pleasures (*kāma-taṇhā)*, (2) thirst for existence and becoming (*bhava-taṇhā)* and (3) thirst for non-existence (self-annihilation, *vibhava-taṇhā).*'[1]

It is this 'thirst', desire, greed, craving, manifesting itself in various ways, that gives rise to all forms of suffering and the continuity of beings. But it should not be taken as the first cause, for there is no first cause possible as, according to Buddhism, everything is relative and inter-dependent. Even this 'thirst', *taṇhā*, which is considered as the cause or origin of *dukkha*, depends for its arising (*samudaya)* on something else, which is sensation (*vedanā)*,[2] and sensation arises depending on contact (*phassa)*, and so on and so forth goes on the circle which is known as Conditioned Genesis (*Paṭicca-samuppāda)*, which we will discuss later.[3]

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So *taṇhā*, 'thirst', is not the first or the only cause of the arising of *dukkha.* But it is the most palpable and immediate cause, the 'principal thing' and the 'all-pervading thing'.[4] Hence in certain places of the original Pali texts themselves the definition of *samudaya* or the origin of *dukkha* includes other defilements and impurities (*kilesā, sāsavā dhammā)*, in addition to *taṇhā* 'thirst' which is always given the first place.[1] Within the necessarily limited space of our discussion, it will be sufficient if we remember that this 'thirst' has as its centre the false idea of self arising out of ignorance.

Here the term 'thirst' includes not only desire for, and attachment to, sense-pleasures, wealth and power, but also desire for, and attachment to, ideas and ideals, views, opinions, theories, conceptions and beliefs (*dhamma-taṇhā).*[2] According to the Buddha's analysis, all the troubles and strife in the world, from little personal quarrels in families to great wars between nations and countries, arise out of this selfish 'thirst'.[3] From this point of view, all economic, political and social problems are rooted in this selfish 'thirst'. Great statesmen who try to settle international disputes and talk of war and peace only in economic and political terms touch the superficialities, and never go deep into the real root of the problem. As the Buddha told Raṭṭapāla: "The world lacks and hankers, and is enslaved to "thirst" (*taṇhādāso).*'

Every one will admit that all the evils in the world are produced by selfish desire. This is not difficult to understand. But how this desire, 'thirst', can produce re-existence and re-becoming (*ponobhavikā)* is a problem not so easy to grasp. It is here that we have to discuss the deeper philosophical side of the Second Noble Truth corresponding to the philosophical

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side of the First Noble Truth. Here we must have some idea about the theory of *karma* and rebirth.

There are four Nutriments (*āhāra)* in the sense of 'cause' or 'condition' necessary for the existence and continuity of beings: (1) ordinary material food (*kabalinkārāhāra)*, (2) contact of our sense-organs (including mind) with the external world *(phassābāra)*, (3) consciousness (*viññaṇāhara)* and (4) mental volition or will (*manosañcetanāhāra).*[4]

Of these four, the last mentioned 'mental volition' is the will to live, to exist, to re-exist, to continue, to become more and more.[1] It creates the root of existence and continuity, striving forward by way of good and bad actions (*kusalākusalakamma).*[2] It is the same as 'Volition' (*cetanā).*[3] We have seen earlier[4] that volition is karma, as the Buddha himself has defined it. Referring to 'Mental volition' just mentioned above the Buddha says: 'When one understands the nutriment of mental volition one understands the three forms of 'thirst' (*taṇhā).'*[5] Thus the terms 'thirst', 'volition', 'mental volition' and 'karma' all denote the same thing: they denote the desire, the will to be, to exist, to re-exist, to become more and more, to grow more and more, to accumulate more and more. This is the cause of the arising of *dukkha*, and this is found within the Aggregate of Mental Formations, one of the Five Aggregates which constitute a being.[6]

Here is one of the most important and essential points in the Buddha's teaching. We must therefore clearly and carefully mark and remember that the cause, the germ, of the arising of *dukkha* is within *dukkha* itself, and not outside; and we must equally well remember that the cause, the germ, of

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the cessation of *dukkha*, of the destruction of *dukkha*, is also within *dukkha* itself, and not outside. This is what is meant by the well-known formula often found in original Pali texts: *Yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃsabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ* 'Whatever is of the nature of arising, all that is of the nature of cessation.'[7] A being, a thing, or a system, if it has within itself the nature of arising, the nature of coming into being, has also within itself the nature, the germ, of its own cessation and destruction. Thus *dukkha* (Five Aggregates) has within itself the nature of its own arising, and has also within itself the nature of its own cessation. This point will be taken up again in the discussion of the Third Noble Truth, *Nirodha.*

Now, the Pali word *kamma* or the Sanskrit word *karma* (from the root *kṛ* to do) literally means 'action', 'doing'. But in the Buddhist theory of karma it has a specific meaning: it means only 'volitional action', not all action. Nor does it mean the result of karma as many people wrongly and loosely use it. In Buddhist terminology karma never means its effect; its effect is known as the 'fruit' or the 'result' of karma (*kamma-phala* or *kamma-vipāka).*

Volition may relatively be good or bad, just as a desire may relatively be good or bad. So karma may be good or bad relatively. Good karma (*kusala)* produces good effects, and bad karma (*akusala)* produces bad effects. 'Thirst', volition, karma, whether good or bad, has one force as its effect: force to continue—to continue in a good or bad direction. Whether good or bad it is relative, and is within the cycle of continuity (*saṃsāra).* An Arahant, though he acts, does not accumulate karma, because he is free from the false idea of self, free from the 'thirst' for continuity and becoming, free from all other defilements and impurities (*kiksā, sāsavā dhammā).* For him

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there is no rebirth.

The theory of karma should not be confused with so-called ‘moral justice’ or ‘reward and punishment’. The idea of moral justice, or reward and punishment, arises out of the conception of a supreme being, a God, who sits in judgment, who is a law-giver and who decides what is right and wrong. The term ‘justice’ is ambiguous and dangerous, and in its name more harm than good is done to humanity. The theory of karma is the theory of cause and effect, of action and reaction; it is a natural law, which has nothing to do with the idea of justice or reward and punishment. Every volitional action produces its effects or results. If a good action produces good effects and a bad action bad effects, it is not justice, or reward, or punishment meted out by anybody or any power sitting in judgment on your action, but this is in virtue of its own nature, its own law. This is not difficult to understand. But what is difficult is that, according to the karma theory, the effects of a volitional action may continue to manifest themselves even in a life after death. Here we have to explain what death is according to Buddhism.

We have seen earlier that a being is nothing but a combination of physical and mental forces or energies. What we call death is the total non-functioning of the physical body. Do all these forces and energies stop altogether with the non-functioning of the body? Buddhism says ‘No’. Will, volition, desire, thirst to exist, to continue, to become more and more, is a tremendous force that moves whole lives, whole existences, that even moves the whole world. This is the greatest force, the greatest energy in the world. According to Buddhism, this force does not stop with the non-functioning of the body, which is death; but it continues

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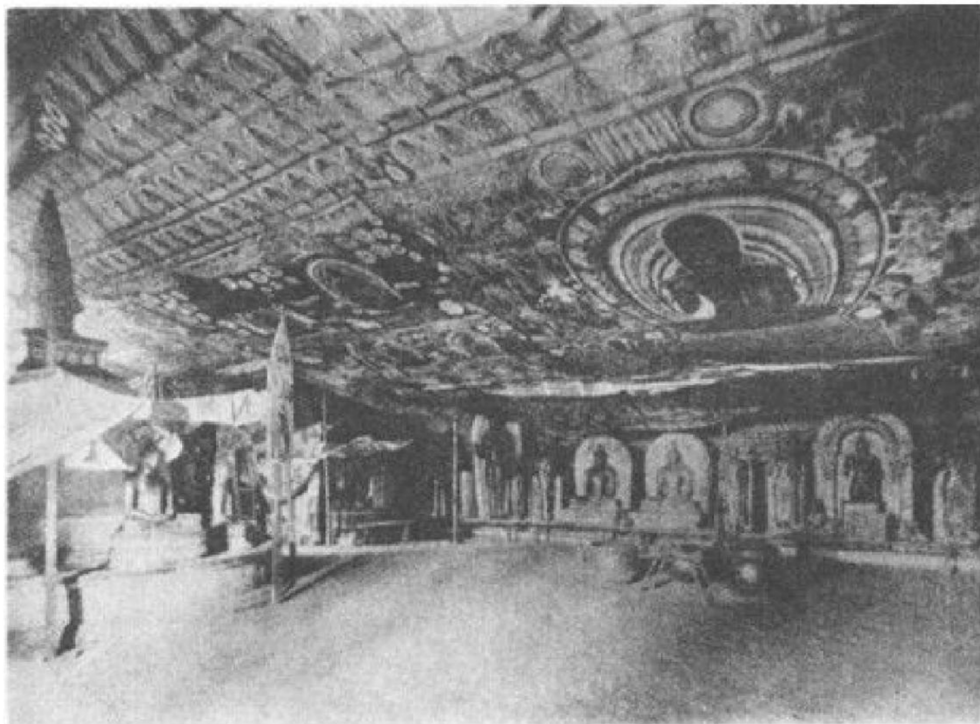
manifesting itself in another form, producing re-existence which is called rebirth.



III. Interior of cave temple—from Dambulla, Ceylon

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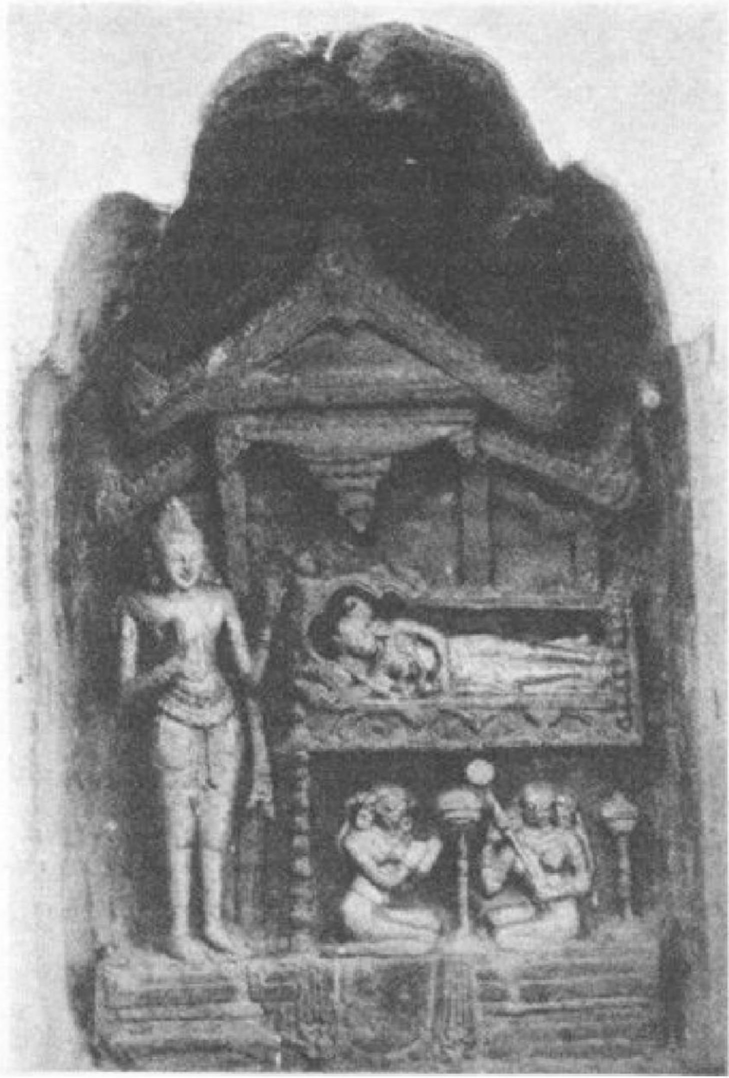

IV. The Great Renunciation—Ananda Temple, Burma

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V. The Buddha—from Mathura, India

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VI. The Buddha—from China

Now, another question arises: If there is no permanent, unchanging entity or substance like Self or Soul (ā*tman)*, what is it that can re-exist or be reborn after death? Before we go on to life after death, let us consider what this life is, and how it continues now. What we call life, as we have so often repeated, is the combination of the Five Aggregates, a combination of physical and mental energies. These are constantly changing; they do not remain the same for two

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consecutive moments. Every moment they are born and they die. 'When the Aggregates arise, decay and die, O bhikkhu, every moment you are born, decay and die.'[1] Thus, even now during this life time, every moment we are born and die, but we continue. If we can understand that in this life we can continue without a permanent, unchanging substance like Self or Soul, why can't we understand that those forces themselves can continue without a Self or a Soul behind them after the non-functioning of the body?

When this physical body is no more capable of functioning, energies do not die with it, but continue to take some other shape or form, which we call another life. In a child all the physical, mental and intellectual faculties are tender and weak, but they have within them the potentiality of producing a full grown man. Physical and mental energies which constitute the so-called being have within themselves the power to take a new form, and grow gradually and gather force to the full.

As there is no permanent, unchanging substance, nothing passes from one moment to the next. So quite obviously, nothing permanent or unchanging can pass or transmigrate from one life to the next. It is a series that continues unbroken, but changes every moment. The series is, really speaking, nothing but movement. It is like a flame that burns through the night: it is not the same flame nor is it another. A child grows up to be a man of sixty. Certainly the man of sixty is not the same as the child of sixty years ago, nor is he another person. Similarly, a person who dies here and is reborn elsewhere is neither the same person, nor another (*na ca so na ca añño).* It is the continuity of the same series. The difference between death and birth is only a thought-

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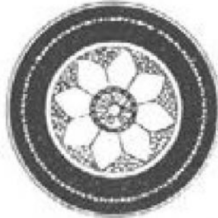
moment: the last thought-moment in this life conditions the first thought-moment in the so-called next life, which, in fact, is the continuity of the same series. During this life itself, too, one thought-moment conditions the next thought-moment. So from the Buddhist point of view, the question of life after death is not a great mystery, and a Buddhist is never worried about this problem.

As long as there is this 'thirst' to be and to become, the cycle of continuity (*saṃsāra*) goes on. It can stop only when its driving force, this 'thirst', is cut off through wisdom which sees Reality, Truth, Nirvāṇa.



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CHAPTER IV

THE THIRD NOBLE TRUTH: *NIRODHA:* 'The Cessation of *Dukkha*'

The Third Noble Truth is that there is emancipation, liberation, freedom from suffering, from the continuity of *dukkha.* This is called the Noble Truth of the Cessation *of dukkha (Dukkhanirodhaariyasacca)*, which is *Nibbāna*, more popularly known in its Sanskrit form of *Nirvāṇa.*

To eliminate *dukkha* completely one has to eliminate the main root of *dukkha*, which is 'thirst' (*taṇhā)*, as we saw earlier. Therefore Nirvāṇ a is known also by the term *Taṇhakkhaya* 'Extinction of Thirst'.

Now you will ask: But what is Nirvāṇa? Volumes have been written in reply to this quite natural and simple question; they have, more and more, only confused the issue rather than clarified it. The only reasonable reply to give to the question is that it can never be answered completely and satisfactorily in words, because human language is too poor to express the real nature of the Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality which is Nirvāṇa. Language is created and used by masses of human beings to express things and ideas experienced by their sense organs and their mind. A supramundane experience like that of the Absolute Truth is not of such a category. Therefore there cannot be words to express that experience, just as the fish had no words in his vocabulary to express the nature of the solid land. The tortoise told his friend the fish that he (the tortoise) just

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returned to the lake after a walk on the land. 'Of course' the fish said, 'You mean swimming.' The tortoise tried to explain that one couldn't swim on the land, that it was solid, and that one walked on it. But the fish insisted that there could be nothing like it, that it must be liquid like his lake, with waves, and that one must be able to dive and swim there.

Words are symbols representing things and ideas known to us; and these symbols do not and cannot convey the true nature of even ordinary things. Language is considered deceptive and misleading in the matter of understanding of the Truth. So the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* says that ignorant people get stuck in words like an elephant in the mud.[1]

Nevertheless we cannot do without language. But if Nirvana is to be expressed and explained in positive terms, we are likely immediately to grasp an idea associated with those terms, which may be quite the contrary. Therefore it is generally expressed in negative terms[2]—a less dangerous mode perhaps. So it is often referred to by such negative terms as *Taṇhakkhaya* 'Extinction of Thirst', *Asaṃkhata* 'Uncompound', 'Unconditioned', *Virāga* 'Absence of desire', *Nirodha* 'Cessation', *Nibbāna* 'Blowing out' or 'Extinction'.

Let us consider a few definitions and descriptions of Nirvāṇa as found in the original Pali texts:

'It is the complete cessation of that very 'thirst' (*taṇhā*), giving it up, renouncing it, emancipation from it, detachment from it.'[3]

'Calming of all conditioned things, giving up of all defilements, extinction of "thirst", detachment, cessation, Nibbāna.'[4]

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‘O bhikkhus, what is the Absolute (*Asaṃkhata*, Unconditioned)? It is, O bhikkhus, the extinction of desire (*rāgakkhayo)* the extinction of hatred (*dosakkhayo)*, the extinction of illusion (*mohakkhayo).* This, O bhikkhus, is called the Absolute.’[5]

‘O Rādha, the extinction of “thirst” (*Taṇhakkhayo)* is Nibbāna.’[6]

‘O bhikkhus, whatever there may be things conditioned or unconditioned, among them detachment (*virāga)* is the highest. That is to say, freedom from conceit, destruction of thirst,[1] the uprooting of attachment, the cutting off of continuity, the extinction of “thirst” (*taṇhā)*, detachment, cessation, Nibbāna.’[2]

The reply of Sāriputta, the chief disciple of the Buddha, to a direct question ‘What is Nibbāna?’ posed by a Parivrājaka, is identical with the definition of *Asaṃkhata* given by the Buddha (above): ‘The extinction of desire, the extinction of hatred, the extinction of illusion.’[3]

‘The abandoning and destruction of desire and craving for these Five Aggregates of Attachment: that is the cessation of *dukkha.*’[4]

‘The cessation of Continuity and becoming (*Bhavanirodha)* is Nibbāna.’[5]

And further, referring to Nirvāṇa the Buddha says:

‘O bhikkhus, there is the unborn, ungrown, and unconditioned. Were there not the unborn, ungrown, and unconditioned, there would be no escape for the born, grown, and conditioned. Since there is the unborn, ungrown, and unconditioned, so there is escape for the born, grown, and

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conditioned.'[6]

'Here the four elements of solidity, fluidity, heat and motion have no place; the notions of length and breadth, the subtle and the gross, good and evil, name and form are altogether destroyed; neither this world nor the other, nor coming, going or standing, neither death nor birth, nor sense-objects are to be found.'[7]

Because Nirvāṇa is thus expressed in negative terms, there are many who have got a wrong notion that it is negative, and expresses self-annihilation. Nirvāṇa is definitely no annihilation of self, because there is no self to annihilate. If at all, it is the annihilation of the illusion, of the false idea of self.

It is incorrect to say that Nirvāṇa is negative or positive. The ideas of 'negative' and 'positive' are relative, and are within the realm of duality. These terms cannot be applied to Nirvāṇa, Absolute Truth, which is beyond duality and relativity.

A negative word need not necessarily indicate a negative state. The Pali or Sanskrit word for health is *ārogya*, a negative term, which literally means 'absence of illness'. But *ārogya* (health) does not represent a negative state. The word 'Immortal' (or its Sanskrit equivalent *Amṛta* or Pali *Amata)*, which also is a synonym for Nirvāṇa, is negative, but it does not denote a negative state. The negation of negative values is not negative. One of the well-known synonyms for Nirvāṇa is 'Freedom' (Pali *Mutti*, Skt. *Mukti).* Nobody would say that freedom is negative. But even freedom has a negative side: freedom is always a liberation from something which is obstructive, which is evil, which is negative. But freedom is

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not negative. So Nirvāṇa, *Mutti* or *Vimutti*, the Absolute Freedom, is freedom from all evil, freedom from craving, hatred and ignorance, freedom from all terms of duality, relativity, time and space.

We may get some idea of Nirvāṇa as Absolute Truth from the *Dhātuvtbhaṇga-sutta* (No. 140) of the *Majjhima-nikāya.* This extremely important discourse was delivered by the Buddha to Pukkusāti (already mentioned), whom the Master found to be intelligent and earnest, in the quiet of the night in a potter's shed. The essence of the relevant portions of the sutta is as follows:

A man is composed of six elements: solidity, fluidity, heat, motion, space and consciousness. He analyses them and finds that none of them is 'mine', or 'me'; or 'my self. He understands how consciousness appears and disappears, how pleasant, unpleasant and neutral sensations appear and disappear. Through this knowledge his mind becomes detached. Then he finds within him a pure equanimity (*upekhā)*, which he can direct towards the attainment of any high spiritual state, and he knows that thus this pure equanimity will last for a long period. But then he thinks:

'If I focus this purified and cleansed equanimity on the Sphere of Infinite Space and develop a mind conforming thereto, that is a mental creation (*saṃkbataṃ).*[1] If I focus this purified and cleansed equanimity on the Sphere of Infinite Consciousness . . . on the Sphere of Nothingness . . . or on the Sphere of Neither-perception nor Non-perception and develop a mind conforming thereto, that is a mental creation.' Then he neither mentally creates nor wills continuity and becoming (*bhava)* or annihilation (*vibbava).*[1] As

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he does not construct or does not will continuity and becoming or annihilation, he does not cling to anything in the world; as he does not cling, he is not anxious; as he is not anxious, he is completely calmed within (fully blown out within *paccattaṃyeva parinibbāyati).* And he knows: 'Finished is birth, lived is pure life, what should be done is done, nothing more is left to be done.'[2]

Now, when he experiences a pleasant, unpleasant or neutral sensation, he knows that it is impermanent, that it does not bind him, that it is not experienced with passion. Whatever may be the sensation, he experiences it without being bound to it (*visaṃyutto).* He knows that all those sensations will be pacified with the dissolution of the body, just as the flame of a lamp goes out when oil and wick give out.

'Therefore, O bhikkhu, a person so endowed is endowed with the absolute wisdom, for the knowledge of the extinction of all *dukkha* is the absolute noble wisdom.

"This his deliverance, founded on Truth, is unshakable. O bhikkhu, that which is unreality (*mosadhamma)* is false; that which is reality (*amosadhamma)*, Nibbāna, is Truth (*Sacca).* Therefore, O bhikkhu, a person so endowed is endowed with this Absolute Truth. For, the Absolute Noble Truth (*paramaṃ ariyasaccaṃ)* is Nibbāna, which is Reality.'

Elsewhere the Buddha unequivocally uses the word Truth in place of Nibbāna: 'I will teach you the Truth and the Path leading to the Truth.'[3] Here Truth definitely means Nirvāṇa.

Now, what is Absolute Truth? According to Buddhism, the Absolute Truth is that there is nothing absolute in the world, that everything is relative, conditioned and impermanent,

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and that there is no unchanging, everlasting, absolute substance like Self, Soul or **Ā***tman* within or without. This is the Absolute Truth. Truth is never negative, though there is a popular expression as negative truth. The realization of this Truth, i.e., to see things as they are (*yathâbhutam)* without illusion or ignorance (*avijj***ā***)*[1] is the extinction of craving 'thirst' (*Taṇhakkhayo)*, and the cessation (*Nirodha)* of *dukkha*, which is Nirvana. It is interesting and useful to remember here the Mahāyāna view of Nirvāṇa as not being different from *Saṃsāra.*[2] The same thing is Saṃsāra or Nirvāṇa according to the way you look at it—subjectively or objectively. This Mahāyāna view was probably developed out of the ideas found in the original Theravāda Pali texts, to which we have just referred in our brief discussion.

It is incorrect to think that Nirvāṇa is the natural result of the extinction of craving. Nirvāṇa is not the result of anything. If it would be a result, then it would be an effect produced by a cause. It would be *saṃkbata* 'produced' and 'conditioned'. Nirvāṇa is neither cause nor effect. It is beyond cause and effect. Truth is not a result nor an effect. It is not produced like a mystic, spiritual, mental state, such as *dhy***ā***na* or *sam***ā***dhi.* TRUTH IS. NIRVĀNA IS. The only thing you can do is to see it, to realize it. There is a path leading to the realization of Nirvāṇa. But Nirvāṇa is not the result of this path.[3] You may get to the mountain along a path, but the mountain is not the result, not an effect of the path. You may see a light, but the light is not the result of your eyesight.

People often ask: What is there after Nirvāṇa? This question cannot arise, because Nirvāṇa is the Ultimate Truth. If it is Ultimate, there can be nothing after it. If there is

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anything after Nirvāṇa, then that will be the Ultimate Truth and not Nirvāṇa. A monk named Rādha put this question to the Buddha in a different form: 'For what purpose (or end) is Nirvāṇa?' This question presupposes something after Nirvāṇa, when it postulates some purpose or end for it. So the Buddha answered: 'O Rādha, this question could not catch its limit (i.e., it is beside the point). One lives the holy life with Nirvāṇa as its final plunge (into the Absolute Truth), as its goal, as its ultimate end.'[1]

Some popular inaccurately phrased expressions like 'The Buddha entered into Nirvāṇa or Parinirvāṇa after his death' have given rise to many imaginary speculations about Nirvāṇa.[2] The moment you hear the phrase that 'the Buddha entered into Nirvāṇa or Parinirvāṇa', you take Nirvāṇa to be a state, or a realm, or a position in which there is some sort of existence, and try to imagine it in terms of the senses of the word 'existence' as it is known to you. This popular expression 'entered into Nirvāṇa' has no equivalent in the original texts. There is no such thing as 'entering into Nirvāṇa after death'. There is a word *parinibbuto* used to denote the death of the Buddha or an Arahant who has realized Nirvāṇa, but it does not mean 'entering into Nirvāṇ a'. '*Partnibbuto* simply means 'fully passed away', 'fully blown out' or 'fully extinct', because the Buddha or an Arahant has no re-existence after his death.

Now another question arises: What happens to the Buddha or an Arahant after his death, *parinirvāṇa?* This comes under the category of unanswered questions (*avyākata).*[3] Even when the Buddha spoke about this, he indicated that no words in our vocabulary could express what happens to an Arahant

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after his death. In reply to a Parivrājaka named Vaccha, the Buddha said that terms like 'bom' or 'not born' do not apply in the case of an Arahant, because those things—matter, sensation, perception, mental activities, consciousness—with which the terms like 'born' and 'not born' are associated, are completely destroyed and uprooted, never to rise again after his death.[4]

An Arahant after his death is often compared to a fire gone out when the supply of wood is over, or to the flame of a lamp gone out when the wick and oil are finished.[5] Here it should be clearly and distinctly understood, without any confusion, that what is compared to a flame or a fire gone out is *not* Nirvāṇa, but the 'being' composed of the Five Aggregates who realized Nirvāṇa. This point has to be emphasized because many people, even some great scholars, have misunderstood and misinterpreted this simile as referring to Nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is never compared to a fire or a lamp gone out.

There is another popular question: If there is no Self, no *Ātman*, who realizes Nirvāṇa? Before we go on to Nirvāṇ a, let us ask the question: Who thinks now, if there is no Self? We have seen earlier that it is the thought that thinks, that there is no thinker behind the thought. In the same way, it is wisdom (*paññā*), realization, that realizes. There is no other self behind the realization. In the discussion of the origin of *dukkha* we saw that whatever it may be—whether being, or thing, or system—if it is of the nature of arising, it has within itself the nature, the germ, of its cessation, its destruction. Now *dukkha, saṃsāra*, the cycle of continuity, is of the nature of arising; it must also be of the nature of cessation. *Dukkha* arises because of 'thirst' (*taṇhā*), and it ceases because of

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wisdom (*paññā*). 'Thirst' and wisdom are both within the Five Aggregates, as we saw earlier.[1]

Thus, the germ of their arising as well as that of their cessation are both within the Five Aggregates. This is the real meaning of the Buddha's well-known statement: 'Within this fathom-long sentient body itself, I postulate the world, the arising of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world.'[2] This means that all the Four Noble Truths are found within the Five Aggregates, i.e., within ourselves. (Here the word 'world' (*loka)* is used in place of *dukkha).* This also means that there is no external power that produces the arising and the cessation of *dukkha.*

When wisdom is developed and cultivated according to the Fourth Noble Truth (the next to be taken up), it sees the secret of life, the reality of things as they are. When the secret is discovered, when the Truth is seen, all the forces which feverishly produce the continuity of *saṃsār* in illusion become calm and incapable of producing any more karma-formations, because there is no more illusion, no more 'thirst' for continuity. It is like a mental disease which is cured when the cause or the secret of the malady is discovered and seen by the patient.

In almost all religions the *summum bonum* can be attained only after death. But Nirvāṇa can be realized in this very life; it is not necessary to wait till you die to 'attain' it.

He who has realized the Truth, Nirvāṇa, is the happiest being in the world. He is free from all 'complexes' and obsessions, the worries and troubles that torment others. His mental health is perfect. He does not repent the past, nor does he brood over the future. He lives fully in the present.[1]

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Therefore he appreciates and enjoys things in the purest sense without self-projections. He is joyful, exultant, enjoying the pure life, his faculties pleased, free from anxiety, serene and peaceful.[2] As he is free from selfish desire, hatred, ignorance, conceit, pride, and all such 'defilements', he is pure and gentle, full of universal love, compassion, kindness, sympathy, understanding and tolerance. His service to others is of the purest, for he has no thought of self. He gains nothing, accumulates nothing, not even anything spiritual, because he is free from the illusion of Self, and the 'thirst' for becoming.

Nirvāṇa is beyond all terms of duality and relativity. It is therefore beyond our conceptions of good and evil, right and wrong, existence and non-existence. Even the word 'happiness' (*sukha)* which is used to describe Nirvāṇa has an entirely different sense here. Sāriputta once said: 'O friend, Nirvāṇa is happiness! Nirvāṇa is happiness!' Then Udāyi asked: 'But, friend Sāriputta, what happiness can it be if there is no sensation?' Sāriputta's reply was highly philosophical and beyond ordinary comprehension: "That there is no sensation itself is happiness'.

Nirvāṇa is beyond logic and reasoning (*atakkāvacara).* However much we may engage, often as a vain intellectual pastime, in highly speculative discussions regarding Nirvāṇa or Ultimate Truth or Reality, we shall never understand it that way. A child in the kindergarten should not quarrel about the theory of relativity. Instead, if he follows his studies patiently and diligently, one day he may understand it. Nirvāṇa is 'to be realized by the wise within themselves' (*paccattaṃveditabbo viññūbi).* If we follow the Path patiently and with diligence, train and purify ourselves earnestly, and

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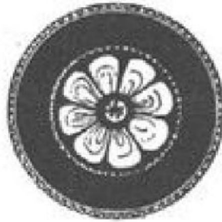
attain the necessary spiritual development, we may one day realize it within ourselves—without taxing ourselves with puzzling and high-sounding words.

Let us therefore now turn to the Path which leads to the realization of Nirvāṇa.



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CHAPTER V

THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH: *MAGGA:* 'The Path'

The Fourth Noble Truth is that of the Way leading to the Cessation of *Dukkha* (*Dukkhanirodhagāmiṇīpaṭipadā-ariyasacca).* This is known as the 'Middle Path' (*MajjhimāPatipadā),* because it avoids two extremes: one extreme being the search for happiness through the pleasures of the senses, which is 'low, common, unprofitable and the way of the ordinary people'; the other being the search for happiness through self-mortification in different forms of asceticism, which is 'painful, unworthy and unprofitable'. Having himself first tried these two extremes, and having found them to be useless, the Buddha discovered through personal experience the Middle Path 'which gives vision and knowledge, which leads to Calm, Insight, Enlightenment, Nirvāṇa'. This Middle Path is generally referred to as the Noble Eightfold Path (*Arija-Aṭṭhaṇgika-Magga)*, because it is composed of eight categories or divisions: namely,

1. Right Understanding (*Sammā diṭṭhi)*,
2. Right Thought (*Sammā saṇkappa)*,
3. Right Speech (*Sammāv ācā)*,
4. Right Action (*Sammākammanta)*,
5. Right Livelihood (*Sammā ājīva)*,
6. Right Effort (*Sammāv āyāma)*,

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7. Right Mindfulness (*Sammāsati)*,

8. Right Concentration (*Sammāsam ādhi).*

Practically the whole teaching of the Buddha, to which he devoted himself during 45 years, deals in some way or other with this Path. He explained it in different ways and in different words to different people, according to the stage of their development and their capacity to understand and follow him. But the essence of those many thousand discourses scattered in the Buddhist Scriptures is found in the Noble Eightfold Path.

It should not be thought that the eight categories or divisions of the Path should be followed and practised one after the other in the numerical order as given in the usual list above. But they are to be developed more or less simultaneously, as far as possible according to the capacity of each individual. They are all linked together and each helps the cultivation of the others.

These eight factors aim at promoting and perfecting the three essentials of Buddhist training and discipline: namely: (*a)* Ethical Conduct (*Sīla), (b)* Mental Discipline (*Samādhi)* and (*c)* Wisdom (*Paññā).*[1] It will therefore be more helpful for a coherent and better understanding of the eight divisions of the Path, if we group them and explain them according to these three heads.

Ethical Conduct (*Sila)* is built on the vast conception of universal love and compassion for all living beings, on which the Buddha's teaching is based. It is regrettable that many scholars forget this great ideal of the Buddha's teaching, and indulge in only dry philosophical and metaphysical divagations when they talk and write about Buddhism. The

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Buddha gave his teaching 'for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world' (*bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānu-kampāya).*

According to Buddhism for a man to be perfect there are two qualities that he should develop equally: compassion (*karuṇā*) on one side, and wisdom (*paññā)* on the other. Here compassion represents love, charity, kindness, tolerance and such noble qualities on the emotional side, or qualities of the heart, while wisdom would stand for the intellectual side or the qualities of the mind. If one develops only the emotional neglecting the intellectual, one may become a good-hearted fool; while to develop only the intellectual side neglecting the emotional may turn one into a hardhearted intellect without feeling for others. Therefore, to be perfect one has to develop both equally. That is the aim of the Buddhist way of life: in it wisdom and compassion are inseparably linked together, as we shall see later.

Now, in Ethical Conduct (*Sila)*, based on love and compassion, are included three factors of the Noble Eightfold Path: namely, Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. (Nos. 3, 4 and 5 in the list).

Right speech means abstention (1) from telling lies, (2) from backbiting and slander and talk that may bring about hatred, enmity, disunity and disharmony among individuals or groups of people, (3) from harsh, rude, impolite, malicious and abusive language, and (4) from idle, useless and foolish babble and gossip. When one abstains from these forms of wrong and harmful speech one naturally has to speak the truth, has to use words that are friendly and benevolent, pleasant and gentle, meaningful and useful. One should not speak carelessly: speech should be at the right time and place.

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If one cannot say something useful, one should keep ‘noble silence’.

Right Action aims at promoting moral, honourable and peaceful conduct. It admonishes us that we should abstain from destroying life, from stealing, from dishonest dealings, from illegitimate sexual intercourse, and that we should also help others to lead a peaceful and honourable life in the right way.

Right Livelihood means that one should abstain from making one’s living through a profession that brings harm to others, such as trading in arms and lethal weapons, intoxicating drinks, poisons, killing animals, cheating, etc., and should live by a profession which is honourable, blameless and innocent of harm to others. One can clearly see here that Buddhism is strongly opposed to any kind of war, when it lays down that trade in arms and lethal weapons is an evil and unjust means of livelihood.

These three factors (Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood) of the Eightfold Path constitute Ethical Conduct. It should be realized that the Buddhist ethical and moral conduct aims at promoting a happy and harmonious life both for the individual and for society. This moral conduct is considered as the indispensable foundation for all higher spiritual attainments. No spiritual development is possible without this moral basis.

Next comes Mental Discipline, in which are included three other factors of the Eightfold Path: namely, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness (or Attentiveness) and Right Concentration. (Nos. 6, 7 and 8 in the list).

Right Effort is the energetic will (1) to prevent evil and unwholesome states of mind from arising, and (2) to get rid of

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such evil and unwholesome states that have already arisen within a man, and also (3) to produce, to cause to arise, good and wholesome states of mind not yet arisen, and (4) to develop and bring to perfection the good and wholesome states of mind already present in a man.

Right Mindfulness (or Attentiveness) is to be diligently aware, mindful and attentive with regard to (1) the activities of the body (*kāya)*, (2) sensations or feelings (*vedanā)*, (3) the activities of the mind (*citta)* and (4) ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things (*dhamma).*

The practice of concentration on breathing (*ānāpānasati)* is one of the well-known exercises, connected with the body, for mental development. There are several other ways of developing attentiveness in relation to the body—as modes of meditation.

With regard to sensations and feelings, one should be clearly aware of all forms of feelings and sensations, pleasant, unpleasant and neutral, of how they appear and disappear within oneself.

Concerning the activities of mind, one should be aware whether one's mind is lustful or not, given to hatred or not, deluded or not, distracted or concentrated, etc. In this way one should be aware of all movements of mind, how they arise and disappear.

As regards ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things, one should know their nature, how they appear and disappear, how they are developed, how they are suppressed, and destroyed, and so on.

These four forms of mental culture or meditation are treated in detail in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (Setting-up of

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Mindfulness).[1]

The third and last factor of Mental Discipline is Right Concentration leading to the four stages of *Dbyāna*, generally called trance or *recueillement.* In the first stage of *Dhyāna*, passionate desires and certain unwholesome thoughts like sensuous lust, ill-will, languor, worry, restlessness, and sceptical doubt are discarded, and feelings of joy and happiness are maintained, along with certain mental activities. In the second stage, all intellectual activities are suppressed, tranquillity and 'one-pointedness' of mind developed, and the feelings of joy and happiness are still retained. In the third stage, the feeling of joy, which is an active sensation, also disappears, while the disposition of happiness still remains in addition to mindful equanimity. In the fourth stage of *Dhyāna*, all sensations, even of happiness and unhappiness, of joy and sorrow, disappear, only pure equanimity and awareness remaining.

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