

BURNING QUESTIONS



HENRI VAN ZEYST

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Henry van Zeyst

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Preface

The following pages contain some almost complete lectures delivered by Rev. Bhikkhu Dhammapala during his Vas-season in our town. They are his answers to some of the most vital and burning questions of our modern times, questions of the deepest interest especially to Buddhist Students. Hence the Panadure Buddhist Students' Union, under whose auspices these lectures were organised, gratefully accepted the offer of Mr. P. Robert Dias of Panadure, as sponsor and patron of this series, to have these talks printed and published. Our only regret is that the continuation of paper-control forbade us to publish the whole series. As condensation would have made the matter unnecessarily difficult, we thought it better to publish only three lectures in almost full length.

The discussions which followed were many times as interesting as the lectures themselves. We therefore express our hope that this booklet may be of service to study-circles, for it is through discussion and exchange of thoughts that a clearer understanding of the subject can be obtained.

According to the wish of the sponsor the proceeds of the sale will go partly to the furtherance of the All-Ceylon Buddhist Students' Union. We are happy to express here once more our gratitude for his generous support.

Rajah Salgado,
Hony. Secr. P.B.S.U., Panadure, 14th October, 1945

Do We Need Religion?

To ask people who publicly and privately profess to adhere to anyone of the great world religions: Do we need religion? may appear to be a very improper question and even a shocking one. But as long as we are sincere, no serious question can be scandalous; if we are rational, no truth should be too holy to be doubted.

The question: Do we need religion? is not merely a question which can be discussed and put off or dismissed. It is a vital question, a burning question, especially in this age of scepticism, a question which dominates our whole life in such a way, that its positive or negative answer might alter our mode of living completely together with our world-view.

A need is an imperative demand for the presence or possession of something. It is the want of something. Thus the question first becomes: Do we want religion? And the straight-forward reply, uttered by nobody, but expressed in everyone's actions is: No. For as soon as Man is placed before the choice between eternal, spiritual gain and some little, temporary, material profit, his religious principles will be ignored, he will compromise with his conscience, truth will be sacrificed, and his action will show that religion is not wanted. This compromising attitude, which is a betrayal of the truth, is not only found in people who live in a world of worry and care, but equally among those whose profession is the religious life.

Religion, which is said to be a search for truth is frequently nothing else but a secret desire for comfort and security. If com-

fort can be obtained, few there are who will not try, even at the cost of the truth. Can those still maintain that they want religion, if they intentionally turn their back toward the object of their search? It is said that the Bodhisatta in his incalculable series of lives preparing himself for Buddhahood never uttered an untruth, whatever may have been his other actions. For how would he ever have been able to attain that goal, if he would have frustrated his search by the use of means so utterly incongruous with the end in view? When we say that we want religion, that we are religious, but when our actions belie our words, are we sure about the end? Do we really know what we want?

Religion is one of those words which are kept conveniently vague enough to allow ample liberty to escape its more precise implications. We make of religion a system of dogmas so that we need not think too much, but may blindly believe and be saved. We make of religion a system of rites, so that we may rely upon their efficacy and be saved by them. We make of religion a system of philosophy, so that we may speculate and discuss problems which belong to a different field. We prefer to embrace a ready made religion rather than to make our own, like we follow an old custom of fashion, because we lack the initiative to think out our own problems. Thus if we want religion, it is not so much because we feel the exasperating need of it, but rather because we do not want to be without it. We want religion like we want the pictures with their frames in our room. We do not require them, but we just do not want to look at bare walls, we do not want to be without them.

And so religion has become like a decoration in our life, not a part of it; it has become stereotyped like a picture, and framed also by cramped convention and dead ritualism. Religion, as we want it, is not the religion which grows as an inner necessity, but it is a construction which can be built like a church, a temple or a mosque. A world without religion would mean for many a world without celebrations and processions, like a picture without colour, a poem without rhyme. Few there are who can appreciate

the beauty of lines, the strength of rhythm, the essence of religion. Few there are who feel the need of saving the world instead of saving self. Hence we may say of the greater majority that though they call themselves followers of some religion or other, yet they do not want religion, because they attach themselves to the particulars and let the essential go as soon as something more tangible in the shape of immediate profit comes their way.

Why is this so? Because those who think in terms of profit—whether it is monetary gain or spiritual merit—think always in terms of self. Self is sought where self is nearest; and as comfort on earth is nearer than bliss in heaven, God will have to wait a while, till the little self is satisfied. The man in need learns to pray when he cannot help himself. Here indeed lies the origin of religion. Man makes the religion he wants, and as his wants are rooted in craving, as they are conceived in ignorance and born from fear, so his religion will be rooted in craving, the child of delusion and superstition.

“Mundus vult decipi”, man wants to be deceived. Like on the market every vendor advertises his goods as the best, so from every pulpit we hear the most fantastic claims of superiority, divine origin or supernatural attainments, the most vague promises of an endless future of bliss, the most contradictory confusion even between those who preach the same gospel. And every seller finds a buyer, for though many have some notion of being exploited and cheated, it is still easier to follow than to lead. The sellers of religion find their buyers because they present their wares in the form which is wanted. Thus religion becomes, as it was defined by one of Sir James Barrie’s characters: “the thing that interests you most”. Religion becomes a hobby according to the interests of the individual. The intellectual finds his philosophic religion in dogmas and speculative theories; the artist finds his religion in the beauty of nature, which he takes as a reflection of God’s goodness and creative power; the man with desires finds his religion in a life of expectation of everlasting happiness in heaven; the simpleton finds his religion in a super-

stitious protection against his own fears. Thus religion becomes the pursuit of science or art, the pursuit of a desire, or a means of escape. The religion which is wanted is a search with a motive, it is a process of acquisition, a spiritualized selfishness; hence it is a delusion. The religion which man wants, is not the religion we need.

If true religion is a search for truth, we should not begin by posing some truth as the truth, as the ideal to be attained. For if we strive for an ideal attainment, it ceases to be a search. But if there is no search, if the truth is known already, religion becomes superfluous, true religion therefore must be a religion of the open mind, inviting doubt. In the search for truth mind's attitude should be a readiness to discard what had been considered as truth so far, as soon as truth reveals itself in a higher form. This ready attitude cannot allow any authority either of a doctrine, sacred book or teacher.

It is the pure spirit of research, investigation, and adventure. No previously conceived limits can be allowed, for those would narrow the field of research, while truth might not lie within those limits.

One of these limitations is feeling. Feeling or sentiment is entirely subjective; it is the greatest enemy of objective research. Feeling is selfishness and it is on this basis that the differences between religions are grounded. Feeling leads to attachment, but attachment is a hindrance to progress. Attachment to methods, to teachers, to formulas, to rituals, all that creates stagnancy and can never lead to the truth. A way of life has nothing to do with sacredness; it must be natural, not supernatural. But the religions, all made by man cater for his ignorant wants, for his childish fears, exploit his ignorance and weakness, till man finds himself fettered by the bonds he made himself. Thus religion truly means a fetter (*ligare*—to bind).

But why should man want to be bound? It is the outcome of his lack of understanding, of his undeveloped mind, which, as in the child, produces that sense of the need of support. Like

the child becomes afraid in the dark or in solitude, so the weaker mind, not guided by understanding but by sentiment, feels uncomfortable if not supported, feels uncanny when facing a new problem. Its natural impulse will be of running away: an escape will be sought, a reliance made. These two feelings are actually the creators of all religious emotions and their consequences. The need of reliance is not only an admission of one's own impotency and inferiority, but is really an act of greed for more power; the desire to escape, to avoid the issue, is also an acknowledgement of defeat, not of greed however, but rather of aversion, both deeply rooted in delusion. The will to escape must naturally intensify the desire for support and thus a wish to be bound is merely felt as a safeguard with greater protection. A natural consequence, so natural that it is almost logical and necessary, is prayer and sacrifice, priest and priestcraft, dogma and belief, salvation and sin, and further all that is connected therewith. It is an almost logical consequence, but if the premises are incorrect, the most logical conclusion must be false. And this false conclusion is organized religion.

Organized religion is the religion man has made according to his wants and desires. But the religion we need is quite different. To find the real one should not wander far into the realms of the unreal. If the truth has not disclosed itself for us, if truth still remains a problem to us, can we ever hope to solve that problem by searching elsewhere? The problem of the need of religion rests in me, and thus in me that problem must be solved. Religions are a search for truth, we said already. But does not a search mean a going about, a striving, intensified action? Will this activity not lead us away from the problem? Is this very activity perhaps not the reason why religions fail to show the truth?

What is the religion we need?

Action leads to reaction, cause to effect, striving to separation, all of which are based on the fundamental distinction made by the mind, the distinction of the seeking self and the unattained goal. It is the separation between feeling and thought. Thought is here,

but feeling is elsewhere, when that feeling is an unsatisfied desire. When feeling is satisfied for a moment, thought is elsewhere to seek for further sensation. In that constant separation lies the origin of disharmony, sorrow. In that disharmony and conflict is born that craving for future happiness, for a future life free from struggle, which is shown as the goal of many religions, but which is nothing more elevated than secret self-seeking. The struggling self of to-day is projected in the future and there imagined as a self without conflict. A mere delusion, for the very idea of self must be opposed to others-than-self; the very idea of future bliss and striving thereto involves a planning for escape which again is separation, a cause of further conflict.

Like the problem of birth is not solved by death, so the problem of sorrow is not solved by bliss, for there also the root of the conflict still remains, namely self. The desire for the end of conflict and sorrow leads to the pursuit of the opposite and again we create a religion based on selfishness. The problem like any other problem cannot be solved elsewhere or in the future; its solution lies there where the problem arises. And that is the religion we need.

That problem is *my* problem, hence nobody else can solve it. To follow others is useless, for they were solving their problems. Yet we make of our religious teachers a standard of our life; we wish them to solve the problem for us. This inertia, which paralyzes all who do not feel the need for living the truth for themselves; has made millions throughout the ages believe in dogmas which are irrational, unnatural, only creating more conflict. Hereby they frustrate their own search, for instead of making themselves free, they forge new chains and fetters. Man fears to be free, for to be free means to stand alone, to bear the responsibility for oneself, to take the initiative, to walk the untrodden path—it means to think. Rational though man claims to be, he is most reluctant to think for himself.

If truth is freedom, then morality must be without obligation, life must not be dominated by a god, salvation must not be of

a self, religion must not come from outside. Freedom comes from within; it is within the problem of life that the solution of truth must be found. True freedom cannot be found in the supernatural, but in natural living and thinking. The fear to think must be overcome before the truth can be seen. When thought is freed and action strong enough to follow the lead of thought, then only will the religion we need be put in practice.

Knowledge with a practical application, that is the religious need of all ages. Knowledge which cannot be made practical is vain speculation which develops pride and conceit. Practice without knowledge is blind faith and superstition. But when the universe is understood as natural, and life in the universe—be it intellectual, emotional or passionate—as subject to the same natural laws, then religion also will remain natural; morality will be natural and life will be good and rational.

The most essential point in religion seems to be to experience the need of religion. This however might not lead to a proper solution. For the experience of a need is the feeling of emptiness. This feeling of incompleteness usually will produce a desire to fill that emptiness. Thus an ideal of completeness is set up and a sincere but futile striving is begun toward the attainment of that ideal. The problem is seen merely as a cross-word puzzle, and all sorts of speculations on its solution provide an interesting pastime. That is done by intellectually approaching the subject. One will speak of and discuss the fact of suffering and with patchwork remedies like social service and Beveridge-plans one will try to bring about some improvement. Even though we know the intuition which brought deliverance to Siddhattha Gotama, in us it remains mere knowledge, the knowledge which is also contained in books. But “all formulated doctrines, all books, all speech and even all thought are inadequate to express the full nature of absolute truth” (Dr. Mc Govern). Like a mathematical problem cannot be solved by sentiments of love, so truth cannot be found by logic. The light of enlightenment is burning in every thought, but delusion hides the light like a lamp hidden in a jar. How many

must have come within a hair's breadth from full realisation, like Āḷāra Kālāma, who had realised the plane of Naught and yet could not come to passionlessness (Majjh. 26, *Ariya-pariyesana Sutta*); like Purāṇa Kassapa, who taught non-resistance and denied moral action (Dīgha 2, *Samaññaphala Sutta*), but did not realise "non-self"; like Pakuddha Kaccayāna, who denied a creator, who was not deluded by the seeming opposition of pleasure and pain, of matter and life, and yet believed in the indestructibility of physical elements as well as of a soul, the principle of life (*ibid*).

Similarly, all Buddhists know the doctrine of soullessness but the fact that they still have selfish motives shows that their knowledge has come through learning and not through intuition which is realisation of the truth. For, if it is once realised that individuality is only a series of limitations, a series of actions (kamma) which accumulate, hinder and burden, which lead to the misconception of "self" through which arises the distinction between and you, and which further leads to likes or dislikes—if it is once realised that this is only a process which cannot proceed without the concourse of other processes, then all separateness which is delusion will disappear like darkness because of the sunlight. To bring this delusion to the light there must be virtue, because vice beclouds the mind; there must be renunciation, because attachment binds the mind; there must be learning, to overcome ignorance. But above all there must be tranquillization, where the mind is not longer swayed either by emotional sensation or speculative argumentation. The intuition of pure religion does not solve a problem by supplying the answer. We give an answer to the problems of others; that is what is done by the religions we have fabricated. Those religions can be explained in questions and answers of a catechism. Those solutions are only key-answers, pointers perhaps, but not solutions: the problem still remains. But true religion which is not of dogmas and rituals, but which is life itself, solves the problem by dissolving it, so that no answer is further wanted. Thus the Buddha solved the problem of sorrow, not by procuring happiness to satisfy himself,

not in ending suffering by mortifying and killing himself, but by the intuition in “non-self”. This intuition cannot be given, because it is there already, like the solution of any problem is in the problem itself; it cannot be taught, because it must grow from inner necessity, from necessity through inner development. Thus learning, methodical thinking which is mind control, discussion which enlarges the viewpoint, should not be despised as having nothing to do with religion. On the contrary they are very necessary, preparatory stages, like virtuous conduct and detachment. The problem of which religions are seeking the solution will not solve itself spontaneously, it must become an obsession till the mind becomes free from sorrow and the delusion which-caused it, like a festering wound throws out the pus and the thorn which caused the ulcer.

True religion, the religion we need, cannot be forced on the one hand; it will not come to pass all by itself on the other hand. Misdirected effort and agitation would give a wrong support, taking the delusion of self as the goal of striving. Lack of effort and sloth would lead to faith and fatalism. Hence the Buddha said: “Unstayed and unstriving did I cross the flood. For, when I kept myself stayed then verily sank; when strove hard, then verily was whirled about” (Sām I, 1). The effort required therefore is one of preparation, of clearing, of protection rather, than of creation, production, formation. Even if one understands the vital necessity of the process of breathing to the life of the organism, one should know too that breath is not life, and that mere effort in breathing cannot produce life. With absolute sincerity and a well-disciplined mind the clouds of karma have to pass away by keeping thoughts undefiled. Then only the clear brightness within may shine forth revealing true religion that self is naught; that our problems were delusions; that the solution was to be found in the losing of the separate self; that all the outer manifestations of form and phenomena are not real but symbols; that all the activities of the mind discriminating this and that, big and small,

good and bad, are only based on the illusory distinction between self and non-self, and are hence unreal and imaginary.

The problem caused by the conflict between self and non-self does not cease by the elimination of one party, because, the distinction being unreal, both parties are delusory. To eliminate one and to leave the other would not solve the problem, but only intensify it without chance of solution as the conflict will have been crushed. This trial to eliminate one of the opposing parties is nothing but a desire to escape, a kind of selfishness, even if one calls it "no-self". The problem can only be solved by solving both factors, for then alone when self and other-than-self are seen as delusions, a true amalgamation may take place, thus actually and really solving the problem, ending the conflict without escape, without desire, without selfishness, without striving, without limitation. That is the religion we need. Those who see "self" as the source of craving, and hence as the origin of sorrow, and who then try to overcome sorrow by the elimination of "self", might easily do so with a secret desire for happiness which again would be some subtler kind of self-seeking through a desire to escape from sorrow. But sorrow is as much a delusion as self, And so is pleasure but a delusory expression or self. Only the understanding that both pleasure and pain, both joy and sorrow, are rooted in the artificial distinction between self and non-self, will instead of eliminating one part by the overcoming of self, merely see this delusion as a product of action. Not by counter-action, but by the cessation of activity which leads to distinction, will this delusion disappear.

When the absence of sorrow would leave a void, that emptiness itself will cry out for satisfaction, a sign that "self" is still there. Thus it happens that people make religions to procure eternal happiness for themselves. But the religion which overcomes the delusion and the distinction of self and non-self will not perceive a void when "self" is gone, for it will perceive that disharmony has vanished. The discord is solved in the harmonious unity of an accord, where no more self, no more non-self

or others in their separateness can be distinguished. There can be no individual joy or sorrow any longer, for all individuality has disappeared in the process. In that process lies all reality, while all seeking for security outside to delusion and must lead to disappointment.

In that harmony; in which all self and non-self are lost and where all conflict has come to an end, all search for satisfaction becomes senseless, love is not any longer acquisitive, truth is complete and thus the problem of life solved in itself, and through itself. The want of religion will have vanished through the understanding and overcoming of fear, without rituals, without prayer, without salvation, without God or Gods, by the working out of the problem of self in ourselves: "Self is the saviour of self" (Dhp. v. 160). While the religions man wanted and man made for his own satisfaction and security are the walls of a prison erected by his own fear and ambition, hope, hate and love—the religion we need will break down those very walls of selfishness and bring about freedom and harmony, where joy and sorrow will be neither mine nor others', for they will have disappeared together with the delusions which created them.

What is Life?

Buddhism, like science, is based on the experimental facts of daily life, which are changing phenomena. As such it is progressive and dynamic; it is a living religion, concerned with life.

“To discuss the origin of life is as senseless as the action of a man who should undertake to measure a line and who should not place a mark at the one point which he knows, on which he stands, but should take imaginary points on an endless line, and from them should measure the distance to himself ...a measuring without measure”. (Leo Tolstoi). Man is conscious of life only in himself, only in his own personality. The life of other beings is learned from observation only and from inference. We are conscious of sensations which are fleeting and hence fraught with disappointment. Our aspirations are rarely realized to the full, and as soon as our hopes are fulfilled they leave an emptiness in the absence of the excitement, which their expectation produced. And thus we live for a while and see others live a life, narrow in its limitations, short in its duration, disappointing in its attainments, vulgar in its expectations, miserable in its gratifications.

What is life? Life is significant, i.e., it becomes the goal of striving, or at least a means to attain that goal, only for him who strives to become, to obtain, i.e., for him who walks in craving. If craving is done away with, life loses its significance altogether. Life then is a thing that can only be willed, for life is grasping. It cannot be understood, for grasping is ignorance. But through understanding does ignorance vanish, grasping cease, and life

itself becomes no more. Understanding is the end of the process of becoming.

But what is life? and from where is it becoming?

For those who see life as craving, Bichat's definition is accurate enough, "Life is the sum of the functions which resist death". If death is taken as the symbol of decay and dissolution, i.e. of impermanence, the resistance to that is clinging to existence, striving for permanence, and that is life.

Other definitions from a physiological point of view are too broad or not broad enough. Too broad is Spencer's definition of life as "the continuous adjustment of internal relations to external relations"; for external conditions will always influence the internal conditions of anything, thus forcing a continuous adjustment. Thus the internal relations of water in a liquid state are forced to adjust themselves to the external relations of the fire over which it is placed, the adjustment resulting in the gaseous state of steam. As this is an entirely physical process of inorganic matter, it is clear that this definition of life is too broad. The definition of B  clard that "life is the sum of the phenomena peculiar to organised beings", is incomplete, as intellectual activity is excluded.

The old division of matter into animal, vegetable and mineral is too simple to bring it in line with the advance of science. If only these three kingdoms are allowed, it will be difficult to find a place for microbes, as many are sharply distinguished both from plants and from animals, yet having life. A most startling feature about them is that some kinds never die of old age, but only violently by accident or through crime. Being almost at the bottom of evolution, if we regard the simplicity of structure and of reproduction without sexual process as in bacteria, they are considered by many biologists as the transitory state between "dead" and "life"-matter. But still lower are viruses, sub-microbes, which have not even been observed with the best microscope, whose existence, however, is known to us by the diseases they cause. Biologists confess that they do not yet know whether

virus is a substance (dead) or an organism (living). It means that science has not yet found the criterion of what is living and what is dead. Will the abstract borderline ever be visible to science?

Some bacteria are capable of living in the dark entirely on chemicals without even the assistance of sunlight. These bacteria can produce life out of the indisputably dead. This fact suggests that a bacterium may have been the first kind of organism to evolve from dead matter. Though Pasteur sterilized all kinds of foodstuff by heating up to 76° C. and preventing further contact and interference from outside. Yet bacilli are found to keep alive even in steam of 30 lbs. per square inch pressure and at 120° C. They have been found to retain their vitality after six months in liquid air at 190° C. Professor Joseph Le Comte in his "Correlation of vital with chemical and physical forces" asks: "What is the nature of the difference between the living organism and the dead organism? We want to detect none, physical or chemical. All the physical and chemical forces withdrawn from the common fund of nature and embodied in the living organism, seem to be still embodied in the dead, until, little by little it is returned by decomposition". The chemist brings into contact two elements contained in the atmosphere: hydrogen and oxygen, and by developing a latent force of affinity, he creates a new body, water. In this union of gases, in a water-drop transparent like a gem, are born the germs of organic life, and in their molecular interstices lurk heat, electricity and light, just as they do in the human body. Whence comes this life into the drop of water just born of the union of two gases?

It is nature itself which began experimenting with the production of life from lifeless matter. Today the scientist tries his hand at the same game. But where the scientist's attempts are like a shot in the dark, nature was able to work through a gradual process of evolutionary stages of change, spread out over thousands and thousands of years, beginning from a mass of gas, slowly solidified into a clod, a rock, so called inanimate matter, developing into the slime we call protoplasm, which contains

that principle of life which no analysis can isolate. Through analysis we know the compound of 72 percent oxygen, 13.5 percent carbon, 9.1 percent hydrogen, 2.5 percent nitrogen, and about 3 percent of phosphor, sulphur, calcium, iron, magnesium together with traces of other elements. Yet all these chemical components mixed in just the right proportions do not produce a sign of life. The explanation is not that life has a supernatural origin, but that life instead of being a synthetic compound is a process of evolution itself, which can only evolve itself through innumerable centuries, because every chemical reaction needs its own time. Even if an infinitely wise physicist could order all the necessary chemicals, his wisdom would not be able to reduce millions of reactionary years into a few minutes. "Nature", says the English scientist L.L. Whyte, "has her own rhythm and won't be rushed". The combination of molecules will take a physicist only about a thousandth of a second, but the formation of a colloidal semi-solid will require already a full second. The formation of an organic colloid will take at least a minute. The greater the number of atoms, that have to settle down together, the longer the time must be. And time is the only thing man cannot dispose of; it is the element of time which beats him in his action, while nature can dispose of measureless time to let reactions work out. The scientist's apparent failure to produce life in a test-tube is not due to lack of knowledge or material, but to lack of time. According to a table of estimated times necessary for synthetic processes the formation of protein would require one hour, primitive protoplasm one month, the simplest uni-cellular organism ten years, a protozoan thousand years, a mammal one million of years.

Life seen as a process cannot be made, but is making itself constantly. Seen from a purely physical viewpoint there is no difference between dead matter and living matter, as both are two phases in a process of evolution. Actually the very atmosphere is alive in the physical sense, though it requires grouping together of molecules to form the cells which manifest life. It is this grouping

in evolution, which requires such a period of time over which no scientist can dispose:

As this grouping is going on all the time, there will be not the least difficulty for life to continue its process of evolution, even if atmospheric conditions on this world-planet will not allow the continuation of life in forms as known to us now. A different atmosphere and temperature will merely produce different conditions for life to develop along different lines.

The presence or absence of life can therefore not be judged from external signs only. Immobility of the body, the coldness of surface, the absence of respiration and pulsation, the sunken state of the eye are no unequivocal evidences that life is wholly extinct. Therefore, when news reaches us from Russia that a Doctor Vladimir Negovsky "revives the dead", this should be understood with some reserve. Respiration had ceased, heart-action had come to a standstill and all the other unmistakable signs had made their appearance. But through the combination of artificial respiration with transfusion of blood, a bloodstream which had come to standstill was set into motion again. Air pressed into the sagging lungs forced them to expand, nerve impulses were excited, and thus the stupor which was setting in was thrown off. The effectiveness of the method hinges on a breakneck race against time. To thwart death, intervention must take place within a margin of five or six minutes, before the disintegration of the most highly differentiated and complex braincells sets in. On the other hand, death agony sets in some time before the actual cessation of vital functions, while some tissues die sooner, and others hold out longer. Are perhaps life and death identical, like heat and cold are only different degrees of temperature?

The common definition of life by scholastic philosophy is the activity by which a being moves itself. Motion is here to be understood in the widest sense as equivalent to all forms of change or alteration, including growth, sensuous energy and intellectual cognition as well as local motion, as long as that motion proceeds

from an internal principle, i.e. an immanent action. Thus according to this definition life is an action by which a being intrinsically strives for greater self-perfection. But if this definition is applied in all its rigour, we must conclude that everything lives. For even so-called inorganic matter without one single exception consists literally of that intrinsic striving for self-protection, which is the tendency to preserve and, if possible, to increase its perfection. It is through this striving that gases expand, that matter resists, that forces attract and repel, that elements combine and combined matter dissolves. Thus an engine is supposed to be lifeless, because even if it moves, it does not move by itself, intrinsically, but under the influence of external causes: water, fire, steam. But what about the heat intrinsically developed by the fire? Is that life? What about the heat assimilated by the water like food by a living organism, which changes the water intrinsically into steam? What about the force inherent in concentrated steam? What about the composition of the metal, which by its inherent characteristics gives strength to the whole structure? What about the intrinsic motion of the electrons in their atoms, which motion constitutes the very essence of matter? Can there be electrons which do not move? Can there be steam which is not hot? Can there be concentration which does not try to expand? Can there be fire which does not burn? If all this is not life, then life cannot be defined as intrinsic striving for self-perfection.

Buddhism also considers striving to be of the intrinsic nature of life, yet not unqualified. This striving should be endowed with, or rather proceed from consciousness. Life is called the controlling faculty of life which points to the active, dynamic, self-expressive side of life. It is not a principle of life which like the supposed soul can animate matter or live separate from it. But life is living, like sight is just seeing. As long as one is talking about the Principle of life, seeking to express itself through matter, one might just as well talk about aquosity seeking to express itself through water. Life is not something apart from matter, though there may be matter which is not alive, like wetness is not a

property of hydrogen or of oxygen, though in combining the two gases a liquid is obtained. Why could life not be a product of non-living elements, why could mind not arise from non-mental factors?

In Buddhist conception life is synonymous with consciousness. To constitute life the intrinsic striving for self-perfection must be conscious. Intrinsic motion, whether it expresses itself as locomotion, as growth or as internal change which is decay, is a property of all matter. That this does not constitute life is admitted by all who say that inorganic beings like minerals have no life. But even the fact of having organs is no sign of life. That plants have organs is beyond all doubt. For, as a minimum there is the sense of touch. But is that ruled by consciousness? Plants, unlike a machine, grow and turn towards the light, but do they perceive it? The leaf-movements of the acacia, the mimosa, the sensitive plant, are well known—plants seek their food, for they send out their roots towards humid places and attach their tendrils to find support. Yet all this action does not rise to the level of conscious action, because it does not contain those elements of volition and determination which go into the making of any thought. If a sunflower turns towards the sun, this is no sign of volition or choice or determination, but rather of mechanical determinism, like the needle of the compass turns to the north, like any piece of cardboard will begin to warp, when exposed to the heat of sun or fire. If there would be sunflowers which would not necessarily react upon the influence of the heat of the sun, but could resist it and turn away from it now and then, there would be some evidence of mind and conscious life. The actions of the organs in a plant which seem comparable to touch in mimosa, to smell in carnivorous plants, to sight in sunflowers, can only be explained as mere physical reactions to certain irritations, which would not be greatly different from mechanical, automatic reaction.

Even the fact of growth in the physiological sense of the word is no sign of life, for even the hair and the nails of a corpse continue to grow, as long as there is humour in the body. From

a chemical point of view no difference can be detected between the living organism and the dead organism. All can be reduced to carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen. But animals and men who seek their food, their protection, the propagation of their life intentionally and by selection, at times and by means of choice, show clearly to possess that element of life which is not found in mineral or plant: intellect.

It is thus consciousness alone which distinguishes the living from the dead. Consciousness is life; the process of thought is the process of becoming of living beings. Then a person who is unconscious is not alive?—Unconscious does not stand opposite to consciousness, like the fact of not listening does not disprove the faculty of hearing. Moreover, a person who is unconscious is so only with regard to his environment, but this does not involve that no more thoughts arise.

If consciousness is life, is then the brain the seat of thought as well as of life?

When speaking of the sense-organs, one finds in Buddhism always the enumeration of six senses; sight, sound, odour, taste, touch and thought. When one further learns that sight is in the eye-organ, sound in the ear, odour in the nose, taste in the tongue and touch in the whole body, the natural question arises: Where is the organ of thought? Scientists and medical men in splendid research and experimental work have been able to indicate in the brain the different controlling centres, which regulate motions in the various parts of the body. The most important motory regions and sensory centres have been localized. Yet the preponderant importance of the brain, as secured in the latest cerebral researches, does not make it appear as a “soul” not even as an organ which produces “intelligence”, “thought” or “will”, but merely as an organ which brings about the most complicated combinations of sensation and motion. The brain is shown as the organ where reflex actions are exchanged; but at the same time the absolute necessity is admitted of the smooth functioning of the nervous system, which is dependent on a regular supply of new material

to replace wastage by means of the circulation of blood. Thus both the nervous system with its sensory and motor-nerves, and the system of blood circulation with its arteries and veins spread themselves throughout the body. Whether one takes the heart or the brain as basis for intellectual action, it is really the matter in the whole of the body. That consciousness does not arise only in the brain, but may arise anywhere in the body—though heart and brain can be considered as the central points where supply and reflexes are exchanged—is clear from the *Book of Relations* where matter is said to be the basis of apprehension and mind-cognition. The heart-base as the organ of the mind is only mentioned in commentaries like *Visuddhi Magga* (Chapter 14) and *Atthasālinī* (I, 4, 2,) but omitted in the canonical books from the list making up matter, e.g. *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*. The heart-base is not the heart, but the whole of the material body. Thus consciousness has no seat, but arises based on the senses and functions wherever that sense-contact is felt and perceived. Therefore we speak of eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, etc.

“Some scientific investigators insist that the mind is merely an epiphenomenon of matter, that the brain secretes thought as the liver secretes bile; that the very notion of consciousness can be discarded altogether and that all mental activity can be explained in terms of conditioned reflexes; that the mind is nothing but an instrument, forged during the course of evolution for searching food, sexual satisfaction and the conditions of physical survival. Others on the contrary argue that the phenomena investigated by science are to a considerable extent constructs of the investigating consciousness: that mind cannot be determined by a ‘matter’ which is itself in part a creation of mind; that mind is a fundamental reality in the universe and is consequently able to pass valid judgements about the nature of the world; that the laws of thought are also laws of things” (Aldous Huxley: *End and Means* p. 256).

Buddhism once more avoids the two extremes by rejecting matter as the sole ruler of all phenomena, by rejecting mind as

an entity not subject to material conditions. It is the mutual influence of action and reaction between matter and mind, which constitutes life. Whether that material body has five senses like a human being, or only one sense, that of touch like in unicellular protozoa, does not make any essential difference. It is not the structure of the material form which constitutes life, for that is only the instrument of living. A more complicated instrument like a human body makes life only more complicated too, but that is only a difference in degree, not in being. The essential factor is the intellectual faculty, which however must have the physical basis of life, protoplasm. The basis of life in itself is not enough to explain the structure of life. But it is the impulse to live, which gives that passionate desire to the physico-psychical combination called "the five aggregates of grasping".

Now the all-important question is: If life is synonymous with conscious grasping—or in other words, if life is the will to live or the result thereof—then where does that will come from? Can that will-to-live arise in any material form and thus animate any matter? Can the origin of life be demonstrated as a natural process acting on non-living material by spontaneous generation?

The examples given of spontaneous generation are not so in the real, ultimate sense, for there is material from which a living being evolves, and there are influences which produce certain conditions. Those experiments may only be called spontaneous in so far as the generation does not come about through parental influence, not from living organism. The difficulty of this problem of the origin of life is only caused by the conception or rather misconception of life as an entity. But life is not an entity, but a process of living which like any other process arises constantly, has a new beginning at any imaginary moment. As such it has nothing to do with matter any more than a flame arising from fuel, but not generated by it.

Light is a mode of motion and as such of the same kind as darkness in which that vibration is slowed down. As light is the vibration of darkness, laying hold of objects and making them

visible—so feeling which is the awareness of contact, originates in pure contact which is non-feeling and lays hold of objects which thus become known. Mind arises from dead matter, not as an entity, not by generation, but conditioned. It is becoming and ceasing like a process. The term “becoming” denotes dynamism. But it has not the same meaning as Bergson’s Vitalism, where the ceaselessly changing Vital Force, though continuing as a process, yet requires a metaphysical reality as time for its duration, and finally is even deified as “unceasing life, action, freedom” (*Creative Evolution*, p. 262).

Life in the Buddhist sense has all the individuality of action and all the impersonality of a process. This paradoxical impersonal individual can only be understood as a process of action, the persistence, the progress, the continuance, the preservation of a subjectively unified, individual process of material and mental formations. This process can arise anywhere, as long as the necessary conditions for its arising are present. Those necessary conditions are its parentage; the coming about of those conditions its lineage and genealogy. Those conditions are a form, in which bodily senses are not absolutely required — and the arising of a will-to-live. Whether the form in which craving will clothe itself anew is as simple as the Amoeba, which in reproducing merely splits itself, as simple as an inhabitant of the Formless Spheres living on intellectual joy, or as complicated as a so-called civilised human being—does not make any essential difference. For all these forms are forms of craving. And if there would be other forms which cannot even find a place in our imagination, forms which do not possess our traditional three dimensions, but would be as subtle and evasive as an electric spark—they too might become the basis and the condition for the genesis of thought and then constitute a living being.

But for the arising of thought are required feeling, perception, and differentiations. And as long as they in their natural tendencies of grasping have the will-to-become, its process of the arising thought will reproduce itself and for that purpose lay hold

of a form in which to express itself. It is that purposive laying hold of matter which constitutes volitional action, which is called kamma. It is this intrinsic nature to grasp which makes life live and which will make it live again, like the nature of fire is to burn and will burn forever, as long as it has fuel to sustain itself. The fuel is an absolutely necessary condition to the flame; and so is matter to the mind.

Now from this absolute conditionality that on material contact depends mental sensation is made a very frequent materialistic conclusion that if we knew sufficient about the distribution of material energy, about the actions of matter and the reactions thereon, we would also be able to explain all mental phenomena and life itself in terms of matter. But the assumption that if we knew everything in space at some particular moment, we would also know everything in any place at any time, is a metaphysical fantasy, not supported by any scientist.

Life is a series of events, incalculable like accidents. A real accident it was which brought us into this world; our conception was a misconception; the latest edition of our life is not only full of misprints, but the publication thereof was an economic and a social blunder. The rejection of the mechanical world view does not necessarily lead us to the other extreme, which accepts a supernatural world view. Accidents do happen. But from the fact that accidents cannot be calculated in advance—for then they would cease to be accidents—it does not follow that accidents cannot be accounted for. An accident is not the same as a mystery; it is only the unexpected. Even if the unexpected cannot be foretold, it may be explained after the event. Such a post-mortem however should never attempt to put purpose in the accident.

To see a purpose in life is to repeat the mistake made in a previous life, for it means the introduction of new craving which will inevitably keep the process going, like additional fuel keeps the fire burning. To put purpose in life makes life as dreadful as a mathematical problem, nay worse than that, because a mathematical problem solves itself, it contains in itself its own

solution; but purpose put into life is like the square root of minus one; multiplied by itself it remains a non-entity. Purpose grows from a lack of the spirit of adventure which alone can lead to the discovery of the truth. Purpose supposes the truth discovered already. But the truth must be found in and by each one for himself. Purpose grows from a lack of imagination, i.e. from ignorance, for it is ignorance which makes man purposefully run after the perishable goods and impermanent pleasures of the world, while knowing even by experience their unsatisfactoriness. Man craves for rebirth, while he is already disgusted before having finished this present existence. Some are mad after gold or science, others after women; some are after God; few, very few after truth. For it is truth alone which must be discovered and which therefore does not allow any purpose, any striving, which narrows our outlook and keeps us bound.

Life is only a means. And hence, as long as we have not realized the truth in ourselves, as long as we feel in ourselves the urge to go forth and find the happiness and satisfaction of life elsewhere, we abuse the means and make of life a purpose, an end in itself. If life is a striving and a struggle, it cannot be an end in itself. At the most it can be a means, an instrument which, however useful, will have to be abandoned. If the will-to-live and will-to-do make for further action and renewed life, thereby prolonging and complicating the problem, the solution will have to be sought in no-more-willing. Should we then will non-willing? This, of course, would involve a contradiction in itself. Non-willing cannot be considered as an ideal; the extinction of life cannot be thought of as the end of life. Only if life is understood as a process of ignorance, craving and sorrow, i.e., ignorance in its origin, craving in its continuance and sorrow as its result, its solution can be the goal of striving. Thus life may be useful as a means for understanding and through understanding to solution; but considered as an aim it becomes dangerous and harmful in the development of I-ness, separateness, isolation.

A good life is useful in keeping away from evil modes of living.

But if we live for the purpose of a good life, for the purpose of a meritorious life, we live for life's sake and we make for ourselves a golden cage in which some day we shall find ourselves prisoners. Lust for life under any form is delusion which can only be overcome by knowledge, by insight in the fact that there is nothing to lust for. Thus the understanding of the void of soullessness as a process, individual in delusion, but a non-entity in reality, will automatically produce non-willing. Craving must be overcome by detachment; but absolute detachment is only possible as a result of insight. This insight is the goal for which we must strive in earnest meditation. This is the goal of our striving, for it will solve the problem of life.

Is Buddhism Consistent with Communism?

“It is the function of religion to provide an explanation of the wholeness of a man’s experience of the universe and of his life, and to relate it to the essential mystery which underlies it all”, said Roger Lloyd, Canon of Winchester, in his book “Revolutionary Religion” (p. 63). “Any religion”, he continues, “must therefore possess a philosophy and a social doctrine, as well as an ethic”.

What is this essential mystery which underlies it all?

The main difference between religions or philosophies is that many see a mystery and leave it unsolved as supernatural. According to Pope Pius XI in his encyclical letter on Atheistic Communism, “*Divini Redemptoris*” (1937): The complications arising from “man’s rights and duties are in the plan of a supreme Creator who destined man for civil society according to the dictates of his very nature. In the plan of the Creator society is a natural means which man can and must use to reach his destined end”. And a little further: “Man’s obligations, toward civil society are divinely imposed”. This is the idealistic explanation of man’s relation to the universe. The mystery of the conflict between man and man, between man and the universe, is seen, but not understood, not solved. It is merely shifted to a higher plane, the supernatural, where it remains above the reach of any human understanding and natural solution. Similar idealistic religious

systems are based on some supernatural origin like revelation, divine authority, manifested in so-called miracles and prophecies.

The materialistic viewpoint tries to solve life's greatest problem of conflict in this life itself, by showing its origin in material conditions, by pointing to its solution through realisation of the true world-value. This is done both by Buddhism and Communism, though their terminology differs. Thus frequently the natural question arises: Is Buddhism consistent with Communism?

In trying to answer this question we must begin by avoiding the mistake which so many people make, when comparing the two systems as we find them in practice. For at present at least, neither Buddhism nor Communism are fully practised. Buddhism is decaying and Communism is not full grown yet in practice. Our question is not about Buddhists and Communists, is not whether there are real Communists who are at the same time true Buddhists, but merely: Is Buddhism consistent with Communism? In other words, if we compare the two ideologies, are the two systems compatible or not? If we consider Buddhism as a religion, and Communism as a policy, as statecraft, we have no point of contact and cannot compare at all. But if we compare the philosophic basis on which these two systems are based, we might be able to prove or disprove the possibility that one can be a good Buddhist and a real Communist at the same time.

Thus two questions arise: What is Buddhism? What is Communism?

Buddhism is a moral code based on a natural philosophy, evolved by the Buddha, i.e. an ethical system of living based on reason. Buddhism therefore denies a supernatural order. It is true that Buddhism accepts the possibility of worlds other than the one in which we live, but that does not constitute a super-nature. Like sun, moon and stars form a part of our cosmos, even though nobody has travelled so far, so what are called "heavens" in Buddhism are not hypercosmic spheres, but merely spheres of existence with different degrees of social happiness, all of them very much material through the gross sense-pleasures which

are indulged in there, or through the unbroken link between mind and matter, which is not dissolved in the formless spheres. Formless does not mean immaterial in the sense of independent from matter; but the characteristic of those spheres of life and thought is that matter does not form the object of concentration any longer. Such states of concentration can be induced in this world and life itself. The different spheres of rebirth are therefore all of a natural order, and the change over from life to life like the change of thought, is not effected by a supernatural being like an almighty God or by some inexorable Fate, but by one's own natural actions, whereby everyone conditions and shapes his own tendencies and character, thus predisposing himself for an environment of his own creation. These actions of man, however, are not entirely of his own choice at every moment of his life, but they are also the outcome of the conditions in which he finds himself placed. These conditions which influence any new action, which are as it were the material from which new actions are being built, are in themselves results of actions in the past, and as effects of previous action they are called. Thus the results and effects of actions in the past are the conditions which influence and modulate the present. Man's effort may try to produce an improvement of those social conditions, yet they will always form the background against, the basis whereon, the material wherewith he has to work.

Even more than that! Those social conditions, which are a product of the past, contain in themselves the seed for new action, as their inherent disharmony, which is shown by man's constant striving for better and more, necessitates the struggle to attain satisfaction, harmony, equilibrium—at least in the unenlightened ones with regard to the real value of things.

As one who wishes to make a fist must of necessity have a hand wherewith to make it—and on the nature of that hand will depend the nature of the fist—so action which is volitional will depend on volitional tendencies which are the outcome of actions in the past. Thus it will be clear that this unidealistic, but very

realistic doctrine has no place for either God or soul, that this materialistic world conception which necessitates an atheistic outlook, cannot remain passive, for in the face of aggressive theism passive resistance would amount to surrender.

Pope Pius XII in his encyclical letter, "*Summi Pontificatus*" (1939) wrote: "Mankind, by a divinely appointed law, is divided into a variety of classes". This is clearly calculated to keep man down in the humble position of the illiterate, or up in the exalted place of the exploiter. It is the supernaturalization of a social blunder. "Natural law", it is said in the same letter, "reposes as upon its foundation, on the notion of God, the almighty creator and father of us all, the supreme and perfect law-giver, the wise and just rewarder of human conduct".

If then all the social injustice we witness in our times, if all the internal conflicts between human ideals and attainments are the intended order of that supreme law-giver, one can only conclude that his cruel, selfish nature, so totally contradicts the conceptions of divine goodness and justice. A revolution against social injustice, any trial to solve the internal conflict, must become therefore a revolution against God who made that order and wishes to maintain it. That is the natural attitude of Buddhism as well as of Communism.

What is Communism? Communism pure and simple, i.e. not any particular brand like Bolshevism, Trotskyism, Sovietism, Stalinism—Communism as a system of practical philosophy is Dialectical Materialism, i.e., a materialistic world-conception dialectically evolved, which means by the study of the contradiction within the very essence of things. Here, therefore, we are confronting a natural philosophy, a system of thought about nature, not derived from supernatural sources, a world-conception which is materialistic, which denies any forces which are beyond nature's control.

Material does not mean made from or composed of matter. Even the most thorough and extreme materialist will never maintain that a thought is a composition of chemicals, of physical

elements. But he will hold that force and matter are intrinsically linked up, interchangeable, and even identical, understood from a different viewpoint. There can be no matter which does not exercise some energy by pressure, extension, resistance, etc; but likewise there can be no energy separate from matter. This being the basis of Materialism, it will be evident how shallow is that statement of Pope Pius IX (Encycl. "*Qui pluribus*" 1846) calling Communism "absolutely contrary to the natural law itself". What can there be more natural than nature itself? How then can Materialism be against natural law? It is not natural law which is opposed by Materialism, but supernatural law.

As such an opposition is also supported by Buddhism as a natural philosophy, we have here the first point of contact, agreement and complete harmony between Dialectical Materialism and Buddhism. Both deny a supernatural order, do not believe in mind as separate and independent from matter, have no room for the ideas of God and soul, make no attempt to deify man's own nature, and are hence opposed to all idealistic systems of thought or religion.

That mind is not considered as a separate entity is in the Buddhist teaching an immediate consequence of the doctrine of soullessness. It is corroborated by the latest findings of experimental science, where matter is proved to be essentially motion. Motion, however, means, essentially, change. It is no longer the substantial being to which change comes as something accidental, leaving the intrinsic thing-in-itself identical and eternally the same. Matter is motion, is change and nothing else. Even the law of conservancy of matter had to be altered, and is now only applicable to matter and energy combined, because ultimately matter is energy. Matter then becomes the temporary expression of energy. Nothing is and remains; but everything becomes and passes.

Idealism holds that the world is full of phenomena which require a substance to support them. Underlying all changes there must be some unchanging entity which remains the same

throughout the changing external appearances, those idealists say. It is this unreal world-concept which gave rise to the unprovable theories about soul. This is contradicted most emphatically by the Buddhist doctrine of no-soul, and totally rejected by science, such as organic chemistry and physics, which show that quantity changes into quality, e.g. an additional atom changes the quality of the molecule.

Here in their common standpoint opposing idealism, Buddhism and Science meet in their materialistic viewpoint that the phenomena of change do not require a substance, a thing-in-itself, a soul, but that matter is nothing but changing phenomena. Buddhism and Communism are both practical applications of these philosophical and scientific materialistic principles. Buddhism has applied materialism in its analysis of mind, its doctrine of *anatta*, its moral teaching of karma and re-birth of the individual life-process. Communism has applied these principles more to the life of society, to the history of social life. Both have become a science, as Psychology in Buddhism and as Sociology in Communism.

But Sociology is dependent on Psychology in so far as society is composed of individuals, so that the study of the individual is necessary to the understanding of social history. On the other hand Psychology is dependent on Sociology, in so far as the individual is a product and a reflection of the social conditions in which he lives, so that the study of the history of society is necessary to the full understanding of the individual mind. Buddhism and Communism therefore go hand in hand, not only in their opposition to idealistic theories, but also in completing and explaining one another.

Communism as a philosophical system is known as Historical and Dialectical Materialism, it is a method of thought guiding to action, based on historical events which show the course of the process. Denying spiritual and supernatural influences, it calls itself rightly Materialism. Building up on the experiences of the past, it calls itself rightly Historical. Viewing the class-

struggle as a contradiction inherent in society, it calls itself rightly Dialectical.

Communism is not merely Materialism, but Dialectical Materialism as developed by Karl Marx. Materialism is, as we have seen already, “the simple conception of nature just as it exists without any foreign admixture” (Engels). As such it is “contrary to Idealism which asserts that only our mind really exists and that the material world exists only in our mind, sensations, ideas and perceptions” (J. Stalin: *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*). Dialectics, said Lenin, is “the study of the contradiction within the very essence of things” (*Philosophical Note-books*). It is the study of development as a disclosure of the contradictions inherent in things. As such Dialectics is in direct opposition to Metaphysics, which places the cause outside the phenomena.

Like the scientific understanding of matter as energy, of being as becoming, solved the basic contradiction within the elements on which all life is built, so the understanding of the operation of matter upon mind will show the mind as a process of thinking based on matter as its object and matter as its instrument. Thus the contradiction between body and mind becomes solved in the process, the action of thinking. What about the conflict of classes? Like any true philosophy should ask, both Buddhism and Communism investigate the cause of the contradiction, so that with the removal of the cause the undesirable effect may disappear and the problem be solved.

Buddhism sees the conflict between self and others as due to craving, which cannot be overcome by renunciation, but only by the understanding of no-self, whereby the distinction between self and others naturally will disappear.

Dialectical Materialism sees the conflict between classes as due to the system of production which divides society into two main classes, those who own the means of production and those who have to sell their labour. In the course of history the means of production have greatly varied and hence also the class-struggle has been fought under different banners. When the method of

procuring the means of life were hand-labour, there was the system of slavery in which the slave-owner considered his slaves merely as instruments of production. When with the progress of civilisation simple tools for weaving, etc. required some responsibility in the workman, the slave became a serf with some personal freedom, while the tools of production remained the sole property of the landlord. Increased civilisation produced more and more complicated machinery which could not possibly be owned except by great capitalists. As thus the means of production remained their sole property, the workmen could receive more freedom, as the machine and factory would keep them bound to their employer. Thus, though the state of the workers seemingly improved, they remained constantly at the mercy of the owners of the means of production.

This opposition, this class-struggle between the possessor who tries to maintain his position on the one hand, and the worker who tries to improve his position on the other hand, is therefore due to the process of production in its different stages in history. It is this system of production further which indirectly determines the forms of government and even religions.

The origin of Christianity as we find it described in the Acts of the Apostles took place at a time when primitive economic conditions were prevailing in Palestine, only recently absorbed into the Roman Empire. Naturally those economic conditions of primitive communism were reflected in the unwritten law of the primitive Church, where the custom prevailed to place all one's possessions at the feet of the Apostles for the benefit of the community. But as the Church was based on an idealistic foundation of spiritualism, animism, theism and mysticism, it did not last long till materialists like Ananias and Sapphira were found out who "sinned against the Holy Ghost" (Acts. V, 1-10) by not surrendering all to the community. They died on the spot, slain by the Holy Ghost, an act which nowadays would be condemned as black magic.

But as soon as the new religion spread outside these recently

conquered provinces, it came into a world where economy and production were not regulated any more by primitive communism, but which was a world of slaves and slave-owners. It may be objected that slavery was known earlier also in Palestine, but these slaves were mainly war-prisoners from other nations, who had not embraced the Hebrew faith. As the first converts came exclusively from Hebrews, it is clear that the economic condition of slavery did not affect the primitive Church, as long as it was confined to the land of its origin.

When Christianity came to Greece and Rome, however, the vast slave-population of those nations was naturally attracted by the Gospel of equality—if not economic equality in this life, at least social equality or even superiority in a life to come. “Blessed are the poor, for theirs will be the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. V, 3). With this influx of slaves into the Church, the Church itself became absorbed by the slave-problem. Even if for a century or so, while Christianity was being persecuted, the distinction between slave and slave-owner was not stressed, this was only due to the fact that all internal forces had to be united in this struggle for existence. But as soon as the Church was able to lift its head owing to imperial protection, the Church itself became a slave-owner. Slavery was not merely tolerated, but actually encouraged by the Church, even introduced into America on the Church’s advice. In Tsarist Russia one eighth of the total slave-population was owned by the Church.

Owing to this change of economic production from the primitive patriarchy to a slave owning community, the Christian religion reflected this change in its doctrine and in its practices with new dogmas and practices like indulgences, and people were induced to start the Crusades, a phenomenon which proved how much scoundrelism can be hidden under the cloak of religious zeal. Naturally this selling of indulgences was resented especially by those who did not have the means to buy off their sins.

The development of slavery into serfdom gave some more independence to man, and immediately the Church shows the

reflection of the same with the rise of heretics, men who dared to think, but who were tortured and burned for their courage. Still, though man had obtained a little more economic freedom, the means to enjoy that freedom remained in the hands of the few feudal landlords. All individual cleverness could not break that charmed circle of feudalism.

But civilisation progressed and with the march of history new developments in the means of production are seen, which are reflected in new changes and reforms in matters religious. The doctrine of predestination, which forms the basic thought of the Christian Reformation by Calvin in the 16th century, according to which man's action cannot save him, if he were not predestined for salvation, was a pure reflection of that time, when owing to the economic conditions a man's cleverness could not open to him the door to success. The doctrine of predestination was largely used by the bourgeoisie, who owned the means of production, to keep the proletariat quiet and obedient. This very accumulation of the means of production in the hands of a few, however, led to unheard of exploitation. The creation of these masses of workers who were unable even to obtain the necessities for their own lives, the reduction of production in order to raise the price of commodities for the benefit of the factory-owners, led finally to reaction and revolution.

Buddhism does not make an exception to the law of dialectics. At the time when its founder lived in the North of India, society had not that complicated aspect which is forced upon it by this age of mechanics. Though caste-distinctions were there, at least in their four main-divisions, the patriarchal spirit was prevailing. Influence of priestcraft was not very strong, for the Brahmins were no longer considered as the highest. That place of honour was given to the Warrior-caste, the Kshatriyas. This army-spirit of unification which constitutes its strength was certainly responsible for the ready acceptance of the Buddha's teaching that no man is noble by birth, but becomes noble by virtue and attainment. That it was resented by the hereditary priesthood is

more than evident. Within a comparatively short time after the Buddha's passing away not less than seventeen heretical schools had sprung into existence, which though condemned were able to maintain themselves, many times with royal support. India, however, in particular, and the greater part of the East in general, have not undergone those radical changes yet as Europe has witnessed with the development of the means of production. Slave-labour has never seen in India the extreme where masters had even the right to take the lives of their slaves. India of 3,000 years ago and India now, at least in the parts away from the westernized towns, was and is still feudal. With the exception of the priesthood regaining their spiritual power, the religious outlook has changed little. But at present, when scientific influences are changing the outlook on life and its problems, religious interpretations reflect the same faithfully.

Let us take as example an essential doctrine of both Hinduism and Buddhism, the doctrine of karma. In Hinduism and in feudal Buddhism this teaching received more and more the interpretation of fate and destiny. It was and is the interest of the ruling class or caste to perpetuate the state of affairs, preventing less fortunate ones to advance. A typical illustration is the strong opposition of denominational schools against the free education bill. The law of karma interpreted as a rigid law of cause and effect naturally produced in the masses that apathy which would maintain everybody in his place. It is true, karma is said to be a cause of some past life producing effects in this life. But the pure Buddhist teaching never said that this is an external cause unconnected with the effect. Neither did Marx say that economic forces are the only ones which rule social affairs, though they may be, nor that individual men act only from material motives. Karl Marx contended that "there exist in any society certain material forces of production. The conditions of production to be well employed require an arrangement of the powers of society. When those forces of production are to be fully utilized, sometimes the social powers will take the shape of State authority controlling

private property". Special forms of political institutions are thus dependent on the underlying social economic conditions, which however are flexible.

Well, this is exactly the teaching of kamma. Karma was never meant to be the feudal vassal of the lord of Fate. Karma is action, i.e. the controlling power in the present; but that controlling power is controlled itself or, as we say, conditioned by previous actions, the material forces of the past, which make their presence felt as results. Kamma is new action, but it will work according to individual tendencies. Thus the present is conditioned by the past, contains elements of the past. That does not mean that the present is a mere development of the past: that would be effects from a cause as found in idealistic theism. But Buddhism teaches conditionality instead of causality. The actions of the past are important influences, they do not, however, necessarily produce the effect, but only if the social conditions are favourable. Thus there will be the constant struggle of action to produce its natural reaction according to its own nature, which reaction, however, is subject to external conditions which may be supporting, counteracting or even destructive. Here we see the dialectic element of kamma, which are tendencies grown from conflict and which produce in themselves further conflict of attraction and repulsion, of greed or aversion.

Kamma, or man's action, is essentially a social and co-operative process, as action is conditioned in its arising and cessation. Hence it is impossible to say what and how much any single individual has produced in a single individual act. This needs a little explanation.

It is evident that man acts intentionally, whether his intentions are good or bad. It is his intention which makes his action moral or immoral. But in order to explain such an intentional act, it is not enough merely to state the fact of his evil intention. It is true: a man steals because he wants to steal. But why should he want it? Surely, to satisfy some internal need. Thus the existence of that need will be the real cause of his act. And whoever has

produced that cause is at least partly responsible for the evil act which finally followed. If a man steals to satisfy his craving for pleasure, which he cannot satisfy with his meagre salary, then all those who have created in him that hunger by advertising pleasure, by setting him an example of sense-satisfaction without giving him the means thereto, by refusing to impart to him that knowledge of pleasure which is not craving of the senses, but leads to understanding and insight of the truth—all those are responsible for the evil deed. An immoral act should not only be condemned in the culprit, but blame should go to the whole society which produced him. Crime, poverty, illiteracy are slurs on the reputation of the nation, of the whole human race. If one understands kamma, i.e. one's action, in this way, one will become extremely careful and sensitive even, owing to this feeling of oneness which is pure and unpolitical Communism.

Kamma does not lead to individualism, if well understood. If there is no "self", action cannot be individual, and hence the effect of such action, merit or demerit, will not be individual either. All action bears a social responsibility; the effect or the produce belongs to the community. Like the economic system, so the moral system is essentially one. Like economic profit should go to the community of workers instead of being stolen from them by a few exploiters, so moral profit or merit should not be a personal reward as is promised to individual souls in an eternal heaven according to idealistic theistic religions— but moral profit should be owned by the community. That is the Buddhist doctrine of morality, where virtue is practised for the sake of virtue, for the sake of the good of all, not for the purpose of acquiring merit for oneself, just because there is no "self" to reap the fruits in another life. Re-birth there is, but a soulless one. Having obtained the satisfaction of having done one's duty towards the community, the sum-total of the good effect will go to the improvement—morally, socially or economically—of the society with whose cooperation the good action was performed.

An objection is raised that in a classless society, where all

men will have not only equal opportunities, but even equal remunerations according to their needs, the law of kamma as moral retribution will have no field of application. In other words, the Buddhist doctrine of kamma giving to everyone according to his deeds, seems to contradict the communist ideal of giving to everyone according to his needs. In answer it may first of all be pointed out that the very fact of a group of certain people striving together towards a common idea indicates equality of action which therefore will yield equality of effect. If, therefore, Communism would be firmly established all over the world, it would merely indicate that the common action of millions had produced an effect affecting all. And that would be quite according to the law of kamma. But still, even though Communism might succeed in solving the class-conflict by establishing a class-less society, even though science may progress and effectively deal with disease, there will always be the disease of old age which finally must end in death. And the more comfortable life is being made, the more difficult it will be to part with it, the greater will be the mental conflict which is sorrow indeed, which no classless society can abolish, where the inequality of mental action always will find a most fruitful field to harvest retribution according to one's deeds, according to the law of kamma.

It will be clear now that it was a gross misconception to understand the working of kamma as fatalism which fixes man's destiny. But reading this misinterpretation in the light of historical developments, we see also how well this fatalistic doctrine fitted in with the feudal system from which large parts of India and Ceylon have not been emancipated yet. Once more, kamma means present action which works under conditions which have evolved from previous action. It is exactly the reaction on an action which gives to a Buddhist the power of emancipation, without which no escape from Samsāra would be possible. It is no attempt of deification of human nature, when man is called his own saviour, but simply an observance of facts excluding supernatural intervention.

The different forms of religion are merely reflections of the world and its conditions in which man lives. When man was illiterate and was essentially an agriculturist, his God was a “husbandman” (*Pater meus agricola est*, said Jesus of himself. John XV.). Man’s vices have always been reflected in his Gods, and man’s ideals have become his idols. A doctrine of many overlords and one supreme Lord fitted the times of feudalism. A doctrine of predestination kept the workman down. And a world of Materialism naturally does away with the supernatural and the Almighty, even if he calls himself love.

It is an injustice to Buddhism to point to the law of karma as a law of predestination. That may be the idea of karma in Hinduism with its many Gods, with its reincarnation of souls, with its unknown and unknowable Brahman. That may be still the necessary outcome of India in bondage, economically enslaved by foreign exploitation, politically fettered by the feudal system of princely rule, intellectually bound by a degrading caste-system, religiously shackled by superstition and priestcraft. But Buddhism which does not acknowledge caste-distinction, which has no priests and sacrifices, which condemns blind faith and encourages free thought—Buddhism with its selfless doctrine of *anatta* where even action is not of self, where heaven and hell can be realised in this world itself, where the highest freedom of Nibbāna must be sought in freedom of mind in a human form—that Buddhism is free from superstition, free from fear, free from serfdom in any form.

As systems of philosophy both Buddhism and Communism are based on nature, rejecting all idealism, all supernatural theories trying to give those basic philosophic thoughts practical value. Here the methods may be somewhat different, but again there is no real opposition except in the minds of the enemies of the masses. Both Buddhism and Communism hold that a mere reform will not cure the evil. There must be a radical change, a real revolution. A mere readjustment will not be sufficient. Not a re-orientation of strivings which are at their root selfish, will

ever produce a true cure, but a complete uprooting of selfishness, an absorption of “self” in the community which makes even private property an act of theft, a surrender of individual rights for the benefit of the community—that and that alone might make a heaven of this world, which too frequently is transformed in a hell by selfish isolation, by nationalistic separation, by imperialistic policy leading to conflict and war.

Too many wars have been fought in the name of religion to earn for the founder of Christianity the title of King of Peace, he who said of himself: “I have come not to bring peace but the sword” (Mt. X, 34). But Buddhism which never forced conversions, but which always insisted on free investigation in the truth, seems to be the only system of thought which can fully satisfy a materialist who does not want to believe anything, who rejects super-nature like God, soul and eternity, whose only aim is to make a heaven of this world.

To blame Communism for violence is senseless. The charge of violence being essential to Communism, while Buddhism is essentially non-violent is very superficial, for violence does not belong any more to Communism than Devadatta to the disciples of the Buddha, than Judas to the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ. Communism is essentially non-egoistic, because it thinks in terms of the community and does not favour a few individuals only. Hence its ideology comes in conflict with any egoistic outlook: capitalism, imperialism, churchism, because these are means by which a few exploit the masses; capitalists exploit labourers, imperialists exploit subject colonies, churchmen exploit their faithful by promising eternal happiness in another life in exchange for temporary goods obtained by priestcraft. Conflict with exploitation in Communism is not worse than conflict with craving in Buddhism. Both exploitation and craving are rooted in ignorance, for the exploiter does not realise that, even if he reaps some momentary profit, in the long run he ruins himself by accentuating the class-conflict. To overcome this ignorance the force of argument might frequently not suffice. Like one has

to exercise force against oneself to overcome wrong habits which are rooted deeply, but which reason tells should be eradicated—so the actions of the nation might have to be regulated, if reason by itself cannot make itself recognised.

To give to everyone according to his needs is a claim so human and so natural that nobody ever dared to contradict it. But then one must be also prepared to use the proper method, namely: from everyone according to his capacity. Instead of shouting: Down with the capitalists, let us personally give according to our capacity, before we can rightly claim that everyone be given according to his needs. Communism is at present not perfect yet, it is not full-grown, it has still to fight the struggle for existence. This struggle is forced upon it by external wars of intervention, by internal attempts: of sabotage; it is the painful process of growth, which necessitates the building up of resistance. But that is not essential, that will naturally disappear once the full status is attained. Like craving is not essential to Buddhism, but rather the overcoming of craving—and yet there is no Buddhist except the perfect Arahat who is without—so violence is not essential to Communism, but rather the overcoming of it. Like a father will reluctantly decide on an operation for his child, though it will pain himself as well as his child, so certain economic measures may become necessary owing to conditions of production, painful to some, like disappropriation of private enterprise, but beneficial to all in the community.

When our needs are satisfied, and yet we crave for more, it is a blessing in disguise, if that further craving is made impossible, like it is for the good of the child, when a sharp knife is taken away from it even by force when it will not surrender voluntarily. Yet the major force employed by Buddhism as well as by Communism is the force of argument, conviction through education. This education must not show one-sidedly the idealistic concept of life, as it has been done constantly by the Churches and their revealed religions, even if they did not resort to the argument of force. This education must be natural, unbiased and hence materialistic,

free from fear of God or hell, based on the understanding of the mutual rights and duties of people living in a community.

Not to believe in the absolute equality of all men would betray such a monstrosity of character, that nowadays nobody dares to express that as his opinion. But the means of achieving that equality will differ according to different systems of thought.

To make people behave like machines, reacting to certain external stimuli, repeating over and over, again certain slogans and formulæ invented by others, is no proof that those masses are actually convinced of the necessity of the new doctrine. One can easily get a good following by promises of wealth and leisure. But that would not bring about equality.

Buddhism is not content with taking away man's property and giving it to another. That is patchwork like social service. Buddhism takes away from people their instinct of possessiveness and gives to those who do not have it a deeper understanding wherewith to grasp the meaning of life. Then people will have enjoyment in pleasure itself and for the sake of joy, instead of being satisfied with having the means thereto which naturally leads to hoarding, banking, exploiting and all other outgrowths of private property. To bring about absolute equality will require a fundamental change in man's mental attitude; and it is here that Buddhist Psychology can complete Communistic Sociology.

A dialectic process can only be brought to an end by the solution of the cause of the conflict. The dialectic of matter and energy was solved by science finding that matter is energy, that the two are not separate but form only one process. The dialectic of matter and mind remained an insurmountable problem, till mind was not longer considered as a separate entity like a soul. In the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* there is only one single process of psycho-physical forces in which mind is just thinking and the body the instrument in which subject and object amalgamate. The dialectic of greed and hate, which are both rooted in delusion, can only be solved by understanding and insight. The dialectic finally, which history shows during the course of the ages, the

conflict between classes cannot come to an end by dictatorial power but only in a classless society. This is the path marked out for humanity, whereby all conflict, which is based on the distinction between self and others, will come to an end by the solution of the two extremes which are in ignorance opposing one another. It is in the impersonal element of a process that all components become dissolved in perfect harmony.

The attainment of this impersonality is the highest perfection in Buddhism as mental development, it is the highest perfection in Communism as a social development. Thus it will be seen that as long as both are interpreted correctly and practised sincerely the most complete harmony can be obtained because both strive in different terminology for the same goal: the breaking down of the fetters of egoism.

If freedom is all we want, why then does our heart ache when someone tries to break those fetters? Because in our ignorance we have begun to identify those fetters with ourselves. When man shall have learned to look upon himself not as a separate individual, but as a limb in the social body of humanity, then he will understand that he will serve himself best by losing his individuality and separateness, by serving all as a part of the whole.

That will be the end of craving in oneself, the end of class-struggle in society, the perfect blending of Buddhism and Communism.

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.