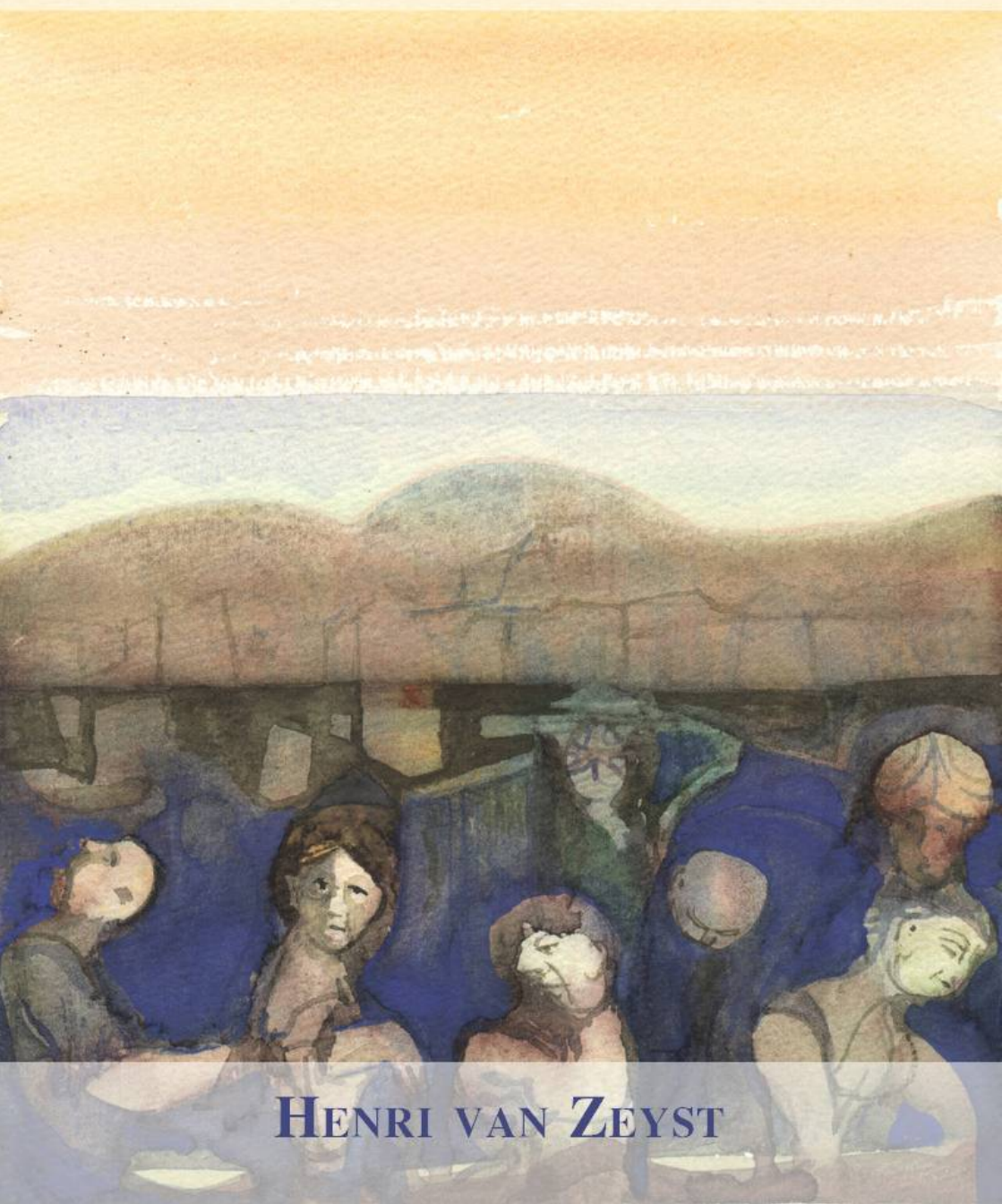


BUDDHISM FOR THE MILLIONS



HENRI VAN ZEYST

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1980

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This is version no. 20210702.

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Introduction

Buddhism is a religion with a difference and the difference is so much that some people think that it is not a religion at all. That depends on what you expect from religion.

If you seek security, safety, salvation, Buddhism is not for you. Don't listen, don't read further, for there is no salvation for your soul, no eternal rest, no security in God.

The only thing that Buddhism offers is understanding: understanding why there is conflict, understanding that I am in conflict just because I try to escape.

This needs some more elaboration, which has resulted in an institutional religion, called Buddhism.

Buddhism has become an institution, not unlike the structure of a building. There are the essential foundations, the protecting roof, the enclosing walls, the passages leading to various rooms each one with its assigned purpose. And the whole is intended to provide shelter and safety.

Thus we have the foundation of the four noble truths, the overhead protection of karma for a future life, the limitations of the human mind, the methods and practices leading with different approaches to tranquillity and insight, maybe to a happier rebirth or to the final rest of deliverance.

The institution as well as the institute will both have the ornamental decorations which are never essential, and which may vary in style according to the developed state of mind, its fancy and desire, imitation and convention. Those fanciful decorations

are interesting, for they show not only the internal attitude towards beauty, but reflect the actual approach of the mind reacting to the environment of traditional development and the result of such search for truth and meaning.

In order to reach at the basic structure, or the essentials of the entire set-up, one has to ignore and overlook the various additions meant to beautify, but actually preventing any clear vision and understanding. One need not destroy such aids to living, as long as one is aware of their true significance: curtains in the windows, pictures on the walls, paint on the doors, polish on the floor. But if one is truly interested, architecturally and functionally, in the construction of the building, of the institution, these will have to be set aside, as a doctor will ask a patient to remove some of his clothing to enable him to examine his chest and listen to his heart-beat.

To understand through investigation the *raison d'être* of Buddhism, one shall have to ignore the supernatural in order to be able to reach at the essential nature. My life is the institute I have been building all these years from the material available. And it is therefore, to these materials that I shall have to turn, to understand the nature of the building process. Hence, without denying the possibility of life in some conscious form outside this little satellite in the solar system, I meet life in its conscious reaction only in this mind of mine. And thus it is to this mind that I shall have to turn my attention from the moment I realise that "all things are made by mind" (Dhp 1) and of which the Bodhisatta on becoming enlightened said; "I know thee, builder of this house; but thou shall build no more."

This shall be, then, my present attitude in trying to understand these reactions in the mind without allowing it to add more. Thus, I shall ignore the marvellous beauty of other lives, hoping to understand the present. I shall try to understand the ugly conflict in life which is so universal that I cannot hope to put a step to the insane cravings of power-blocks. But, in seeing the prototype of this insanity in the leanings of my own heart, I shall perhaps

be able to understand my own conflict, as it is being made by my own misunderstanding.

Thus, there must be a constant reference to myself, for I am that reaction to that misunderstanding; I am at the bottom of this conflict. In fearlessness I must approach this “self” of mine to learn how it came about to understand its actions and reactions with no further purpose than the immediate understanding of what I have made of life.

As in discovering the false, I may learn the truth, so in seeing the conflict for what it is, I may be without conflict. That was the basic function of the teaching of Buddha:

“One thing only do I teach:
Woe and how its end to reach”.

Such end would be the ending of conflict. To reach that end, one has to go far, but I must begin very near, within myself.

It is not only in the teaching of the Buddha that the “I” is the focus of investigation. “Know thyself”, was the maxim of the old Greek philosopher, as it was the maxim of the saintly seer of Tiruvannamalai, Shri Ramana Mahārshi, who brought all inquiry down to the basic: “Who am I?”

The many systems of religious thought have provided various solutions and answers to this question. But I want to find the answer for myself, without quoting the authority of inspired saints, of developed thinkers, of religious leaders. They may be right, but it can be right for me, only if I can discover it for myself. What I can do, can be done by millions of others, for I do not want to rely on supernatural inspirations, revelation or spiritual authority. It is for that reason that I turn to the Buddha, for he was no divine person, but had to find the way through the jungle of thought, just as I have to do. I am that jungle and I must find out what it is about, if I ever hope to be free from its entanglement.

That is the work each one has to do for himself: to find out: Who am I? May be I am God, as some have said. May be I am

not, as others have maintained. What I am does not depend on their sayings, and thus I set out as a fairly intelligent human being, bent upon understanding, not blinded by the prospects of a goal, but just exploring as others have done before me, to find out what is true and what is false. Then, perhaps, I may have to change my approach, my attitude to life. There may be no gain, no satisfaction in the end; but there will be truth.

The Buddha and the Origin of Buddhism

Without going beyond some historical details of the life of the Buddha, and restricting ourselves to the bare facts, we find that the Buddha had no supernatural powers, never founded an organisation to promulgate his teachings.

He was born in the sixth century before Christ, in the princely family of a small feudal state in North India. His mother died within a week after childbirth and her sister took over the task of looking after the child's physical needs. He had private tutors, educating him in the traditional sciences of the day, and others who prepared him for rulership in the arts and crafts of warfare, combat, hunting and whatever passed for sport at that time. Being of a philosophical mind he took greater interest in the socio-economic problems of his people than in planning for expansion of the kingdom or amassing greater personal wealth.

The philosophies known in those days all had their bases on the ancient scriptures of the Vedas, which were supposed to have originated from wise and saintly men, called Rishis, several centuries earlier. It was a remarkable philosophy, which even now draws the admiration of students of comparative religion.

The basic teaching of Vedanta was and is the acceptance of an Absolute, the Brahman (not to be confused with the individual deity Mahā Brahma). This all-embracing Absolute could not be comprehended, but only experienced. But, individual self-interest

of the human intellect found it necessary to place itself in relationship to the Absolute, thereby forming the relative concept of an individual soul, steeped in arrogance, craving and illusion (*māyā*). The purpose of religion then was to rend this veil of illusion, thereby to realise that the individual soul is but a deception, as it is part of the universal soul (*paramātmān*) which is the absolute Brahman. All knowledge being relative, there is no possibility of knowing the Absolute: but there is the possibility of realising that the little "self" is not really separate from the absolute "self". This is expressed in the famous maxims "Thou art That" (*tat tvam āsi*) and "I am Brahman" (*Brahmoham*). Thus, the little drop of water is reabsorbed in the ocean from where it originated and from which it had separated itself in thought, in time, in delusion.

Such was the religio-philosophic background against which the young prince Siddhattha viewed the various problems of human existence. He did not know poverty, but he would have seen old age and illness, and even death, for such unwelcome visitors cannot be excluded even from a royal palace. Marriage came to him as a matter of fact and duty, when he was 29 years old. But when a child was born, prince Siddhattha realised that this would bind him to the world more than any possession. And thus he left his palace during the night, renouncing the succession to the throne, giving up his family life at home with comfort and affection, to become a wandering ascetic in search of truth on the long way to self-realisation.

To obtain assistance in this quest he went in search of teachers (*gurus*) who could help him in his body-control through asceticism, and in mind-control through concentration. In the performance of penance he soon outstripped all his companions on the same road; in the practice of mind-concentration he went to the very limits his teachers could lead him: the perception of nothingness, and the experience in mental absorption which admits of neither perception nor the absence thereof. But, however high and far those concentration exercises were leading him to the

brink of infinity, there was still the awareness that even infinite thought is still thought; and that “thought” is a creation of the mind, a concept, an idea; and that the search for a universal Self is still a search for self. Thus a search will end where it began: “self”.

Then, rejecting all idealism, of faith and hope, he also left off all striving for an ideal, for the salvation: of a “self”. Thus he gave up self-mortification, as he had given up earlier already a search for “self”. And that he now saw as the crux of all problems.

In ignorance, he had been searching his conditioned mind for the unconditioned and found only action of the mind. Now he saw this mental action as a search and craving for existence, tranquillity and security. Without knowing that “self”, he wanted continuance, endurance, becoming. But, in becoming, which is birth, rebirth, evolution, there is also cessation, death, involution, and no solution. Then what is the problem? Where is the problem? Not in poverty or in death. Poverty or riches are only decorations, not essential to life. Is death then the essence of life? Does life end with death?

At that stage, when there was nothing to search for, he realised that his very search was the problem, and not the way or method, not the goal at the end. I am the problem! My search for “self” is the conflict I make. My goal of striving is the attempt to escape: self, running away from self! Self, trying to attain self!

It was during that night of light that he realised his emancipation, his freedom from self. Henceforth, he is the Buddha, the one who is awakened from his dream.

Unable as a flame to contain its light within itself, and as a flower to retain its perfume, so the Buddha walked the earth for 45 more years, showing people their foolishness. Many flocked around him and he gave them some advice as to simplicity of living. For him not the fasting of asceticism, but the sufficiency of one meal a day; not the nakedness of austerity, but the disfigured robes of a mendicant, of a homeless one, who can be content with any shelter, any food.

He was a teacher, but not a leader. He refused to appoint any one to be the head of the band of followers, even after his death. The rules of discipline for his monks as well as for those continuing the life of a householder were the mere laws of nature for those who trusted to nature for their support. No home-making, no property, no beautifying, no double-dealing, no harmfulness, in short, nothing that could make a "self" secure. But, in that freedom of a bird in flight, there is the awareness of what is, without the aspiration to what may be.

It is from that basic attitude that we shall now look at the structure of the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha was not divine, he was no deity, he was no saviour, his teaching was not a revelation. He did not dispense "grace", he did not forgive "sin", but he showed us something that we can all see for ourselves, if we are not afraid to look. Thus, he is still our teacher; and his teaching is still with us; and that teaching can still solve the problem, not by giving an answer, but by dissolving the conflict, so that each one for himself can see that there never was a problem. The problematic child is to be discovered in the problem-parents. The search for a super-self in security ceases with the realisation that there is no "self".

The Basic Truths

The first dialogue the Buddha had after his discovery was with his earlier companions in his ascetic life. They had deserted him when they saw that he had left the path of self-abnegation, a path of extreme austerity and self-mortification. They were sincere but mistaken; and the Buddha turned to them first to show them their mistake which had been his also. Rightly, therefore, he called himself the Tathāgata, because he himself had “gone the whole way” indeed; and thus he spoke with a great conviction in the very simplicity of his words.

There is a path which avoids the two extremes of self-indulgence and of self-mortification, which lies between them and is thus called the middle path. But, before he could speak of the path, he had to make them see and understand the real problem which confronts all seekers after truth. Whatever path or method they use. For, his teaching is not a super-natural revelation, but is based on the essential facts of life as it is known to all who care to know.

The seeker seeks a path in the jungle of the mind. It is obvious that the seeker has not come to the end of his search; he is seeking, just because he has not found. It is this search which is so painful, because all searching has been in vain, so far. And the honest seeker will go on, from guru to guru, from method to method, sustained by faith and hope, but every time becoming more and more disillusioned. Life is too short to try all the jungle paths; and often one discovers that the same method has already been tried,

perhaps in the opposite direction. One may have rejected the traditional forms of faith and ritualism to find oneself accepting atheistic dogmas and political ideologies, leading very far apart and essentially the same.

Thus, rejecting, or rather ignoring, all pre-ordained principles, the question arises: what is the basic truth, the only established fact in this asphalt-jungle of modern life? The fact of my search for a way out shows that I am not satisfied with material solutions. The fact of my continued search among so many established religions and philosophies shows that I am not satisfied with their spiritual solutions. My search continues and I do not know for what. Truth is an abstraction which has only meaning for me as an ideal. I have not reached that ideal, for I am still searching. I am, not going towards it, even if I give it a definite name as God, or the Absolute, or Brahman, because I do not know.

Then, what do I know? I know that I am searching; I know that I have formed in my mind an ideal, a symbol, an object; and now I direct my search in that direction: God is the highest, God is love. But I do not know the highest; I do not know love; I do not know God. And if I am at all sincere in my search I cannot accept the assurances of others, the authority of revelation, the dogmas of religious and political creeds. My search has to lead me to my goal; but I do not know my goal. I only know my ideal, that is the picture I have made for myself, a picture of my ideal, a concept of my mind, a thought of myself? I am writing a book on myself all by myself; and what else shall I find there but myself?

It is the hopelessness of such a search, which can form a starting point. For, this very hopelessness of the situation forms the only fact I know with any certainty. The fact of my search for an ideal, for a solution, for a way-out, proves that I have not solved my problem, that I have not found a way-out.

So, that is the first truth I discover: the truth of conflict (*dukkha-sacca*). Now, I am not going to run away from this fact, for that would be an escape, a thing I have been doing all the time. Thus, I am in conflict. Or, as you may like to say: I have

a problem. Well, what is the problem? I am not satisfied with prevailing conditions (to leave it very general for the moment) and I want better conditions; not perhaps living conditions, for they can be improved by so many simple means, through taxation, through change of government, through revolution, perhaps. But my dissatisfaction with life is much deeper, for there is a discontent within myself, as if I am at the bottom of all this conflict. Some slight physical indisposition, perhaps caused by some undigested food, may upset me beyond all reasonableness, and stay with me the whole day long, conditioning all my relationship and contacts throughout the day. It cannot be that little physical discomfort which has upset me. Now I am angry with myself for being so easily upset; and that is a thing I cannot get away from. And so, my conflict is really with myself. I had a fairly good idea of myself, of being well-balanced in my judgement and behaviour; but I have let myself down by some miserable little piece of undigested muscle-fibre, or whatever it was.

I am in conflict; and I am that conflict. I had a mighty big opinion of myself; and now feel like a deflated tyre with which I am stuck. Inflation won't help, because there is a hole in the tube. And so I patch up that hole. But I know too, that I am still as vulnerable as before. There has been a stoppage, but no cure. It is this vulnerability, then, which is the cause of my conflict: I have let myself down. All my striving for perfection, for learning, for virtue, is mere patches on that hollow tube which is myself, which has to be fully inflated to be of any use. And that is the second truth about the cause of conflict (*dukkha-samudaya*). I am in conflict, a fact proved by my continued search: and I am myself the cause of that conflict. I am conflict, because I refuse to accept what I am; and because I try to become what I am not. In this attempted escape from facts I create new problems without even trying to understand what the conflict is all about.

It is the understanding of the cause of this conflict which is the third truth, it is so simple really:

- Fact No. 1: I am inflated as a water-bubble.

- Fact No. 2: A child pricks me, and the bubble is gone.
- Fact No. 3: The bubble was merely some air, caught in a film of water, senseless, meaningless, valueless; but still a bubble.

It is not in restoring that bubble which can make conflict cease, but in seeing the nature of the conflict in the nature of the bubble. In the understanding of the nature of the conflict and of its cause lies the cessation of both (*dukkha-nirodha*), not by suppression, not by action, not by sublimation, but by seeing and understanding that all conflict is caused by the opposition of an ideal to the real.

Having now discovered, at least in theory, the structural fault in the composition of the building of the “self”, which is the answer to the question: What is conflict?, there now remains the question: How to remedy that faulty construction? If the fault is in the foundation, the building has to come down. It is only on a new foundation that one can build a life of righteousness.

Whether we call it a foundation or a way, it must be a totally new approach to the realities of life.

It is the fourth truth, which the Buddha presents in the form of a path, for it was this middle path by which he avoided the two extremes of sadism and masochism. It is a path (*magga*) of right thinking, speaking and acting. It is the noble eightfold path with the predominance on right thought as views (*diṭṭhi*), intentions (*saṅkappa*), mindfulness (*sati*) and concentration (*samādhi*). The remaining four are given as right action (*kammanta*) and effort (*vāyāma*), as right speech (*vācā*) and right living (*ājīva*).

This is the contents of the first discourse wherewith the Buddha set rolling the wheel of righteousness (*dhmma-cakka*). It is comprehensive, but not detailed and although it was sufficient for the five ascetics to regroup themselves as followers of the Buddha, just as the bodily senses will follow the lead of the liberated mind, it was only one of them who was able to set his first step (*sotāpatti*) on the path of deliverance. It needed a further

discourse on the essential teaching of non-entity (*anatta*) to bring all five to full comprehension and enlightenment as Arahants.

Non-Entity

Of all essentials, this doctrine of soullessness or non-entity is not only the most essential of all three characteristics (*ti-lakkhaṇa*), but it is also so distinct, that it is the sign of Buddhahood, which is not to be found in any other religion.

The purpose of religion in general is the preparation in this life for a better life hereafter. The nature of such future life may vary in many systems, but the belief in a spiritual entity to survive the death of the body, to reap in a future life its due reward or punishment, is so essential to all religious structures, that this forms the basis and motive of all morality, purification and ultimate beatification in union with God or his equivalent concept of the absolute. Without such belief those religions (Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam) are meaningless. Even materialistic systems of philosophy, although rejecting the existence of spiritual entities as soul or God, accept the existence of a substance to support the appearance of phenomena.

It is only in the teaching of the Buddha that there is an unconditional denial of the existence of an entity in any form or essence, substance or soul, Brahman or God. There have been atheistic religious systems as the Sāṃkhyas, but none dared to go the whole way in the denial of personal entity, of an individual or universal soul.

To understand this Buddhist standpoint, we have to take the three characteristics (*ti-lakkhaṇa*) together, for they are so linked that they cannot be understood separately.

They are the three marks of distinction¹ impermanence (*anicca*), conflict (*dukkha*) and non-entity (*anatta*).

Merely to see the impermanence of everything cannot lead to deliverance through insight, for the knowledge of impermanence will cause a desire for permanence, for continuance, for eternity. The awareness of conflict (*dukkha*) would naturally lead to a search for an escape. And indeed, the knowledge of these two characteristics has peopled the monasteries all over the world in an acceptance of an ultimate escape from death in life eternal.

And indeed, when conflict is not seen in impermanence (*anicca-dukkha*), there will be a necessary search for the opposite, as permanent, as bliss, as heaven, as beatific vision, as life eternal. In Buddhism there is no such search for an escape-route from conflict, sorrow, or general unsatisfactoriness. But we are urged to find out why there is conflict in the experience of impermanence.

The experience of impermanence is universal, so universal that archaeologists would be surprised to find in their diggings a vase or vessel which was not broken. Whatever is breakable will break. Whatever is composed will decompose (*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*). This decomposability is then the inherent nature of all that is composed. We know it; but do we accept the fact? We build houses to withstand a cyclone. We erect monuments for the dead to make them live on in our memory. We live and work not for to-day, but to make to-morrow secure. We know impermanence as universal, but we refuse to accept the fact. Every action which is planned we perform with an eye on the future. Even in the world of spiritual thought this present life is but a preparation for a life to come. We have invented systems and theories of survival which form the basis of our education, of our beliefs, our traditions and religions. Without survival life to-day would be meaningless; and so we invent a purpose, a goal, which will carry us a Step forward in hope and also in fear.

Fear is there, because although our life is based on the con-

¹See the present author's separate work on this subject.

cepts of progress and evolution, there is the underlying knowledge that growth is at the cost of decay, that everything becoming is also ceasing, that nutrition can come only through absorption. Thus, knowing the nature of all to be impermanent, we yet live and make our lives secure to continue, to produce, to propagate, to make to-morrow. It is the nature of things, it is our nature, to be impermanent, because all component things are decomposable.

But the fight goes on, even with the knowledge of fighting a losing battle: for, without that struggle for life there would be no chance of survival. It is then the will-to-survive, which is the will-to-become, the will-to-resist, which refuses to accept defeat, and will fight the impermanent in the hope and with the fear of survival.

Such is the conflict (*dukkha*) which is not in the nature of impermanence, but in the nature of resistance to impermanence (*anicca-dukkha*). In order to be, to exist, to live, to act, I have to become, to continue, to struggle, to expand, to resist; for, without such action I cannot be. This conflict is the second characteristic of all that lives and thinks, and grows and moves, an essential characteristic (*lakkhaṇa*); to exist I have to resist. Thus, striving becomes essential to living, as growth is essential to life.

And what is living in resistance? What is living in conflict? What is conflict? It is the war between the ideal and the real. I have created an image of the permanent in the substance of phenomena, in the soul of the body, in the relative to the absolute. But it is still an image, a concept, an ideal. And that image is my own self: that concept is my own thought: that ideal is my own projection. "Thou art That"!

It is a categorical necessity, as Kant said; but the categories are of my own making. Without them I am not! I cannot think without thoughts; I cannot move without a goal; I cannot survive without an ideal. Then I am that thought, I am that goal, as I am that ideal. And without that, there is no "self". See the non-entity of conflict (*dukkha-anatta*) and there will be no conflict in impermanence (*anicca-dukkha*). The "I" which resists is but a

concept, conceived by the will-to-become. In desire there arises the opposition, in which the “I” is only the reaction to a wilful action.

Action

Existence then is becoming, and becoming is action. When all activity ceases there is death. In life there is no stagnancy, as there is no stagnancy in a river. But becoming means change; and change is impermanent. When thought seeks the permanent, even then it is change from the impermanent, which is the object and the nature of the search. But, that is still change, that is still impermanent. Thus, the very search for the permanent is a contradiction, a conflict, because searching is essentially impermanent; and the object a mere concept of a transitory thought.

Thought itself is moving towards its object; and this movement is change. When there is no change, there is no thought; and when there is no thought, there is no will; and when there is no will, there is no action.

All action then is reaction, either mechanical or volitional. Mechanical reaction is the result of physical pressure of a depression, of the need to fill a vacuum. Volitional activity is caused by choice, which is an attempt to fill a psychological vacuum. One chooses through ignorance, because when there is full understanding, there is no doubt and no choice. Choice involves indecision, doubt, a motive, a desire, which is a want, a psychological vacuum. When the flame consumes the oxygen in burning, the temperature rises, and a depression a low is formed which brings in new fuel. So the mind consumes in craving and thereby brings in more food for thought. It feeds on thought, and thought is the reaction to contact in sensation. Just as a

flame must burn, and in burning requires new fuel, so the mind in feeding its thought requires the action of desire, of volition, to maintain itself. That volitional action is karma.

It is not only that the “I” *wants* to consume, it *must* consume in order to exist at all. Thus, becoming is the essence of action, just as action is the essence of existence, as thought is the essence of the mind, as will is the essence of life.

Buddhism is a philosophy of change and impermanence (*anicca*), that is, of movement, of action (*karma*) and reaction, in which there is no static element (*anatta*), no entity, no substance, soul or God. Thus it is a pure philosophy without speculation about ultimates or idealised concepts, even of matter. Thought is a reaction of sensation, when the senses come into contact with phenomena. Sensation, then, is a collision between two movements. As long as each movement tries to enforce its progress, there is a conflict (*dukkha*), which is most evident when the movement of thought wants to absorb that reaction in order to strengthen, consolidate, continue its movement.

The movement is natural, and so is its contact. But the desire to continue is the will to conquer, to absorb, to assimilate; it is an attempt to stabilise the movement of change, without which there can be no continuance of endurance, that is, no future, no goal, no permanence, the only basis for survival of an “I”. Becoming must change into being for possessions and properties to have any meaning at all. It is then this “I” which gives meaning to property by craving and clinging to its sensation. The “I” must crave to become; and it must become to exist; and in order to exist must resist the impermanent. That is conflict (*dukkha*), the resistance to the impermanent (*anicca*), the struggle to exist, the categorical necessity to resist in order to exist. The will-to-be causes the urge-to-become.

Without the urge-to-become, which is craving, there can be no will-to-exist. Without this will-to-exist, there can be no ideal of progress, and no identification with such ideal. The identification is an expression of the need to be an entity in

existence; for, in a process of change there is no entity and hence no permanence. This need of identity is, then, a reaction to the process of movement, of change, of impermanence, a reaction to the desire to exist, the urge to resist, the need to become. The "I" is, therefore, just a reaction and a refusal to accept the flow of existence which is both life and death.

This vicious circle is symbolised as the wheel of *Samsāra*, a wheel which not only has no beginning and no end in its circumference, but which by nature must rotate. This rotation of the wheel of life is the process of evolution, of dependent origination, which is at the same time a process of involution, of dependent cessation. And the hub of that wheel is its essence; but it is hollow, empty, void, a non-entity.

Rebirth

If one fails to understand the past as it presents itself in the present, in memory, it is not a lack of knowledge, but it is by being possessed, which prevents one from letting the past go. Only seeing the past as dead can bring the present to life, not a revival or a continuance of the past, which is but grasping at death, but in understanding that the present need not be a reaction to what is dead, and in creative insight that the present is always new, when unconditioned by clinging to experiences of the past.

The man who is creative has not been educated to become so; he cannot be made or conditioned; he cannot make himself so. He, who wants to become creative, original, independent, free, will never be so: his wanting it will prevent it.

It is a mind which refuses to accept whatever is conditioned, such a mind is free. It is the action which refuses to follow tradition and then to become its reaction, such an action is creative. It is the will which refuses to choose, and then be conditioned by the object of choice, such a will is free of choice and independent. He is free from willing. Thus, when the mind is free and creative and independent, there is unconditioned activity in understanding, a freedom from willing in seeing what is right, an independent approach without motive or purpose in action, which is fresh and free in every new moment, meeting a challenge with an open mind, acting with understanding and insight, which is truly creative.

In opposition there is “self” and conflict. In creation there is understanding and insight and love in work, thought, word and deed.

Life is a struggle for existence, for continuance, to be and to become, that is, a struggle for rebirth. But the saddest in this struggle is that the cause of this conflict is an illusion. It need not be so; it cannot be so; and yet it is so: life is conflict! Life is bondage when the “self” is seen as an isolated object, when that object wants to become a free subject, when that subject acts in opposition and creates conflict, when that “self” wants to become free and cannot be independent, for the very concept of “self” is born in opposition, in conflict, in bondage. Life is conflict, but it need not be so. It cannot be so, if it is seen and understood without projection, without illusion, without desire. Can there be a desire for an illusion, if that illusion is understood as such?

Then, why does this “self” struggle on, so that life itself is a struggle to be and to become? Without becoming, without continuance, there is no “self” for the future; and thus there is fear in the present. This fear has as its object the concept of loneliness, of the void, of loss. It is not a loss of property; but a loss of “self”, of identity, of being nobody, that becomes the object of fear. And yet, this concept of loneliness is as much delusion as the concept of “self” as an entity, as an identity. Only in the understanding of the void of this concept can be experienced the void of fear, the void or conflict (*dukkha-anatta*). There is no conflict, apart from the delusion of conflict.

The continuation of the process of living includes not only the formation of new cells and tissues of the body, but also the discarding of waste material. In this one process there is growth and decay, evolution and involution, life and death. In fact, life is death, just as growth can only take place at the cost and decay of nutriment.

Then, where is the “I”, the soul, the entity, the basis of this entire process? The “I” is the reaction of ignorance which does not understand the nature of action, which will not allow the stream

of experiencing to pass, and therefore, dissociates itself from experiencing, in order to preserve the memory of an experience as the experiencer. In delusion, the thinker remains, while thought moves on. That is the “I”.

But, what is the thinker, the actor, apart from thought and action? Can there be a subject without the verb to act on the object? It is the action which is the actor; and their separation is but a delusion created for the purpose of continuance. Walking as an action has to cease. But when the walk is over, is there a walker to continue?

Such is the Buddhist teaching of karma and rebirth. It is action which in its volition to continue must produce a reaction, the “I”. The “I”-concept, then, is the reaction (*vipāka*) of volitional action (*kamma*). A mere physical reaction to satisfy a natural need has no desire for continuance beyond that immediate satisfaction of a need. But, when the reaction to a need becomes a desire for continuance, then there is greed (*taṇhā*) which makes the “I” become. Where need (hunger, thirst, rest) calls, there is a need for immediate physical attention. But when there is greed aiming at a future mental satisfaction (security, power, continuance), that is the birth of the ideal of “self”, of entity, of permanence, of soul. It is the reaction of thought to become. That is the “I”.

Such is the concept, the understanding of rebirth without a soul, not a transmigration of some spirit, but rather the understanding of action becoming reaction, conditions becoming causes of effects. It is not the “self” which is reborn as an entity or soul, but action becoming reaction, need becoming greed, thought becoming a thinker, an idea becoming the ideal; it is the rebirth of a concept conceived in ignorance, producing chaos and conflict.

When the self is the object of one’s search, either perceptual or conceptual, that cannot be the searcher, the subject. Thus, if there is a search, the object is only a concept, a reflection, an idea; and that is the self. A reflection of what? A reflection of a desire to be, to become, to endure, to project. Without that desire

there is no concept, no ideal; and without ideal, there is nothing to strive for, no desire; without concept there is no thought, no idea, no image, no goal.

Then, what is? There is only this moment of perception. And when there is no reflection of memory in this perception, and when there is no projection of desire in this perception, then there is only the present action of understanding what is: namely, the process of change, the delusion of reaction, the conflict of escape, the void of identity; and from that understanding arises the need to act, which is not the greed of reaction. And that is the end of rebirth.

Conditioned Origination

This conception of the process of rebirth without a surviving entity or a transmigrating soul, entering a new body at the death of the former one, raises the natural question: If there is no connecting entity, then what is the connecting link?

According to Buddhism there is no imperishable substratum which carries over from birth to birth the burden of reward or punishment. But, just as each act conditions the next one, so each thought influences and conditions the next thought. It is not a chain of causation which causes or creates the effects, but each deed contains the seed for propagation. It is indeed the very nature of an action to produce its reaction, its result. But it is also the result which as an ideal has brought about the activity, as a target attracts the arrow, as a desirable object attracts the will to possess. In that action-reaction relationship there is nothing passing over; and yet there is the conditioned connection which leads to the origination of the result. The seed contains the faculty of developing into a full-grown tree of the same type, and yet different in so many details which are conditioned by many influences not directly linked with its cause.

The process of passing on the energy, without an entity carrying over the impact, has been illustrated in many ways. There is the simile of the billiard-balls: A ball is set rolling for some distance, when it sets the next ball in motion. Nothing material has passed over from ball to ball; and yet each ball gives motion to

the next one by its impact. And that motion is far from accidental, but gives it a certain predetermined direction to carry on.

Similarly, from the pre-condition of ignorance (*avijjā*) have arisen in a previous existence the intentions which were formed into actions (*saṅkhāra*). These mental formations became the resultant thought (*viññāṇa*) which was the beginning of a new cycle of life in body and mind (*nāmarūpa*), with its six fold sphere of sensations (*saḷāyatana*) leading to contact (*phassa*). Contact will bring about the actual sensation (*vedanā*), which then may result in craving (*taṇhā*) and clinging (*upādāna*).

It is at this stage, when sensations develop into desire, that a new cycle starts when the results of the past become active conditions in the present, assisting in the formation of further results and reactions. It is in craving and clinging that desire is born for continuance and becoming (*bhava*), which together form the conditions for the origination of a new life (*jāti*) with its consequences of birth, conflict and death (*jāti-jarā-maraṇa*) in a subsequent life.

Here then we see the past, present and future linked together, not by a chain of causal activity, but by a wilful bringing about of conditions which may produce the reactions of the desired kind. Many may be the circumstances which could prevent such reaction to take shape; or perhaps intensify or modify or weaken the effects. And that makes the “law” of conditioned origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*) not a rigid law of causality. Here is no inexorable predestination either in grace or in disgrace, but an opportunity to develop in evolution, in understanding, in insight, when action may not be used as a means to reaction, and which then may not lead to further rebirth.

Action which does not lead on is an act of perfection in itself. It has no motive, no hope to continue in the future, because it was not born out of fear in the past. A perfect action is an act of understanding, an act which spontaneously bursts forth through insight, through comprehension of the need of action, without being motivated by greed. Such karma knows no volition and

produces, therefore, no karmic result (*vipāka*) which is rebirth. An act without volition is an act of emancipation, in which there is no projection, and no projector. That is deliverance.

Morality Through Meditation

What we lack is intelligence to be a Buddhist. And knowing that, what are we going to do about it? Knowledge is not intelligence. Knowledge can be acquired, cultivated, stored in books. But intelligence is insight; it is the direct apprehension of what is.

Knowledge is necessary, even if it is only memory of what has been learned, so that it can be recalled when necessary. Knowledge is very necessary for daily life, for preparing now the path of life for to-morrow. He who begins to learn how to produce his food when he gets hungry will have died long before his labour could have produced any fruit. Knowledge is necessary for the fulfilment of daily needs; to make the machines to make the clothes we are going to wear; to make the bricks to build the house in which we are going to live.

But there are deeper needs which seek fulfilment which cannot come through the satisfaction of the senses. Hunger is not a problem if one can work. But it becomes a problem, if one is ashamed to work. If one cannot work, hunger may drive one even to steal. Is stealing wrong in an unjust society which withholds the opportunity to live? The question can only be answered by one who is actually experiencing such privation. As for us, are we right in supporting such society? It is easy to lay down a commandment: Thou shalt not steal. It is easy to formulate a rule of conduct: I undertake the precept to abstain from stealing.

But are we honest in the work for which we are being paid? Am I honest when I pretend to be different from what I am? Do I understand what I am, and what I am doing?

Such understanding does not come through knowledge, through legislation, through codes of morality such understanding can come only through insight, which is not the knowledge of effects, but which is seeing what is, what I am doing now, what I am. Then, if I see that I am a hypocrite, claiming my dues, clamouring for rights while refusing to do my duty, if I truly see and understand that I am stealing time for which I am paid, using the property of others, of the state, as if it were my own, I shall cease doing it, for I cannot live and see myself truly as a double-dealing hypocrite, Seeing myself as I am in fact, I shall cease being a hypocrite, a liar in my own eyes. But that needs courage and strength. Yet, to see the false as false is truth. It may not be the truth as I have made it in my ideal, but it is the truth in which the false has no place, the real in which there is no place for an ideal.

Life is not an abstract concept; it is living together in relationship. And when I set myself up in isolation, in opposition, in exploitation, then there is obviously no relationship at all. And that is immoral, unhealthy, unwholesome. A wholesome life (*kusala*) is a life without chaos and conflict; that means a life without egotistic isolation. Thus, ethically as well as psychologically, the Buddha's teaching of no-self (*anatta*) stands supreme, not as a high standard of morality based on ethical principles, but as a life based on the sincerity of insight.

Insight is the deepest comprehension of the nature of things. This is not a definition, but a description of an inward experiencing, which can come only through meditation.

Meditation as mind-culture (*bhāvanā*) is best known as concentration (*samādhi*) which may lead to tranquillity of mind (*samatha-bhāvanā*). There are found in various, texts and commentaries forty different objects for concentration, but none of them is exclusively Buddhist. Concentration on an object means

just what the name implies: the fixing of one's thought on one centre. In doing so, there is a culturing of thought, restricting it, preventing it from wandering, and perhaps through the elimination of discursive thinking even of spiritual joy and mental ease, bringing thought to one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*) in which there can be an experience of equanimity or even-mindedness (*upekkhā*). In such state of absorption (*jhāna*) the mind is tranquil without distraction, by means of exclusion of all undesirable factors and hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) of lust and hate, of sloth, agitation and perplexity. It is a state of mind in seclusion, and the experience is one of tranquillity.

But life is not like that. Relationship is not tranquil, but is more often than not disturbing one's peace of mind. It is that disturbance which is avoided in the exclusive thought of mental concentration.

Avoidance, however, is an escape, rather than a solution. One may close one's eyes so as not to see evil; one may close one's ears to the demands of living in relationship. But, avoidance in seclusion can never solve the problem of a disturbed relationship. When there is hate in my heart, I may try to forget it by concentrating on loving kindness; but that is only an escape from the fact that there is hate. And there is hate as long as the "I" remains in opposition, in seclusion, refusing to see what is.

Without cultivating opposite virtues (as if virtue could ever be made to grow!), let there be awareness and acceptance of the fact of hate in my heart. See it, and live with it, as a mother with her sick child. Then, what happens? What can happen if I do not run away from it in order to become kind? There is hate, which is not an evil or sinful quality which I can shed like an overcoat. There is no hate in itself; there is only hating; and "I" am hating. I do not have hate which I can throw away as a rotten apple. I am hate because I am in opposition. I am aggression, because I am expanding. I am envy, because I am resisting. I am rotting with decay, while I refuse to die to myself.

Every action of this "self" is one of ambition, of aggression,

of acquisition (even if it is virtue), from the lowest gathering of merit to the highest striving for attainment. It is always “self”: May I attain Nirvāṇa! In self-righteousness there is striving for attainment of an ideal “self”, without understanding, without insight. Is that morality?

Seeing all this and understanding its value, can I still strive to become good and virtuous? Is not one’s very desire to become virtuous an admission of one’s unwholesomeness? And I am unwholesome, because I am “I”, because I am isolation, opposition, exploitation, hypocrisy, even when I speak of tolerance and forbearance. In love there is no thought of “self”, there is no thought of “I am in love”. In love there is no you, but only loving. As in ecstasy the “I” is not there: there is no “I” in experiencing. The “I” is there only in the memory of an experience which must be retained, because without that memory there is no “I”.

Meditation-exercises of concentration have as their focus the attainment of tranquillity in which the “I” can be at peace. But in the meditation which is insight, (*vipassanā*) there is no exercise, because there is no goal of attainment. To see things as they are (*yathā-bhūtañāṇa-dassana*) does not require an escape, an exclusion from the ugly or from the false. For, there is no ideal of beauty or of truth. There is only awareness (*sati*) of what is, without making ideals. And in the intelligent awakening through awareness there is only experiencing what is. And that is truth.

The beauty of the mountains I may behold; but what experience is only my reaction to such perception. Thus, “I” am that beauty, as I am that hate which has no basis in itself. Thus seeing beauty or seeing hate, seeing love or seeing agitation, it is seen as a reaction of that “self” which wants to become the ideal of non-hate, non-violence, non-aggression. But my ideal of non-aggression is only an ideal of security, so that “I” shall be free from aggression, and safe.

Living now in the present is not a self-projection, and thus there is no attachment when there is no “I”. There is no striving-to-become, to attain, to achieve, to suppress, to avoid. There is

only the awareness of action which tries to become a reaction.
And seeing thus, that is understanding; in thus understanding
there is insight; in insight there is freedom.

Nibbāna

Enough has been said. Why speak further on the unspeakable? There may be lurking some misconception of Nibbāna, as the supreme goal of attainment, as the highest bliss, the ultimate deliverance. But its nature of deliverance (*vimutti*) is in the freedom from attachment (*nirvāṇa*). It is then in the understanding of attachment that the freedom thereof can be experienced. Attachment is caused by a delusion of continuance and permanence. One cannot be attached to the sight of a moving cloud. One may try to recapture the mood in which the awareness was awakened; one may take a photo to recall the time and place; but nothing of all that is the actual experiencing. Our attachment is an attempt to make the experience last, because only in continuance can there be a lasting satisfaction. That is the work of memory which has created the “I” as an actor who can survive the roll in his play and call it back at will.

The understanding of this function of the “I” can prevent an experience to become an attachment. Such realisation sees the working of memory as an attempt at making an experience last. It is the search for continuance which is attachment. And the freedom from attachment is then the freedom from the delusion of continuity.

Continuity is not the continuation of the experience, but rather of the experiencer who can retain the memory and thus relive the past in the future. Thus, the realisation of deliverance can come through any one of the three characteristics, as they are

intrinsically bound together. It is the “I” which wants to continue and which retains memory for that purpose, but which in doing so causes a conflict between this ideal of permanence and the reality of impermanence. It is then, in the realisation of non-entity, of non-self, of non-continuity, that the experiencing of impermanence ceases to be a conflict. When there is no conflict, there is no desire for escape or for attainment, no will-to-become, no reaction which is rebirth.

And thus, Nibbāna is not only the extinction of desire (*āsavakkhaya*), but also the cessation of becoming (*bhavanirodha*). There is no place, no opportunity for, further striving, as there is the complete understanding through insight that there is no “self”. Then, action will not re-act, love will not attach, understanding will not be knowledge but insight. With that insight, the nature of “self” has been fully understood, and cannot be revived in rebirth.

It is of that unspeakable freedom of deliverance that some Arahants have spoken in their mystic language of the burden which has been laid down, of the fire which was extinguished, of the crossing of the flood, of the day’s duty done. There is the famous passage in the Udāna (v. 80): “there is an unborn, a not-become, a not-made, a non-composite ...for if there were not, it would be impossible to be freed from what is born, become, made or conditioned.” It is not to be understood as if Nibbāna were an entity; for, though it is not conditioned (*asaṅkhata*) and hence cannot be created (*akata*), it is without entity, just as anything whatsoever (*sabbe dhammā anattā*). Thus, Nibbāna cannot be compared with the absolute Brahman.

It indicates the state of the Buddha and the Arahant in such a transformation of consciousness, that all terms of birth, becoming, originating and conditioning are totally inapplicable to a mind which is entirely set free, not born from fear of loss, not become with hope of attainment, not made in the conditioning of tradition, not composite in the conflicting formations of thought. This Nibbāna, then, is not a goal to be attained as heavenly bliss or beatific vision, but a complete transformation of approach,

understanding and insight, unconditioned by hope and fear, by memory and projection, by any thought of “self” in which relationship is misunderstood in opposition and conflict. It is not an ideal to strive for, but the freedom from all such composite conditionings which are the limitations of “self”-identification.

In this complete re-orientation, thought has been replaced by intuition, knowledge by insight, striving by experiencing, virtue by perfection, concentration by contemplation, conventional truth by realisation, the Bodhisatta-ideal by the reality of Buddhahood, Saṃsāra by Nibbāna.

They are not opposites in the sense of antipodes, for, where one (*Nibbāna*) is, the other is not. Saṃsāra, a process of delusion and conflict is a misapprehension with the view of permanency as an ideal goal; and thus it has no real existence. It is ignorance and void. All experiences in that void are equally meaningless. And so “I” the concept of an experienter.

It is experiencing this void, that there is freedom and understanding, which is free from conflict, just because the concept of conflict is based on the concept of “self”, a delusion. Only when concepts cease, there is pure experiencing without recognition, classification, identification, the means of making the “self” become. In the pure experiencing of that total freedom, there is the deliverance of Nibbāna.

May such understanding be the guide of all our actions. May all our actions be free.

About the Author

Henri van Zeyst was born in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in 1905. Educated throughout in Catholic schools and colleges, he spent his final years of studies in philosophy and theology and the first year of his priestly ordination in an Italian monastery near Florence. At the age of 31 he was sent to London to be in charge of a new foundation of his Order, where he was also teaching Dogmatic Theology to the scholastics of Christus Rex Priory in North London. An intensive course of comparative religion brought him in contact with Buddhism. Within a year of his coming to Sri Lanka he was ordained a Buddhist monk there in 1938 under the name of Bhikkhu Dhammapāla. From 1956 to 1968 he worked at the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism at the University of Ceylon in Peradeniya of which he was in the final years of that period the Senior Assistant Editor and Administrative Officer. During the last stages of his life he was residing in a meditation centre at Nilambe, Kandy, giving instructions to those who came to him for guidance on meditation.

He died on September 15th in 1988.