WAIT A MINUTE!

ANATTA

DEDICATION ...

In memory of those who are remembered by no-one, for without them, no-one would remember those they do. Everyone has his role to play, and thus, everyone is important.

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INTRODUCTION

Before anyone asks me: ‘Why did you write this book?’ I will pre-empt them and ask it of myself:

I have written it not because I think I have all the answers to all the problems in the world, but because I think we often look in the wrong places or in the wrong ways for answers; usually, our minds are full of ideas about what it is we are looking for, and are motivated by fear or greed, not realizing that such looking only distorts what is here and prevents us from seeing clearly. Too concerned with ourselves, we become like dogs running round in circles chasing their own tails.

The world is a whole and we are parts of it; even if we dislike or disagree with it, we cannot separate ourselves from it. So we need a realistic way of looking at it, a compassionate and positive way. “As I am, so are these; as these are, so am I”. The Buddha’s words help us to see people and other living things with understanding and love instead of with constant fear and self-concern.

I have chosen the cover-picture and the title for this book to show different points-of-view. Both the hawk and the mouse could be saying to each other: Wait a minute! but for different reasons. One could be saying: “Wait a minute! Don’t go away; I want to catch you”, while the other could be saying: “Wait a minute! Let’s talk this thing over!”

Unlike the participants of the picture, we can look at both sides: that of the hawk and that of the mouse. The hawk would excite admiration for its streamlined grace, as it did in the person who gave me the picture: “Isn’t it magnificent!” Few of us would feel sympathy for the mouse, as mice are regarded as pests that destroy crops, spread disease, and so on. But the mouse also has its point-of-view. Mice were on the planet long before men began to produce food; it is not their purpose on earth to destroy crops; that is our idea of them. Just what is their purpose, we don't know, but then, that is not surprising, is it? We don't even know what our purpose is—or even if we have a purpose—do we? Moreover, like you and I, mice also have feelings, and wish to live and be happy.

In the hawk's eyes, we see exultation of the kill, while in the eyes of the mouse terror of being killed. Nature is ruthless and without sentiment and cares not if we live or die. Why does it favor the strong over the weak? Why does it play cruel and deadly games with its children?

Life is a struggle, involving much pain and heartache, and finally, when death comes upon us, we seem to lose all that we struggled for. But, looking back, can we say that the living and dying of all the people before us was a total loss and waste? Does not every generation leave something to those that follow? We carry on where others left off, as in a relay-race, not needing to start all over again from the beginning. And if we, as individuals, do not pass on much to those who follow us, I am optimistic that the generation of which we are part, will, though to be sure, we will also pass on things not good, simply because we are imperfect and still learning.

In and from our struggles, we might learn things unique to our species and which distinguish us from other beings, like compassion, tolerance, self-sacrifice and wisdom; we have a broader vision of life than animals have; our struggles and sufferings will not be in vain if we acquire something of such things. We inherited so much from people who lived before us, and so, even though we pass and die, our living will not have been a waste if we leave something of value to others. Would this not be a more-worthy motive for living well than thoughts of a better personal life after death? If there is an after-life, it will probably follow on as a result of how we live this life.

The hawk has no choice but to kill; the mouse no choice about what to eat, be it crops in the field or grain in the store. We, however, do.

Go well!

DISCONTENTMENT

Just as the tension that builds up under the earth's crust is finally released in earthquakes or volcanic eruptions, so now the tension that has been building up in me for some time past seeks release through my pen. I have some ideas in mind but I know that as I go on, many things will emerge unsought, not thought of. I have long found this process fascinating, and it is, for me, quite instructive, affording insights into different aspects of life. Many things are hidden in our minds that we know nothing of, but may emerge if we allow them to.

Although we know that words are not the things they represent, nevertheless we may find great beauty in them for what they are and a joy in being able to communicate and express our ideas and feelings to others thereby. I obviously feel that I have something to communicate to others; this is why I write and speak (I am not going to be falsely modest about it); so, words are very useful tools to me. Though they are limited, we seldom use them to their full extent, beyond which they must be left behind as inadequate. Like a boat that may carry us over a river, they should not be abandoned in mid-stream.

We may appreciate and use things without being unduly attached to them, like vacuum cleaners, pens, pots and pans, and so on; we use them as means to an end, but we do not worship them on altars or take them to bed with us. So it is with words. And the fact that many of us live largely on the verbal level and take words for their objects, thinking that just because we know the word we therefore know the thing, it is not the fault of the words. If we understood this, words would serve us better and open many doors.

I once had a conversation with a Christian, during the course of which, almost inevitably, the word 'God' came up. I asked him what he meant by it and if he knew the thing it represented. My question clearly took him by surprise, which indicated that he had never really thought about it but had merely been content—like most people—to accept and believe unquestioningly what he had heard from others; he had only the word. And is the word 'God' God? Of course not! He would have done better—this middle aged man—to have heeded Pierre Abelard's words: "By doubt we come to inquiry, and by inquiry we arrive at Truth".

Until now, most of us have been content to use the words of others that we have inherited, but we can, if we wish, make them our own—and by so doing, demonstrate our gratitude to the originators of these tools, whoever they were—by investigating them, pulling them apart, turning them around, rolling them on our tongues, and feeling them, as if they were tangible. Our lives are so very enriched by words and we owe them so much; it is a tragedy that we take them for granted and do not think more about them. I have written about words before—words about words—and am doing so again in order to try to impart a little of their wonder to maybe just a few people who aren't yet aware of it.

When I was in primary school, one of my teachers (whose name I don't recall), gave me extra tuition in reading during the lunch break. Why she singled me out for this I don't know. Did she see something in me worth coaching? Whatever it was, I am grateful to her (and to many others, of course, but especially to her, as she did it in her spare time when she didn't have to) for helping me to learn how to read, for if this had been the only thing I learned in school, it would have been enough; it opened many doors and revealed many worlds to me. Thank you, Miss X, wherever and however you are now; although I've forgotten your name, I've not forgotten you, and hope you are well in every way!

I would like to examine the word discontentment, as I feel it has far too much negativity attached to it. Most people would think of the state or condition of discontentment as negative, even though many of us wallow in it like pigs in muck. And indeed, it usually is negative, in that it causes us to complain about our lot and to be acquisitive and greedy for more than we've already got; we envy others for having what we don't have, and envy, unchecked and not seen for what it is, may lead us to do things that in our ‘right minds’ we probably would not do. But it is not exclusively negative, and it would be good if, now and then, we recognized or remembered its positive aspect—that feeling which urges us on to achieve better things, not just for ourselves, but for others, too. Positive discontentment will not allow us to rest easy with mediocre achievement, but tells us: “This is not the end; this is not good enough; it is incomplete; things can be better than this”. There are innumerable examples of positive discontentment, both in others and in ourselves; all around us are manifestations of it and we all benefit from it, for if we as a species had not been capable of feeling and using our discontentment constructively, we would not have made any progress and would still be living like cavemen! It has resulted in countless discoveries, inventions, breakthroughs and insights in so many fields of human endeavor; we could not have survived without it.

The best example of positive discontentment, perhaps—and I can think of no better, because of the far-reaching and beneficial effects he had on the lives of countless people since then—is found in the person of Prince Siddhartha, who had everything money could buy at that time—luxury, pleasure and ease—but still he was dissatisfied, not for more pleasures of the senses but because he felt that there had to be more to life than just the things he’d been surrounded with from birth; he felt hollow, empty and unfulfilled, and it was this that led him to renounce his kingdom at the age of 29 and creep out of the palace at the dead of night to become a wandering ascetic in the forest in search of truth. His search, and all the hardships, pain and deprivations thereof, finally bore fruit six years later when he became enlightened. His discontentment with his princely life led him to attain Buddhahood, the effects of which are still being felt—like the after-shocks of a major earthquake—more than 2,500 years later.

Some detractors of Buddhism—and there is no shortage of them, though they usually speak from prejudice or lack of understanding—claim that Prince Siddhartha failed in his duty as a husband and father by abandoning his wife and new-born child. However, had he remained in the palace and succeeded to the throne, he might indeed have fulfilled the role of husband

and father admirably and ruled his people well, but how long after his death would his benevolent influence as husband, father and ruler have lasted? We probably would not even have heard of him if he had not chosen that course, let alone benefited from him ourselves!

A certain American multi-millionaire had a socialist-minded nephew who used to upbraid him for being so wealthy, claiming that he had become so at the expense of the poor, and saying that his wealth should be given back to the people. The uncle tolerated this until his patience wore thin, then one day, when his nephew visited and started his usual harangue, he gave him five cents.

"What's this?" said the nephew.
"That's your share", replied the uncle.
"My share? Share of what?"
"Your share of my wealth."
"Only five cents?! But you have millions—maybe even billions—of dollars!" spluttered the nephew.
"Yes, maybe I have", said the uncle, "but you've been advising me for years to distribute my wealth, and five cents is what everyone would get if I did this, so I'm starting with you. This is your share!"

Money has limits; there are things that cannot be bought, no matter how much money one has; and the more money one gives to others, the less one has for oneself. But what the Buddha found and gave is not limited like that and is, in fact, just the opposite, as no matter how much one shares it with others, it does not diminish. His wife, son, father and many of His former subjects, also benefited, because He later led them to Enlightenment, too. And thus, He was vindicated for having left them earlier. If he had not returned, with such a hard-won gift, He might be held culpable. If only we could give such a gift to our families!

Very few people are contented with their lives, though not many really know why they are discontented and try to cover it up with 'band aids' which give only temporary relief; they seldom try to understand or put their discontent to good use. Many sociologists and welfare workers attribute the escalating crime rate to poverty, but this is mere short-sightedness. Poverty is relative and what is known as poverty in the West is something quite different from poverty in many other countries; moreover, the poverty of the West today is not what it was 40 or even 20 years ago, but is simply poverty compared to something else. And to blame crime on poverty is wrong; just because people are poor—especially in a relative way and not to the extent of starving to death, as many people in really poor countries are—doesn't mean they must automatically turn to crime. We must look a bit deeper for the cause of crime than material poverty; I think it can be traced to poverty of a different kind: inward or spiritual poverty. When people are poor within and lack spiritual values, are deficient in understanding and care little about others, then no matter what their material condition, it is easy for them to behave antisocially; nor is it people who are poor materially who commit crimes; the rich are not immune to that, and many of the greatest criminals are the most 'successful' and don't get caught, perhaps because of the strings they can afford to pull.

I am not denying that material poverty is a factor in crime, as it undoubtedly is, but I am saying that it is only one of the causes, and not the main one, either. The main cause, said the Buddha, is ignorance of the causes of things. It may sound a bit simplistic today to talk about the search for happiness, but nevertheless this is at the root of many of our problems and restlessness; basically unhappy, we are blindly groping for happiness in the dark; but our efforts to find happiness are so misguided that they often produce the opposite results; our energy is therefore not only wasted but is sometimes used destructively. Famous psychologist Erich Fromm said this on the matter: "It would seem that the amount of destructiveness to be found in individuals is proportionate to the amount to which expansiveness of life is curtailed ... Life has an inner dynamism of its own; it tends to grow, to be expressed, to be lived. It seems that if this tendency is thwarted the energy directed towards life undergoes a process of decomposition and changes into energy directed towards destruction ... The more the drive towards life is thwarted, the stronger is the drive towards destruction; the more life is realized, the less of destructiveness. Destructiveness is the outcome of unlived life."

A teacher once said to his disciples: "Listen: I will tell you a secret". The disciples gathered around, expecting to hear something profound. Speaking in a conspiratorial tone, the teacher then said: "The secret is this: there is no secret!" Happiness is also not a secret, and cannot be found, but must come to us; the search for happiness is counterproductive and causes many problems. If only we could forget about happiness! We would be so much happier than we are!

So, poverty—material poverty—is just one of the causes of crime, but poverty, like everything else, has many causes, and it would help if we recognized some of them in ourselves instead of always looking for them outside and blaming others or circumstances for the situations we find ourselves in. Laziness, theft, drunkenness, dishonesty, wastefulness, envy, niggardliness, and stinginess—all of which have many causes and could be written about at length—are causes of poverty; nothing happens by chance. If we are to deal with the problems that beset us, we must try to identify their causes. J.C. is reported to have said: "No man gathers grapes from thistles or figs from thorns". To say that crime is the result of poverty may lead to increased welfare payments and other attempts to remedy the situation, but it would only be treating the symptoms and not resolve the problem; as long as we have no understanding of the Law of Cause-and-Effect and the Golden Rule, and no ability or willingness to consider others as ourselves, the problems will go on, and we will need more rules and laws and more people to enforce them; life will become more complex and more of a problem than it already is. There is no 'magic-wand' solution to our problems, of course, no pill that we may take to resolve things and make life beautiful. The problems have been long in developing, and the treatment of them, if ever begun, will also take a long time. And yet we have the means already in place to begin it: the education system. For generations—in the West, at least—education up to a certain age has been compulsory, but it has not achieved what it might have done and has only half educated us, leaving most of us spiritually little better off—and many of us worse—than before we began, as it has inculcated in us the belief that, just because we have been given equal rights in the eyes of the law, we are therefore equal, which is just not true at all. Equality is only an idea, not a fact; in reality, there is no such thing as equality; there is variety and difference. The education system has also provided us with knowledge but not with the wisdom to use it properly, so it increases selfishness and greed rather than decreases them. Is it too late to change direction and educate people from a very early age (as this is where it must begin) to understand more about life and living communally, and the joys, benefits, rights and responsibilities thereof, than we have done until now? I don't think it is, but it will be difficult to change now, as the forces of inertia and ingrained habit are arrayed against us, and so we will probably take the line of least resistance and continue on course, hoping somehow to muddle through. We will continue to turn out —in some cases—people who are highly educated in specific fields but who are selfish and ruthless in their ambitions and drives to excel, succeed and achieve at all costs, and who are spiritually hollow and empty, like bamboo, and in other cases, people who understand very little from all their years in school. Albert Einstein once said that the thing that fascinated him the most about the school system was its ability to destroy in young people the fundamental urge to learn.

We have our priorities wrong, and would do well to heed some more words of J.C.: "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul?"

Wishing to discover what people really wanted from life, a certain king, of a philosophical temperament, unhappy with the theories and answers that he had so far been presented with, one day sent some of his courtiers out to find and bring back an 'average' person—not old but not young, not very intelligent but not very dull, not very handsome but not very ugly, and so on. The courtiers came back after some time with a man about 35 who fitted the description the king had given them. After putting the man at ease and assuring him that no harm would come to him, the king asked him what he would really like from life. Recovering from his initial nervousness, the man—let's call him George for convenience here—said that he would like to be so wealthy that he'd never have to work again and could employ people to do everything for him.

"Anything else?" asked the king.

"Well, yes", said George. "I would like endless pleasure and entertainment, because there would be no point in being rich and idle if I couldn't enjoy it."

"Quite right", said the king, "but is there anything else other than wealth and pleasure you would like?"

George thought for a moment and then said: "Er, yes, since you ask, I might as well mention it, although I know there's no hope of it happening, but I would like everyone to respect me and defer to me without me having to defer to or obey others."

"Can you think of anything else you would like?" said the king.

"Not right now", said George, "that would do."

"Well, suppose you could have all these things you mentioned; it is within my power to grant them, you know. I could provide you with as much wealth as you desire, and assure you of pleasure beyond your wildest dreams, and could issue an edict commanding everyone to respect and honor you without you have to defer to anyone, and to such an extent that you could even call me by my first name, on almost equal terms. What do you think? Would that make you happy?"

"Of course", said George, "Who wouldn't be happy with such conditions?"

"Well, forthwith, I will provide you with the things you desire and which you say would make you happy, but there is one condition: after one year of living like this you will have to forfeit your life—ah, but don't worry! I will see to it that your death will be quite painless; you won't feel a thing!"

George said: "You must be joking, your majesty! I want to live a bit longer than that, even though I'm not very well off! And so, if that's all, I should be getting back to work now", and he turned to go.

"Oh, don't be so hasty!" said the king. "Let's negotiate. How about five years?"

"It's very kind of you", said George, "but no thanks," and continued towards the door.

"Ten years?" said the king.
George hesitated, his hand on the door-knob.
"Twenty years?"
George's feet began to turn on their own accord, but he controlled them and slyly thought: "If it is within the king's power to grant me these things, why put a time limit on them? Besides, he has shown a willingness to negotiate, so if I hold out a bit longer maybe he'll increase the time again." So, refusing once more, he opened the door.
The king was not about to give up, however, and called out: "Then how about fifty years? My final offer!"
"You're on!" said George, trying to conceal his delight at having managed to persuade the king into such a marvelous arrangement, thinking that it would take him into a ripe old age which, under any conditions, he could not be sure of reaching anyway.

To his dismay and chagrin, however, just when he thought this fabulous dream was about to become reality, the king said: "Sorry; I've changed my mind. But thanks anyway, George, because you have helped me understand something that I've been wanting to know for a long time: that what people really want from life is something that they've already got: Life itself! Other things, like wealth, pleasure, fame and honor are only secondary. But please accept this purse of gold as a token of my appreciation for your help. Feel free to visit me anytime you like."

Yes, we really do not understand what we've got and take it all for granted, considering it 'ordinary', until it's time to lose it. What a pity we are not taught, from our earliest years, how to count our blessings. As it is, the opposite happens: we are taught to be greedy and acquisitive, never satisfied with what we have but always to want more. Negative discontentment is inculcated in us, to the point where we think of discontentment —if we think of it at all—as solely negative and, in the case of many of us, never get a glimpse of its positive side or recognize it as such. Consequently, we spend much of our lives complaining, feeling sorry for ourselves and envying others.

Instead of pushing on, expecting and hoping to muddle through and achieve something in the future, maybe we should turn back—not in time, to the past, for such a thing is impossible, but inwards, to ourselves. We need to take stock of ourselves, learn about ourselves, and discover things we never dreamed were there. It will entail, no doubt, facing and coming to terms with unpleasant and ugly things inside ourselves—thistles, thorns and weeds, as it were—and this will be painful, so be forewarned. Yet it is necessary in order to discover our positive qualities, our treasures, through and beyond them. Take heart and do not be dismayed at the difficulties, nor at the length of time it takes to cut through the tangled undergrowth of the mind, for we have allies in our quest, urging us on, and each small success, each little insight, each spark of enlightenment concerning things we did not understand before, will encourage us to go on; indeed, eventually, we will find that life itself, with all its pain, hardships, frustrations, sorrows and disappointments, is on our side, for it refuses to allow us to rest long content with things that, by their very nature, are unreliable and cannot afford us a firm foundation. We may think we have got everything together, everything worked out and going smoothly, and then something might happen—maybe something unexpected and even quite trivial—that can quickly and easily throw us into confusion.

The wonderful advances of our science and technology and the widespread literacy we have achieved have not turned out to be unalloyed blessings but have brought with them tensions, frustrations and a sense of personal worthlessness in degrees never known before; we are more dissatisfied than we ever were, probably because we have been brought to depend so much on the world 'outside' us, to the disregard or neglect of the world 'within'; our greed is unquenchable, and it is as if we have become accessories rather than the beneficiaries of our technology, that we exist to serve it rather than it serving us. Much of our deep-seated feeling of discontentment arises from our over-dependence on others, which diminishes us and makes us feel impotent; we lose sight of ourselves and feel alienated and lost. But precisely because of this there is so much to be discovered in ourselves, and therefore the alienation—painful though it is—which is largely the result of our dependence on our dehumanizing technology, may be looked upon as good, because before we can return home, first we must go away; if we are satisfied with our condition we will stay as we are.

What does it take to turn people back to themselves, to get them to break free from the cocoon of delusion and selfishness? What does it take to smash the prison bars of self and enlarge our mental horizons so that we might regard the world with understanding and love instead of with greed and fear? What does it take to divert the powerful energies of discontentment from negative into positive channels? Alas, many people, known and unknown, have pondered on this down the ages and offered remedies and suggestions, and in so doing, many were persecuted and some even lost their lives. It seems that the world prefers darkness to light and any attempt to change things will be met with stiff resistance. A Chinese sage, seeing this, wrote these rather disconsolate words: “The real pain is the pain of knowing that the Way does not prevail in the world”. It is because the Way does not prevail in the world that much of the suffering and all of the evil goes on.

However, while it is true that ‘you can take a horse to the water but you cannot make it drink’, there are always people who are thirsty and in search of water. In any age this is true, and so the attempt must be made to provide something for them. Anyone attempting this should know that, ultimately, the ripening-agents of Time and Suffering are on his side, so he must be patient and wise, and create or wait for opportunities to turn things around. We should try to keep it in mind, too, that human nature is basically good (is there not goodness in yourself? Where did it come from?); no-one really wants to be bad; there are very few really evil people in the world.

Try to harness your discontentment and make it work for you and others.

THE ACTUAL AND THE IDEAL

When we set out on a spiritual Way, we have, of course, something in mind, an idea of what, eventually, we hope to achieve—Heaven, Liberation, Nirvana, Enlightenment, Peace, etc. The ideal to which we aspire is, and must be, far ahead of us; there is a long way to go from the actual to that. But it must not be so far ahead that we do not get an occasional glimpse or inkling of what it is we are aiming for, otherwise it will be easy to give up in despair, crushed by the immensity and remoteness of the ideal.

We must begin with the actual, with ourselves as we are. But how are we? We understand little of our physical bodies, and even less of our minds. But we can see, if we care to, that we are the result of many forces and influences pressing on us from all sides, molding, twisting and changing us; there is no plan in it all, it is not consistent or deliberate, and even small things can remodel us considerably. We identify with the name our parents gave us and which is therefore not ours but theirs; we think we are as the mirror says we are, but that is only a reflection and not what it reflects. We do not have a very accurate picture of ourselves at all. Who are we? We simply do not know. The funny thing is, though, we never move away from ourselves; no matter what kind of journey we are on, we cannot get away from ourselves.

And then the ideal at which we aim: what do we know of that, except what others have told us or what we have read? What we do feel sure of, however, is that it must be different and better than what we are right now, as we are living in a state of misery and confusion; we are just not happy or integrated; we are impure, imperfect, incomplete, and there has to be, we presume, a better condition, a better state of being than this!

We live, then, in a state of anxiety and restlessness, not wanting to be what we are but something that we are not. We are divided in ourselves, at war with ourselves, mocked by the ideals we have set ourselves.

To become what we are not, to change from this to that, to grow and develop, requires effort along certain lines, and this doesn't happen immediately, of course, but takes time. What often happens, however, is that we measure our imperfection beside the state of perfection at which we aim, and find ourselves deficient. This results in feelings of guilt and misery; sometimes we think: "After so long, I am no further along the way than I was when I began! What am I doing? Where am I going? Is there any point in continuing? Might I not as well give up?" This happens when our eyes are fixed so far ahead, longing for something that we probably will not reach for a long, long time—and maybe will never reach at all; perhaps it's just a carrot on a stick, dangled before our nose to motivate us and get us moving in the direction of self-improvement and self-discovery—and forget to take into account the successes along the way, however small they may be.

Perhaps we are blinded by the ideal, and have lost sight of the actual; perhaps we are too hard on ourselves and do not give ourselves a chance. Does it mean we are unworthy and lack faith in the Way if something unfortunate happens to us? If we get sick or suffer, does it mean that we are sinful and therefore deserve it? If we are sad, afraid or angry at times, does it mean that we are not sufficiently grounded in the Dharma? No, it is not like this; it is simply because we are human, with our entire past still with us; it is because it is the normal human state. We may be trying to run before we can walk. To do so would be to overlook and disregard our great good fortune at being human rather than to use it to go further. It is said that it is very hard to be born human, and we should understand and appreciate this, not deprecate it. We might not be fully-enlightened yet—we are not, let's face it—but then, no-one starts out fully-enlightened, do they?

Do you think, in your faint-heartedness, dejection and despair that you are just not enlightened at all? That would be just as wrong as thinking you are fully-enlightened when you are not, and would display ignorance and ingratitude about your human condition. It would also be a rejection and betrayal of all that people before us struggled for and passed on to us, a rejection even of the Buddha Himself and His Dharma! We must try to be realistic and not falsely modest. We are enlightened, to some degree—perhaps only to a small degree, but nevertheless, it is there. And although it is true that our thinking, feeling and understanding are often distorted and biased, they might be straightened out and our enlightenment increased—even until full enlightenment, if there is such a thing; at our stage, we do not know if there are limits to growth or not. It really helps to remember, though, that pain is not just a condition of decay but also of growth.

To understand ourselves, we must see our situation and our place among others, for it is simply not possible to understand ourselves alone, in isolation. We are like leaves or flowers on a tree; without the tree, we simply would not exist. And so, before we try to separate ourselves from the rest of humanity, we must look back and see how we have been carried by the stream of humanity to the present: we have always been part of something much bigger than ourselves and cannot ever be separate from it, as in our conceit we think we can. Suppose you were able to sever all connections with people and live on your own, growing your own food and making whatever you needed, like Robinson Crusoe on his island: what about your thoughts? They would still not be your own, but would be made up of the words of others, the language that you inherited in the place you were born. You see, we are not separate and never can be, but are dependent. Why are we so reluctant to recognize this? It doesn't in the last detract from what we are; on the contrary, it leads us to see that we are part of a vast movement, a mystical unfolding, and a cosmic drama. If we look back and peer into the mists of time we will get a dim idea of how far we have come as a species. Go to a museum and look at the exhibits of stone tools made by primitive man, see the replicas of their habitations, feel how it might have been in those far-off times, when life was precarious and short. You can't deny we have evolved. But do you know how we evolved? And did you have any share in it, did you play a part in the evolution of our race? Why have we been born at this time and not another? Would you like to live as a cave-man, a million years ago? Think of what you have inherited by being born in this time: all the struggles, labors, pain and suffering of those who lived before you—including the crude, blind, uninformed gropings of our savage and primitive ancestors—and the understanding and skills that resulted there from, have contributed to and made possible everything that we now have. They have not really ceased to be, but are here with us now, through the things they bequeathed us. We must think about them kindly, with gratitude; their living was not in vain, and if we look at it in this way, our living will also not be in vain.

Our feet rest on the soil of the past, but we cannot stay here, and must go on. And shall we go on without pain, without fear, without problems? Of course not! The way ahead holds many difficulties; suffering will not be rare. Know, however, "that it is the broad view and the long vision which alone can cure our fearfulness and fortify our steps. A longer vista lies before us than even anthropology can offer of the past". Your living is not for yourself alone. Your every action affects the world. What will you be doing as you read or hear what I have written, I wonder? Whatever it is, it will be changing the world in one way or another, imperceptible though it may be; you could equally well be doing something other than what you are doing, something better or something worse, but whatever it is, it is having an effect on the world. The world is changing constantly, becoming other than it is. We change it when we build or destroy; we change it when we scatter litter or pick up litter scattered by others; we change it by teaching and by cheating; we change it when we kill or heal, when we lie or when we steal; we change it when we drink or eat; we change it when we work or sleep; I am changing the world by writing books (hopefully for the better); in short, we cannot not change the world, because we are part of it, and so whatever we do has an effect on the whole.

Following a spiritual way, even though we may feel all alone and lonely thereon, has a salutary effect in the world around us, because we are making it just that bit more spiritual, and are using our energies positively instead of negatively. Moreover, we know that it is not just for ourselves that we do this, but for the world that we belong to and can never be apart from. Upon His Enlightenment, the Buddha did not cease to be human, and devoted the rest of His life to sharing with others what He had found. What an impact He had!

We should be careful not to let fear become the motivating force on our spiritual journey, for fear always distorts things and prevents clear seeing. We must see the situation as clearly as possible: We have been born; we are alive; we suffer; we will die. What will happen then, we really don't know, but fear makes us think about it, and leads us to grasp at concepts that hold out hope of some sort of survival. Most of these concepts, however, come at a price: we must give or do something to qualify for their benefits. If the proffered hope is attractive enough, we struggle to do or give what is asked; we want, and therefore must pay.

Yes, something must be given up to adapt to the Way, of course; the Way will never adapt to us. But we should not do it with the idea of getting this for that, like buying something. If that is the way we do things, we will surely be disappointed. Giving up things that are not compatible with the Way should be done from understanding that it is the right thing to do—even if it is hard and painful—and not from a desire for results; we cannot bribe the Way. A moral code should be embraced and followed because it covers our relationships with others; it should be adopted from love for others rather than from fear of making 'bad karma' if we do not follow it, or from greed for 'merit' for following it. Love is a much-better foundation for following the Way than fear or greed, and it arises from seeing clearly how things are. If we see that others are just like us in their desire to be happy and free from suffering, we will know what to do; the Way will open out before us; and although we know that merit or 'good karma' is essential, we will not let that be our guiding motive for following the Way, but will let good actions flow naturally, from understanding.

To reinforce what I have just said, I would like to quote here from the Roman emperor-philosopher Marcus Aurelius, of the 2nd century: "One man, when he has done a service to another, is ready to set it down to his account as a favor conferred. Another is not ready to do this, but still in his own mind he thinks of the man as his debtor, and he knows what he has done. A third in a manner does not even know what he has done, but is like a vine which has produced grapes, and seeks for nothing more after it has produced its proper fruit. As a horse when he has run, a dog when he has caught the game, a bee when it has made honey, so a man when he has done a good act does not call out for others to come and see, but goes on to another act, as a vine goes on to produce again the grapes in season". (Meditations).

We are able to do good only because of supporting factors; so many things are involved in our actions; we do not act alone. So there is no reason to be proud or to think of oneself as good. We receive far more good from others than we in turn create, and should be happy that circumstances have conspired to bring about the opportunity to do good, without thinking about the results to oneself there from.

We must learn to love life. Sure, life is full of pain; sure, life will leave and we will die, but if we learn to love it for what it is, we will be able to learn far more about it than if we despise it, for in despising life we turn away from it and see only the surface, and there is much more to life than that. Living with love reduces the gulf between the actual and the ideal, while fear, greed, and concern for self widen it. Love overcomes fear and greed because it is concerned more with the whole than with the part, more with others than with self. We realize that enlightenment is not as far away as we used to think it was. We watch the interplay of conditions, less attached than we were before.

Love liberates.

"An age is called Dark not because the light fails to shine, but because people refuse to see it."

James A. Michener: Space

ANANDA'S FAULT

It is October 1995, as I write this, and I am in Germany, staying with an old friend. It is good to see him again; we had not met since 1973, when we were together in Thailand as monks. Of course, we have both changed a lot in the meantime; he is no longer a monk and has a family, but is still the friend I spent good times with all those years ago—kind, gentle, not easily upset—and remains a dedicated Buddhist who thinks often of Dharma. His wife says that he is still very much a monk at heart; fortunately, she is also a Buddhist and shares his devotion, otherwise there would easily be a clash of interests; I have often seen it when either the husband or the wife have an interest in spiritual matters, but their partner does not; it creates quite a space between them and sometimes gives rise to great problems.

Since I've been here, he has helped me understand something that puzzled me for years: why the Buddha, who led so many others to Enlightenment, was unable to awaken Ananda. I assumed that with His vast wisdom and ability to perceive the mental level of people, and teach them accordingly, He should have been able to do this. Was I too naïve or idealistic in thinking so? Let us look at it.

Ananda was a first-cousin of Prince Siddhartha, of around the same age, and followed him into the monk's life soon after Siddhartha attained Enlightenment and became the Buddha at the age of 35. He was the Buddha's favorite disciple and later became His personal attendant. They had a special arrangement between them: when Ananda had undertaken to attend the Buddha, they had agreed upon several things requested by him, one of which was that the Buddha should repeat to him any sermons or teachings that He gave while he was not with Him, so that he could store them away in his very retentive memory. Because of this, it was Ananda who repeated the Buddha's discourses at the first Sangha Council three months after the Buddha passed away.

Ananda comes across to us as a very warm, kind, self-effacing person, utterly devoted to the Buddha, and the fact that he was later blamed for several things by some of the other monks does not detract from this. One gets the feeling—though it might be wrong, of course—that Ananda was not too popular with some of the monks; there might well have been some jealousy or resentment towards him because he was so close to the Buddha; the things he was blamed for do not, in our eyes, seem blameworthy at all. We cannot be sure how it was, of course, and have only the scriptures to go by, and they were committed to writing only 500 years later; moreover, we do not know how objectively or accurately they were recorded, and must not assume that the recorders were completely without bias; people were human in those days, too.

In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta of the Pali Canon, which tells of the last days and passing away of the Buddha, Ananda is shown asking how to behave towards women. How strange that at this late stage, having been with the Buddha for so long, and privy to all His teachings, Ananda should ask such a naïve question that might be expected from a newly-ordained monk but hardly from one of his seniority. Can Ananda really have asked this? And can the Buddha really have told him, first, not to look at women, and then, if seeing them were unavoidable, not to speak to them, and if this, too, could not be avoided, one should be alert and mindful? How strange; how incongruous! Can we seriously entertain the idea that Ananda did not know how to behave towards women? Perhaps he was only asking this question for the sake of young monks? But at this time, when the Buddha was on His death-bed? It would surely have been most inappropriate, and could well be an interpolation. If Ananda really had asked this question, we can imagine the Buddha looking askance at him and thinking: "Oh dear, what a waste of 25 years as my personal attendant!"

The scriptures say that, during His final days, the Buddha told Ananda that His end was near, and hinted that if He were requested to live some years longer, for the sake of sentient beings, it was within His power to do so. But Ananda did not take the hint and so did not make the request (the reason given is that at the time he was under the control of Mara, the Evil

One—the Indian equivalent of the Bible's Satan, but in reality, not apart from one's own mind!) The Buddha then announced that three months later He would enter Final Nirvana and pass away; it is said that, having made this prediction, it could not be rescinded. Ananda was thereafter held responsible, both by the Buddha Himself and some of the monks, for not asking Him to extend His life. But does it not seem strange that such a wise and compassionate person as the Buddha, who had devoted His whole enlightened life to helping others, should need to be asked to live longer? Why should Ananda be blamed for failing to make such a request? No doubt there are explanations for this, but whether or not they would fit the situation is another matter; many people must have pondered on it over the 25 centuries since then, trying to make sense of it. Like Christians over the Bible, many Buddhists are of the opinion that everything in the Buddhist scriptures must be true simply because it is there; they dare not allow themselves, for a moment, to doubt and question, or to imagine that something might not be as it appears; to them, it would be the translation or interpretation of the scriptures at fault, rather than the scriptures themselves, which must be infallible, of course, just because they are scriptures!

According to the scriptures, at the end, when the Buddha lay on His death-bed in a forest, calm and self-possessed, He noticed that Ananda was not among those surrounding Him, and asked where he was. Someone told Him: "He is over there, Lord, in the sala [preaching hall], with his head against the door-post, weeping and saying: 'Too soon is the Light of the World going out! Too soon is my beloved master leaving me—He who was so kind to me—and I am still a learner, yet to find my deliverance!'" The Buddha sent someone to call him, and when he came, consoled and comforted him: "Do not weep, Ananda; do not be sad. For have I not told you so many times and in so many ways that all that is near and dear to us will perish? How could it be that this body of mine, having been born, should not die? For so long, Ananda, you have served me faithfully in thought, word and deed. Great good have you gathered, Ananda. Now you must make effort, and soon, you too will be free!" Not long after this, the Buddha passed away, and within three months, Ananda did become Enlightened.

I have pondered on this many times, and failed to understand why the Buddha did not—or could not—lead Ananda to awakening, when He had led people like Kisagotami the bereaved mother, Angulimala the murderer, Sunita the untouchable sweeper, and many others who were not well-educated or consciously spiritual.

My friend told me he had also pondered on this matter until it occurred to him that the problem was not from the Buddha's inability to lead him; He would have led Ananda to awakening if He could, but something prevented Him, something He had often spoken of and identified as one of the main causes of suffering, namely: attachment. Ananda was attached!

But had he not left the luxury and pleasure of a prince to become a monk and follow the Buddha, leading a simple but contented life? How can we imagine him being attached? To what was he attached? He had no personal possessions other than the bare requisites of a monk, and at that age, he certainly had no thought of abandoning the monk's life and returning to his former life as a prince, to marry and start a family. What he was attached to was the person of the Buddha—so attached that it held him back, all those years, and prevented him from becoming enlightened. During this time he must have seen or known of many others becoming enlightened, while he remained unenlightened, and nothing the Buddha could do or say was able to change this. But we can be sure it was not for want of caring; He loved Ananda as Ananda loved Him, but with the wisdom of Enlightenment instead of attachment. The Buddha did nothing to encourage or increase the attachment of Ananda, but He—the Buddha Himself, who many Buddhists believe had unlimited powers—was unable to lead His beloved disciple to Enlightenment. This illustrates just how strong attachment can be!

But the Buddha had one final teaching to give—we might almost consider it His most-powerful initiation—and it had the effect of breaking the attachment of Ananda, namely: His demise! The Buddha had to die and disappear physically in order for Ananda to let go of Him!

We must be able to visualize the scene of the Buddha's passing away; it is very important for us! Here is this teacher, at the age of 80, old, wrinkled and weather-beaten from the life He had led, but still tremendously dignified, lying dying in a forest. The news had spread like wildfire that He was about to pass away, and His followers, ordained and lay, had come from far and wide to see their beloved master for the last time. Many were grief-stricken as they gathered around Him, but those who had attained Enlightenment through His teachings were restrained and quiet.

Lying on His right side, as was His custom, He showed no sign of His bodily pains, and continued to teach right up to the end. Mindful and with measured words, He said: "The thought may occur to some of you, Ananda, that when I am gone you will no longer have a teacher. But you should not think thus. The Dharma and the Discipline shall be your teacher after I have gone. Therefore, be an island unto yourself; be a lamp unto yourself; be a refuge unto yourself. With the Dharma and the Discipline as your refuge, do not look for a refuge outside of yourself." His last words were: "All compounded things are impermanent. Work out your own salvation with diligence!" And with that, the Buddha passed away.

The Buddha was not a savior but a teacher; He could not save anyone, nor did He claim to be able to, as is clear from His last words. He was able, however, to lead people to Enlightenment, to draw out of them something that was already there, lying dormant, something that is in all of us, just waiting for someone or something to come along and kindle a spark. In some, it is quite easy to do this, while in others it is very hard and almost impossible—almost.

It has been said that only Truth can set us free; our efforts to become free only further entangle us. After the Buddha passed away, Ananda did not try to cut off his attachment; it was more a matter of it falling away when its object was no longer there; and when the attachment fell away, Ananda became Enlightened!

But we are all attached; were we not we would not be here, suffering as we do. We are attached to all sorts of things, from gross material pleasures to lofty spiritual states, with countless other things in between. It's even possible to be attached to pain and suffering! Someone I know has suffered for many years from a stomach-complaint but refuses to submit to the operation—a relatively minor one—that might cure it, because he believes that his ailment and pain is a 'karmic purification'—sort of 'penance for his sins', if you will—and therefore something positive, not realizing that this attitude is what the Buddha condemned as 'useless self-mortification', which will never result in Enlightenment. His Way is one of self-help, and is not opposed to surgery or the use of medication.

One of the many things I am attached to—I confess—is my glasses. Years ago, when I tried contact-lenses, I felt naked without them; I was not naked, of course, but I have worn glasses for so many years that I missed them, even though I could see quite well with the contact-lenses. My glasses have become so much a part of me that I can sleep with them on, and have even washed my face with them on, forgetting they were there! So, I am not just physically dependent on them but psychologically addicted, too. It is silly, I know, but that's how attachment works; it is so subconscious and deep-rooted that we often don't realize it is there until something like loss makes us aware of it. And it doesn't go away just by being aware of the trouble it causes or by wishing it gone; it's more tenacious than to give up like that.

We may try to overcome attachment, but if we are not careful, we may become attached to such effort and more firmly entangled than before. Our effort must be balanced and guided by wisdom; effort without wisdom is maybe worse than no effort at all. Moreover, even rightly-guided effort can take us only so far; ultimately, only Enlightenment can cut off attachment, but there is no Enlightenment-button we may press to produce it; we cannot make it arise; that is not within our capacity. But it helps to know that attachment can be broken and come to an end; we have Buddha-nature—or the potential for Enlightenment—not for nothing. We can draw nearer to this by cultivating and maintaining an interest in Dharma, by frequently tuning into it and staying tuned, so that the process of inquiry becomes so sustained that it sinks down into the subconscious and continues to go on there even while we are asleep; it is from the subconscious that realization comes; we thus give it a chance to emerge and burn away our delusion.

So, my friend in Germany, I thank you and wish you well in your Dharma-faring! I will remember you fondly!

MISPLACED FAITH

Early 1995 saw the culmination of something that had been shaking the Buddhism of S.E. Asia for several years: a prominent Thai monk, accused of sexual misconduct, was forced by the Sangha Council of Thailand to disrobe, although he still maintained that he was innocent of what he had been accused. The case received wide media coverage both in Thailand and abroad.

I do not intend to go into the details of this case, but feel something should be said in an attempt to correct some of the damage done—if possible—as the faith of many Buddhists has been badly shaken thereby, and because there are people ever-ready to exploit such situations for their own ends. Christian missionaries in Thailand and elsewhere must be elated!

As in the recent sensational trial of O.J. Simpson in the U.S., some people consider the monk in question to be guilty, and point to his repeated refusal to undergo a DNA test as tantamount to a confession; there are, on the other hand, people who consider him innocent and feel he was framed, from motives of jealousy. (Well, some years ago, I became the target of someone whose mind was so full of jealousy that he even found fault with me for taking morning-walks or organizing blood-donations, so I have had some direct experience of what jealousy can do). I am not going to take sides in this, but will try to turn it around and use it to illustrate some Dharma.

I first heard of this monk (I will refrain from naming him as I abhor using names) in 1991, when he was already well-known as charismatic and handsome. His books contained photos of him posing like a movie-star, obviously aware of his good looks and the effects he had upon others. I remember thinking then that he was too handsome for his own good.

He had large followings in Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and other countries, and I heard of him being regarded and received as an arahant—

saint—in many places—including the Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Center in Penang—and white cloths spread before him to walk on and consecrate; some people then took these cloths home and treated them as objects of veneration, like holy relics; he was rapidly becoming a cult-figure, and did nothing to discourage this unhealthy trend; in fact, by not discouraging it, he tacitly encouraged it and caused people to become dependent upon him. It is this that I regard as his biggest mistake; he allowed people to worship him, and now many people are confused and have lost their faith. Of course, they lost their faith because it was misplaced, but he, in his position, should have used his influence to correct this and teach that the faith of a Buddhist must be in the Dharma, so that nothing can shake it. He should have explained that personality is insubstantial, hollow and empty, and will only let us down; like sand, it is not a good foundation, and will crumble when troubles arise. Instead of doing this, however, he allowed people to become addicted to him—quite the opposite of the Buddhist Way. Sadly, this kind of thing is not uncommon today; there are numerous teachers and gurus who are more concerned with promoting themselves than with helping people to understand Dharma; in reality, they are not teachers but cheaters!

I have seen, often, how the excessive respect paid by lay-Buddhists to monks and nuns has a corruptive effect; it becomes more intoxicating than whiskey, and one must be on guard against it. It happens, in the case of the laity, when there is more faith than wisdom, and in the case of the monks, when there is more self-esteem than wisdom; in both cases it happens because the central place of the Dharma is neglected or forgotten. Consequently, when scandals like this arise, many people lose everything, whereas if their faith had been solidly rooted in the Dharma, they would not have been so shaken, and would still have been able to carry on.

Long ago, I abandoned the personality-cult of Christianity, and now, freed from the belief in Jesus as a savior, regard him as a teacher. I do not mind that he was not fully-enlightened or free from imperfections; a person doesn't need to be perfect in order for me to learn from him something useful to me in my own life; in fact, it is perhaps better that I see his imperfections, as it is easier to relate to him than it would be to someone perfect. Christians are not allowed, or refuse to see, the imperfections of Jesus; the Church has glossed over and explained them away, and made him into an unrealistic figure. The image it has given of him is of someone so far beyond us as to be impossible of emulation; this is what comes of deification, of regarding a person as divine instead of human; rather than being an elevation, it is really a degradation, and renders meaningless the attempts of a teacher to lead people to higher things than they have hitherto been aware of, and to indicate the potential of being human.

Milarepa, Tibet's most famous and respected yogi, was once requested by the people of a certain village to stay with them as their guru. He gratefully declined, however, saying that if he were to stay with them, there would soon come a time when they would focus critically on his manners and behavior, and would no longer listen to him when he explained the Dharma, and that would be to their detriment. It would be far better, he said, if he kept himself at a distance. What was he saying? That the Dharma is the most important thing, and should not be confused with personality. If only we would realize and remember this, it would be so much easier for us to understand the Dharma.

All is not lost unless we allow it to be lost.
The Dharma is always as it is.

CONUNDRUM

From my early years in school, I dimly recall hearing or being presented with a conundrum, but do not remember the explanation of it, if I were ever given one. Apparently, it is quite well-known, but there would be more people who do not know it than those who do, and of those who know or remember the riddle itself, I would dare say that only few understand its meaning. For many years, it lay dormant in my subconscious, until a few years ago, when it surfaced again (though why, I cannot tell), and caused me to reflect on it. It seems nonsensical, but in fact, is pregnant with wisdom. It is this:

The child is the father of the man.

Should it not be 'the man' is the father of the child? If it were, there would be nothing to ponder on, as that is obvious. So, it is clear that this is not something obvious, and that is why it is called a 'conundrum' or riddle. How can a child be the father of a man? In the conventional sense, it cannot be; it is simply impossible. So we must look at it in a different way: in terms of Cause-and-Effect.

Although we are unable to perceive or even to conceive of a First Cause of things (to imagine we can is only delusion), and decide, once and for all, such knotty questions as 'Which came first: the chicken or the egg?', we can see that in the natural sequence of things, adulthood follows childhood, never the other way around; no-one is born a fully-formed adult and, growing younger, becomes a child. We all know this.

According to the Buddha, "*we are the results of what we were; we will be the results of what we are*" (though these might not have been the exact words, He probably said something like it numerous times, to many people and in various situations, as it forms an important part of His explanation of that aspect, department or dimension of the overall Law of

Cause-and-Effect that Indian thought has termed ‘Karma’). This has been repeated by Buddhists for ages, and regarded by many and maybe most of them as true, simply because the Buddha is supposed to have said it, and not as the result of deep insight or realization on their parts. Now, we who live so long after Him cannot in any way be certain that He said it, any more than the followers of other religions can be certain that the founders of their religions said what they are supposed or reported to have said, and so we should not cling dogmatically to such sayings; it would be better to apply another saying ascribed to the Buddha: “*You should test my teachings as a goldsmith would test gold*”—in other words: do not simply believe, but strive to find out. This means that we’ve got plenty to keep us busy, and it’s not just a matter of memorizing texts either, no matter how well we can do that. There is no substitute for direct personal experience of Dharma, just as there is no way to know the taste of sugar than by tasting it oneself; it is not enough for someone else to tell us it’s sweet, or for us to read that it is.

If I often play the role of ‘the Devil’s Advocate’—the opposition-party, as it were—it is because I feel that someone must, in order to try to counter the tendency in people to simply believe and accept things on the authority of others, which is just not good enough. Therefore, when people ramble on about unverifiable things, I might ask: “How do you know? Do you know this by your own experience, or are you merely repeating what you have read or heard elsewhere? If so, you should be honest and open about it and say so, instead of perhaps leading people to think that what you are referring to is something of your own experience.” We have a good precedent for this, in the person of the Buddha’s favorite and closest disciple, Ananda, who attended the Buddha for many years, and who had an extremely-retentive memory. After the Buddha had passed away, Ananda was called upon to recite from memory what he had heard the Buddha say, and where and when and to whom He had said it; before reciting each discourse, sermon or sutra, Ananda began with these words: *Evam me sutam* (“Thus have I heard”), thereby leaving people in no doubt that he was reciting the words of the Buddha rather than his own.

Now, it is highly unlikely that the scriptures of today, in any language, are an exact record of what the Buddha said and did; it does not take 2,500 years for changes to be made, for editing, adding, subtraction and distortion to take place, intentionally or otherwise; it can happen within a very short time, even without translation, interpretation and the risks involved in these processes. Nor do the prefacing words 'Thus have I heard' of a text make it absolutely certain that the words that follow are the genuine words of the Buddha; there have always been unscrupulous people in the world who would not hesitate to use such words to authenticate their fraudulent works. It is useful—very useful—to keep in mind the distinction between the letter (or the literal meaning) and the spirit that pervades the scriptures, and recall the words of St Paul of the Christian Bible, which are not amiss here: "It is the letter that killeth, but the spirit which giveth life."

I have been accused recently—though maybe 'accused' is too strong a word and 'regarded' might be better—of propagating my own teachings instead of the 'pure Buddha's words', as I speak and write from my own experience and observation rather than from a scriptural point-of-view with lots of textual references to support me. This came from someone who considers his own talks to be 'pure, unadulterated Dhamma', in exact alignment with what the Buddha taught, but which I regard as dry, scholastic and hair-splitting, besides sounding presumptuous and arrogant.

I don't deny that what I talk and write about is my understanding of the Buddha's Way—in fact, I make it quite clear it is—and sometimes say that my religion is Life, rather than Buddhism, because Life, to me, is what Buddhism is all about, while Buddhism, the organization, is one of many religions in the world; it is not accepted by nor does it apply to everyone; moreover, Buddhism has lost much of its vitality these days and become largely formalistic. I do maintain, however, that 'my teachings'—if they may be called such—are based upon principles that Buddhism terms The Three Characteristics (Anicca, or Impermanence, nothing lasts; Dukkha, or Suffering, Pain, Disease, Unsatisfactoriness; and Anatta, or No Self-existence, No-independence), which are of the Eternal Now that can be experienced and verified without requiring belief. It is on these things, and their obverse or positive counterparts, that I take my stand.

Care must be taken with phrases like ‘We are the results of what we were; we will be the results of what we are’ lest, in repeating them, we miss, overlook or misunderstand their meaning. If taken at face value, these words may mislead us, for the reality is not quite as simple as that, because a human-being—or anything/everything else for that matter—is an extremely complex thing involving (by reason of the fact that we are interdependent and interconnected) literally everything. Therefore, we are the results not only of our personal past—the totality of our thoughts, words and deeds (karma)—but also of our environments, circumstances and times, which have contributed immensely, immeasurably, to what we have become. Consciously and by deliberate design or choice, we ourselves have had very little to do with it. Our will is conditioned and far from free and we are more the victims than the masters of our circumstances. And until and unless we understand this, we will continue to be blown hither and thither by the winds of change, unable to do much about it. It is all very well to talk about being ‘the architects of our future’, but if we have no plans, know nothing about building or the materials to build with, we won’t get very far, and may even make a mess.

I have had the good fortune to be able to travel widely, and I regard this to have been my education. But had circumstances outside and beyond my control not permitted me to travel, I would never have been able to. I had nothing to do with the invention of the automobile, the train, the airplane, road-construction, the printing of passports, the setting up of border-controls, or things like that, yet it was only because of such things that I have been able to travel as I have done. I have become what I am now largely as a result of my travels. Our personal karma is not responsible for everything that happens to us; it simply slots in with something much bigger than we are; we share in the karma of others, too, just as we use the roads that others have made.

Generally, we think of ourselves as 'self-contained' and separate from what is 'not-us'; we think of our self, our being, as delineated by our skin, which keeps the inside—the self—in and the outside—the not-self—out. But is this really so? Can we really draw the line there and say: "This is me, and this is not-me"? Are we really separate like that? Is not the 'outside' also part of us, and we part of it, simply because we depend so vitally upon it, and without which we cannot exist and would therefore mean nothing? We can live without food for some months, and without water for some days, but we cannot go without air for even a minute! So, are we separate from the 'outside' or part of it, and the distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' not clear-cut after all? Who and what are we when we can no longer delineate ourselves so narrowly and separately? Obviously, not what we think we are, but much, much more. If we begin to follow up this lead and push back our limits—limits of ignorance—perhaps we will find that there are no limits; our 'self-view'—opinion or understanding of ourselves—would necessarily expand and fall into line with reality.

The search for personal enlightenment and the practices designed to hopefully bring it about, is ironic and displays fear and the desire for separateness, which means ignorance and misunderstanding of how things are. The basis of Mahayana (which we may translate as the way of the Bodhisattva) however, is the understanding of how we are not separate from the rest of existence, nor ever can be; from this flows our living, which is not a set of practices designed to bring about more qualities or states deemed virtuous or desirable, but simply an expression of our understanding of Dharma—that is, of the way things are. How can Enlightenment arise when we are so full of thoughts about and for self? Some Buddhist practices are ridiculous and only further entangle us in the spider-web of selfishness, from which they are supposed to liberate us! We are only making our jail more snug instead of escaping from it.

As an example of a practice gone astray there is the idea of 'making merit'. If only we could get rid of this idea! It is really a hindrance and makes us self-conscious about doing what should be done spontaneously and naturally. There is a little anecdote to illustrate this. A man once said to a centipede: “How do you manage to walk with so many legs? I have only two, but even so I have difficulty walking at times!” The centipede stopped in its tracks, unable to move, and a look of stunned surprise came upon its face; when it was eventually able to speak, it said: “I never had a problem before, and walked perfectly well without even thinking about it, but now you have asked, my legs don’t seem to work anymore! You have quite disturbed me! Why don’t you leave people alone!?”

It has been said—I forget by whom, if I ever knew, and it doesn’t matter, as he, like I, was using other people’s words to say what he wanted to say; what matters is whether or not it rings true and is supported by facts—it has been said that “no-one can sin or suffer the effects of sin alone.” This can be said of anything else we do and that happens to us. If we understand this—deeply feel it and know it to be true on a mystical or transcendental level, rather than on a merely intellectual level—it imbues us with an unshakable sense of belonging and responsibility and leads us to do what is right and good simply because we know it to be so and not from consideration of what we might get as a result, just as a tree brings forth fruit, naturally and free of pride or thought of gaining merit.

We can and should be helped on the way to realization from a very early age. Even small children are capable of understanding the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would like others to do to you. It’s not hard to understand it if we are given examples of it in daily life.

No-one likes to be abused, cheated or mistreated, but many people think little about behaving badly towards others. This is probably because we were never shown how to learn from our experiences, particularly the painful and unpleasant ones, and so there is nothing within to restrain ourselves from doing things to others that we do not like others to do to us. Take muggers and burglars, for example: would they like to be mugged, or to come home to find it ransacked and burgled? How is it that so many people seem incapable of thinking clearly? Must we always wait for others to teach or show us?

I was out with some young people in a Melbourne park one day, when we came to a shelter that was uglified with graffiti, much of it in obscene language. When I commented on it, one of the youngsters, perhaps wishing to show how cool he was about such things, said, “It’s only words”, to which I responded, “Is it? How would you feel, I wonder, if and when you have kids of your own, and one of them were to say to you: ‘Daddy, what does that word mean?’?” We all know these words, of course—how can we not?—but that doesn’t mean that we have to use them, does it? We have the power of choice and discrimination over what to do and what not to do.

We must be practical and think not just about the present but about the possible effects of our living. Even plants seem to be somewhat aware of the future, for do they not provide for it by developing elaborate devices—colors, shapes, flavors and scents—to attract insects, birds and animals (beings very different from themselves) to help them in their need to spread their pollen, spores or seeds? How has Nature produced such systems whereby bees and other insects are induced to enter flowers in search of nectar and in the process unwittingly collect pollen on themselves, which is then rubbed off on visits to other flowers, thus fertilizing them if they are of the same kind, and so ensuring the propagation and survival of the species? The plants use the insects for their own purposes, just as the insects use the plants, each getting what they want from the arrangement. Faced by such facts, dare we say that plants are not conscious and cannot think or feel? Surely, there must be some awareness in plants, a sense of the importance of living not just for themselves in the present, but of trying to pass something on (and maybe there is also some fear of not succeeding in this). And, if plants have such an awareness, it’s not surprising that humans have it in a greater degree.

Jesus is reported to have said: “Take no thought for tomorrow; sufficient to the day is the evil thereof”, but what would happen if everyone lived by such advice? We would soon starve to death, as no-one would plant anything and there would be no crops; we plant seeds to get a harvest in the future. What he meant, of course, was don’t worry about the future, as each day has enough problems of its own, without worrying about the problems of tomorrow. But, although the only time we can live is now, we really must think ahead somewhat; it would be improvident of us not to do so; moreover, worrying about something is quite different than thinking clearly about it.

So, there are three periods of Time to be considered (if we may speak of Time like that without people becoming excited and shouting, "There is no such thing as Time; it's an illusion!"): the Past, the Present and the Future. We will use these terms to illustrate a point and not as realities that everyone can and will agree upon. A seed comes from a fruit or flower, and the fruit comes from a tree. The seed, however, has the potential of giving rise to a fruit-bearing tree ("Great oaks from little acorns grow"), though for that to happen the seed must cease to exist as such, because a seed is not a tree, but only has the potential to grow into one. Likewise, although a man is—or may be—the father of a child, the child has the potential to become a father himself. And not just this, because our conundrum is speaking of only one person, not two, one person who is the same person (as a process spanning many years, over the course of which the potential becomes the actual), and also not the same, for the person has changed from child to man. According to the Law of Karma (or what we might translate loosely as the 'Law of Deeds'), whereby each person receives the results of his own actions, we are, in a sense, our own ancestors and will be our own descendants; our parents are merely the channels through which we manifest physically, but they are not totally responsible for what we become or how we live our lives. Look at old photos of yourself as a child: you have changed, and are no longer a child, and might well have children or even grandchildren of your own, but you cannot deny that the child in the photograph was you, and you can trace your life forwards from that time; there is continuity, and you are neither the same person nor different—or we might also say that you are the same and different. It is because of the continuity that we feel remorse for things we did or didn't do that we should not or should have done, and satisfaction over our positive achievements.

Perhaps some people will object to the grammatical inaccuracy of our conundrum, saying that it should be "The child will be the father of the man", as we are talking about the potential rather than the actual. Well, of course, we all know that this is correct (or might be), but were it to be stated thus, it would not arouse our interest or possibly yield some insight; in fact, it would not be a conundrum at all! Therefore, I have stated it as I heard it so long ago, and given my understanding or interpretation of it, and in doing so, have availed myself of opportunities to touch on other things.

Only the present is ours, and that is such a fine moment that we cannot even talk about it; it must be lived, wisely, if we are not to regret it later. Right now, and at any moment, all the time, we are engaged in creating our future, and the more we understand about it, the more we shall be able to make it as we want.

The Child becomes the Man.

INTOLERANCE

Countless wars have been caused by it; it gives rise to hatred and violence; untold arguments, feuds and crimes stem from it; it is so much a part of some societies, religions and political systems that it is practically an institution; it is synonymous with fanaticism and bigotry. Intolerance is one of the greatest causes of trouble in the world.

Where does it come from? It is important to know if we are to counteract it. Can we identify its source? Yes, it's simple: it comes from the idea of self. We see the world in terms of self and not-self, and thus there is always comparison: self compared with others; we feel separate from the rest of existence, unaware that we are part of it. Now, at our present stage of evolution, we probably could not live without comparing; it gives us a needed sense of security, even if it is false.

Because we are basically unsure about ourselves, we look at others to see what they are doing and how they are doing it; we then compare ourselves with that, to see if we are 'better', 'worse', or 'the same'. If we compare ourselves with people who seem to be more fortunate and better-off than us, envy might arise: 'I would like to be like them; they are so lucky!' If we compare ourselves with others who are less well-off, pride might arise: 'I am better than them'. It does not have to happen like this, of course; we could feel joy for others who are better-off than us, instead of envy; we could feel sympathy rather than pride towards those who are less well-off; we could, but seldom do.

Comparison gives rise to the idea of norms or standards —by observing how the majority of people do things, and com-paring it with the way others (the minority) do them; anyone doing things differently is regarded as 'abnormal'. But what is normal? If we studied people and things closely, we might find that there is no such thing; it is only an idea, artificial and arbitrary, and has the effect of dividing us and stifling individuality of expression. The Holy Inquisition, which was responsible for the persecution and death of millions of innocent people, was based on standards devised by a Pope of the Catholic Church, and implemented by many of his successors over a period of several centuries. (Needless to say, there was nothing holy about it; on the contrary, it was the most unholy institution ever!) Hitler's 'Final Solution' for the Jews came from his rabid desire to eliminate anyone who did not fit his notion of the 'Aryan Superman'. Nor was it only the Jews who suffered from his intolerance; gypsies, cripples, homosexuals, communists and certain artists and writers also became targets. He permitted nobody to stand in the way of achieving his vision.

We could learn to compare better than we are used to, so that prejudice might decrease and wisdom increase. You see, it usually happens when we compare ourselves with others that we allow our emotions to interfere and distort things; selfish desire and fear come in; bias and prejudice take over. We should be honest about our feelings; it's quite alright to dislike things (nobody likes everything or everyone); but we should be sufficiently mature and in control that we do not always allow our likes and dislikes to rule our lives. We should be able to examine the rationale behind our feelings, and be willing to put our preferences behind us at times, because we cannot always have what we want or like, and it wouldn't be good if we could. How spoiled and arrogant we would become if we could always gratify ourselves!

Our understanding of self and others is inaccurate; we begin with an unclear self-view that comes from comparison: I am handsome/ugly; he is ugly/handsome. I am smart/dumb; she is dumb/smart. I am good/they are bad, and so on. By what standards do we judge? Are they natural standards, valid in all times and places? Or are they just relative concepts that change? Can we establish, once and for all, in a manner that would be acceptable to everyone, what is good, bad, handsome, ugly, right, wrong, smart, dumb, etc.? Do we not all have elements of good and bad in us? If we want to, we can see good in bad and bad in good, right in wrong and wrong in right, regardless of whether or not they are there. And even the most externally-ugly person may have some beauty inside him, the most-intelligent person some flaw. A poor man may be rich in spirit, and a rich man poor; there are many ways to be rich and poor, and not just in terms of money.

Who is so perfect that he dares think of himself as the model or ideal for others? This is how intolerance arises. In their ignorance and conceit, some people think of themselves as so good, so right, that no-one else can possibly be as good or right, and should therefore become like photocopies of them. We like others to accept our standards, and some of us try to impose them on others; Christian missionaries are notorious for this in their zeal to convert others, while knowing little or nothing—or even misunderstanding—about their ways.

If we would realize and accept the fact that nature knows nothing of equality or uniformity but produces things in variety, maybe intolerance would not arise; we would feel more secure about ourselves and would more readily accept people as they are—different, unique and special—and not expect or want them to conform to our standards. It is because we are insecure in ourselves that we feel threatened by the differences of others and want them to be like us, so that we won't be alone, the thought of which terrifies us. Funny, though, because in another way, we also want to be different, and would hate to live in a society like Mao's China, where everyone dressed alike! What we really want in our confusion, we do not know.

Some years ago, I overheard some young people making fun of someone who was rather effeminate and calling him 'queer'. "Hold on a minute", I said, "before you go making fun of others in this way, you need to be sure of a few things. First, you should know that very few people want to be as they are; are you content with the way you are? Is there nothing you would change about yourself if you could? We are as we are because of circumstances and conditions, not by choice. Secondly, can you be sure that if and when you marry and have children, none of them will turn out to be like the people you make fun of now?" It caused them to think somewhat, and one of them vowed never again to make fun of others who were different from him. If only it were often so easy to explain things to others and be understood!

Right now, we may be 'alright', but because everything changes and nothing remains the same, it might happen that we become 'not alright', and how would we feel then? From what I can gather, getting married is usually a happy thing (at the time of the event and shortly after, at least, but several people, speaking with hind-sight, have informed me how lucky I am to be unmarried and advised me to remain so! I wasn't sure if they were joking or serious); it is also a tremendous gamble, and many people lose. If and when they have children there is absolutely no way to know how they will turn out; they cannot be ordered to specification.

It has been reported that, according to some statistics (though how true it is we cannot say), about 10% of the world's population is gay, or have homosexual tendencies. If it is true, it would mean that there are about 600 million gay people, male and female, in the world—an astounding figure! And every one of them has or had a mother and father; they were not brought by storks or found under bushes in the garden. Some parents blame themselves and ask what they did wrong that caused their child to become gay; but it is not the fault of the parents; there is no-one to blame; there is no pill that a woman may take—not yet, anyway—to guarantee that the child in her womb will not be gay. Being gay is something inborn, something of nature rather than nurture, because who, in their right mind, would choose to be gay, when there is just so much suffering involved? No-one would choose to be fat or ugly, would they? We do not know why or how people become gay, but it is surely not by choice; we should be quite clear about this. We may not like or understand gays, but there are good reasons to restrain ourselves from being intolerant towards them, lest it comes back to us.

No-one can prove or disprove reincarnation, but the widespread belief in it indicates we should suspend judgment and say 'maybe, maybe not' rather than 'pooh-poohing' the idea. People who claim to be able to see the continuum of past lives through to the present—mediums, clairvoyants, psychics or seers—say that arrogance, derision, scornful laughter and so on produce terrible consequences later on because of the pain caused to others thereby. How far this is true I cannot say, as I am not one of such people. But I can see that terrible things do happen in the world, and feel that it is better to restrain ourselves now than to 'eat humble pie' later if the kind of thing that we have condemned or made fun of in others happens to us or someone near and dear to us; there, but for fortune, go you and I. Life seems to have methods for correcting our shortcomings, but they are seldom painless; wouldn't it be better if we tried to correct them ourselves, and avoid the necessity of life doing it painfully?

We can look back and see that we have come here from the past, with much pain and struggle, but we cannot, with equal certainty, look into the future and see where we are going. One thing we can be certain of, however, is that we will not stay as we are now. And although you and I will grow older and eventually die, that which we are part of will continue to evolve, assisted, maybe, by something of our individual efforts during our appearance here. We pass, you and I, but the show goes on, and the players on the stage of the future might benefit from things that we are doing now. Let us live, therefore, with open arms, open minds, and open hearts.

The world awaits us.

SMOKE UNDER FIRE

THE HAZARDS OF SMOKING are no secret these days and many smokers have quit (many have died horrible deaths from it, of course); others would like to quit but find it very hard; many, while continuing to smoke, advise others not to take up this rather strange and addictive practice, but such advice often falls on deaf ears and does not prevent the cigarette-companies from recruiting new converts and making vast profits. For reasons hard to fathom, many young people still consider it cool to smoke, and willingly succumb to the pressure of their peers and the seductive cigarette-advertisements to ‘light up’.

It was a mistake, I soon realized, not to have taken a bus from Kuala Lumpur to Ipoh, instead of a share-taxi. True, the bus would also have got held up in K.L.’s increasingly-thick traffic, but would have been air-conditioned, where-as the taxi I was in, although fitted with air-conditioning, was driven with it off and the windows down, making it like an oven as we inched forward. I was in the front with the driver, and two other passengers were in the back. I tried to tolerate the torrid heat, but was soon wet with sweat, so asked the driver to turn on the air-conditioner. I didn’t quite catch what he mumbled—something about waiting until we got clear of the city and reached the highway, or maybe that it was out of order. Rather than argue, I said nothing more about this, though I suspected he was trying to economize on fuel—which is something I agree with, but within limits.

Sitting there in the jammed traffic, the passengers behind started to smoke. I objected to this, and asked the driver to tell them to desist, but he was reluctant to do so and made the excuse that it was alright since the windows were down. I maintained that it was not alright, and pointed to the NO SMOKING sign on the dashboard, saying that if he were not prepared to enforce the rule, the sign should not be displayed. He still held out, until I told him that I did not intend to pay my fare if I had to put up with smoke.

By this time, the smokers had finally realized that they were at fault and that I was not going to tolerate it, so extinguished their foul-smelling objects of dispute.

Usually, I will put up with some inconvenience rather than cause a fuss, but whenever possible, without being too rigid or fanatical about it, I will protest against smoking, because now, finally, non-smokers have the right to do so and the law on our side; we've got the smokers on the run, and should not give up now we've got this far, but should follow up on our gains.

I do not favor a total ban on smoking, as that would merely send it underground to join other harmful and illegal drugs, and give it the 'forbidden-fruit' mystique, making it more attractive, and causing more crime, which we do not need, of course. Moreover, I am an advocate of freedom of choice, and feel that if people want to ruin their health by smoking, it is up to them, especially as they know the risks; they may go ahead and smoke, as far as I'm concerned, as long as it doesn't interfere with the rights of others. To keep it within the law, but with the pressure of public disapproval increasingly applied to it, will probably have more effect in the long run than banning it outright. When smokers are shunned as stinkers, and made to feel unwelcome, it would be another reason, beyond rising costs and health considerations, for them to consider the advantages (if any) and the disadvantages (many) of their obnoxious habit. It will take a long time, needless to say, and there will be fierce opposition from vested interests—namely, the tobacco-companies, who won't give up their lucrative traffic without a fight—but in the relatively-few years since smoking has come under fire in its previously-impregnable fortress, we have made great strides; its bastions have been breached, and I am confident that we shall advance even further in the right direction.

Until quite recently, smokers held the platform, and non-smokers had no right to complain and had to suffer in silence; but now the tide has turned; the pressure is on, and I, for one, say "Hurrah!"

A judge's wife—a lady prominent in her society, and used to getting her own way—came to visit me in a place where I was staying in Malaysia. Almost as soon as she sat down, she took out a packet of cigarettes and asked if she might smoke. I replied: "I would prefer it if you didn't". She accepted this without protest and returned the packet to her purse. Someone later expressed surprise at her acquiescence, saying that no-one had ever dared refuse her anything. My response was: "Well, she asked, and I told her straight how I felt, which is my right". I didn't tell her not to smoke; nor did I tell her what I think of smoking; I merely responded to her question honestly.

I am prepared to accord other people their reasonable rights, but in this case, I will stand up for something that is not just my right, but for what is right, and for the sake of others. And I will state unequivocally that I consider smoking to be a dirty, stinking, stupid, useless, harmful and wasteful habit, with nothing positive about it at all! Apart from its harmful and often fatal effects upon health, tobacco-smoke permeates and clings to clothes, curtains, carpets and upholstery, and is difficult to eliminate. For over 400 years, since its introduction to Europe from the Americas, tobacco has been a bane. It is really something that the world would have been better off without, but it is here, and it's not going to go away.

My father was a life-long smoker, both of cigarettes and a pipe, and must have burned away a fortune (fortunately, he was not also a drinker!) I was very pleased when, after suffering several heart-attacks towards the end of his life, he was forced to give up smoking, and told him that I never thought I would see the day his pipe became cold while he was still alive! By that time, the damage has been done, however, and was irreparable; he died of emphysema.

Most parents claim that they love their children, but the fact that many parents smoke in close proximity to their young children shows that their love is not very deep and is more self-love—or self-indulgence—than love for their children. These days, no-one can plead ignorance of the mountainous proof that smoking is harmful to health, yet it is not uncommon to see parents smoking while holding little babies!! Is that love, or just gross irresponsibility? Babies are unable to complain about this themselves and demand their rights, so others must do so on their behalf.

Here is a report from a Malaysian newspaper (I neglected to jot down the actual date of the cutting, but it was sometime in August 1997) on this matter; it is headed:

6,200 children die yearly due to parents' smoking.

"CHICAGO. At least 6,200 children die each year in the United States because of their parents' smoking, killed by such things as lung infections and burns, a study says.

"More young children are killed by parental smoking than by all unintentional injuries combined", the researchers said in the July issue of the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine.

"In addition, some 5.4 million other youngsters each year survive ailments such as ear infections and asthma that are triggered by their parents' smoking, and these problems cost US$4.6 billion (RM11.5 billion) annually to treat, the researchers from the University of Wisconsin Medical School in Madison estimated.

"The study looked at reports from 1980 to 1996 involving children up to 18, existing research about the risks associated with parental smoking and the costs of treating smoking-related illnesses.

"The researchers estimated that the childhood loss of life from parental smoking costs US$8.2 billion a year, based partly on how much a child would be expected to earn over a lifetime.

"The cost analyses were conservative, because they did not include the cost of work-time lost by parents caring for sick youngsters, said Dr. Thomas E. Novotny, an epidemiologist with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

"All of these illnesses and economic costs are foisted upon children who have had absolutely no choice in the matter," said Novotny, who was not involved with the study.

"The researchers said 2,800 of the deaths were due to low birth-weight caused by mothers who smoked while pregnant.

"Low birth-weight babies are frail and vulnerable to many ills, including respiratory distress syndrome caused by second-hand tobacco-smoke. An additional 1,100 are due to respiratory infection.

"About 250 children die of burns from fires caused by cigarettes, matches or lighters. And 14 children die of asthma.

"A related study in the July issue of the Archives of General Psychiatry found that women who smoke while pregnant are more likely to give birth to boys who are diagnosed with what psychiatrists call 'conduct disorder'.

"The disorder is marked by frequent and persistent lying, fire-setting, vandalism, physical cruelty, sexual aggression or stealing that begins much earlier than typical juvenile delinquency and is much more severe.

"A team led by Benjamin B. Lahey, a psychiatrist professor at the University of Chicago, studied 177 boys aged 7 to 12 who had been referred to outpatient clinics in Pennsylvania and Georgia for possible conduct disorder.

"The team said 105 were diagnosed with the disorder."

If governments did not draw such huge revenues from the tax on tobacco, they would certainly take a stronger stance on this matter, and follow up the evidence of medical science and the high death-and-disability toll caused by smoking, and take more steps to limit the damage done. (I heard—at the time of writing this—that in Germany alone, the annual costs to the nation of the ill-effects of smoking is DM90 billion, and rising! Of course, it is the people themselves who foot the bills, not the government). Singapore, though only a tiny nation, is the leader in this direction, and plans to be the first 'smoke-free' country in the world, but the methods it employs to become so might prove counter-productive and produce a backlash; it will be interesting to observe the progress of its program. Several years ago, Singapore banned its citizens from chewing gum there, because—as in other countries—chewing-gum was found stuck all over the place—on floors, furniture, carpets, sidewalks, and even on the doors of elevators and trains—creating great problems and expense. Will Singaporeans understand and happily abide by the ban, or will some of them defy it, just to assert themselves and oppose authority, and not from any innate goodness of chewing gum? It remains to be seen. But, in this, and in any other public-spirited measure, the government of Singapore has my full support.

The various NO SMOKING signs that are now commonplace in public places are excellent ways of letting smokers know that their habit is unwelcome, and obviates the need of telling them verbally, which is sometimes embarrassing to both parties. My favorite is the one that says, courteously:

THANK YOU FOR NOT SMOKING.

PILATE'S TRIAL

[Before I begin, I would like to say that the following article might make sense only to those who are familiar with the story of Jesus and Christian history; it might be advisable for others to miss reading it].

Only now, when religion has lost its stranglehold on us and we are free to examine things, can we see that much of the world, and the West especially, has been misled and deceived by organized religion for 2,000 years. Regrettably, only a small minority avail themselves of this opportunity; many more still accept and cling to the propaganda they have been fed for so long, and rejoice in wearing their chains as if they were garlands. On the other hand, there are even more who have no interest in religion at all, and who dismiss it as old rubbish, but by doing so, they completely miss the positive side and deprive themselves of much benefit.

The ancient Egyptians are long gone, leaving pyramids, temples, tombs, desiccated mummies and fragments of papyrus to fascinate and cause us to wonder and speculate about what kind of people they were. They had a brilliant civilization, of which the West still stands in awe today.

The idea that most Westerners have of the ancient Egyptians, however (I was no exception, until I began to think about it), comes, firstly, from the Jewish-Christian Bible, where they are depicted by the Hebrews as cruel tyrants who enslaved them for 400 years and forced them to build pyramids, pylons, sphinxes and other awesome monuments, and secondly, by the movies. But have we ever tried looking at this story from the point-of-view of the Egyptians? Wouldn't it be only fair to do so, especially as their civilization was so advanced? They kept slaves, it is true, and worked them hard, no doubt, but in this they were no different from other civilizations of that time or much later—the Sumerians, Persians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Chinese, Indians and Arabs; in those days there was no concept of human-rights, and the institution of slavery was accepted and taken for granted; no-one questioned it except maybe the slaves themselves, and then only because they were slaves; had their situation been reversed, they would probably have kept slaves, too.

What I will look at here, however, are the Hebrews who, while they were slaves in Egypt, complained—understandably, of course—about their ill-treatment at the hands of the Egyptians. Were they in any way superior to the Egyptians? (We should not place too much importance on Cecil B. de Mills' sensational movie, The Ten Commandments; that is fiction). Were the Hebrews more cultured and refined, more humane and compassionate than the Egyptians? Did they learn anything from all their suffering to make them morally superior or more spiritual?

Before anyone accuses me of racism or anti-Semitism, let me say that I'm not speaking here of present-day Jews, who I have nothing at all against as a race; they are also human beings, even if Hitler and his gang did not think so. I am speaking of people who lived thousands of years ago; it has nothing to do with the Jews of our time. I do not subscribe to the biblical notion that the descendants of a man will be punished for his sins; people cannot be held responsible for what their ancestors did, unless they choose to be responsible and insist on taking the burden upon themselves. And if reincarnation is true (I am neither saying it is nor is not; I'm only saying if it is true), any or all of us, regardless of our race at present, could have been a Hebrew, an Egyptian, or a member of any other race in the past; who knows? (Should it be that we are born every time as a member of the same race or nation? The idea, which I accept, leaves no room at all for narrow ideas such as racialism or nationalism). The early Hebrews—as portrayed in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible, also known as the books of Moses, and revered by the Jews as the Torah) had no concept of an after-life, whether in heaven, hell or elsewhere; this life was all there was for them. In order, therefore, to persuade them to live cohesively and obey the laws of their tribe, their leaders convinced them that their sins would be inherited and paid for by their descendants. It was only much later that they got hold of the idea of an after-life—borrowed, in all probability, from the Babylonians during their exile in Babylon.

I am talking here about history, or what goes under that term. We have only to read the first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy)—whoever has enough time and patience to do so, (it's very hard-going and repulsive, so be warned!)—to see that the Hebrews, or the 'Children of Israel', were a savage and blood-thirsty horde! One thing we have to concede is that the Hebrews (who only much later came to be known as Jews; the name 'Jew' comes from Judah, the eldest of the 12 sons of Jacob, who the 12 tribes of Israel were named after) were quite objective—if not always accurate—in recording their history as they saw it, as they included all the debits as well as the credits, and what a lot of debits there were! (They were much more honest than the Christian writers of the New Testament, who had no qualms about deliberately falsifying their reports). They burst out of Egypt, rejoicing in their freedom after centuries of bondage, and spent some time wandering around the Sinai desert until they got their bearings (40 years is just too incredible!) Then, arriving at the land of Canaan (known to us now as the troubled 'West Bank' of the Jordan), they proceeded to slaughter and exterminate the inhabitants there (down to and including their animals, in some cases!), and justified this by claiming that their tribal-god, Jehovah, had ordered them to do so! ((While I was writing this, in Nov. 1995, news of the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of Israel had just come through; the young Jewish killer said he was acting on God's orders!)) Accounts of these atrocities and crimes like murder, rape, incest, etc., are there in the Bible for all to read. The Hebrews most definitely were not a cultured and humane people! But characters from the Old Testament—some of them murderers, thieves, rapists and liars—were presented to us as role-models in our childhood! What a basis for morality! Abraham was about to sacrifice his only son to please his blood-thirsty God, but changed his mind at the last moment and slaughtered a ram instead; he also told his wife to agree to have sex with the Pharoah of Egypt in order to save his own life, and then his God punished the Pharoah with terrible diseases, when he was not the one to blame! Joshua was Moses' right-hand man—his star-general—and perpetrated the butchery in Canaan. King David was a murderer and adulterer, subject to fits of madness and depression. And we were taught and expected to respect such people? How incongruous and strange! Stranger still is a God that demands blood-sacrifice! Why do people—how can they—continue to believe such stuff and make it the basis of their living? The fact that they can and do, when they really don't have to, is simply fantastic, and indicates a kind of schizophrenia! Are they not aware that there are far-superior alternatives?

But, so much for the ancient Hebrews. Let us move ahead some centuries to the time of Emperor Tiberius of Rome, and his governor of Palestine, Pontius Pilate.

Following the story of Jesus that can be pieced together from the four gospels (let's not question their authenticity for the moment; we do not have a great deal more to go on right now, though there is much doubt and speculation concerning it, fueled by the numerous discrepancies and errors in the New Testament), I wish to raise several questions concerning his trial and imagine what might have happened or how it happened. No doubt these questions have been raised before, but I do not recall hearing them, so I'm sure there must be many others who have never heard them.

Because Jesus had created quite a stir in Jerusalem since arriving several days earlier with his disciples, the priests of the temple had met and decided that he must be arrested and tried. Late one Thursday night, therefore, when Jesus and his disciples were praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, the temple-guards and servants of the priests came and captured him and hauled him off to the palace of Caiaphas, the High Priest, where the priests were already waiting to try him for blasphemy, the punishment for which—according to the savage law of the Jews—was death. It was a foregone conclusion. They had earlier bribed Judas, one of Jesus' chosen disciples, to betray him; they feared his growing popularity would result in an uprising against the Romans, who would then retaliate by massacring the Jews; they also feared and hated the kind of things Jesus was saying about them and their corruption, and were determined to get him put to death by one means or another. However, the Romans had suspended their authority to condemn people to death.

Caiaphas asked Jesus if it were true what people had been saying about him: that he was the King of the Jews, the awaited Messiah. Jesus answered, non-committable: “You say that I am.” The priests who were already wound up, went into a fury, and forthwith pronounced him guilty. Unable, however, to order him to be stoned to death (their preferred method; moreover, the stoning was carried out by the public rather than by a single executioner, and thus became not just a public spectacle but a public act, making everyone responsible and serving to deter others from committing the same faults), they had to appeal to the Roman governor for a final judgment. The Gospels are not very clear on what time all this took place, but we can assume it was sometime in the wee hours of Friday morning. Now, Pilate was probably an early riser, being a military man, but he would not have made haste to receive a delegation of priests (whom he despised and had little patience with anyway), until finishing his ablutions and breaking his fast at his usual leisurely pace, so it would have been well-past sunrise when they were finally shown into his presence.

Pilate would have been well-educated and urbane by the standards of his time. He had been sent from Rome to keep order in that troublesome province, and had his headquarters in Jerusalem. He probably had no religious bias, but we can imagine that he had little sympathy with the Jewish priests, who were generally self-righteous bigots (at least, this is the impression we get of them from the Bible, which is the account we are following here). But protocol required that he hear their complaints, as they had quite a lot of power in their community and could cause trouble. He could no doubt see that they were worked-up about the person they had brought bound into his presence, but must have been somewhat amused to hear the charges made against him: that he claimed to be the Son of God, which was blasphemy under Jewish law and carried the death-penalty. The term ‘Son of God’, would have meant little to Pilate, and he would see it as insufficient reason to put a man to death, and though he was concerned with maintaining order in the province, he was not a cruel man. (The Romans ruled with a firm hand, it is true, but they were generally more cultured and just than the peoples they ruled). Questioning Jesus, Pilate was convinced he was innocent of the charges made against him; probably he thought he was just another religious nut, a little soft in the head, perhaps, but otherwise harmless. Maybe, at this stage, Pilate did not take the matter seriously and wanted to be finished with it, so, upon learning that Jesus was from that part of Palestine called Galilee, over which King Herod had jurisdiction, he saw a way out. "Take him to Herod!" he said; "He's his responsibility, not mine! Let him decide what to do with this fellow!"

So, Jesus was brought to Herod, Judea's puppet-king, who was residing in his Jerusalem palace at that time. He had heard of this 'miracle-worker' and was curious about him, but likewise did not regard him as dangerous. When he inquired about his miracles Jesus refused to answer, and Herod, unimpressed, sent him back to Pilate without a verdict.

This put Pilate into a deeper dilemma than before. The tempo of the drama was increasing, the priests insisting on Jesus' crucifixion. Pilate questioned him again, and asked him if he were a king. Jesus answered: "You say I am. I came here to bear witness to the truth." Pilate said: "What is truth? Is it some unchanging law? We all have truths; is mine the same as yours?" Jesus remained silent on this. Pilate again found him innocent of any offense. In an attempt to appease the priests and the people outside who were howling for the death of Jesus, however, Pilate ordered Jesus to be flogged, thinking that they might then agree to let him go. It did not work; although Jesus was savagely flogged, the priests would not give up their prey. No doubt they could see that Pilate wanted to release Jesus, and to prevent this, they resorted to blackmail, turning what had been until then a religious affair into a political matter—something very serious in the eyes of the Romans. The priests probably knew that Pilate had obtained his office through the influence of Sejanus, the commander of the Praetorian Guard, who had since been executed for treason in Rome. Pilate was therefore in a rather precarious position and could not afford any adverse reports about him to reach the ears of the Emperor. The priests understood this and exploited it, saying that he would not be considered a friend of Rome if he did not order the execution of Jesus on grounds of sedition. Cunning priests! Pilate was cornered!

But he still had one last hope of saving Jesus: that day marked the beginning of the Feast of the Pass-over—the Jewish celebration of the liberation from bondage in Egypt—and as a conciliatory gesture, it was a custom of the Romans to release a prisoner that day on the choice of the people. Now, at that time, there was a notorious criminal named Barabbas in jail, and Pilate thought they would not want him to be released, but when he asked the crowd outside who they wished to be freed—Jesus or Barabbas—they called for Barabbas as they had been told (or bribed) to do (the priests had assembled the crowd and instructed them to shout loudly for the execution of Jesus and drown out any calls for his release). Exasperated by the intransigence of the priests, and realizing there was nothing more he could do for Jesus (especially as he showed little interest in defending himself against the charges), Pilate called for water to wash his hands, saying: "I am innocent of this man's blood", and turned Jesus over to be crucified. Things had moved quickly; all this had taken place within a few hours in the morning; it was still only about noon.

It would take a whole book to tell and examine this story in detail, and even then it would not be conclusive; so many books have been written about it and still there is confusion and dispute; little has been resolved. My purpose in telling it like this here is to show how Pilate tried hard to save Jesus, and to raise a few questions about things that many people have overlooked or maybe have not even thought about.

You see, we have been so influenced by Hollywood that it seldom occurs to us to ask what language the trial might have been held in. All the movie-characters speak the same language, but the reality would have been quite different. Jesus and Pilate probably could not communicate directly with each other. It is hardly likely that Pilate spoke Hebrew or Aramaic, or Jesus Latin or Greek. Obviously, a translator would have been used, and translation—as many of us know—is often inaccurate. This is the point at which I would like to ask my questions, which I consider quite relevant: Who reported the procedure of the trial? How did the writers of the gospels get their 'information' about it? None of the disciples were present, as they had all abandoned him and fled. The priests who had accused Jesus were also not present, but were waiting outside in an anteroom, afraid of becoming defiled—the bigots—from being in a Roman house. Were the proceedings of the trial recorded by a scribe? If so, might he, or the translator, have later reported what went on, and did he do it accurately? Jesus himself had no time to tell his followers about it, as he was led away for execution immediately afterwards. And Pilate, as far as we know, did not write about it (what if there turned out to be a 'Gospel according to Pilate'—a report from his point-of-view? It would make interesting reading, no?) We will probably never know the answers, but I feel satisfied in having been able to raise these questions; they might cause a few people to think a bit more about something that is very doubtful. It has long been in my mind to write about Pilate, and I am happy that I have finally done so. But my line of inquiry concerning him does not end here. There is a little more.

Jesus was taken from Pilate's palace to be crucified outside the city-walls, dragging his cross as he was led along. By this time, it must have been well-past noon, and it was Friday, the last working day of the Jewish week. Sabbath began at sunset that day, and all work then had to cease for 24 hours; it was considered a serious crime deserving severe punishment to work on the Sabbath Day. All business had to be settled before sunset.

Jesus was crucified, together with two criminals. Normally, death by crucifixion was a lingering and painful affair—and meant to be—lasting for several days; victims died from exhaustion rather than loss of blood. While hanging there, nailed through his wrists and feet, Jesus called out that he was thirsty. Someone stepped forward with a sponge atop a long stick and held it up to Jesus' lips so that he might drink from it. The gospel-writers say the sponge was soaked in vinegar or bitter wine, but it might have contained a drug that caused Jesus soon after to fall into a state so resembling death that it was thought he had died.

Quickly, some of his followers went to ask Pilate to allow the body to be taken down for burial before sunset. Pilate was astonished, and cried: "What! Is he dead so soon?! How can it be?" Calling the captain of the execution-squad, he was told that it was really so. He then ordered the body to be taken down and given to his followers for burial. Maybe he suspected that Jesus was not dead, and at this late stage, still hoped to save him. "He’s a deluded but harmless fool", he might have thought, "Let him go, if he still lives. The priests can’t complain he wasn’t crucified; they got what they wanted on that score. Let him escape, if he can; hopefully he’ll just disappear and won’t be heard of again". He also ordered that the legs of the criminals crucified along with Jesus be broken, so they would die faster and could also be taken down before the Sabbath began; because Jesus was thought to be dead already, his legs were not ordered broken.

Before taking Jesus down from the cross, however, a soldier pierced his right side with a spear, though why he did so we can only guess. If he had wanted to make sure that Jesus was dead, he would have thrust the spear through his heart; Roman soldiers were trained to kill; they knew very well which side of the body the heart was on; it was not a mistake, and was not intended to be a fatal blow.

What really happened to Jesus, no-one knows, and because of this, he is without doubt, the most-controversial person the world has ever known, and the uncertainty regarding him has caused so much trouble that a little bit of honest doubt might have prevented. There are no grounds at all for the implausible notion that he ‘rose from the dead’. It is likely that he wasn’t dead when he was taken down from the cross, and was revived later, as he is said to have appeared to his disciples several times afterwards, and they did not recognize him at first—their master! They did not recognize him for the simple reason that he had disguised himself to avoid detection by the priests, who were certainly skeptical of the report of his early death. If he had ‘risen from the dead’, he would have been beyond death and have no reason to fear it or disguise himself. We have not been told the truth—no, more: we have been deliberately deceived and misled!—for two thousand years. Why? To perpetuate a myth concocted by deluded and power-hungry people; it was all a matter of politics. We have not been shown the real Jesus, but have been left to discover him for ourselves, if this is at all possible.

There is now a rumor circulating that the Shroud of Turin was not a fake, as it was pronounced to be several years ago, but exactly what it was first claimed to be: the shroud that Jesus was wrapped in after he was taken down from the cross. The Vatican was in a very difficult situation and preferred to have it labeled a fake—was most anxious to have it declared a fake—because of what it revealed: that the person wrapped in it wasn't dead, but still living and bleeding! Dead bodies don't bleed; the blood clots upon death and ceases to flow.

Moreover, at the time when this shroud and the stains on it was supposed to have been 'manufactured', about 800 years ago, crucifixion had long gone out of style, and people believed that victims were nailed to the cross through their palms. That, however, wouldn't have been the case, as the flesh of the palms would not have borne the victim's weight for long and would soon have torn through. The Shroud shows that the victim had been nailed through the wrists, something that forgers of the 12th century would not have been aware of, as the Church had taught for centuries that Jesus was nailed through the palms (the paintings of that period and later all show the prevailing belief), and there are cases recorded of fervent Christians developing 'holy stigmata' like the wounds of Jesus, through long contemplation of the nail-marks on his palms and feet; the belief that he was nailed through the palms was so strong!

But if this second and more-objective claim for the authenticity of the Shroud is true, how do we account for the carbon-dating tests that were carried out on it that proved it was a forgery? Simple: the Vatican was not going to allow its very foundations to be undermined by the discovery that the body the shroud had contained was that of a living man rather than a dead one; there are clever and ruthless people in the Vatican who must have known this; they are not so stupid as to turn over evidence that would destroy them. A piece of another relic—the Vatican is full of relics—was given to the scientists, who must have momentarily lost their healthy skepticism and took it to be the genuine article; the whole precious shroud would not have been given into the hands of such sacrilegious people, who more than likely had doubts about its authenticity from the start. Were the scientists who carried out the tests on the fragment of cloth they had been given absolutely sure that it was from the Shroud and not from another old piece of cloth? Again, I must reiterate here that this is just a rumor that might or might not be true; I do not know. As far as I am concerned, though, the very basis of Christianity rests upon a rumor, and one that is not at all convincing! Resurrection from the dead: hard to disprove, but the onus of proof rests with those who claim it to be so, not with those who don't. Even though it is only a rumor in place of another rumor, if it causes us to doubt the first rumor—which is far more implausible than the second—it will have served some purpose. If I had to choose between the word of a scientist and the word of the Vatican, however, I would not long hesitate, as the scientist, true to the methods of his discipline, would support his thesis with evidence, whereas the Vatican relies upon belief and threats of punishment. Galileo was a scientist, and the Vatican has finally had to back down over the stand it took against him; very hard for the 'infallible' Vatican to admit to making mistakes! There is room for honest doubt; belief must be put to the test.

History—which was Christian history, of course—has not been kind to Pilate and held him to be a tyrant, when this was not so. Convinced that Jesus was not guilty of the charges against him, he tried hard to save him, but did not succeed. Since then, Pilate has been on trial, but he also was innocent of the charges made against him. I cannot imagine Jesus holding any hard feelings towards Pilate, when on the cross, he forgave his executioners. Pilate was the most just of all the people involved with Jesus' last days.

GREEN DHARMA

FRIEND OF MINE recently visited Tibet, and among the human-rights abuses and other shocking things she saw there was the great number of trucks loaded with huge logs being driven towards China; she counted over 400 in just one day; the narrow roads were clogged with them! The occupation forces of China are raping and pillaging Tibet of its natural resources, and cutting down the forests in the east of that tragic land at an alarming rate, with the result that the states of western China to the east of Tibet, where the mighty Yangtse River has its source, are undergoing disastrous floods, as are Nepal, Bangladesh and the eastern states of India. For the sake of immediate profit, Tibet's ancient forests are being systematically destroyed, with no consideration of the long-term effects. When forests are destroyed, the soil no longer holds water and is easily eroded; landslides and floods then follow.

Tibetans always respected nature, and were mindful of the importance of conservation, felling trees only with the greatest reluctance. But with their land now occupied and controlled by a brutal and repressive force, they are unable to do anything to prevent the destruction. As settlers from China stream in, the Tibetans are rapidly becoming a minority in their own land, and for the sake of harmonious relations with China, the governments of the world keep quiet.

My travels have taken me through several deserts, where the land is dry and barren, and almost nothing grows. I was struck with the desolation of such deserts, as some of them were once fertile lands. Now, the few people who inhabit them manage to eke out a precarious living. I am not eager to join them there; I prefer green to brown.

At the time of the Buddha, the Indian subcontinent was not densely populated and much of it was forested. But now, because of the immense population, most of the forests are gone, leaving large areas of scrub-land

and increasing desert. Attempts at reforestation have had little success, as trees are cut down for fuel and building purposes before they can grow to maturity—cut down without being replaced. It is hard to educate poor people about the necessity to think of the future when survival in the present occupies their minds.

How many Buddhists have noticed how trees played a part in the Buddha's life, I wonder? Prince Siddhartha was born under a sala tree; later, when he was a boy, and was taken to the Spring Ploughing Festival, he sat meditating beneath a jambu (rose-apple) tree; at the age of 35, he became Enlightened under the bodhi—a kind of fig—tree; He gave His first sermon beneath a tree in the Deer Park; and He passed away under some sala trees. Did trees contribute anything to the special events in His life, apart from providing shade, or was it a concession—on the part of those who later narrated the Buddha's life-story—to the widespread Animism or nature-worship of that time, a way of winning people over to Buddhism? Until today, shrines at the base of trees are a common sight in India.

The books say that, after His Enlightenment, the Buddha stood for a week in the same spot, gazing at the tree under which He attained Enlightenment, as a way of showing respect for the shelter it had provided Him. It is a little hard to imagine someone standing in one spot for a week, without moving, and we might be forgiven for doubting it, but we should consider the implication of the story: what is it trying to convey?

Almost all the events of the Buddha's life-story—even the most trivial—may be seen as having some relevance to us. We can see the role of trees in the story as encouraging us to understand their vital importance to us; we have been far too profligate with trees, cutting them down willy-nilly, without bothering to replace them. The underlying ideas of Animism are worthy of consideration rather than being regarded as superstitions of primitive hill-tribes and jungle-folk: the belief that rocks, trees, mountains, rivers and so on are the homes of spirits, and should therefore be treated with respect; it's not a bad idea at all, and far superior to the long-held notion that nature is there to be exploited for whatever we can get from it, without thinking of the future or of what we can—and should—put back. The biblical notion that God gave man the right to use nature as he likes is totally unacceptable today; we are being forced to realize that the Earth doesn't belong to us, but that, as the most-intelligent species on the planet (though one sometimes wonders about that), we are only the custodians of it and should take care of it and pass it on in good condition to those who come after us. Unfortunately, now that we are starting to understand this, we find it is rather late; we have inherited a global garbage-dump from those who went before us, and have contributed to it ourselves.

The 21st century is almost here, but although tremendously advanced technologically, in some ways we are quite backwards. I have just read a newspaper article entitled Belief in Devil High. Since it is very short, I will quote it in full here:

"NEW YORK, Nov. 5, 1995: Two out of three Americans believe in the existence of Satan, with 85% of the evangelical Protestants taking that position, a Newsweek magazine poll showed on Saturday.

"More than one out of three people polled—37%—said they had been tempted by the Devil while 61% of the evangelical Protestants said they had, according to the magazine. Among the general population, 27% said they did not believe in Satan, while only 13% of the evangelical Protestants did not.

"The poll, conducted July 27-28 by Princeton Research Associates, reached 752 people including 209 evangelical Protestants. The margin of error was 4 percentage points for the entire group and eight points for the evangelicals.

"The poll asked whether certain things were caused by the Devil. The answers—with the general-public figures first and evangelical Protestants second—ranged from crime (36%/59%) and pornography (34%/62%), to feminism (12%/20%), famine in Africa (16%/26%) and the homosexual-rights movement (21%/43%).”

The USA is considered the foremost example of a developed country and taken as a role-model by millions of people world-wide, though it is hard to understand why; it is a greatly-imbalanced society, and one to be learned from rather than emulated. Such a belief as outlined above indicates a desire to shirk responsibility for one’s own life and to blame others—be it only an imaginary Devil—and is reminiscent of the Middle Ages, when it was widely-believed that disease was caused by demons, or the evil-eye cast by witches; combined with poor hygiene and non-existent sanitation, such ignorance allowed plague and other epidemics to rage unchecked. That myth was dispelled by the advent of modern medicine and the discovery of viruses, microbes and bacteria, etc.; these days, no reasonably-intelligent person believes that disease is caused by demons or witches.

So as not to appear one-sided, I will reproduce something from Singapore’s Straits Times of 3rd of November 1997:

“HONG KONG: An elderly Hong Kong woman was left in a ditch for two days because superstitious passers-by refused to call emergency services on the unlucky number 999, reports said yesterday.

“The 73-year-old woman slipped into the drain late on Thursday in Kowloon, one of the busiest and most densely populated areas in the world, and was only rescued on Saturday when another elderly woman called the police after hearing about her plight from some of those who had seen her.

“Most people do not like to call 999 except for extreme emergencies because Chinese people do not like to mention this number," a police spokesman told the Sunday Morning Post.

“It is because of superstition. It is an unlucky number."

"The woman, whose husband had reported her missing, suffered bruising to her forehead and right knee but was otherwise unscathed, the reports said.

“She is thought to have fallen into the large dry drain while she was walking home.

"Social commentators expressed shock at the callous attitudes of those who ignored her plight.

"My God, I cannot accept that. Every time I hear about these sad stories of our senior citizens I feel extremely sad and ashamed of Hong Kong people", said the director of the Society for Community Organization at Ho Hei Wah."

Einstein, through his research and ponderings, came very near to the Buddha's Way, and wrote: "*The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God, and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense of all things, natural and spiritual, as a meaningful unity.*"

Buddhism has always emphasized that we are part of the world around us, rather than separate from it; it teaches us to consider the rights and feelings of all living things, and not just humans (and certainly not just the feelings of people of our own religion or sect!) As a world-view, it is complete, leaving out or disregarding nothing. Nor is it only living things we should consider, but everything, for, in reality, nothing is dead or not-living! The Way of the Buddha may be compared to the footprint of an elephant: the footprints of all other animals—including man—can fit into it and there will still be space to spare; really, it is a green philosophy, symbolized in the Mahayana vow of the Bodhisattva not to enter Final Nirvana until the last blade of grass has become Enlightened.

We should not take this literally, of course, but figuratively; grass cannot be enlightened! But a thing doesn't have to be true to be effective and good; whoever believes that the animals of Aesop's Fables or the Jataka Tales could talk? We all know that such tales are not literally true, but are means of conveying a message or lesson. What is important about the Bodhisattva vow is the aspiration: to see so far beyond oneself that even a lowly blade of grass is not outside one's concern.

We should always beware of literal interpretations; a prime example is how countless Christians (though not all) have misunderstood Jesus's words at the Last Supper about the bread and wine: he was only speaking symbolically, and meant that his disciples should remember him whenever they ate and drank—that is: often. Instead of this, a fantastic notion arose (called The Doctrine of Trans-substantiation) whereby the consecrated bread and wine of the mass was actually believed to become the flesh and blood of Jesus, making it nothing more or less than ritualistic cannibalism! Jesus would be quite amazed at how much he was misunderstood! On several occasions, he threw up his hands in despair of his disciples ever understanding him—and not without good reason, too! If only he could see what became of his teachings!

But, back to the position of trees in Buddhism: many people have misunderstood and become tree-worshippers. The meaning, surely, is that we should show respect to all trees, and not just the kind of tree under which the Buddha was sitting when He became Enlightened. We can sit under only one tree at a time, not two or more; if He had been sitting under a gum-tree or an oak-tree when He became Enlightened, we would now be paying respect to that instead of a type of fig-tree! His Enlightenment had nothing to do with the tree He was sitting under! Any tree might be a bodhi tree!

FREE TIBET!

REFUTATION

Some time ago, I came across a little booklet that had been written with the stated purpose of "analyzing and studying straightforwardly" the question of vegetarianism from a Buddhist point-of-view, but which soon turned into a vicious attack from a sectarian angle. I have written about vegetarianism several times before, but I feel I must do so again, in order to try to counteract such blatant prejudice.

The word 'vegetarianism' is regrettably awkward, as it implies an 'ism', like a religion, rather than something one undertakes or observes voluntarily, from the understanding that it is the right thing to do; however, we do not have a better word at this time, so we will continue to use it here.

Before I begin, perhaps it would be helpful to explain—for those who are not aware of it—that some monks (and some lay-people, too)—mainly those of the Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese forms of Mahayana Buddhism—are vegetarians, while others—mainly of the Theravada school, but also the Tibetans—are not. This has long been a point of controversy and even contention among Buddhists, with some blaming others for lack of compassion, and others insisting that the Buddha did not consider vegetarianism important, and even ate meat Himself! Both parties quote scripture to support their stand-points.

To respond to the above-mentioned booklet in full would require another book, which might become boring, so I don't intend to. The title is: Issues of Vegetarianism: ARE YOU HERBIVORE OR CARNIVORE? by Jan Sanjivaputta of Indonesia. For those who are interested, and who might obtain a copy, it was reprinted for free distribution by W.A.V.E. in Kuala Lumpur; it is worth reading, if only to see how other people think.

The Preface contains the words: "After considering the background, objective, practice, effectiveness and validity of Vegetarianism discussed in this writing, Buddhists should be able to find a method of settlement which is wise and based on the Dhamma." The writer clearly has a conclusion already in mind, and we find it at the end of the book, thus: "A fool likes to raise frivolous questions and be choosy about what kind of food is to be eaten, whilst a wise man is more attentive and considers how the food should be eaten mindfully, without arousing mental defilement." Well, it's easy to call other people fools and consider oneself wise, but it is hardly wise to do so; moreover, it should be borne in mind that, just as Compassion should be balanced by Wisdom to prevent it becoming emotional and misguided, so wisdom should be offset by Compassion to prevent it becoming cold, heartless and merely a thing of the head.

Perhaps I am biased, as a vegetarian myself, because I think that becoming so is the logical thing for someone aspiring to the Buddha's Way, and I will explain why I think so, without quoting scripture to support me. As I have stated elsewhere, I feel that religion should rest upon reality—that is, not based upon belief, but upon things we can verify for ourselves, upon things that form part of our experience of life. Let us—for the time being—leave aside what the Buddha is reported to have said or not said about vegetarianism, and whether He ate meat or not; I do not accept, wholesale, all that is written in the scriptures, because I want to find out, for myself, instead of merely believing or following. It is not a condition, when we become Buddhists, that we must believe certain things; there are no articles of faith—as in other religions—that we must subscribe to and accept. The Buddha's way is not an end in itself, but a means to an end; it is not something magical, like 'Open Sesame' or 'Abracadabra', the mere uttering of which—it is hoped—will bring about miraculous results, but something to be tested, and which helps us to understand reality in the Here and Now. The Buddha expected us to think for ourselves and to test His teachings in the crucible of daily life, not to become His slaves and mindlessly repeat everything He said, word for word.

Let us look at this problem—and it is a problem, a big problem, for the animals—by the essence of the Buddha's teachings—that is, in terms of Cause-and-Effect. We can all see, for example— without believing— that animals are being slaughtered in great numbers now, not 2,500 years ago; people do not eat ancient meat! And why are they being slaughtered? This also we can see, without belief and without referring to the scriptures: they are slaughtered for their flesh. And what is their flesh for? We can see this, too: the flesh of the slaughtered animals is for eating. And who eats the flesh of these slaughtered animals? Not me, because I decided to abstain from eating meat as a protest against killing. I am not boasting here; I do not think that abstaining from eating meat will make me pure or enlightened; it is not as easy as that (if only it were!)

By putting it this way, I do not mean to be flippant but merely to point out how clear and undeniable the process is. The animals are killed for those who eat their meat; how can we avoid this fact? It's no use trying to hide behind the old excuse that, "Well, I don't kill the animals; I only buy the meat from the butcher", or "I only eat what is offered to me." That is like trying to hide behind a chop-stick, and convinces no-one! Ask the butcher why he kills and he will tell you, quite honestly, that he does so in order to sell the meat, as that is the way he earns his living. Tell him that, according to the Buddha, butchery is wrong livelihood, as it causes pain to the animals: do you think he would change his work? Could we persuade all the butchers in the world to give up killing? Of course not, but just suppose it happened, and there was no meat for sale: people would not be able to buy or eat meat unless they killed the animals, fish or fowl themselves. They are able to do so only because butchers kill animals; but the butchers kill the animals only because people buy and eat meat; the chain of causation here is very clear, except, perhaps, to those who don't want to see it and always look for excuses to go on eating meat. The fact that Sanjivaputta writes so vehemently against vegetarianism indicates that, deep inside him, he has some doubts about it; maybe he feels guilty about eating meat and seeks to cover it up. He talks about compassion in a distorted way, and says we can feel compassion only for living animals but not for meat, which is no longer living! "Whether its meat is eaten or not," he says, "the animal has already died, and will not come to life again. The underlying objective of all the Buddha's teachings is to relieve oneself and other creatures from the suffering which is being or will be experienced, not the 'suffering which has passed', for past suffering cannot be altered." Doesn't he know how meat comes to be not-living? Is he so naïve?! He says the animals have already died, but this is not so; they have been killed! Would he eat the flesh of animals that had died naturally? He says the approach of the Theravadins—assuming that all Theravadins are meat-eaters, like himself, which is not true; Venerable Narada, a foremost and famous Theravadin monk, was a very strict vegetarian—is more effective in reducing the killing of living things than merely abstaining from eating meat, as they—the Theravadins—exhort people not to kill. "... the lives of animals can be saved not by forbidding the eating of their meat or considering their meat as dirty, but by referring to the value of life, and fighting for the basic rights of animals. There is no doubt that the way taken by Theravada to overcome the dilemma of animal slaughter may be stated as a direct method of solution. This is totally different from the method proposed and adopted by the vegetarians, which may be considered as an unfruitful method, a 'seeming salvation' of animal life." What strange logic! He assumes that vegetarians do not explain to others the real reason for their being vegetarian, or that they do it only for their own 'merit' and not from concern for the animals. But in this, he gravely errs. He says, "The effective way to reduce the killing of animals is to provide the people with information about the Dhamma. It is only in this way that they can really understand that the value of life is important for all beings, including animals."

To denounce killing, and exhort people to feel compassion, but at the same time to eat meat, is hardly likely to convince anyone. Theravada has been the dominant form of Buddhism in Thailand for almost a thousand years, but it has not had the effect of helping people there to respect life to the point of not killing animals and birds; the trade in endangered animals and their skins in Thailand is well-known and of great concern to Wildlife organizations; outsiders looking on must get a very negative impression of Buddhism from Thailand. There are about 300,000 monks there, and most of them eat meat. Many innocent animals would be spared every day if the monks there decided to tell the people not to offer them meat or fish! And, before anyone comes up with the old objection to this, saying that a monk is not allowed to be choosy and say "I like this; I don't like that," but must accept whatever is offered to him provided he does not see, hear or suspect that the animal has been killed especially for him, let me say that, if the monks requested people to offer them only vegetarian food, they would not be asking for themselves, but for the sake of the animals, for animal rights. Buddhism there would become much more alive and dynamic than it is; at present, it seems that—as far as the average Thai Buddhist is concerned—it is little more than a thing of tradition and not meant to be understood and lived by. Buddha-images there are of far greater importance than trying to understand and live by the Dharma. How sad that this great spiritual way has become largely a matter of idolatry and superstition!

The correct way to look at the subject of vegetarianism is from the point-of-view of the animals, as they are the ones who are being bred and killed for their flesh. We cannot bring the slaughtered animals back to life, it is true, but can think about and understand why they were slaughtered in the first place, and do something to prevent others being slaughtered in the future; we are concerned about the living.

Buddhism is quite unlike Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It does not hold that animals were created for our use, but teaches respect for the rights and feelings of all living things. Ask the animals what they think about it; what do you think they would say?

Unwilling to accept the obvious, some people might still argue: “But humans have always eaten meat; it’s natural for us; moreover, most animals eat meat, too—stronger animals eat weaker animals, big fish eat small. This being so, why shouldn’t we eat them?” Reasoning like this reduces us to the level of the animals and we would have no choice but to follow the law of the jungle: Kill or be killed. Although humans are animals, we are a higher kind of animal than the others. A tiger must kill and eat meat in order to survive; it could not suddenly decide: "I've had enough of killing and eating meat; it's time for me to become vegetarian." It kills in order to eat, but we cannot say it is evil because of that, as it has no choice. Only when we have the power of choice does the question of good and evil arise.

Humans have that power; had we not, there would be no possibility or purpose of trying to follow a spiritual way. As far as we know, animals cannot empathize with humans; they do not have this capacity, or not much, anyway. We, however, can empathize with and feel compassion towards animals; we can identify with them, and have therefore a greater responsibility than animals, and much more opportunity to grow and develop; animals live by nature and evolve slowly; we humans went against nature millions of years ago, and took our development into our own hands rather than waiting for the slow process of evolution to guide our steps (the fact that you are reading what I have written is a sign—just one of countless—that we have gone against nature). And even though, through ignorance, we have made lots of mistakes and brought our planet and everything on it to the brink of disaster, we are able to think about this, too, and hopefully will be able to correct it before it's too late. So, unless we are willing to live like animals and abandon our human progress in totality, we cannot use nature as an excuse for eating meat.

It is true—as Sanjivaputta says—that it would be hard to find any food that somewhere along the line has not involved the deaths of living beings, but this does not invalidate vegetarianism, as he appears to hope for; it is not a matter of all or nothing. Clearly, he thinks that all vegetarians are concerned only about themselves—their health, purity, merit, etc., things that might motivate him, but which are not—or should not be—a Buddhist's reason for being vegetarian. A sincere Buddhist observes the effects of his actions upon others, and if he realizes that they cause pain, he tries to refrain from them. If he cannot completely succeed in this—and he cannot, of course, simply because being alive becomes the occasion of pain to others in one way or another—he tries to lessen and minimize the pain he inadvertently causes; he tries to cause as little pain as possible as he passes through the world. But he is not dismayed or deterred by the fact that he cannot completely succeed, and will not say to himself: "There's no point in even trying." And if, unknown to him, there is meat or fish in the food that someone offers him, he will not castigate himself or lose any sleep over the matter as he knows the meaning of the words of Jesus: "It is not what goes into a man that makes him impure, but that which comes out of him;" he doesn't think he has committed a sin and rush off to the nearest 'sacred river' to purify himself and pray to the gods for forgiveness. He does not think of meat as 'impure'—like the brahmins of India—but of the way flesh becomes meat: the slaughter of the animals and the pain and terror involved. He knows that all beings desire happiness and do not want to suffer, just like he himself. He sees himself in others and others in himself, and knows that the pain of one is the pain of all, and vice versa; we are interconnected and do not live alone, by and for ourselves; it is simply impossible to do so. The vegetarianism of Mahayana Buddhism is based upon the Bodhisattva ideal, and is not for oneself but for others. Later on, long after vegetarianism—or any other practice, for that matter—has ceased to be a practice and become just a spontaneous expression of one's understanding, one will not think in terms of 'self and others'.

Often, in the West or in countries like Malaysia and Singapore, when there is a large gathering of Buddhists of different sects, the printed programs contain words like: "A vegetarian lunch will be served," thereby making it acceptable to all; anyone may eat vegetarian food, regardless of their religious affiliations. The late Venerable Hong Choon of Singapore used to host meetings of the Inter-Religious Council at his temple, where everyone—no matter what or why their dietary restrictions—could eat freely the vegetarian food; Hindus had no fear that the food might contain beef, nor Muslims or Jews that it might contain pork; vegetarian food unites where other food divides.

Sanjivaputta raises the issue of "artificial meat, made of wheat-flour kneaded with other ingredients in such a way that its taste, texture and smell are exactly the same as real meat —even a cook would have difficulties in differentiating the artificial from the real meat." He finds this incongruous, and goes on to say: "Many questions should be asked of the vegetarians who are interested in and have an appetite for such artificial meat. How does the idea and practice of artificial meat production relate in terms of religion? If the eaten food is artificial meat, is the attained purity also not artificial purity? Is such a practice not just the same as an effort to cleanse one mental stain by giving rise to another mental stain which is more loathsome? Furthermore, can this not be considered extreme hypocrisy?" Again, he reveals his misunderstanding by his conviction that vegetarianism is undertaken for the sake of personal purity. He is right, however, in saying that purity is not so easily attained; if it were, then cows, horses, buffaloes, sheep, rhinoceroses, elephants, buffaloes and other herbivores would all have haloes around their heads! But personal purity—or gain of any kind for self—is not the motive behind vegetarianism, as I have tried to show. The purpose of artificial meat is to meet people half-way, so to speak, and gradually wean them from eating meat; for many people, to change abruptly from a meat-based diet to a vegetarian diet would be too much of a shock to their system; some people can do it, but most would find it too hard. I admit, however, that I feel uneasy about such food, and prefer vegetables as vegetables or flour as bread rather than disguised as meat.

Maybe as a way of being at peace with their eating of meat, some monks say that when they finally reach enlightenment, they will remember and assist those animals whose flesh they have eaten to also become enlightened, but I find this argument not worth considering. Does it mean they will help only those beings whose flesh they have lived on, and not others? Is their compassion so conditional? And how do they propose to find those animals in the future, anyway, even supposing they do become enlightened, which is not sure? This is merely an excuse—and a very transparent excuse at that; they are fooling no-one except themselves. Would it not be better to abstain from eating meat instead of trying to rationalize it, particularly in places like India, where it is not difficult to get vegetarian food?

There are—it is true—several misconceptions about vegetarianism. Some people seem to think that vegetarians must be free from diseases like cancer, heart-disease or diabetes, but this is not so; they are also susceptible to such diseases, though maybe not to the extent that meat-eaters are. There is also the widespread belief that just because a person is vegetarian, he must therefore be more spiritually developed than non-vegetarians, with less 'fire' and passion in his blood, but this is also not necessarily so. Vegetarianism does not make a person good, because he has done nothing good thereby; he has merely abstained from eating meat as a protest against killing. It is a not-doing rather than a doing, even though it has a positive effect. Hitler was a vegetarian, but it did not make him good, and any positive effects from it in his case were completely nullified by the evil of his life.

An Australian monk named Dhammika, who I met in Singapore some years ago, once told me that when he was walking down a street in Macau, he passed a slaughter-house, and the anguished cries of the animals therein so moved him that he decided to become vegetarian, which he had not hitherto been. The animals spoke Dharma to him and he responded!

On the other hand, I was once told of a high-ranking and well-known Tibetan lama who, while on a visit to Melbourne, was taken for dinner in a restaurant, where he ordered steak; the steak was not cooked according to his liking, however, so he had it taken away and another one brought. Not only was this wasteful, but it showed a complete lack of regard for the animal from whom the steak had come. The fact that it was reported to me indicated what the reporter thought of this.

A Malaysian disciple of the same lama ('lama' means 'teacher', not 'monk'; a layman may be a lama as well as a monk), sharply asked a vegetarian, as if she had done something wrong: "What for is your vegetarianism? It won't make you holy, you know!" The young woman never imagined that it would make her holy. That was his mistake!

To sum up: I stand with the animals on this issue, and would like to reiterate that it should be seen from their point-of-view—objectively, not subjectively—rather than ours, as it is they who are being killed for their flesh. It is a matter of Here-and-Now, a case of what is right rather than who is right. We do not need the flesh and blood of animals in order to live; they do!

N.B. In June 1997, I went to Indonesia, where I was told that Sanjivaputta is a monk—a Theravada monk—who stirred up such strong feelings in his homeland by his book that he is now living in virtual exile in Bangkok. Not only this, but apparently he used to be a vegetarian himself.

SCENARIO

The flight from London to Sydney had stopped-over in Singapore where some passengers had got off while others had got on; then, with few vacant seats and over 300 people on board—including the crew—the plane took off for its final 7-hours' leg to Sydney.

Not surprisingly, those aboard represented a broad cross-section of many societies and races: men, women and children, young and old, some in their distinctive national dress—Indian ladies in sarees, Sikh men with turbans and beards, Catholic nuns in their habits, Muslim women in their typical head-scarves, a Jew with his yarmulke, an Anglican minister with purple shirt and dog-collar—and even a Western Buddhist monk with shaven head and saffron robes! There were businessmen and backpackers, migrants and students, a concert-pianist from Hungary, a chess-player from Russia, a basketball-team from Malaysia. There were politicians returning from 'perk-trips', night-club entertainers, a circus acrobat, a cat-burglar (though not declared as such), and someone smuggling drugs (but only he knew that). Then there were doctors, lawyers, builders, fishermen, secretaries, cooks, drivers and engineers; there were complete families, single mothers with children, widows, widowers, spinsters, bachelors, divorcees, straights and gays, gamblers, alcoholics, thieves, speculators, liars and cheats; there were military personnel, civil-servants and 'private-eyes'. All had their hopes, fears and plans for the future, and most had arranged for someone to meet them at Sydney airport, although those people were probably still asleep in bed at that time of night.

There was also someone sinister, with plans not just for himself but for everyone else on board, though his plans were short-term—very short-term—a suicide-bomber who intended to blow up the plane in mid-flight with a small but sufficient slab of plastic-explosive he had carried—undetected by the metal-detector at the airport—in his hand-luggage; dispersed in his bag and on his person, too, were the detonator-parts, needing just assembly and fitting. Time was short for all on board as the plane sped through the night over the Java Sea.

Supper was served shortly after take-off, and when everyone had eaten and things been cleared away, the lights were dimmed and a movie shown for those who wanted to watch; most people just settled down to sleep as best they could. The assassin waited for people to become quiet and still, then from his bag beneath the seat he took out a toiletry-case and a rolled-up towel, and made his way to a vacant toilet. There, he took the Semtex from the case and the detonator-parts from the towel and his person, and carefully assembled everything, using his alarm-watch as the fuse. Twice checking the device, he opened the paper-towel dispenser on the wall, removed some of the towels to make room, and taped his mechanism—timed to explode in fifteen minutes—inside. Closing the dispenser and gathering up his bits and pieces, he flushed the toilet and ran the water in the wash-basin for a few moments. Opening the door, he went back to his seat to pray and ready his mind for the explosion, happy at having struck a blow at Western aggression and interests and drawn the attention of the world to the plight of his oppressed people, sure of going immediately to heaven for his ‘act of faith’. One of his accomplices would call the New York Times as soon as he knew the plan had succeeded, to explain everything. The plane flew on, the minutes ticked by, and no-one apart from the assassin knew what was about to happen.

The explosion tore the plane apart, and it fell, flaming, into the sea below. No-one survived.

A scenario—not real. But things like this have happened — most notably, the Lockerbie disaster over Scotland—and may easily do so again. I have fabricated this simple story here, however, to raise a point: how to account for the deaths, so similar, of people so dissimilar? It strains our fond theories and beliefs quite a bit if we think of it instead of lightly dismissing it, doesn’t it? Are we to continue to talk glibly about ‘God’s will’ or ‘karma’? That would be callous and indifferent to the feelings of people who lose loved ones like that; if it happened to someone close to us, we would probably be angry, bewildered, faith-shaken and shattered, and our theories would comfort us little.

We like to be able to explain things; it gives us a sense of security if we feel we understand how things happen, even if we can't prevent them happening. We have understood and can explain natural phenomena like floods, storms, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tidal-waves, etc., and are able to take precautions against them. We know how the Earth rotates in orbit around the Sun, about its atmosphere and climate. We have discovered that disease is caused by germs, microbes, bacteria, imbalances in the body and so on. We know and can explain so many things, and it is really wonderful.

But there are many things that we do not understand and which we cannot explain and demonstrate, things that—even with our tremendous scientific and technological advances—still baffle us. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy", said Shakespeare's Hamlet to his friend. Why do we feel the need to explain everything? Perhaps it would be better to feel the wonder of life all around us, and know that we are part of it all.

We have prattled on for centuries, thoughtlessly repeating stock phrases like "As you sow, so shall you reap", without insight or direct personal experience, and never pausing to wonder at cases of large and disparate groups of people killed in disasters like the imaginary one above: were they all drawn together in space and time like that by some terrible karma they had jointly committed long ago, and is their karma then expiated by them all dying similar deaths? What terrible things can they possibly all have done to cause them to die like that, leaving their friends and relatives to suffer similarly, too? Does the cause merit the effect, or the 'punishment fit the crime', as the concept of the Law of Karma—which, let's face it, is still hypothetical as far as most of us is concerned—has it? Is the Law of Karma so general, flexible and approximate that the same effect can be 'used' to suit various causes, like adjustable seat-belts? Is it not too-convenient, and thus rather suspect, to put everything down to past karma—the awful abnormalities and birth-defects, the vast differences and discrepancies between people, the incredible evils, horrors and crimes that humans perpetrate on each other, the endless and seemingly-pointless suffering in the world? If it is educative and corrective, how come we remember or perceive so little of what might have caused it all? To say it must have come from a previous lifetime that we do not remember and have just no way—the vast majority of us—of checking, sounds too facile and easy. To smack a small boy for no reason that he is aware of, and then tell him, if he asks why, that it is for something he did when he was two years old—especially if you don't tell him what it was that was considered deserving of such punishment—would be punitive and cruel but hardly educative. Does this theory really satisfy us and explain things appropriately, or does it just anaesthetize us? Does it not cause us to doubt and question it? I am not saying that it is right or wrong, but merely trying to be objective about it, as I feel too many people accept and subscribe to this concept with little or no investigation, and thereby derive no benefit from it; in fact, they become prisoners of it, bound and fettered.

It is claimed that the workings of the Karmic Law can only be understood by a fully-enlightened Buddha, but this is a claim that must be taken on faith and which some of us would regard as a 'smoke-screen'—something that cannot be proved true or false, and therefore conveniently beyond question and investigation. It is similar to what the 'Godists' say: 'The ways of the Lord are inscrutable and beyond mortal comprehension'. Such phrases are used to disguise and cover up ignorance rather than admit it.

Buddhists, Hindus and other 'karmites' find themselves in a similar condition, with their theories, as the Godists with theirs, except that, to the latter, the 'rewarding-and-punishing' agency is personal, while to the former it is the function of an impersonal law or principle, like the law of gravity. Buddhists smile at and find quaint the concept of a 'Creator-God/Cosmic-Judge' figure, who—and to the Godists it is a 'he' rather than a 'she' or 'it'—spends his time thinking up and apportioning rewards and punishments for deeds he regards as good and evil: 'This lady has been more than reasonably kind, so I'll reward her with wealth and high position'; 'This man has been honest and hard-working, so I'll have him promoted'; 'This boy is devout and prays to me a lot, and I like that—I do so love to be prayed to and adored!—so I'll see he passes his exams with honors'; 'This girl has been cheerful and uncomplaining in spite of her crippling disease, so I'll step in and cure her'. And, on the punishment-side: 'This fellow broke my law against working on the Sabbath and went out gathering firewood, and I can't allow that, so I'll have him stoned to death'; 'This woman earned her living indecently by prostitution for many years; a good dose of leprosy will fix her; let's see how she feels when her body starts to rot'; 'And that gay bloke down there—oh, how I hate gays! They are an abomination in my sight!—well, this little pestilence I concocted recently, and which humans call AIDS: that should do nicely for him and his kind!' 'And this lot over here—they are just a bunch of infidels who have completely ignored what I've been saying for thousands of years—that I am the only God and they shouldn't worship any others, as that only makes me mad, and when I get mad, well, I sometimes lose control, and then, watch out! They can't say I didn't warn them! And now I've run out of patience, so here's a nice little earthquake to shake up their port-city, and if that doesn't do the trick and have them groveling at my feet, I can always send a tidal-wave, a fire or a flood—the big flood I sent a while back was great, but still they didn't learn, dammit! Then there are famines and wars, droughts and plagues—yes, I've a few more of those up my sleeve! The Black Death caused quite a stir in Europe, didn't it? Wiped out half the population, it did—bodies lying everywhere, rotting and stinking, with not enough living to bury the dead, and too scared to go near 'em anyway! AIDS is nice, but isn't spreading fast enough; I'll release a few of these nice new beasties—my favorites, mmh! That'll thin 'em out a bit—and quicker than the Second World War, which lasted six years but killed only 50 million! I just have to speed things up a bit; these humans are becoming too cocky, too wicked and sinful by far! I've got to show 'em who's the boss around here, otherwise I'll be marginalized! They don't understand kindness; I mean, look how they treated my boy in Palestine when I sent him to warn them! Shameful, it was! This has just got to stop! It's ruining my appetite!"

Yes, we think that’s funny, and yet it’s not very far from the kind of thing some people believe and propagate. We must take care that we don’t fall into the same hole with our ideas about Karma. Let me say here that I accept the concept of Karma, but tentatively, and with some reservations. As a hypo-thesis, as yet unproved, it may help us—in our own lives—to suppose that whatever is happening to us is the result of some thing or things we did previously, even if we do not recall doing them, and to say something like: "I don’t know why this is happening to me now, and I certainly don’t like it; however, since I can see that nothing comes from nothing, but from causes both known and unknown, I suppose this is the result of some-thing I did in the past, and so let me see what I can do with it and where I can go from here". Or, "I don’t know why this is happening to me; maybe it’s just part of the price to pay for being alive, and since being alive provides me opportunities for many things, I will accept this, look at it in different ways, and see what I can do with it; after all, every situation is an opportunity to learn something, even if it’s not always immediately apparent; and what I learn might be useful to others and not just myself". Saying things like this, instead of feeling sorry for ourselves, bemoaning our fate or blaming others, helps us accept our situation and come to terms with it.

We might call this a ‘working hypothesis’, and one that is not too offensive or insulting to the reason. But we must take great care about extending this concept or hypothesis outwards from ourselves, as if it’s an established and proven fact, and that we know why things are happening to ourselves and others, as it would then be easy for us to judge and condemn. "Oh, it’s his karma and he must deserve it, otherwise it would not— could not—be happening to him". "I knew it! I told you this would happen if you did that, but you wouldn’t listen, and went ahead and did it anyway!" We become ‘experts’ or ‘professors’ of ‘karmology’, ready with explanations for almost everything: "The Jews who died in the Holocaust were reaping what they sowed long ago when, as Hebrews, newly-liberated from bondage in Egypt, they came to Palestine and seized the country from the people there, claiming that their God had given it to them, and slaughtering not just all the men, women and children of the towns they besieged and captured, but even all the animals, too!" Or, like people in medieval Europe used to think: "The Jews deserve to be persecuted because they rejected and crucified Jesus! They are the enemies of God!" (And after the Second World War, Pope Pius XII had the audacity to say that—after 6 million Jews had been murdered in concentration-camps—they had finally been forgiven by God! What arrogance!)

Our understanding of the karma-concept can be very dangerous and we should treat it with great caution. The fact is, we don't know; we only think that we know. We may be good at memorizing and expounding theories and explanations that have been passed down for generations or which are to be found in religious scriptures, but if we have not experienced things directly, for ourselves, we still do not know. We cannot say a thing is true merely because it is written in a book or books that are regarded as 'sacred'; if we have not experienced it directly for ourselves, we are not qualified to say it is true; the books are merely ink on paper. Moses Maimonides, a 12th century Jewish philosopher, said this:

"Do not consider a thing as proof because you find it written in books, for just as a liar will deceive with his tongue, he will not be deterred from doing the same with his pen. They are utter fools who accept a thing as convincing truth simply because it is in writing."

If we start out with a set of concepts about life, we must be careful not to try to make everything fit in with and conform thereto; concepts, religions and philosophies must be supported by reality, and not the other way around.

All the reasons that we really need for following the Way—that is, leading a moral and responsible life and discovering or learning about oneself and others: that we are inseparable—are right Here and Now. If we do good just because it's the right thing to do at the time (that is, when we do it, in the Here and Now), and likewise restrain ourselves—as far as possible at this stage of our evolution—from doing the evil that we are all capable of, all the results we need are here, immediately. And to think and live in this way all we have to do is to ponder, reflect and meditate upon how we benefit in so many ways from the labors of others, and we will then know—automatically and without needing to be told or taught—what and what not to do. We still might not understand how and why the universe functions as it does, why people are different, and why things happen to us as they do—and might never understand such things—but we will have a purpose in our lives and know that we are living not just for ourselves but as part of something much bigger than us; the whole contains the part; the part reflects the whole, and though there will still be acts of terrorism in the world, and evil and crime, they will be committed by those who do not understand what we have understood, and when/if they do understand—and there is a possibility of this, just as we have understood what we have understood so far—they will desist from such things and turn to positive living, instead.

Let us say there are two opposing sides in a game, ten players to a side. If one player changes sides, one side will have eleven players and the other only nine. So, one more for is two less against. Each of us is important and has a role to play in the world. Think about this.

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Without wishing to belittle or denigrate but merely to see things as they are, I wish to say that if we observe and examine our Buddhist establishments we will be forced to conclude that most of them are not really Buddhist in the true sense of that term—Budh being its root, meaning 'awake' or 'enlightened'—but simply 'ethnic Buddhist' centers, places more of national or racial culture than of Universal Dharma.

If they are recognized as such, there is no problem, of course, but they are often taken to be representative of the whole instead of just a part. This causes misunderstandings.

As an example, take Melbourne—not because it is outstanding in any way, but because I spent several years there and so am more familiar with it. Melbourne now has numerous Buddhist centers—monasteries, temples, societies and associations—as do most big cities in Australia and other Western countries. Firstly, because it is the oldest, there is the Buddhist Society of Victoria, with a mostly Western membership; because of this, it is—or should be—more open and less sectarian than any of the other groups, as most of its members have chosen to be Buddhists rather than being born into Buddhist families and thus inheriting Buddhism; it should be comparatively easy for such people to perceive Universal Dharma, as they do not have to cut through the cultural accretions of centuries, but many still allow themselves to be sidetracked and polarized by sectarian and ethnic Buddhism, and this is very sad, of course. The Buddhist Society of Victoria leans more towards Theravada Buddhism, and towards the Thai form of Theravada in particular, probably because that is the form that has been most active there in recent years.

Then, there are numerous Vietnamese temples—ten or more of them—plus small groups of Vietnamese Buddhists who meet regularly, but they are not very strongly linked to each other. There are several large Tibetan centers which cater mostly for Westerners who prefer the Tibetan cultural flavor and teaching-style; there are four or five Chinese temples (not on very close terms with each other), two or three Thai temples, two Laotian temples, two Sri Lankan temples (also at odds with each other), two Cambodian temples, and the ubiquitous Zen groups, with their would-be-Japanese Western devotees, using Japanese Zen terminology, as if Dharma can only be understood in Japanese.

All these centers provide something for people, but I sometimes feel that instead of helping them to open and broaden their minds, they only make them more narrow and sectarian, and in this way, do them a disservice. Although most of these centers would probably turn no-one away (and I say 'most' here rather than 'all', as an Australian lady once told me of being turned away from one of the Sri Lankan temples with the explanation that it was only for Sri Lankans! What kind of Buddhism is that?), some make no attempt to cater for anyone other than their own ethnic groups—most of the Vietnamese monks resident in Australia, for example (according to my experience of them) seem unconcerned about the necessity of opening their doors to non-Vietnamese, and I have spoken and written about the vital importance of making things available in English as well as in Vietnamese, not just for any non-Vietnamese who might be attracted to their temples for whatever reasons, but also for their own young people whose first language now, having grown up in the West, is English rather than Vietnamese; if these people are not catered for in languages they understand, it will be very difficult to reach them. Sadly, I foresee nationalistic and cultural enclaves—which is what the Vietnamese temples in the West really are—having little future and in danger of drying up at the roots and becoming irrelevant. Moreover, most of them—and the Chinese temples, too—provide little in the way of teaching and helping people to understand the Way of the Buddha, but focus more on ceremonies and chanting. I have not met more than two Vietnamese people who have ventured into forms of Buddhism different than the several forms prevalent in Vietnam; countless Vietnamese—under various kinds of pressure—have converted to Christianity, while many others have such a shallow understanding of Buddhism that it really does not matter what—if anything—they choose to call themselves. Many obviously think of Buddhism as merely a matter of offering incense to an image twice a day!

Chinese temples in the West, however, without knowing it or understanding the significance of it, have an advantage over temples of other ethnic groups like the Vietnamese, Thais or Sri Lankans—something consistent with the Bodhisattva ideal that is central to their usually-moribund form of Buddhism —in that there are no nationalistic flags to be seen (except, perhaps, for that of their host country); the Chinese people assemble in their temples from many countries; this is definitely a big step in the right direction towards Universal Dharma, but is seldom—if ever—seen as such, and is not used as a spring-board for going further.

Now, why do I differentiate between what I call 'ethnic Buddhism' (or 'cultural Buddhism') and Universal Dharma? I must explain this again—hammer away at it—as it is of paramount importance. Let me define the terms first. 'Ethnic' has to do with racial divisions, but my use of this term here merely means I recognize that differences exist between races; it does not and should not be taken to mean that I am racist, although, as I have explained elsewhere, we all have some racism in us (if only latent) by reason of our upbringing as members of one or another of the various racial groups; belonging to such a group, however, does not mean that we must automatically allow racist feelings towards others to manifest in us; knowing something of how racism operates, we can be on guard against partisan emotions flaring up in us and be more in control. Make no mistake about it, though: every one of us is as capable of expressing racism as we are of killing and stealing, even if we never do such things; there are things inside us that we know nothing about.

Different races have different cultures, traditions and ways of doing things. These things may be seen and enjoyed by others if they are sympathetic (or at least, not unsympathetic), or they may be seen as threats, merely because they are different. But whether it is seen as positive or negative, culture is something that forms a division between people and sets them apart from each other, unless and until they can see through and beyond it.

Now, as Buddhism spread from its native India it encountered different cultures and traditions, but being flexible and tolerant as it always was, instead of conflicting and contending with them for mastery it adapted to them and adopted elements of them, with the result that it developed different forms. So now there are a dozen or more forms, distinct from the original Indian Buddhism—Tibetan, Chinese, Mongolian, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Thai, Burmese, Nepalese and Sri Lankan, with sub-sects of these, too. Nor is this surprising, as different people have different ways of looking at the same things.

The problem is, we are prone to getting stuck on form, without seeing the essence. Most Buddhists (there's no need to mention people of other religions here, though they are—for the most part—in a similar or even worse condition) accept, without question, the form of Buddhism that they were born into and raised by, without investigating other forms; it is part of their overall conditioning. Most conclude that their form of Buddhism is either the totality of Buddhism or the purest and most-complete form, not realizing that the real Buddhism is far beyond any of its forms. Thus, they overlook—and may not even be aware of—the treasures of the Dharma within the form, but take the form for everything.

Here is a little story to illustrate how we become stuck on form: A certain monastery had a cat, which used to come into the dining-hall at mealtimes and make itself a nuisance by jumping on the tables. So as to keep it away from the food, the abbot ordered it to be tied to one of the posts. This solved the problem, and from then on the cat was tied to the post at meal-times. When it died some years later, the ritual of tying up the cat had become such a part of daily life in the monastery that another cat was acquired just so it could be tied up at meal-times. The original meaning of tying up the cat had been forgotten and had been superseded by the ritual.

And there’s another funny little story illustrating the difference between the form and the spirit, the letter and the meaning:

While out in the African jungle one day, a missionary was confronted by a ferocious lion. Unable to escape, he fell to his knees and prayed: Oh, Lord, please give this wild beast just one Christian thought".

Thereupon, the lion fell to its knees in imitation of the missionary, and said: “For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful. Amen!”

Westerners, coming to Buddhism from the ‘outside’, and finding all its forms Asian, usually adopt one of them, though on what basis they choose one over the others is often not clear; it is probably just a matter of following their preferences or taking the first they come to. This is sad, as many of them, having become sufficiently disentangled from their Judaeo-Christian background, are looking for something more logical to replace it; many of them have an inbuilt understanding of Universal Dharma—to some degree, anyway—but allow themselves to be drawn into this or that form of ethnic Buddhism, and try to conform thereto; thus they become sidetracked and polarized. I once saw a Western Zen-follower bowing to his meditation-cushion as he had heard that such was done by meditators in Japan as a way of showing respect to the support given by the cushion. But if we are going to adopt such customs—tying the cat to the post, as it were—we should be consistent and bow to the toilet-seat and the seat of the car and the armchair, because they also provide valuable support and it is possible to meditate while sitting on them, too. In fact, why let respect stop there, or anywhere? We depend, vitally, upon so many things; respect should come from understanding, and so infuse us that we become respectful. But were we to start bowing to things both big and small from which we derive support, we would constantly be bowing, and would—not without reason—be regarded as cranks!

I heard, not long ago, of monks in England visiting one of their supporters for breakfast and insisting on their toast being cut into bite-sized pieces and their coffee stirred before being ritually offered to them! These particular monks follow the rules very strictly—and even invent more—obviously believing that they are becoming holy thereby, and not realizing that they are causing inconvenience for others and making themselves look silly. The custom of food being formally offered is only to make it quite clear that it is intended for the monk and that he has not taken what was not given to him. When it is clear that the food is meant for the monk, the rule has no significance. It would save a lot of time and trouble if we would ask ourselves why are we doing what we are doing? Obviously, we expect to get something from our practices and disciplines, otherwise we wouldn't do them. But what do we expect, and are our expectations realistic? It would pay dividends to think carefully and examine things before beginning a spiritual journey. Many of us are in a great hurry to achieve things, and do not seem to be aware of the dangers thereof. Meditation may easily turn into maditation!

There is a Western form of Buddhism now taking shape, shorn of Asian cultural trappings, and this will probably be good, as long as the limitations of form—any form—are understood and not mistaken for the essence.

And the Essence, or Universal Dharma—which applies to everyone and everything, in all times and places—takes us far beyond name-and-form and frees us from narrow ideas and beliefs pertaining to race, nationality, party-politics, culture, creed and so on, most of which are artificial and mind-made anyway. And most of all, it frees us from the distorted, convoluted and deluded ideas about ourselves and others, from the notion that we exist separately and independently from everything else, apart from, instead of a part of. The Buddha said that He remained unenlightened until He fully understood this and other things like Anicca and Dukkha. Enlightenment comes about, therefore, by understanding things clearly and deeply, and comes from inside—that is, from the mind—not from outside. It is not true—as some people claim—that the Buddha received help from a God, angel, spirit or divine being, etc; what He found came from within His own mind.

And can this Essence be revealed shorn of cultural and ethnic accretions? Yes, it can, insofar as it can be revealed by one to another; ultimately, it must be experienced directly, by the individual, and in no other way. No-one can eat or drink for another, can they? It is just as intimate as that.

Wherever we were born, it was into one or another of the various races that populate this planet; by birth, too, we acquired nationality. Such things were coincidental upon our birth and not accidents, as nothing happens accidentally, just by it-self. But just why we were born, we really don't know, in spite of what various religions have said about it—and I'm talking about something more than just the mating of our parents, who provided merely the physical basis for our birth. Why were we born where we were born? We must be honest and acknowledge our ignorance about this, and not try to fill the gap with concepts, theories and fairy-tales, for we simply do not know! What we can see, however, is that it was not an accident but a result of causes, and because it is a complex result rather than a simple one it must have involved innumerable causes, conspiring to produce—in each case—a unique being. There is no reason for a person to think and feel superior to others just because he was born into a certain nation and race, for his birth there was not a matter of his choice; in fact, there is not much about us that is a result of our choice, for who would choose to be blind, deaf, crippled, deformed, arthritic, diabetic, mentally-retarded, etc.? We would all choose to be good-looking and healthy if we could, of course, but such things are results of causes outside our choice and preference, and so far beyond our comprehension that life seems to be unfair, cruel and arbitrary, producing—on one hand—people who have everything going for them from birth, and—on the other hand—people who seem doomed to suffer and to have no chance in life from the start. No, it is not by choice that we are as we are, and if we understand this we will walk carefully through life, more considerate of other people's rights and sensitivities. As far as possible, too, we will resist the inclination to become proud about our well-being and good fortune and not take it for granted, as it can change, sometimes very quickly and suddenly, as did the life of movie-star Christopher Reeve, famous for his role as Superman. Thrown from a horse, he landed on his head and will probably be paralyzed from his neck down for the rest of his life, trapped as a prisoner in his body, fully aware of his condition.

We must be grateful to culture for providing us with security when we need it most, with a framework or backdrop for our lives. As we grow older and mature and become surer of ourselves, however, we need such security less and less until finally, it can and should be left behind, to the extent that we cease to identify exclusively with it and no longer think of ‘our’ culture as superior to that of others; failure to drop it and leave it behind when we no longer need it has a stultifying effect, like insisting on forcing our feet into shoes we have outgrown; thus, what may have served us well at a particular stage impedes us at a later stage and we become victims of culture instead of beneficiaries.

But to leave behind one’s cultural identity can be risky and scary, for it will often mean facing life alone and accepting responsibility for oneself. Leaving the security of the known, we proceed into the unknown, and this means insecurity and vulnerability; there is little we can hold onto for support, and must acknowledge—honestly and humbly—that there are many things we don’t know—that, in reality, there is very little that we do know, by our own experience. I have noticed that, as I grow older, it becomes less difficult to admit that I don’t know things; when we are young, this is hard to do, as we are involved with establishing our identity; this requires a certain feeling of security. As we grow older, and learn more about life, we realize that security is an illusion; the carpet can be pulled from under us at any moment; life is fragile and slips from our grasp. Why be shy or embarrassed to admit that we don’t know? On the contrary, we should be happy to admit it, as it opens us to the possibility of learning.

Embarking upon this path many years ago, I felt secure within the framework of Buddhism (it gave me an identity and a sense of security that comes from knowing one is not alone), and thought I knew quite well what Buddhism was/is. Some years ago, however, that sense of security began to slip; perhaps I had reached a point where I could stand on my own feet and didn’t need it any longer, so now, if someone asks me what Buddhism is all about, I might answer—without shame—"I don’t really know anymore", as Buddhism is just so many things to so many people that it would be impossible to adequately explain it in a way that would be acceptable to everyone. I might say "It is this" or "It is that", but would have to qualify my statements by adding that this is my understanding of it and not necessarily anyone else’s, and certainly not everyone else’s. Moreover, Buddhism became so mixed up with Hinduism in the land of its birth that it would be almost impossible to separate them.

No, I’m not ashamed to say I don’t know what Buddhism is all about now, although I must and do gratefully acknowledge my great debt to Buddhism—the organization, the religion, the container—for having preserved and been the vehicle of the Buddha’s Teaching for so long, just as I also acknowledge my lesser debt to Christianity for what it gave me earlier on in my life. What is important to me now, however, is the Contents rather than the Container, and if I seem to disregard the Container there are plenty of other people who will continue to serve and take care of it, even if they pay little attention to the Contents. But we must be very clear about this: The Container—no matter how resplendent—exists for the Contents, not the other way around.

So, I will leave the explaining of what Buddhism is and is not to others; to me, it is just one of the many religions in the world which we may compare and contrast in an attempt to prove that ‘ours’ is better than ‘yours’—is, in fact, the best—but still it will be, at most, the best among many and not the totality. I am more interested with that which embraces and involves everyone and everything, and this is what we mean by the word Dharma (I realize that it is a culturally-loaded and religiously-biased word, with a strong flavor of India, but if we were to try to translate it we would need many words and would still only get an approximate meaning; it is better, therefore, to leave it as it is and try to feel its several meanings, the most important and broadest being Cause-and-Effect); also, if we are open-minded, to the extent necessary for following a spiritual path, we surely will not mind the use of this word; if we are not so open-minded, no amount of words will suffice, and we will have to wait. So, if we are really sincere in our desire to discover what is True, we must see that Buddhism, in any or all of its forms, is not enough, and in going beyond them would really demonstrate our respect and gratitude to them, while to cling to them would mean that we have not understood and used them as far as they can take us.

I would like to close here with a quotation from WALK ON! By Christmas Humphries, the late founder-president of the London Buddhist Society: “In the early stages we move, like cattle, in herds; later, we congregate in religions, movements and societies; later, we advance in groups, which grow ever smaller; finally, we advance alone.”

LIVING AND DYING

Some time ago, I had a letter from a lady who was quite distraught after running over a stray kitten she had taken in as a stray and nursed back to health. She had lavished care and attention on it and been extra-cautious when driving in and out of the garage where she had housed it, but in spite of all this, the poor cat managed to get in the way of the wheels one day, and .... RIP!

Just as with the birth and growth of anything, so, too, with Compassion: pain is involved; in fact, the very word means 'to suffer, or feel, with'. It was compassion that had induced the lady to take in the abandoned kitten in the first place, and devote time and care to restoring it to health, seeing it was properly housed, fed and so on. Now she blames herself for its death and feels that she killed it, which is unjust to herself and only increases her suffering, and will never bring the kitten back to life anyway. Of course she feels sorry that something she cared for and loved is now dead; but although it died beneath the wheels of her car as she reversed out of the garage, she did not kill it, simply because she didn't know it was there at the time, and would never intentionally have harmed it in any way.

We live within limits; all that is born will die, and it's only a matter of time before we go off into the Void, and although there is nothing we can do to prevent this, there is plenty that we can do about the limits of ignorance, which is our greatest foe. While we are here, we should do what we can to alleviate and remove pain—in others as well as in ourselves—but, more than anything else, should try to understand the nature of life—how uncertain and insecure it is—and strive to help others to understand, too, for just as we are grateful if someone helps us to understand something, there are lots of people who would appreciate a bit of help from us. I know someone who imparts a little Dharma to people while giving driving-lessons; he once told me about this, so: "I explain that driving involves not only driving-skills but also a moral attitude, and can be compared to daily life, since all the time one is on the road the situation changes and is never the same; hence one has to be aware of everything that is happening on the road. I start my lessons with a warning of what people should try to avoid if they want to drive a motor vehicle: first, not to drink and drive; second, not to get upset or angry and drive; third, not to think too much about other things and drive; and fourth, not to drive when one is very tired. If one pays attention to such things, driving will be an art and a pleasure for everyone". This is practical Dharma at the wheel.

Feeling and fearing—but seldom deeply understanding—the insecurity of life, we take out insurance-policies of various kinds in an attempt to protect and buffer ourselves; man has done this for millions of years. And neither is it just humans who do this; it seems instinctual and can be seen throughout the animal-realm, with birds building nests, squirrels storing up nuts for the winter, beavers constructing their lodges, down to tiny insects like spiders spinning their webs, and ants and termites providently working for the future. Nor is it confined to animals and insects, because—as I mentioned elsewhere in this book—plants also plan and provide for the future. It must be something that Nature, down the foggy ruins of time, has built into the genes of all living things. This causes us to query somewhat the well-known words of Jesus: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they toil not, neither do they spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these;" the 'lilies of the field' are not so improvident as they might appear; only by a long process of evolution have they become what they are; they didn't start out like that in Jurassic Park.

Money, fame, power and the uses and abuses thereof, are all used as insurance-policies, especially in times—most of human history and pre-history, in fact—when there were no things like welfare-states or social-security systems; it was expected that children should care for their parents in their old age. It is still this way in poor and not-so-poor countries. Wives, husbands, parents and friends are also insurance-policies.

Religion and philosophy—the 'love of wisdom'—are the ultimate insurance-policies, on which people fall back and hold onto for support when all else fails. Often, however, it is too late then; the time for becoming religious and seeking wisdom is before disaster strikes, not afterwards.

We hear a lot nowadays of 'death-bed conversions' from one religious 'brand-name' to another. I will not say 'from one religion to another' because that is rarely so. It is more the case of people whose minds—understandably—are fearful at the known or expected approach of death, and who succumb to the seductive wiles and promises of those who are drawn to death-beds like vultures in the hope of winning last-minute converts with inducements of different kinds, including fear and threats. It is usually just a change of name rather than of substance, for if the dying had spent more time in trying to understand their religion when they were younger, healthier and better able to, and had also done some research into other religions—as we all should—they would have more to lean on and would probably be less afraid and more composed at the end. Of course, I am speaking from conjecture and generalizing here, and there is no blueprint that everyone can and should follow; surely, the end, and the way it is faced, will be different with every individual. If I have lived and died before, I do not remember it, and am yet to face my death in this life (although I have probably come near to it many more times than I was aware of); how I shall fare—supposing it doesn't come suddenly and without warning—I cannot imagine, but must wait and see. Meanwhile, life provides us with many opportunities to prepare for it.

The concept of God as held by Christians and others, can be, at one level—I will admit—reassuring (it is also terrifying if one thinks about it in a wider way!) When I was a Christian I used to believe in God and pray, but that was long ago, and I now find the concept unsatisfactory and childish. Far from accepting the statement in Genesis that God created man in his own image, I feel that it was the other way around: that Man created God from his hopes and fears in his image! What, then, do I have in place of an anthropomorphic[1] God from which I draw strength and comfort? I have Dharma, the central principle of which is the Law of Cause-and-Effect; but

[1] Anthropomorphic means 'having human form', 'in human form'.

this is not a person with likes and dislikes, unpredictable and volatile emotions and so on—as is the Christian God—and prayers of supplication to it, promises, pleas, bargaining, ceremonies, offerings, mediating priests, etc., will have no effect whatsoever, just as praying for light in a dark cave will never dispel the darkness; we must strive for understanding and light, and the more we acquire of these, the better-equipped we will be to face whatever life throws at or brings us.

This might appear rather stark and stoical philosophy and I know that it will not suit everyone, but there are plenty of people who do and would subscribe to it, who are fed-up with airy-fairy ideas and untenable doctrines. I might have stated it rather forcefully and some people might think I am trying to deprive others of hope, but this is not so; I am trying to impart something that people may accept or reject as they see fit, something that I feel is better and more reliable than the 'pie-in-the-sky' hope held unthinkingly by vast numbers of people around the world; with so many negative ideas thriving therein, I feel I have something positive and constructive to contribute.

If we examine hope, we will find that it is always accompanied by fear; hope is, in fact, the other side of the coin of fear. Where there is hope, there is fear; where there is fear, there is hope; they go together inseparably and perhaps we can say that they are really two different names for the same thing, because when we hope for something, there is fear of not getting it, and when we are afraid of something, there is hope that it will not happen. Can we separate hope of winning or succeeding from the fear of losing or failing? And the things that we hope/fear for: is there a realistic basis for them? If we would examine them, we would almost certainly find that we have merely adopted the standards of others, which they adopted from others, back and back; in other words, our hopes and fears—especially of things abstract and unseen, like what will happen after we die, heaven and hell, etc.—are inherited from others. This is not to say they have no substance and are false and illusory, but neither does it say that they are time-tested and true. It merely says that they should be thought about and investigated.

Since Buddhism rejects the notion of a personal ‘Creator-God’ who or which will take the faithful to heaven upon death and cast the sinners into hell forever, how are Buddhists taught to face death?

Buddhism teaches and encourages us to develop self-reliance while we are alive and able to, and to accept responsibility for our own living; it teaches us to face the inevitable end—if death is the end—with understanding, courage and detachment. It teaches that rather than praying/hoping/fearing, it is better to focus on good and positive things like the virtues of the Three Jewels: the Buddha, as the one who discovered and revealed the Way, the Dharma, as both the Way and the eventual Goal, and the Sangha, or those who have experienced or attained—in some degree, at least—the Goal that the Buddha indicated. We should reflect on the virtuous things we have done and accomplished in our lives—not in a manner, however, that would cause us to think egoistically, "How good I have been!", which we must always be alert against, but because such accomplishments are indications that we have, at times, drawn near to Dharma. We should recall things we have done that were of benefit to others, particularly things of public benefit rather than restricted to specific individuals, things which helped us to transcend personality, both of self and of others. Thinking of how one’s life has been useful to others—of how it has not been a complete waste or in vain, and that good seeds were sown—will help to counteract fear and uncertainty and enable the mind to become peaceful and joyful, buoyant and light, and will make the passing easier. As far as possible, the mind should not be allowed to dwell on negative things like fear, worry, anger and regret for things done and undone. Remorse is useful and productive of good while we are alive and able to correct things, but should not be indulged in when it comes time to die, as it makes the mind sorrowful and unclear and drags us down, rather than helping us to ‘soar from life’s low vale’. Most useful of all at the time of death, however, is the insight—penetrating and clear—into the nature of life that we experienced while alive, as this influences us very much, of course; it is this, most of all, that can carry us through, and this is one of the reasons we are advised to take advantage of our opportunities while we are healthy and well to inquire, investigate, meditate on and apply ourselves to Dharma, instead of living mainly and merely to enjoy ourselves, so that at the end we will be better prepared.

It is good, too—very good—if it can be arranged—either by us in advance or by others for us at the time—for someone to be present at the death-bed to talk us over, someone who understands and who might inspire, uplift and encourage us, someone who cares. It need not be an ordained person; there is no monopoly on sympathy, love and wisdom. It is often enough for someone like that to be there, without saying or doing anything special. Help can be rendered on a non-verbal level, too, if words are not appropriate, such as when the languages of the dying and the helper are different. I was once called to visit an old lady in a nursing-home who had been comatose for some weeks and whose son felt was near the end. Her mouth had been open for some days, unable to close, it seemed. Because she knew no English, I did not endeavor to speak to her as I sat by the bedside, but asked her son for a moist face-towel, which I held and concentrated on while trying to tune-in to her consciousness and send her positive thoughts. After some minutes, I gave the face-towel back to the son and told him to gently wipe his mother's face with it. As he did so, her mouth closed. Later that night, a nurse phoned to inform the son that his mother had just passed away peacefully.

For all our religious and philosophical beliefs and theories about what happens after death, no-one really knows. Now, let us suppose—just suppose, if we are not afraid to—that this life is all we've got and there is nothing further beyond death; certainly, it is a belief or even a conviction that many people hold, and it is, as far as we know, a possibility, so let's consider that it might be so (I'm not saying that it is, mind, but just looking at the possibility of it, and cannot prove, one way or the other, that it is or is not). Would that preclude or invalidate any attempt to lead a moral or religious life? Would it render meaningless any effort to make sense out of life, with all its pain and confusion? I don't think so; on the contrary, if we lived nearer to the present than we do, instead of worrying and speculating about what—if anything—lies beyond death, we would probably make a better job of living than we do. There would be a good reason to live fully and responsibly if we thought that this is the only time we have; we would not defer our living until later—after-death living, so to speak. We don't know if there is life after death, but there is certainly life before it!

Life, from the infinite past, is fulfilled and expressed in each one of us. Feeling this deeply, we ask ourselves, "What is my role in this great drama? What can I leave to those who will come after me?" Such soul-searching will counteract the tendency in us to be complacent and take everything for granted, and discover that we all have qualities, talents and abilities that can be of benefit to others. And shall we always put a price on and market these abilities? Or shall we offer them,

with love?

THE END

If we start out with a set of concepts about life, we must be careful not to try to make everything fit in with and conform thereto; concepts, religions and philosophies must be supported by reality, and not the other way around.