# The Buddhist Critique of Sassatavada and Ucchedavada:

## The Key to a proper Understanding of the Origin and the Doctrines of early Buddhism

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The early Buddhist discourses often refer to the mutual opposition between two views. One is the view of permanence or eternalism (*sassatavada*). The other is the view of annihilation (*ucchedavada*). The former is sometimes referred to as *bhava-ditthi*, the belief in being, and the latter as *vibhava-ditthi*, the belief in non-being. The world at large has a general tendency to lean upon one of these two views. Thus, addressing Kaccayana, the Buddha says: 'This world, O Kaccayana, generally proceeds on a duality, of (the belief in) existence and (the belief in) non-existence.' What interests us here is the fact that it is against these two views that Buddhist polemics are continually directed. What is more, all the fundamental doctrines of early Buddhism are presented in such a way as to unfold themselves, or to follow as a logical sequence, from a sustained criticism of *sassatavada* and *ucchedavada*. This particular context is sometimes explicitly stated; at other times it is taken for granted. Therefore, it is within the framework of the Buddhist critique of *sassatavada* and *ucchedavada* that the Buddhist doctrines seem to assume their significance. For it is through the demolition of these two world-views that Buddhism seeks to construct its own world-view. The conclusion is that it was as a critical response to the mutual opposition between these two views that Buddhism emerged as a new faith amidst many other faiths.

This should become clear if we examine briefly the religious and intellectual milieu in which Buddhism originated. In fact, the prevailing mood of the time is very well reflected in the early Buddhist discourses themselves. The first sutta of the first *nikaya* (section or 'basket') in the *tipitaka* (the 'Three Baskets' of the Buddhist canon) begins with an enumeration, and a refutation from the Buddhist point of view, of 62 other views. This and many other suttas in the first four *nikayas* show that there prevailed a wide variety of mutually exclusive speculations on the nature and destiny of man and his place in the cosmos. Despite their wide variety, we can classify them into three main groups. The first includes all the religions current at the time; the second comprises materialist theories which arose in direct opposition to religion; and the third consists of all forms of scepticism which arose as a reaction against both.

Among the many religions of the day, some were a linear development of Vedic thought while others seem to have emerged either in isolation from or in opposition to it. In the former, the trend was more towards theism, monism and orthodoxy; in the latter, it was more towards non-theism, pluralism and heterodoxy. Between the two groups there were a variety of religious teachings which were based on epistemological grounds such as scriptural authority (*pitaka-sampada*), revelation (*anussava*), the omniscience of the teacher (*sabbaï¿½ï¿½uta*), knowledge gained through extrasensory perception and arguments based on pure reasoning (*takka-vimamsa*). Although they represented a wide spectrum of religious views and practices, they all appear to have subscribed to a belief in a soul or self-entity. This common belief, though it had many variations, is represented in the early Buddhist discourses as a general

statement: *aï¿½ï¿½am jivam aï¿½ï¿½am sariram* (the *jiva* or soul is one thing and the *sarira* or body is another). This distinction seems to emphasize the fact that while the soul is something permanent, the body is something perishable. This distinction is also one between the physical body and the metaphysical self. There seems to have been general agreement among all religions that, since this self-entity is something immutable, it survives death and that it is in this self-entity (soul) that man's true essence is to be found. This religious or spiritual view of the human personality is the theory of the metaphysical self. It was this belief in a permanent spiritual substance within man that came to be represented in the Pali suttas as *sassatavada*. Accordingly, from the Buddhist point of view, all the religions of the day which subscribed to an eternal self-subsisting spiritual entity were but different kinds of *sassatavada*.

The materialist tradition which emerged in direct opposition to religion also seems to have had more than one school of thought. These took their stand on the epistemological ground that sense-perception was the only valid means of knowledge. Hence they questioned the validity of theological and metaphysical theories which do not come within the ambit of sense-experience. This explains why they rejected the religious version of *atmavada*, the belief in a metaphysical self, and gave it a new interpretation. This new interpretation is expressed in the Pali suttas by the words *tam jivam tam sariram* (the self is the same as the body). This is quite in contrast to the religious view which emphasizes their duality rather than their identity. The line of argument which seems to have led to this conclusion may be stated as follows: there is no observable self-entity apart from the body, and since only the observable exists, this self-entity must be identical with the physical body. Therefore, for materialism the soul is a product of the four primary elements of matter (*ayam atta rupi catummahabhutiko*). This materialist view of the human personality is the theory of the physical self. Because materialism identifies the self with the physical body, it necessarily follows that at death, with the break-up of the body, the self too is annihilated (*ucchindati, vinassati*), without any prospect of post-mortal existence. In view of this inevitable conclusion to which the materialist view of life leads, it came to be represented in the Buddhist texts as *ucchedavada* (annihilationism).

There is a general belief among some modern scholars that materialism (*ucchedavada*) rejects *in toto* what is called *atmavada* or the belief in a soul or self-entity. Generally speaking this may be true, but from the Buddhist point of view it is not valid. According to the Buddhist understanding of *atmavada*, any kind of thing, whether it is material, mental or spiritual, could become an ï¿½tman if it becomes an object of self-identification. This process of self-identification is said to manifest itself in three ways: this is mine (*etam mama*); this I am (*esoham asmi*); and this is my self (*eso me atta*). As materialism takes the body to be the self, to be an object of self-identification, it is also a variety of *atmavada*. One objection that may be raised here is that what materialists identify as the self is not a metaphysical entity but the perishable physical body. In the context of Buddhist teachings, however, what matters is not the permanence or impermanence of the object of self-identification but the very fact of self-identification. Thus Buddhists view both *sassatavada* and *ucchedavada* as two varieties of *atmavada*.

Because *sassatavada* emphasizes the duality between the soul and the body, its theory of man's emancipation is based on this notion of duality. Between the soul and the body, it is the soul that is in bondage. Hence if anything is to be saved, it must be the soul. What prevents its upward journey is the gravitational pull of the body, that is gratification in sensuality. Thus deliverance of the soul, its perpetuation in a state of eternal bliss, requires the mortification of the flesh. This is what came to be represented in the Buddhist texts as *attakilamathanuyoga* (self-mortification). It is very likely that it was this belief that led to a variety of ascetic practices during the time of the Buddha. A case in point was Jainism, which advocated rigid austerities to liberate the soul.

For *ucchedavada* (materialism), on the other hand, man 'is a pure product of the earth' awaiting annihilation at death. His aim in this temporary life thus cannot be the rejection of sense-pleasures in the pursuit of a higher spiritual ideal. If anything, it should be just the opposite. This is what came to be described in the Buddhist texts as *kamasukhallikanuyoga*

(sensual gratification). Hence self mortification and sensual gratification represent the practical aspects of the two theories of *sasssatavada* and *ucchedavada*.

It is very likely that it was this polarization of intellectual thought into *sasssatavada* and *ucchedavada*, with a number of sects and subsects within each tradition, that paved the way for the emergence of scepticism. It is of course true that, as K N Jayatilake observes, there had been sceptical hints and agnostic trends even in pre-Buddhistic Indian thought. However, as he further observes, the actual 'impetus and the occasion for their arising seem to have been provided by the presence of diverse, conflicting and irreconcilable theories pertaining to moral, metaphysical and religious beliefs'. In the Indian context, however, scepticism does not necessarily mean complete dissociation from any ideal of salvation. For there is evidence to suggest that some adopted scepticism on the grounds that knowledge was not only impossible but also a danger to moral development and salvation.

The polarization of religious and intellectual thought into *sassatavada* and *ucchedavada* paved the way for the birth of scepticism, and it seems very likely that this very same circumstance led to the emergence of Buddhism as well. This conclusion is, in fact, very much suggested by the Buddha's first sermon, the Sermon on the Setting in Motion of the Wheel of the Dhamma (the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta). It is against the background of *sassatavada* and *ucchedavada* that the Buddha sets out in it his newly discovered path to emancipation, the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-atthangikamagga*). The Buddha himself calls it *majjhima patipada* (the Middle Path) because it avoids the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification. The avoidance of these two extremes also means the avoidance of the two theories which serve as their background, namely *sassatavada* and *ucchedavada*, in other words the physical and the metaphysical theories of the nature of the human personality. Thus the use of the two words Middle Path brings into focus the religious and intellectual background against which Buddhism originated. That the Middle Path is not a compromise between the two extremes or an admixture of them is indicated by its definition in the same sermon as *ubho ante anupagamma* (without entering into either extreme). This shows that it is called the Middle Path because it transcends the mutual opposition between the two extremes.

In point of fact, the Buddha's life itself delineates the perennial conflict between *sassatavada* and *ucchedavada* and its transcendence by the Middle Path. The Buddha's lay life as a prince exemplifies one extreme; his life as an ascetic practising severe austerities exemplifies the other. And his attainment of enlightenment by giving up both extremes shows the efficacy of the Middle Path for deliverance from all suffering.

The Buddhist critique of views, it may be noted here, is not confined to arguments based on logic, epistemology and ontology. It also takes into consideration their psychological motivation, that is the mental dispositions which serve as their causative factors. The theory behind this is that our desires and expectations have an impact on what we tend to believe in. According to the Buddhist diagnosis of the 'psychology' of *sassatavada* (=*bhava-ditthi*) and *ucchedavada* (=*vibhava-ditthi*), the former is due to craving for being (*bhava-tanha*), the desire to perpetuate individuality, and the latter is due to craving for non-being (*vibhava-tanha*), the desire to be completely annihilated at death. From the Buddhist point of view the reasoning for this may be conjectured as follows: because *ucchedavada* rejects survival, it tends to encourage man to lead a life without being burdened by a sense of moral responsibility or tormented by moral inhibitions. Therefore it abhors any prospect of after-death existence, as it implies the possibility of moral retribution. It is this psychological resistance on the part of the one who believes in *ucchedavada* that leads to the desire for annihilation at death. Thus, the mutual conflict between *sassatavada* and *ucchedavada* represents not only the perennial conflict between the spiritual and the materialist theories of existence but also the human mind's oscillation between two deep-seated desires.

From what we have observed so far, two things should be clear. The first is that *sassatavada* is the Buddhist term for all religions other than Buddhism which were current at the time of the Buddha. The second is that *ucchedavada* is the Buddhist term for all forms of materialism which reject all religions, including Buddhism. Thus the Buddhist critique of *sassatavada* and

*ucchedavada* identifies Buddhism's position in relation to other world-views which were contemporaneous with it.

It must also be mentioned here that, although Buddhism rejects both *sassatavada* and *ucchedavada*, it does so after making a critical assessment of them. According to this assessment, the Buddha was more sympathetic towards *sassatavada* and more critical of *ucchedavada*. This too is clear from the Buddha's first sermon, where he refers to the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification. Three of the terms used here in criticizing the former, which represents *ucchedavada*, are *hina* (inferior), *gamma* (rustic or vulgar) and *pothujjanika* (worldly). However, these three terms are conspicuously absent in the Buddha's assessment of self-mortification, which represents *sassatavada*. The implication seems to be that although *sassatavada* does not lead to the realization of the ideal of emancipation (*anattha-samhita*), nevertheless it does not lead to the collapse of the moral life. It is not subversive of the moral foundation of human society. As it recognizes a spiritual source in man, it also recognizes moral distinctions. In point of fact, according to Buddhism's assessment, all religions are different forms of *kammavada*, because they all advocate the supremacy of the moral life. On the other hand, *ucchedavada*, which represents the materialist theory, encourages a pattern of life which takes gratification in sensuality as the ultimate purpose in life. It takes for granted that man's present existence is entirely due to fortuitous circumstances and thus that he is not morally responsible for what he does during his temporary sojourn in this world.

We observed earlier that it was on the basis of the Noble Eightfold Path that Buddhism transcends the mutual opposition between sensual indulgence and self-mortification. On what basis, then, does Buddhism transcend the mutual opposition between *sassatavada* and *ucchedavada*? The answer is provided by the Kaccayanagotta Sutta of the Samyutta Nikaya, where the Buddha addresses Kaccayana thus:

This world, O Kaccayana, generally proceeds on a duality, of (the view of) existence and (the view of) non-existence. But he who with right insight sees the uprising of the world as it really is does not hold with the non-existence of the world. But he who with right insight sees the passing away of the world as it really is does not hold with the existence of the world. Everything exists - this is one extreme. Nothing exists - this is another extreme. Not approaching either extreme the Tathagata (the Buddha) teaches you a doctrine by the middle (*Tathagato majjhena dhammam deseti*).

That the words 'a doctrine by the middle' are a reference to the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*) is clear not only from the context but also from what follows it. For immediately after this the Buddha refers to it specifically, implying thereby that it is through this particular doctrine that Buddhism avoids both *sassatavada* and *ucchedavada*. It will thus be seen that just as the Noble Eightfold Path is called the Middle Path, because it avoids the two extremes of sensual gratification and self-mortification, the doctrine of dependent origination is called the doctrine by the middle (*majjhima-dhamma*), because it avoids in the self-same manner their theoretical background.

The central position assigned to this particular doctrine is seen by the Buddha's statement that one who discerns dependent origination discerns the Dhamma (*Yo paticcasamuppadam passati so dhammam passati*). This statement has often been understood as a reference to the well-known twelve-linked causal formula. However, it is very likely that the reference here is to the causal principle, that is the very fact of dependent origination, and not to its application. The causal principle, as stated in the Pali suttas, is as follows: whenever A is present, B is present (*imasmim sati idam hoti*); whenever A is absent, B is absent (*imasmim asati idam na hoti*). Therefore, 'from the arising of A, B arises (*imass'uppada idam uppajjati*); from the cessation of A, B ceases (*imassa nirodha idam nirujjhati*). This principle should be distinguished from its application, as it has many applications. In fact, it is on the basis of this principle that Buddhism seeks to explain all its fundamental doctrines, such as the analysis of mind and the theory of perception, karma and the moral order and the nature of the empirical individuality and its samsaric dimension. This explains why, as the above quotation shows, an insight into the principle of dependent origination is said to constitute an insight into the very

heart of the Dhamma. Stated otherwise, this means that it is the foundation of the Buddhist world-view, and it is through this doctrine that Buddhism transcends the other two world-views represented by *sassatavada* and *ucchedavada*.

If Buddhism avoids *sassatavada*, this means that there is no self-entity within man which is impervious to change. This may also be interpreted as the denial of any kind of spiritual substance within man which relates him to some kind of transcendental reality serving as the ultimate ground of existence. If Buddhism avoids *ucchedavada*, this means that the human personality is not a pure product of matter but is an uninterrupted and interconnected process of psycho-physical phenomena which does not terminate at death. Although Buddhism does not agree completely with *sassatavada*, it does not deny survival (*punabbhava*) and moral responsibility (*kammavada*).

> *If anything arises it is suffering, if anything passes away it is (also) suffering .*
>
> *Both formerly and now also, Anuradha, it is just suffering and the cessation of suffering that I proclaim.*
>
> *As the vast ocean, O disciples, has but one taste, the taste of salt, even so this doctrine and discipline has but one taste, the taste of deliverance.*

These three quotations from the discourses of the Buddha show what Buddhism is and what it is not. Buddhism is concerned, not mainly as some are inclined to believe, but totally, with man's existentialist predicament which according to Buddhism is the problem of suffering. If Buddhism is to be understood in this context, it follows that all Buddhist teachings - whether they relate to ontology, epistemology, psychology and ethics - are ultimately related to the problem of suffering and its final solution. It is on this theme that all Buddhist teachings converge and it is in relation to this that they assume their significance. The Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, which the Buddha himself wants us to consider as the heart of the Dhamma does in fact amount to a statement of the origin and cessation of suffering, when it is understood both under its progressive and regressive aspects. Its latter aspect which explains the cessation of suffering is often overlooked in modern writings which results in the mistaken view that the Buddhist teaching on causality is concerned only with the origin of suffering.

That all Buddhist teachings converge on the problem of suffering and its solution is also shown by the reference in the Pali suttas to two kinds of teaching . The first is called *anupubbi-katha* or the 'graduated talk'. Talk on charity (*dana-katha*), talk on morality (*sila-katha*), talk on heaven as a reward for virtuous living (*sagga-katha*), talk on the disadvantages, the folly and the defiling nature of sense pleasures and the advantages of renunciation - this is what constitutes 'the graduated talk'. It is this aspect which Buddhism seems to have shared with all other religions of the day as different kinds of kammavada i.e. as commonly advocating the moral life. The second is *sumukkamsika-desana* or the 'exalting discourse' which consists of the Buddhist diagnosis of the human condition and the solution thereto. If the first is called 'graduated talk', this could be understood in two ways. One is that it gradually prepares the background necessary for the deliverance of the 'exalting discourse'. The other is that it also gradually prepares the mind of the listener as a proper receptacle (cf. *kallacitta, muducitta*, etc.) for its proper understanding. This clearly shows that the Buddha's 'exalting discourse' which refers to the fact of suffering and its solution is his teaching par excellence and that all other teachings are only a prelude to it. If the Buddha makes recourse to the 'graduated talk', it is not for its own sake, but for the sole purpose of preparing the ground for the deliverance of this characteristically Buddhistic doctrine.

Buddhism presents its teaching on the problem of suffering and the solution thereto through four propositions: There is suffering (*dukkha*); there is a cause for this suffering; there is a cessation of suffering through the removal of the cause of suffering; there is a way which leads to the removal of the cause of suffering which results in the cessation of suffering. It is

these four propositions that the Buddha has introduced as the Four Noble Truths (*cattari ariya-saccani*).

That their formulation does not rest on a theory of degrees of truth is fairly obvious. For what they bring into focus is not the dichotomy between two kinds of truth corresponding to two levels of reality, as is the case with the theory of double truth which came to be developed in the schools of Buddhist thought. What it brings into focus, instead, is the logical sequence between four facts. Therefore they do not lend themselves to be interpreted on a hierarchical basis. If the first truth refers to man's present predicament (pathological), the second seeks to explain its origination (diagnostical); if the third refers to the complete elimination of suffering (ideal), the fourth shows the way to its realization (prescriptive). This is not to overlook the fact that the four truths in combination imply two levels of reality, the samsaric dimension of the empiric individuality and its Nibbanic dimension when the former is brought to an end. However, this distinction between two levels of experience (=reality) does not in any way impart to the Four Noble Truths a qualitative distinction as four statements of truth. Taken as four propositions, they are co-ordinate. This seems to be the reason why they are all introduced as Noble Truths.

Because of the logical sequence between the Four Noble Truths, the significance of each cannot be understood in a context from where the other three are excluded. Each assumes significance in relation to the other three. If the truth of suffering is sought to be understood in isolation from the rest, such an understanding will necessarily lead to the conclusion that Buddhism advocates a pessimistic view of life. Any such misconception could be easily removed if it is understood in its proper context, i.e. in relation to the other three truths. Even Nibbana, which is the final goal of Buddhism and which corresponds to the third Noble Truth, assumes its significance in the context of the other three Noble Truths. Their mutual relation and inter-connection are such that it would not be incorrect to say that they are not four different propositions, but are four aspects of one and the same proposition. In point of fact, it is maintained in the Buddhist discourses themselves that 'when the first Noble Truth is comprehended, the second suggests itself, when the second is comprehended, the third suggests itself, when the third is comprehended, the fourth suggests itself'. As Arvind Sharma observes, 'the four Noble Truths constitute a progressive series, each leading to the next and each throwing light on the next'.

The logical sequence which the four Noble Truths exhibit is also taken into consideration when they become the basis for actual practice of the religious life. Hence it is observed that the fact of suffering is to be thoroughly understood (*parinneyya*), the cause of suffering is to be removed (*pahatabba*), the cessation of suffering is to be realized a (*sacchikatabba*), and the path that leads to the cessation of suffering is to be developed (*bhavetabba*) . If the second and the fourth could be taken as two aspects relating to practice, then here we have the three main dimensions of Buddhism as a theory and praxis, namely understanding, practice and realization. It is under these three aspects that all Buddhist teachings relating to the problem of suffering and its final solution are presented.

Like many other Buddhist teachings, the Buddhist teaching on suffering, too, is presented against the background of similar theories current at the time. Mention is made in the Pali suttas of four theories as to why man suffers . According to the first suffering is self-caused (*sayamkata*). This is based on the view that there is a persisting self entity which acts and suffers its consequences. The second is based on the theory of external causation according to which man suffers due to a principle which is external to him (*paramkata*), such as a creator God (*issara*), Destiny (*niyati*), Nature ('*svabhava*'). According to the third suffering is both self-caused and caused by another (*sayamkatam ca paramkatam*). It is an attempt to combine the first two theories. The fourth rejects all the three theories mentioned above and seeks to explain man's suffering as befallen by chance, i.e. due to fortuitous circumstances (*adhiccasamuppanna*).

Buddhism rejects all the four theories and explains man's suffering on the basis of dependent origination (*paticca-samuppanna dukkham*). This is the significance of the twelve-linked causal formula, where each succeeding link is said to result from what immediately precedes

it. What this amounts to is that the causes of suffering are identifiable without reference to an external principle and without positing a self-entity which persists throughout the cycle of samsaric existence and also without subscribing to the view that suffering is befallen by chance.

This does not mean that the Buddhist causal formula explains only the origination of suffering. It does explain its cessation as well. It is only in its progressive order that it explains how suffering comes to be. This is based on the principle: Whenever A is present B is (also) present (*imasmim sati idam hoti*). Therefore: from the arising of A, B arises (*imassa uppada idam uppajjati*). In its regressive order, the causal formula shows how suffering comes to cessation. This is based on the principle: whenever A is absent, B is (also) absent (*imasmim asati idam na hoti*). Therefore: from the cessation of A, B (too) comes to cessation (*imassa nirodha idam nirujjhati*). What this means is that every statement referring to the arising of suffering is always supplemented by another statement which explains how suffering comes to an end, to be more precise, how it can be brought to an end.

The causality of suffering does also show that although Buddhism recognizes the samsaric dimension of the empiric individuality, it does not trace the causes of suffering to any transcendental reality.

In his *Spokes of the Wheel*, Arvind Sharma raises a very pertinent question: When Buddhism speaks of suffering, does this mean 1) there is suffering in life or 2) that life itself is suffering. His answer is that the Buddhist teaching seems to alternate between these two understandings. Whether this answer is justifiable should become clear if we examine how the fact of suffering is defined in the Buddhist texts. In *The Religions of Man*, Hurston Smith identifies six particular occasions of suffering as recognized in Buddhism. They are 1) the trauma of birth (*ja ti pi dukkha*), 2) the pathology of sickness (*vyadhi pi dukkha*), 3) the morbidity of decrepitude (*jara pi dukkha*) 4) the phobia of death (*maranam pi dukkham*), 5) to be separated from what one loves (*piyehi vippayoga*). Before we refer to what Hurston Smith cites as the sixth, two more items should be added to the above list. They are: 6) to be united with what is unpleasant (*appiyehi sampayoga*) and 7) impeded will or unfulfilled expectation (*yam icchati tam na labhati*). The last item which Smith cites as the sixth is a comprehensive summing up of what suffering is. That is, 8) in brief the five aggregates of grasping are all suffering. This concluding sentence in the Buddhist definition of suffering is the one that is most significant, the one that could be the most controversial. For the seven occasions of suffering listed before the last one, could be accepted by almost all as veritable sources of suffering.

As we shall see in the course of this article, according to Buddhism the five aggregates of grasping (*panca upadanakkandha*) themselves constitute the human personality in its samsaric dimension. The very fact that they are described as suffering clearly shows that from the Buddhist point of view, it is not correct to say that there is suffering in life. The correct answer should be life itself is suffering.

If life itself is suffering is not this controverted by empirical evidence. Aren't there pleasures in sensual gratification, in the titillation of the senses? Buddhism would not quarrel with such an assertion. 'If there were no satisfaction in the world' - so runs the Buddhist argument - 'beings would not be attached to the world' . Buddhist texts make glowing praises of the blessings of the good house-holder's life. Reference is made to many kinds of pleasure and happiness which could be obtained through righteous or non-righteous means. There is happiness on being praised, on obtaining wealth and by birth as denizen in a heavenly existence . The bliss of heavenly life is recorded in glowing terms. As Arvind Sharma rightly observes, the very fact that Buddhism rejects *kamasukhallikanuyoga* shows that a life given to sensual gratification is not impossible. It is not even described as suffering (*dukkha*) as is its opposite, *attakilamathanuyoga*, a life given to self-mortification. If it is rejected, it is not because of its impossibility, but because of its futility. Again the very fact that Nibbana is defined as the Highest Happiness does also show, by implication, that there are many other forms of happiness which are lower than that. What all this suggests is that Buddhism recognizes different levels of happiness which culminate in Nibbana. Hence happiness itself

came to be defined as that which has Nibbana as its consummation (*Nibbanaparamam sukham*).

In point of fact, the Buddhist definition of suffering, to which we referred earlier, could also be considered as a definition of happiness, as well. The fact that suffering is defined as association with what is unpleasant (*appiyehi sampayoga*) shows that, conversely, dissociation from what is unpleasant is a source of happiness. Secondly, if dissociation from what is pleasant (*piyehi vippayoga*) is a source of suffering, its opposite condition should necessarily be a source of happiness. Thirdly if impeded will or frustration (*yam na labhati tam*) is suffering, it follows that the fulfillment of will, fulfillment of our desires and expectations are a sure source of happiness.

Is there then a contradiction between the assertion that life is suffering and the recognition of the actuality and the possibility of pleasures in life? The answer to this question should become clear if we go back to the Buddhist definition of suffering. This definition shows that Buddhism recognizes three levels of suffering. At the most elemental level, suffering appears as physical pain and oppression. This is represented by such occasions as *jati, jara and vyadhi*, which Hurston Smith has translated as the trauma of birth, the pathology of sickness and the morbidity of decrepitude. To this may be added such experiences as hunger, thirst, privation and accident. The next level is suffering as psychological experience. Association with what is unpleasant or dissociation from what is pleasant or impeded will or frustrated desire could be cited as appropriate instances. At the third or the deepest level is anguish or disharmony, which seems to be at the very core of human life. It is this level which Buddhism takes into consideration when it says that the five aggregates of grasping are themselves suffering. It will be seen that the various occasions of suffering which are identified in the above definition are so enumerated as to bring into focus these three levels of suffering.

What we have introduced as the first two levels of suffering do not completely exclude the possibilities of happiness. For in the first two levels only some occasions that lead to suffering are identified and itemized. Therefore, if we take into consideration only the first two levels, then we should conclude that life has suffering and not life is suffering. But when we come to the third level, the definition is so comprehensive to justify the conclusion that life is suffering and not that life has suffering.

Now, let us consider why and how the five aggregates of grasping are said to be suffering. It is a well known fact that according to the Buddhist analysis of the empiric individuality, it consists of five aggregates known as *khandhas*. The human personality can therefore be defined as their sum total. However, in the Buddhist definition of suffering it is not the five aggregates (*pancakkhandha*) but the five aggregates of grasping (*panca upadanakkhandha*) that are characterised as suffering. This shows that although the five aggregates in themselves are not suffering, they can be a source of suffering when they become objects of grasping (*upadana*). Thus there is a clear distinction between the five aggregates on the one hand and the fiveaggregates of grasping, on the other. Strictly speaking, what Buddhism calls the individual is not the five aggregates, but the five aggregates when they are grasped or appropriated. This explains why in the Buddhist definition of suffering, the reference is made to the aggregates of grasping and not to the aggregates themselves. The so-called individual can thus be reduced to a causally conditioned process of grasping. And it is this process of grasping that Buddhism describes as suffering. Hence the Buddhist conclusion is that life, at its very bottom or core, is characterized by suffering.

This explanation gives rise to two questions. One is by whom are the five aggregates grasped. The other is how and why this process of grasping leads to suffering? The answer to the first question is that besides the process of grasping, there is no agent who performs the act of grasping. This may appear rather paradoxical, nevertheless it is understandable in the context of the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* and the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination. What both seek to show is that the individual is a conditioned process, without an agent either inside or outside the process. This process of grasping manifests itself in three ways: This is mine (*etam mama*), this I am (*esoham asmi*), and this is myself (*eso me atta*). The first is due to craving (*tanha*); the second is due to conceit (*mana*); and the third is due to the mistaken

belief in a self-entity (*ditthi*) . It is through this process of three-fold self-identification that the idea of 'mine', 'I am' and 'my self' arises. If there is a thing called individuality in its samsaric dimension, it is entirely due to the superimposition on the five aggregates of these three ideas.

Now let us take the second question as to why and how the aggregates of grasping are themselves called suffering. This is because the five aggregates which become the object of self-identification are in a state of constant change, in a state of continuous flux, with no enduring essence, with no perduring substance. Their nature is such that they do not remain in the way we want them to remain. They are not under our control. As we have mentioned in our second lecture, this is one of the fundamental meanings of *anatta.* Hence by identifying ourselves with what is impermanent, with what does not come under our full control, we come to suffering. This explains why Buddhism traces the fact of suffering to the fact of impermanence (*Yad aniccam tam dukkham*). Hence the very act of self-identification is itself suffering. When the process of self-identification is eliminated, suffering, too, comes to an end. This is the difference between samsara and Nibbana. The samsara continues as long as the process of self-identification persists. As long as it persists there is suffering. The moment it stops, the samsaric process, too, comes to an end, and together with it all suffering, too comes to an end. This is the significance of the first quotation which we cited at the very beginning of this lecture: 'If anything arises, it is suffering, if anything passes away it is (also) suffering.'

In the Buddhist texts themselves three kinds of suffering are distinguished which do not exactly correspond to the three levels of suffering to which we have been drawing attention up to now. The first is *dukkha-dukkha*. This reduplicated form of the term refers to suffering as generally understood, i.e. physical pain as well as its deeper psychological experience as sorrow and anxiety. It therefore corresponds to the first two levels of our classification. The second is *viparinama-dukkha*, i.e. suffering through change, what Edward Conze translates as 'suffering from reversal'. This refers to situations when, even when we are happy, suffering stares at us in the background. Moments of happiness do not obtain in uninterrupted continuity, but have a tendency to get interrupted through change of circumstances. It is a deeper analysis than the first. The third which is called *sankhara-dukkha* corresponds exactly to the third level of suffering which we discussed above, i.e. suffering involved in grasping the five aggregates.

Commenting on the theory of suffering as generally understood by classical Indian religions, B K Motilal poses an important question. It is that whether the 'pain-thesis is a factual statement or a statement of evaluation, whether it is a proposition or an exclamation (i.e. an exhortation to act), whether it is a description of how things are or a prescription of how we ought to consider it' . In his opinion what we referred to above as *dukkha-dukkha* is clearly a factual proposition. Thus for example, suffering experienced due to impeded will is lived and factual suffering. On the other hand, he observes that the third level of suffering which is *sankhara-dukkha* is clearly a statement of evaluation, evaluation in relation to Nibbana .

Although we tend to agree with this conclusion, it must also be admitted that this conclusion is made from the point of view of samsaric existence. On the other hand, the Buddhist definition of all suffering (not only *saakhara-dukkha*) is made from the point of view of Nibbana. It is of course true that such palpable instances of suffering as phobia of death could be understood without reference to Nibbana. However, the fact that Nibbana is also defined as 'freedom from death' (*amata*) shows that according to the Buddhist assessment, even the phobia of death as suffering has significance in relation to Nibbana. Nibbana is the very negation of samsara. And since the former is defined as the highest level of happiness from that point of view all samsaric experience is suffering. Even as a general statement, it may not be incorrect to say that all assessment of suffering involves some kind of evaluation. For suffering assumes significance in relation to its contrary, which is happiness. One's fear of death should be understood in relation to one's desire to live. If association with what is unpleasant (*appiyehi sampayoga*) is an occasion of suffering, it is because dissociation from what is unpleasant ('*appiyehi vippayoga*') is a source of happiness. Therefore, it is difficult to understand why only *sankhara-dukkha* should be singled out as an instance of evaluation.

In any case, Buddhism describes suffering as *tatha* (real and objective), *avitatha* (not unreal and not non-objective) and *anannatha* (invariable). These three characteristics are applied to the principle of dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*) too. What seems to be emphasized here is that although suffering is a subjective experience, it is presented as an objective fact in order to emphasize its universality.

If Buddhism emphasizes the universality of suffering, this could be understood from another point of view, from the point of view of the cause of suffering. The cause of suffering is the self-centred desire which manifests itself in many forms. Hence the universality of suffering does also mean the universality of the self-centred desire. To say that man suffers is the same as saying that man is motivated by self-centred desires. The two statements are mutually convertible, the first is by way of the effect and the second is by way of the cause. In modern writings on Buddhism this fact, namely the causative factor of suffering, is often overlooked.

Buddhism's great concern with the problem of suffering may, on a superficial appraisal, appear as an inordinate obsession with an unwarranted problem, particularly when it is considered in the context of the joys and pleasures of life. What should not be overlooked here is that if Buddhism is concerned with the problem of suffering it is because it is equally concerned with its solution. If it identifies all sources and occasions of suffering, it is in order to ensure that happiness is based on a sure and solid foundation. Thus even jhanic experience and the delights of heavenly existence which for all practical purposes may be described as an instance of supreme happiness are also identified as suffering. Therefore, the Buddhist teaching on suffering could also be understood as the Buddhist teaching on the pursuit of happiness.

The Buddhist attitude to suffering is very well analyzed by Alexandra David-Neel in her *Buddhism, Its Doctrines and Its Methods* . She refers here to four possible attitudes in respect of suffering. The first is the denial of suffering, in the face of all evidence. This may be interpreted as naiveoptimism. The second is 'passive resignation, the acceptance of a state of things which one considers inevitable'. This may be interpreted as out-and-out pessimism. The third is camouflage of suffering by the help of pompous sophistry or by gratuitously attaching to it such virtues and transcendent aims as one thinks may ennoble it or diminish its bitterness'. This may be interpreted as rationalization of suffering. The fourth is 'the war against suffering, accompanied by the faith in the possibility of overcoming it'. This may be described as the rational and the most sane attitude to suffering. It is this fourth attitude to suffering that Buddhism adopts. This also explains why Buddhism does not make any attempts to interpret suffering. For any interpretation of suffering implies an attempt to rationalize it. Rationalization of suffering, in turn, implies an attempt to 'hide its bitterness' on spiritual or other grounds. It amounts to an escapism in the face of suffering, which in other words, means a postponement of a solution to it.

Accordingly Buddhism emphasizes the urgency of the need for a solution to the problem of suffering. Man's existentialist predicament is, therefore, compared to a person who has been pierced with a poisoned arrow (*salla-viddha*). This simile draws attention not only to his present predicament but also to the urgency of solving it. It also draws attention to two other things: That is, what one should do and what one should not do at such a situation. In the first place, he must not waste his time by asking such silly questions as to who shot the arrow, what is his name, caste, etc. Nor should be insist that he would not get the poisoned arrow removed until he knows the answers to these questions 33. To raise such questions is to create another problem which has no relevance to the problem at issue, and what is more, the patient would die before he could get satisfactory answers to his questions.

It is on this analogy that the Buddhist attitude to the problem of suffering and the solution of metaphysical questions should be understood. Hence it is that when Malunkyaputta asked the Buddha whether the world is eternal or non-eternal or whether the world is finite or infinite, the Buddha refused to answer these questions. Malunkyaputta then decided to leave the order. Then addressing him the Buddha says: 'The religious life, O Malunkyaputta does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal or not, nor does it depend on the dogma that the world is finite or not. Whether the world is eternal or not, whether the world is finite or not, there is

birth, there is death, there are grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation and despair and it is for their extinction in this very life itself, that I preach the doctrine' . It was in illustrating this point that the Buddha used the simile of the poisoned arrow. If the Buddha refused to answer such metaphysical questions it was because their solution whether they are solvable or not is another question - has no relevance to man's understanding of his present predicament or to solving it. These questions, as the Buddha says, are not concerned with the spiritual and the Higher Life. 'They do not conduce to aversion, to dispassion, to cessation (of suffering), to calming, to higher knowledge, to awakening or to Nibbana'. What is most significant to note here is that immediately after saying so, the Buddha goes on to explain the Four Noble Truths, which is the Buddhist formulation of the problem of suffering and its solution. It is in this context that the second quotation which we cited at the beginning of this lecture becomes significant: 'Both formerly and now also, 'Anuradha, I declare only two things, suffering and its cessation'.

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*Source: The Middle Way, The Buddhist Society U.K., https://www.thebuddhistsociety.org.uk*

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