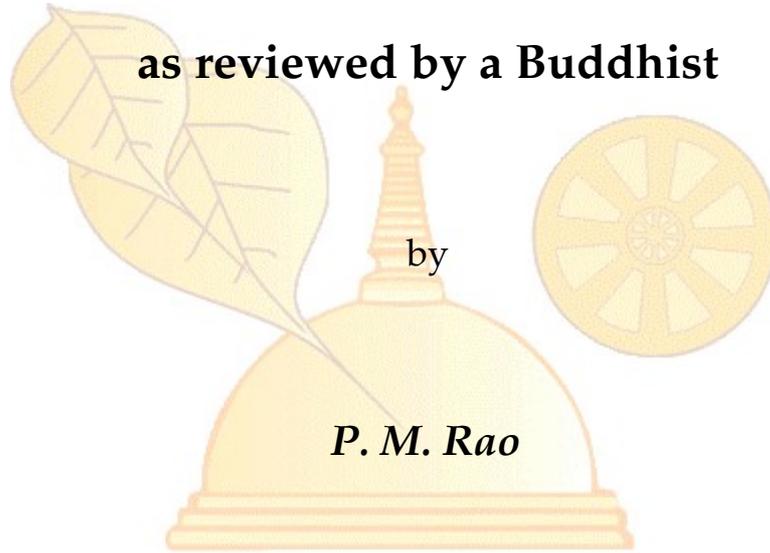


The Problem of Sin

as reviewed by a Buddhist



P. M. Rao

Buddhist Publication Society
Kandy • Sri Lanka

The Wheel Publication No. 136

First Edition: 1969

BPS Online Edition © (2008)

Digital Transcription Source: Buddhist Publication Society

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

The Problem of Sin

This essay is an attempt to try and understand the meaning of the verse from the Dhammapada:

“Abstaining from all sin, cultivating only the good, and the purifying of one’s heart, this is the teaching of the Buddhas.”¹

The problem of sin seems to have dogged the human race practically from its infancy. Though the word “sin” has meant different things to different people in different parts of the world and at different times, the mythologies and religions of the world have assigned an important place to the solution of this problem. Buddhists as well as Hindus believe that sin is the result of ignorance and the destruction of the latter is their common aim. Christians, on the other hand, believe that no amount of knowledge, no amount of human effort can make an end of sin; it is something deep and intrinsic and only the grace of God through Christ can wipe it out. The humanist, with religious zeal, regards all antisocial acts as sin. The Marxist looks upon “deviationism” with the horror an Inquisitor might have felt towards heresy. The newer ideologies have only redefined the concept of sin without succeeding in eradicating the sense of sin.

Indeed the problem of sin is essentially the problem of the sense of sin. The latter is entirely independent of the theories of sin. The Hindu, the Buddhist, the humanist and the rank materialist all suffer from the sense of sin as much as the Jew or the Christian. Were it not so, a change of religion or the profession of a new creed could have rid humanity of this problem. But the very existence of the neuroses—disorders of the psyche in the absence of organic disease—forcibly brings to our notice the omnipresence of the sense of sin, or of the sense of guilt as it is usually called by psycho-analysts. It is one of the chief factors encountered by the analyst in the resistance offered by the patient towards the regaining of mental health.²

But there are many people around us who do not appear to have any sense of sin at all. Does this mean that they do not possess it, or have they managed to solve the problem? It is a psychological fact that, as is the case with the neurotics, it may not be consciously felt as a sense of sin at all; instead it may manifest itself as a vague feeling of dissatisfaction, or of loneliness or boredom, from which the “normal” person tries to escape by throwing himself into work, or social activity, or enjoyment of the senses, or by day-dreaming, or, as a last resort, by taking refuge in sleep. Thus the normal man’s method of solving the problem is to ignore it. But to camouflage it or to ignore it is not to solve it.

We shall now try to distinguish the sense of sin from allied notions such as the sense of shame or the sense of guilt. The sense of shame has to do with recollections of anti-social behaviour without ethical overtones; and the sense of guilt has to do with the actual breaking, or with a feeling of responsibility for the breaking, of the moral laws recognised by the individual as a member of the society in which he lives. Both these feelings are based on overt acts and therefore directly related to actuality. The sense of sin is essentially different from both of these because it may not be related to actuality; it also does not depend on the beliefs held by the individual or by the society to which he belongs, and it may exist without its existence being recognised as such by the person who has it, as we have already pointed out. Its manifestation may be an intense feeling of loneliness in the midst of society, an intense dissatisfaction in the midst of plenty and a vague restlessness when you ought to be at peace; and its effect on the

¹ Dhammapada 183.

² *An Outline of Psycho-analysis* by Sigmund Freud, Hogarth Press, p. 45.

person may be to drive him into activity or to take refuge in day-dreaming or, at the other extreme, to neurosis, insanity, crime or suicide.

No wonder that so elusive a feeling, so varied in its manifestations should have engaged the attention of the priests and medical men through the ages. There is evidence to show that, 1500 years ago, Amerindian tribes inhabiting present-day Latin America suffered from the same sort of neuroses and psychoses as modern man: the affective, schizophrenic, obsessive-compulsive and psychopathic. If it is accepted that a feeling of guilt is an important factor underlying most, if not all, of these afflictions, then an enquiry into its origins becomes interesting.

The first condition for the arising of the sense of sin is that peculiar function of the mind known as the conscience. It approves of some of our actions and condemns some others. A common view is that it is something given to us by a higher power to guide us, and that we can never go wrong if we follow its dictates. But it is not quite convincing to us at all times. The conscience sometimes condemns us for a passing thought, not only for completed acts. In our practical lives we would think it unjust to condemn a person for thinking murderous thoughts and we would consider anyone who supports such "thought control" as unrealistic and dictatorial. The conscience is essentially unrealistic and dictatorial; and the more dictatorial and unrealistic it is the greater will be the sense of sin.

The second condition for the arising of the sense of sin is a deep inner urge to take pleasure and delight in, and, above all, to approve of, the very thought or deed that the conscience condemns. This coexistence of condemnation and approval is what gives the sense of sin that peculiar intensity.

We can illustrate the hollowness of the claims of the conscience to guide us and also its irrationality by means of an example. You see a half-starved bullock trying to pull a heavily laden cart and the driver twisting its tail and whipping it mercilessly. Suddenly your anger flames forth, and, if you are impulsive, you pull the whip out of the hand of the driver and whip him as mercilessly as he had whipped the bullock. Doing this gives you a strange satisfaction and you explain to yourself that your action was motivated by righteous indignation. But if you analyse your action dispassionately you will notice that you derived as much pleasure in whipping the driver as the driver did in whipping the bullock. If you carry out the analysis still further, you discover that you found as much pleasure in the pain of the bullock as the driver himself and you felt an inner urge, demanding immediate satisfaction, to emulate the driver. Your action in whipping the driver was a clever move on your part to satisfy your inner urge as well as the conscience at the same time.

This example not only demonstrates the fallibility and irrationality of the conscience but also brings out one of the most important aspects of the sense of sin—its ability to masquerade as virtue. They used to say of the self-righteous Puritans that they condemned men not so much for their sins as for the pleasure these men got from the sinning; what must have made their condemnation so virulent was the fact that in the depths of their hearts they approved of the very sins they condemned. If you are a professed saint and you have been ill-used by your enemies, you are constrained by your profession from retaliating; but the desire to retaliate persists and the conscience is aware of it. So one recourse is to seeing visions, such as those described in Revelation 6–9 & 10 of the Holy Bible in which martyr-saints, who, when on earth, had long-suffering as the badge of their sainthood, actually plead with God to avenge their blood. Thus saint as well as sinner has been dogged by this sense of sin and has felt the need to assuage it.

Now let us turn to the various methods employed through the ages for tackling this problem of the sense of sin. The earliest attempts known in India were those of the Vedic Aryans. At that

time Varuṇa was worshipped as the supreme deity and as Dr Radhakrishnan remarks: “In almost all the hymns to Varuṇa we find prayers for the forgiveness of sin, filled with confessions of guilt and repentance, which show that the Aryan poets had a sense of the burden of sin and prayer.”³ Later, with the rise in importance of Brahmaṇaspati, sacrifices became more common until, at the time of the Buddha, blood sacrifices had become of supreme importance. But, apparently, all these methods, running the gamut from simple prayers through elaborate ritualism to blood sacrifices turned out to be only temporary palliatives for the sense of sin. People began to look out for new solutions to the old problem.

The Upanishads, while maintaining an attitude of reverence for the Vedas, made direct mystical experience the basis for their philosophy, which linked the identity of the individual self with the Universal Self. This view, especially in its Advaita form, has had great influence on thinkers in India as well as in the West. But if the individual self is in fact identical with the Universal Self, you cannot escape the inevitable corollary that all morality is refuted and that our moral sense is based on an illusion.

Many have been the arguments brought in support of the Vedantic view of consciousness, but the aim here is not to discuss that view—rather it is to investigate consciousness at a level where distinctions between good and evil are no longer perceived. Our focus is not the transcending of good and evil but the transcending of the distinction between good and evil.

Of special interest to us here are the six other systems of philosophy that existed at the time of the Buddha. In the Sutta Piṭaka they are described one after another as if the Buddha was only interested in presenting to us a catalogue of the non-brahmanical systems of his time. But if we look at them more carefully we can discern a common thread running through all of them, namely, attempts to present solutions to the problem of sin. We shall, therefore, try to probe into the motives that might have inspired the six philosophers to propound their theories and methods.

Pūraṇa Kassapa seems to have realised the part played by the conscience in building up the sense of sin and also the belief that went with it, namely, that good actions have good results and evil actions have evil results. So he sought to undermine this belief and hence to cut out the root-cause of the sense of sin by teaching that if anyone kills, steals, commits adultery or speaks falsehood, no sin is committed, and, similarly, that if one practises good deeds through charity, love and compassion, no merit is acquired.

Makkhali Gosāla realised the importance of another aspect of the sense of sin: the word “sin” is significant only if a sense of responsibility for one’s actions goes with it. He believed that if men could be taught that it is foolish to believe in personal responsibility for actions for the simple reason that we are only toys in the hands of fate then the problem of sin is solved. His teaching is called *saṃsārasuddhi* or purification through the round of rebirths. According to this, everyone, the sage as well as the fool, the saint as well as the sinner, go through a definite number of rebirths, at the end of which all, without exception, will attain to the end of the miseries of life. Accordingly, you could behave as you pleased, telling yourself, “It was all predestined.”

Ajita Kesakambali took his stand on pure materialism. He felt that it was a stupid notion that living beings had a special status different from that of inorganic matter. He taught that organic as well as inorganic things were made of the four elements, and when one thinks one has killed a living being, or committed adultery, all that has happened is that one group of four elements has reacted against another group of four elements. All this fuss about sin was really a fuss about nothing.

³ *Indian Philosophy*, by S. Radhakrishnan, p. 77–78.

Pakudha Kaccāyana worked out another ingenious scheme to explain away the sense of sin. He taught that every living being was composed of seven elements: the usual four elements and, in addition, ease, disease, and the life-principle. The specialty of this scheme lies in the view that not only is each element eternal but that each of them is completely independent of the others and can never act against the others. Thus when you think that you are killing someone you are really causing no harm to anyone at all, for how can you cause any change in eternal unchanging elements?

Sanjaya Belaṭṭhiputta is described in the Suttas as dull-witted and an “Eel-wiggler.” His was a system of complete scepticism. He noted that it is a fact that a human being is not content, like the lower animals, to merely react to his environment; he needs a set of beliefs on which to base his world-view as well as the norms needed as guides to action. While, on the one hand, this has raised him far above the other animals, on the other, it has given him that sense of sin which appears to act as a drag on his progress. Hence Sanjaya taught his followers to be sceptical with regard to every kind of belief, hoping thereby to destroy the foundation of the sense of sin.

The above five systems thus taught a change in beliefs as a solution to the problem of sin. But, as has already been pointed out at the beginning of this essay, a mere change in beliefs is utterly inadequate as a solution. The Nigaṇṭhas (whose successors are the present-day Jains) realised this and therefore taught that we can make an end of sin through self-discipline. It required of its votaries high ethical ideals and strict and rigorous self-discipline. The Buddha pointed out that such a system is workable only if we knew definitely that we had committed sins in our past lives, that we knew the exact amount of sin we had committed, exactly how much sin has been worn out by discipline and how much is still left over. That criteria for these were never worked out by the Jains is shown by the fact that to this day they expect their saints to fast to death carrying the burden of the sense of sin to the grave.

It might be considered an oversimplification to treat all philosophical systems, as we have done, as if they were expressly invented for the purpose of removing the sense of sin. It is also a fact that one follows a religion as a matter of tradition, or that one accepts a new philosophy because it provides practically workable solutions to social and political problems, or perhaps because it appeals to one’s aesthetic sense or to one’s reason. But even after accepting all this, if one gets a deeper and more abiding satisfaction at all from one’s religion or philosophy it will be if, in addition, it provides a solution to the problem of sin. Take the case of a person suffering from a dire disease and a Christian faith-healer comes along and miraculously cures him. He gives up his former religion and embraces Christianity out of faith. He is happier than before in his new religion and if it happens that his former religion had insisted, as in Buddhism, that one cannot escape from the results of one’s actions, then a fresh cause for a deeper satisfaction for him, in his new religion, will be the teaching about grace and forgiveness of sins. Thus any philosophy of a general type which includes a world view is sure to have an aspect dealing with the problem of sin.

We shall now briefly look at the problem of sin in the West. The result of the impact of Christianity was to intensify the sense of sin. It has already been shown that the conscience tends to identify the thought with the deed. This tendency was endorsed and intensified by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount: “But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not thy whole body should be cast into hell.” This intensification of the sense of sin together with the perverse satisfaction that the conscience gets when anybody at all is punished for wickedness led to witch-hunting and the horrors of the Inquisition. The laity could, temporarily at least, alleviate their sense of sin by the enjoyment of the “holy” satisfaction

of watching the tortures of the condemned. The monks, who could not take part in the actual tortures, turned instead against themselves and practised flagellation and other forms of self-torture.

With the rise of scientific materialism, however, these methods of satisfying the conscience became outdated. The primitive pleasure that was derived by regarding the mentally afflicted as wicked had to give place to compassion for them. From this arose a greater awareness of mental afflictions—from the mildest neuroses to insanity and even to crime—as curable diseases. The struggle in men's hearts between what they wished to do and what they felt they ought not to do came up again, but now from the point of view of mental health. The psychotherapists have had to develop theories and devise methods for the treatment of the neuroses and other forms of mental ill-health. As many of the neuroses are directly traceable to what we have described as the sense of sin, it would be instructive to see what modern scientific theories have to say about the problem. We shall look into the theories of Freud as a typical case and try to see to what extent they succeeded and to what extent they failed in their objective.

According to Freud, the human personality may be divided into three provinces—the Id, the Ego and Super Ego. The Id, whose field of activity is entirely in the unconscious, contains everything that is present at birth, that is fixed in the constitution, and, above all, includes the instincts—which are basically two: Eros (the unifying instinct) and the Death instinct (or the destructive instinct). The Id works on the pleasure principle and always desires instinctual satisfaction whenever an internal tension is felt. The Id is never in direct contact with reality. Mediating between it and the external world is the Ego which works on the reality principle. It decides whether the demands of the Id are to be satisfied at all or postponed according to the necessities of self-preservation in the real world.

The most important aspect of the personality for our purpose here is the Super Ego: it forms when the child is about five years old and takes the place of the parents and later of the teachers and other influential persons in society; but the Super Ego is much stricter and harsher in its judgments than the real parents or teachers and is ready to punish the Ego not only for actual acts but also for its thoughts and its unexecuted intentions. This shows that the Super Ego, like the Id, is not in direct contact with reality. The Ego has to try to steer a course between the demands of the Id, the threats of the Super Ego and the necessities of the real world. In normal people, if the Ego decides to disagree with the Id or the Super Ego, it takes advantage of the fact that both of them are not in direct contact with reality—it tries to placate the former by offering it substitute objects in place of the ones demanded by it and the latter by the method of rationalisation. The example of the bullock cart driver illustrates both: the punishment meted out to the driver satisfies the aggressiveness of the Id as well as the moral indignation of the Super Ego.

When the Ego is weak or the Super Ego cruel and harsh, mental and psycho-somatic diseases make their appearance; this is where the psycho-therapist steps in and uses his methods to turn the patient into a normal person. A normal person is supposed to be one who is well-adjusted to society—but if the sole aim of each member of a society were to be well adjusted to it, society would stagnate. Great men could alter society for the better precisely because they were not adjusted to it. Besides, society is not monolithic; it contains many strata and each stratum has its own norms of morality and behaviour. So if any society wishes to maintain its stability, it cannot afford to be more moral or less moral than necessary for its stability. If those in charge of the sanctions behind society insist on a higher standard of morality, vice goes underground and leads to corrupt practices—as an example we may take the failure of prohibition in the USA and elsewhere. On the other hand, if the standard of morality is lowered, as for instance in persons in politics or public life, it can only lead to disruption of society, rebellion and chaos.

The attitude of society towards moral standards has, therefore, always remained flexible. Take the case of the institutions of marriage and prostitution. When a high standard of morality was expected within the marital relationship, prostitution was not only countenanced but encouraged. But a lowering of the intra-marital standards of morality has gone hand in hand with a discouragement of the institution of prostitution. Becoming adjusted to this society is essentially the same as coming to terms with our lower self. The modern solution to the problem is, therefore, the same as that of the five materialist philosophers at the time of the Buddha: sex relations are to be freer and the aggressive instincts are either to be channelled into the field of sport or to be used to work up hysteria against an enemy. A natural consequence of this attitude has been to regard attempts at overcoming the passions as signs of mental disease.

A reflection of this modern trend can be seen in the fields of literature and education. In James Hilton's "Lost Horizon" a simple method for attaining sainthood as practised in the earthly paradise at Shangri-La is described. With the help of a powerful herb the span of life is extended to more than three hundred years, and the aspirant to sainthood, after a century or more of self-indulgence in all the passions, finds the passions dropping off by themselves—he becomes a saint by virtue of being too old to have any passions and of being too young yet to die. Similarly, in the story "Siddhartha" by the German Nobel Laureate Hermann Hesse, a young man falls in love with a beautiful courtesan and then makes his love for her the basis for the highest spiritual attainment.

This general movement towards a slackening of the barriers against free indulgence of the passions has been helped by the studies of the anthropologists. In the school-room and the College campus, boys and girls have been encouraged to discuss sex freely; learned lecturers have taught them to appreciate the fact that among the Melanesians the elders trained their children in the art of self-abuse, and that in Samoa bedrooms have no walls. Thus the solution seems to be to make the Super Ego less harsh by making freer sex acceptable to society. But how far has this method succeeded?

The direct result of the labours of the scientifically minded social reformers appears to have been the rise of the "beat" generation. The chief articles of faith of these angry young men are an insistence on free sex experience and the enjoyment of tabloid mysticism provided by LSD and marijuana. The latest to join them are the micro-boppers, children between the ages of eight and twelve, all boasting of their sex experiences. This close association between free sex and the marijuana pipe dreams should remind psycho-analysts of what they must have often encountered in their professional practice: when the Ego is hard-pressed by an intolerant Super Ego, the former may choose one of two ways of escape—it may overthrow the Super Ego, as in mania or hypomania, or it may withdraw from reality and thus create an inner world where a Super Ego is unnecessary, as in schizophrenia. The behaviour of the "beat" generation should strongly remind them of the schizophrenics. The culmination of the reform movement seems to have been reached now when it becomes difficult to distinguish between those within the mental institutions and those outside them.

Thus we have shown that the deep sense of evil in our hearts cannot be removed by prayers and incantations, or by sacrifices, or by the grace of a deity, or by changing one's beliefs, or by self-discipline, or by adjusting to society, or by changing the social norms. The final verdict of Freud on this problem was: "It seems as though the activity of the other agencies of the mind is able only to modify the pleasure principle but not to nullify it; and it remains a question of the greatest theoretical importance, and one that has not yet been answered, when and how it is ever possible for the pleasure principle to be overcome. The consideration that the pleasure principle requires a reduction, or perhaps ultimately the extinction, of the tension of the instinctual needs (that is, a state of Nirvana) leads to problems that are still unexamined in the

relations between the pleasure principle and the two primal forces, Eros and the death instinct.”

4

Is the prospect so bleak? Can no way be found? We can come to a definite conclusion only after a study of what Buddhism has to say in the matter. In Buddhism it is the Way and actual practice that are all-important; the psychological notions with which we shall begin only serve to help us appreciate the validity of the methods.

According to Buddhism, the personality of a human being at any moment is the sum total of all the instincts and tendencies that he was born with and of what he has made of himself up to that moment. At the same time it is taught that consciousness (*citta*) is essentially pure and bright and it is only due to adventitious circumstances that it becomes impure; and these adventitious circumstances are our actions which are guided by what are known as the *hetus* or root-causes. The morally good roots are *alobha* (greedlessness), *adosa* (hatelessness), and *amoha* (non-delusion). The morally bad roots are *lobha* (greed), *dosa* (hatred), and *moha* (delusion).

But to assess the validity of the method taught by the Buddha for tackling the problem of sin we must first understand how we came by our instincts and tendencies at birth. The type of consciousness at birth is called the *vipāka* (resultant) consciousness and is the result of our actions in the previous life. This important matter is better explained by Ven. J. Kashyap:⁵

“The bad *hetus* ... are the animal qualities in man. They come as fits of instinctive impulses. Under their influence, they make a man lose his self-consciousness and reasoning faculty.

“The *vipāka* (resultant) of immoral consciousness, therefore, is a very dull and feeble consciousness, eminently instinctive. It must be *ahetuka* (without root-causes), for it is too feeble to be rooted in the *hetus*.

“The *vipāka* of a moral consciousness, with weak *hetus*, is also a feeble consciousness, and therefore *ahetuka*.

“The good *hetus*—*alobha*, *adosa*, *amoha*, on the other hand, are the higher rational qualities in a man. One who develops these in him is able to overcome his instinctive side, and make his consciousness more moral and rational.

“The *vipāka* of strong moral consciousness, therefore, is a consciousness as strong and good as the types of moral consciousness themselves, accompanied by the *hetus* (*sahetuka*). It is *sahetuka* strong enough to be rooted in the *hetus*.”

From the above analysis it becomes clear that the *vipāka* of strong immoral consciousness is a feeble, non-rational, instinctive type of consciousness, whereas the *vipāka* of a strong moral consciousness is strong enough to be rooted in the *hetus*. Thus according to the explanation offered by Buddhism, the consciousness of animals, and of some human beings like those who are born idiots, are all too feeble to be rooted in the *hetus*. The reason is that the former are the *vipāka* of strong immoral consciousness and the latter of feeble moral consciousness—hence both of them are morally neutral.

If we accept the above analysis as convincing, we can try to imagine how the human consciousness might have developed during evolution, although Buddhism, interested as it is in spiritual evolution in the vertical direction, has nothing to say about biological evolution in the horizontal direction. Perhaps in primitive human society the consciousness was mainly instinctive and therefore not rooted in the *hetus*. These children of Nature might have loved and fought and mated and died essentially like the lower animals; but their consciousness was

⁴ Freud, op. cit., p. 68.

⁵ Taken from *The Abhidhamma Philosophy* by Ven. J. Kashyap, Vol. I, p. 7.

human and therefore we might be able to imagine what sort of world they saw around them. It must have been a world of pure experience, of wonder and awe and terror, of strong but short lived loves and hatreds and yet devoid of notions of good and evil. It must have been a world of concrete things, alive and tangible: a non-rational world withal, yet man must have felt completely at home in such a world enjoying not only its pleasures but also its pains. Indeed there must have been moments in his life when he felt a one-ness with the whole universe and with all the living things in it. Perhaps it is this world, which Aldous Huxley described as “a blissful sub-rational eternity on the hither side of good and evil,”⁶ is what we perceive in our mystic moments when we are temporarily dissociated from the rational parts of our natures. This also probably explains why the mystic experience is so much more delectable and appears more real than the world of actuality.

But fully developed man is essentially a rational creature. While our instinctive nature recognises only experience, our rational nature is dissatisfied with it and wants to take an objective view of things. This is what we mean by “being aware of things.” This objectivity extends even to his subjective world—when he uses this faculty, he is said to have “self awareness.” As pointed out by Ven. J. Kashyap, as our instinctive impulses rooted in the bad *hetus* come up, they oppose our self-awareness and rational faculty and try to swamp them. It is our rational faculty that opposes and tries to curb the instinctual drives. Thus the specific teaching of Buddhism is that, apart from our rational faculty, there is no separate entity equivalent to our everyday notion of a conscience. It is of this rational faculty that the Buddha spoke when he taught:

“There is no secrecy in this world when one has committed sin.

For, your own self, O man, knows what is truth and what is falsity!”⁷

The objective aspect of the rational faculty (perhaps by reason of its objectivity) creates in us a strange dissatisfaction with the world. All its loves and hates and fears which appear to us to be so essential and to form the very core of our being are seen to be insubstantial and non-essential in our truly rational moments. But our thirst for life is so great that, in our ignorance, we misunderstand this dissatisfaction. Instead of realising that this feeling of dissatisfaction is the result of an insight into truth, we turn our rational faculty to attempting to drown the feeling. This always takes the form of some kind of activity of the body or of the mind or of both. In our wrong-headedness (*ayoniso manasikāra*), we ask (if we are metaphysically inclined): “Was I in ages past? Was I not in ages past? What was I then? How was I then? From what did I pass to what?”—and similarly “he questions about the future and the present and comes to the conclusion that he has a self, or that he has no self, or that his self is eternal” etc.⁸

This inability to be alone with oneself is a sure indication of our escapist tendency. If a man goes to sleep because he is bored and not because his body or mind is in need of rest—he is an escapist. If a man throws himself into work or social activity or sense-enjoyment because he cannot do without them—he is an escapist. If a man practises austerities and tortures himself ceaselessly—he is an escapist. If a man has been successful in his worldly life, and though he has everything that he wants he suffers from an intolerable boredom and frequents the parlours of the psychiatrists—he is an escapist.

All these are the results of misapplication of our rational faculty. If we were to apply it properly (*yoniso manasikāra*) we would arrive at two of the truths about the unsatisfactoriness of the world: namely, 1. the world of experience cannot give us true and lasting satisfaction; and 2. the dissatisfaction is due to the fact that, in spite of frustrations, we continue to expect this world

⁶ *Perennial Philosophy*, Fontana Book No. 272R, p. 175.

⁷ AN 3:4.

⁸ MN 2.

to give us satisfaction—in other words, our frustrated desires are the cause of our dissatisfaction. If it happens that one is also a follower of the Buddha, one learns two more truths: that there is such a thing as putting an end to this dissatisfaction; and that there is a way to its attainment. These are the only supreme truths in the world; the other truths about which religious people dispute and quarrel are the off springs of their imaginations.

If we now apply our rational faculty to the subjective sphere, we arrive at a slightly different set of results. The average unregenerate person in his spontaneous moments feels the urge to go after and take whatever he wants, to attack or sometimes even to kill any person who comes in the way of the satisfaction of his desires, to satisfy his sexual appetite whenever it arises. But when he turns his rational faculty on to these urges, he sees himself in relation to other living beings and realises that these urges are for self-satisfaction at the expense of others, and so he feels a strange dissatisfaction with them. On the other hand, refraining from lustful actions, refraining from taking what is not given, refraining from onslaught on creatures, and refraining from untruth gives him a strange satisfaction (*avippaṭisāra*, or absence of regret or remorse). But still he allows his desires to rule over him; and instead he turns to society and its sanctions to regulate them. He gets society to approve of murder so long as it is done for the good of the tribe to which he belongs and is practised on those who do not belong to it. He gets society to recognise the institution of marriage to regulate sexual relations, and to institute rules for the recognition of the ownership of property. Many other social institutions follow.

As soon as society takes over the functions that rightly belong to the individual's rational faculty, the foundation is laid for what we call conscience—the Freudian Super Ego. Parents and teachers are no longer true guides but are only representatives of society. Conscience, like society, is an attempt at a compromise between the truth as revealed by our rational faculty and the need to satisfy our urges. Hence the conscience is neither rational like our rational faculty nor non-rational like our instincts, but irrational. Besides, it arrogates to itself the punitive functions of society and makes life miserable for the individual. It is of this conscience of ours that the Blessed One speaks when he tells us:

“They who feel shame where is no cause for shame and they who feel no shame when they ought to be ashamed—both enter the downward path following false views.

“They who fear when there is no cause for fear and they who do not fear when they ought to fear—both enter the downward path following false views.

“They who discern evil where there is no evil and they who see no evil in what is evil—both enter the downward path following false views.”⁹

It is this irrational conscience of ours that is unable to distinguish between thought and action. The rational way of looking at this relation between thought and action can be seen from the very first two verses of the Dhammapada:

“(The mental) natures are the result of what we have thought, are chieftained by our thoughts, are made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, sorrow follows him (as a consequence) even as the wheel follows the foot of the drawer (i.e. the ox which draws the cart).

“(The mental) natures are the result of what we have thought, are chieftained by our thoughts, are made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him (in consequence) like a shadow that never leaves him.”¹⁰

The following points are to be noted from a study of the verses above:

⁹ Dhṛ. 316–318.

¹⁰ Translation by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan.

1. What we are at any moment can be judged from the thoughts that are passing through our minds at that moment as well as by all the thoughts we have thought before that moment and thus permitted to modify and mould our characters.

2. A good or evil result follows when an action initiated by a good or evil thought is completed.

The Abhidhamma explains the evils of killing and of sexual misconduct as:¹¹

“The following five conditions are necessary to complete the evil of killing: (i) a living being, (ii) knowledge that it is a living being, (iii) intention of killing, (iv) effort to kill, and (v) consequent death.

“Four conditions are necessary to complete the evil of sexual misconduct: namely, (i) the thought to enjoy, (ii) consequent effort, (iii) means to gratify, and (iv) gratification.”¹²

We can compare this broadly realistic attitude with the teaching of Jesus already quoted that “whosoever looks on a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Though it is doubtful whether, in practice, any priest was actually unfrocked for thinking adulterous thoughts, this teaching has undoubtedly given the Christian a harsh and intolerant conscience.

A further consequence of the rational attitude Buddhism has towards sin is that sin is not considered as something wicked and intrinsic, but as something that has arisen in consequence of a misapplication of our rational faculty. In other words, it is something born of ignorance, a foolish act (*akusala*), and the sinner is a fool (*bāla*).

From this account of the Buddhist explanation of the arising of sin, are we in a better position to solve the problem of the eradication of the sense of sin? Is it enough if we listen to the voice of our rational faculty, lead blameless lives and train our minds to think only good thoughts? Training ourselves to think good thoughts certainly produces in our minds a deep satisfaction and an atmosphere of peace and joy; but, as has already been pointed out, the inner core of our being is made up of our instinctive urges and is entirely non-rational. No amount of rational thinking and the doing of good deeds can in any way modify or even affect our inner core. It is like arguing with an idiot or an insane person. It is for this reason that the Blessed One scoffed at the Nigaṇṭhas for believing in the perfectionist doctrine that by austerities and discipline we can make an end of evil.¹³ Can it be done by attaining the *jhānas*? There is the belief, held even today, that in a *jhānic* state one is “in tune with the Infinite.” But the Blessed One pointed out, as in the *Sallekha Sutta*, that the *jhānas* and *āruppas* are only easeful and peaceful states. The Buddhist analysis, up to this point, appears to support the Freudian thesis that the pleasure principle of the Id can only be modified but not nullified.

But the Buddha has shown the world a way of nullifying the pleasure principle. To understand this better, let us consider how even ordinary people are sometimes able to give up powerful habits without putting up a struggle. Take the case of a young man of good family, well-educated and of excellent manners—but fond of the cruel sport of hunting animals for pleasure. All attempts to persuade him to give it up had proved fruitless. His appeal to materialistic theories in support of his actions showed that there was in him a cruel streak that would not be denied satisfaction. One day he went with his gun to hunt as usual, carefully

¹¹ Taken from *The Buddha and His Teachings*, by Ven. Narada Thera, pp. 373–374.

¹² Buddhism certainly recognises purely mental acts, but it does not make the mistake of equating, say, a passing thought of ill-will (e.g. rising anger immediately restrained, (cf. *Dhp* 222)), a constant dwelling on thoughts of ill-will not leading to overt action (*vyāpāda*), and a murder deliberately planned and executed.

¹³ *Devadaha Sutta*, MN 101.

stalked a deer, and shot it down. He saw it fall and went forward to take possession of the kill. But when he came closer he saw that the buckshot had ripped open the side of the deer and a dead foetus was hanging out. The deer was still alive but did not make the usual struggle to escape. Instead, it lifted up its head and looked at its enemy; in that look the young man saw not a hint of terror but a look of indescribable sorrow and almost of pity. Then the deer dropped back dead. The young man threw down his gun and went home in a high fever. He was confined to bed for a month. On full recovery it was discovered that not a hint of that cruel streak that was formerly in him was in evidence. What caused this sudden transformation of character? To explain it in terms of conditioned reflexes or as the result of a sudden alteration in the centre of emotional excitement, as William James would put it, is to appeal to dogma on insufficient grounds.

Soviet Russia swore by the method of conditioned reflexes for the cure of the neuroses, but, if recent newspaper reports are to be believed, attempts are being made to introduce Freudian methods. In the USA, where there were no restrictions on the methods employed, a conference of psychotherapists condemned the attitude of the psychiatrists in trying to treat the neuroses as if they were diseases and recommended persons of the stature of gurus to help the afflicted. All this goes to show that no infallible and completely convincing theory of the neuroses has yet been worked out. Without being dogmatic, therefore, we shall have a look at the important aspects of the above case of a permanent change for character.

First, it was an intense experience. Secondly, the experience was coupled with the realisation of a truth, namely, that there is no essential difference between the killing of a human being and the killing of an animal. And, thirdly, the urge to kill had been completely wiped out, a feat that no amount of conscious struggle could have accomplished.

This qualitative and permanent transformation of character we shall refer to as “transcendence”—provided the quality affected by the transformation is an inborn one and not one acquired in this life. It has already been pointed out that our inborn tendencies belong to the sphere of the non-rational and that they can understand and be at home with experience and experience alone. This is the reason why a realisation of the truth alone is unable to affect our inner core. Experience alone is equally powerless, since, to our inner core, one experience is as good as any other—it enjoys them all. It is only when that peculiar combination of truth and experience that we can call “experiencing of truth” takes place that our inner core is transformed and transcendence takes place.

The path taught by the Buddha included the way of transcendence. A clear distinction has been drawn in the teaching between the mundane (ordinary) and supramundane (transcendent) aspects of the path—the former for the overcoming of evil moral habits acquired in this life and the latter for the transcending of the innate tendencies. The supramundane path is attainable only by the method of transcendence, and that too, only when the truth experienced is the Truth of Suffering. In the mundane path, certain traits of character which depend on our innate tendencies may be transformed by this “ordinary” method—but the process is not irreversible if the truth experienced is not the sole ultimate truth, namely, the Fourfold Truth of Suffering. Irrational fears, for instance, do not yield to rational thought: it is useless telling ourselves that these fears are groundless. The Bodhisatta’s conquest of irrational fears is thus described in the Bhaya-bherava Sutta:

“I would seek out haunted shrines in woodland or forest or under tutelary trees and there abide in those awesome and grisly scenes —perchance there to discover fear and dread ... As I abode there, either an animal passed along, or a peacock knocked off a branch, or the wind rustled the fallen leaves, so that I thought this must surely be fear and dread coming. Thought I: “Wherefore am I doing nothing but await the coming of fear and dread? Come

as they may, I, just as they find me, will even so overcome them without changing my posture for them.”

“I was pacing to and fro when fear and dread came upon me; I continued to pace to and fro till I had overcome them, neither standing still nor lying down.”¹⁴

Here it is important to note that the Bodhisatta did not change his posture; to have changed it would have meant effort and struggle against the oncoming fear. Without struggling, without opposing, the experience of fear was transformed into experience of the truth that there was nothing to be afraid of, that the noise that set off the dread was only due to the rustle of leaves in the wind or due to a twig being broken off by a peacock. With this realisation the Bodhisatta was able to transcend his irrational fears.

When we grow from childhood through adolescence into manhood, many changes take place. We give up playing with the toys of childhood; we also cease feeling some of those childish fears that appeared to be so overwhelming when we were children. If we could but remember them, there must have been moments in our adolescence (a period when we become aware of new and unfamiliar emotions), when we realized the silliness of playing with toys and the stupidity of allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by those childish fears. We may think that a real transcendence has taken place, but the hallmark of transcendence is that, normally, there is no reversibility of the process. We have to make this qualified statement because, according to Buddhism, only transformations based on the Fourfold Truth of Suffering are absolutely irreversible, while those based on mundane truths are sometimes reversible: it is a well-known fact that during hypnotic trance, regression to earlier states is possible.

Psycho-analysts are aware that many of the neuroses arise out of the inability to transcend certain childish attitudes, and the analyst attempts to make the patient realise this fact. But very often, a mere realisation, in the sense of a purely intellectual acceptance of the truth does not effect the cure. It must come not as a realisation but as a revelation, a flash—the truth, in other words, must be experienced. But the psycho-analyst stops as soon as the patient is transformed from an immature adult into a mature one without realising that an adult, with his hates and lusts and above all with that sense of sin, is still a child.

Transcendence is not a contradiction or suppression of an existent state but is the attainment of a new dimension which cannot be explained in terms of the conditions within that state. A study of the characteristics of transcendence reveals some remarkable facts. A few years ago we would have found it easy to declare in what sense man transcended the machine. But since the growth of cybernetic science and the construction of life-imitating machines, even scientists, in fact scientists more than others, have insisted that there is no clear-cut line dividing man from the machine, that both are equally pseudo-purposive.

The Buddha was critical of such deterministic views. He said: “To those who fall back on something done previously as the essential reason, there comes to be no desire or exertion connected with the idea that this is to be done or this is not to be done.”¹⁵ He wished to point out that sectarians who held this deterministic view of actions and their results thought that thereby they could shut their eyes to the need to have to make choices in this world.

In man, the inevitable result of self-awareness is that we see ourselves in relation to the rest of the universe. The first result of this is the realisation that we are bound; to be aware that one is bound is to realise the existence of an infinite number of problems to be solved; to realise the existence of problems is to engage in effort to solve them—this is to engage in a truly purposeful activity of solving the problems. The machine, on the other hand, has no self-awareness, has no

¹⁴ MN 4.

¹⁵ AN 3:7.

realisation that it is bound and therefore has no problems though it may be able to solve them faster than man. The machine solves the problems provided by man with the help of the pseudo-purposive machinery built into it by man. Was it not Engels who pointed out that “to know one is bound is to be free?” It is because of his self-awareness that man is an economic animal, an ethical animal, a political animal, an animal aware of the meaning of history, and an animal capable of creating newer and ever newer sciences.

With the insight we have gained into transcendence, we can say that to realise that we are bound is to transcend the mere machine, to recognise the existence of the problem of sin is to transcend the mere animal, to experience the Truth of Suffering (i.e., of the unsatisfactoriness of the world of experience) is to transcend mere man.

Thus the solution to the problem of sin is its transcendence. The supreme importance of direct experience in Buddhism is to be seen from the preponderance of the many words in it related to the word *passati* or “to see”. Direct experience is always described as a “seeing,” perhaps because visual experience is the highest form of direct sense-experience and perhaps also because most of our knowledge of the world is acquired through it. The Buddha himself is called *samanta-cakkhu* (all-seeing), the Dhamma is *ehi-passika* (come and see), the first flash of insight into the truth is called *dhamma-cakkhu* (the eye of truth), the contemplation on the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self-ness of worldly things is described as *anupassanā* (observing), spiritual insight is called *vipassanā* (seeing clearly), and the final act directly leading to Arahantship is *jānāti passati* (to know and to see):

“He realises as absolute truth: ‘This is suffering, this is the arising of suffering, this is the cessation of suffering and this is the Way to the cessation of suffering.’ He realises as absolute truth: ‘These are the *āsavas*, this is the arising of the *āsavas*, this is the cessation of the *āsavas*, and this is the Way to the cessation of the *āsavas*.’ From knowing and seeing thus, his mind is freed from the *āsava* of sense-desires, from the *āsava* of love of continued existence, from the *āsava* of ignorance—and from being freed arises the knowledge that he is free.”¹⁶

The purpose of this knowing and seeing, of “the experiencing of truth” as we have called it, is to transcend the latent tendencies known in the Pāli language as *anusayas*, which form the non-rational inner core of our being. The various expedients we think up in order to escape from facing the Truth of Suffering have their origin in these *anusayas*: our love for metaphysical theories from *diṭṭhānusaya*, love for scepticism from *vicikicchānusaya*, the desire for sense-enjoyment from *kāmarāgā-nusaya*, taking delight in hurting others from *paṭighānusayā*, pride and self-righteousness from *mānānusaya*, all activities undertaken for sheer love and attachment for continued existence from *bhavarāgānusaya*, and all the other activities that we undertake through ignorance and confused thinking from *avijjānusaya*.

The way of transcendence is known in the scriptures as *lokuttara magga* (Supramundane Path) and its purpose is only to transcend the *anusayas*. Transcending all the *anusayas* may not be possible at one time and hence four stages of transcendence have been described in the Dhamma. The first two *anusayas* are transcended by the Sotāpanna, the next two are attenuated by the Sakadāgāmi and transcended by the Anāgāmi, and the last three are transcended by the Arahant.

To know how transcendence takes place in theory is not enough. There are certain dangers and difficulties inherent in the practical application of the method described below. This can be illustrated from the examples already quoted of the character transformation of the hunter and the Bodhisatta’s victory over irrational fears. In the former, the hunter’s friends and relatives

¹⁶ DN 2.

had constantly been telling him of the wickedness of his ways and this was probably at the back of his mind when he had the experience. Similarly, when the Bodhisatta exposed himself deliberately to the fears in the lonesome forest he was already intellectually convinced of the irrational basis of his fears. Both had the right mental atmosphere at the moment of experience; if the wrong mental atmosphere had been present the results might have been different. Even if one has the right mental atmosphere it might not always be possible to arrange for an experience of the right intensity and at the right moment; or the morbid aspect of the experience might overcome and unbalance the mind.

The Noble Eightfold Path encompasses these contingencies. The very first step is to have the Fourfold Truth of Suffering impressed on the mind; the next step is to remove all those unwholesome tendencies of character that have been acquired by us, in one way or another, throughout our life. The method of this removal is described in the Sabbāsava Sutta:¹⁷ Those acquired by allowing the mind to dwell upon attractive and repulsive objects are to be removed by self-restraint, those developed through attachment to articles of daily use such as food and clothing are to be removed by using them solely for supporting or protecting the body, those acquired by allowing oneself to be overcome by physical discomforts are to be removed by bearing them with patience, those acquired through evil company are to be removed through shunning it, and those acquired by failure in watching over one's thoughts are to be removed by constant watch over them. This removal of unwholesome tendencies creates in us an atmosphere of deep satisfaction known as *avippaṭisāra* (absence of regret or remorse). This atmosphere is to be deepened by the development of wholesome qualities like loving-kindness, compassion, joy in the happiness of others and equanimity in all circumstances.

If an intense experience is encountered during this stage, there is the possibility of being overcome by the morbid aspect of the situation. In this circumstance, the exercise of watching one's breath calms the mind and helps one to maintain one's equanimity.

Next we come to a step that is specifically Buddhist. This is the development of awareness in all its aspects. We have emphasised that it is in self-awareness that we transcend the mere animal and that it is self-awareness coupled with our rational faculty that makes us realise the Truth of Suffering. Special exercises, therefore, have been worked out for the development of self-awareness in all our daily activities.

These exercises comprise the practice of *vipassanā*—the attempt to experience the Truth of Suffering by means of meditations on the corruptibility of all conditioned things. This can be carried out by the contemplation on the loathsomeness of one's own bodily constituents or, if necessary, by contemplation on the various stages of corruption of a corpse in a cemetery. If, however, one has a special aptitude for what are known as *jhānas* one may develop a subtle state of the mind with which one may attain *yathābhūta nāṇadassana* (the ability to see things as they are)—with the help of this ability one can see the Truth of Suffering in the ordinary events of life and thus dispense with the need for intensity of experience.

Such, in brief, is the way of transcendence. To close this essay we can do no better than quote from the scriptures and demonstrate two of the most essential points of the Path—1. the proper frame of mind, and 2. the fourfold Truth of Suffering which alone is capable of effecting absolutely irreversible transcendence.

“And the Exalted One saw Suppabuddha, the leper, sitting in that assembly, and at the sight he thought: ‘This one here is of growth to understand dhamma.’ So for the sake of Suppabuddha, the leper, he gave a talk dealing in due order with these topics: on alms-

¹⁷ MN 2.

giving, virtue, the heaven world, of the danger, meanness and corruption of sense-desires, and the profit of getting free from them.

“And when the Exalted One knew that the heart of Suppabuddha, the leper, was ready, softened, unbiased, elated, and believing, then he unfolded those dhamma teachings which the awakened ones have themselves discovered, namely: suffering, the arising of suffering, the ending of suffering, and the way leading to the ending of suffering.”

“Then just as a white cloth, free from stain, is ready to receive the dye, even so in Suppabuddha, the leper, as he sat there in that very seat, arose the pure, stainless dhamma-sight, the knowledge that whatsoever is of nature to arise, that also is of nature to end.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Udāna 5:3, translation by F.L. Woodward.

The Buddhist Publication Society

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

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

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

The Administrative Secretary
Buddhist Publication Society
P.O. Box 61
54 Sangharaja Mawatha
Kandy, Sri Lanka
E-mail: bps@bps.lk
Web site: <http://www.bps.lk>
Tel: 0094 81 223 7283
Fax: 0094 81 222 3679