

Lily de Sylva: A Radical Therapist

Some Collected Works as a Tribute to her Life's Work.

About the Author

Lily de Silva was a professor [until retirement] in Buddhist Studies at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. Educated at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, she obtained the degree of Bachelor of Arts with First Class Honors in Pali and the Woodward Prize for Pali. She has taught at the University of Peradeniya since 1959 and was awarded the Ph.D. degree in 1967. Dr. de Silva is the editor of the *Digha Nikaya Atthakatha Tika* (Subcommentary to the Digha Nikaya), published by the Pali Text Society of London in three volumes. She is also the author of *Paritta: The Buddhist Ceremony for Peace and Prosperity in Sri Lanka* (National Museums of Sri Lanka, Colombo, 1981) and is a regular contributor to Buddhist scholarly and popular journals. She was a Visiting Scholar at the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, in 1978-79.

She has also written a number of books for the BPS Wheel Series in Kandy. This collection contains some of her best-known works, as shown in list below.

Table of Contents:

1. One Foot in the World
2. The Self-Made Private Prison
3. The Buddhist Attitude Toward Nature
4. Radical Therapy
5. Giving in the Pali Canon
6. Nibbana as Living Experience
7. The Buddha and the Arahant

One Foot in the World

Buddhist Approaches to Present-day Problems

Lily De Silva

The Wheel Publication No. 337/338

Table of Contents of One Foot in the World:

- Preface
- A Layman's Happiness
- The Mechanics of Bondage and Suffering
- Understanding and Managing Stress
- The Buddhist Attitude to Gain and Honor
- Livelihood and Development
- Facing Death Without Fear
- The Human Body
- Sensualistic Social Trends and Buddhism in Modern Times
- About the Author
- Notes

Preface

The dispensation of the Buddha includes not only monks and nuns, but male and female lay followers as well. All these four groups comprising the Buddhist community have but one ultimate goal. That goal is the attainment of Nibbana.

Though Nibbana means final liberation from the world, while walking along the path to liberation a Buddhist has to live in the world and deal with the conditions of worldly existence. This problem is likely to be felt especially acutely by the lay Buddhist, who may find that the demands and attractions of secular life tend to pull him away from the

path to deliverance. However, the Buddha was not unaware of or unconcerned about this dilemma confronted by his lay disciples, but gave it his careful attention. He taught his lay followers how to organize lay life in accordance with the ethical principles of the Dhamma and how to lead successful lay lives without deviating from the path of rectitude.

As lay Buddhists, we must be ever vigilant so that in our pursuit of worldly goals such as wealth, pleasure, and success we do not lose sight of our spiritual goal.

Care should be taken especially to avoid the violation of the basic moral principles summed up in the Five Precepts, as such violation leads to regression on the path. We must often remind ourselves that the first two of the four stages of holiness can be attained by those still leading a married life; that there have been non- returners of the third stage who continued to remain in lay life though observing celibacy; and that the texts record instances of laymen who even attained arahatship prior to their deaths. The Pali Canon contains ample evidence of exemplary laymen and laywomen, such as Anathapindika, Visakha, and the parents of Nakula, to mention only the most prominent. Therefore a layman should make every endeavor to follow the way to the end of suffering in this very life itself, by leading a life of moderation and self-discipline and by practicing meditation with the aim of developing insight into the ultimate truths of life and death.

The essays in this booklet explore various facets of experience from lay life, which require the attention of the lay aspirant to deliverance.

They deal particularly with those which have become more pronounced and urgent in our contemporary materialistic and secularized world.

My wish is to share these ideas with others who also may be attempting to follow the Buddha's path in the lay life, and are thus walking with one foot on the way to Nibbana and one foot still in the world. I hope these essays will assist them to understand and overcome

the problems they may face in their day-to-day lives.

A Layman's Happiness

Life in the modern age has become particularly trying and problematic. Though it remains a fact that the standard of living has generally improved, man is still suffering immensely under the weight of present-day living. The physical condition of man has been reduced to such a pathetic level that he succumbs to untimely death by killer diseases such as cancer, heart failure, diabetes, etc. to an unprecedented degree.

Mentally, he is so tension-ridden that he has forgotten the art of relaxing, and he cannot even enjoy sound sleep without the aid of tranquilizers. In this set up interpersonal relations have become so brittle and vulnerable that the divorce rate has become alarmingly high, thus letting loose a whole series of other social problems such as uncared-for children, juvenile delinquency, suicide, etc. Thus life has become a problematic burden and a solution to make life more tolerable and enjoyable is a great pressing need.

As the world of the Buddha is of everlasting value and universal applicability, and as the Buddha preached not only to monks and nuns but also to the lay public as well, it is useful to find a teaching of the Buddha which is relevant to our present-day problems.

In the *Pattakammavagga* of the Anguttara Nikaya (A II, 69) the Buddha preached a sutta to Anathapindika on the fourfold pleasures of a layman. It is our considered opinion that this sutta offers adequate insight to meet the demands of the present-day problems as well. The four types of pleasure listed there are: *atthisukha*, the pleasure of having material wealth; *bhogasukha*, the pleasure of enjoying material wealth; *ananasukha*, the pleasure of being debtless; and *anavajjaskha*, the pleasure of being blameless.

Let us take these for discussion one by one and see how these sources

of pleasure can be harnessed for leading a happy life in the present-day world.

Atthisukha -- Man should not only have a righteous means of living, avoiding blameworthy trades such as dealing in meat, liquor, poison, firearms and slavery, he should also entertain a wholesome attitude towards his righteous occupation. For instance, if a doctor welcomes epidemics in the locality in order to make much money, or a trader hopes for natural calamities to send market prices up, the money earned by such unscrupulous individuals is not righteous money as their intentions are impure and foul. Also one should not deceive or exploit others in carrying out one's occupation. Exerting oneself with great perseverance, one should earn one's living, and such hard-earned wealth is called righteous wealth (*dhammika dhammaladdha*). Again one could have great wealth, but if one does not experience a sense of contentment with what one has, one cannot really enjoy *atthisukha* or the pleasure of having.

The amassing of wealth of such a person is like trying to fill a bottomless vessel. This is one of the widespread maladies we see in the present-day society. Inordinate expansion of wealth becomes a source not of happiness, but of anxiety. Such wealth exposes the possessor to the jealousies and maneuvers of other unscrupulous individuals, hence the occurrence of blackmailing and kidnapping, from time to time. But if one does have a righteous means of earning one's living and the correct attitude to wealth, one can escape many of the hazards which money brings in its wake to modern man.

Bhogasukha -- Wealth has only instrumental value and the proper enjoyment of wealth is an art which is worth carefully cultivating. Buddhism deplores both extravagance and miserly hoarding. One must maintain a healthy balanced standard of living according to one's means.

If, in the enjoyment of wealth, one overindulges in sense pleasures, one is bound to run into health hazards in a very short time. If, for instance, one overindulges in food just because one can afford it, one will soon be overcome by diseases such as heart failure, high blood

pressure and diabetes. Such a one will be faced with the situation of "cutting his neck with his own tongue."

Moderation in food is a virtue praised in Buddhism, and it is a health-promoting habit. Often, in the name of enjoying wealth, man cultivates unhealthy habits such as smoking and drinking. It is paradoxical that man, who actually loves himself most, should act as if he were his own worst enemy by indulging in habits which ultimately reduce him to a physical wreck. It is medically established that smoking causes the highest percentage of lung cancer, and that drinking causes irreparable damage to vital organs of the body.

If only one pauses to ponder over one's own welfare, and if only one entertains at least some degree of compassion towards oneself, one would not get into the clutches of these vicious habits. Wealthy men often end up in the pitiful plight of the ant fallen in the pot of honey. Such men did not know the art of enjoying *bhogasukha*. They regard the body as an instrument for pleasure, and they wear out and debilitate the body's capacity for enjoyment in double quick time, long before the natural process of wear and tear sets in.

If we love ourselves, we have to treat our bodies with proper care without taxing it with overindulgence and deprivation. It is with the body that we can enjoy not only the pleasures of the senses, but even the spiritual bliss of Nibbana.

Another aspect of the joy of wealth is the art of sharing. Without being an *Adinnapubbaka*, a "never-giver," if one learns to share one's riches with the less fortunate have-nots, one will have the noble experience of being happy at the joy of another. At the same time, one will learn the love and good will of others, instead of becoming the target of jealousy and intrigue.

Ananasukha -- The pleasure of being debtless is the third quality discussed in our sutta. Economically, if one can be completely free of debt, one is indeed a very fortunate person. To be really debtless in society one has to discharge one's obligations scrupulously. As a wage earner one has to discharge one's duties for which one is paid,

otherwise one can be indebted to the wage one gets. As a parent one has to fulfill one's obligations to one's children. In our society children are taught to worship and look after their parents, and it is well to bear in mind that parents too have to qualify themselves for the honor they receive by being dutiful parents.

It should be emphasized that fathers who neglect their families as a result of their addiction to vices such as drinking and gambling fall far short of the ideal of debtlessness. One can have the satisfaction of being debtless only if one has fulfilled one's obligations in all social roles one has to perform.

Anavajjasukha -- The satisfaction of leading a blameless life is the highest form of satisfaction that a layman can have. Every society has a code of ethics to be followed by its members. According to Buddhism, the minimum code of ethics regulating the life of its adherents is the *panila*, the Five Precepts.^[1] If one practices these virtues, one can have the satisfaction of leading a righteous life to a great extent.

Refraining from doing to others what one does not like others to do unto oneself is the basic principle underlying these virtues. Buddhism speaks of *hiri* and *ottappa*, the sense of shame and the fear to do wrong, as *deva dhamma* or celestial qualities. These are the basic qualities which separate man from the animal kingdom. Unlike the animals man has a conscience which makes him squeamish about doing wrong. Buddhism recognizes blameless mental activity as well.

Mental activities which spring from greed, hatred and delusion are unwholesome and blameworthy. Let us see how such mental behavior is a source of unhappiness.

Take for instance the case of a person who is angry. What are the symptoms of anger? Hard breathing, accelerated heart beat, faster circulation of blood, feeling hot, sweating, trepidation, restlessness, etc. -- these are the physical manifestations of anger. These are certainly not comfortable physical experiences. Each time the cause of anger is remembered, even though the physical manifestations of anger

may not be that marked, one feels quite restless and mentally ill at ease. We use expressions such as "boiling with anger," "I got the devil on to me," etc. to mean getting angry, and these sayings are literally expressive of the situation.

It is just not possible for one to be angry and happy at the same time. An irritable person is truly a very sad person, and what is worse he infects others around him too with the same sadness.

The cultivation of sublime modes of behavior such as loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity are truly conducive to happy living. Those who live with such attitudes habitually are pleasant and amicable people who can be happy alone as well as in company.

If we truly understand the significance of the four kinds of happiness elucidated in our sutta, and translate them into action, life will be much more pleasant and happy even in this modern age.

The Mechanics of Bondage and Suffering

The Buddhist texts repeatedly describe man as being bound and fettered to suffering. Many Pali words are used to describe this pathetic situation, such as *samyojana*, *bandha* and *pasa*, meaning bond, fetter, and snare, respectively.

One sutta employs a simple simile to illustrate the manner in which man is fettered to *samsaric* life. According to this simile, a black bull and a white bull are tied together with a rope. In this situation, it cannot be said that the black bull is a fetter to the white bull, or that the white bull is a fetter to the black bull. Actually, it is the rope with which the two are tied together that constitutes the fetter.

Similarly the external world is not a fetter to man, nor is man a fetter to the external world. It is the desire for pleasure with which man is bound to the external world that forms the fetter. Desire is a very strong fetter which chains man to the external world and, thereby, to the ever-recurring cycle of births and deaths.

This strong fetter has six strands emerging from the six sense faculties, namely, the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and the mental faculty. The last mentioned faculty is called *mano* in Pali and is regarded as the sense that unifies all other faculties.

The Pali word for sense faculty is *indriya*, a very interesting word which reveals much about our human situation. *Indra* means lord or king, and the sense faculties are called *indriyas* because they dominate us so much. They act as our lords or masters and we slavishly obey them. The eye wishes to see pleasant forms, the ear wishes to hear pleasant sounds, the nose to smell pleasant smells, the tongue to enjoy pleasant tastes, and the body to feel pleasant tactile objects.

The mental faculty which unifies all other sense faculties, gets terribly disturbed as it is dragged in different directions by the different sense stimuli, while it has to deal with its own share of agitations in the form of hopes, memories, and imaginations.

The *Chappanaka Sutta* of the Samyutta Nikaya beautifully illustrates the struggle of the six senses with an eloquent simile. According to this simile, six animals having different habits and diverse fields of action are tied together in one knot by a strong rope. The six animals are a crocodile who tries to run to the water, a bird who tries to fly in the air, a dog who tries to run to a village, a fox who tries to flee to a cemetery, a monkey who tries to go to the forest, and a snake who tries to creep into an anthill. These six animals are constantly struggling to reach their respective habitats.

Similarly, the six senses are constantly seeking gratification in their own spheres, and the man who has no control over his sense faculties becomes terribly confused.

Through our senses, we are chained to sense stimuli. We are chained to pleasant sense stimuli by the way of greed. We love to see pleasant objects and we spend a great deal of time, energy, and money in our endeavor to procure as many pleasant objects as possible. We love to hear pleasant words; if someone speaks in praise of us once, we will often recall it with pleasure and be attached to that pleasure. We love

to eat tasty food. This is a great weakness in most of us. Even when rich food is detrimental to our health, the desire to please the tongue is so great that we indulge in food even at the risk of our precious lives. This is how we sometimes go to the extent of beheading ourselves with our tongues.

Man's desire to gratify his sex desire is also so intense that he runs the gravest risk of suffering great pain and debility with social diseases. AIDS (Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome), the present dreaded disease which is taking a very heavy toll of human life, is the latest severe penalty man is paying for his unrestrained greed for sensuality. The plight of modern man can be illustrated by the traditional simile of the ant fallen in the pot of honey, bogged down and drowning in the very pleasures he is trying to enjoy.

Just as much as we can become fettered by greed, so we can also get trapped by dislike and hatred. Our aversion is aroused by unpleasant sense stimuli. The stronger the aversion, the more tenaciously we become fettered to the unpleasant object. Let us take an example. Suppose we have seen a disgusting object just before or during a meal. Our aversion may grow so strong that we will reject even the most delicious food. If we see a worm in a bean curry, our aversion to it may even make us give up eating beans altogether, for each time we see beans we would be reminded of the unpleasant experience.

Let us take another example from auditory experience. If somebody abuses us in front of a gathering, we might, indeed, get very angry with the abuser. This incident would come to our mind often and each time it came up we would experience anger. When we recall the abuse over and over and inject negative emotions of anger and hatred into this memory, we should know that a fetter has been formed.

By these obsessions by greed and hatred generated through the instrumentality of the senses, man's freedom of activity is limited and demarcated. He becomes like an animal tethered to a post by a rope, with its range of activity limited by the length of the rope. Here egoism is like the post, as we are all tied to the idea of self or "I". The rope stands for desire or aversion, for the stronger the idea of self, the more

selfish we become, and the more selfish we become, the stronger grow our desires, likes, and dislikes.

So it goes on like a vicious circle. Let us work out the simile in greater detail: when the rope of desire is strong, the rope itself becomes short, restricting man's freedom of activity proportionally. The man with a very strong sense of ego is like the animal that is smothered by the tightness and the shortness of the rope. The nature of this desire-rope is such that, when negative emotions of likes and dislikes are weak, the rope itself is not only weakened, but also lengthened, giving the human animal greater freedom of activity.

When negative emotions become weak, positive emotions such as love and compassion emerge, expanding man's scope of freedom. The entire message of the Dhamma can be summarized as a method of rescuing human beings from the trammels of egocentricity, negative emotions, and ignorance, and granting them complete and unlimited freedom. In the language of our simile, it is like cutting the rope and uprooting the post to which the animal is tied.

The suttas also speak of another human tendency with regard to sense pleasures: dwelling on past sensual pleasures while even neglecting to enjoy present pleasures. The past sense objects have already passed away and changed, but we become attached to our memories of them and, thus, experience anguish.

Another trap we fall into because of our enjoyment of sense objects is the generation of the three types of conceit. When we think that we have a greater share of sensual pleasures than others, we develop a superiority complex (*seyyamana*); by considering ourselves equal to others, we develop the equality complex (*sadisamana*); and by thinking of ourselves as being less fortunate than others in the enjoyment of sense pleasures, we develop the inferiority complex (*hinamana*).

Thus, by using the measuring rod of sense pleasures to quantify status, we become more and more self-centered and suffer the consequences of all possible complexes. Therefore, the Buddha calls sense pleasures

the "snare of Mara," the Evil One.

A sutta in the Salayatana Samyutta explains the situation from a different angle. When the sense faculties are unrestrained, the mind gets corrupted, wallowing in the enjoyment of sense objects. Such a corrupt mind does not find *pamojja*, delight in those higher noble pursuits which elevate the mind.

When this *pamojja*, or spiritual delight is absent, pious joy (*piti*) is also absent. When pious joy is missing there is no *passaddhi*, physical and mental relaxation. He who is not relaxed, lives in tension, frustration, and misery. This is what is called in Pali *dukkha*, "suffering." Thus suffering is traced to non-restraint in the sense faculties.

Looking at the problem from another perspective, the Salayatana Samyutta traces the origin of the world to sense experience.

Depending on the sense faculties and sense objects there arises sense consciousness.

The convergence of these three factors -- sense faculties, sense objects and sense consciousness -- is called contact (*phassa*). Contact generates feelings (*phassapaccaya vedana*). In other words, if the object is delightful we experience pleasure in making contact with it. Feelings give rise to craving (*vedanapaccaya tanha*), as we tend to desire more and more of the pleasant feelings.

Craving generates clinging (*tanhapaccaya upadanam*), when we try to possess the objects we crave for. Clinging nurtures the growth of personal factors (*upadanapaccaya bhavo*), which in turn causes birth (*jati*). Birth brings in its wake all the ills of old age, death, grief, lamentation, etc. This is called the arising of the world. Thus, we construct our own private worlds through the instrumentality of our sense faculties.

All this material goes to show that we are trapped [attached] to *samsara* through the domination of our senses.

If we allow them free rein, we allow them to control us. Bondage and

suffering are proportionate to the extent that we allow our sense faculties to dominate us. If we desire freedom and happiness for ourselves we have to subjugate the senses and make them our servants.

Understanding and Managing Stress

Stress is a term adopted from engineering science by psychology and medicine.

Simply defined, stress in engineering means force upon an area. As so many forces are working upon us in the modern age, and we find it extremely difficult to cope under so much pressure, stress is called the "disease of civilization."

Philip Zimbardo in his *Psychology and Life* traces four interrelated levels at which we react to the pressures exerted upon us from our environment. The four are: the emotional level, the behavioral level, the physiological level, and the cognitive level.

The emotional responses to stress are sadness, depression, anger, irritation, and frustration. The behavioral responses are poor concentration, forgetfulness, poor interpersonal relations, and lowered productivity. The physiological responses consist of bodily tensions, which may lead to headaches, backaches, stomach ulcers, high blood pressure, and even killer diseases.

At the cognitive level one may lose self-esteem and self-confidence, which leads to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. At worst such a person may even end up committing suicide.

In order to understand stress let us consider the various environmental factors which exert pressure on modern man. In this modern age, the very survival of the species is threatened. Potential nuclear war threatens every single human being on earth, irrespective of whether one lives in a country with nuclear weapons or not.

Population explosion threatens man with severe food shortages; at

present, even a large segment of human population is undernourished while still others are dying of starvation and malnutrition. Environmental pollution causes severe health hazards and mental and physical retardation. Unemployment among the skilled is a growing global problem. The pace of life has become so hectic that man is simply rushing from one task to another without any relaxation.

This is really paradoxical in an age when labor-saving devices are freely available, and are in use to an unprecedented degree.

Competition for educational and employment opportunities is so severe that it has contributed to a fair share to increase the rate of suicide.

Enjoyment of sense pleasures has grown so obsessive that it has become like drinking salt water to quench thirst.

Constant stimulation of the senses is today considered a necessity, and, thus, pocket radios with earphones, chewing gum, and cosmetics and modern technical devices are marketed everywhere.

Sense stimulation goes on unrestrained but satiation is far from achieved. It is no wonder that man, caught up in all this, is terribly confused and frustrated, and his life is intolerably stressful. This is the situation Buddhism describes as "tangles within and tangles without, people are enmeshed in tangles."

While the above observations were made from the point of view of modern studies and contemporary conditions, Buddhism makes similar observations from a psychological perspective. Man experiences stress and suffering because of five psychological states which envelop his whole personality. They are called *nivarana* in the Pali language, meaning hindrances.

They hinder happiness and over-cloud man's vision of himself, his environment and the interaction between the two. The thicker and more opaque these hindrances, the greater the stress and suffering man experiences. The thinner and more sparse these hindrances, the less his

suffering with a corresponding increase in happiness.

These five hindrances are the desire for sensual pleasures, anger, indolence, worry and doubt. The Pali Canon illustrates the effect of these hindrances with the help of five eloquent similes.

The mind overpowered by the desire for sense pleasures is compared to colored water which prevents a true reflection of a thing on the water. Thus a man obsessed with the desire for sense pleasures is unable to get a true perspective of either himself or other people or his environment.

The mind oppressed by anger is compared to boiling water which cannot give an accurate reflection. A man overpowered by anger is unable to discern an issue properly.

When the mind is in the grip of indolence it is like moss covered water: light cannot even reach the water and a reflection is impossible. The lazy man does not even make an effort at correct understanding. When worried the mind is like wind-tossed turbulent water, which also fails to give a true reflection.

The worried man, forever restless, is unable to make a proper assessment of an issue.

When the mind is in doubt it is compared to muddy water placed in darkness which cannot reflect an image well.

Thus, all the five hindrances deprive the mind of understanding and happiness and cause much stress and suffering.

Buddhism puts forward a methodical plan of action for the gradual elimination of stress and the increase of happiness and understanding. The first step recommended in this plan is the observance of the Five Precepts comprising the abstention from killing, stealing, illicit sex, falsehood and intoxicants. Stress is greatly enhanced by guilt, and these precepts help man to free his conscience of the sense of guilt.

The *Dhammapada* says the evil-doer suffers here and hereafter; on the

other hand, the man who does good deeds rejoices here and hereafter.

Buddhism firmly believes that evil increases stress while good increases happiness.

In addition to the observance of the Five Precepts throughout life, Buddhism advocates the periodical observance of the Eight Precepts by laymen. These additional precepts attempt to train man for leading a simple life catering to one's needs rather than one's greeds. A frugal mode of life where wants are few and are easily satisfied is highly extolled in Buddhism. It is the avaricious and the acquisitive mentality that is responsible for so much stress that we experience.

The next step in the process of training is the control of the sense faculties. When our sense faculties are uncontrolled, we experience severe strain. We have to, first, understand what is meant by being uncontrolled in the sense faculties.

When a person sees a beautiful form with his eyes, he gets attracted to it; when he sees an unpleasant object, he gets repelled by it. Similarly with the other senses too. Thus the person who has no control over his senses is constantly attracted and repelled by sense data, as during waking life sense data keep on impinging on his sense faculties constantly. When pulled in different directions by sense stimuli, we become confused and distressed.

Our sense faculties have different spheres of activity and different objects, and as each sense faculty is a lord in its own sphere, and as they can severally and collectively dominate man, they are called in Pali *indriyas*, meaning "lords" or "masters."

If we allow the sense faculties to dominate us, we get terribly confused. If we assert ourselves and control our sense faculties, we can have unalloyed pleasure (*avyasekasukha*), so called because this pleasure is uncontaminated by defilements. It is also called *adhicittasukha*, meaning spiritual pleasure. Whereas sense pleasures increase stress, this type of spiritual pleasure reduces stressfulness and

increases peace of mind and contentment.

The third step in the management of stress is the cultivation of wholesome mental habits through meditation (*bhavana*).

Just as we look after and nurture our body with proper food and cleanliness, the mind too needs proper nourishment and cleansing. The mind is most volatile in its untrained state, but when it is tamed and made more stable, it brings great happiness. Buddhism prescribes two fundamental meditative methods of mind-training called *samatha* and *vipassana*, calm and insight.

The former is the method of calming the volatile mind, while the latter is the method of comprehending the true nature of bodily and mental phenomena.

Both methods are extremely helpful for overcoming stress. The *Sama-hala Sutta* explains with the help of five appropriate similes how meditation reduces the psychological stress caused by the five hindrances.

The man who practices meditation gains a great sense of relief, and it is this sense of unburdening oneself that the similes illustrate. They are as follows: A man, who has raised capital for a business by taking a loan, prospers in business, pays off the loan and manages his day-to-day affairs with financial ease. Such a man experiences a great sense of relief. The second simile portrays a man who has suffered a great deal with a prolonged chronic illness. He gets well at long last, food becomes palatable to him and he gains physical strength. Great is the relief such a man experiences. The third simile speaks of the relief a prisoner enjoys after being released from a long term in jail. The fourth is the slave who gains freedom from slavery. The fifth simile speaks of a well-to-do man who gets lost in a fearful desert without food. On coming to a place of safety, he experiences great relief.

When the stress caused by the five hindrances is eliminated from the mind, great joy and delight arise, similar to the relief enjoyed by the men described in the similes. The best and most effective way of

overcoming stress is the practice of meditation or mental culture. But as a prelude to that, at least the Five Precepts must be observed.

The cultivation of positive emotions such as loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*) is another means of conquering stress.

Strained interpersonal relations is one of the common causes of stress in household life and in the workplace. *Loving kindness* is the positive wholesome attitude one can cultivate with benefit for oneself and others in all interpersonal relationships. *Compassion* is the emotion with which one should regard and help those in distress. *Sympathetic joy* is the ability to rejoice in the joy of another. It is difficult for a man of mean character to entertain this attitude as the joy of another brings jealousy to the mind of such a person. Where there is jealousy there is no unity, and where there is no unity there is no progress. The cultivation of these positive emotions stands for both material and spiritual progress. *Equanimity* is the attitude to be adopted in the face of the vicissitudes of life.

There are eight natural ways of the world that we have to face in life. They are gain and loss, fame and lack of fame, praise and blame, happiness and sorrow.

If one trains oneself to maintain an equanimous temperament without being either elated or dejected in the face of these vicissitudes, one can avoid much stress and lead a simple life with peace and contentment. We cannot change the world so that it will give us happiness. But we can change our attitude towards the world so as to remain unaffected by the stresses exerted by events around us. Buddhism teaches the way to bring about this wholesome change of attitude.

The Buddhist Attitude to Gain and Honor

The world today has evolved various means of bestowing honor on individuals whom society recognizes as worthy of being honored. The

Nobel Prize is considered one of the most prestigious, and there are various other prizes and honorific titles that are bestowed annually or from time to time on distinguished persons. In the scholarly world the publication of felicitation and commemoration volumes and the conferment of honorary degrees are the usual methods of honoring academic celebrities.

In society at large we indulge in various devices in the public display of honor and appreciation. Often we resort to overtly ego-boosting methods. As the public display of honor and esteem has now become such an important phenomena in our social lives, given much publicity over all the media -- the press, radio and television, etc. -- it is timely to pause to understand the Buddhist attitude towards the display and acceptance of such public honor.

The Pali Canon uses terms such as *labha*, *sakkara*, *siloka*, *puja* and *vandana* to mean various expressions of honor, esteem and reverence.

According to Buddhism, the presence of ethical and spiritual qualities is the primary criterion for eligibility for honor. The Buddha, the Paccekabuddha, the Arahant and the universal monarch rank as the highest personages who are worthy of honor and respect. Honor paid to those worthy of honor is listed as a great blessing in the *Mahamangala Sutta* (*puja ca pujaniyanam etam mangalam uttamam*). The *Dhammapada* (vv. 105-6) declares that honor paid to a perfected saint is far better than a century spent in the performance of sacrifice. The same text reiterates that the merit of one who reverences those worthy of honor cannot be measured (v. 195). In the domestic sphere, parents are greatly honored and esteemed. As they have done so much for the children, toiling through a whole lifetime, they deserve to be appreciated, honored and looked-after by the children.

There should be mutual honor and respect between husband and wife. This quality helps to weave a cohesive relationship to build a happy home for the rearing of progeny. It is also a healthy age-old custom to honor and welcome guests as is, for instance, maintained in the *Canki Sutta* (M. II, 167). Respect shown to elders is also highly commended as is well illustrated by the parable of the *Tittira Jataka* (J. I, 218).

Thus noble spiritual qualities, parentage and seniority are recognized as some of the main criteria deserving the display of honor and respect.

Now, let us turn our attention to the attitude to gain and honor by those who receive them. Since the Buddha's immediate disciples were monks, who by reason of their religious status regularly received gains and honor from the laity, it is to be expected that his statements on this subject are addressed primarily to the monks and their concerns. Moreover, as the monks have committed themselves fully to the quest for deliverance, the Buddha's advice to them, naturally, takes their special vocation into account.

However, while recognizing the differences in their position, lay people can take the Buddha's counsel to the monks as guidelines for their own attitudes towards gain and honor.

The Pali texts show that it is possible to adopt one of the following three attitudes: (a) One could eagerly appreciate and enjoy the honor one receives, even actively seek it. (b) One could turn away and refuse to accept the honor bestowed. (c) One could be indifferent and entertain an attitude of equanimity towards such honors. We shall take these one by one for discussion.

(a) The *Mahasaropama Sutta* (M.I, 192) elucidates the appreciative attitude to gain and honor with the help of a simile. If a monk who has entered the Order enjoys the gain and honor he receives and is satisfied therewith, he is like a man who, being in search of timber, is satisfied with the end trimmings of a huge tree. What he looked for is timber, but what he is satisfied with is just twigs and foliage.

Devadatta (J.I, 186) is the classic example of one who fell into utter ruin by enjoying gain and honor. He had developed psychic powers, and he utilized these powers for convincing laymen of his spiritual development. The most influential layman who was thus convinced was Ajatasattu. The unconcealed display of superhuman powers gave rise to much gain and honor for Devadatta, so much so that, in his utter stupidity, he wished to kill the Buddha and usurp Buddhahood, and he

enticed Ajatasattu to kill his father and usurp the kingship.

The Buddha pronounced that it is for Devadatta's utter ruin and downfall that he was endowed with so much gain and honor, just as the plantain tree bears fruit for its own ruin. (S.II, 241).

The *Dhammapada* maintains that gain and honor is one thing and the path to the realization of Nibbana is another. Knowing this clearly, a monk should not take delight in gain and honor (Dh. 75). According to the *Milindapanha* (p. 377), just as a ship has to withstand various forces such as the force of strong currents, thunder and whirlpools, even so a monk has to withstand the forces of gain, honor, fame and homage. If a monk relishes these and gets a bloated ego, he flounders and sinks just like a wrecked ship.

The *Milindapanha* (p. 377) takes another simile from naval experience. A ship's anchor is able to hold a ship fast without letting it drift along, even in very deep waters, even so a monk must remain anchored to his purpose with great strength of character without letting the gain and honor that comes in the wake of virtue carry him adrift.

It is no doubt the duty of the layman to honor and respect a virtuous monk, and also to provide him with the requisites. It is the responsibility of the monk to maintain a sane balanced attitude, without becoming elated. Buddhism maintains that it is difficult for a man of mean spiritual development to resist the enjoyment of gain and honor (*sakkaro kapurisenā dujjaho*, Thag. 1053).

There is the great danger of spiritual erosion when a man indulges and basks in the glory of fame and honor. One develops a bloated-ego and boastfulness creeps into his character in the most surreptitious ways. Such men also develop contemptuous attitudes towards others, who do not get so much honor.

The *Labhasakkara Samyutta* sarcastically compares him to the dung beetle who entertains contempt towards other dung beetles for having less dung. The *Anangana Sutta* (M. I, 29-30) shows the abhorrence and disgust towards a monk who undertakes the religious life and

difficult ascetic practices for the sake of public generosity and popularity. Such a monk is compared to one who places the carcass of a snake or a dog in a beautifully polished brand new metal bowl. The bowl of higher life (*brahmacariya*) is not meant for storing carcass-like immoral intentions.

Monks are advised in the most emphatic terms to guard against taking delight in gain and honor.

The *Labhasakkara Samyutta* works out a number of similes in great detail to illustrate the point (S. II, 226-7). A young tortoise who defied the elders' advice is shot with a splinter to which a string is attached and he is bound to be caught by the hunter in no time. The hunter in the simile is none other than Mara himself. The splinter is gain, honor and fame. The string attached to the splinter is the monk's attachment to gain and honor. Again, gain and honor are compared to a bait which greedy monks might swallow to be utterly ruined in the hands of the trapper Mara.

(b) Now, let us turn to the attitude of the monk who refuses gain and honor. Mahakassapa was an eminent monk who eschewed gain and honor, and found delight in helping the poor to earn merit by going to them for alms. Once the Buddha saw him begging his alms in a locality where poverty-stricken weavers lived, in spite of gods trying to procure for him a fine meal. On this occasion the Buddha gave expression to an inspired utterance (*Udana*, p.11) in appreciation of Mahakassapa's simplicity. Once a famous householder named Citta was impressed by the explanation of a knotty doctrinal point by a monk named Isidatta in a great assembly. Citta invited Isidatta to reside in the locality and promised him hospitality with all requisites. Isidatta seized the first opportunity to quietly leave the locality without informing Citta (S. IV, 286-8). Such was the scrupulous reticent behavior of those who understood the pernicious nature of gain and honor.

(c) Generally, the Buddha and Arahants do not fight shy of gain and honor. They face it with the same equanimity as they face loss and blame. The *Maha-Govinda Sutta* (D. II, 223) records that gods rejoice

in the Buddha because of his attitude to gain and honor. The Buddha has received gain and fame which a king would long to have, but with no trace of elation whatsoever, he fares along partaking of only the basic requisites.

The gods declare that there was never a teacher of such caliber before. The lotus, though born in the water, remains unsullied above the water. Similarly the Buddha and Arahants rise uncontaminated above the mundane conditions of family, prestige, gain, fame, and reverence (*Milinda*, p.375). "The Unique Ones (*asamasama*) are worshipped by gods and men. But they relish no honor. This is the norm of Buddhas" (*Milinda*, p.95). Cullasabhadda, an *upasika*, observes that while the world is elated and depressed by gain and loss respectively, the true monks maintain an equanimous attitude in the face of both.

Buddha declares that he has personally known, seen and understood (*samam natam samam dittam samam veditam*, *Itivuttaka*, p.74) that beings who have been overwhelmed (*pariyadinnacitta*) by gain and honor, and also those who are obsessed by the lack of gain and honor, at the disintegration of the body are born in states of woe.

The desire for honor and recognition is so insinuating, that even normally upright individuals can succumb to it.

The Buddha says that there are some who would not stoop so low as to tell a deliberate lie for the sake of silver and gold, a beauty queen, parents, children or even life, but who would do so to gain honor and prestige. So vicious and pernicious are the snares of gain and honor (S. II, 234, 243).

Except Arahants, those of the highest order who have reached the state of *akuppa cetovimutti* (S. II, 239) or unshakable mental emancipation, all those of lesser spiritual development are said to be vulnerable in this respect. It is no wonder that gain and honor is a powerful member of the army of Mara (Sn. 438-9). It should be recognized by all those who value spiritual progress as a disaster come in the guise of a blessing.

Livelihood and Development

Right livelihood (*samma ajiva*) is the fifth factor in the Noble Eightfold Path. As a method of earning one's living is important to every human being, whether a member of the clergy or a layman, the correct understanding of right livelihood is crucial. For a monk, complete dedication to the higher life constitutes right livelihood. He then is rightly entitled to be supported by public generosity. In this essay we shall confine ourselves to an inquiry into the concept of right livelihood for the layman.

Right livelihood implies that one has to avoid a wrong means of earning a living, known as *miccha ajiva* in Pali. This includes trades which are directly or indirectly injurious to others, be they animal or human, such as trade in meat, liquor, poison, weapons and slaves. These are contrary to the basic five precepts which all lay Buddhists are expected to abide by. In the world today these trades, except perhaps the slave trade, are flourishing industries, and much of the revenue to governments comes from these industries. This shows to what an extent wrong livelihood is prevalent in the world today.

Even a blameless means of living can become blameworthy if practiced with inordinate greed and dishonesty.

If a doctor in private practice makes mints of money exploiting his patients, he is guilty of wrong livelihood even though medicine itself is a noble profession.

A vegetable dealer who cheats in weights and measures is similarly guilty of wrong livelihood. Honest scrupulous service rendered without exploiting the public is considered an essential feature of right livelihood.

Buddhism upholds the quality of having few wants (*appicchata*) and the ability to be satisfied with little (*santutthi*) as great virtues.

One has to practice these virtues not only in consumerism but in

production too; in the modern world, however, these virtues have been totally lost sight of in both these spheres. Therefore, governments as well as the private sector aim at ever increasing development. Such development, however, has no limit. Each time a target has been reached, the limit to possible growth recedes further like a mirage. More and more is produced, more and more is consumed.

There is no satiation with development, nor with consumerism. This is a limitless race in a limited world with limited resources. Therefore, mankind has to learn that the concept of development, as it is understood today, cannot go on forever, it is logically and practically impossible.

Nature seems to set its own limits to this process of escalated growth. It appears that there are biological, psychological, social and ecological limits to growth. The physical constitution of man seems to revolt against this limitless growth. There is an array of diseases man readily succumbs to today, related to overconsumption and overindulgence. There are pressure-related diseases too, which affect both the human body and the human mind.

Present-day development taxes man's endurance enormously and he becomes a psychological wreck due to the pressures of work, competition and maintaining standards. Interpersonal relationships have become superficial, brittle and sour, and this seems to be a sign that society cannot withstand the weight of its material development.

In the external world, too, there are unequivocal signs which portend impending catastrophe unless man changes his course of action. There is air, water and land pollution everywhere, and this is extremely injurious not only to human life but to all forms of life in this planet. These are nature's ways of expressing her disapproval of the methods and rate of production and consumption man has chosen today.

Agriculture is recognized in Buddhism as a noble means of making a living, but what has happened in this sphere? Prompted by population pressures, and encouraged by the ever-expanding vistas of scientific knowledge, traditional methods of tilling the land have given way to

mechanized industrial agriculture. Vast acres are plowed by machines; chemical fertilizers are applied freely; weedacides, insecticides and pesticides are used indiscriminately; and large harvests are gathered. More and more research is going on in agricultural engineering to produce better seeds which promise higher yields. Though production has increased, prices remain at a constant high level.

In some countries when the price level threatens to go down due to overproduction, the products are methodically destroyed or dumped into the sea despite the fact that large masses of people in the world today are undernourished and some are actually starving to death. It is blatantly clear that the whole industrialized agricultural policy is prompted by inordinate greed and it is far from right livelihood.

From the Buddhist point of view, this whole system is wrong. On the one hand, it has resulted in the erosion of moral and human values. It has deprived man of sympathy for his fellow sentient beings as is evident from the large-scale use of insecticides. Economic gain seems to be the only criterion by which man is prompted to action.

Blinded by short-term economic gain, man seems to turn a blind eye to the long-term repercussions of his aggressive policies on this planet. In the wake of the avaricious and aggressive industrialization, the crime rate has risen to an unprecedented degree, and this is a clear index to man's moral degeneration.

Moreover, the natural ecological balance of the earth has been disturbed to an alarming degree. Chemical pollution of land and water has affected bacteria, insects and fish. While some of these forms of life, useful to man, have died or are dying, others, especially insects dangerous to man have become resistant to insecticides. As more and more effective chemicals are produced, these creatures become immune to them and the vicious circle goes on without any practical solution in sight.

The natural fertility and the organic balance of the soil also diminish as more and more chemical fertilizers are applied throughout the years

and, thus, a vicious circle gets formed there too.

All this evidence clearly shows that man cannot dominate and subjugate nature. In the long run nature emerges triumphant and man becomes the loser. Instead man must learn to co-operate with nature. Here, we are reminded of an admonition given by the Buddha that in amassing wealth, man must exploit nature as a bee collects pollen. The bee harms neither the beauty of the flower nor its fragrance, similarly man must not pollute or rob nature of its richness, beauty and its rejuvenating and replenishing capacity. This is the real implication of right livelihood when it comes to the utilization of natural resources.

It should be reiterated that the whole modern concept of development, which seems to have nothing short of the sky itself as the limit, is severely antithetical to Buddhist values. Buddhism sets the limit at the other end: it advocates that we feed our needs and not our greeds.

Man needs the basic comforts of food, clothing, shelter and medicine. It is the responsibility of the rulers to provide avenues of employment, so that the average man can afford to have these needs satisfied with a fair degree of comfort. As man is naturally prone to greed, Buddhism emphasizes the value of having few wants (*appicchara*).

Contentment (*santutthi*) is also a much valued virtue in Buddhism. Care is taken to see that these virtues do not degenerate into apathy and cause social stagnation. Buddhism encourages the layman to be industrious, to forge ahead in his chosen and blameless occupation (*utthanasampada*). Wealth earned by sheer perseverance, by the sweat of one's brow, is highly-praised as well-gotten righteous wealth. It is even recommended that a layman should invest half of his earnings for improvement of his industry. Laymen are also exhorted to save (*arakkhasampada*) their hard earned money, and to lead a comfortable life consonant with earning capacity, avoiding both extremes of miserliness and extravagance/over-indulgence.

Thus the tension between having few wants (*appicchata*) and contentment (*santutthi*) on the one hand, and on the other industriousness (*arakkhasampada*), helps to keep society at a

practically comfortable level of development which can be sustained for a long time. When these economic ideas are reinforced with the other moral values, inculcated by Buddhism, a stable society with harmonious interpersonal relations can be expected.

The modern concept of large-scale industries and factories also does not agree with the Buddhist concept of right livelihood. These large industries along with mechanized labor have made a few people enormously rich and thrown millions of employable people out of employment.

Thus wealth gets concentrated among a few factory owners and businessmen while millions of others can barely eke out an existence. Maldistribution of wealth is regarded in Buddhism as a social evil which paves the way to crime and revolution. Moreover, machines have robbed man of his creativity and left him terribly-frustrated. This may be one of the reasons why the youth of the present generation are using drugs to find an easy escape route.

The concept of right livelihood works with the notion that man is the central concern in economy as producer as well as consumer, not the profit made in the process of products changing hands.

The skills and talents of the producer should be enhanced in the process of production, and he should have the satisfaction derived from his output. The producer, not an employer above him or a middleman, should get a fair return commensurate with his labor and sufficient to afford him a decent living. The consumer, on the other hand, should get quality and quantity for what he pays.

In sharp contrast to this ideology, the profit made by the employer is the central concern today: both the producer and the consumer are subservient to the profit motive. Therefore, right livelihood would opt for small-scale industries which would satisfy the creative instinct of man and the basic needs of many more people, and would also ensure a more equitable distribution of wealth in society. It is better to have a large number of skilled cobblers than a well-equipped mechanized

shoe factory.

As right livelihood is a part and parcel of the Noble Eightfold Path, when it is rightly practiced it leads to the elimination of greed, hatred and delusion (S. V, 5).

Just as the river Ganges is inclined towards the east, he who practices the Noble Eightfold Path is inclined towards Nibbana.

Thus, the correct understanding of right livelihood is essential for the Buddhist layman who is bent on his spiritual welfare.

Facing Death Without Fear

Death is the only certain thing in life. It is also the thing for which we are least prepared. We plan and prepare for various other things -- examinations, weddings, business transactions, building houses -- but we can never be certain whether our plans will materialize according to our wish. Death, on the other hand, can come any minute, sooner or later; it is the most certain event in life.

Just as the mushroom raises itself from the ground carrying a bit of earth on its hood, so every living being brings with himself the certainty of death from the moment of his birth.

The Anguttara Nikaya (IV, 136) illustrates the uncertainty and the evanescent nature of life with the help of a few evocative similes:

Life is compared to a dew drop at the tip of a blade of grass: it can drop off any moment and even if it does not fall off, it evaporates as soon as the sun comes up. Life is also as fleeting as a bubble of water formed by the falling rain or a line drawn on the water. The text points out that life rushes towards death incessantly like a mountain stream rushing down without stopping. The *Dhammapada* compares the fragility of the body to foam (v 46) and to a clay water pot (v 40). Thus with various similes the uncertainty of life and the certainty of

death are emphasized over and over again in the Buddhist texts.

It is accepted as a general truth that everybody fears death (*sabbe bhayanti maccuno* -- Dh 129). We fear death because we crave for life with all our might. It is also a fact that we fear the unknown. We know least about death; therefore, we fear death for a duality of reasons. It seems reasonable to conjecture that the fear of death, or the fear of harm to life, lurks at the root of all fear. Therefore, each time we become frightened we either run away from the source of fear or fight against it, thus making every effort to preserve life. But we can do so only so long as our body is capable of either fighting or running away from danger. But when, at last, we are on the deathbed face to face with approaching death, and the body is no longer strong enough for any protest, it is very unlikely that we will accept death with a mental attitude of resignation.

We will mentally try hard to survive. As our yearning for life (*tanha*) is so strong, we will mentally grasp (*upadana*) another viable place, as our body can no longer support life. Once such a place, for example the fertilized ovum in a potential mother's womb, has been grasped, the psychological process of life (*bhava*) will continue, with the newly found place as its basis.

Birth (*jati*) will take place in due course.

This seems to be the process that is explained in the chain of causation as: craving conditions grasping, grasping conditions becoming or the process of growth, which, in turn, conditions birth. Thus, the average man who fears death will necessarily take another birth as his ardent desire is to survive.

Let us probe a little further into the process of death, going from the known to the unknown.

We know that in normal life, when we are awake, sense data keep on impinging on our sense faculties. We are kept busy attending to these sense data, rejecting some, selecting some for greater attention, and getting obsessed with still other things. This is an ongoing process so

long as we are awake. In the modern age man is reaching out and seeking more and more sense stimulation. The popularity of the portable technology devices with and without earphones, new products to attract the senses, cosmetics and television and films, etc. is a clear indication of the present trend for more and more sense stimulation.

By all this, we have become alienated from ourselves; we do not know our own real nature, or the real nature of our mind to be more precise. Moreover, we go about our business in social life wearing masks appropriate for each occasion. We often do not show our true feelings of jealousy, greed, hatred, pride, or selfishness. We hide them in socially accepted ways of formalized verbal expressions such as congratulations, thank you, deepest sympathies. But there are times when our negative emotions are so acute that they come into the open in the form of killing, stealing, quarreling, backbiting, and so forth, although we generally we try to keep these venomous snakes of negative emotions inhibited.

Now, let us see what happens at the moment of death. We believe that death is a process and not just a sudden instantaneous event. When the senses lose their vitality, one by one, and they stop providing stimulation, the inhibitions too fall away. The masks we have been wearing in our various roles get cast off. We are at last face to face with ourselves in all our nakedness.

At that moment if what we see are the venomous snakes of negative emotions of hatred, jealousy, etc., we would be laden with guilt, remorse and grief. It is very likely that our memories too will become quite sharp, as all the sensory disturbances and inhibitions which kept them suppressed have fallen off. We may remember our own actions committed and omitted during our lifetimes with unpretentious clarity. If they were morally unwholesome we would be guilty and grief stricken (S. V. 386), but if they were morally wholesome we would be contented and happy.

The *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* speaks of the presentation of *kamma* or *kammanimitta* at the mind door on the advent of death. This seems to be the revival in memory of an actual action or action veiled in

symbols at the onset of death. It is said that rebirth will be determined by the quality of thoughts that surface in this manner.

Death is as natural an event as nightfall; it is but one of the manifestations of the law of impermanence. Though we dislike it immensely, we have to orient ourselves to accept its inevitability, as there is no escape therefrom.

The Buddhist texts advocate the cultivation of the mindfulness of death often so that we are not taken unawares when the event does take place. To face death peacefully, one has to learn the art of living peacefully with one's own self as well as with those around. One method of doing so is to remember the inevitability of death, which will deter one from unwholesome behavior. The practice of meditation is the best technique which will enable one to live peacefully with oneself and others.

The practice of loving-kindness (*mettabhavana*) is an effective method of meditation. One of its special advantages is the ability to face death undeluded (*asammulho kalam karoti*).

In one sutta (A. III, 293) the Buddha explains how to prepare for a peaceful death. One has to organize one's life and cultivate an appropriate attitude for this purpose. The instructions given there are as follows:

- (1) One should not be fond of a busy life involved in various activities.
- (2) One should not be fond of being talkative.
- (3) One should not be fond of sleeping.
- (4) One should not be fond of having too many companions.
- (5) One should not be fond of too much social intercourse.
- (6) One should not be fond of daydreaming.

Another sutta (A. I, 57-8) explains that if one avoids unwholesome

wicked activities through body, speech and mind, one need not fear death. The *Maha-parinibbana Sutta* (D. II, 85-6) categorically states that those who are evil in character face death with delusion while the virtuous face death free from delusion. Thus if one leads a simple virtuous life one need not fear death.

Once Mahanama Sakka (S. V. 369) disclosed to the Buddha that he was worried where he would be reborn if he were to meet with a violent death in a road accident. The Buddha explained that those who have cultivated the qualities of faith, virtue, learning, generosity and wisdom for a long time need not entertain such fears. To illustrate the position further the Buddha employs a simile. If a pot of oil or ghee is broken in deep water the potsherds will sink to the riverbed and the oil or ghee will rise to the surface of the water. Similarly in such a tragic situation, the body would be discarded and may be devoured by vultures and jackals, but the mind will rise and progress upwards.

The account of the illness of Nakula's father (A. III, 295) is another interesting episode regarding the Buddhist attitude to death. Once Nakula's father was seriously ill and his wife noticed that he was fretful and anxious. She advised him that death with anxiety is painful and is denounced by the Buddha. Therefore he must compose himself. Comforting him, she said that he might be worried about the family income and the task of bringing up the children after his death. She assured him that she was capable of spinning and weaving and, thus, she could provide for the family and bring up the children. He may be anxious that she would remarry after his death. She said that he knows just as well as she that she has never been unfaithful to him ever since they were married at the age of sixteen, and she pledged that she would remain loyal to him even after his death. Perhaps he may worry about her spiritual development and she assured him that she would continue to be earnest in her spiritual welfare. Therefore he must face death, if need there be, with no anxiety. Such was her advice to her husband who was fatally ill. It is said that he regained self-composure and thereby good health too. The matter was later reported to the Buddha, who commended Nakula's mother for her wisdom and

composure.

The suttas also discuss the advantages of the regular contemplation of death (A. IV, 46-48; S. V, 344,408). The mind gets divested from the love of life, and being intoxicated with the zest of life, men commit various atrocities. That can be prevented by the habit of practicing mindfulness of death. If we only remember that we have not come to this world to stay forever, we would take care to lead much better lives.

If, when we take stock, we find wicked negative emotions such as lust, hatred and jealousy in us, we should immediately take steps to eradicate them as we would try to put out the flames if our head were to catch fire (A. IV, 320).

Thus, the Buddhist texts tirelessly reiterate the positive benefits of the regular contemplation of the inevitability of death. It helps one to lead a more wholesome life and also to face death, the one and only certain event in life, with calm composure and fearless confidence.

The Human Body

When alive, the human body is the most precious and the most mysterious object in the whole world. We regard it as beautiful and spend much time, energy, and money to make it more beautiful. We regard it as an instrument for pleasure and spend nearly all our lives in procuring objects of pleasure. We assume it is a vital part of our self. It would be useful to discuss the validity of these attitudes and assumptions from the Buddhist point of view.

The human body is the most intricate machine in the world. Each human body is unique not only in appearance but also in its biochemical structure, sensitivity of sense faculties, disease resistance, disease susceptibility, etc., and hereditary laws alone are incapable of offering a satisfactory explanation.

Buddhism holds that the body and its sense faculties have been so

structured as the effect of former kamma. From the dawn of civilization man has tried to understand the mystery of the human personality, and he has given rise to various sciences and religions. In one sutta the Buddha says that within this fathom-long sentient human body is found the whole world, its origin, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation. In a way this means that the world of experience is within the human body. In another sense, it means that if one were to understand the mystery of the human body, that would amount to understanding the mystery of the world. In fact the external world is nothing but what we get to know through the instrumentality of our sense faculties. If we understand the sense faculties and sense data, we have understood everything.

The relationship of the body and the mind is most elusive. According to the *Sama hala Sutta* this relationship can be understood only after the attainment of the fourth *jhana*. The adept can then see consciousness established in the physical constitution just as one can see a colored thread running through the aperture of a transparent gem. Another sutta explains the interdependency of body and mind through the simile of two bundles of reeds placed against one another supporting each other. Emotional changes in the mind affect body chemistry, and fluctuations in body chemistry affect the mind.

As a gross example we can take the negative emotion of anger. Anger triggers off glandular secretions which alter body chemistry considerably to bring about changes such as trepidation, sweating, feeling hot, etc. On the other hand, changes in body chemistry produced, for instance by the intake of alcohol or drugs affect the mind to bring about appropriate mood changes, euphoria and hallucinations.

According to a sutta in the Anguttara Nikaya (A. IV, 385 f.) all thoughts are translated into sensations (*sabbedhamma vedanasamosarana*). This shows the extent to which the body is influenced by the mind. Buddhism has clearly recognized this interdependency and utilized that knowledge in its path to liberation. The body is disciplined through morality (*sila*) and is, thus, maintained at a reasonably healthy biochemical level. The mind is disciplined with

meditation (*bhavana*) to produce healthy psychological changes and, thereby, reinforce a more healthy biochemical composition of the body. This process goes on until the attainment of Arahantship, when the biochemical composition has undergone such a radical, irreversible change that an Arahant is said to be incapable of certain physiological functions which are antithetical to spiritual development but normal in average human beings.

Though the sentient human body is most precious, no precious material goes into its composition. It is precious because, through its instrumentality, man is able to probe into the deepest mysteries of the universe and of himself, into the meaning of life and the enigma of death.

When we stand by the ocean in the evening twilight and gaze at the vast ocean as far as the horizon, or at the star-studded firmament receding into infinity as far as the eye can see, we are awe-struck by the magnitude of the universe. Compared to that man is but an infinitesimal speck of dust in size.

But when we pay attention to the potentialities of man, it is he who can even conceive of this mighty universe, it is he who can unravel its mysteries. Though part and parcel of the universe, though subject to natural cosmic laws, man has the capacity to transcend the natural material world and can even reach Buddhahood. Therefore, man is supreme and the sentient human frame is precious.

It is true that we generally look at the human body as a thing of beauty. We speak of beautiful eyes, teeth, face, hair, and figure. But Buddhism looks at the human body from a realistic point of view. The body is a bag of filth, it is full of impurities. The Buddhist texts dealing with the thirty-two parts of the body spell out in detail its foul material constituents.

If we only pause a moment to consider attentively the state of the face prior to a wash in the morning, we can gain a fair idea of the body's repulsive nature. It exudes so much dirt from its major nine apertures and numerous pores that it needs constant cleaning. Just imagine how

intolerable the body would be if we neglect to clean what it discharges from the outlets even for a single day, let alone for a long period. Great care has to be taken to keep the body clean, so that it is not offensive to oneself and others. If no regular cleaning is done, it can be the home of various parasites, and, thus, a public nuisance. We have to understand the real nature and the composition of the body in order to reduce and eliminate our infatuation with it.

We have to feed the body very carefully throughout life. However well the body is fed, it grows hungry over and over again. Hunger is the worst disease says the *Dhammapada*. There is no end to feeding the body until death. The stomach is like an open sore which needs careful periodical dressing. Gross food is but one of the nutriments the body needs according to Buddhism; contact with the environment (*phassa*), volition (*manosancetana*), and consciousness (*vinanna*) are the other three nutriments. All these four forms of nutriment are essential for the continuance of the body in health. The body also needs to be protected from heat, cold, rain, injurious germs and external harm. We have to be ever alert to protect the body from these various sources of external danger. For these reasons Buddhism says that the body is a source of great anxiety -- *bahudukkho ayam kayo*. Great is the hardship man has to undergo just to keep the body viable, clean and healthy.

The body is endowed with sense faculties and they are ever in search of pleasure. The eye is in search of pleasant forms, the ear of pleasant sounds, the nose of pleasant smells, the tongue of pleasant tastes and the body of pleasant tactiles.

Most of our life is spent in the pursuit of these pleasures. But it remains a fact that the body texture is such that it does not tolerate excessive pleasure. However desirable pleasures may be, the body falls ill when overloaded with them. For instance, however palatable rich food may be, when it is taken in excess, the body becomes a victim of killer diseases. Similarly, excessive indulgence in sex causes social diseases, of which the most dreaded today is AIDS. Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome. Therefore restraint in the enjoyment of sense pleasures is the best course of conduct for those desirous of

health and long life.

When we look at the body in its various postures of standing, sitting, walking and lying down, we realize that the body can tolerate these postures only for a very short time. Even if we are sitting in the most comfortable seat, we continue to remain in the same position without moving around only for a short time. Automatically, we move about adjusting our limbs to more comfortable positions in a constant search for pleasure. But pleasure is short-lived; pain raises its head, and we move and adjust ourselves again to eke out a little pleasure.

Thus, the search for pleasure goes on and we delude ourselves saying that we enjoy life. The basic truth is that the body is a source of misery, but we prefer to turn a blind eye to this fact, and we cling desperately to fleeting pleasures. The Buddha says that there is no doubt an iota of pleasure *appassada*, but the misery is far in excess of this pleasure, *bahudukkha*.

The body in its various stages of growth also brings much pain. Birth causes excruciating pain both to mother and babe. The infant is completely at the mercy of others around it. If its needs are not duly attended to, it experiences much misery, which it expresses by pitiful cries. Teething is a significant landmark in the series of growing pains. All attempts to master the various physical postures contribute their own quota of hardships to infancy. Puberty and adolescence are also harassed by the growing pains appropriate to those ages.

Old age is particularly notorious for aches and pains. The sense faculties are on the decline, sight fails, hearing becomes short and other senses too diminish in their acuity. Various joint pains and body aches become more constant and the body strength ebbs away. Even the Buddha in his old age said that his body was like an old worn-out cart which could be kept going only with much repair. He added that he enjoyed physical comfort only when he spent time in *jhanic* ecstasy. Such is the nature of the body in old age. We cannot forget that the body is prone to various diseases during all stages of its growth.

Though the body is, thus, a source of great misery we cannot afford to hate it. To have a healthy attitude towards the body we should avoid both extremes of being infatuated with the body and hating it.

We should have *metta*, a friendly attitude towards the body. Realistically understanding its nature, we should avoid misusing it as an instrument only for pleasure. We should be very careful not to form habits which are injurious to the body, such as smoking, drinking, and the excessive indulgence in sensual pleasures. The body becomes a prey to self-inflicted diseases if we fail to cultivate an attitude of friendliness towards it. If we want to enjoy a reasonably healthy body as a vital part of our self.

When we say: "I am tall, I am fat, I am fair, I am beautiful or ugly," we really mean that the body has these attributes. But as we keep on using the pronoun "I" we get caught in the grammatical subject and assume the existence of an ontological subject such as the soul or the ego. Therefore, we establish a relationship of identity and possession with the body. Thus, the body becomes a vital part of the self. The Buddha argues that if the body is really ours as we assume it is, it should behave according to our wishes. It should remain young, healthy, beautiful and strong as we always wish it to be. But the body hardly behaves according to our wishes, and we come to grief when it goes against our wishes and expectations.

The Buddha points out that the body really does not belong to us, nor is it really our self or a part of our self. We should, therefore, give up craving for it, we should cease to identify ourselves with it. Giving up craving for the body results in much happiness and peace.

In order to wean ourselves from our habitual identification and ownership, we have to impress the repulsive and alien nature of our bodies into our minds with deep sensitivity, so that an attitudinal change takes place in us with regard to the body. Observation of the repulsive and misery-producing nature of our bodies repeatedly, over and over again, is one sure way of gaining the realistic perspective. This is the path leading out of misery.

Sensualistic Social Trends and Buddhism in Modern Times[2]

Causes for Sensualistic Social Trends[3]

Scientific and technological advancement has brought about widespread changes in the lifestyle of modern man. Changes have been so rapid and overwhelming, during the 20th century, that this century seems to far outweigh all other centuries put together in this respect.

Man's attitudes, values, goals and ideals too have undergone radical change. Scientific knowledge regarding the nature and evolution of the universe, man, society, culture and civilization has unsettled many of the old certitudes and undermined the very basis and authority of the Western theistic religious traditions. With the loss of respect for authority and tradition, the validity of moral values too came to be questioned.

Ever renewing scientific knowledge, which exposed traditional beliefs one after another as superstitious or mythical, gave a halo of superiority to modernity. Nurtured in such an environment, the younger generation became alienated from the lifestyle of their parents and, thus, the age-old generation gap assumed unprecedented proportions.

While scientific knowledge rendered man a skeptic alienated from his cultural heritage technology robbed him of his creative ability. The machine with its vast powers of production reduced man to a button-pusher and threw millions of workers out of employment. Their muscular and creative powers were left unharnessed, thwarted and frustrated.

As a result the indigenous folk arts and crafts of all nations, which were in fact expressions of sublimated emotions, became almost extinct. Man in his admiration for creativity and feeble struggle for self-expression has now become an antique collector.

The next force which completely overwhelmed modern man was the tyranny of commercialization and advertising. When production exceeded consumption man had to be persuaded into consuming more, lest trade suffer with a backlog of unconsumed stockpiles. Deliberate and calculated attempts were made to change traditional frugality into an ethic of consumption. Mass media were utilized to convince the people of the virtues and necessity of increasing consumption to maintain the newly acquired standard of affluent living. Research into motivational and behavioral psychology betrayed the susceptibilities of man, and advertising agents made capital by playing upon these weaknesses, namely, man's innate greed for sensual pleasure, personal property and social prestige.

Unleashed as he was from his cultural moorings, and frustrated as he was in his creative urge, modern man succumbed to the attractive appeals of mass media and plunged into a life of self-indulgence.

Harmful Effects on Individual and Society

Having thus briefly outlined the main causes responsible for modern sensualistic social trends, it is useful to glance at the effects they have produced on the individual and society of today. Venereal diseases have become rampant; it was reported that there was an increase of 300% within one decade in the United States. The ever-widening field of psychiatry shows that mental health is rapidly deteriorating. Alcoholism and drug addiction are major health problems. The crime rate is ever mounting. Bonds of wedlock have become sadly brittle and the divorce rate is alarmingly high. The family as a viable institution is threatened, according to some sociologists, with extinction in the not too distant future.

Disruption of family life has affected child life most pathetically. A British report of Health Economics published in January 1976 informs us that babies had become the most common homicide victims in Britain since the early 1960s. They are battered to death at times of family stress. Teenage drug addictions and juvenile delinquency have become alarming problems of the day. These social phenomena are directly related to man's attitude towards sense pleasure and serious

rethinking seems most urgent, today, if man is to be saved from the imminent danger of self-destruction through sensuality.

Can Buddhism Help?

Buddhism has been a great civilizing force and a guiding principle for millions of people during the last twenty-five centuries. It would be useful to see what light Buddhism sheds on the present chaotic situation, and what wisdom it offers for self-adjustment under modern conditions and for healthy family and interpersonal relations.

Though criticism is often leveled that Buddhism is a life-denying ascetic ideal, and that it is anti-social and anti-political, it should be remembered that Buddhism embraces in its dispensation not only monks (*bhikkhu*) and nuns (*bhikkhuni*), but also male and female lay followers (*upasaka, upasika*).

The intellectual and disciplinary training of the laity is as important a concern in Buddhism as that of the monks. Therefore, Buddhism offers a social and a political philosophy, the goal of which is the creation of a society where human rights are safeguarded, human enterprise is the key to success, resources are well-distributed and justice reigns supreme. As Trevor Ling, too, maintains, Buddhism is not just a religion or a philosophy, it is, in fact, a whole civilization, a full-fledged multi-faceted philosophy of life designed to meet the secular and spiritual needs of man.[\[4\]](#)

Sensuality and Human Ambitions

According to Buddhism, the ambitions of man center on the acquisition of wealth, pleasure, fame, longevity and happiness after death. (A. II, 66-68). Accepting these as given human aspirations and goals of human endeavor, Buddhism advocates a way of life to help man realize these aims.

For the danger is ever present that man in his pursuit of pleasure will in the long run defeat those very aims.

Wealth and sex are two important means of acquiring pleasure. A

prudent attitude towards them would go a long way for the realization of the other three human ambitions as well. As most of the social ills of today are attributable to the mishandling of these two, a correct understanding of the Buddhist attitude towards them would be most profitable.

Wealth

The Buddhist attitude towards wealth is such that it has never prescribed a ceiling on income. What it has prescribed is that wealth should be acquired through righteous means and expended also in a righteous manner. Wealth earned by the sweat of one's brow without harming, deceiving or exploiting others is highly commended.

It is always emphasized that wealth has only instrumental value. It should be utilized for (a) living in comfort making one's family, parents, dependents and friends happy, (b) insuring oneself against possible calamities through fire, water, etc., (c) performing one's duties to relatives, guests and state, and for religio-cultural activities, and (d) patronizing those engaged in spiritual advancement.

According to one's means, on a large or very small scale, one should try to make the best use of one's resources in the most righteous manner.

What is deplored in Buddhism is the excessive acquisitive greed and the hoarding habit. While niggardliness is held in contempt, frugality is extolled as a virtue. Wastefulness is a deplorable habit and it is even regarded as anti-social.

Once Ananda explained to a king how the monks put the gifts offered to them to maximum use. When new robes are offered the old ones are taken as coverlets, the old coverlets are utilized as mattress covers, the former mattress covers are used as rugs, the old rugs are taken as dusters, the old tattered dusters are kneaded with clay and used to repair cracked floors and walls (Vin. II, 291).

Such was the Buddhist monks' conscientious use of resources. The

same frugality has influenced the laity too and the famous episode of a wealthy merchant who bade a servant to collect a drop of ghee off the floor, lest it be wasted, is a very fine example. The same merchant was so generous that his largesse surprised the recipients (Vin. I, 271). Though frugality and generosity appear to be incompatible, they are recognized as commendable virtues in their own right to be cultivated by one and all. When these simple virtues are compared with the information revealed to us, for instance, by Vance Packard's eye-opener *The Waste Makers*, one begins to wonder whether sanity and common sense have left the knowledgeable man of science today.

Some investigators estimate that American consumption of the world's resources within forty years is equal to what mankind has consumed during the last 4000 years. As the earth's resources are not unlimited, it is high time that modern man did some re-thinking and cultivated some economical Buddhist habits at least out of sympathy for posterity. It is true that oceanography opens unexploited resources to man, but it must be remembered that the ocean too is not unlimited, whereas man's greed knows no limit and no satiation.

Sex

Buddhism recognizes the sex attraction as a universal reality. Among animals the sex impulse is regulated by nature and thus their mating and breeding are seasonal.

Among humans there is no such natural mechanism, and man has by a long process of experiment and adjustment arrived at certain taboos, rules and regulations to handle his sex drive in a manner appropriate to himself and his fellow beings. Though these rules differ according to times and place, on the whole, they have helped man to emerge from savagery to civilization.

According to Buddhism monogamy is the ideal form of marriage, while chastity and fidelity form ideal behavior before marriage. This alone is not sufficient for success in married life. Mutual confidence (*saddha*), morality (*sila*), self-denial (*caga*) and prudence (*pa* are emphasized as virtues which ensure conjugal happiness and success. In

other words, mutual confidence means dependability, morality implies strength of character, self-denial or the joy of selfless service to the beloved denotes emotional maturity, and prudence shows intellectual maturity.

These qualities bring the spouses so close to one another, it is said, that the relationship could persist even after death in a future existence. Nakula's parents are portrayed in Buddhist literature as an ideal couple who, in their old age, expressed the wish that their love should survive death. The Buddha replied that the wish would materialize if the above qualities are equally shared by both partners (A. II, 61-61).

The marital bonds of modern man have become so brittle and fragile because these cohesive emotional forces have become lost due to sensuality. Much emphasis is laid on carnal pleasure while personality adjustments and emotional involvement which call for sacrifices and selflessness respectively, are ignored or neglected. Though sex is an important basic requirement in marriage, it is certainly not the be-all and end-all of family life. Indulgence in sex for its own sake never brings satisfaction, whence fulfillment? The insatiability of lust is disdainfully illustrated in Buddhist literature by the traditional simile of a dog licking a bone to satisfy hunger.

But sex as an expression of conjugal love is a satisfying emotional experience. If sex was the only concern, man need not have evolved an institution like the family. Animals too satisfy their sex instinct, but nothing compared to the human family has evolved in the animal kingdom. The important function of family life seems to be to teach man a great moral lesson to overcome his egocentric nature.

Man starts life in his mother's womb as the most selfish parasite. He then passes through the emotional stages of self-love, conjugal love and parental love. As a mature man and a parent, he completely loses himself in the service of his offspring. His self-denial is such he even relinquishes his personal possessions, acquired through the toil of a lifetime, in favor of his children. Finally, he makes an emotional self-sacrifice when he gets a partner for his child to love and cherish. In his old age he regards his offspring with equanimity and contentment, but

this emotional maturity and fulfillment is utterly impossible if sensuality is regarded as the goal of married life.

Fame and Longevity

These two ambitions of man depend to a very large extent, as mentioned earlier, on the manner in which he handles his wealth and pleasure. Special mention should be made that liquor, like sensuality, is a great betrayer of all human ambitions. It has been aptly remarked that a man's conscience is soluble in alcohol.

According to Buddhism both liquor and sensuality destroy man's physical and mental health, drain his resources, spoil his public image and distort his intellectual capacities (D. III, 182-184).

Happiness After Death

In this age of material pleasure, man is not much concerned with a life after death. The Buddhist axiom is that a man reaps what he sows. If one has led a useful moral life and reached old age with a sense of fulfillment, contentment and equanimity, one has no regrets. A well-spent blameless life has, according to Buddhism, happiness beyond the grave. Such a person is said to progress from light to brighter light (*joti joti parayano*, A. II, 86).

Sensuality and Intellectual Maturity

Another noteworthy ill effect of self-indulgence is the inhibition of intellectual capacities. Buddhism emphasizes that obsession with sensuality prevents clear thinking, distorts vision, clouds issues, inhibits wisdom and destroys peace of mind. While these observations were made twenty-five centuries ago by the Buddha, the inhibitory effect of sex on brain activity seems to be indicated quite independently by medical research on the pineal gland.

In man, the pineal gland is a pear-shaped midline structure located at the back of the base of the brain. This gland synthesizes a hormone called melatonin which affects behavior, sleep, brain activity, and sexual activity such as puberty, ovulation and sexual maturation.

While melatonin stimulates brain activity, it inhibits sexual activity. Again it has been recognized that light, dark, olfaction, cold, stress and other neural inputs affect the pineal function. Exposure to light reduces the synthesis of melatonin and depresses pineal weight. On the other hand light accelerates sexual maturation activity.[5]

It will be useful to compare this medical information with Buddhist ideology. Buddhism maintains that sense stimuli disturb mental activity. If the sense doors are well-guarded (*indriyesu guttadvaro hoti*), i.e., if visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile inputs are controlled, a corresponding degree of concentrated mental activity becomes possible.

Cittassa ekaggata or the ability to fix the mind on one point is greatly determined by the control of the sense faculties. In terms of physiology, it seems to mean that such sense control helps the synthesis of melatonin in the pineal gland, which stimulates brain activity and retards sexual activity. Thus, with the help of medical research it seems possible to confirm the Buddhist point of view that sensuality inhibits intellectual maturity.

Sensuality and Culture

According to the *Agga Sutta*, which gives an account of the evolution of the world and society, the earliest inhabitants of the earth were mind-made and self-luminous beings who subsisted on joy and moved about in the sky. After a long time they tasted something extremely flavorsome and were delighted with this new gustatory sense experience. Craving entered into them and they went on tasting food in this manner. Consequently their bodies became coarser and coarser; they lost their radiance and the ability to subsist on joy and to traverse in the sky. (D. III, 84-86).

Now what is important for us here is not the authenticity of this evolutionary process, but the point that sensual desire has caused the loss of higher mental and physical capacities which man is supposed to have once possessed.

The *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta* (D. III, 69-74) deals with the problem of social change. As a result of the unequal distribution of wealth, poverty becomes widespread and moral standards deteriorate rapidly. With moral degeneration, there is a corresponding decrease in physical beauty and length of life. As time goes on and immorality settles down, society comes under the grip of three derogatory phenomena, namely, perverted lust (*adhammaraga*), wanton greed (*visamalobha*) and a wrong sense of values (*micchadhamma*).

Disrespect for family, religious and cultural traditions becomes an accepted social phenomenon. When moral degradation continues, thus, a time will come when the life-span is reduced to ten years, and the marriageable age goes down to five. By that time food will undergo so much change that delicacies such as ghee, butter, honey, etc. will vanish, and what is considered coarse today will be a delicacy of that time.

All concepts of morality will disappear and language will have no word to denote morality. Immorality will reign supreme with social sanction. There will be no marriage laws or no kinship, and society will fall into a state of utter promiscuity, as among animals. Among such humans keen mutual enmity will become the rule, and they will be overcome by passionate thoughts of killing one another. A world war will break out and large-scale massacre would be the result. After this mass blood bath, the few destitutes who are left behind will find solace in each other's company, and they will begin to regard one another with kindly thoughts. With this change of heart, there will be a gradual re-evolution of moral values. Step by step the good life will be restored, physical beauty will reappear and the life-span will increase. Mental potentialities too will gradually develop.

Such are the Buddhist ideas of social change. Society stands or falls with the rise or fall of moral values.

It is noteworthy that some present-day sociological studies too have revealed that morality and culture are causally connected. William Stephens observes that primitive tribes have great sexual freedom, premarital as well as extramarital, when compared with civilized

communities which have tight sex restrictions.[6] Dean Robert Fitch has connected the decline of the Roman civilization with the deterioration of their sexual morality.[7] The most important contribution in this respect is made by J.D. Unwin in a study called *Sex and Culture*. [8] He has conducted a survey of the sexual behavior and the level of culture of eighty uncivilized tribes and also those of six known civilizations. He concludes that there is a definite relationship between permissiveness and primitiveness, and sex restrictions and civilization. Sexual freedom gives rise to what he calls a zoistic (dead level of conception) culture where people are born, they satisfy their desire, they die and are forgotten after the remains are disposed of. They are not able to rationally find out the causal connection between events. When afflicted by illness, for instance, they resort to witchcraft and nothing more. When a certain degree of sex restriction, occasional, premarital, or post-nuptial, is present, the result is a manistic culture where ancestors are worshipped at times of crisis, but without a definite place of worship. Strict sex regulations as in monogamy produce a deistic culture with definite places of worship. Culture in the sense of the external expression of internal human energy resulting from the use of human powers of reason, creation and self knowledge becomes possible only within strictly enforced monogamous sex mores. The mechanism of this operation is not known, just as it is not known how carbon placed under different settings turns to coal or diamond.[9] All that can be said is that there is a definite causal link between sexual behavior and the culture pattern. As Unwin comes to this conclusion after conducting his exhaustive and methodical investigations, it is possible to maintain that scientific inquiries too have begun to confirm the Buddhist point of view regarding the relationship between morality and culture.

Sensuality and Environment

The Anguttara Nikaya (I, 160) maintains that rainfall decreases when society comes under the sway of perverted lust, wanton greed and wrong values. Drought causes famine as a result of which the mortality rate goes up. Though it is difficult to establish a direct connection between immorality and lack of rain, an interpretation of the five

natural laws mentioned on the commentaries might offer a plausible explanation.

In the cosmos there are five natural laws or forces, namely *utuniyama* (lit. season law), *bijaniyama* (lit. seed-law) *cittaniyama*, *kammaniyama*, and *dhammaniyama*.[\[10\]](#) These can be translated as physical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, moral laws, and causal laws.

While the first four laws operate within their respective spheres, the last law of causality operates within them as well as among them. Thus, the physical environment or ecology affects living organisms, i.e., biology; this influences psychology, which determines the moral force. The opposite process also operates with harmful or beneficial results depending on the nature or the forces at work.

Perhaps the process of operation can be illustrated with a concrete example. Man's greed for luxury, wealth and power has caused the setting up of vast factories. They created the problem of air, water and noise pollution, which have adversely affected both fauna and flora.[\[11\]](#) The inadvertent modifications of atmospheric properties and processes caused by human activities is intensively studied by scientific research bodies today. It is complained that although the effects of pollutants and smog upon people, plants and economic activities have been extensively studied, relatively little attention has been paid to the effects of pollution and smog upon climatic patterns. It is well known that many climatic elements such as radiation, cloudiness, fog, visibility and the atmospheric electric field are affected by pollution. Temperature and humidity are influenced indirectly and effects on precipitation are also suspected.[\[12\]](#)

Science will reveal in the course of time whether pollution is definitely responsible for weather and climatic change, but it remains a fact that the world is already confronted with an acute shortage of potable water.

It is no secret that man uses his inherent powers of reason, intelligence and creativity to change his environment for his own advantage. But

man is not aware that the moral force he himself creates brings about corresponding changes in his environment to his weal or woe whether he likes it or not.

Conclusion

Concluding this essay, we should emphasize that there is a Cosmic Moral Force which profoundly influences man. According to Buddhism it is this Cosmic Moral Law or Force which makes the world and mankind go on: *kammana vattati loko, kammana vattati paja* (Sn. v 654).

This Cosmic Moral Force is generated by none other than man himself, for the Buddha maintains that human thoughts are a moral force (*cetanaham bhikkhave kammam vadami*, A III, 410). It is also more directly said that thoughts (or ideologies) make the world go on (*cittena ni yato loko*, S. I, 39). Therefore man has to discover his own inherent powers which are, at present, mostly dissipated on alcohol and sensuality.

The discovery of the potentialities of *The World Within* is the most urgent need of today as modern man living in *Sick Cities*, lost in a *Sexual Wilderness*, unaware of *The Hidden Persuaders*, is being slowly but surely reduced to a *Naked Ape*.[\[13\]](#)

Notes

1. Abstinence from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech and intoxicants.

[2. Paper read at the Conference on Buddhism and the Modern World, Dongguk University, Seoul, Korea, 1976.

3. Works consulted are: Vance Packard, *The Sexual Wilderness* (London, 1968); Lord Annan *The Disintegration of an Old Culture* (Oxford, 1966).

4. Trevor Ling, *The Buddha* (London, 1973), pp. 17, 24 f.
5. See G.E.W. Wolstenholme and Julie Knight, eds., *The Pineal Gland* (London, 1971).
6. *The Family in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York, 1963), pp. 256-259.
7. Quoted by Packard, *The Sexual Wilderness*, p.417.
8. London: Oxford University Press, 1934.
9. Ibid., pp. 424, 417, 412, etc.
10. *Atthasalini*, PTS ed., p.272.
11. Mitchell Gordon, *Sick Cities* (New York, 1963), pp. 92, 80.
12. *Weather and Climate Modification: Problems and Prospects*, Vol. II (National Academy of Sciences, Washington, 1966) pp. 82- 108.
13. References are to the titles of works by Gina Cerminara (New York, 1957), Mitchell Gordon, Vance Packard (op. cit. and London, 1957), and Desmond Morris (New York, 1967).

For free distribution only.

You may print copies of this work for your personal use.

You may re-format and redistribute this work for use on computers and computer networks,

provided that you *charge no fees* for its distribution or use.

Otherwise, all rights reserved.

This edition was transcribed from the print edition in 1994 by Maureen Riordan under the auspices of the DharmaNet Dharma Book Transcription Project, with the kind permission of the Buddhist Publication Society

The Buddhist Publication Society

The Buddhist Publication Society is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for people of all creeds.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is -- a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

The Honorary Secretary
BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY
P.O. Box 61
54, Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy
Sri Lanka

or
Barre Center for Buddhist Studies
149 Lockwood Road
Barre, MA 01005 USA

E-mail <www.bps.lk>

Source: Access-to-Insight,

<http://www.accesstoinight.org>

The Self Made Private Prison

by

Lily de Silva

Bodhi Leaves No: 120

Copyright © Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, (1990)

BPS Online Edition © (2006)

Digital Transcription Source: Access to Insight Transcription Project.

For free distribution. This work may be republished, reformatted, reprinted and redistributed in any medium. However, any such republication and redistribution is to be made available to the public on a free and unrestricted basis and translations and other derivative works are to be clearly marked as such.

According to the teachings of the Buddha the human personality comprises five "aggregates of grasping," called in Pali *panc'upadanakkhandha*. They are enumerated as:

- the aggregate of body;
- the aggregate of feelings;
- the aggregate of perception;
- the aggregate of volitional activities;
- the aggregate of consciousness;

We may wonder why the Buddha mentions only five aggregates, no more and no less. We can attempt to answer this question by analyzing any unit of experience in our day-to-day life. Suppose, for instance, we hear a big noise on the road, and we rush to the spot and recognize that a motorcycle accident has taken place; we feel sorry for the victim and want to rush him to the hospital. If we look at this experience and analyze the physical and mental phenomena involved, we will notice that they can be accommodated within the five aggregates of grasping.

Of course, we all know the body or the material aspect of our personality. It is this *body* which approached the site of the accident. We heard the noise and saw the scene of the accident; that means we have had auditory and visual *consciousness*. We recognized that it is a motorcycle accident; that is the aggregate of *perception and ideation*. We felt sorry for the victim, and our sorrow is the *feeling* aspect of our personality. We wanted to take the victim to hospital, and that is the *volitional* aspect. Thus, we have found all five aggregates of grasping in this unit of experience.

The physical and mental phenomena involved in all our varied experiences can be included within these five aggregates. It is very likely that the Buddha too discovered these five aggregates of grasping by analyzing experience through objective awareness (*sati*) and intuitive wisdom (*panya*).

Why are they called aggregates, *khandha*? *Khandha* means "heap" or "accumulation." It is easy to understand that the body is a heap of material elements. We maintain its process of growth by heaping it up with gross material food. In the mental sphere, too, through our experiences we accumulate feelings, perceptions and ideas, volitions, and consciousness. Therefore, all five aspects of the personality are called 'heaps,' accumulations, or aggregates.

Since they are intimately interconnected and act on one another, the processes are extremely complex and complicated. According to one commentarial simile they are like the waters at a confluence where five rivers meet. One cannot take a handful of water and say that it came from such and such a river. The aggregates are ever-changing and are constantly in a state of flux. They are so volatile and dynamic that they give rise to the notion of "I" and "mine."

Just as a fast revolving firebrand gives the illusion of a circle of fire, these dynamic processes of physical and mental energy give rise to the illusion of I, self, ego, soul.

They are called aggregates of grasping because we cling to them passionately as "I" and "mine." Just as an animal tied with a strap to a firm post runs round and round the post, stands, sits, and lies down beside the post, so the person who regards the five aggregates as his self cannot escape from the aggregates and the suffering, disappointment, and anxiety which invariably accompany them (SN XXII.99; S iii.150).

The five aggregates constitute a real private prison for us. We suffer a great deal due to our attachment to this prison and our expectations of what the prison should be. As our perception of the external world and our relations with our fellow human beings are conditioned by the nature of this prison, interpersonal relations and communication become extremely complex, tricky, and problematic. Problems

become more and more complicated, to the extent that we identify ourselves with this private prison.

Now, let us try to supplement our understanding of the canonical teachings in terms of our daily experience and see how we cling to each and every one of these aggregates as "I" and "mine," and continue to suffer in the private prison that we make for ourselves.

The aggregate of body

If someone were to ask us the question: "Who are you?" we would immediately respond by stating: "I am so and so." The name is but a label and it can be anything. We can also say: "I am a human being." By that we have only stated the species to which we belong. "I am a man or woman." This only affirms the sex of the person. "I am so and so's daughter, sister, wife, mother," etc. These describe relationships, but we have still not answered the question: "Who are you?" We produce the identity card to prove our identity, but the identity card shows only a picture of the body with the name label. Now we believe that we have satisfactorily answered the question: "Who are you?" Thus, we identify ourselves with our bodies.

When we say: "I am tall, I am fat, I am fair," etc., we really mean that the body is tall or fat or fair, but what we do is identify the body as I. What is more, we decorate it in various ways and regard it as our beautiful self, "Am I not beautiful in this sari?" We regard the body as our precious

possession — "my face, my hair, my teeth," etc. Thus it is very clear that we cling to the material body as our very own self. This identification is so widely accepted and thorough that it has crept in linguistic usages as well. In words such as "somebody," "everybody," and "nobody," "body" is used in the sense of person.

Now, the Buddha, who analyzed the body objectively under the 'microscope of mindfulness,' realized the true nature of the body and found that there is nothing in it that can be called beautiful. It is made-up of flesh, phlegm, saliva, blood, urine, and feces, all very repulsive. Even what is generally considered beautiful such as hair, teeth, and nails, if found out of context, say for instance in one's food, becomes extremely repulsive. So too the face of a beauty queen, if closely looked at before an early morning wash. It is not necessary to dwell at length on the ravages of old age and the decomposition of the body at death.

Therefore the Buddha says that this body is a bag of filth, a burden to be discarded rather than clung to as "I" and "mine."

The body is composed of the material elements of solidity (earth), cohesion (water), heat (fire), and motion (air). There is nothing worth grasping in any of these elements. They are found abundantly in the external world too, but we cling to this fathom-long blob of matter as "I" and "mine."

The Buddha defines the body, or "form," as that which gets re-formed and de-formed; it is afflicted with heat, cold, and insects. The body is but a body-building activity.

Modern medical science informs us that the body is composed of billions and billions of cells which are continually in a process of growth and decay. What is meant here can be explained with the help of a simile. We say that there is rain and use the noun "rain." But in actuality there is no "thing" called rain apart from the activity of raining. The process of drops of water falling from the sky — that we call rain. Though we use the noun "rain," there is, in reality, only the activity of raining which can be better described with a verb.

Similarly, what we call the body is but a process of body building; therefore, the Buddha defines the noun "form" (*ruupa*) with its corresponding verb "forming" (*ruppati*). This process of body-building is going on all the time and, thus, is always in a state of unrest. Therefore, form is looked upon as impermanent (*anicca*).

In this changing process of body-building activity there is absolutely nothing that can be regarded as a self, an unchanging ego, an "I," a permanent soul. Thus our identification with the body as self is a big delusion.

During its lifetime, the body passes through the stages of infancy, childhood, adolescence, youth, middle age and old age. Throughout this process, there is a type of suffering

which is characteristic of each particular age. Teething, learning skills in locomotion, communication add much frustration to infancy. Childhood is comparatively free of suffering if one is fortunate to have a healthy body, but coping with the growing body can become frustrating if energy is not channeled towards healthy play and creative work. Adolescence, when an individual is neither small enough to be a child nor mature enough to be an adult, is particularly troublesome. In youth, the body can be quite problematic as sexual energy is at its peak. Unless it is wisely channeled, indulged in lawfully accepted ways, restrained with understanding, and sublimated, youth can lead to much misery. In middle age the body is prone to pressure-related diseases; for many it is a period of much anxiety. Suffering in old age is manifold; the body becomes too big a burden to carry. Thus, at no stage in life does the body remain trouble-free; it is a source of suffering throughout life.

However much we pamper the body with all five strands of sense pleasures, the body is never grateful. It never behaves the way we would like it to behave. However much we wash it, it gets dirty. However much we feed it, it gets hungry and tired. It falls ill, it gets old; it loses its beauty and strength. It never stays within our control. Therefore, it is not worth hankering after, calling it "I" and "mine."

In the private prison of the five aggregates the body is the most tangible shapely wall. The body of each person is a

unique combination of elements having particular biochemical and bioelectrical properties. Each body has strengths and weaknesses peculiar to itself. Each one is prone to certain types of diseases in a particular way.

There is no individual who is completely healthy all through life. One person may be asthmatic, another diabetic. One may have a weak respiratory system, or another a weak digestive system. Each one suffers individually, privately, by the body he has inherited.

Our bodies vary in size, shape, color and appearance, and, because of these differences, we suffer various complexities. Our bodies may not be what we would like them to be. Then we get disappointed and depressed. A woman who had lost her sight in early childhood regained her sight after about thirty years as a result of the shock of a sudden fall. She was overjoyed to regain her sight, but her joy was short-lived, for she discovered through the mirror that she was not beautiful. Such is the disappointment the body brings when it does not come up to our expectations.

The body also changes from age to age: the once beautiful strong body becomes the haggard and infirm, and we suffer on account of that. We resort to various methods of making it beautiful and strong — we paint the face, dye the hair, use dentures and wigs; we take vitamins, tonics, and elixirs. Yet all the same the body defies our expectations and we

continue to suffer within the confines of the private prison of our body.

Once a friend of mine related how he saw a child meddling with the rear bumper of a parked car. The owner started driving the car, and the child, clinging to the rear bumper, was yelling as he got dragged along. If only the child let go of his hold on the car his suffering would have ceased.

Similarly, we cling to our body, and we grieve and lament when it goes according to its nature. If only we would learn to let go of it, our suffering would cease. Therefore, the Buddha says: "Give up that which does not belong to you. The five aggregates of grasping do not belong to you."

The aggregate of feelings

Feelings demarcate the body from the rest of the environment and give the body the sense of self. The Khandhasamyutta (SN XXII.47; S iii.46) says that the uninstructed man, being impressed by feelings which are produced through contact with ignorance, thinks "I am this (body)."

The body is strewn with an intricately woven network of nerve fibers, and there is no part of the body which is not sensitive to touch. The entire sensitive volume constitutes the I, the self, the ego.

When we say: "I am comfortable or happy or sad," we identify ourselves with feelings. Statements such as: "He

does not care for *my* happiness, he hurt *my* feelings," also show how we establish a sense of possession for our feelings.

There are three kinds of feelings, namely, pleasurable or happy feelings, unpleasant or painful feelings, and neutral feelings. No two types ever occur concurrently at any single moment. When pleasurable feelings are present the other two are absent; when painful feelings are there pleasant and neutral feelings are absent; similarly with neutral feelings. The Mahaanidaana Sutta asks the question: when feelings are so complex in this manner, which feeling would one accept as one's self?

According to the Vedanaasa.myutta, innumerable feelings arise in the body just as all kinds of winds blow in different directions in the atmosphere. We are hardly aware of these feelings for the simple reason that we do not pay enough attention to them.

If we observe, for a couple of minutes, how often we adjust our bodies and change the position of our limbs, we will be surprised to note that we hardly keep still even for a few seconds. What is the reason for this constant change of position and posture? Monotony of position causes discomfort, and we change position and posture in search for comfort.

We react to feelings, yearning for more and more pleasurable feelings, revolting against unpleasant feelings, and being generally unaware of neutral feelings.

Therefore, pleasurable feelings have desire as their latent tendency, unpleasant feelings have aversion as their latent tendency, and neutral feelings have ignorance as their latent tendency (MN 44; M i.303). Thus, all feelings generate unskillful motivational roots and they partake of the nature of suffering (*ya.m kinci vedayita.m ta.m dukkhasmi.m* , SN XXXVI.11; S iv.216). Though the search for comfort and pleasure goes on constantly throughout life, pleasure always eludes us like a mirage.

Our feelings are extremely private and personal. One may have a splitting headache, but the one next to him may not know anything about his painful sensations. We only *infer* the pain of another by his facial expressions, behavior, and words, but we certainly do not *know* the feelings of another.

We are so unique in the experiences of feelings: one may be sensitive to heat; another to cold, mosquitoes, or fleas; another to certain kinds of pollen. One may have a low threshold for pain and another a high threshold. Thus, each one is so unique in the totality of his sensitivity that we are utterly and absolutely alone in our private prison of feelings.

The Buddha defines feeling as the act of feeling. There is no "thing" called feeling apart from the act of feeling.

Therefore, feelings are dynamic, ever-changing, impermanent.

They do not remain within our control either, for we cannot say: "Let me have or not have such and such feelings." They come and go as they please; we have no control or right of ownership over them. Therefore, the Buddha exhorts us: "Give up that which does not belong to you." Trying to possess that which is fleeting and defies ownership causes grief. Giving up spells the end of sorrow.

The aggregate of perception

Sanna in Pali is translated as perception or ideation. Perception is nothing but the act of perceiving. Thus it is a dynamic process, an activity. What does it perceive? It perceives colors such as blue, yellow, red, white, etc. This definition of *sanna* seems to imply that the linguistic ability of man is associated with *sanna*. The word *sanna* also means symbol, and symbolization is closely associated with language. It is language that helps us to form ideas, and that is the reason why *sanna* is sometimes translated as ideation. According to one's perception, one forms a point of view, an idea.

We identify ourselves with our ideas too: "This is *my* point of view, this is *my* idea, this is *my* opinion; this is what *I* meant" — these are all expressions identifying ourselves with ideation and perception.

Sometimes, this identification is so strong that we are ready to sacrifice our lives for the sake of an idea. Many wars are waged in the world propagating or defending ideas. As this is such a dominant form of clinging it has been singled out by the Buddha as *di.t.th' upaadaana* , clinging to a particular view one chooses to believe in. Identifying ourselves with various points of view we choose to call ourselves democrats, socialists, eternalists, annihilationists, positivists.

Our ideas change due to changing emotions and circumstances. A friend becomes a foe, an enemy becomes an ally; a stranger becomes a spouse. Therefore, in ideation, too, there is nothing constant and permanent; it is not possible to hold them fast as "I" and "mine" without coming to grief.

Memory is also associated with *sanna*. That is why we are able to recognize a person we have met before. Through the faculty of memory, we recall having existed in the past experiencing such and such events. By projecting the same kind of experience into the future we anticipate that we will exist in the future. Thus, through the memory aspect of *sanna* we posit the illusion of a self continuing through the three periods of past, present and future. But we little realize that the retrospection of the past and the anticipation of the future are both in fact done in the present moment itself.

How does *sanna* form a wall in our private prison? Each one of us perceives the world around us through our own

preconceived ideas. Let us take a very gross example. A doctor's perception of the world will be quite different from the perception of a politician or a businessman. A doctor looking at an apple might think of its nutritional value, a politician of the advantages and disadvantages permitting importation, the businessman of the commercial value. Thus, we are so much conditioned by our interests and ideologies — some absorbed from upbringing, some from the culture we are exposed to, some from the academic and professional training we have acquired — that no two people can have identical perceptions.

There are sufficient common factors in these aspects to allow us to form general superficial agreements with other individuals, but when we take into account all ramifications, we have to conclude that as regards perception, too, each one of us lives in a private prison. If we wish to experience wisdom and happiness welling within ourselves, we have to give up clinging to our ideas, unlearn what we have spent years to learn, de-condition ourselves and empty our minds.

The aggregate of volitional activities

There are three types of volitional activities: physical, verbal, and mental. We identify ourselves so much with these volitional activities that we posit an agent behind them as the doer, the speaker, and the thinker. Therefore, we say: "*I do (walk, stand, sit, work, rest, etc.), I speak, I think.*" Because this egocentricity in activities is so much

emphasized, we want to perform not only at our maximum efficiency but we also try to outdo others. Record breaking is a mania today. There are so many competitors vying with one another at the international level eager to earn a place in the *Guinness Book of Records*.

Because of our volitional activities we are involved in an endless process of preparation from womb to tomb. As infants, we prepare ourselves for childhood, struggling and learning skills of locomotion and speech. As children, we prepare ourselves for youth, and, then, we study various skills, arts, and sciences trying to become successful adults. Adults prepare for parenthood. At last, in our old age, too, we do not give up preparation. We turn to religion in our old age to prepare for heaven. This same aspect of our personalities is expressed in different words as *cetanaa* , intention, which in turn is said to constitute the moral force of *kamma* which propels life from birth to birth.

Repeated action has the cumulative effect of transforming character, and, thus, through repeated volitional activities we can shape our destinies.

A little story taken from an Indian classical text illustrates how our destiny is affected by our behavior. One day two young men who were lost in a forest chanced to meet a hermit living there who was able to predict the future. Before departing the young men requested the hermit to tell their fortunes. The hermit was reluctant, but the men pleaded.

Then the hermit observed them closely and predicted that Vipul would be a king within a year and Vijan would die in the hands of an assassin. Vipul was very much elated and Vijan was naturally very sad. They went back to their homes and Vipul became very arrogant in his behavior towards others, thinking he would soon be king. Vijan was a teacher and he performed his duties conscientiously; he became very virtuous and led a humble meditative life.

After about six months Vipul called his friend to go in search of a place to build a palace, and they went into a deserted area. When they were searching Vipul found a pot of gold and was very happy that his fortune was unfolding. When the two friends were examining the gold in great happiness and excitement, a bandit rushed in and snatched the pot. Vijan fought with the bandit and rescued the gold, but had to suffer a cut on the shoulder from the bandit's weapon. Vipul invited Vijan to share the gold, but Vijan declined the offer as he would die in a few months. Vipul took the gold and spent it in eating, drinking and enjoying himself in anticipation of becoming king. Vijan spent the time in meditation and humility. A year passed but the prediction did not come true. They revisited the hermit and asked why his prediction had not come to pass.

The hermit explained that by the arrogant behavior of Vipul his fortune was reduced to a mere pot of gold, while the virtuous behavior of Vijan was powerful enough to mitigate his misfortune to a mere wound in the hands of a bandit.

The noun *sankhaara* is defined by its verbal counterpart thus: "Volitional activities are those (mental forces) which construct, form, shape or prepare the physical body into what it is, the feelings into what they are, perceptions, volitional activities and consciousness into what they are." This is a process that is going on all the time.

What is meant can be understood in the following manner: the distinctive physical and mental characteristic features of each individual are determined by these volitional activities. To this category, belong all our hopes, aspirations, ambitions and determinations, and we identify ourselves with them as *my* hopes, *my* ambitions, etc. No two people will be identical in this respect either. What one person will treasure and strive for, another may consider a trifle. When one person prefers to hoard money, another would prefer to spend it on education. Still another may consider both of these as insignificant and run after power, honor, and prestige. We shape our destinies alone, imprisoned as we are within the wall of volitional activities. If we want to free ourselves, we have to give up identification with this prison wall too.

The aggregate of consciousness

Consciousness is defined as the act of becoming conscious of objects through the instrumentality of the sense faculties. Therefore, there is

eye-consciousness,

ear consciousness,
nose consciousness,
tongue consciousness,
body consciousness,
and mind-consciousness.

This cognitive process takes-place so rapidly and so continuously that we identify ourselves with the function of the sense faculties as: "*I see, I hear, I smell, I taste, I feel, I think and imagine.*"

According to the Buddha, there is no I, ego, self, or soul who cognizes and enjoys these sense objects. Sense consciousness is but a causally produced phenomenon, dependent on sense faculties and sense objects.

Each person's sense faculties are differently constituted. Some are blind, some have weak eyes, some have keen vision, some are deaf, some are hard of hearing and some have sharp hearing. Because of the differences in the very constitution of the sense faculties, our cognitive capacity too has to be different, however slight the differences may be.

Moreover, our sense experiences are conditioned by our likes and dislikes, by our previous experiences and memories, by our aspirations and ambitions. As such, however much we value sense experience as authentic no two people will experience the same sense object in exactly

the same way. For example, suppose that three people are watching a fight between two boys. If the three people happen to be a friend, an enemy, and a parent of one of those involved in the fight, the three people will have entirely different views regarding it.

Our senses communicate to us what we prefer to see. Volitions condition consciousness throughout our day-to-day experiences. For instance, if we are looking for a pen on a crowded table, we may see the pen and take it away. We may have failed to see the glass that was next to it and we may have to make a fresh search for the glass, rather than look straight at the place where the pen was.

This is because what we look for is predetermined by our will, which to a certain extent excludes from our field of attention and vision things irrelevant to our purposes.

If we gaze at a scene vacantly, only a few items which have kindled our interest are registered in our memory. Interests are divergent; therefore, different people see different things in the same situation. Thus, it is extremely difficult to acquire impartial objective experience of sense objects, as each one of us is psychologically conditioned in a unique way. Therefore, in sense experience too we lead a lonely private life imprisoned in a private cell.

Because each one of us is leading a secluded life within the confines of our individual personalities, interpersonal relations become extremely difficult and complicated. The

way to be released from this self-imprisonment is to stop regarding the five constituents of personality individually or collectively as "I" and "mine."

According to the Khandhasamyutta (SN XXII.93; S iii.137-38), a man carried down by the strong current of a river grabs at the grasses and leaves overhanging the river, but they give him no support as they are easily uprooted.

Similarly, the uninstructed man grabs at the five aggregates as his self or ego, but as they are themselves evanescent and unstable they cannot support him. Being dependent on them, the man only comes to grief and delusion. We have to realize the impermanent, ever-changing, conditional nature of these five factors of personality and become detached from them. It is only with this detachment that we can make ourselves free from the self-made private prison of our personality

About the Author

Lily de Silva is Professor of Pali and Buddhist Studies at the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka. A regular contributor to Buddhist scholarly and popular journals, she is also the editor of the subcommentary to the Digha Nikaya, published by the Pali Text Society of London. Her collection of essays, *One Foot in the World*, is published by BPS (Wheel No. 337/338).



THE BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

The BPS is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for all people.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as

well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is—a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

For more information about the BPS and our publications, please visit our web site, or contact:

The Administrative Secretary
BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY
P.O. Box 61,
54, Sangharaja Mawatha,
Kandy, Sri Lanka.

— ॐ —

The Buddhist Attitude Towards Nature

by

Lily de Silva

© 2005–2009

Modern man in his search for pleasure and affluence has exploited nature without any moral restraint to such an extent that nature has been rendered almost incapable of sustaining healthy life.

Invaluable gifts of nature, such as air and water, have been polluted with severely disastrous consequences. Man is now searching for ways and means of overcoming the pollution problem as his health too is alarmingly threatened. He also feels that it is irresponsible and morally wrong on his part to commit the future generations to a polluted planet.

If man is to act with a sense of responsibility to the natural world, to his fellow human beings and to unborn future generations, he has to find an appropriate environmental ethic today to prevent further aggravation of the present pollution problem. Hence, his search for wisdom and attitudes in a hitherto neglected area of knowledge, namely, religion.

Buddhism strictly limits itself to the delineation of a way of life designed to eradicate human suffering. The Buddha refused to answer questions which did not directly or indirectly bear on the central problem of human suffering and its ending. Furthermore, environmental pollution is a problem of the modern age, unheard of and unsuspected during the time of the Buddha. Therefore, it is difficult to find any specific discourse which deals with the topic we are interested in here. Nevertheless, as Buddhism is a full-fledged philosophy of life reflecting all aspects of experience, it is possible to find enough material in the Pali canon to delineate the Buddhist attitude towards nature.

The word "nature" in our essay means everything in the world which is not organized and constructed by man. The

Pali equivalents which come closest to "nature" are *loka* and *yathabhuta*. The former is usually translated as "world" while the latter literally means "things as they really are." The words *dhammata* and *niyama* are used in the Pali canon to mean "natural law or way."

Nature as Dynamic

According to Buddhism changeability is one of the perennial principles of nature. Everything changes in nature and nothing remains static. This concept is expressed by the Pali term *anicca*.

Everything formed is in a constant process of change (*sabbe sankhara anicca*).¹ The world is therefore defined as that which disintegrates (*lujjati ti loko*); the world is so called, because it is dynamic and kinetic, it is constantly in a process of undergoing change.² In nature, there are no static and stable "things"; there are only ever-changing, ever-moving processes.

Rain is a good example to illustrate this point. Though we use a noun called "rain" which appears to denote a "thing," rain is nothing but the process of drops of water falling from

the skies. Apart from this process, the activity of raining, there is no rain as such which could be expressed by a seemingly static nominal concept. The very elements of solidity (*pathavi*), liquidity (*apo*), heat (*tejo*) and mobility (*vayo*), recognized as the building material of nature, are all ever-changing phenomena.

Even the most solid looking mountains and the very earth that supports everything on it are not beyond this inexorable law of change. One sutta explains how the massive king of mountains — Mount Sineru, which is rooted in the great ocean to a depth of 84,000 leagues and which rises above sea level to another great height of 84,000 leagues and which is very classical symbol of stability and steadfastness — also gets destroyed by heat, without leaving even ashes, with the appearance of multiple suns.³ Thus change is the very essence of nature.

Morality and Nature

The world passes through alternating cycles of evolution and dissolution, each of which endures for a long period of time.

Though change is inherent in nature, Buddhism believes that natural processes are affected by the morals of man.

According to the *Aggañña Sutta*,⁴ which relates the Buddhist legend regarding the evolution of the world, the appearance of greed in the primordial beings — who at that time were self-luminous, subsisting on joy, and traversing in the skies — caused the gradual loss of their radiance and their ability to subsist on joy and to move about in the sky. The moral degradation had effects on the external environment too. At that time the entire earth was covered over by a very flavorsome fragrant substance similar to butter.

When beings started partaking of this substance with more and more greed, on the one hand, their subtle bodies became coarser and coarser. On the other hand, the flavorsome substance itself started gradually diminishing. With the solidification of bodies differences of form appeared; some were beautiful while others were homely. Thereupon, conceit manifested itself in those beings, and the beautiful ones started looking down upon the others.

As a result of these moral blemishes the delicious edible earth-substance completely disappeared. In its place, there appeared edible mushrooms and later another kind of edible creeper. In the beings who subsisted on them successively sex differentiation became manifest and the former method of spontaneous birth was replaced by sexual reproduction.

Self-growing rice appeared on earth and through laziness to collect each meal man grew accustomed to hoarding food. As a result of this hoarding habit, the growth rate of food could not keep pace with the rate of demand. Therupon, land had to be divided among families. After private ownership of land became the order of the day, those who were of a more-greedy disposition started robbing from others' plots of land. When they were detected they denied that they had stolen.

Thus through greed vices such as stealing and lying became manifest in society. To curb the wrong doers and punish them, a king was elected by the people and, thus, the original simple society became much more complex and complicated.

It is said that this moral degeneration of man had adverse effects on nature. The richness of the earth diminished and self-growing rice disappeared. Man had to till the land and cultivate rice for food. This rice grain was enveloped in chaff; it needed cleaning before consumption.

The point I wish to emphasize by citing this evolutionary legend is that Buddhism believes that though change is a factor inherent in nature, man's moral deterioration accelerates the process of change and brings about changes which are adverse to human well being and happiness.

The *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta* of the Digha Nikaya predicts the future course of events when human morals undergo further degeneration.⁵ Gradually, man's health will deteriorate so much that life expectancy will diminish until at last the average human life-span is reduced to ten years and marriageable age to five years. At that time all delicacies such as ghee, butter, honey, etc. will have disappeared from the earth; what is considered the poorest coarse food today will become a delicacy of that day. Thus Buddhism maintains that there is a close link between man's morals and the natural resources available to him.

According to a discourse in the Anguttara Nikaya, when profligate lust, wanton greed, and wrong values grip the heart of man and immorality becomes widespread in society, timely rain does not fall. When timely rain does not fall crops get adversely affected with various kinds of pests and plant diseases. Through lack of nourishing food the human mortality rate rises.[6](#)

Thus, several suttas from the Pali canon show that early Buddhism believes there to be a close relationship between human morality and the natural environment. This idea has been systematized in the theory of the five natural laws (*pañca niyamadhamma*) in the later commentaries.[7](#) According to this theory, in the cosmos there are five natural laws or forces at work, namely *utuniyama* (lit. "season-law"), *bijaniyama* (lit. "seed-law"), *cittaniyama*, *kammaniyama*, and *dhammaniyama*.

They can be translated as physical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, moral laws, and causal laws, respectively. While the first four laws operate within their respective spheres, the last-mentioned law of causality operates *within* each of them as well as *among* them.

This means that the physical environment of any given area conditions the growth and development of its biological component, i.e. flora and fauna.

These in turn influence the thought pattern of the people interacting with them. Modes of thinking determine moral standards. The opposite process of interaction is also possible.

The morals of man influence not only the psychological makeup of the people but the biological and physical environment of the area as well. Thus, the five laws demonstrate that man and nature are bound together in a reciprocal causal relationship with changes in one necessarily bringing about changes in the other.

The commentary on the *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta* goes on to explain the pattern of mutual interaction further.⁸ When mankind is demoralized through greed, famine is the natural outcome; when moral degeneration is due to ignorance, epidemic is the inevitable result; when hatred is the demoralizing force, widespread violence is the ultimate outcome.

If and when mankind realizes that large-scale devastation has taken place as a result of his moral degeneration, a change of heart takes place among the few surviving human beings. With gradual moral regeneration, conditions improve through a long period of cause and effect and mankind, again, starts to enjoy gradually increasing prosperity and longer life.

The world, including nature and mankind, stands or falls with the type of moral force at work. If immorality grips society, man and nature deteriorate; if morality reigns, the quality of human life and nature improves. Thus, greed, hatred, and delusion produce pollution within and without. Generosity, compassion, and wisdom produce purity within and without. This is one reason the Buddha has pronounced that the world is led by the mind, *cittena niyati loko*.⁹ Thus man and nature, according to the ideas expressed in early Buddhism, are interdependent.

Human Use of Natural Resources

For survival, mankind has to depend on nature for his food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and other requisites.

For optimum benefits man has to understand nature so that he can utilize natural resources and live harmoniously with nature. By understanding the working of nature — for example, the seasonal rainfall pattern, methods of conserving water by irrigation, the soil types, the physical conditions required for growth of various food crops, etc. — man can learn to get better returns from his agricultural pursuits. But this learning has to be accompanied by moral restraint, if he is to enjoy the benefits of natural resources for a long time. Man must learn to satisfy his needs and not feed his greeds.

The resources of the world are not unlimited whereas man's greed knows neither limit nor satiation.

Modern man in his unbridled voracious greed for pleasure and acquisition of wealth has exploited nature to the point of near impoverishment.

Ostentatious consumerism is accepted as the order of the day. One writer says that within forty years Americans alone have consumed natural resources to the quantity of what all mankind has consumed for the last 4000 years.[10](#) The vast non-replenishable resources of fossil fuels which took

millions of years to form have been consumed within a couple of centuries to the point of near exhaustion.

This consumerism has given rise to an energy crisis on the one hand and a pollution problem on the other. Man's unrestrained exploitation of nature to gratify his insatiate greed reminds one of the traditional parable of the goose that laid the golden eggs.[11](#)

Buddhism tirelessly advocates the virtues of non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion in all human pursuits. Greed breeds sorrow and unhealthy consequences. Contentment (*santutthi*) is a much praised virtue in Buddhism.[12](#)

The man leading a simple life with few wants easily satisfied is upheld and appreciated as an exemplary character.[13](#) Miserliness[14](#) and wastefulness[15](#) are equally deplored in Buddhism as two degenerate extremes.

Wealth has only instrumental value; it is to be utilized for the satisfaction of man's needs. Hoarding is a senseless anti-social habit comparable to the attitude of the dog in the manger. The vast hoarding of wealth in some countries and the methodical destruction of large quantities of agricultural

produce to keep the market prices from falling, while half the world is dying of hunger and starvation, is really a sad paradox of the present affluent age.

Buddhism commends frugality as a virtue in its own right.

Once, Ananda explained to King Udena the thrifty economic use of robes by the monks in the following order. When new robes are received the old robes are used as coverlets, the old coverlets as mattress covers, the old mattress covers as rugs, the old rugs as dusters, and the old tattered dusters are kneaded with clay and used to repair cracked floors and walls.[16](#) Thus nothing is wasted.

Those who waste are derided as "wood-apple eaters."[17](#) A man shakes the branch of a wood-apple tree and all the fruits, ripe as well as unripe, fall. The man would collect only what he wants and walk away leaving the rest to rot. Such a wasteful attitude is certainly deplored in Buddhism as not only anti-social but criminal.

The excessive exploitation of nature as is done today would certainly be condemned by Buddhism in the strongest possible terms.

Buddhism advocates a gentle non-aggressive attitude towards nature. According to the *Sigalovada Sutta* a householder should accumulate wealth as a bee collects pollen from a flower.¹⁸ The bee harms neither the fragrance nor the beauty of the flower, but gathers pollen to turn it into sweet honey. Similarly, man is expected to make legitimate use of nature so that he can rise above nature and realize his innate spiritual potential.

Attitude towards Animal and Plant Life

The well-known Five Precepts (*pañca sila*) form the minimum code of ethics that every lay Buddhist is expected to adhere to.

Its first precept involves abstention from injury to life. It is explained as the casting aside of all forms of weapons, being conscientious about depriving a living being of life.

In its positive sense it means the cultivation of compassion and sympathy for all living things.¹⁹ The Buddhist layman is expected to abstain from trading in meat too.²⁰

The Buddhist monk has to abide by an even stricter code of ethics than the layman. He has to abstain from practices which would involve even unintentional injury to living creatures. For instance, the Buddha promulgated the rule against going on a journey during the rainy season because of possible injury to worms and insects that come to the surface in wet weather.[21](#) The same concern for non-violence prevents a monk from digging the ground.[22](#)

Once a monk who was a potter prior to ordination built for himself a clay hut and set it on fire to give it a fine finish. The Buddha strongly objected to this as so many living creatures would have been burnt in the process. The hut was broken down on the Buddha's instructions to prevent it from creating a bad precedent for later generations.[23](#) The scrupulous nonviolent attitude towards even the smallest living creatures prevents the monks from drinking unstrained water.[24](#) It is no doubt a sound hygienic habit, but what is noteworthy is the reason which prompts the practice, namely sympathy for living creatures.

Buddhism also prescribes the practice of *metta*, "loving-kindness" towards all creatures of all quarters without restriction.

The *Karaniyametta Sutta* enjoins the cultivation of loving-kindness towards all creatures timid and steady, long and short, big and small, minute and great, visible and invisible, near and far, born and awaiting birth.²⁵ All quarters are to be suffused with this loving attitude. Just as one's own life is precious to oneself, so is the life of the other precious to himself. Therefore, a reverential attitude must be cultivated towards all forms of life.

The *Nandivisala Jataka* illustrates how kindness should be shown to animals domesticated for human service.²⁶ Even a wild animal can be tamed with kind words. Parileyya was a wild elephant who attended on the Buddha when he spent time in the forest away from the monks.²⁷ The infuriated elephant Nalagiri was tamed by the Buddha with no other miraculous power than the power of loving-kindness.²⁸ Man and beast can live and let live without fear of one another if only man cultivates sympathy and regards all life with compassion.

The understanding of kamma and rebirth, too, prepares the Buddhist to adopt a sympathetic attitude towards animals. According to this belief it is possible for human beings to be reborn in subhuman states among animals. The *Kukkuravatika Sutta* can be cited as a canonical reference which substantiates this view.[29](#)

The Jatakas provide ample testimony to this view from commentarial literature. It is possible that our own close relatives have been reborn as animals. Therefore, it is only right that we should treat animals with kindness and sympathy.

The Buddhist notion of merit also engenders a gentle non-violent attitude towards living creatures. It is said that if one throws dish-washing water into a pool where there are insects and living creatures, intending that they feed on the tiny particles of food thus washed away, one accumulates merit even by such trivial generosity.[30](#) According to the *Macchuddana Jataka* the Bodhisatta threw his leftover food into a river in order to feed the fish, and by the power of that merit he was saved from an impending disaster.[31](#) Thus, kindness to animals, be they big or small, is a source of merit

— merit needed for human beings to improve their lot in the cycle of rebirths and to approach the final goal of Nibbana.

Buddhism expresses a gentle non-violent attitude towards the vegetable kingdom as well. It is said that one should not even break the branch of a tree that has given one shelter.[32](#) Plants are so helpful to us in providing us with all necessities of life that we are expected not to adopt a callous attitude towards them. The more strict monastic rules prevent the monks from injuring plant life.[33](#)

Prior to the rise of Buddhism people regarded natural phenomena such as mountains, forests, groves, and trees with a sense of awe and reverence.[34](#) They considered them as the abode of powerful non-human beings who could assist human beings at times of need.

Though Buddhism gave man a far superior Triple Refuge (*tisarana*) in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, these places continued to enjoy public patronage at a popular level, as the acceptance of terrestrial non-human beings such as *devatas*[35](#) and *yakkhas*[36](#) did not violate the belief system of Buddhism.

Therefore, among the Buddhists there is a reverential attitude towards specially long-standing gigantic trees. They are *vanaspati* in Pali, meaning "lords of the forests."[37](#) As huge trees such as the ironwood, the sala, and the fig are also recognized as the Bodhi trees of former Buddhas, the deferential attitude towards trees is further strengthened.[38](#)

It is well known that the *ficus religiosa* is held as an object of great veneration in the Buddhist world today as the tree under which the Buddha attained Enlightenment.

The construction of parks and pleasure groves for public use is considered a great meritorious deed.[39](#) Sakka the lord of gods is said to have reached his status as a result of social services such as the construction of parks, pleasure groves, ponds, wells, and roads.[40](#)

The open air, natural habitats and forest trees have a special fascination for the Eastern mind as symbols of spiritual freedom. The home life is regarded as a fetter (*sambadha*) that keeps man in bondage and misery.

Renunciation is like the open air (*abbhokasa*), nature unhampered by man's activity.[41](#) The chief events in the life

of the Buddha too took place in the open air. He was born in a park at the foot of a tree in Kapilavatthu; he attained Enlightenment in the open air at the foot of the Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya; he inaugurated his missionary activity in the open air in the sala grove of the Malas in Pava. The Buddha's constant advice to his disciples also was to resort to natural habitats such as forest groves and glades. There, undisturbed by human activity, they could zealously engage themselves in meditation.[42](#)

Attitude towards Pollution

Environmental pollution has assumed such vast proportions today that man has been forced to recognize the presence of an ecological crisis. He can no longer turn a blind eye to the situation as he is already threatened with new pollution-related diseases. Pollution to this extent was unheard of during the time of the Buddha. But there is sufficient evidence in the Pali canon to give us insight into the Buddhist attitude towards the pollution problem. Several Vinaya rules prohibit monks from polluting green grass and water with saliva, urine, and feces.[43](#) These were the

common agents of pollution known during the Buddha's day and rules were promulgated against causing such pollution.

Cleanliness was highly commended by the Buddhists both in the person and in the environment. They were much concerned about keeping water clean, be it in the river, pond, or well. These sources of water were for public use and each individual had to use them with proper public-spirited caution so that others after him could use them with the same degree of cleanliness. Rules regarding the cleanliness of green grass were prompted by ethical and aesthetic considerations. Moreover, grass is food for most animals and it is man's duty to refrain from polluting it by his activities.

Noise is today recognized as a serious personal and environmental pollutant troubling everyone to some extent. It causes deafness, stress, and irritation, breeds resentment, saps energy, and inevitably lowers efficiency.⁴⁴ The Buddha's attitude to noise is very clear from the Pali canon. He was critical of noise and did not hesitate to voice his stern disapproval whenever occasion arose.⁴⁵ Once he ordered a group of monks to leave the monastery for noisy behavior.⁴⁶ He enjoyed solitude and silence immensely and

spoke in praise of silence as it is most appropriate for mental culture. Noise is described as a thorn to one engaged in the first step of meditation,[47](#) but, thereafter, noise ceases to be a disturbance as the meditator passes beyond the possibility of being disturbed by sound.

The Buddha and his disciples reveled in the silent solitary natural habitats unencumbered by human activity. Even in the choice of monasteries the presence of undisturbed silence was an important quality they looked for.[48](#) Silence invigorates those who are pure at heart and raises their efficiency for meditation. But silence overawes those who are impure with ignoble impulses of greed, hatred, and delusion. The *Bhayabherava Sutta* beautifully illustrates how even the rustle of leaves by a falling twig in the forest sends tremors through an impure heart.[49](#) This may perhaps account for the present craze for constant auditory stimulation with transistors and earphones, etc.

The moral impurity caused by greed, avarice, acquisitive instincts, and aggression has rendered man so timid that he cannot bear silence which lays bare the reality of self-awareness. He, therefore, prefers to drown himself in loud

music. Unlike classical music, which tends to soothe nerves and induce relaxation, rock music excites the senses. Constant exposure to it actually renders man incapable of relaxation and sound sleep without tranquilizers.

As to the question of the Buddhist attitude to music, it is recorded that the Buddha has spoken quite appreciatively of music on one occasion.[50](#) When Pañcasikha the divine musician sang a song while playing the lute in front of the Buddha, the Buddha praised his musical ability saying that the instrumental music blended well with his song. Again, the remark of an Arahant that the joy of seeing the real nature of things is far more exquisite than orchestral music[51](#) shows the recognition that music affords a certain amount of pleasure even if it is inferior to higher kinds of pleasure.

But it is stressed that the ear is a powerful sensory channel through which man gets addicted to sense pleasures. Therefore, to dissuade monks from getting addicted to melodious sounds, the monastic discipline describes music as a lament.[52](#)

The psychological training of the monks is so advanced that they are expected to cultivate a taste not only for external silence, but for inner silence of speech, desire, and thought as well. The sub-vocal speech, the inner chatter that goes on constantly within us in our waking life is expected to be silenced through meditation.[53](#)

The sage who succeeded in quelling this inner speech completely is described as a *muni*, a silent one.[54](#) His inner silence is maintained even when he speaks!

It is not inappropriate to pay passing notice to the Buddhist attitude to speech as well. Moderation in speech is considered a virtue, as one can avoid four unwholesome vocal activities thereby, namely, falsehood, slander, harsh speech, and frivolous talk.

In its positive aspect moderation in speech paves the path to self-awareness. Buddhism commends speaking at the appropriate time, speaking the truth, speaking gently, speaking what is useful, and speaking out of loving-kindness; the opposite modes of speech are condemned.[55](#) The Buddha's general advice to the monks regarding speech

is to be engaged in discussing the Dhamma or maintain noble silence.[56](#) The silence that reigned in vast congregations of monks during the Buddha's day was indeed a surprise even to the kings of the time.[57](#)

Silence is serene and noble as it is conducive to the spiritual progress of those who are pure at heart.

Even Buddhist laymen were reputed to have appreciated quietude and silence. Pañcangika Thapati can be cited as a conspicuous example.[58](#) Once Mahanama the Sakyan complained to the Buddha that he is disturbed by the hustle of the busy city of Kapilavatthu. He explained that he experiences calm serenity when he visits the Buddha in the quiet salubrious surroundings of the monastery and his peace of mind gets disturbed when he goes to the city.[59](#)

Though noise to the extent of being a pollutant causing health hazards was not known during the Buddha's day, we have adduced enough material from the Pali canon to illustrate the Buddha's attitude to the problem. Quietude is much appreciated as spiritually rewarding, while noise condemned as a personal and social nuisance.

Nature as Beautiful

The Buddha and his disciples regarded natural beauty as a source of great joy and aesthetic satisfaction. The saints who purged themselves of sensuous worldly pleasures responded to natural beauty with a detached sense of appreciation. The average poet looks at nature and derives inspiration mostly by the sentiments it evokes in his own heart; he becomes emotionally involved with nature. For instance, he may compare the sun's rays passing over the mountain tops to the blush on a sensitive face, he may see a tear in a dew drop, the lips of his beloved in a rose petal, etc. But the appreciation of the saint is quite different. He appreciates nature's beauty for its own sake and derives joy unsullied by sensuous associations and self-projected ideas. The simple spontaneous appreciation of nature's exquisite beauty is expressed by the Elder Mahakassapa in the following words:[60](#)

Those upland glades delightful to the soul,
Where the Kaveri spreads its wildering wreaths,
Where sound the trumpet-calls of elephants:
Those are the hills where my soul delights.

Those rocky heights with hue of dark blue clouds
Where lies embossed many a shining lake
Of crystal-clear, cool waters, and whose slopes
The 'herds of Indra' cover and bedeck:
Those are the hills wherein my soul delights.

Fair uplands rain-refreshed, and resonant
With crested creatures' cries antiphonal,
Lone heights where silent Rishis oft resort:
Those are the hills wherein my soul delights.

Again the poem of Kaludayi, inviting the Buddha to visit
Kapilavatthu, contains a beautiful description of spring:[61](#)

Now crimson glow the trees, dear Lord, and cast
Their ancient foliage in quest of fruit,
Like crests of flame they shine irradiant
And rich in hope, great Hero, is the hour.

Verdure and blossom-time in every tree
Wherever we look delightful to the eye,
And every quarter breathing fragrant airs,

While petals falling, yearning comes fruit:

It is time, O Hero, that we set out hence.

The long poem of Talaputa is a fascinating soliloquy.⁶² His religious aspirations are beautifully blended with a profound knowledge of the teachings of the Buddha against the background of a sylvan resort. Many more poems could be cited for saintly appreciation of nature, but it is not necessary to burden the essay with any more quotations. Suffice it to know that the saints, too, were sensitive to the beauties and harmony of nature and that their appreciation is colored by spontaneity, simplicity, and a non-sensuous spirituality.

Conclusion

In the modern age, man has become alienated from himself and nature. When science started opening new vistas of knowledge revealing the secrets of nature one by one, man gradually lost faith in theistic religions. Consequently, he developed scanty respect for moral and spiritual values as well.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the acquisition of wealth by mechanical exploitation of natural

resources, man has become more and more materialistic in his attitudes and values. The pursuit of sense pleasures and the acquisition of possessions have become ends in themselves. Man's sense faculties dominate him to an unrelenting degree and man has become a slave to his insatiable passions. (Incidentally the sense faculties are in Pali *indriyas* or lords, because they control man unless he is sufficiently vigilant to become their master.) Thus, man has become alienated from himself as he abandoned himself to the influence of sense pleasures and acquisitive instincts.

In his greed for more and more possessions, he has adopted a violent and aggressive attitude towards nature. Forgetting that he is a part and parcel of nature, he exploits it with unrestrained greed, thus alienating himself from nature as well.

The net result is the deterioration of man's physical and mental health on the one hand, and the rapid depletion of non-replenishable natural resources and environmental pollution on the other. These results remind us of the Buddhist teachings in the suttas discussed above, which maintain that the moral degeneration of man leads to the

decrease of his life-span and the depletion of natural resources.

Moral degeneration is a double-edged weapon, it exercises adverse effects on man's psycho-physical well being as well as on nature.

Already killer diseases such as heart ailments, cancer, diabetes, AIDS, etc., are claiming victims on an unprecedented scale. In the final analysis these can all be traced to man's moral deterioration. Depletion of vast resources of fossil fuels and forests has given rise to an energy crisis. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that such rapid depletion of non-renewable natural resources within less than two centuries, an infinitesimal fraction of the millions of years taken for them to form, is due to modern man's inordinate greed and acquisitiveness.

A number of simple ancient societies had advanced technological skills, as is evident by their vast sophisticated irrigation schemes designed to feed the fundamental needs of several millions. Yet they survived in some countries over 2000 years without such problems as environmental

pollution and depletion of natural resources. This was no doubt due to validity of the philosophy which inspired and formed the basis of these civilizations.

In the present ecocrisis man has to look for radical solutions. "Pollution cannot be dealt with in the long term on a remedial or cosmetic basis or by tackling symptoms: all measures should deal with basic causes. These are determined largely by our values, priorities, and choices."[63](#)
Man must reappraise his value system. The materialism that has guided his lifestyle has landed him in very severe problems.

Buddhism teaches that mind is the forerunner of all things, mind is supreme. If one acts with an impure mind, i.e. a mind sullied with greed, hatred and delusion, suffering is the inevitable result.

If one acts with a pure mind, i.e. with the opposite qualities of contentment, compassion, and wisdom, happiness will follow like a shadow.[64](#)

Man has to understand that pollution in the environment has been caused because there has been psychological pollution

within himself. If he wants a clean environment he has to adopt a lifestyle that springs from a moral and spiritual dimension.

Buddhism offers man a simple moderate lifestyle eschewing both extremes of self-deprivation and self-indulgence. Satisfaction of basic human necessities, reduction of wants to the minimum, frugality, and contentment are its important characteristics. Each man has to order his life on normal principles, exercise self-control in the enjoyment of the senses, discharge his duties in his various social roles, and conduct himself with wisdom and self-awareness in all activities. It is only when each man adopts a simple moderate lifestyle that mankind as a whole will stop polluting the environment.

This seems to be the only way of overcoming the present ecocrisis and the problem of alienation. With such a lifestyle, man will adopt a non-exploitative, non-aggressive, gentle attitude towards nature. He can then live in harmony with nature, utilizing its resources for the satisfaction of his basic needs.

The Buddhist admonition is to utilize nature in the same way as a bee collects pollen from the flower, neither polluting its beauty nor depleting its fragrance. Just as the bee manufactures honey out of pollen, so man should be able to find happiness and fulfillment in life without harming the natural world in which he lives.

Notes

All Pali texts referred to are editions of the Pali Text Society, London. Abbreviations used are as follows:

A Anguttara Nikaya

D Digha Nikaya

Dh Dhammapada

Dh.A Dhammapada Atthakatha

J Jataka

M Majjhima Nikaya

S Samyutta Nikaya

Sn Sutta-nipata

Thag Theragatha

Vin Vinaya Pitaka

[1.](#) A. IV, 100.

[2.](#) S. IV, 52.

[3.](#) A. IV, 100.

[4.](#) D. III, 80.

[5.](#) D. III, 71.

[6.](#) A. I, 160.

[7.](#) Atthasalini, 854.

[8.](#) Dh.A III, 854.

[9.](#) S. I, 39.

[10.](#) Quoted in Vance Packard, *The Waste Makers* (London 1961), p. 195.

[11.](#) Cp. J. I, 475 f.

[12.](#) Dh. v. 204.

[13.](#) A. IV, 2, 220, 229.

- [14.](#) Dh.A. I, 20 ff.
- [15.](#) Dh.A. III, 129 ff.
- [16.](#) Vin. II, 291.
- [17.](#)A. IV, 283.
- [18.](#)D. III, 188.
- [19.](#) D. I, 4.
- [20.](#) A. III, 208.
- [21.](#)Vin. I, 137.
- [22.](#) Vin. IV, 125.
- [23.](#) Vin. III, 42.
- [24.](#)Vin. IV, 125.
- [25.](#) Sn. vv. 143-152.
- [26.](#) J. I, 191.
- [27.](#) Dh.A. I, 58 ff.
- [28.](#) Vin. II, 194 f.
- [29.](#) M. I, 387 f.
- [30.](#) A. I, 161.
- [31.](#) J. II, 423.
- [32.](#) Petavatthu II, 9, 3.
- [33.](#) Vin. IV, 34.
- [34.](#) Dh. v. 188.
- [35.](#) S. I, 1-45.

- [36.](#) S. I, 206-215.
- [37.](#) S. IV, 302; Dh.A. I, 3
- [38.](#) D. II, 4
- [39.](#) S. I, 33.
- [40.](#) J. I, 199 f.
- [41.](#) D. I, 63.
- [42.](#) M. I, 118; S. IV, 373
- [43.](#) Vin. IV, 205-206.
- [44.](#) Robert Arvill, *Man and Environment* (Penguin Books, 1978), p. 118.
- [45.](#) A. III, 31.
- [46.](#) M. I, 457.
- [47.](#) A. V, 135.
- [48.](#) A. V, 15.
- [49.](#) M. I, 16-24.
- [50.](#) D. II, 267.
- [51.](#) Thag. v. 398.
- [52.](#) A. I, 261.
- [53.](#) S. IV, 217, 293.
- [54.](#) Sn. vv. 207-221; A. I, 273.
- [55.](#) M. I, 126.
- [56.](#) M. I, 161.

[57](#). M. II, 122; D. I, 50.

[58](#). M. II, 23.

[59](#). S. V, 369.

[60](#). Thag. vv. 1062-1071.

[61](#). Thag. vv. 527-529.

[62](#). Thag. vv. 1091-1145.

[63](#). Arvill, *Man and Environment*, p. 170.

[64](#). Dh. vv. 1, 2

Publisher's note

The [Buddhist Publication Society](#) is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for people of all creeds.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is — a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

Buddhist Publication Society

P.O. Box 61

54, Sangharaja Mawatha

Kandy, Sri Lanka

Provenance:

©1987 Lily de Silva.

Excerpted from *Buddhist Perspectives on the Ecocrisis* (Wheel Publication No. 346), edited by Klass Sandell (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1987). Transcribed from a file provided by the BPS, with minor revisions in accordance with the ATI style sheet.

This Access to Insight edition is ©2005–2009 John T. Bullitt.

Terms of use: You may copy, reformat, reprint, republish, and redistribute this work in any medium whatsoever, provided that: (1) you only make such copies, etc. available *free of charge*; (2) you clearly indicate that any derivatives of this work (including translations) are derived from this source document; and (3) you include the full text of this license in any copies or derivatives of this work. Otherwise, all rights reserved. For additional information about this license, see the [FAQ](#).

How to cite this document (one suggested style): "The Buddhist Attitude Towards Nature", by Lily de Silva. *Access to Insight*, June 7, 2009, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/desilva/attitude.html>.

Radical Therapy

Buddhist Precepts in the Modern World

by

Lily de Silva

© 2005–2009

The Five Precepts are the basic moral code of Buddhism, undertaken daily by lay Buddhists along with the Three Refuges and regarded as the indispensable foundation of a life governed by the Dhamma.

The Five Precepts consist of five training rules of abstinence: (1) from killing, (2) from stealing, (3) from sexual misconduct, (4) from false speech, (5) from intoxicants.

The Five Precepts are designed to discipline and purify the three avenues of human action — body, speech, and mind. Abstention from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct

disciplines bodily action. Abstention from false speech disciplines verbal action. It is also expected under this fourth precept that one should refrain from slander, abusive speech and frivolous talk. The dual discipline of body and speech has a salutary effect on the purity of mind, though complete mental purity can be brought about effectively only through bhavana, mental culture or meditation. The fifth precept against the use of intoxicants attempts to safeguard the mental faculty from degenerating through a bad habit. A man under the influence of intoxicants has no control over himself, and thus, is easily tempted to transgress the four other precepts as well.

Traditionally, the Five Precepts are regarded as part and parcel of personal morality, a stepping stone along the path to liberation. However, these Five Precepts also have a momentous relevance to modern society.

Man in the modern world lives in a critical state of illness — an illness rooted in moral negligence. The five rules of training which form the backbone of Buddhist ethics offer a remedy for that illness, a course of therapy that is radical

because it strikes at the root of the problem. This I hope to show by an examination of each of the precepts.

The precept against killing

The world today is plagued by various kinds of conflicts: ethnic, racial, religious and ideological. Terrorism appears to reign supreme in many countries. War is not just a threat; it is a continuing actuality all over the globe. The use of nuclear power in war is a worldwide anxiety. The manufacture of firearms is a thriving industry.

Are there wars because there are firearms, or are there firearms because there are wars? The two seem to form a vicious circle, and it may be questioned whether conflicts are maneuvered and nurtured in order to find a ready market for the flourishing arms industry.

Enough nuclear power is available today to blow the planet up several times over. Chemical and biological weapons capable of inflicting unimaginable torment have been designed to kill people but leave buildings intact. But it is well to remember that cruelty dehumanizes the victim overtly, and the perpetrators in more subtle ways. The

question arises whether life is deemed more, or less, valuable today when man is at the apex of his technological prowess, than in earlier periods of his history.

If a new world war erupts, there will be no victor to enjoy victory, as the victor, victim, and the uninvolved will all be annihilated. Some realization of this imminent catastrophe seems to have dawned on the nuclear powers at long last, hence their continuing negotiations for arms control. But it is a timely question to ask how valuable one individual holds the life of another to be.

When we pay attention to the precarious situation man faces today, we begin to appreciate and marvel at the real value and significance of the precept against killing. If only the scientific community of the proud modern world had observed this simple moral precept of the inviolability and sanctity of life, it might have concentrated only on the constructive uses of science.

But what is paradoxical and even ludicrous, today, is that modern man is foolhardy enough to pride himself on unprecedented scientific achievement, when in fact he has

brought the entire human species to the very brink of disaster.

Militarism is not the only ill effect of the lack of sympathy for life. It is felt to a very marked degree in agriculture. The free use of insecticides, weedicides, and chemical fertilizers has caused soil pollution with disastrous long-term consequences. The natural chemical and bacterial balance of the soil has been disturbed. As a result the fertility and the productivity of the soil are diminishing at an alarming rate. Rivers and seas too have been polluted by chemical waste and in some areas rivers have become incapable of sustaining aquatic life.

All these have adversely affected human life, and, unless man turns over a new leaf with a radical change in attitude, this dangerous trend portends disaster. A return to moral values seems a survival imperative.

Another disgraceful inhuman activity we hear of sometimes is the prevalence of baby farms in the Third World countries, where it is alleged that unwanted babies are sold to human tissue banks to provide organs and tissues for transplant

purposes. One shudders, overcome with revulsion at this callous and shameful disregard for the life of another.

Money, status, and power seem to be the criteria which determine the value of one person's life as against that of another. Can civilized man, with a clear conscience, use the life of one individual to save the life of another?

This shows the extent to which modern man has been dehumanized. Moral discipline is a crying need to impress upon him the inherent worth and dignity of all humanity.

The precept against stealing

Lawlessness and misappropriation of various kinds are prevalent today to an unprecedented degree. The mass media are replete with distressing news about pick-pocketing, bribery, smuggling, organized robbery, blackmailing, hijacking, and, in the world news, worse. Society today has acquired such perverse values that sometimes daredevil crimes are sentimentalized as acts of valor. Apart from such blatant crimes, modern society is guilty of subtle forms of misappropriation which have far-reaching adverse effects.

Man today uses non-renewable natural resources at the risk of his own survival. Goods of inferior quality are produced so that they have a short span of utility value because a market must be found for their speedily produced replacements.

Brain-washed by commercial advertisements to believe in the merits of consumerism, modern man is actually using the earth's resources at a rate which jeopardizes generations yet unborn. Is this not a case of robbing the rights of future generations? If a household prepared food sufficient for ten people, but it was all consumed by four, we would not hesitate to call the behavior of the four selfish and immoral. But when modern man consumes earth's non-renewable resources without regard for future generations, we are foolish enough to call it development and progress.

Periodically, the world today destroys thousands of tons of surplus food to prevent the reduction of market prices, when in fact there are millions of people undernourished and dying of starvation.

At a time when food preservation techniques and transport facilities are plentiful, and people in all parts of the world are well informed about the situation in other countries, it is appalling to see the wanton waste of usable goods and the lack of fellow feeling and altruism.

The inordinate acquisitive greed of man is the root cause of much misery today. The wanton felling of trees has resulted in severe soil erosion in mountainous regions. Time and again, the consequence has been massive mudslides resulting in the destruction of whole villages and the loss of hundreds of lives. The destruction caused to tropical rain forests all over the world has also altered the climatic conditions of the whole planet. Scientists have been warning of the danger of a global temperature rise and the consequent melting of ice-caps in the polar regions. In such an event within the course of the next century, vast inhabited coastal areas of all the continents will be engulfed by the sea.

All these and many more calamities are the direct effects of modern man's greed, which has assumed intolerable proportions. The first step to curb greed is the observance of the second precept, the positive aspect of which is non-

ostentatiousness and the ability to be contented with a simple life where needs are satisfied rather than greeds.

The precept against sexual misconduct

Disdaining the sexual mores of the pre-industrial era, modern man has plunged headlong into a life of uninhibited pleasure, so much so that the last few decades have been characterized by what is called a sexual revolution. The discovery of contraception relieved man of the responsibilities that come in the wake of sex and sensuality has become an accepted social trend. All manners of sexual behavior are practiced with uninhabited openness. Homosexuality, lesbianism, premarital and extra-marital sex have become widespread phenomena. Incest and rape, too, raise their ugly heads with unprecedented frequency. Sexual abuse of children within the family circle is so common that in Britain a telephone service called Childline has been set up which specializes in counseling abused children. It is reported that this voluntary organization receives over 1000 calls a day!

The ill effects of this permissiveness have gradually emerged. The divorce rate has become alarmingly high as couples are incapable of maintaining steady, lasting, emotionally sound relationships. Children have suffered most in broken homes and large numbers of adolescents have become drug addicts and delinquents. Juvenile delinquency is thus a serious social problem. Public institutions have been organized to care for unwanted children, and to rehabilitate drug addicts and delinquents. Babies are sometimes battered to death during family crises and measures have been adopted to deal with family violence. Abortion has become so frequent that it is currently a widely debated moral and socio-legal medical issue.

Sexually transmitted diseases have increased by leaps and bounds to assume almost epidemic proportions. The whole world was shaken with a rude shock by the advent of the dreaded disease AIDS, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, with which medical scientists all over the globe are still struggling. It is also a well-known secret that one of the causes for cancer of the cervix in women is exposure to several sexual partners.

Already burdened with various other socio-economic problems due to industrialization and urbanization, man also has to face the additional burden of family and health problems. Interpersonal relations have become superficial and brittle, and large numbers of people find themselves alienated, frustrated and mentally ill, without a sense of direction and purpose. The alienated individual has no friend to turn to for solace, and as he is already estranged from religion, although psychiatry has stepped in to give some measure of relief.

It must not be forgotten that man emerged from savagery to civilization through family life. The love of the mother for her offspring played a significant role in this march, and the family was the vital social unit in giving the new arrival the comfort and security which he sorely needed. Modern man in his greed for sensual pleasures has sacrificed the sanctity of this vital institution, and he found himself drowning in the very pleasures which he so much wanted to enjoy, reminding one of the traditional simile of the ant fallen in the pot of honey.

It is really to safeguard man against such catastrophic disasters that the third precept has been so designed to form part and parcel of the code of discipline obligatory for laymen.

The precept against false speech

When selfish pursuit of personal gain and pleasure largely determine human action, one can hardly expect a high standard of honesty to prevail in society. Today, there appear to be discrepancies between words and deeds even at the highest levels of national authority.

Nations establish diplomatic relations as a gesture of friendship and goodwill, but from time to time we also hear them accusing each other of employing spy services to pry into one another's internal affairs. This shows that there are double standards and double dealings and often, despite a facade of friendship, the result is mutual distrust and suspicion at the international level.

We also hear about terrorist training camps being established in some countries to train men in guerrilla warfare to destabilize the government of another friendly country.

Showing a very friendly face, some leaders work with sinister hypocritical motives to stabilize their own political positions at the expense of others.

Newspapers have also reported how a ship laden with toxic chemical waste was going from an undisclosed country to an unidentified destination. Ultimately, it is said to have unloaded its "cargo" in a coastal farm in Nigeria, purchasing the consent of the poor farmer without the knowledge of the Nigerian government.

From time to time we also hear reports of scandalous behavior on the part of national leaders. In some instances when their honesty and integrity have become questionable, public pressure has obliged them to resign from high office. Some have been defeated at elections due to malpractices. When those in the highest social and political positions stoop to such dishonesty, one cannot expect moral standards to be maintained in society at large.

According to Buddhism rulers have to set a good example to their subjects by maintaining a high standard of morality in their public and private lives. It is men of high integrity and

moral stature who can command the respect and loyalty of the people. When rulers are unrighteous and morally depraved, social values deteriorate and society gradually sinks into anarchy and chaos (*sabbam rattham dukkham seti raja ce hoti adhammiko*, A.ii, 74-76).

As man is social animal, mutual dependability is a survival strategy. Dishonesty weakens the very basis of society and the whole social structure breaks down with mutual distrust. Military strength cannot bring unity and harmony within society; it is moral power which infuses resilience and strength to social life.

The precept against intoxicants

Brewing liquor is one of the most profitable industries in the world, today, and the market is replete with various brands of alcohol. In Sri Lanka the state coffers are handsomely augmented by the revenue earned from the sale of liquor, and the consumption of expensive foreign alcohol is regarded as a luxury of high society. Values have become so perverted that it is the tee-totaller who gets cornered in society today. Only a man with high moral scruples and a

strong character can decline the offer of a drink at a party despite the embarrassment of being regarded as a wet blanket or one under petticoat government. It also remains a fact that many who end up as alcoholics were first introduced to drinking for social acceptance.

Alcoholism and drug abuse are burning social problems of modern society. They ruin the physical and mental health of the addicts. One does not have to be a habitual drunkard to fall prey to disease. According to a British medical journal, daily beer drinkers are twelve times more at risk of developing cancer of the colon than non-drinkers. It is also reported that even relatively modest social drinking by pregnant women can harm the fetus. The babies are abnormally small, or have small heads or jittery eyes. These are effects associated with what is called the fetal-alcoholism syndrome, which in its extreme form produces very distorted features and a retarded brain. Alcohol also causes irreparable damage to brain cells in adults even when taken in small quantities, while larger quantities can damage vital organs of the body. Drug abuse is even more injurious.

Fully realizing the harmful effects of intoxicants, Buddhism has included abstention from them among the basic moral precepts. The dangers of intoxicants are enumerated in a number of the Buddha's discourses, the most famous of which is the Sigalovada Sutta (D.iii,182). Indulgence in intoxicants causes economic downfall. The episode of Mahadhanasetthi (DhA.iii,129), who squandered a vast fortune by drinking with evil friends and was reduced to beggary in his old age, is a classic example related in the Pali texts of a wealthy man ruined by alcohol.

Intoxicants can cause disputes, quarrels and family violence. Disruption of family life is often caused by addiction to liquor and drugs, and this brings about a whole chain of other related social problems. The Suttas report that ill health and a bad reputation are also caused by the habit of taking intoxicants, which also destroys inhibitions and weakens wisdom. The situation is aptly summarized by a modern writer who said that man's conscience is soluble in alcohol.

Most of the crimes in modern society, as well as serious traffic accidents, have liquor and drugs as the root cause. In spite of the devastating social effects of alcohol that are so

evident today, attractive advertisements clutter the mass media depicting liquor as integral to the lifestyle of the affluent, to emulate which is the dream of the common man.

People have to be educated and convinced not only of the ill effects of intoxicants but also of the value of will power and strength of character to resist the temptations that society throws in their way. It is only one who is weak in character that will get trapped in these snares.

The individual should also be taught to cultivate a sympathetic attitude toward his own body and mind. They are his instruments of action, and it is his own responsibility, and in his own interest, to keep them healthy and efficient.

In the meditation on loving-kindness in Buddhism the individual is first taught how to develop a benevolent attitude toward himself. "May I be well and happy" is quietly and mindfully repeated several times each day at the beginning of the meditation to impress upon the mind a compassionate attitude toward himself. When the benevolent attitude becomes deeply ingrained in the mind, the meditator

will gradually refrain from habits which are injurious to his own body and mind.

It is the paramount duty of all concerned people who realize that society today is in a precarious state, to muster all resources at their command to bring about a change in man's attitude to rescue him from the perils of his own making.

The moral dimension

The scientific man of today has tapped many of nature's secrets and has learned to control the physical forces of universe. But he has yet to learn to master the social and psychological forces that affect his very being, and his relationship to his fellowmen and the environment.

Though man in this modern age may be an intellectual giant who has achieved technological wonders, emotionally he is a mere dwarf who has barely taken a couple of steps beyond the Stone Age. One writer compares modern man to a person who has one leg tied to a jet plane while the other leg is tied to a bullock cart.

Thus man's development is utterly lopsided, and this psychological imbalance seems to be largely responsible for the crisis situation we face. What is needed is the total development of the personality as a whole, and for that the cultivation of the moral dimension is an absolute must.

We have traffic rules to facilitate the smooth flow of traffic. Though they appear to place restrictions on the freedom of the individual, they in fact grant freedom of movement to one and all. Moral laws are similar to traffic rules. They impose certain restraints with the double purpose of granting maximum satisfaction to the individual in the long run, and of preventing the individual from hindering his fellowmen from realizing their own satisfaction. Moral laws coordinate different aspects of human experience so that there are no conflicts within the individual and among individuals.

Conflicts, terrorism, and wars have to be understood as the external manifestations of the internal disharmony of man. Man thinks violent-thoughts, therefore, there is violence in society. The corrupt mind brings suffering in its wake. This is an eternal truth. If happiness is what we yearn for, we have to entertain wholesome thoughts, and act with

wholesome thoughts; then, happiness will follow effortlessly like a shadow. To train the mind for wholesome thoughts and healthy attitudes our physical and verbal activities must be disciplined, and this is exactly what the Five Precepts do.

They control our destructive potentials and humanize the predatory animal in us.

About the Author

Lily de Silva is Professor of Pali and Buddhist Studies at the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka. A regular contributor to Buddhist scholarly and popular journals, she is also the editor of the subcommentary to the Digha Nikaya, published by the Pali Text Society of London. Her previous BPS publications are *One Foot in the World* (Wheel No.337/338) and *The Self-Made Private Prison* (Bodhi Leaves No.120).

Publisher's note

The [Buddhist Publication Society](#) is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for people of all creeds.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is — a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

Buddhist Publication Society

P.O. Box 61

54, Sangharaja Mawatha

Kandy, Sri Lanka

Provenance:

©1991 Lily de Silva.

Bodhi Leaves No. 123 (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991). Transcribed from the print edition in 2005 by a volunteer, under the auspices of the Access to Insight Dhamma Transcription Project and by arrangement with the Buddhist Publication Society. Minor revisions were made in accordance with the ATI style sheet. Pali diacritics have been omitted.

This Access to Insight edition is ©2005–2009 John T. Bullitt.

Terms of use: You may copy, reformat, reprint, republish, and redistribute this work in any medium whatsoever, provided that: (1) you only make such copies, etc. available *free of charge*; (2) you clearly indicate that any derivatives of this work (including translations) are derived from this source document;

and (3) you include the full text of this license in any copies or derivatives of this work. Otherwise, all rights reserved. For additional information about this license, see the [FAQ](#).

How to cite this document (one suggested style): "Radical Therapy: Buddhist Precepts in the Modern World", by Lily de Silva. *Access to Insight*, June 7, 2009, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/desilva/bl123.html>.

Giving in the Pali Canon _

by Lily de Silva

Dana, giving, is extolled in the Pali canon as a great virtue. It is, in fact, the beginning of the path to liberation. When the Buddha preaches to a newcomer he starts his graduated sermon with an exposition on the virtues of giving (*danakatha*, Vin.i,15,18). Of the three bases for the performance of meritorious deeds (*punnakiriyavatthu*), giving is the first, the other two being virtue and mental culture (A.iv,241). It is also the first of the ten *paramita* perfected by a Buddha. Therefore, on the march towards liberation as an arahant or a Buddha, one initially has to practice *dana*.

Function of Giving

Giving is of prime importance in the Buddhist scheme of mental purification, because it is the best weapon against greed (*lobha*), the first of the three unwholesome

motivational roots (*akusalamula*). Greed is wrapt up with egoism and selfishness, since we hold our personalities and our possessions as "I" and "mine". Giving helps make egoism thaw: it is the antidote to cure the illness of egoism and greed.

"Overcome the taint of greed and practice giving," exhorts the Devatasamyutta (S.i,18). The Dhammapada admonishes us to conquer miserliness with generosity (*jine kadariyam danena*, Dhp. 223).

It is difficult to exercise this virtue of giving proportionate to the intensity of one's greed and selfishness. As such the Devatasamyutta equates giving to a battle (*danan ca yuddhan ca samanam ahu*, S.i,20). One has to fight the evil forces of greed before one can make up one's mind to give away something dear and useful to oneself.

The Latukikopama Sutta illustrates how a man lacking in spiritual strength finds it hard to give up a thing he has been used to (M.i, 449). A small quail can come to death when it gets entangled even in a useless rotten creeper. Though weak, a rotten creeper is a great bond for the small bird. But

even an iron chain is not too big a bond for a strong elephant. Similarly, a poor wretched man of weak character would find it difficult to part with his shabby meager belongings, while a strong-charactered king will even give up a kingdom once convinced of the dangers of greed.

Miserliness is not the only hindrance to giving. Carelessness and ignorance of the working of kamma and survival after death are equally valid causes (*macchera ca pamada ca evam danam na diyati*, S.i,18). If one knows the moral advantages of giving, one will be vigilant to seize opportunities to practice this great virtue. Once the Buddha said that if people only knew the value of giving as he does, they would not take a single meal without sharing their food with others (It.p,18).

Qualities of the Donor

The suttas (e.g., D.i,137) employ a number of terms to describe the qualities of a donor. He is a man with faith (*saddha*), he has faith in the nobility of a morally sound life, in the teachings of kamma and survival after death. He believes in the possibility of the moral and spiritual

perfection of man. In short, he is not a materialist, and he has faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha.

He is not merely a giver (*dayako*), he is a lordly giver (*danapati*). The commentary explains the concept of "lordly giver" in the following words: "He who himself enjoys delicious things but gives to others what is not delicious becomes a donor who is a slave to the gifts he gives. He who gives things of the same quality as he himself enjoys is one who is like a friend of the gift. He who satisfies himself with whatever he can get but gives delicacies to others is a lordly giver, a senior and a master of the gifts given."

The donor is also described as one who keeps an open house for the needy (*anavatadvaro*). He is like a wellspring (*opanabhuto*) for recluses, brahmans, the destitute, wayfarers, wanderers and beggars. Being such a one he does meritorious deeds. He is munificent (*muttacago*) and is interested in sharing his blessings with others (*danasamvibhagarato*). He is a philanthropist who understands the difficulties of the poor (*vadannu*). He is open-handed and is ready to comply with another's request (*payatapani*). He is one fit to be asked from (*yacayogo*). He

takes delight in distributing gifts to the needy (*vossaggarato*), and has a heart bent on giving (*cagaparibhavitacitto*). Such are the epithets used in the suttas to describe the qualities of the liberal-minded.

A noble giver is one who is happy before, during and after giving (A.iii,336). Before giving, he is happy anticipating the opportunity to exercise his generosity. While giving, he is happy that he is making another happy by fulfilling a need. After giving, he is satisfied that he has done a good deed.

The suttas list generosity as one of the important qualities that go to make a gentleman (A.iv,220). The Buddha compares the man who righteously earns his wealth and gives of it to the needy to a man who has both eyes, whereas the one who only earns wealth but does no merit is like a one-eyed man (A.i,129-30). The wealthy man who enjoys his riches by himself without sharing is said to be digging his own grave (Sn. 102).

The Donations

Practically anything useful can be given as a gift. The Niddesa (ND.2, 523) gives a list of fourteen items that are fit to be given for charity. They are robes, almsfood, dwelling places, medicine and other requisites for the sick, food, drink, cloths, vehicles, garlands, perfume, unguent, beds, houses and lamps. It is not necessary to have much to practice generosity, for one can give according to one's means.

Gifts given from one's meager resources are considered very valuable (*appasma dakkhina dinna sahasena samam mita*, S.i,18; *dajjappasmim pi yacito*, Dhp. 224). If a person leads a righteous life, even though he ekes out a bare existence on gleanings, looks after his family according to his means, but makes it a point to give from his limited stores, his generosity is worth more than a thousand sacrifices (S.i, 19-20).

Alms given from wealth righteously earned is greatly praised by the Buddha (A.iii,354; It.p.66; A.iii,45-46). A householder who does so is said to be one who is lucky here and hereafter. In the Magha Sutta of the Sutta Nipata (Sn.p.87) the Buddha highly appreciates Magha who says

that he earns through righteous means and liberally gives of it to the needy.

Even if one gives a small amount with a heart full of faith one can gain happiness hereafter. The Vimnavattha supplies ample examples. According to the Acamadavikavimnavatthu, the alms given consisted of a little rice crust, but as it was given with great devotion to an eminent arahant, the reward was rebirth in a magnificent celestial mansion.

The Dakkhainavibhanga Sutta states that an offering is purified on account of the giver when the giver is virtuous, on account of the recipient when the recipient is virtuous, on account of both the giver and the recipient if both are virtuous, by none if both happen to be impious. *Dhammadana*, the dissemination of the knowledge of the Dhamma, is said to excel all other forms of giving (*sabbadanam dhammadanam jinati*, Dh.354).

The Anguttara Nikaya mentions five great gifts which have been held in high esteem by noble-minded men from ancient times (A.iv,246). Their value was not doubted in ancient

times, it is not doubted at present, nor will it be doubted in the future. The wise recluses and brahmans had the highest respect for them.

These great givings comprise the meticulous observance of the Five Precepts. By doing so one gives fearlessness, love and benevolence to all beings. If one human being can give security and freedom from fear to others by his behavior, that is the highest form of *dana* one can give, not only to mankind, but to all living beings.

The Donee

The suttas also describe the person to whom alms should be given (A.iii, 41). Guests, travelers and the sick should be treated with hospitality and due consideration. During famines the needy should be liberally entertained.

The virtuous should be first entertained with the first fruits of fresh crops. There is a recurrent phrase in the suttas (D.i, 137; ii,354; iii,76) describing those who are particularly in need of public generosity. They are recluses (*samana*), brahmans (*brahmana*), destitutes (*kapana*), wayfarers (*addhika*), wanderers (*vanibbaka*) and beggars (*yacaka*). The

recluses and brahmans are religious persons who do not earn wages. They give spiritual guidance to the laity and the laity is expected to support them.

The poor need the help of the rich to survive and the rich become spiritually richer by helping the poor. At a time when transport facilities were meager and amenities for travelers were not adequately organized, the public had to step in to help the wayfarer. Buddhism considers it a person's moral obligation to give assistance to all these types of people.

In the Anguttara Nikaya the Buddha describes, with sacrificial terminology, three types of fires that should be tended with care and honor (A.iv,44). They are *ahuneyyaggi*, *gahapataggi* and *dakkhineyyaggi*. The Buddha explained that *ahuneyyaggi* means one's parents, and they should be honored and cared for. *Gahapataggi* means one's wife and children, employees and dependents. *Dakkineyyaggi* represents religious persons who have either attained the goal of arahantship or have embarked on a course of training for the elimination of negative mental traits. All these should be cared for and looked after as one would tend a sacrificial

fire. According to the Maha-mangala Sutta, offering hospitality to one's relatives is one of the great auspicious deeds a layperson can perform (Sn. 262-63).

King Kosala once asked the Buddha to whom alms should be given (S.i,98). The Buddha replied that alms should be given to those by giving to whom one becomes happy. Then the king asked another question: To whom should alms be offered to obtain great fruit? The Buddha discriminated the two as different questions and replied that alms offered to the virtuous bears great fruit.

He further clarified that offerings yield great fruit when made to virtuous recluses who have eliminated the five mental hindrances (*nivarana*) and cultivated moral habits, concentration, wisdom, emancipation and knowledge and vision of emancipation (*sila, samadhi, pañña, vimutti, vimuttinadassana*).

In the Sakkasamyutta (S.i,233) Sakka asked the same question from the Buddha: Gifts given to whom bring the greatest result? The Buddha replied that what is given to the Sangha bears great results. Here the Buddha specifies that

what he means by "Sangha" is the community of those upright noble individuals who have entered the path and who have established themselves in the fruit of saint-ship, and who are endowed with morality, concentration and wisdom.

It is important to note that "Sangha" according to the Vinaya means a sufficient group of monks to represent the Order of monks for various ecclesiastical purposes (Vin. i,319). But in the suttas "Sangha" means the four pairs of noble individuals or the eight particular individuals (*cattari purisayugani, attha purisapuggala*), i.e., those who are on the path to stream-entry, once-returning, non-returning, and arahantship, and those who have obtained the fruits thereof.

The Magha Sutta (Sn.p.86) gives a detailed account of the virtues of the arahant to show to whom alms should be offered by one desiring merit. The Brahmanasamyutta (S.i,175) maintains that offerings bear greatest results when they are made to those who know their previous lives, who have seen heavens and hells, who have put an end to birth and who have realized ultimate knowledge. Thus the Sangha comprising morally perfect, worthy personages as described

in the suttas constitutes the field of merit (*punnakkhetta*, M.i,447).

Just as seeds sown in fertile well-watered fields yields bountiful crops, alms given to the virtuous established on the Noble Eightfold Path yield great results (A.iv,238; i,162). The Dhammapada maintains that fields have weeds as their blemish; lust, hatred, delusion and desire are the blemishes of people and, therefore, what is given to those who have eliminated those blemishes bears great fruit (Dhp. 356-59).

The results of generosity are measured more by the quality of the field of merit represented by the recipient than by the quantity and value of the gift given.

The Anguttara Nikaya (A.iv,392-95) records a fabulous alms-giving conducted by the Bodhisatta when he was born as a brahman named Velama. Lavish gifts of silver, gold, elephants, cows, carriages, etc., not to mention food, drink and clothing, were distributed among everybody who came forward to receive them. But this open-handed munificence was not very valuable as far as merit was concerned because there were no worthy recipients. It is said to be more

meritorious to feed one person with right view, a stream-enterer (*sotapanna*), than to give great alms such as that given by Velama.

It is more meritorious to feed one once-returner than a hundred stream-enterers. Next in order come non-returners, the arahants, then Paccekabuddhas and Sammasambuddhas. Feeding the Buddha and the Sangha is more meritorious than feeding the Buddha alone.

It is even more meritorious to construct a monastery for the general use of the Sangha of the four quarters of all times. Taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha is better still. Abiding by the Five Precepts is even more valuable. But better still is the cultivation of *metta*, loving-kindness, and best of all, the insight into impermanence, which leads to Nibbana.

The Motivation for Giving

The suttas record various motives for exercising generosity. The Anguttara Nikaya (A.iv,236) enumerates the following eight motives:

1. *Asajja danam deti*: one gives with annoyance, or as a way of offending the recipient, or with the idea of insulting him.[5](#)
2. *Bhaya danam deti*: fear also can motivate a person to make an offering.
3. *Adasi me ti danam deti*: one gives in return for a favor done to oneself in the past.
4. *Dassati me ti danam deti* one also may give with the hope of getting a similar favor for oneself in the future.
5. *Sadhu danan ti danam deti*: one gives because giving is considered good.
6. *Aham pacami, ime ne pacanti, na arahami pacanto apacantanam adatun ti danam deti*: "I cook, they do not cook. It is not proper for me who cooks not to give to those who do not cook." Some give urged by such altruistic motives.
7. *Imam me danam dadato kalyano kittisaddo abbhuggacchati ti danam deti*: some give alms to gain a good reputation.

8. *Cittalankara-cittaparikkarattham danam deti*: still others give alms to adorn and beautify the mind.

Favoritism (*chanda*), ill will (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) are also listed as motives for giving. Sometimes alms are given for the sake of maintaining a long-standing family tradition. Desire to be reborn in heaven after death is another dominant motive. Giving pleases some and they give with the idea of winning a happy frame of mind (A.iv, 236).

But it is maintained in the suttas (A.iv,62) that alms should be given without any expectations (*na sapekho danam deti*). Nor should alms be given with attachment to the recipient.

If one gives, with the idea of accumulating things for later use, that is an inferior act of giving. If one gives with the hope of enjoying the result thereof after death, that is also an inferior act of giving. The only valid motive for giving should be the motive of adorning the mind, to rid the mind of the ugliness of greed and selfishness.

The Manner of Giving

The suttas (e.g., A.iii,172) lay much emphasis on the manner of giving. The attitude of the donor in the act of giving makes a world of difference for the goodwill between the donor and recipient irrespective of whether the gift given is big or small.

Sakkaccam danam deti: alms should be given in such a way that the donee does not feel humiliated, belittled or hurt. The needy ask for something with a sense of embarrassment, and it is the duty of the donor not to make him feel more embarrassed and make his already heavy burden still heavier.

Cittikatva danam deti: alms should be given with due consideration and respect. The recipient should be made to feel welcome. It is when a gift is given with such warmth that a cohesive mutually enriching friendliness emerges between the donor and donee. *Sahattha deti:* one should give with one's own hand.

The personal involvement in the act of giving is greatly beneficial. This promotes rapport between the donor and donee and that is the social value of giving.

Society is welded in unity with care and concern for one another when generosity is exercised with a warm sense of personal involvement.

Na apaviddham deti: one should not give as alms what is only fit to be thrown away. One should be careful to give only what is useful and appropriate.

Na anagamanaditthiko deti: one should not give in such a callous manner so as to make the donee not feel like coming again.

Giving with faith (*saddhaya deti*) is much extolled in the suttas (A.iii,172). Especially when offering alms to the clergy one should do so with due deference and respect, taking delight in the opportunity one has got to serve them. One should also give at the proper time to meet a dire need (*kalena deti*). Such timely gifts are most valuable as they relieve the anxiety and stress of the supplicant.

One should give with altruistic concerns, with the sole intention of helping another in difficulty (*anuggahacitto danam deti*).

In the act of giving one should take care not to hurt oneself or another (*attanā ca parā ca anupahacca danam deti*).

Giving with understanding and discretion is praised by the Buddha (*viceyyadanam sugatappasattham*). If a gift contributes to the well-being of the donee, it is wise to give. But if the gift is detrimental to the welfare of the donee, one should be careful to exercise one's discretion.

Giving as described above is highly commended as noble giving (*sappurisdana*). More than what is given, it is the manner of giving that makes a gift valuable. One may not be able to afford a lavish gift, but one can always make the recipient feel cared for by the manner of giving.

The Value of Giving

Many suttas enumerate the various benefits of giving. Giving promotes social cohesion and solidarity. It is the best means of bridging the psychological gap, much more than the material economic gap, that exists between haves and have-nots.

The Magha Sutta maintains that hates gets eliminated when one is established in generosity (Sn. 506). The one with a generous heart earns the love of others and many associate with him (A.iii,40). Giving also cements friendships (Sn. 187).

It is maintained that if a person makes an aspiration to be born in a particular place after giving alms, the aspiration will be fulfilled only if he is virtuous, but not otherwise (A.iv,239).

According to one sutta (A.iv,241-43), if one practices giving and morality to a very limited degree and has no idea about meditation, one obtains an unfortunate birth in the human world.

One who performs meritorious deeds such as giving and morality to a considerable degree, but does not understand anything about meditation, meets a fortunate human birth.

But those who practice giving and morality to a great extent without any knowledge of meditation find rebirth in one of the heavens. They excel other deities in the length of life, beauty, pleasure, fame and the five strands of sense pleasure.

The Anguttara Nikaya (A.iv,79) enumerates a number of these-worldly benefits of giving. The generous person, and not the miser, wins the sympathy of others. Arahants approach him, accept alms and preach to him first. A good reputation spreads about him. He can attend any assembly with confidence and dignity. He is reborn in a state of happiness after death.

Another sutta (A.iii,41) adds that a generous person wins popularity; people of noble character associate with him and he has the satisfaction of having fulfilled a layperson's duties (*gihidhamma anapeto hoti*).

It is said that an almsgiver bestows on others life, beauty, happiness, strength and intelligence. Having bestowed them on others, he becomes a beneficiary of them himself (A.iii,42). The same idea is expressed by the succinct statement that one reaps what one sows (*yadisam vapate bijam tadisam harate phalam*, S.i,227).

Giving with faith results in the attainment of riches and beauty whenever the fruition of the gift occurs. By giving alms with due deference one gains, in addition, children,

wives, subordinates and servants who are obedient, dutiful and understanding.

By giving alms at the proper time not only does one obtain great wealth but also timely fulfillment of needs. By giving alms with the genuine desire to help others, one gains great wealth and the inclination to enjoy the best of sense pleasures. By giving alms without hurting oneself and others, one gains security from dangers such as fire, floods, thieves, kings and unloved heirs (A. iii,172).

Alms given to recluses and brahmins who follow the Noble Eightfold Path yield wonderful results just as seeds sown on fertile, well-prepared, well-watered fields produce abundant crops (A.iv,238). Alms given without any expectations whatsoever can lead to birth in the Brahma-world, at the end of which one may become a non-returner (A.iv,62).

The Dakkhinavibhanga Sutta enumerates a list of persons to whom alms can be offered and the merit accruing therefrom in ascending order. A thing given to an animal brings a reward a hundredfold. A gift given to an ordinary person of poor moral habit yields a reward a thousandfold; a gift given

to a virtuous person yields a reward a hundred thousandfold. When a gift is given to a person outside the dispensation of Buddhism who is without attachment to sense pleasures, the yield is a hundred thousandfold of crores. When a gift is given to one on the path to stream-entry the yield is incalculable and immeasurable.

So what can be said of a gift given to a stream-enterer, a once-returner, a non-returner, an arahant, a Paccekabuddha, and a Fully Enlightened Buddha?

The same sutta emphasizes that a gift given to the Sangha as a group is more valuable than a gift offered to a single monk in his individual capacity. It is said that in the distant future there will be Buddhist monks who wear only a yellow collar as a distinguishing clerical mark, who are immoral and of evil character. If a gift is offered even to such monks in the name of the Order, it yields much more merit than a gift given to a monk in his individual capacity. But it should be observed that this statement is contradictory to ideas expressed elsewhere, that what is given to the virtuous is greatly beneficial but not what is given to the immoral. It is

evident here that a later interpolation cannot be altogether ruled out.

The Buddha once explained that it is a meritorious act even to throw away the water after washing one's plate with the generous thought: "May the particles of food in the washing water be food to the creatures on the ground." When that is so, how much more meritorious it is to feed a human being! But the sutta hastens to add that it is more meritorious to feed a virtuous person (A.i,161).

Another sutta (A.iii,336) maintains that it is not possible to estimate the amount of merit that accrues when an offering is endowed with six particular characteristics. Three of the characteristics belong to the donor while three belong to the donee. The donor should be happy at the thought of giving prior to making the offering. He should be pleased at the time of making the offering, and he should be satisfied after the offering is made. Thus the nobility of thought — without a trace of greed before, during and after the offering — makes a gift truly great. The recipients also should be free from lust, hatred and delusion, or they should have embarked on a course of training for the elimination of these mental

depravities. When an almsgiving is endowed with these qualities of the donor and donee, the merit is said to be as immeasurable as the waters in the ocean.

Once Visakha gave a learned explanation of the benefits she expected from her munificence when the Buddha questioned her as to what she saw as the advantages of her great generosity (Vin.i,293-94). She said that when she hears that a particular monk or nun has attained any of the fruits of recluseship, and if that monk or nun has visited Savatthi, she would be certain that he or she has partaken of the offerings she constantly makes. When she reflects that she has contributed in some measure to his or her spiritual distinction, great delight (*pamuja*) arises in her. Joy (*piti*) arises in the mind that is delighted. When the mind is joyful the body relaxes (*kayo passambhissati*). When the body relaxes a sense of ease (*sukha*) is experienced which helps the mind to be concentrated (*cittam samadhiyissati*). That will help the development of the spiritual faculties (*indriyabhavana*), spiritual powers (*balabhavana*), and factors of enlightenment (*bojjhangabhavana*). These are the advantages she hopes for by her munificence. The Buddha

was so pleased with her erudite reply that he exclaimed, "Sadhu sadhu sadhu" in approbation.

It is evident that giving alone is not sufficient for one to make an end of suffering. Anathapindika, who was pronounced by the Buddha as the foremost among almsgivers, became only a stream-enterer.

It is specifically said that *dana* has to be fortified by *sila*, morality, if it is to produce good results. Though Anathapindika practiced unblemished virtue, it is nowhere stated that he practiced mental culture or meditation (*bhavana*). Therefore, in spite of all his magnanimous munificence, he had to remain a stream-enterer.

The *Ghatikara Sutta* (M.ii,52) records a unique almsgiving where even the donor was not present. Ghatikara the potter was the chief benefactor of the Buddha Kassapa. He was a non-returner who did not want to enter the Order as he was looking after his blind, aged parents. He had greatly won the trust of the Buddha by the nobility of his conduct and devotion. One day the Buddha Kassapa went to his house on his alms round but Ghatikara was out. He asked the blind

parents where the potter had gone. They replied that he had gone out, but invited the Buddha to serve himself from the pots and pans and partake of a meal. The Buddha did so. When Ghatikara returned and inquired who had taken from the food, the parents informed him that the Buddha had come and they had requested him to help himself to a meal. Ghatikara was overjoyed to hear this as he felt that the Buddha had so much trust in him. It is said that the joy and happiness (*pitisukha*) he experienced did not leave him for two weeks, and the parents' joy and happiness did not wane for a whole week.

The same sutta reports that on another occasion the roof of the Buddha Kassapa's monastery started leaking. He sent the monks to Ghatikara's house to fetch some straw, but Ghatikara was out at the time. Monks came back and said that there was no straw available there except what was on the roof. The Buddha asked the monks to get the straw from the roof there. Monks started stripping the straw from the roof and the aged parents of Ghatikara asked who was removing the straw. The monks explained the matter and the parents said, "Please do take all the straw." When Ghatikara

heard about this he was deeply moved by the trust the Buddha reposed in him. The joy and happiness that arose in him did not leave him for a full fortnight and that of his parents did not subside for a week. For three months Ghatikara's house remained without a roof with only the sky above, but it is said that the rain did not wet the house. Such was the great piety and generosity of Ghatikara.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, *dana* is the first of the meritorious deeds. It is also one of the four benevolent ways of treating others (*cattari sangahavatthuni*), A.iv,219). But is noteworthy that in the lists of virtues required for liberation such as those included among the thirty-seven requisites of enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiya dhamma*), *dana* never occurs as a required virtue. Instead of *dana*, *caga* or generosity is included in some of the lists, such as the five qualities — faith virtue, learning, generosity and wisdom. Perhaps there is a slight difference between *dana* and *caga* when considered as virtues ingrained in the mind. *Dana* is the very practical act of giving, *caga* is the generous attitude ingrained in the mind by the repeated practice of *dana*. The word *caga* literally means giving up, abandonment, and it is

an indication that the close-fitted selfish grip one has on one's possessions is loosened by *caga*. It is possible to give alms even out of negative motives such as favoritism (*chanda*), ill will (*dosa*), fear (*bhaya*), delusion (*moha*), desire for a good reputation, etc., but *caga* is the positive virtue of a generous disposition.

Buddhism teaches a gradual process of emptying oneself. It starts with giving away one's external possessions. When the generous dispositional trait sets in and is fortified by the deepening insight into the real nature of things, one grows disenchanted with sense pleasures (*nibbindati*). At this stage one gives up household life and seeks ordination. Next comes the emptying of sensory inputs by guarding the sense doors. Through meditation (*bhavana*) one empties oneself of deep-seated defilements and fills oneself with positive noble qualities. But this whole process of bailing out negativities starts with *dana*, the practice of giving.

Revised: Tuesday 2007-08-14

Source: *Bodhi Leaves* No. 132 (Kandy: [Buddhist Publication Society](#), 1994).
Transcribed from a file provided by the BPS.

Ministering to the Sick and the Terminally Ill

by

"He who attends on the sick attends on me," declared the Buddha, exhorting his disciples on the importance of ministering to the sick.

This famous statement was made by the Blessed One when he discovered a monk lying in his soiled robes, desperately ill, with an acute attack of dysentery. With the help of Ananda, the Buddha washed and cleaned the sick monk in warm water.

On this occasion he reminded the monks that they have neither parents nor relatives to look after them, so they must look after one another. If the teacher is ill, it is the bounden duty of the pupil to look after him, and if the pupil is ill, it is the teacher's duty to look after the sick pupil. If a teacher or a pupil is not available it is the responsibility of the community to look after the sick (Vin.i,301ff.).

On another occasion the Buddha discovered a monk whose body was covered with sores, his robe sticking to the body with pus oozing from the sores. Unable to look after him, his fellow monks had abandoned him.

On discovering this monk, the Buddha boiled water and washed the monk with his own hands, then cleaned and dried his robes. When the monk felt comforted the Buddha

preached to him, and he became an arahant, soon after which he passed away (DhpA.i,319).

Thus the Buddha not only advocated the importance of looking after the sick, he also set a noble example by himself ministering to those who were so ill that they were even considered repulsive by others.

The Buddha has enumerated the qualities that should be present in a good nurse. He should be competent to administer the medicine; he should know what is agreeable to the patient and what is not. He should keep away what is disagreeable and give only what is agreeable to the patient.

He should be benevolent and kind-hearted, he should perform his duties out of a sense of service and not just for the sake of remuneration (*mettacitto gilanam upatthati no amisantaro*).

He should not feel repulsion towards saliva, phlegm, urine, stools, sores, etc. He should be capable of exhorting and stimulating the patient with noble ideas, with Dhamma talk (A.iii,144).

Here, it is noteworthy that the nurse is expected to be efficient not only in taking care of the body by giving proper food and medicine, but the nurse is also expected to nurture the patient's mental condition. It is well-known that the kindness of nurses and doctors is almost as effective as medicine for a patient's morale and recovery.

When one is desperately ill and feels helpless, a kind word or a gentle act becomes a source of comfort and hope. That is why benevolence (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*), which are also sublime emotions (*brahmavihara*), are regarded as praiseworthy qualities in a nurse.

The sutta adds another dimension to the nursing profession by including the spiritual element in a nurse's talk. Sickness is a time when one is face to face with the realities of life and it is a good opportunity to instill a sense of spiritual urgency even in the most materialistic mind. Further, the fear of death is naturally greater when a person is ill than when well.

The best means of calming this fear is by diverting attention to the Dhamma. A nurse is expected to give this spiritual guidance to the patient in his or her charge as a part and parcel of a nurse's duty.

In the Anguttara Nikaya the Buddha describes three types of patients (A.i,120). There are patients who do not recover whether or not they get proper medical attention and nursing care; there are others who recover irrespective of whether or not they get medical attention and nursing care; there are others who recover only with appropriate medical treatment and care. Because there is this third type of patient, all those who are ill should be given the best medical treatment available, agreeable food and proper nursing care.

So long as a patient is alive, everything possible should be done for his recovery.

According to another sutta, (A.iii,56,62), illness is one of the inevitables in life. When faced with it, all resources available to one, even magical incantations, should be utilized with the hope of restoring health. Here the question of whether such performances are effective or not is not discussed.

The point seems to be that at the time of a crisis there is no harm in trying out even methods traditionally believed to be efficacious, but in which one does not necessarily have faith or belief. Of course, such methods should not clash with one's conscience. If, in spite of these efforts, death does occur, then, one has to accept it as a verdict of kamma with equanimity and philosophical maturity.

Here, we are reminded of an episode (MA.i,203) where a mother who was critically ill needed rabbit meat as a cure. The son, finding that rabbit meat was not available in the open market, went in search of a rabbit. He caught one but was loathe to kill even for the sake of his mother. He let the rabbit go and wished his mother well. Simultaneously with this wish, the power of the son's moral virtue brought about the mother's recovery. The Buddhist tradition seems to hold that under certain circumstances moral power has healing properties that may work even in cases when orthodox medicine fails.

The Medicines Chapter of the Vinaya Mahavagga (Vin.i,199ff.) shows that the Buddha relaxed a number of minor disciplinary rules to accommodate the needs of sick monks. Though a strict disciplinarian, the Buddha has shown great sympathy and understanding to those who are ill. The value of health has been fully-realized and it is even recognized as the greatest gain (*arogyaparama labha*, Dhp.204).

The Buddha teaches that the patient too should cooperate with the doctor and the nurse in order to get well. Such a good patient should take and do only what is agreeable to him. Even in taking agreeable food, he should know the proper quantity. He should take the prescribed medicine without fuss. He should honestly disclose his ailments to his duty-conscious nurse. He should patiently bear physical pain even when it is acute and excruciating (A.iii,144).

The suttas show that the Buddha exercised great will power and composure on occasions when he fell ill.

He experienced excruciating pain when a stone splinter pierced his foot after Devadatta hurled a boulder at him. He endured such pain with mindfulness and self-composure and was not overpowered by the pain (S.i,27, 210).

During his last illness, too, the Buddha mindfully bore up great physical pain and with admirable courage he walked from Pava to Kusinara with his devoted attendant Ananda, resting in a number of places to soothe his tired body

(D.ii,128,134). The Maha-parinibbana Sutta also reports that the Buddha once willfully suppressed a grave illness in Beluvagama and regained health (D.ii,99).

It seems that those who are highly developed mentally are able to suppress illness, at least on certain occasions. Once Nakulapita visited the Buddha in old age, and the Master advised him to remain mentally healthy even though the body is feeble (S.iii,1).

There is physical and mental pain (*dve vedana kayika ca cetasika ca*). If, when one has physical pain, one becomes worried and adds mental pain too, that is like being shot with two arrows (S.iv,208). One who is spiritually evolved is capable of keeping the mind healthy proportionate to his spiritual development. As an arahant is fully developed spiritually, he is capable of experiencing physical pain only, without mental pain (*so ekam vedanam vediyati kayikam na cetasikam*, S.iv,209).

A number of suttas advocate the recitation of the enlightenment factors (*bojjhanga*) for the purpose of healing physical ailments. On two occasions, when the Elders Mahakassapa and Mahamoggallana were ill, the Buddha recited the enlightenment factors, and it is reported that the monks regained normal health (S.v,79-80). It is perhaps significant to note that all the monks concerned were arahants, and had, therefore, fully developed the enlightenment factors.

The Bojjhanga Samyutta also reports that once when the Buddha was ill, he requested Cunda to recite the enlightenment factors (S.v,81). The Buddha was pleased at the recitation and it is said that he regained health. On another occasion, when the monk Girimananda was very ill (A.v,109), the Buddha informed Ananda that if a discourse on ten perceptions (*dasa sañña*) is delivered to him, he might get well. The ten perceptions are the (i) perception of impermanence, (ii) egolessness, (iii) impurity of the body, (iv) evil consequences (of bodily existence), (v) elimination (of sense pleasures), (vi) detachment, (vii) cessation, (viii) disenchantment with the entire world, impermanence of all component things, and (ix) mindfulness of breathing.

Ananda learned the discourse from the Buddha and repeated it for Girimananda and it is reported that he recovered.

Once the Buddha heard that a newly ordained monk who was not very well known among his fellow monks was very ill (S.iv,46). The Buddha visited him. When he saw the Buddha approaching him he stirred in his bed and tried to get up, but the Buddha cautioned him not to rise. Having taken a seat, the Buddha inquired after his health, whether the pains are decreasing and not increasing. The monk replied that he is feeling very ill and weak, that his pains are increasing and not decreasing. The Buddha then inquired whether he had any misgiving or remorse. The monk replied that he had plenty of misgiving and remorse. The Buddha then asked whether he reproached himself for breach of virtue. He said

no. Then the Buddha asked why he felt remorseful if he was not guilty of any breach of virtue. The monk replied that the Buddha does not preach the doctrine for purity of virtue, but for detachment from lust (*ragaviragatthaya*). Greatly pleased, the Buddha exclaimed *Sadhu Sadhu* in approbation.

The Buddha, then, went on to preach the doctrine to the monk. He explained that the sense faculties are impermanent, unsatisfactory and egoless; therefore, they should not be considered as "I" and "mine." Understanding their true nature the noble disciple becomes disenchanted with the sense faculties. When this explanation of the Dhamma was being given the vision of truth (*dhammacakkhu*) dawned on the monk; he realized that whatever has the nature of arising necessarily has the nature of cessation. In other words, he became a *sotapanna*, a stream-enterer.

According to the *Sotapattisamyutta* Anathapindika was once very ill, and at his request the Venerable Sariputta visited him (S.v,380). On being told that the pains are excruciating and increasing Sariputta delivered a discourse reminding Anathapindika of his own virtues. Sariputta explained that the uninstructed worldling who has no faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha and who has not cultivated virtuous moral habits goes to a state of woe on the destruction of the body. But Anathapindika has unshakable conviction in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and has cultivated noble

moral habits. Sariputta told him that when these noble qualities are mindfully appreciated the pains would subside.

Further, Sariputta pointed-out that uninstructed worldlings reach a state of woe on the disintegration of the body, as they have not cultivated the Noble Eightfold Path. But on the contrary Anathapindika has cultivated the Noble Eightfold Path. When attention is paid to the factors and the noble qualities are appreciated the pains would subside. It is reported that the pains subsided and Anathapindika recovered from that illness. So much so, that Anathapindika got out of bed and served the Venerable Sariputta with the meal that was prepared for himself.

The *Sotapattisamyutta* records an account of another occasion when Anathapindika was ill (S.v,385). The Venerable Ananda was summoned to the bedside, and he delivered a discourse. Ananda explained that uninstructed ordinary people who have no faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha and who are given to immoral habits are seized with trepidation and fear at the approach of death. But the noble disciple who has deep conviction in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha and who has cultivated moral habits does not experience trepidation and fear of death. Anathapindika then confessed unshakable conviction in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and declared that he is endowed with the spotless virtue of a householder. Ananda exclaimed that it is indeed a great gain that Anathapindika has disclosed the attainment of the fruit of stream-entry. It is,

however, not reported whether Anathapindika recovered straight away.

The Buddha recommends that a monk should not relax his energy and determination for spiritual progress even when he is ill (A.iv,335). It is possible that the illness might deteriorate, and before that happens care should be taken to advance spiritually as much as possible. After recovering from an illness, too, one should not be negligent, because, should there be a relapse, the chances of gaining higher spiritual attainments diminish.

The Buddhist method of ministering to the sick, as is evident from the canonical texts cited above, attaches great importance not only to proper medical and nursing care, but also to directing the mind of the patient to wholesome thoughts.

There seems to be a belief that attention paid to doctrinal topics, especially the recitation of virtues which one has already cultivated, is endowed with healing properties. In the case of the Buddha and arahants the recitation of the *bojjhangas* has restored normal health. In the case of the monk Girimananda, who was probably not an arahant at the time of his illness, it was a discourse on the ten perceptions that restored his good health. Anathapindika was a *sotapanna* and a discussion on the special qualities of a *sotapanna* was instrumental for his speedy recovery. It may be that when one is reminded of the spiritual qualities one

has already acquired, great joy arises in the mind. Such joy is perhaps capable even of altering one's bodily chemistry in a positive and healthy manner.

Here we are reminded of a relevant episode contained in the *Papañcasudani* (MA.i,78). A monk while listening to the Dhamma was bitten by a snake. He ignored the snake bite and continued to listen. The venom spread and the pain became acute. He then reflected on the unblemished purity of his virtuous conduct (*sila*) from the time of his higher ordination. Great joy and satisfaction arose within him when he realized the spotless nature of his character. This healthy psychological change acted as anti-venom, and he was immediately cured. These episodes seem to reveal that when attention is drawn to one's own spiritual qualities at times of serious illness, and pious joy wells up in the mind thereby, health-promoting factors become activated in the body, perhaps by way of the secretion of health-restoring hormones. That may be the mechanism by which spiritually advanced individuals regain health when appropriate suttas are recited.

There is much material in the Pali canon on counseling the terminally ill. Speaking about death to a terminally ill patient is not avoided as an unpleasant topic. On the contrary, the reality of death and perhaps its imminence are accepted without any pretense and the patient is made to face the prospect of death with confidence and tranquillity.

The advice given by Nakulamata to Nakulapita is extremely valuable in this connection (A.iii,295-98). Once Nakulapita was seriously ill and his wife Nakulamata noticed that he was anxious and worried. She advised him thus: "Please, sir, do not face death with anxiety. Painful is death for one who is anxious. The Buddha has looked down upon death with anxiety. It may be you are anxious that I will not be able to support the family after your death. Please do not think so. I am capable of spinning and weaving, and I will be able to bring up the children even if you are no more. Perhaps you are worried that I will remarry after your death. Please do not think so. We both led pure wholesome lives according to the noble conduct of householders. So do not entertain any anxiety on that account. It may be you are worried that I will neglect attending on the Buddha and the Sangha. Please do not think so. I will be more devoted to the Buddha and the Sangha after your death. Perhaps you are worried that I will neglect keeping to the precepts. Please do not have any doubts on that account. I am one of those who fully practice the moral habits declared for the laity, and if you wish please ask the Buddha about this matter. Perhaps you fear that I have not gained inner mental composure. Please do not think so. I am one of those who have gained inner mental composure as much as a householder could gain. If you have any doubts about this, the Buddha is at Bhesakalavana, ask him. Perhaps it occurs to you that I have not attained proficiency in the Buddha's dispensation, that I have not gone beyond doubt and perplexity without depending on

another. If you wish to have these matters clarified ask the Buddha. But please do not face death with anxiety, for it is painful and censured by the Buddha."

It is reported that after Nakulapita was thus admonished by Nakulamata, he regained his health, and gone was that illness never to recur. Later on, this whole incident was narrated to the Buddha, who commended Nakulamata for her sagacious advice.

The *Sotapattisamyutta* contains a valuable discourse on the question of counseling the terminally ill (S.v,408). Once Mahanama the Sakyan inquired from the Buddha how a wise layman should advise another wise layman who is terminally ill. Here it should be noted that both the counselor and the patient are wise lay Buddhists. The Buddha delivered a whole discourse on how this should be done. First, a wise layman should comfort a wise layman who is terminally ill with the four assurances: "Be comforted friend, you have unshakable confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, that the Buddha is fully enlightened, the Dhamma is well proclaimed, and the Sangha is well disciplined. You also have cultivated unblemished virtuous conduct which is conducive to concentration." Having thus comforted the patient with the four assurances, he should ask him whether he has any longing for his parents. If he says yes, it should be pointed out that death will certainly come whether he has longing for his parents or not. Therefore, it is better to give up the longing. Then, if he says he gives up his longing for

his parents, he should be asked whether he has longing for his wife and children. With the same reasoning he should be persuaded to give up that longing too. Then, he should be asked if he has any longing for the pleasures of the senses. If he says yes, he should be convinced that divine pleasures are superior to human pleasures, and should be encouraged to aspire for divine pleasures. Then, he should be gradually lead up the scale of divine pleasures, and when he comes to the highest heaven of the sense sphere, his attention should be diverted to the Brahma-world. If he says he has resolved on the attainment of the Brahma-world, he should be admonished that even the Brahma-world is characterized by impermanence and the rebirth personality. Therefore, it is better to aspire for the cessation of the rebirth personality. If he can establish his mind on the cessation of the rebirth personality, then, the Buddha says, there is no difference between him and the monk who is liberated.

This, no doubt, is the highest form of counseling that can be given to a highly advanced person who is terminally ill by an equally spiritually advanced person. It is very clear from the discourse that the patient must be one who is as advanced as a stream-enterer, as the four assurances or the consoling factors mentioned at the very beginning of the discourse are identical with the qualities of a stream-enterer.

The *Cittasamyutta* contains an interesting episode of the death of a spiritually advanced learned lay disciple (S.iv,302). Citta the householder was a non-returner

(*anagamin*, A.iii,451). When he fell critically ill, a group of sylvan deities invited Citta to set his mind on becoming a universal monarch (*cakkavattiraja*) because the aspirations of the virtuous come to pass. He refused, saying that that too is impermanent. Though lying on his deathbed he admonished his relatives, who had assembled round him, on the importance of cultivating faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and on the importance of charity, then, he passed away.

According to the *Sotapattisamyutta*, the Buddha once visited the bedside of Dighavu the lay disciple who was terminally ill (S.v,344). The Master advised him to fix his attention on unwavering confidence in the noble qualities of the Triple Gem and to will that he be endowed with spotless virtuous conduct. Dighavu replied that these qualities of a stream-enterer are already found in him. Then, the Buddha advised him to be established in those virtues and develop the six qualities conducive to understanding, namely, the perception of the impermanence of all component things, the unsatisfactoriness of all that is impermanent, the egolessness of what is unsatisfactory, the perception of elimination, detachment and cessation. Dighavu replied that these qualities too are found in him, but he is concerned that his father will be sad when he dies. Then Jotipala, his father, advised him not to be worried on that account, but to pay heed to what the Buddha says. The Buddha, having admonished him, left and Dighavu died soon after. Later the

Buddha declared that Dighavu passed away as a non-returner.

The brahman Dhananjani was an unscrupulous tax collector who exploited both the king and the public (M.ii,184-96). The Venerable Sariputta met him once and exhorted him on the evil consequences of an unrighteous life. Shortly thereafter Dhananjani was seriously ill and Sariputta was summoned to his bedside. On being inquired about his health, Dhananjani informed Sariputta that he has an unbearable headache. Sariputta then engaged him in a conversation gradually drawing his attention from lower to higher realms of existence as far as the Brahma-world. Having thus diverted the attention of the near-death patient to the Brahma-world, Sariputta went on to explain the path leading to the attainment of the Brahma-world, namely, the full development of the *brahmaviharas* — loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity — to suffuse all quarters. At the end of the discourse Dhananjani requested Sariputta to convey his respects to the Buddha. Sariputta departed and shortly afterwards Dhananjani died. It is reported that he was reborn in the Brahma-world. Later when the matter was related to the Buddha, he found fault with Sariputta for not having led Dhananjani further on the spiritual path.

This sutta shows that a man who had been unscrupulous in his dealings could also be guided to a happier rebirth by counseling during the crucial period just prior to death. It is

highly doubtful whether any and every evil doer could be, thus, guided towards rebirth in a happy realm. Perhaps Dhananjani's good qualities outweighed his evil deeds (Dhp.173) and that may be the reason why it was possible to lead him to rebirth in a happy state by counsel offered by a noble arahant at the hour of death.

That this may have been so can be inferred from the facts reported in the sutta (M.ii,185). Sariputta made it a point to inquire about Dhananjani's spiritual zeal, soon after inquiring about the Buddha's health, from a monk coming from Rajagaha, when he himself was touring in the far away Dakkhinapatha. It is very likely that Dhananjani was a faithful patron of the Sangha when his first wife, a lady full of faith, was alive. His second wife was a faithless woman. When Sariputta heard that Dhananjani was negligent he was dismayed, and made up his mind to talk to Dhananjani should the occasion arise to meet him.

Another important noteworthy feature in this discourse is that the Venerable Sariputta starts the discourse from the lowest state of existence, and works upwards as far as the Brahma-world. Perhaps he started from the hells because Dhananjani had deteriorated to that level. Sariputta may have helped to remind him of his former good deeds, and also may have drawn his attention to a relevant Dhamma discourse Sariputta had delivered to him, perhaps only a few days prior to his illness. Thus, by drawing on the spiritual potential that was hidden in him, Sariputta may have been

able to help Dhananjani attain a happy rebirth by last minute counseling.

Here, we are reminded of the episode of young Mattakundali (DhpA.i,26). When he was lying on his death-bed the Blessed One appeared and Mattakundali, being greatly pleased, generated much faith in the Buddha. Dying soon after, he was reborn in a celestial realm.

A sutta in the *Sotapattisamyutta* (S.v,386) maintains that when an uninstructed ordinary person at the threshold of death sees that he has no faith in the noble qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and that he has led an immoral life, great fear of death and trepidation arise in him. But a person who has deep unwavering faith in the noble qualities of the Triple Gem, and who is spotlessly pure in his conduct, experiences no such fear of death and trepidation. It seems to be the guilty conscience that causes much anguish at the moment of death. When there is fear and anxiety at this crucial moment, rebirth must take place in a sphere that is proportionate and commensurate to that experience of anguish.

It is appropriate to record here a relevant discussion Mahanama the Sakyan had with the Buddha regarding the fate of one who meets with a violent death (S.v,369). Mahanama tells the Buddha that when he comes to the serene atmosphere of the monastery and associates with pious monks of noble qualities, he feels quite calm and self-

possessed. But when he goes out into the streets of Kapilavatthu, busy with constant traffic, he feels frightened over the future birth that would await him should he meet with a violent death in a traffic accident. The Buddha assures him that a person who has cultivated moral virtues and led a righteous life need not entertain such fears. He explains the situation with the help of a simile. If a pot of ghee is broken after being submerged in water, the potsherds will sink to the riverbed, but the ghee will rise to the surface. Similarly, the body will disintegrate, but the cultured mind will rise up like the ghee.

It is the same idea that is emphasized in suttas such as Sankharuppatti, (M.iii,99) Kukkuravatika (M.i,387) and Tevijja (D.i,235). Rebirth usually depends on the thoughts that are most often entertained during a life-time. If one entertains thoughts and dispositions that are suitable for an animal, for a dog or a cow as given in the Kukkuravatika Sutta, then it is likely one will be reborn among these animals, i.e., among beings who have similar dispositions. If, on the other hand, one has entertained thoughts and dispositions comparable to those among the Brahmas, by the cultivation of sublime emotions such as universal love and compassion, one has a good chance of being reborn among the Brahmas. Therefore, preparation for death really has to be done while living. Even to be guided in thought to a higher rebirth, when death is imminent, one needs the prior requisite of faith in the ideal of human virtue and

understanding — for this is what is meant by having faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha — and the cultivation of moral habits. If one lacks virtue, guidance of thought patterns at the hour of death to a higher level will be difficult to the extent that one is deficient in virtue. But however difficult and effective the actual guidance may be, it is a Buddhist custom to invite a monk to the bedside of a terminally ill patient with the hope that the chanting of certain protective suttas (*paritta*) will help the patient to develop faith and elevate his thoughts to a higher plane of spirituality.

We are reminded, here, that, according to the Vinaya (iii,8), some previous Buddhas such as Vessabhu, whose dispensations did not last long, used to instruct their disciples by looking into their minds with telepathic powers and guiding their thought patterns thus: "Think thus, do not think thus, pay attention thus, do not pay attention thus, give this up, develop this," etc. Perhaps this may be the technique used by Gotama Buddha and his eminent disciples to guide thought patterns of amenable adherents at the hour of death. They seem to have mainly used more general techniques with lengthy doctrinal discourses at other normal times in preference to guided meditation with insight into the thought patterns of individuals.

The question may arise of how effective spiritual guidance will be if the terminally ill patient is unconscious. Here what is actually important is that we are really unaware of the

patient's mental condition at the hour of death. The doctors and onlookers might conclude that the patient is unconscious because he does not respond to his surroundings and to the questions put to him. His five faculties may have become partly or completely defunct, but nobody can be certain whether or not his mental faculty is active. We certainly do not know what special potentialities the mind harbors on the occasion of death. It is quite likely that the mental faculty is most active at this crucial hour. Perhaps this is the time that one has the most violent mental struggle, yearning for life with the firm habitual resistance and protest against death.

It is our conjecture that yearning for life is greatest when the fear of death is greatest. The fear of death is greatest when one's sense of guilt is greatest, the fear that one has squandered the great opportunity of human life, an opportunity which could have been well-utilized for spiritual growth. If, on the other hand, one has well utilized the opportunity of human life for spiritual growth, one can face the inevitability of death with relative calm, contentment and happy satisfaction. One's rebirth seems to be commensurate with one's spiritual potential, which in Buddhist terminology is called *kamma*.

It is appropriate to conclude this essay by giving thought to what we should do when we visit a terminally ill patient. Our normal attitude is one of sadness and pity, but Buddhism holds that it is wrong to entertain negative thoughts at such a moment. It is my opinion that it would be helpful to the

terminally ill patient, and to any patient for that matter, if we radiate thoughts of *metta*, loving kindness to him.

As the dying person's mind may be working at this crucial hour, unencumbered by the limitations imposed by the physical sense faculties, it is possible that the person's mind will be sensitive and receptive to the spiritual thought waves of those around him. If negative thought waves are generated by grief and lamentation the dying person may be adversely affected. But if gentle thoughts of love and kindness are extended, such thoughts may function as a subtle mental balm that allays the distress and anxiety brought on by the approach of death and envelops the dying person's mind in a warm protective cloak of consoling peace.

Abbreviations

All references in text are to the editions of the Pali Text Society, Oxford.

A Anguttara Nikaya

D Digha Nikaya

Dhp Dhammapada

DhpA Dhammapada Atthakatha

M Majjhima Nikaya

MA Majjhima Nikaya Atthakatha

S Samyutta Nikaya Vin Vinaya Pitaka

About the Author

Lily de Silva is Professor of Pali and Buddhist Studies at the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka. A regular contributor to Buddhist scholarly and popular journals, she is also the editor of the *Digha Nikaya Tika*, published by the Pali Text Society. Her previous BPS publications include *One Foot in the World* (Wheel No. 337/338), *The Self-Made Private Prison* (Bodhi Leaves No. 120), and *Radical Therapy* (Bodhi Leaves No. 123).

The Buddhist Publication Society is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for people of all creeds.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is — a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

BUDDHIST PUBLICATION
SOCIETY

P.O. Box 61

54, Sangharaja Mawatha

Kandy

Sri Lanka

» <http://www.bps.lk>

Revised: Tuesday 2007-08-14

Nibbana as Living Experience **The Buddha and The Arahant** **Two Studies from the Pali Canon**

by

Lily de Silva

© 2005–2009

Nibbana as Living Experience

Nibbana [*nibbaana*] is the culmination of the Buddhist quest for perfection and happiness. In order to understand the meaning of this term, it is useful to refer to the verse attributed to Kisa Gotami when she saw Prince Siddhattha returning to the palace from the park on the eve of his great renunciation. She declared:

*Nibbutaa nuuna saa maataa, nibbuto nuuna so pitaa,
Nibbutaa nuuna saa naarii, yassaayam iidiso patii.*[1](#)

"Happy/contented/peaceful indeed is the mother (who has such a son), happy indeed is the father (who has such a son), happy indeed is the woman who has such a one as her husband."

Nibbuta (from *nir* + *v.r*) is often treated as the past participle of the verb *nibbaayati*, and *nibbaana* is the nominal form of that verb. It means happiness, contentment, and peace. *Nibbaayati* also means to extinguish, to blow out as in the blowing out of a lamp.[2](#)

Nibbana is so called because it is the blowing out of the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion (*raagaggi, dosaggi, mohaggi*)[3](#) When these fires are blown out peace is attained, and one becomes completely cooled — *siitibhuuta* [4](#) It is sometimes conjectured that Nibbana is called cool because the Buddha preached in a warm country, where the cool was appreciated as comfortable. Had he taught in a cold climate, he might

have described Nibbana in terms of warmth. But it is certain that the term "cool" was chosen to convey a literal psychological reality.[5](#)

Anger makes us hot and restless. We use expressions such as "boiling with anger," and they clearly express the intensity of the aggressive emotion. When such negative emotions are completely eradicated, never to arise again, the temperament has to be described as cool.

Nibbana is a state to be attained, here and now, in this very life[6](#) and not a state to be attained only after death. In terms of *living experience* Nibbana can be characterized by four special attributes: (i) happiness, (ii) moral perfection, (iii) realization, and (v) freedom. We shall take these up for discussion one by one.

Happiness

Nibbana is described as the highest happiness, the supreme state of bliss.[7](#) Those who have attained Nibbana live in utter bliss, free from hatred and mental illness amongst those who are hateful and mentally ill.[8](#) *Sukha* in Paali denotes both happiness and pleasure. In English, happiness denotes more a sense of mental ease while pleasure denotes physical well being. The Paali word *sukha* extends to both these aspects and it is certain (as will be shown below) that mental and physical bliss is experienced by one who has attained Nibbana.

The experience of non-sensuous physical bliss for limited periods is possible even before the attainment of Nibbana through the practice of *jhaana* or meditative absorption. The Saamaññaphala Sutta describes these physical experiences with the help of eloquent similes.⁹ When bath powder is kneaded with water into a neat wet ball, the moisture touches every part of the ball but does not ooze out; similarly, the body of the adept in the first *jhaana* is drenched and suffused with joy and pleasure born of detachment from sense pleasures (*vivekaja.m piitisukha.m*). The experience in the second *jhaana* is elucidated with a different simile. A deep pool filled to the brim with clear cool water is fed by underground springs, yet the waters do not overflow and no part of the pool remains untouched by the cool waters. Similarly joy and pleasure born of concentration (*samaadhija.m piitisukha.m*) pervade the body of the meditator in the second *jhaana*. The simile for the third *jhaana* is a lotus born in water, grown in water, fully submerged in water, and drawing nourishment from water, with no part of the lotus remaining untouched by the cool water. Thus, happiness/pleasure suffuses, drenches, and permeates the entire body of the adept in the third *jhaana*. These are the experiences of non-sensuous pleasure before the attainment of Nibbana. On the attainment of Nibbana more refined non-sensuous pleasure is permanently established. The Ca"nkii Sutta specifically states that when a monk realizes the ultimate truth, he experiences that truth "with the body."¹⁰

Regarding the experience of the arahant, the Suttanipaata states that by the destruction of all feelings/sensations a monk lives desireless and at peace.[11](#) Once Saariputta was asked what happiness there can be when there is no feeling/sensation.[12](#) He explained that the absence of feeling/sensation itself is happiness.[13](#) It is relevant to note here that the Buddha says that he does not speak of happiness only within the reference to pleasant feelings/sensations. Wherever there is happiness or pleasure, that he recognizes as happiness or pleasure.[14](#)

Here, we are reminded of the statement that all mental states converge on feelings.[15](#) What is meant by this statement seems to be that all mental states are translated into sensations in the body. It is possible to understand the import of this statement, if we pay attention to a gross emotion, such as anger.

When we are angry we experience a variety of bodily sensations: feeling hot, being restless, breaking out in a sweat, trepidation, etc. When we are sad, tears come into our eyes. These are brought about by changes in body chemistry through the discharge of various glandular secretions. If intense emotions bring about such gross sensations, we might conjecture that all thoughts cause subtle sensations in the body resulting from changes in body chemistry.

We are hardly aware of these sensations which, however, become noticeable with the development of

vedanaanupassanaa, contemplation of sensations. Thoughts are endless and continuous; therefore, if this interpretation that thoughts are translated into sensations is correct, sensations too should be endless and continuous. The Vedanaasa.myutta states that just as diverse winds constantly blow in different directions, numerous sensations pass through the body.[16](#)

An arahant has full control over his thoughts;[17](#) therefore, he must have full control over his feelings/sensations too. What is meant by the statement that "a monk lives desireless and at peace by the destruction of all feelings/sensations" seems to be that he has destroyed all psychogenic feelings/sensations.

This leads us to another statement: that all feelings/sensations partake of the nature of suffering.[18](#) In order to understand the significance of this statement, we must pay attention to our postures. If we have to remain seated for some time, say for an hour, we are not even aware of how many times we shift and adjust our limbs to more comfortable positions. This happens almost mechanically, as all the time we unconsciously seek to avoid discomfort. This is because monotony of sensations, even pleasant sensations, brings about discomfort and a change brings about a temporary sensation of comfort. If there were no sensations produced from within perhaps we would not need to change positions so often and we would have a running sense of ease even if we continue to remain in the same position for a long time.

Here it might be asked whether an arahant has lost the ability to feel pain, which is also an essential part of the touch sensation. It has to be pointed-out that this is not so, for in that case an arahant would not even know if a part of his body is seriously injured or burnt. There is plenty of evidence to show that an arahant does feel sensations caused by physical changes. For instance, the Buddha felt acute pain when he was wounded by a stone splinter¹⁹ and when he suffered from indigestion.²⁰ But he was able to withstand the painful sensations with mindfulness and clear comprehension without being fatigued by them.

Again, an experience of Saariputta throws light on the subject.²¹ His experience refers to events which modern psychology designates as "non-ordinary reality of altered states of consciousness." A *yakkha*, a malevolent spirit, once gave Saariputta a blow on the head. The blow, it is said, was so powerful that it was capable of splitting a mountain peak or making a seven and a half cubit high elephant go down on its knees. Moggallaana, who saw the incident with his divine eye, inquired from Saariputta how he was feeling. He replied that he was all right, but there was slight pain in the head. This shows us that a blow, which could have deprived an ordinary person of life, had only minimal impact on an arahant.

Perhaps because the psychological factors which predispose a person to the experience of sensations are perfectly well under control in an arahant, he experiences only those

sensations that are felt purely physically by an animate organism. It seems as if the body is under some sort of mentally regulated anesthesia which allows a narrow margin of sensation to protect the body from external danger. There are two kinds of pain, physical and mental,[22](#) and arahants are said to experience only physical pain,[23](#) without the anxious mental agony when experiencing physical pain.

It is also possible to look at this issue from another angle.

Though the texts state that *vedanaa* is destroyed in the arahant, they never say that the sense faculties are destroyed.

When describing the super-conscious state of *sa~n~naa-vedayitanirodha*, the sense faculties are said to be refined — *vippasannaani indriyaani*.[24](#) So in the case of the arahant, too, the sense faculties must certainly be refined and not rendered deficient in any way. In that case it is possible to surmise that, though *vedanaa* is extinct, body-sensitivity continues to be active and is thoroughly refined.

The *Vedanaasa.myutta* differentiates between three types of joy and pleasure:[25](#)

1. *Saamisaa piiti saamisa.m sukha.m* : joy and pleasure stimulated by sense objects, e.g. worldly sense pleasures.
2. *Niraamisaa piiti niraamisa.m sukha.m* : Joy and pleasure free from stimulation by sense objects, e.g. jhaanic experiences.

3. *Niraamisataraa piiti niraamisataram sukham* : more refined joy and pleasure free from stimulation by sense objects, e.g. Nibbana.

An arahant experiences both physical and mental bliss (*so kaayasukham pi cetosukham pi patisa.mvedeti*) as all tensions (*darathaa*), torments (*santaapaa*), and fevers (*pari.laahaa*) have been completely eliminated for good.[26](#)

Bhaddiya was a monk who often exclaimed "What happiness, what happiness!" (*aho sukham aho sukham*). This expression of joy was misunderstood by his less developed fellow monks and they reported the matter to the Buddha, suspecting that Bhaddiya was often reminiscing about his lay comforts. On being questioned by the Buddha, Bhaddiya explained that he was a prince in his lay life and that he had armed guards stationed in all strategic points within and without his palace, yet still he suffered from insomnia and insecurity, fearing that rivals might usurp his position and even deprive him of his life. But now, though living all alone in the open air, he is completely free from fear and anxiety. Therefore, to express his happiness, he frequently exclaimed: "What happiness, what happiness!"[27](#)

So great was the experience of joy on the attainment of release from all mental intoxicants (*aasavakkhaya*) that sometimes arahants have stayed in that same position continuously without moving for seven days enjoying the

bliss of emancipation.[28](#) It is said that the whole body was permeated with this joy and bliss.

Thus, there are various passages in the Paali Canon which record the experience of bliss in the attainment of Nibbana. But it appears that this bliss is not confined to or dependent on the five aggregates which constitute the individual. For the Dvayataanupassanaa Sutta maintains that suffering (*dukkha*) ceases to arise with the cessation of the five aggregates.[29](#) Further, it is said in the Alagadduupama Sutta that the perfected being (*tathaagata*) cannot be identified with any of the five personality factors even while he is still alive.[30](#)

Moral Perfection

Nibbana is a state of moral perfection. For one who has attained Nibbana, all unwholesome motivational roots such as greed, hatred, and delusion have been fully eradicated with no possibility of their ever becoming active again. Therefore, Nibbana is called the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion (*raagakkhaya, dosakkhaya, mohakkhaya*). All inflowing moral depravities are destroyed, hence the epithet *aasavakkhaya* for Nibbana. Craving has been uprooted for good; therefore, *ta.nhakkhaya* is another synonym. All types of conceit, the superiority and the inferiority complex plus the complex of equality (*seyyamaana, hiinamaana, and sadisamaana*), are eliminated.

This necessarily has to be so as an arahant has no egoistic delusions such as I and mine. Just as much as an arahant has transcended egoism, he has transcended sexuality too.

When Soma, a female arahant, was rebuked by Maara the Evil One, saying that womankind with very little intelligence cannot attain that state which is to be attained with great effort by seers and sages, Soma replied that womanhood is no impediment for the realization of truth to one who is endowed with intelligence and concentration.[31](#) Further, she adds that Maara must address these words to one who thinks "I am a man" or "I am a woman" and not to one like herself. This reply seems to imply that one loses even sexual identity on the attainment of arahantship.

There is evidence that an arahant has undergone such transformation in body chemistry that he has gone beyond the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity. All normal physiological sexual functions seem to be atrophied in an arahant, as it is said that seminal emission is impossible for an arahant even in sleep.[32](#)

We may also note the tradition maintaining that arahants never dream,[33](#) maybe because they have attained such perfect mental health that there is no necessity to release tension through dreams.

The sublime modes of conduct (*brahmavihaara*) such as loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and

equanimity (*mettaa, karu.naa, muditaa, upekkhaa*) are fully developed without any limitations.

An arahant is such a perfect being that it is simply impossible for him to commit an immoral act. He is incapable of willfully destroying the life of a living creature. It is impossible for him to stoop so low as to steal something, to indulge in sex, to utter a deliberate lie, or to enjoy accumulated goods as in the household life.[34](#)

One may wonder why household life is an impossibility for an arahant. The reason may be that the household is recognized as a fortress of greed where we deposit all *our* belongings; it is, in other words, the external repository of our ego. An arahant, who has fully transcended the ego, is incapable of partaking of such an institution.

Realization

Several expressions are used in the Paali Canon to denote the cognitive aspect of the experience of Nibbana:

"The mass of darkness (of ignorance) has been torn asunder" (*tamokkhandha.m padaalita.m*) [35](#) is a frequent expression.

In his First Sermon the Buddha describes the realization of the Four Noble Truths as the arising of the eye, wisdom, insight, knowledge, and light.[36](#) "The three knowledges have been attained" (*tisso vijjaa anuppattaa*) is another expression.[37](#)

The triple knowledge consists of retrocognition (*pubbenivaasaanussati~naa.na*), clairvoyance (*dibbacakkhu*), and the knowledge of the destruction of defilements (*aasavakkhaya~naa.na*). With the first two knowledges one obtains personal verification of the doctrines of rebirth and kamma respectively. With the destruction of intoxicants one realizes the causal origination of all phenomena and egolessness.[38](#) Sometimes, three other cognitive faculties (*abhi~n~naa*) are mentioned as extra qualifications of arahants, namely, miraculous powers (*iddhividha*), the divine ear (*dibbasota*), and telepathy (*cetopariya~naa.na*).[39](#) With the attainment of Nibbana one also realizes that birth is destroyed, the higher life has been successfully lived, one's duty has been done, and there is no more of this (mundane) existence.[40](#)

The Uddesavibha"nga Sutta explains the nature of consciousness and the general cognitive attitude of an arahant:[41](#)

1. The consciousness of an arahant is not scattered and diffused in the external world (*bahiddhaa vi~n~naa.na.m avikkhitta.m avisa.ta.m*) ; this becomes possible because he does not indulge in the enjoyment of sense objects.
2. His consciousness is not established within (*ajjhatta.m asa.n.thi.ta.m*): this is possible because he does not become attached to the enjoyment of the jhaanas.

3. He remains unagitated without grasping (*anupaadaaya na paritassati*): this means that he does not identify himself with any of the five aggregates or personality factors.

The Mahaasa.laayatanika Sutta explains more fully the cognitive experience of an arahant from the angle of sense experience.[42](#)

The arahant realistically understands the nature of sense faculties, sense objects, sense consciousness, sense contact established by the convergence of these three factors, and the resulting sensations of pleasure, pain, and hedonic neutrality.

He does not get attached to any of these factors. When he lives without deriving pleasure and without getting attached to perceived sense objects and without being deluded by the process of sense perception, recognizing the evil consequences of sense perception, the five aggregates of grasping or the personality factors do not get built up. They fall apart, as craving which leads to rebirth is totally eliminated. All physical and mental tensions (*darathaa*), torments (*santaapaa*), and fevers (*pari.laahaa*) are destroyed. The arahant experiences perfect physical and mental bliss.

We are not quite sure exactly what is meant by the realistic understanding of the nature of sense faculties, but we might suppose that an arahant intuitively understands, through the framework of his own personality, how the sense stimuli

pass through sense receptors and nerve fibers and are interpreted at brain centers.

Modern science explains to a certain extent the physiological processes involved in the activity of sense perception, but this understanding is confined at best to the intellectual level and is dependent on technological devices in medical laboratories. Such knowledge cannot bring about the attitudinal and emotional changes which are necessary for liberation. An arahant's understanding springs from a deeper experiential level with direct vision into the whole perceptual process as explained, for instance, in the Madhupi.n.dika Sutta.[43](#)

What is meant by the realistic understanding of sense objects? Most likely, it is the realization of the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-substantial nature of all that is around us. This too is a direct profound experience of acute sensitivity, a direct personal vision into the dynamism of atomic and sub-atomic particles that go to form the material world around us as well as our bodies.

The Dhammapada records that when a monk sees in his contemplations the dynamic working of the physical and mental phenomena composing his own personality, great joy arises in him, and that can only be described as superhuman joy.[44](#)

One has direct insight into the inner workings of one's body, the arising and passing away of body cells, sensations,

perceptions, activities, and consciousness. Great is the joy and delight of this realization, and it is the realization of deathlessness.[45](#) This is what is called the "bliss of enlightenment" (*sambodhisukha*).

Freedom

All bonds which tie us down to suffering are torn asunder; thus Nibbana is called *sa.myojanakkhaya* .[46](#) As the arahant has complete mastery over his thoughts (*cetovasippatta*),[47](#) no recurring unhealthy thoughts obsess him. Negative emotions restrict an individual's psychological freedom; therefore, greed, hatred, and ignorance are described as *pamaa.nakara.na*, i.e. they circumscribe an individual's freedom.[48](#) Greed, hatred, and ignorance are roots of unwholesome mental states which fetter the individual within *sa.msaara*.

There is an interesting simile which illustrates the nature of a fetter.[49](#) If there are a white bull and a black bull tied together by a rope, the question is asked, whether the white bull is a fetter to the black bull or the black bull is a fetter to the white bull. In fact neither is a fetter to the other; the fetter is the rope by which they are tied together. Similarly, the desire we have for external objects is the fetter that binds us. The arahant has cut this off and attained freedom.

Unhealthy negative emotions are always self-oriented and self-centered. The Dhammapada says that the fool laments, "He abused *me*, he beat *me*, he defeated *me*, he robbed *me*,"

and generates anger.[50](#) As he is firmly tied to the idea of the self or the ego, and he cannot wean himself away from the experience which inflicted a wound on his ego, he is like a dog tied to a post.

This situation is quite in contrast to an experience the Buddha had once.[51](#) A brahman came and abused him in very harsh language. The Buddha remained silent. When at last the brahman stopped, the Buddha asked: "If you were to visit a friend and you took a gift to him, but the friend declined to accept the gift, what would you do?" The brahman replied that he would take it back. The Buddha said: "You brought me a gift of much abuse, I do not accept; you can take it back."

The Buddha also states that even if one is cut into pieces with a double-handled saw, one should train oneself not to generate anger towards the tormentor.[52](#) Moggallaana was an arahant who was mercilessly beaten by robbers but he was able to maintain his composure without a trace of anger. Such is the freedom one gains from negative emotions on the attainment of Nibbana.

An arahant has fully developed the *brahmavihaaras*, the sublime modes of conduct — universal love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These positive qualities are generated by transcending the self and are described as all-embracing and immeasurable (*appamaana*).[53](#) Thus, they do not limit the scope of psychological freedom as do the

mental states rooted in greed, hatred, and ignorance (*pamaa.nakara.na*).

The freedom won by an arahant is called *cetovimutti* and *pa~n~naavimutti*, release of mind and release through wisdom. Knowledge also arises in the meditator that freedom has been gained (*vimuttasmi.m vimuttam iti ~naa.na.m hoti*). This is called the "bliss of emancipation" (*vimuttisukha*), the highest bliss that any human being could enjoy.

Creativity

Creativity is another aspect under which the achievement of an arahant can be fruitfully discussed. The virtues of the arahant can be succinctly summarized as *karu.naa* and *pa~n~naa*, compassion and wisdom. These are the two qualities through which the creativity of the arahant finds expression. When arahants look at humanity they are moved by great compassion as they fully realize the gravity of the precarious condition of the worldlings.

Therefore, they willingly plunge into a life of selfless activity, preaching to the people, trying to show them the path leading out of misery to eternal peace. It is especially noteworthy that the Buddha's role as teacher was so demanding that he barely slept two hours a day. The body of discourses he gave during the course of his long ministry of forty-five years is as profound as it is extensive. It stands preeminent in world literary history for originality of ideas,

profundity of thought, and clarity of expression. These observations hold good for the discourses delivered by the arahants as well.

The entire Paali Canon can be considered as testimony to the creative genius of the liberated beings. It is but natural that creativity finds spontaneous expression when a person attains liberation, as all negative emotions which hinder creativity and distort spontaneity are totally eliminated in the arahant.

Some arahants are endowed with the special accomplishment of the fourfold analytical knowledge (*pa.tisambhidaa~naa.na*), which qualifies them even more thoroughly for creative work.[54](#)

These are spelt out as analytical knowledge of the meaning or goal, profound truth, language or the medium of communication, and originality of expression (*attha, dhamma, nirutti, pa.tibhaana*).

These four special qualifications make arahants experts in communicating to their audience the exact meanings and goals of the profound truths they have discovered, through the medium of refined language, using their own original modes of expression such as eloquent similes, metaphors, etc.

Several arahants, both male and female, are recorded as eloquent speakers and erudite exponents of the Dhamma.[55](#)

Special mention must be made of the Theragaathaa and Theriigaathaa, which comprise poems of exquisite beauty. They are utterances of monks and nuns embodying their varied experiences. Literary critics rank them among the best lyrics in Indian literature.⁵⁶ They remain unrivalled in the literary history of the world as creative writing issuing forth from the undefiled purity of the human heart and the nobility of human wisdom. They are ever-fresh fountains of inspiration to the truth-seeker and lasting monuments to the creative genius of the liberated beings.

Physiology and Spirituality

Having considered this traditional material from the Paali Canon, let us now turn to modern studies on psychophysiology and meditation to see whether we can draw some inferences from them on the experience of Nibbana.

Studies done by investigators such as Walter B. Cannon show beyond doubt that there is a definite correlation between physiology and strong emotions.⁵⁷ "When a sensory trunk is strongly excited the adrenal glands are reflexly stimulated and they pour into the blood stream an increased amount of adrenalin."⁵⁸ This gives rise to the overt manifestation of bodily changes such as dilation of the pupils, sweating, rapid respiration, etc.⁵⁹ There are other physiological changes such as those in heart beat, blood pressure, blood volume, electro-dermal responses, etc.⁶⁰ But they are not quite useful

for us as they cannot be related to material found in the Paali Canon.

The logical inference is that if strong negative emotions can give rise to certain physiological changes in the body, changes which may be described as unhealthy, the cultivation of positive emotions too should give rise to physiological changes which are quite different from those stimulated by negative emotions.

As opposed to the dilation of the pupils and a consequent look of ferocity in the instance of a strong emotion such as anger, we find in the Paali texts, instead, mention is made of the monks' eyes as being very pleasant. The monks, it is said, look at one another with amiable eyes, and they mix with one another as milk and water blend.[61](#)

This feature was conspicuous enough to draw the attention of the intelligent public; for example, King Pasenadi Kosala cited the pleasing expression in the eyes of the monks as one of the special characteristics which convinced him that they possess purity of heart and spiritual maturity.

The complexion or facial expression of the monks is also mentioned as an impressive feature indicating the height of spirituality attained. The bright clear complexion or serene facial expression[62](#) attracted the attention of many observers and inspired their confidence in the Dhamma.

For instance, Saariputta was impressed by the bright countenance and the serene appearance of the monk Assaji, and that was the starting point of his conversion.⁶³ King Asoka's conversion to Buddhism was prompted by the outward appearance of the novice Nigrodha.⁶⁴ The spotlessly pure bright complexion of the Buddha was counted as one of the thirty-two marks of a great man and these marks are considered the outward manifestations of profound spiritual maturity.⁶⁵

As sweating is one of the physiological manifestations of emotional excitement, there is an interesting incident from the life of the Buddha relevant for our present study:

Once Saccaka, who was a redoubtable debater, came for a debate with the Buddha. He boasted that he would harass the Buddha in debate as a strong man would shake a goat to and fro while holding it by its long beard. Arrogantly, he bragged that he could see no man who would not break out in a sweat when challenged by him in debate.

But when the debate with the Buddha was actually held, before a large audience, it was Saccaka who sweated profusely in defeat. The Buddha bared his chest and showed that he did not sweat at all.⁶⁶ This episode may be taken as evidence that an arahant does not perspire due to emotional excitement.

Rapid respiration is yet another physiological accompaniment of negative emotions:

Changes in breathing rhythm or amplitude are considered excellent indicators of deception.[67](#) It is a commonplace experience that respiration remains calm and placid when we are quiet and resting. It becomes even calmer in meditation. The Paali Canon maintains that respiration ceases altogether during the fourth jhaana, which is a subtle, highly refined state of superconsciousness.[68](#) It is possible that metabolism comes to a standstill or a minimum level during this state. Though arahants do not always abide in this jhaana, they must constantly maintain a calm regular rhythm in their respiration, for they never become emotionally disturbed or excited.

Their calm is so profound that it is said that they also maintain an inner silence even when they speak, as the sub-vocal chatter which is characteristic of others has been quelled altogether in their case.[69](#)

Modern scientific studies on the physiology of meditation shed light on some other aspects relevant to the present study:

It has been found that the concentration of blood-lactate level declines precipitously in meditation.[70](#) Its concentration normally falls in a subject at rest but the rate of decline during meditation has proved to be more than three times faster than the normal rate.[71](#) This offers a good contrast to the rise of blood-lactate levels when patients with anxiety neurosis are placed under stress.[72](#)

It is also reported from experiments that the infusion of lactate brings about attacks of anxiety in such patients. Furthermore, it is also significant that patients with hypertension (essential and renal) show higher blood-lactate levels in a resting state than patients without hypertension, whereas in contrast, the low lactate level in meditators is associated with low blood pressure.[73](#) Thus, it is clear that the fall in the blood-lactate level has a beneficial psychophysiological effect.

All this medical evidence goes to show that a calm healthy mind finds expression in a positively transformed body chemistry. Therefore, it is reasonable to maintain that one who has reached the culmination of meditative practice and realized Nibbana is healthy in both mind and body.

The body has certain electrical properties that are clearly associated with psychological processes such as attention and emotion.[74](#) One of these is shown in the rapid rise in the electrical resistance of the skin accompanying meditation. Wallace and Benson report that fifteen subjects tested showed a rise of about 140,000 ohms in 20 minutes.[75](#) In sleep, skin resistance normally rises, but not so much or at such a rate.[76](#) The same test is used in lie detection, and most laboratory studies have found that the skin resistance response is the best indicator of deception.[77](#)

This evidence shows beyond doubt that involuntary physiological changes accompany emotional states both

positive and negative. Again, it is said that the brain is constantly emitting small electrical potentials measured in cycles per second called Hertz (Hz). These waves of varying frequencies and shapes are labeled with Greek letters such as delta waves (less than 4 Hz), theta waves (4-7 Hz), alpha waves (8-13 Hz), and beta waves (greater than 4 Hz).[78](#)

Electro-encephalographic recordings of subjects in meditation have disclosed a marked intensification of alpha waves. Wallace and Benson report that they recorded the waves from seven main areas of the brain on magnetic tape and analyzed the patterns with a computer. They say that typically there was an increase in intensity of slow alpha waves at eight or nine cycles per second in the frontal and central regions of the brain during meditation. In several subjects this change was also accompanied by prominent theta waves in the frontal areas.[79](#)

On the other hand, emotional disturbance such as anger is always accompanied by alpha blocking whereas sleep, "the antithesis of emotion," is characterized by slow high-amplitude activity. Light and sound stimuli also block the alpha rhythm. It is reduced or suppressed during periods of apprehension. Alpha waves are absent in records of patients in an anxiety state.[80](#) On the strength of these findings it is possible to conjecture that the harmony of the mind determines to a very large extent the health of the body.

When related to the experience of Nibbana it seems reasonable to conjecture that an arahant has put an end to all psychosomatic diseases. His body would be susceptible only to physical ailments and injury caused by external agents.

There are reports in the Paali Canon of arahants falling ill and experiencing acute pain.[81](#) It is also noteworthy that they are said to have recovered by meditating on the Dhamma. On the strength of the evidence furnished so far one is inclined to regard their illnesses as being caused by physiological factors. There is also an incident of a monk who is not an arahant dying of snakebite. The Buddha says that if the monk had practiced *mettaa* fully he would not have met with such an unfortunate death.[82](#) It may be that the snake would not have bitten him in the first place had *mettaa* been fully cultivated. On the other hand, there is another commentarial episode where a non-arahant monk was bitten by a poisonous snake while he was listening to the Dhamma.[83](#) The poison started spreading in the body and the pain became acute. The monk then reflected on the immaculate purity of his virtues from the time he received higher ordination. It is said that, as a result of this reflection, great joy arose in his mind suffusing his entire body. The joy acted as an anti-venom and he was cured.

Meditation is described in psycho-physiological terminology as a "wakeful hypo-metabolic" state characterized by: "reductions in oxygen consumption, carbon dioxide elimination, and the rate and volume of respiration; a slight

increase in the acidity of arterial blood; a marked decrease in the blood-lactate level; a slowing of the heart beat; a considerable increase in skin resistance; and an electroencephalogram pattern of intensification of slow alpha waves with occasional theta-wave activity."[84](#)

It may be surmised that the metabolism during normal waking hours is probably maintained at the lowest possible healthy level in the case of the arahant, as his body is not subject to undue wear and tear brought about by emotional excitement. The positive refined sublime emotions or the divine modes of conduct (*brahmavihaara*) such as *mettaa*, *karu.naa*, *muditaa*, and *upekkhaa*, not to speak of the higher cognitive states, must necessarily find expression in body chemistry to produce a healthy constitution and a calm, unruffled, serene personality filled with peace, contentment, and the joy of enlightenment (*sambodhisukha*) .

We are reminded, here, of a statement the Buddha once made. He said that even if there is a portion as small as a pinch of dust that defies change in the psychophysical personality of the human being, leading the higher life (*brahmacariya*) would be useless.[85](#)

What is meant is that there is no such permanent part and the higher life can successfully bring about a total transformation of the individual in both mind and body. Modern scientific studies on the physiology of meditation prove that basic biochemical and bioelectrical changes do

take place in the body as a result of mental culture. It is, therefore, possible to surmise that mental culture culminates in a total psychophysical transformation.

Studies done on the bio-feedback technique suggest that a radical transformation of the nervous system must take place with the development of higher mental potentialities. It is common knowledge that the autonomous nervous system is divided into two parts, the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system.

Johann Stoyva, in an article on bio-feedback techniques, states that probably in deep relaxation there is a shift in the autonomous nervous system towards parasympathetic dominance. Parasympathetic functioning is associated with subtler emotions — wonder, religious and aesthetic experiences, contemplation — emotions characterized by a broader range of awareness.[86](#)

On the other hand, sympathetic predominance is linked to emotions in which the range of awareness is restricted — anger and fear, for example. On the strength of this evidence it may be conjectured that parasympathetic functioning develops to greater efficiency with spiritual advancement.

Very little is known about the functions of the pineal gland, which Renè Descartes regarded as the chosen residence of the human soul. It is described as the built-in biological clock of the human being on which depends the regularity of sleeping and waking.[87](#) This gland synthesizes a hormone

called *melatonin* which affects behavior, sleep, brain activity, and sexual activity such as puberty, ovulation, and sexual maturation.[88](#)

While melatonin stimulates brain activity, it inhibits sexual activity. Again it has been recognized that light/dark, olfaction, cold, stress, and other neural inputs affect the pineal function.[89](#) Exposure to light reduces the synthesis of melatonin and depresses pineal weight.[90](#) On the other hand, light accelerates sexual maturation and activity.[91](#)

In the context of Buddhist thought the function of the pineal gland seems to be the biological basis of sense control. Buddhism maintains that unrestrained sense stimulation disturbs mental activity. If the sense doors are well guarded, i.e. if visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile inputs are controlled, a corresponding degree of happiness (*avyaasekasukha*) and concentrated mental activity become possible.[92](#)

Cittass'ekaggataa, the ability to fix the mind on one point, is greatly determined by the control of the sense faculties. In terms of physiology it seems that such sense control helps the synthesis of melatonin in the pineal gland which stimulates brain activity and retards sexual activity. Thus in terms of pineal function, brain activity and sexual activity seem to be antithetical. Buddhism, too, emphasizes that sexual desire prevents clear thinking, distorts vision, clouds issues, inhibits wisdom, and destroys peace of mind.[93](#)

The entire scheme of spiritual development comprising the Noble Eightfold Path is an efficient methodical plan of action designed to bring a gradual psychophysical transformation culminating in the attainment of Nibbana.

Cultivation of moral habits (*siila*) is the frame for wholesome behavior by means of which healthy body chemistry gets gradually established. Neural circuits related to harmonious physical and vocal activity are strengthened and those related to violence become proportionately weak.

The second phase in the development of the Noble Eightfold Path comprises meditation. A steady rapid psychophysical development takes place during this phase. It is our conjecture that the adrenalin secretion which accompanied negative emotions of rage and fear is reduced to a healthy, workable level.

Perhaps adrenalin is secreted in small quantities into the blood stream to maintain an unflagging enthusiasm to continue in the difficult practice of meditation with undaunted courage and perseverance. Or it may be, as the endocrine glands stimulate or inhibit one another, a balanced combination of these glandular secretions affects the cognitive and emotional behavior of the meditator.

When sublime modes of conduct such as *mettaa*, *karu.naa*, *mudita*, and *upekkha* are practiced over and over again they must become ingrained in the nervous system, perhaps increasing parasympathetic dominance. With the practice of

vipassanaa or insight-meditation, the pineal gland seems to develop its full bodily potential for unlocking all possible spiritual knowledges in the meditator's mind, and when the process is complete Nibbana is attained.

This interpretation finds further support in the Buddhist conception of the reciprocal relationship between *vi~n~naa.na* and *naamaruupa*. This relationship is illustrated in the Canon with the simile of two bundles of reeds placed together supporting each other. A change of position in one is bound to make a corresponding change in the other.

Thus psychological development affects physiological function, apparently through the activity of the nervous system and the endocrine glands. Healthy physiological changes reinforce healthy psychological activity. Thus, the process of mutual psychophysical interaction works for the happiness or misery of the individual, depending on the moral quality of the actions performed through body, speech, and mind. As the mind is involved in all activity, it is the mind that is responsible for the quality of body chemistry and neural function.

When the mind ultimately attains to a state of absolute purity beyond corruptibility, body chemistry and neural function undergo a radical transformation which will not be reversed again.

It can be conjectured that when the pineal gland and its auxiliaries develop to the fullest possible capacity, the

hitherto inactive brain regions unlock their secrets and reveal them when attention is directed accordingly. Thus, memory becomes so efficient as to revive prenatal knowledge running into numerous previous existences. Similarly, the divine eye, or clairvoyance, is clarified, disclosing the kammic antecedents of human experience. When one gains direct vision and knowledge of the bodily and mental processes involved in the human personality one attains supreme enlightenment.

The Avyaakatas

The state of Nibbana after the death of the arahant is nowhere discussed in the Paali Canon. The four alternatives put forward regarding this state, namely: Does the Perfect One exist after death, does he not, does he and does he not, does he neither exist nor not exist after death, are all left aside unanswered.

These questions are put aside because they are not useful to human happiness and understanding, not concerned with the Dhamma; not helpful for the higher life; not conducive to disenchantment and detachment; not conducive to cessation of misery, to tranquillity of the mind, to higher knowledge, to insight, and to peace (Nibbana).[94](#)

The Aggivacchagotta Sutta cites a simile in this connection which illustrates that the questions themselves are meaningless.[95](#) If there is a fire burning and if the fire goes out without fuel, can one ask the question: "In which

direction did the fire go, east, south, west, or north?" The question itself is inappropriate as it assumes that fire can have existence independent of fuel.

The nun Khemaa points out that the state of the Tathaagata after death is immeasurable. Just as it is impossible to calculate the drops of water in the ocean and the grains of sand in the earth, so is it impossible to conceptualize the state of Nibbana after the demise of the arahant.[96](#)

The Anuraadha Sutta states that the five aggregates of grasping, or the personality factors, are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-self. Therefore, the noble disciple is detached from them. He wins freedom, and after death becomes completely untraceable.[97](#) The Alagadduupama Sutta maintains that the Tathaagata cannot be identified with the personality factors even during his lifetime, so how can he be identified after death?[98](#)

A plausible explanation is necessary for the traditional silence regarding the state of the arahant after death. Existence in the world implies time and space.

One exists within a particular period in a particular space or locality. If one passes beyond time and beyond space, it is not possible to speak of existence with reference to such a one. To speak of both time and space one needs a point of reference, e.g. A is 50 years old. This means 50 years have passed since the event of A's birth. If A is not born, it is impossible to speak of "time" or existence with reference to

him. Similarly with space. Without points of reference it is not possible to grasp space. There is a definite distance between any two specific points. Nor can one speak of direction without a point of reference. When the notion of "I," which is the point of personal reference, is eradicated, one goes beyond time, beyond space, and beyond causality. Therefore, it is not possible to speak of the liberated being as existing or not existing.

Here, we are reminded of a statement made by Fritjof Capra in his *Tao of Physics* relevant to our present context. He states: "Physicists can 'experience' the four dimensional space-time world through the abstract mathematical formalism of their theories, but their visual imagination, like everybody else's, is limited to the three-dimensional world of the senses.

Our language and thought patterns have evolved in this three-dimensional world and, therefore, we find it extremely hard to deal with the four-dimensional reality of relativistic physics."[99](#)

Thus, when the four-dimensional reality too eludes the perceptual experience of the average man, how can Nibbana, which transcends all these four dimensions, come within mere verbal experience? Therefore, it is impossible to speak of the arahant's state in terms of existence or non-existence.

At this point an observation can be made from another point of view. Buddhism describes the characteristics of all things

in three statements: *Sabbe sa"nkhaaraa anicca, sabbe sa"nkhaaraa dukkha, sabbe dhammaa anatta*, meaning all conditioned things are impermanent, all conditioned things are unsatisfactory, all phenomena are non-self.[100](#) Here the change of terminology in the last statement seems important.

The Sa.myutta Commentary explains the last statement as: *Sabbe dhammaa anatta ti sabbe catubhuumakaa dhammaa* .[101](#) The *Visuddhimagga* explains the four *bhuumis* or planes as *kaamaavacara, ruupaavacara, aruupaavacara*, and *lokuttara*, meaning the sensual sphere, the fine-material sphere, the immaterial sphere, and the supramundane.[102](#) Therefore *dhammaa* in our statement can be interpreted as including the supramundane state of Nibbana as well.

Commenting on this statement Ven. Narada Thera observes: "*Dhammaa* can be applied to both conditioned and unconditioned things and states. It embraces both conditioned and unconditioned things including Nibbana. In order to show that even Nibbana is free from a permanent soul the Buddha used the term *dhammaa* in the third verse. Nibbana is a positive supramundane state and is without a soul."[103](#)

It is significant that *dhammaa* was not used in the first two statements. The purpose seems to be to exclude Nibbana which is permanent and blissful. Therefore, we can surmise a condition that is permanent and blissful, but it is not a self. That state is Nibbana. It has to be a dimension completely

different from all that is worldly. The permanence that is conjectured here has no reference to time and space, and the bliss that is spoken of has no reference to feelings, *vedanaa* .

Further, there is a great difference between the death of an ordinary worldling and that of an arahant. To indicate this, a different terminology is used: *mara.na/miyyati* is used to designate the death of a worldling, while *parinibbaana/parinibbaayati* is used in the case of an arahant. In fact, the Dhammapada specifically states that the vigilant ones, meaning arahants, never die (in the ordinary sense of the word).[104](#)

Let us first see what happens when a worldling dies. It is an accepted fact that everybody fears death.[105](#) We also fear the unknown; therefore, death is doubly fearful because we know least about it. It seems reasonable to assume that at the root of all fear there lurks the fear of death. In other words, we fear everything which directly or indirectly threatens our life. So long as our bodies are strong enough, we can either fight or run away from the source of fear, with the intention of preserving life. But when ultimately we are on the deathbed face to face with death and our body is no longer strong enough to flee from death, it is highly unlikely that we will mentally accept death with resignation. We will struggle hard, long for and crave for life (*ta.nhaa*), and reach out and grasp (*upaadaana*) a viable base somewhere as the dying body can no longer sustain life.

Once such a viable base, for instance a fertilized ovum in a mother's womb, has been grasped, the process of becoming or growth (*bhava*) starts there, which in due course gives rise to birth (*jaati*). This is what is referred to in the twelve-linked *pa.ticcasamuppaada* as "craving conditions grasping, grasping conditions becoming, becoming conditions birth."[106](#) Thus a worldling dies and is reborn.

Now, let us consider the last moments of an arahant. As an arahant has no fear whatsoever from any source (*akutobhaya*), he would not be agitated (*na paritassati*) as he has no craving for life.[107](#) He will watch the process of death with perfect equanimity and crystal-clear mindfulness.[108](#)

Further, the Mahaaparinibbaana Sutta, which explains the final moments of the Buddha, states that the Buddha passed away immediately after rising from the fourth jhaana.[109](#) The fourth jhaana is characterized by purity of equanimity and mindfulness.[110](#)

It is not known whether all arahants attain *parinibbaana* after the fourth jhaana, but certainly they cannot have a deluded death.[111](#)

As they do not grasp another birth the state they attain after final passing away has to be described as unborn (*ajaata*) . Similarly it is uncaused (*asa'nkhata*).[112](#) As it is no ordinary death it is called the deathless state.[113](#) It is beyond elemental existence, beyond *brahmalokas*, neither in this

world nor the next, beyond the radiance of the sun and moon.[114](#) It is beyond what we know of in the three worlds of *kaama*, *ruupa*, and *aruupa* . Therefore, as it is beyond the ken of ordinary human understanding, any attempt to define the state is bound to end in failure. The course of liberated ones cannot be traced like that of birds in the air.[115](#)

Notes

[1.](#) S IV 19.

[2.](#) *Nibbantii dhiiraa yathaaya.m padiipo*: Sn 235.

[3.](#) S IV 19.

[4.](#) Sn 542, 642.

[5.](#) A I 138, III 435.

[6.](#) D I 156, 167.

[7.](#) *Nibbana.m parama.m sukha.m*: Dh 203.

[8.](#) *Susukha.m vata jiivaama verinesu averino/aaturesu anaaturaa* : Dh 197-99.

[9.](#) D I 74.

[10.](#) *Kaayena c'eva paramasacca.m sacchikaroti*: M II 173.

[11.](#) *Vedanaana.m khayaa bhikkhu nicchaato parinibbuto*: Sn 739.

[12.](#) *Kim pan'ettha n'atthi vedayitan ti*: A IV 415.

- [13.](#) *Etad eva khv'ettha sukha.m yad ettha n'atthi vedayita.m .*
- [14.](#) S IV 228.
- [15.](#) *Vedanaasamosara.naa sabbe dhammaa: A IV 339, V 107; sa'nkappavitakkaa vedanaasamosara.naa: A IV 385.*
- [16.](#) S IV 218.
- [17.](#) *Cetovasippatta : A II 6, 36.*
- [18.](#) *Ya.m ki~nci vedayita.m ta.m dukkhasmin ti: S IV 216.*
- [19.](#) Vin II 193.
- [20.](#) D II 127.
- [21.](#) Ud 40.
- [22.](#) *Kaayika~n ca cetasikaa ca: S IV 231.*
- [23.](#) *Arahaa eka.m vedana.m vediyati kaayika.m na cetasikan ti : Miln 253.*
- [24.](#) M I 296.
- [25.](#) S IV 235.
- [26.](#) M III 288-89.
- [27.](#) ThagA III 52.

28. *Piitisukhena ca kaaya.m pharitvaa vihari.m tadaa / Sattamiyaa paade pasaaresi.m tamokkhandha.m padaaliya:* Thig 274.

29. Sn pp.142-48.

30. M I 140.

31. S I 129.

32. *A.t.thaanam eta.m anavakaaso ya.m arahato asuci mucceyyaa ti :* Vin I 295.

33. *Compendium of Philosophy* (London: PTS, 1956), p.50.

34. M I 523.

35. Thag 128.

36. *Cakkhu.m udapaadi ~naa.na.m udapaadi pa~n~naa udapaadi vijjaa udapaadi aaloko udapaadi :* S V 424.

37. M II 105.

38. M I 55.

39. II 18-22.

40. *Naapara.m itthattaayaa ti pajaanaati:* M I 67.

41. M III 223.

42. M III 287.

[43.](#) M I 111.

[44.](#) Dh 373.

[45.](#) Dh 374.

[46.](#) S II 186.

[47.](#) A II 6, 36.

[48.](#) M I 298.

[49.](#) S IV 162.

[50.](#) Dh 4.

[51.](#) S I 162.

[52.](#) M I 129.

[53.](#) D I 251.

[54.](#) A II 160.

[55.](#) A I 23, 25.

[56.](#) M. Winternitz, *Indian Literature*, Vol. II, p.100.

[57.](#) *Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage* (Maryland: McGrath, 1970), pp.12-24.

[58.](#) Ibid., p.59.

[59.](#) Ibid., p.57.

[60.](#) William W. Grings and Michael E. Dawson, *Emotions and Bodily Responses* (New York: Academic Press, 1978), pp.12-24.

[61.](#) *Khiirodakiibhuute a~n~nama~n~na.m piyacakkhuuhi sampassante viharante* : M II 121.

[62.](#) *Parisuddho chaviva.n.no pariyodaato* : Vin I 8.

[63.](#) Vin I 41.

[64.](#) VinA I 45.

[65.](#) Lakkha.na Sutta, D I 143.

[66.](#) M I 233.

[67.](#) Grings and Dawson, pp.157-58.

[68.](#) S IV 217.

[69.](#) Sn 731, M I 301.

[70.](#) "The Physiology of Meditation" by Robert Keith Wallace and Herbert Benson, in *The Nature of Human Consciousness*, ed. Robert E. Ornstein (San Francisco: H.W. Freeman, 1973), p.262.

[71.](#) Ibid., p.262.

[72.](#) Ibid., p.264.

[73.](#) Ibid., p.265.

[74.](#) Grings and Dawson, p.16

[75.](#) *The Nature of Human Consciousness*, p.264.

[76.](#) Ibid., p.264.

[77.](#) Grings and Dawson, pp.156ff.

[78.](#) Ibid., p.19.

[79.](#) *The Nature of Human Consciousness*, pp.257, 265, 270.

[80.](#) S.P. Grossman, *Textbook of Physiological Psychology* (New York, 1967), pp.516-17.

[81.](#) S V 79-81; A V 108.

[82.](#) A II 72; Vin II 109.

[83.](#) MA I 78.

[84.](#) *The Nature of Human Consciousness*, p.266.

[85.](#) S III 147.

[86.](#) *The Physiology of Thinking: Studies in Covert Processes*, ed. E.J. McGuigan and R.A. Schoonover (N.Y.: Academic Press, 1973).

[87.](#) Nigel Calder, *The Mind of Man* (New York, 1970), p.36

[88.](#) *The Pineal Gland*, ed. G.E.W. Wolstenholme and Julie Knight (Ciba Foundation Symposium, London, 1971), pp.215, 368-372, 343, 268, 271-272.

[89](#). Ibid., pp.384, 385.

[90](#). Ibid., pp.381, 380.

[91](#).Ibid., p.300.

[92](#). D I 70.

[93](#). A I 216; M I 115.

[94](#). See e.g. D I 191.

[95](#). M I 487.

[96](#). S IV 374.

[97](#). S IV 380.

[98](#). M I 140.

[99](#). p.150

[100](#). Dh 277-79; S III 133.

[101](#). SA II 318.

[102](#). Vsm 454. A note of caution has to be added to this interpretation, as DhA III 407 explains: *tattha sabbe dhammaa ti pa~ncakkhandhaa va adhippetaa ti*, "what is meant by all dhammas is precisely the five aggregates."

[103](#). *The Dhammapada*, a translation by Ven. Narada Thera, p.225, on v.279.

[104.](#) *Appamattaa na miyanti: Dh 21.*

[105.](#) *Sabbe bhaayanti maccuno : Dh 129; also Vsm I 239.*

[106.](#) *Ta.nhaapaccayaa upaadaana.m upaadaanapaccayaa bhavo bhavapaccayaa jaati .*

[107.](#) *Na ki~nci loke upadiyati, anupaadiya.m na paritassati, aparitassa.m paccatta.m yeva parinibbaayati: D II 68; anupaadaaya aparitassato aayati.m jaatijaraamara.nadukkhasamudayasambhavo na hoti : M III 223.*

[108.](#) *Upekhavaa anupaadaaya ca na paritassati: M III 228.*

[109.](#) *Catutthajjhaanaa vu.t.thahitvaa samanantaraa Bhagavaa parinibbaayi : D II 156.*

[110.](#) *Upekkhaasatipaarisuddhi : D I 75.*

[111.](#) *Sammohamara.na : Vsm 314.*

[112.](#) Ud 80.

[113.](#) *Amatapada : Dh 21.*

[114.](#) Ud 80.

[115.](#) *AAkaase va sakuntaana.m gati tesa.m durannayaa: Dh 92.*

The Buddha and the Arahant

In the Gopakamoggallaana Sutta a brahman asks the Venerable Ananda whether there is a single monk who is completely endowed with all the qualities with which the Buddha is endowed. Ananda replies that there is not a single monk who is so endowed.¹ In this paper an attempt is made to compare the attainments of the Buddha with those of the arahant, with a view to ascertain wherein the two differ.

Both the Buddha and the arahants are recognized as equal as far as the attainment of the final goal of Nibbana is concerned. The principal difference is that the Buddha is the pioneer, the discoverer of the undiscovered path, while the arahants are followers who tread the path mapped out by the pioneering Buddha. The Cūḷagopāḷaka Sutta uses a slightly different allegory: it compares the Buddha to a clever cowherd who gets his herd to cross a deep river from a safe ford.²

Later Buddhist texts elucidate the pioneership of the Buddha with lucid descriptions of how he spent incalculable periods of time practising and perfecting the virtues called *paaramitaa*, which gave him the intellectual and emotional maturity to discover the long forgotten path to Nibbana.³ But it is specifically stated that the Buddha did not preach all that he understood during the process of preparation. What he preached is compared to a handful of leaves, whereas

what he understood but refrained from teaching is like the leaves in the forest.[4](#)

The Buddha also maintains that he preached the Dhamma in its entirety without any reservations.[5](#) What is meant by these superficially contradictory statements seems to be that the Buddha taught everything useful and relevant for emancipation, but kept strictly aside everything that was useless and irrelevant for that purpose. This position is reiterated in the Canon in a number of suttas.

The Buddha clearly defined the scope of his teaching and strictly confined himself to the problem of suffering and its elimination.[6](#)

The Buddha's standpoint can be illustrated with the help of a simile. He was like a lonely man who was lost in the fearful wilderness of *sa.msara* and, earnestly, sought a way out. As he had to spend a long time in this vast terrible forest, he had to learn a great deal about the forest itself. To survive he had to learn about edible and poisonous plants and fruits; he had to learn the habits and habitats of wild animals; he had to climb trees in order to discover in which direction there were signs of a human settlement, etc. But at long last, when he did discover a straight path leading out of the wilderness, he thought, quite rightly, that it was a waste of time to teach about the ways of the forest to others who are also lost in the wilderness.

It was most useful and urgent that he devoted his time and energy to point out the path to other suffering beings. This is exactly the function of a Buddha. Therefore he refrained from teaching what was irrelevant to emancipation. This clearly shows that the Buddha is far superior to other arahants regarding knowledge about matters not directly related to Nibbana.

Among arahants, too, there are differences in attainment. In one place the Buddha states that in a group of 500 monks sixty are arahants with the six higher knowledges (*cha.labhi~n~naa*), sixty are arahants with the three clear knowledges (*tevijjaa*), another sixty are arahants liberated from both parts (*ubhatobhaagavimutta*), while the rest are arahants liberated by wisdom (*pa~n~naavimutta*) .[7](#)

(1) The highest qualifications among arahants are the six higher knowledges (*cha.labhi~n~naa*) and the four analytical knowledges (*catupa.tisambhidaa*) .[8](#) The former comprise psychic powers, the divine ear, thought reading, retrocognition (the ability to recall one's former births), clairvoyance (the ability to see beings dying and being reborn according to their kamma), and the knowledge of the destruction of defilements. The four analytical knowledges comprise insight into the meaning of words (*attha*), truth (*dhamma*), use of language (*nirutti*), and originality of ideas (*pa.tibhaana*). They seem to pivot round the ability to teach the Dhamma through the medium of verbal communication with appealing and meaningful ways of presentation.

(2) Arahants of lesser attainments have only three higher knowledges: retrocognition, clairvoyance, and the knowledge of the destruction of defilements.

(3) Still other arahants attain emancipation from both parts (*ubhatobhaagavimutti*). They have gained emancipation from the body (*ruupakaaya*) [9](#) by the physical experience and complete mastery of eight "deliverances" (*vimokkhas*) or supernormal states of consciousness, and emancipation from the mind (*naamakaaya*)[10](#) through the destruction of defilements.

(4) Arahants who are released through wisdom have only the knowledge of the destruction of defilements. As a common denominator all arahants have *pa~n~naavimutti*, also called *akuppaa cetovimutti*, "imperturbable mental freedom."

While the highest qualities attainable by an arahant are certainly found in the Buddha,[11](#) the Suttas assign additional qualifications to the Buddha which are not shared by other arahants. The Mahaasiihanaada Sutta describes ten special powers of the Buddha called *tathaagatabala* .[12](#) They are tabulated below and will be taken up for discussion in comparison with the attainments of arahants.

Endowed with these ten powers, the Buddha claims a position of supreme eminence (*aasabha.m .thaana.m pa.tijaanaati*). He is fearless in facing any audience or critic; the text metaphorically states that "he roars like a lion in assemblies" (*parisaasu siihanaada.m nadati*). He exercises

supreme authority among human beings (*brahmacakka.m pavatteti*) . The ten powers are as follows:

(1) He knows realistically a possibility as a possibility and an impossibility as an impossibility.

(2) He knows realistically the causally connected results of all actions whether they belong to the past, present, or future.

(3) He knows realistically the course of action leading to all states of existence.

(4) He knows realistically all worlds composed of various and diverse elements.

(5) He knows realistically the various spiritual propensities or dispositions of human beings.

(6) He knows realistically the maturity levels of the spiritual faculties of various human beings.

(7) He knows, realistically, the attainment of superconscious meditational levels such as *jhaana*, *vimokkha*, *samaadhi*, and *samaapatti* together with the defilements and purities associated with them and the means of rising from these states.

(8) He has retro-cognitive powers extending up to several aeons with ability to recall details regarding past existences.

(9) He has clairvoyant powers with the ability to see beings dying and being reborn in high or low states according to their own kamma.

(10) He has attained knowledge of the complete destruction of all defilements in this very life.

These will be taken up for discussion in comparison with the attainments of arahants, in reverse order as it seems to be clearer and more convenient to do so.

(10): The Buddha shares the last of the *tathaagatabalas* with all other arahants, and there seems to be no difference between the Buddha and the arahants in regard to emancipation.

(8) and (9): Arahants with the triple and six-fold higher knowledge share with the Buddha the retro-cognitive and clairvoyant abilities. But there seems to be a difference in proficiency and extent of vision: the Buddha seems to have unlimited retrocognitive and clairvoyant abilities, as he says that he can see as far as he wishes to see (*yaavad eva aaka"nkhaami*) .[13](#)

(7): The Buddha shares his mastery over superconscious meditational levels with the *ubhatobhaagavimutta* arahant, who can attain the eight deliverances (*a.t.tha vimokkhaa*) in progressive order, regressive order, and in both progressive and regressive orders; he can attain whatever he wishes,

whenever he wishes, for any length of time he wishes, and can also rise from them at will.[14](#)

(5) and (6): These are special aspects of thought-reading (*cetopariya~naa.na*). Though arahants with *cha.labhi~n~naa* are said to have the ability of thought-reading, nowhere is it stated in the Paali Canon that arahants can discern the spiritual propensities and maturity levels of the spiritual faculties of other individuals. This seems to be a special province of the Buddha alone. Much evidence could be gathered from the Paali Canon in support of this special ability of the Buddha. Seeing the spiritual maturity of Angulimaala, Suniita, and AAlavaka, the Buddha approached them on his own initiative.[15](#) He preached to them and they gained lasting spiritual distinction. Whereas, there is not a single instance of an arahant approaching a prospective saint with prior knowledge of his spiritual potentialities.

According to the Udaana the Buddha saw the spiritual potential of a poor leper named Suppabuddha and preached a sermon which was particularly appealing to him.[16](#) At the end of the discourse he became a *sotaapanna*, a stream-enterer. According to the Cuu.laraahulovaada Sutta the Buddha saw that Raahula was mature and ready for further instruction. He preached to Raahula about the nature of sense faculties, sense data, and their interaction. At the end of this discourse, it is reported that Raahula attained arahantship.[17](#) Countless other examples could be cited.

(2), (3), and (4): These seem to be specialities connected with clairvoyance (*dibbacakkhu*) . They show that the Buddha possesses a world view far superior to that of the arahants. With clairvoyance arahants realize only one aspect, the truth of kamma, which is so helpful for the understanding of man's *sa.msaric* condition. The Buddha's clairvoyance encompasses knowledge regarding the extern, he knows realistically the worlds with various and diverse elements. Perhaps this means that he has understood the universe comprising gross physical realms such as the human world, fine-material realms such as the Brahma-worlds, and non-material realms such as the *aruupa* world.

He also knows the type of action which leads to rebirth in these various worlds, and he has understood the perennial laws pertaining to these worlds. His clairvoyant vision reaches so far back that he has recorded in the Mahaapadaana Sutta details regarding the lives of six previous Buddhas, much to the admiration of his followers.[18](#) In fact, as mentioned earlier in this essay, the Buddha's clairvoyant powers seem limitless.

(1): This special power of knowing a possibility as a possibility and of knowing an impossibility as an impossibility is never mentioned as a knowledge of the arahant. The Buddha may have left the "undetermined (*abyaakata*) problems" unanswered because he was utterly convinced by this special form of insight that it is not only

useless but impossible for unenlightened beings to know the solutions to those problems.

Besides the ten *tathaagatabalas*, the Mahaasiihanaada Sutta also enumerates four confidences (*cattaari vesaarajjaani*) enjoyed by the Buddha alone.¹⁹ He has the absolute confidence that no human or superhuman being can reasonably accuse him: (a) of not being fully enlightened; (b) of not being free of all mental defilements; (c) of wrongly declaring as dangers things that are not really dangerous; (d) of preaching a doctrine which does not lead to the goal it professes to lead to. Endowed with this absolute confidence the Buddha claims supreme eminence and authority among gods and men that no arahant could ever claim.

The A"nguttara Nikaaya enumerates ten powers of the arahant and they all seem to pivot round the practice and realization of the Dhamma:²⁰

- (1) An arahant sees all component things as impermanent.
- (2) He sees all sense pleasures as a pit of burning embers.
- (3) His mind is inclined towards seclusion and renunciation.
- (4) He has developed the four stations of mindfulness.
- (5) He has developed the fourfold right exertion.
- (6) He has developed the four bases of psychic powers.
- (7) He has developed the five spiritual faculties.

(8) He has developed the five spiritual powers.

(9) He has developed the seven factors of enlightenment.

(10) He has developed the Noble Eightfold Path.

Endowed with these powers a monk can claim to have destroyed all mental defilements. When compared with the powers and confidences of the Buddha, these center round the theme of one's own individual emancipation. The Buddha, on the other hand, wields far greater powers which can even be called universal, with insight into the spiritual potential of other individuals and a world view far superior to that of arahants.

It is appropriate to compare the epithets which normally describe an arahant with those applied to the Buddha. Suttas describe an arahant as *khii.naasavo*, "one whose mental defilements are destroyed"; *vusitavaa*, "one who has successfully lived the higher life"; *katakara.niiyo*, "one whose duty is done"; *ohitabhaaro*, "one who has laid the burden aside"; *anuppattasadattho*, "one who has attained the noble goal"; *parikkhii.nabhavasa.myojano*, "one who has destroyed all bonds leading to further existences"; and *sammada~n~naavimutto*, "one who has attained emancipation with right knowledge."[21](#) All these epithets describe aspects of the personal emancipation of the arahant. Though all these epithets can rightly be applied to the Buddha, they are hardly used with reference to him as it is not just his personal emancipation that makes him unique.

The Buddha's fame spread in terms of nine other epithets. He is called *araha.m*, as he is the worthy one who does no evil even in secret; *sammaa-sambuddho*, because he has become fully enlightened and self-enlightened; *vijjaacara.nasampanno*, because he is endowed with knowledge and (virtuous) conduct; *sugato*, because he successfully reached the goal as a pioneer; *lokaviduu*, because he has understood the universe with its world systems; *purisadammasaarathii*, because he is the champion, the tamer of human beings; *satthaa devamanussaana.m*, because he is the teacher of gods and men; *buddho*, because he has awakened to reality; *bhagavaa*, because he is the fortunate one, the Blessed One, the lord.²² Though a few of these epithets could be attributed to the arahant, as well, this group of nine epithets collectively expresses the praiseworthy qualities of the Buddha alone. In their totality they can never be applied to an arahant.

To emphasize his superiority, the Buddha himself declares that even those monks who are liberated in mind and who have achieved "unsurpassed vision, unsurpassed practice, and unsurpassed liberation" still honor, respect, esteem, and worship the Buddha. The reason is: "The Blessed One is enlightened, and teaches the Dhamma for enlightenment; he is tamed, and teaches the Dhamma for taming; he is at peace, and teaches the Dhamma for peace; he has attained Nibbana, and teaches the Dhamma for attaining Nibbana."²³

The Buddha has sometimes referred to himself as *sabbaabhibhuu*,[24](#) because he has conquered everything, all passions. Though the Buddha acknowledges himself to be *sabbaviduu*,[25](#) "all-knowing," he has rejected the epithet *sabba~n~nuu* which also has the same meaning.[26](#)

At the time of the Buddha, *sabba~n~nuu* had a special connotation, as Niga.n.tha Naataputta, the founder of Jainism, also claimed to be *sabba~n~nuu* .[27](#) Naataputta claimed to have ever-present continuous knowledge of everything all the time whether he was awake or asleep. The Buddha disclaims such ever-present continuous knowledge of everything. In fact he maintains that no one can ever have knowledge of everything at one and the same time.[28](#) It is an impossibility.

It is possible to interpret the "all-knowing" (*sabbaviduu*) aspect of the Buddha's knowledge in terms of the definition of *sabba*, "all, everything" as given in the Sabba Sutta.[29](#)

According to this definition "everything" means the five sense faculties and their corresponding objects, plus the mind and the corresponding mental phenomena. In this sutta, the Buddha challenges anybody to give a more comprehensive definition of "everything."

The Buddha's ability to know something was such that he had to direct his attention to the desired object in order to know it as it really is. The Buddha clearly says that he can recollect as far back as he wishes through his retro-cognitive

knowledge, and his clairvoyant abilities are similarly wish-bound. He does not have a mirror-like knowledge or vision where everything is automatically reflected.

Here we are reminded of the incident when the Buddha decided to preach the Dhamma.[30](#) He thought of AAlaara Kaalaama first to preach the Dhamma to, but he did not know that AAlaara had died a week ago. Then he thought of Uddaka Raamaputta only to realize that he too had passed away the previous night. These episodes clearly show that the Buddha had to direct his attention if he wished to know something.

These episodes bring us to the interesting question whether it was possible for others to read the mind of the Buddha. And the answer is that when the Buddha was disinclined to preach the doctrine, after his Awakening. Sahampati, the great Brahmaa, immediately knew this and he came and requested the Buddha to preach.[31](#)

According to the Brahmasa.myutta, when the Buddha decided to honor the Dhamma as his teacher, because he saw none capable of being his teacher in the whole world of gods and men, Brahmaa Sahampati appeared once again and informed him that this was the custom of previous Buddhas too, and Buddhas in the future also will do the same.[32](#)

When the Buddha thought of choosing AAlaara Kaalaama and Uddaka Raamaputta to become his first disciples, gods informed him of their death.[33](#) The Khandhasa.myutta

records another incident when Mahaabrahmaa read the thoughts of the Buddha and appeared before him to plead on behalf of some errant monks.[34](#)

According to the Mahaapariniibbaana Sutta, when the Buddha was going through the jhaanic process in ascending and descending orders just before attaining *parinibbaana*, Anuruddha knew the jhaanic process he was going through.[35](#) All these episodes point to the fact that at least certain aspects of the Buddha's mind were accessible to other arahants with thought-reading ability and certain superhuman beings.

Another episode recorded in the Mahaapariniibbaana Sutta shows that all aspects of the Buddha's mind are not known even to the most eminent arahants.[36](#) Saariputta once told the Buddha that he was convinced that there has never been, there will never be, and there is not at present any other recluse or brahman who is more distinguished in enlightenment than the Buddha.

The Buddha then asked Saariputta whether he had read the minds of all past, present, and future Buddhas and known their virtue to be such and such (*eva.msiilaa*), their concentration to be such and such (*eva.mdhammaa*), their wisdom to be such and such (*eva.mpa~n~naa*), their mode of living to be such and such (*eva.mvihaarii*), and their emancipation to be such and such (*eva.mvimuttaa*).

Saariputta replied that he had no such knowledge and that he was only making a reasonable inference.

All this evidence clearly points to the fact that there is no human or superhuman being, not even an arahant, who can fully-read the mind of the Buddha, but of course the Buddha had the ability to read the minds of all others including arahants.

The Paali Canon mentions five types of vision that the Buddha has. The first is *ma.msacakkhu*, the normal human vision consisting of the physical faculty of sight. According to the Lakkha.na Sutta the Buddha possesses a perfect pair of deep blue eyes with long eye lashes, because as a human being fulfilling the perfections requisite for Buddhahood he looked at others with pleasant kind eyes, honest and uncritical eyes.[37](#) The second type of vision is *dibbacakkhu*, the divine vision or clairvoyance, the most important function of which is the ability to see the passing away and rebirth of beings according to their respective kamma. The third is *pa~n~naacakkhu*, the vision of insight, which enabled the Buddha to see things as they really are, the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and the non-substantial nature of everything.[38](#) The fourth is *buddhacakkhu*, the Buddha vision;[39](#) when the Buddha surveyed the world with this vision he saw people with a lesser and a greater degree of defilements, people with refined and dull spiritual faculties. The fifth is *samantacakkhu*, which we venture to translate as pan-vision.[40](#)

It is possible to infer that this vision refers to the ability to see a problem or an issue in its entirety, as *samanta* means entire or all-round. Moreover, Mahaabrahmaa addresses the Buddha as *samantacakkhu* when he entreats him in allegorical terms to ascend to the top of the "Dhamma mansion" and behold the suffering mass of humanity.[41](#) The last two visions are never attributed to arahants and remain the sole province of the Buddha.

The Paali Canon contains interesting material to draw a distinction between the enlightenment experience of the Buddha and that of the arahant. The Chabbisodhana Sutta enumerates several criteria of arahantship, which give a clear idea of what the Buddha expected of his disciples who have reached the ultimate goal of realization.[42](#)

These criteria comprise the unshakeable freedom of the mind from the influence of the senses, from hankering after the constituents of personality, from craving for elements constituting the world, from the yearning for the internal and external sense spheres, and from the bias of the notion of "I" and "mine."[43](#)

One of the most comprehensive accounts of the enlightenment experience of an arahant is given in the Mahaa Assapura Sutta.[44](#) According to this, the adept who has attained to the fourth jhaana gains, first, retrocognition and, then, clairvoyance. Then he directs his mind to the knowledge of the destruction of defilements. In this process

he gains first-hand knowledge of suffering, its cause, its elimination, and the path leading to its elimination. He understands what mental defilements are, their origin, cessation, and the path leading to their cessation. When knowing, thus, the mind (*citta*) is freed from the defilements of sense pleasures, desire for continued existence, and ignorance. In him who is released, thus, there arises the knowledge of freedom: birth is destroyed, the higher life has been successfully lived, one's duty has been done, and there is no more of this continued existence. Just as a man standing beside a pool of clear unsullied water would see the shells, pebbles, and fish in the water, the adept would see, clearly and directly, suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation.

This could very well be a description of the Buddha's enlightenment experience too. But scattered in the Paali Canon there are various biographical descriptions of his enlightenment which suggest that the above was only one of its aspects.

It appears that the Buddha's enlightenment was a full, multi-faceted, rich experience that could be explained from various angles.

In the Mahaasaccaka Sutta, the Buddha relates that he realized retro-cognition during the first watch of the night, clairvoyance during the second watch, and the knowledge of the destruction of defilements during the third watch.[45](#)

Therefore, it is clear that enlightenment is not a sudden flash, but a gradual unfolding of human potentialities when conditions for it are ripe. It can be compared to the gradual unfolding of petals in the blossoming of a flower.

In the *Khandhasamyutta*, the Buddha says: "So long as I did not understand the satisfaction (*assaada*), the evil consequences (*aadiinava*), and the escape (*nissarana*) from the five aggregates of grasping, so long I did not claim supreme enlightenment."[46](#)

The *Mahaapadaana Sutta* states that the mind (of Vipassī Buddha) attained emancipation from defilements when contemplating the rise and fall of the five aggregates of grasping.[47](#) Thus, knowledge and vision into the five aggregates is another aspect of the enlightenment experience.

According to the *Vedanaasamyutta*, the Buddha did not claim enlightenment until he gained full vision into all aspects of feelings: what is feeling, what is its origin, its cessation, the path leading to its cessation, its satisfaction, its evil consequences, and the escape therefrom.[48](#)

As all beings are bound to *samsāra*, because of their attachment to pleasures, and pleasures are but pleasurable sensations, it is only too logical that one has to have a thorough knowledge of all sensations (including pleasurable sensations) if one wants to make an end of *samsāra*. Therefore, the Buddha's enlightenment experience

comprised a thorough-going realization of all aspects of feeling too.

The *Sa.laayatanasa.myutta*, records another aspect.[49](#) According to this, the Buddha did not claim enlightenment in the world of gods and men so long as he did not realistically understand the six sense faculties and their respective objects according to the satisfaction they yield and the evil consequences they entail, and the escape therefrom. As we are attached to pleasures through the instrumentality of our sense organs, in order to gain release, we have to understand the nature of the sense faculties, sense objects, and their inter-relationship.

In the *Nidaanasa.myutta* the Buddha says that vision and knowledge arose in him regarding matters not heard of before (*ananussutesu dhammesu*) as he contemplated the *pa.ticcasamuppaada*, paying attention to the causal process giving rise to suffering and the causal process bringing about the cessation of suffering.[50](#)

The *A"nguttara Nikaaya* explains the gradual deepening of *dibbacakkhu*, clairvoyance, as an aspect of the enlightenment experience.[51](#) There are eight stages in this process of gradual development extending from pre-enlightenment days up to the enlightenment. The Buddha says that so long as he did not understand these eight stages, he did not claim enlightenment in the world of gods and men.

The most important and the most famous account of the enlightenment experience of the Buddha is recorded in the Vinaya Mahaavagga and this comprises the full comprehension of the Four Noble Truths.[52](#)

As this statement is of great significance it is recorded below in detail. The Buddha says that:

(1) (i) Wisdom and knowledge arose in him regarding truths never heard of before and he was able to isolate the problem of the noble truth of suffering; (ii) he understood that the truth of suffering must be fully comprehended, and (iii) that the truth of suffering has been fully comprehended.

(2) (i) Wisdom and knowledge arose in him regarding the cause of suffering; (ii) he understood that this cause of suffering must be eliminated, and (iii) that this cause of suffering has been eliminated.

(3) (i) Wisdom and knowledge arose in him that the cessation of suffering is a possibility; (ii) he understood that the cessation of suffering must be realized, and (iii) that the cessation of suffering has been realized.

(4) (i) Wisdom and knowledge arose in him regarding the path leading to the cessation of suffering; (ii) he understood that this path must be developed, and (iii) that this path has been developed.

The Buddha says that he did not claim to have attained supreme enlightenment until he realized the Four Noble

Truths each according to the threefold ramifications (*tipariva.t.ta.m*) ; thus the four truths run into twelve details (*dvaadasaakaara.m*).

This was such a novel realization that he uses the phrase "truths never heard of before" (*pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu*) with each of the above twelve statements. The wisdom that arose was so profound that he uses five terms to describe different aspects of this deep spiritual awakening: "vision arose" (*cakkhu.m udapaadi*), "wisdom arose" (*~naa.na.m udapaadi*), "insight arose" (*pa~n~naa udapaadi*), "knowledge arose" (*vijjaa udapaadi*), and "illumination arose" (*aaloko udapaadi*) .

We are now in a position to compare the enlightenment experience of the arahant with that of the Buddha. The Mahaa Assapura account cited earlier in this essay, which can be regarded as one of the best descriptions of an arahant's enlightenment experience, seems to fade into insignificance, when compared with the rich, multifaceted enlightenment experience of the Buddha. Nowhere has the Paali Canon attributed insight into the sense faculties, sense objects, sensations, etc., *as an enlightenment experience* of an arahant.

As stated in the Chabbisodhana Sutta, it is very probable that they realistically understand the nature of sense faculties, sense objects, elements, etc., that these phenomena are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-substantial,[53](#) but they

may not gain insight into the inner workings of these phenomena.

The arahant's enlightenment experience is introduced by the phrase *yathaabhuuta.m pajaanaati*, "realistically understands," whereas the Buddha's enlightenment experience is expressed as "vision arose, wisdom arose, insight arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose." The Paali Canon never uses this phraseology to refer to the realization of an arahant. The realization of the Four Noble Truths by an arahant is also expressed in terms of realistic understanding.[54](#) But the Buddha's vision into the Four Truths is described in twelve details consisting of the threefold-ramifications with respect to each of the Four Truths.

The simile used in the Mahaa Assapura Sutta to describe the enlightenment experience of the *arahant* was that of a pond of crystal-clear water where a man standing on its bank sees the pebbles, shells, etc., in its bed and shoals of fish swimming in the water.[55](#) But the *Buddha's* enlightenment experience is like the panoramic view one gets from the summit of a mountain, and this is exactly the imagery Mahaabrahmaa uses to describe the Buddha's enlightenment experience.[56](#)

We are not in a position to conjecture whether the various facets of the enlightenment experience of the Buddha had a

chronological and a hierarchical order, and if so what that order was.

It could also have been an experience like circular vision, as when one is at the top of a mountain where the scenery on the east is different from the scenery in the west, and the scenery in the north different from that of the south. However different the sceneries may be from the different directions, all the scenes constitute one integrated experience of a person standing on a vantage point.

The scanty evidence gleaned from the Paali Canon seems to favor a combination of both these patterns for the Buddha's enlightenment experience. The experience has started with a chronological hierarchy, as according to the Mahaasaccaka Sutta the higher knowledges of retrocognition, clairvoyance, and the destruction of defilements were realized during the first, second, and third watches of the night respectively.[57](#) The other facets of the enlightenment experience may be parts of the spiritual panorama seen in different directions from the vantage point of reality. Whatever the pattern may be, an arahant's enlightenment is a much less significant, much less dramatic experience than that of the Buddha, which is so profound, multifaceted, rich, and unique.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the Buddha would have realized a far more profound world view than he chose to preach to humanity. As that knowledge was far too complicated for ordinary comprehension, and as it was

irrelevant for the solution of the human problem of suffering, keeping that profound knowledge as the framework within which to work, the Buddha would have preached to humanity how best we could order our life in order to achieve harmony and peace in such a world.

This harmony at the highest level is Nibbana. Those who followed him lacked the profound panoramic view, but learned the practice for the attainment of lasting peace and emancipation.

Notes

1. M III 7-15.

2. M I 225-27.

3. J I 19 ff.

4. S V 438.

5. *Desito AAnanda mayaa dhammo anantara.m abaahira.msa"nk karitvaa, natthi tathaagatassa dhammesu aacariyamu.t.thi* : D II 100.

6. M I 140; S I 135, III 119, V 384.

7. S I 191.

8. A II 160.

9. See Lily de Silva, "Cetovimutti, Pa~n~naavimutti, and Ubhatobhaagavimutti," *Pali Buddhist Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3. 1978, pp.142-43.

10. Ibid.

11. M I 22-23, 117, 248-49.

12. M I 68-83.

13. M I 482.

14. D II 71.

15. M II 98-99; Thag 620-31; Sn p.31.

16. Ud pp. 48-51.

17. M III 277-80.

18. D II 2 ff.; see M III 118.

19. M I 71.

20. A V 174-76.

21. M I 141.

22. D I 49, 87, 111, etc.

23. M I 235.

24. Vin I 8; M I 171.

25. Ibid.

[26.](#) M I 482.

[27.](#) M II 31.

[28.](#) *Natthi so sama.no vaa braahma.no vaa yo sakid eva sabba.m naassati sabba.m dakkhiti n'eta.m .thaana.m vijjatiiti:* M II 127.

[29.](#) S IV 15.

[30.](#) M I 170.

[31.](#) M I 168.

[32.](#) S I 139.

[33.](#) M I 170.

[34.](#) S III 91.

[35.](#) D II 156.

[36.](#) D II 82; S V 159.

[37.](#) D II 167.

[38.](#) S IV 292, V 467; A I 35.

[39.](#) Vin I 6 = S I 138.

[40.](#) M I 168.

[41.](#) Ibid.

[42.](#) M III 29-37.

[43.](#) Karel Werner, "Bodhi and Arahattaphala: From Early Buddhism to Early Mahaayaana." *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1981, p.76.

[44.](#) M I 278-79.

[45.](#) M I 248.

[46.](#) S III 27.

[47.](#) D II 35.

[48.](#) S IV 233.

[49.](#) S IV 7-10.

[50.](#) S II 10.

[51.](#) A IV 302-5.

[52.](#) Vin I 10 = S V 422, 436.

[53.](#) M III 29-37.

[54.](#) *Yathaabhuuta.m pajaanaati* : M I 62, 279.

[55.](#) M I 279.

[56.](#) *Sele yathaa pabbatamuddhani.t.thito* : M I 168.

[57.](#) M I 248-49.

The [Buddhist Publication Society](#) is an approved charity dedicated to making known the Teaching of the Buddha, which has a vital message for people of all creeds.

Founded in 1958, the BPS has published a wide variety of books and booklets covering a great range of topics. Its publications include accurate annotated translations of the Buddha's discourses, standard reference works, as well as original contemporary expositions of Buddhist thought and practice. These works present Buddhism as it truly is — a dynamic force which has influenced receptive minds for the past 2500 years and is still as relevant today as it was when it first arose.

Buddhist Publication Society
P.O. Box 61
54, Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy, Sri Lanka

Provenance:

©1996 Lily de Silva.

The Wheel Publication No. 407/408 (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1986). Transcribed from a file provided by the BPS, with minor revisions in accordance with the ATI style sheet. Pali diacritics are represented using the Velthuis convention.

This Access to Insight edition is ©2005–2009 John T. Bullitt.

Terms of use: You may copy, reformat, reprint, republish, and redistribute this work in any medium whatsoever, provided that: (1) you only make such copies, etc. available *free of charge*; (2) you clearly indicate that any derivatives of this work (including translations) are derived from this source document; and (3) you include the full text of this license in any copies or derivatives of this work. Otherwise, all rights reserved. For additional information about this license, see the [FAQ](#).

How to cite this document (one suggested style): "Nibbana as Living Experience / The Buddha and The Arahant: Two Studies from the Pali Canon", by Lily de Silva. *Access to Insight*, June 7, 2009, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/desilva/wheel407.html>.

Alternate format:

Editor's note: 'Nibbana As Living Experience' originally appeared in the *Sri Lanka Journal of Buddhist Studies* (Vol. I, 1987). 'The Buddha and the Arahant' originally appeared in *Pritidana Mañjari*, Mudliyar W.S. Gunawardena Commemoration Volume, edited by M.H.F. Jayasuriya, Dehiwela, Sri Lanka.