



Buddhist Publication Society  
Kandy—1980 Sri Lanka

## **The Wheel Publication No. 139**

First Edition 1969

Reprinted 1980

BPS Online Edition © (2008)

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# Prayer and Worship

Once when the Buddha was talking to the prominent lay-disciple Anāthapiṇḍika, he made the following comment on the uses of prayer:

There are, O householder, five desirable, pleasant and agreeable things which are rare in the world. What are those five? They are long life, beauty, happiness, fame and (rebirth in) the heavens. But of these five things, O householder, I do not teach that they are to be obtained by prayers<sup>1</sup> or by vows<sup>2</sup> If one could obtain them by prayers or vows, who would not do it?

For a noble disciple, O householder, who wishes to have long life, it is not befitting that he should pray for long life or take delight in so doing. He should rather follow a path<sup>3</sup> of life that is conducive to longevity. By following such a path he will obtain long life, be it divine or human.

For a noble disciple who wishes to have beauty, happiness, fame (rebirth in) the heavens, it is not befitting that he should pray for (them) or take delight in so doing. He should rather follow a path of life that is conducive to beauty, happiness, fame and (rebirth in) the heavens. By following such a path he will obtain (rebirth in) the heavens.

Āṅguttara Nikāya, Pañcaka Nipāta (The Fives) No. 43.

Among the Teachers of his time the Buddha was known as a *kammavādin*,<sup>4</sup> one who taught the efficacy and importance of actions. In his doctrine and discipline it is not through supplicating unseen powers by traditional religious ceremonies that man obtains benefits he desires; they have to be earned by living the good life in thought, word and deed. This indeed is the basis of Buddhist ethical teaching. The law of moral compensation and retribution inherent in the causal structure of events is the principle which alone can lift rules of conduct out of the sphere of the purely man-made and arbitrary, and place them on a universal basis. Without that, they are subject everywhere to the exigencies of situation and fashion, and people of intelligence are bound to query their validity. All the various symptoms of present-day moral doubt and disintegration are basically due to the lack of understanding of this principle of moral cause and effect.<sup>5</sup>

The third of the ten fetters to be broken before *sotāpattimagga*, the first stage of deliverance, can be reached, is *sīlabbataparāmāsa*, the belief in and clinging to empty ritual. In the time of the Buddha this meant the rituals of the Brahmins, such as tending the sacred fire (mentioned as a useless practice in the Dhammapada), and the vows of extreme asceticism taken by naked recluses of the Nigaṇṭha school, and others who lived like dogs or cows. *Sīlabbataparāmāsa* also embraced offerings and sacrifices to the gods; in fact, all the elaborate formalism of Vedic religion. The Rig Veda, which was old before the Buddha's birth, was a collection of hymns and prayers.

The Buddha, who declared himself "also a knower of the Vedas," was familiar with them and had found them to be useless as aids to Enlightenment. In the text quoted above he even rejects them as a means of obtaining mundane benefits. To understand this position taken by the Buddha it is necessary to examine the nature of prayer and worship in general.

<sup>1</sup> Prayer: *āyācana-hetu*

<sup>2</sup> Vows: *patthanā-hetu*

<sup>3</sup> Comy: *dāna, sīla, bhāvanā*; liberality, virtue, meditation

<sup>4</sup> Not the *karma-yoga* of the Bhagavadgītā, which consists in observing religious ritual and caste duties.

<sup>5</sup> In Buddhism, *kamma* (volitional act, involving choice between wholesome and unwholesome action) and *vipāka* (result of such action, in the present life or a subsequent one).

It seems to be a fundamental instinct in human nature to turn to prayer in times of need or perplexity. Prayer is an appeal to a higher power, either for guidance or to intervene in a situation which the individual feels himself unable to ameliorate by any effort of his own. The external power whose benevolence he invokes may be real or imaginary, but whichever it is, cases are cited which seem to show that this kind of prayer is sometimes followed by the desired result. It may be that this was what Voltaire had in mind when he wrote that if God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him.

The aphorism does not at all imply that God does exist, for clearly Voltaire held other views. What it does suggest, rather strongly, is that he recognised the existence of a common need, the wish to believe that there is an invisible power, stronger than those acting within the familiar framework of causality; a power, moreover, that is intelligently interested in human affairs and is willing to mould events to our satisfaction.

How primeval this instinct is can be seen from the earliest records of prehistoric man, which date from a time when prayer, or something like it, was conceived in terms of sympathetic magic. The first evidences of human pictorial art are the drawings of deer and buffaloes transfixed by hunters' arrows, left to us by the early cave-dwellers, and they were most likely intended to serve magical purpose. By picturing in anticipation the slaying of these animals, primitive man believed that he could ensure the success of his hunting expeditions. He supposed that by depicting the situation he desired he could bring it about. From this belief that by willing an event, and giving it concrete and visible form, it could be made an actuality, must have come the idea of prayer. We do not know what strange ceremonies may have accompanied the execution of these cave drawings to give them magical potency, nor whether they did indeed bring results. All we know is that they are there, and from magical usages still to be found in many parts of the world we are able to divine their purpose. They are functional, not decorative, art.

Since we have been led so far back into man's obscure past, it is tempting to speculate that the notion of worship, which is linked with that of prayer, may be present in a crude form at an even lower stage, perhaps among other primates. Tales have been told of travellers seeing apes at the time of the full moon performing something like ritual dances while gazing at the lunar disc, clasping their hands and bending their bodies in an equivalent to the human posture of genuflexion. Such tales are naturally dubious, but there is no really conclusive reason for disbelieving them. The instinct to worship is clearly of such antiquity that it may well be present at this level. The higher apes show so many human characteristics that it would be strange rather than otherwise, if this one very universal element were absent from their behaviour when in their natural state. It has not been observed among chimpanzees or orang-utans in captivity, so far as I am aware; but it may be that the animals, seeing the inability of their lunar god to release them, lose their faith; or, since all their needs are provided by man, neglect their religious duties.

It would be fruitless to enter here into a discussion regarding the existence of a God or gods able to answer prayer. A more profitable line of inquiry is to ask whether man's thought itself is capable of interfering with the natural progress of events which lie outside his direct control. As I have already remarked, it sometimes seems as though prayers can produce results. But is this really so? It is rather more probable that the cases in which prayer seems to have been "answered" are far outnumbered by those in which it is not, but that it is the cases of seeming success that are noted and recalled, while the fruitless examples are forgotten. When a positive response appears to have been made to the prayer it may be due to chance (that is to say, to other, unknown causes), for among a great number of petitions chance average will ensure that some prayers must be followed by the result prayed for. It is only where the chances against the

occurrence of a particular event that has been prayed for are very much above average, yet the event takes place, that we are justified in looking for another element besides chance in the situation.

And here we cannot but take notice of the peculiar pattern of events to which Carl G. Jung has given the name "acausal synchronicity." This denotes, for want of a better term, the occurrence of a series of apparently chance events, all belonging to the same order of things or having reference to the same object, where no causal connection between one event and the others can be discerned. To give what is perhaps the commonest example of this, one may light upon an interesting item of information which has never come to one's notice before, although it is within the ambit of one's normal interests. Shortly afterwards one finds a reference to the same item in a book, newspaper or magazine; and this reference may be followed by others in quick succession, as though a source connected with that particular subject had been tapped, while it is impossible to trace any connection between the random events which are bringing it to one's attention. The whole series of events is seemingly haphazard, yet it carries a suggestion that each may be a part of some structure of relationships that underlies the causality of the sensible world, or which projects our familiar system of causal relationships into other dimensions where we cannot follow it. What we are observing is the penetration of one level of reality by outcroppings from another. Every event of which we are conscious has a genealogy in time, but it is not at all certain that an event in its totality conforms to its measurable aspect as that is known to us and as it can be stated in terms of temporal sequence. To grasp its organisation we are compelled to think in terms of mutual and coincidental dependence as well as in terms of sequential causality, just as we are when considering *paṭicca-samuppāda*, the Buddhist doctrine of Dependent Origination.

Seen in this context, the praying for a certain thing to happen, and its subsequent happening, may not be events related to one another in the temporal order with which we are familiar: both events may be dependent upon a substructure which is extra-spatial and extra-temporal, a total event of which we are conscious only in those parts of it which project into our world-structure and are spatially and temporally limited. Thus a constellation of unrelated events may enter into our experience without our realising that each event belongs categorically to one total event that lies outside our time and space-conditioned awareness. They are outflowings from another level of causality of which we have no sensory information, but which stands in relation to our normal area of awareness much as the world of nuclear physics stands in relation to the Newtonian world. It is becoming more and more evident that time on the sub-atomic level is not the time that we know. Its freakish behaviour is causing scientists to revise many of their ideas in the attempt to reconcile it with the concept of causality in conventional physics; and this is hardly surprising when they have stumbled upon an order of time which apparently admits of movement in both directions, or, in popular parlance, a time that moves backwards.

But that is perhaps stating the case too crudely. The situation as it stands at the time of writing is that the behaviour of neutrinos and other elementary particles with a life-span of one billionth of a second in the sub-atomic world does not adhere rigidly to the parity and time reversal invariance principles, which are fundamental to the principle of causality in physics. It seems also that some particles found in super-dense stars can travel faster than light; which gives rise to the inference that signals sent out by these particles travel backwards in time and reach their destination before they are emitted from their source. But it is notoriously unsafe to base any philosophical conjecture on the ever-shifting sands of science.

The universe of concepts is a closed system, and although it may expand into incredible realms, the conceptual mind can travel only around its inner circumference, to reach no final resting place. It is not by journeying to the world's end that the real nature of things can be

discerned, but only by making a break-through into other levels of consciousness. This has always been axiomatic in Buddhism. All that science can contribute to ultimate knowledge is the negative demonstration of the conditioned and relative nature of the world, which is only the starting-point of Buddhism's venture into reality.

A further hint of the paradoxical state of affairs that science appears to have disclosed in the world-structure may be found in the numerous cases of well-authenticated precognition. If precognition, as distinct from mere prediction, is a fact, it means that our accepted view that cause must precede effect is not valid in all circumstances. Normally, an event which we perceive takes place before our perception of it, if only by a split second. This agrees nicely with our belief that the event represents cause and our perception of it is its effect. But if an event is actually seen occurring before it takes place, the effect has come about before the cause, and the relationship in sequence between them has been reversed. This points to a state of things in which, using a different mode of apprehension, it could be seen that our willing of an event to occur is not the cause, but could be the result, of its subsequent occurrence. If this is so, belief in the efficacy of prayer founded upon instances in which it seems to have brought results may be due to nothing but a misunderstanding of extra-temporal causality, or what Jung called acausal synchronicity. Altered states of consciousness experienced under special conditions are themselves sufficient proof that the time which is dominated by events and space-relationships is by no means the only order of time, nor is our world the only plane on which the mind can function. Consciousness is confined to this sphere just so long as it depends solely upon the sensory contacts possible to the human body for its support. For these, the space-time continuum is the framework necessary to give them definition and meaningfulness. There is more than a symbiotic relationship between space, time and events; they are all aspects of the same conceptual reality that forms the structure of relative or conventional truth, and which Buddhism calls *sammuti-sacca*. All phenomena that we apprehend through the senses are made up of mutually-conditioned factors belonging to the same order of interdependence, and this state of things holds good throughout the material universe. But matter itself is now known to exist in unfamiliar states, in which different orders of causality obtain, so that it is clear that none of these states represents an absolute, rock-bed foundation to the edifice of our cognitive experience.

Many people, among them Balzac, who made much of it in his novels, have held the belief that the human will can be concentrated into a force, quasi-material, which is capable of acting upon the flow of events and of altering its direction. This is an attractive and not altogether impossible idea, but to do justice to it a rather oblique approach is needed. We have seen that modern physics is tending to become somewhat mystical, if by that word is understood the entertaining of concepts that lie outside direct observation. But biology, which claims to hold the key of life, or at least of living organisms, is still firmly entrenched in materialism. Therefore to speak of "science" as though it were a homogeneous system that presents a solid front against everything metaphysical is very deceptive, to say the least. Whether the various scientific disciplines will ever form a unified body is doubtful. Between them there still lies a lot of untrodden ground, and those who are attempting to explore it, the parapsychologists, are not receiving much encouragement. Among parapsychologists, too, many are not interested in physical phenomena. Beyond a few experiments in psychokinesis and some, by amateurs, in trying to promote the growth of plants by prayer, not much has been done to test the potency of thought when it is directed towards influencing external objects without physical contact. The most impressive of such experiments to date have been conducted in Russia. In January 1969 I saw a film, brought from Russia by American parapsychologists, of tests that were carried out on a Russian woman who it is claimed has the ability to move objects by mental concentration. Some small articles were placed on a stand in front of her, under a glass dome. Pictures were

taken from various angles to show that there was no physical contact between the woman and the objects, the stand and the dome. She appeared to be concentrating intensely, moving her body from side to side and forward and backward. The objects under the glass certainly moved, always towards her. It seemed rather unlikely that fraud was involved since the experiments, or at least the exhibiting of the film, had not been approved by the Russian authorities. It had been shown to the American parapsychologists clandestinely, and brought from Russia in secret. It may be presumed that the experiment was scientifically controlled, but one defect in its presentation by motion pictures lay in the fact that there was no means of ensuring that the objects were not of metal or contained metal, and could not be influenced by magnets.

Whether there is any power in prayer to influence events, and if there is, whether it resides in an external agency or is an unknown faculty of the mind, must rest undecided. Rather than trying to settle the issue on the basis of observed facts it is more instructive to examine the rationale of worship. By this I mean the worship of deities for specific ends, for it was this that gave the first impulse to religion and which still provides the chief motivation in theistic worship for the majority of people.

Most prayers are for gain, although today it has become rather unfashionable to admit that self-interest enters into religion at all. The best known prayer in the world makes the appeal, "Give us our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses....." The point to be noted is that the idea that man should not expect rewards from his religion, and that to do so is in some way unworthy, is only of very recent origin. It has come from the growing tendency to make religion conform to the ideas of humanism, which itself has nothing more to offer as the result of living the good life than the bare satisfaction of doing so. According to the bleak ethics of this school, an honest tradesman whose business is being crushed out of existence by an unscrupulous competitor must be happy in the knowledge that his own moral life is sound. That is the only recompense he will ever get for suffering for his principles. What is to become of the poor man's happiness, in the midst of the ruin brought about by his dishonest competitor, if he ever questions the validity of "natural law," or whether ethics exist in nature at all, is best left to the imagination. If he does, he will feel cheated; for as P. M. Rao has pointed out in a penetrating essay, *The Problem of Sin*,<sup>6</sup> "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." The concept of doing good solely for its own sake and without any belief in an adjustment of the moral balance is an invention of humanism; it can scarcely be found in the original form of any religion. It is assumed, a priori, in religious thought that there are transcendental rewards for living righteously, and evil consequences for violating the sacred laws. This element is as strong in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as it is in any other religious exhortation, as an unbiased reading of it will testify. On one occasion the Buddha suggested, for the sake of sceptics who could not believe in a continuation of life after the dissolution of the body, that to obey the moral law was an end in itself, leading to an untroubled mind and an unblemished reputation in the world; but so far as I am aware this passage is the only one of its kind.<sup>7</sup> In many other texts the Buddha condemns the theory that there are no heavens and no hells, and no consequences of good and bad deeds in an after state, as being beliefs that make the good life almost impossible.

Regarding the Bhikkhu life itself the Buddha said, "A man will not give up an inferior pleasure except with the prospect of gaining one that is superior." By this he meant the surrender of sensual, worldly joys for the higher and more secure happiness to be found in the *jhānas*, and ultimately in Nibbāna.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Wheel* No. 136, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> *The Kālāma Sutta* (*The Wheel* No. 8).

So it is as well to recognise that most men worship as they trade— for gain of some kind. Their prayer is a respectful attempt to strike a bargain with some deity in which they tender so much faith, or so much self-denial in mild forms of asceticism, in the hope of receiving substantial benefits, here or hereafter. Prayer and fasting, the burning of votive candles and the observance of holy days all belong to this aspect of religion.

In principle there is nothing discreditable in this, but its practice gives rise to some anomalous situations, of which most people today have become aware. For example, when two countries professing the same faith are at war with one another, each will pray to the same God for victory, and ecclesiastics will bless the regiments and weapons of destruction before they go into action. But if God is certain to grant victory to the more righteous of the two powers, to ask him to do so seems superfluous. If both sides are equally in the right (or equally in the wrong, which is more likely) the deity is placed in an awkward quandary, which can be resolved only by giving victory to the side that has pleased him most or displeased him least. Again, it is to be presumed that he would do that in any case, even if it is only a pyrrhic victory. Or is it believed that he can be persuaded to overlook faults if sufficient praise and flattery is lavished upon him, and give the victory to the unworthy? Expressed thus crudely, the theist would doubtless call this a blasphemous idea; but it is hard to find any alternative possibility. In the human mind, of course, the difficulty is readily overcome by the naive tendency of each side to believe that it is in the right. Which again brings us back to square one: for if a nation believes it is in the right, it should also believe that God will automatically grant it the victory.

Again, it is generally held that an omnipotent God, who is benevolently disposed towards his devotees, will ensure that they get whatever is best for them. He may be assumed to have made up his mind as to what he will grant and what he will withhold, and that whatever he decides will be for their greatest advantage. If that is so, a prayer can only be an attempt to make God's decision for him, or to persuade him to change his mind, as though it is the petitioner, not God, who knows best. Even if the prayer is followed by the formula "Yet not my will but thine, O Lord, be done," the situation is not materially altered. The addition merely transforms the request into a reminder that this is what the devotee would like God to do for him. And if God possesses the attribute of omniscience he must know what is desired before the prayer is uttered. Omniscience also implies that God knows whether the prayer will be granted or not before it is made. Whichever way one looks at it, the idea of praying, for some specific end is difficult to justify logically. If prayer is effective in any circumstances it must be because some principle entirely different from that of divine intervention is brought into play.

What has been said applies, of course, only to strictly monotheistic systems. Under a polytheism such as that of ancient Greece or of popular Hinduism, where no god is omnipotent but all have varying degrees of power in relation to one another, or special areas of jurisdiction, praying to any one of them is like applying to a superior in worldly rank, who by exerting himself on one's behalf may be able to accomplish what is required of him, and will do so if one can gain his favour, even if the devotee is morally unworthy or if the granting of the request is not to his best advantage in the long run. For this to be the case it requires gods who have human characteristics, who are limited in power and who are not too exacting in ethics. Precisely such are the gods worshipped in popular Hinduism.

If this point should be challenged, the legendary accounts of the gods in the Purāṇas may be consulted for verification. These bear many similarities to the Graeco-Roman myths. Aside from whether prayer to such gods is effective or not, it can be more reasonably justified than can prayer to a sole, omniscient and omnipotent deity. This is but one of many advantages that polytheism has over monotheism when it is necessary to give a rational account of the belief in supernatural intervention in human affairs.

The concept of one omnipotent God raises many problems besides those connected with prayer. Formerly the difficulties were glossed over by theologians, but for practical purposes every monotheism has had to be in effect a dualism not unlike that of the Manicheans, with a principle of evil opposed to that of good. A system with only one Cause and Mover cannot be made to work.

Though the general purpose of prayer may be the same wherever it is resorted to, the things for which individual men pray have always shown a rich variety. The unspiritual man tends to pray for material profit or victory over his rivals, for success in business, or to gain the bubble reputation at the shrine rather than the canon's mouth. The more devoutly inclined pray for higher wisdom, for communion with their God, for forgiveness of their sins or for the welfare of humanity. This higher type of religious impulse is found among some comparatively rare followers of every creed, and the form and content of their prayer is more akin to the Buddhist discursive meditations (on *mettā*, for example) than are the petitions of those who crave material benefits. All the same, behind the prayer there usually lurks a personal wish, the longing for salvation and immortality. And it is in this regard that Buddhism takes an altogether different position.

In Buddhism there can be no question of calling upon a deity for aid so far as ultimate liberation, the attainment of Nibbāna, is concerned, for it is recognised as being something that no external power can bestow. On the lower level, Buddhism is not intent upon the kind of benefits that deities may be assumed to confer. Except insofar as it is the field of moral choice where alone striving for Nibbāna is possible, the life of this world is not the concern of Buddhism in the same way as it is to the creeds which teach the existence of a Creator-God who is thought to be actively interested in the welfare of his creatures and responsible for it. The Buddhist knows that he himself is the sole author of his being, or rather that he is the product of Ignorance conjoined with Craving, and that the Dhamma is not a vehicle for the increase of mundane pleasures and attachments, but a means of gaining release from the suffering they bring. Since the gods themselves are involved in saṃsāric conditions, they cannot help. The Noble Eightfold Path is a way that each has to tread by his own effort: "*Appamādena sampādetha*"—"Strive with earnestness," was the Buddha's final exhortation. Neither liberation nor even the courage and determination to strive for it are things that prayer can bring.

And if it is useless to pray to any gods, it is equally so to pray to the Buddha. He is not a creator, preserver, or destroyer of the universe; neither is he a dispenser of favours nor a supreme punitive power. The principle of Buddhahood is not attached to an entity. When the Buddha is worshipped it is as a teacher, the greatest Teacher of all beings, and such devotion is a spiritual exercise; the Great Wisdom (*Bodhi*), last personified in the Master, is the true object of veneration.

The *pūjā* offered by Buddhists therefore cannot be called prayer, since it contains none of the elements usually present in the attitude denoted by that word. The Buddha image is a cenotaph, enshrining nothing more than the idea of the Master who once lived, the symbol of his presence—which, all the same, is more immediately felt in the Dhamma he taught and becomes ever more so as it is penetrated with understanding. The outward aspect of *pūjā*, the offering of flowers, lights and incense, is not only a token gesture of homage; it also carries a deep symbolism, which is expressed in the Pali formulas that are recited at the time. The transient beauty of the flowers, so soon to lie withered on the tray, reminds the devotee of the impermanence of all composite things: 'Even as these flowers must soon wither, so shall my body lie crumbling in decay.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See "Flower Offering," by Kassapa Thera, in *Devotion in Buddhism, The Wheel* No. 18.

The candles or lamps recall the Great Teacher whose Bodhi dispels the darkness of ignorance: "These lights I offer to the Teacher who is the Light of the Three Worlds." The incense symbolises the sweet and cleansing fragrance of the Dhamma which permeates the mind; it also stands for the pleasing odour of good deeds which, like the scent of Tagara blossoms, can be recognised from afar. (Dhammapada, v. 11–12)

For the rest, Buddhist devotion is the mental or vocal recitation of the supreme qualities of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, followed by homage to the Buddhas of the past and future (for homage in anticipation is perfectly reasonable), and the recitation of the Mettā, Mahā Maṅgala and other Suttas, especially any Sutta which is particularly appropriate to the occasion. It is, in short, an act of mental purification and is carried out with that intent alone.

In Buddhism the cult of devotion (*bhakti*) is certainly not absent; but it is restrained, and emotional transports are not encouraged. Particularly this is so on the levels of the highest endeavour. The Buddha rebuked a monk who showed an excessive attachment to his person which was interfering with the monk's progress, and on his death-bed he praised a Bhikkhu who had retired to practise Bhāvanā instead of watching beside him to the end (*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*).<sup>9</sup>

There is a story of a Christian missionary who found a Chinese priest chanting in a temple. When the Chinese had finished, the missionary asked him: "To whom were you praying?" The Chinese looked faintly surprised. "To no one," he replied. "Well, what were you praying for?" The missionary insisted. "Nothing," said the Chinese. The missionary turned away, baffled. As he was leaving the temple, the Chinese added, kindly, "And there was no one praying, you know.'

The Chinese in that story understood perfectly the psychology of prayer as an instrument of mental purification. If it were understood in this sense by people who can no longer believe in any god to pray to, they might still be able to contact sources of power within themselves that have become closed to them by reason of their scepticism. Prayer of this kind, which is not really prayer at all, can be an instrument of potency in itself, irrespective of whether it invokes any external agency or not. When it takes the form of an interior dialogue, or approaches abstract contemplation, it has a real therapeutic value that is entirely lacking in prayer for the fulfilment of desires or for supernatural intervention.

To pray for the welfare of others, when the prayer is untainted by thoughts of self, is another action that brings into play the higher mental impulses (*adhicitta*), and one that, whatever invisible power it may seek to invoke, makes for spiritual growth. This kind of prayer, even though it may be the outcome of wrong assumptions, such as the belief that it will be heard by a Heavenly Father or transmitted to him by one of his angelic emissaries, has its own value, a value that cannot be assessed in any way except by reference to the internal experience that accompanies it and leaves its stamp upon the mind. It may be called the first approach to the divine abidings (*brahma-vihāra*) by way of mental purification through *mettā* (loving-kindness) and *karuṇā* (compassion). Such prayer, when it is accompanied by erroneous views, may have in it too much of emotion to achieve *upekkhā* (equanimity or detachment), and may be too narrowly restricted to concern for those who are in a pitiful plight to include *muditā* (joy in the happiness of others), but nevertheless it opens up the heart and prepares it for a more comprehensive understanding of the truths which, thoroughly penetrated, bring wisdom and insight. An example of this may be seen in the case of Kisā Gotamī, whose distracted prayers for the revival of her dead child were the prelude to the dawn of higher knowledge. In a sense it may be likened to those moral principles found in all religions which, although they are grounded on

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<sup>9</sup> *The Last Days of the Buddha, The Wheel No. 67/69.*

false views (*diṭṭhi-nissita-sīla*), are good in themselves, and the observance of which is kammically wholesome.

There is another kind of prayer, also, which takes effect, if not in outward circumstances in the individual's subjective experience. It is that which is wrung from a man in the last extreme of anxiety, anguish, perplexity or remorse for a wrong deed that he cannot undo, when he is more concerned for the harm it has caused someone else than he is for any punishment it may bring upon himself. In crises such as these, the spontaneous and irrepressible cry from the heart is an emotional and spiritual catharsis, and it often brings relief from internal tensions that can neither be relaxed nor any longer endured. Remorse in itself is a purely negative emotion and Buddhists do not usually surrender themselves to it, knowing it to be an unwholesome and unprofitable state of mind. If it does arise, it should be translated into beneficial action. The best way of dealing with a situation of this kind, should it occur, is to determine to avoid actions likely to cause it in future, and then to counteract the unwholesome *citta* that has arisen by some deed, or some positive thought, of a wholesome nature. But for those not trained in the Buddhist discipline, prayer is often the only means of finding relief in unbearable situations, and it is not without benefit. If it is a question of some moral problem to solve, the release of tension brought about by praying, restores the balanced calm necessary to view the problem in its true light and come to a decision. But in the resort to prayer for escape from remorse there lies an insidious danger. It is that the prayer, and the resulting sensation of relief from the burden of guilt, may lead to a belief that the wrong deed has been forgiven and washed out, though not expiated, and that there is no need to take any further action. Unless the penitential prayer is accompanied by a genuine resolve to make whatever restitution may be possible, and to exert oneself to do better in future, the release from anxiety it has brought will be a delusion, and possibly a very harmful one, like putting a soothing dressing on a wound that is turning gangrenous. It is a device for suppressing the guilt feeling instead of removing it altogether. Past unwholesome kamma cannot be undone or blotted out by wishful thinking, but it can be counter balanced, and in part at least mitigated, by good kamma of the present and future. If the prayer leads to this insight, in however vague a way, and inspires wholesome action, it is good. If not, it is altogether useless. It has given temporary relief without correcting the fault, which will continue to appear, again and again, in recurring situations of a like nature.

Certain Christian sects, taking an extreme view of man's helplessness in the grip of an incurable corruption and of the doctrine that salvation can come only through grace from without, have taught that the devotee must yield himself to the utmost depravity before he can enter into communion with God,<sup>10</sup> in the belief that "the greater the sin, the greater the forgiveness." Heretical though these sects may have been, the germs of their error are to be found in orthodox Christianity itself, from the Old Testament doctrine of Original Sin down to its New Testament corollary of vicarious atonement and the preference Jesus seems to have shown for sinners over the righteous. This has helped to form ambivalent attitudes towards sin and redemption in the Western mind; attitudes which often bring confusion, and consequent anxiety, to problems of moral responsibility. It has also, in an indirect way, been the cause of an exaggerated concern over the actions of others. In recent times this has shown itself in feelings of guilt arising through an acute sense of personal identification with the societal group and its collective acts of the past, extending to cases where the individual had neither taken part in the group activities he condemns, nor even approved of them, and where, consequently, Buddhism would see no personal guilt involved. Since a mistaken sense of guilt is almost as unhealthy a state of mind as one based upon reality, it might be supposed to be also an uncomfortable one; but there is in fact some reason to believe that the Western mind finds feelings of collective guilt easier to support than the sense of an individual rightness which it has been taught to regard as

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<sup>10</sup> *Histoire du pantheisme populaire au moyen age et au seizieme siecle.* Auguste Jundt.

Pharisaic. The current tendency to level off distinctions may also have something to do with this, making it more comfortable to be a sinner in company, or to imagine oneself one, than to be a good man alone. The idea of the church congregation, the flock, is the spiritual father of “togetherness,” and while it may be a good thing in certain respects it has disadvantages in others. One man may be tempted to throw the entire burden of his moral responsibility upon the group, while another, more conscientious, may tend to take the weight of collective guilt onto his own shoulders and become a victim to feelings of personal involvement that are entirely unwarranted. In the circumstances the good but worldly-minded man tries to interfere. He becomes a reformist—that is to say, if he goes far enough, an executioner.<sup>11</sup> The more spiritual retires to solitude and prayer.

The religious background to this state of affairs is further complicated by the fact that there are two streams of thought in Christianity, due to its eclectic origins: one is predeterministic, the other is dynamic and more akin to the *kamma-vāda* of Buddhism, and since the conflict between them has never been satisfactorily resolved it has been left for sectarians to place the emphasis on whichever reading they prefer. Jansenism, with its theory that some are chosen for salvation from the beginning, and Calvinism with its similarly pre-elective view, are typical examples of the attitudes that must result from belief in an omnipotent and omniscient deity; other churches attempt, with varying degrees of success, to hold a balance between doctrines that are not easy to reconcile. Whether the new “God is dead” theology will eventually remove the difficulties, or whether it makes a crack in the fabric which must quickly lead to its collapse, remains to be seen. What will most surely be affected by it is the attitude towards prayer, and especially towards prayer that calls upon a personal deity for intervention in mundane affairs. In the absence of such a deity there are, however, some alternative possibilities that are not entirely without support in actual experience. We may glance at them, although it is not practicable to discuss them in detail here.

Elsewhere<sup>12</sup> I have mentioned some evidence which seems to suggest that intelligences from other planes of being do occasionally intervene in the affairs of the living, and I am far from discounting this possibility. But in those cases that have come to my notice and which appear to me most worthy of credence, help seems to have come not from any of the gods recognised by theistic systems but from beings now in one of the lower heavenly states who were formerly connected by ties of relationship or friendship with the person who receives the help. In these cases it seldom, if ever, takes the form of material assistance, but rather that of guidance in times of perplexity, comfort in times of stress and warnings of impending danger. It also seems to come spontaneously rather than in answer to any prayerful demand, unless an unspoken call for help constitutes a prayer. Moreover, it appears to have come in a number of cases when the person concerned was quite unaware that he was in need of help. One such case is that of a European Buddhist monk who affirms that he has several times been saved from a totally unsuspected danger by what he calls his “protecting hand.” This sometimes manifested to him as an internal voice, sometimes in the form of physical restraint. On one occasion it took the second form when, running from pursuers in pitch darkness, he was suddenly arrested, as though by an invisible barrier, to find that he had been heading straight for a precipice. Again, the explanation could lie in a psychic faculty of the person concerned, which precognises the peril and alerts the conscious mind to its presence. Relatively few people who have known such experiences, however, are willing to accept this explanation. To them it always appears as though some external agency had been at work, and it would be altogether arbitrary to dismiss their conviction as groundless. Many examples of this type of experience are to be found in the

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<sup>11</sup> Some of the great criminals of history—the Cromwells, the Robespierres, the Marats—were not the less criminal because they were necessary. But others have been criminals without being necessary.

<sup>12</sup> *The Case for Rebirth*. The Wheel No. 12/13.

literature of psychical research, and they have not yet been given a satisfactory explanation that rules out the external agency hypothesis. Some of the recorded cases, taken at their face value, point as definitely to some kind of intercommunication between the human world and other planes of existence as do similar accounts given in Buddhist texts. In this connection it is worth noting that the present-day positivist tendency to regard Buddhism as being “only a philosophy” could easily be corrected if its advocates would study the material on this subject to be found in the earliest Buddhist canonical texts, and make an unbiased attempt to interpret it in the light of contemporary research in parapsychology.

We have seen that Buddhist *pūja* has nothing in common with the offerings made to gods who are believed to be mystically present in their images, and that Buddhism is little concerned with the eight worldly conditions,<sup>13</sup> except in relation to the truth of dukkha. But Buddhists are human, their lives filled with ordinary pre-occupations and anxieties, for themselves and for those dependent upon them. Buddhism, which starts as a very realistic system of ethico-psychology, recognises two forms of aspiration, the worldly and the transcendental, *lokiya* and *lokuttara*. He who wishes to be wholly world-transcending in his aims must of necessity give up mundane attachments. Ultimately there is no avoiding the choice between one and the other. Yet this does not mean that one still remaining in the world rejects the higher life completely. The path of renunciation lies through actions that bear good results (*kusala kamma*) to the abandoning of all result-bearing actions, the good equally with the bad, when Arahantship is reached. And so the ordinary lay Buddhist, just as much as the Christian, Hindu and Muslim, sometimes feels the need of help from a higher source in his everyday affairs.

The Mahāyāna did not have to invent a god for this purpose; it has the Bodhisattvas who, unlike the Buddha, are still benevolently active in saṃsāra. But the very early Buddhists, before the advent of the Mahāyāna, evidently had to be advised against resorting to the gods of the Vedic pantheon for the fulfilment of their wishes. The Buddha was particularly emphatic against Vedic worship when it involved costly and inhumane sacrifices, and when it was mistakenly believed to confer *mokṣa* (deliverance). It was one of the Devas themselves who asked the Buddha what was the highest (most effective) of the propitious observances to bring about happy results. The commentary to the Maṅgala Sutta tells us that the propitious observances (*maṅgala*) in dispute were the Brahmanical ceremonies at birth, name-giving, marriage and so on, at different stages of life. The Buddha’s reply was that the observance most certain to bring felicity was to live in accordance with Dhamma. By this he meant that a man’s good *kamma* is his only certain protection from the ills of the world, not the observance of religious ceremonies, smearing one’s forehead and that of others with ashes, interpreting good and bad omens and lucky or unlucky hours of the day, and offering food to gods who were unable to eat it, or, if they really were gods, had no need of it. According to Buddhism—and not merely commentarial Buddhism, but the Buddhism of the oldest texts—what the Devas need and welcome is a share of the merit that only human beings can gain, through deeds of charity, compassion and duty towards the Sangha. The right living of a householder is fully set out in the Sigālovāda Sutta,<sup>14</sup> where the Buddha resourcefully takes advantage of the erroneous views of the young layman, Sigāla, to show him the right path to peace of mind and prosperity. The teaching given in the Sigālovāda Sutta sets forth in detail the moral code (*sīla*) of a householder, and is the same as that summarised in the quotation at the beginning of this essay. It emphasises man’s ability to enrich his own life with meaning and value, without dependence upon supernatural aid.

Yet despite this, the practice of appealing to gods for *lokiya* benefits persists among Buddhists, and to give a clear idea of what is meant by this, some explanation of the two terms *lokiya* and

<sup>13</sup> *Aṭṭha-loka-dhammā*; Gain and loss, honour and dishonour, happiness and misery, praise and blame.

<sup>14</sup> Included in *Everyman’s Ethics*, The Wheel No. 14.

*lokuttara* must be given. Buddhism recognises *lokiya* experience as well as *lokiya* aspiration, and *lokuttara* experience as well as *lokuttara* aspiration. But *lokiya* aspiration and experience bear a wider connotation than does the word “mundane.” As a descriptive and defining term *lokiya* relates to all forms of consciousness and of existence within the thirty one abodes of *samsāra*. Even the heavenly states are included in that which is *lokiya*, “worldly” or “mundane.” The “world” in Buddhism is not only the sensible world of ordinary consciousness, it is the unseen environment of that world as well, comprising many planes of existence related to consciousness, and one to unconsciousness. As corollary to this, the definition of *lokuttara*, the “supramundane,” is narrower; it relates solely to the state outside of conditioned phenomena; that is, *Nibbāna*. Therefore in Buddhism the desire to be reborn in a heavenly state is just as much a *lokiya* aspiration as would be, for example, to wish for promotion in one’s job or success in a business venture. There is thus a displacement of values when a comparison is made between the Buddhist terms *lokiya* and *lokuttara*, and what they denote, and the English words used to translate them. In Western thinking, heavenly existence is considered to be supra-mundane, and the mundane is only life as experienced on this earth, the world known to us through the senses.

It follows, then, that the *devas* to whom Buddhists sometimes pray in the *devalas* and Hindu *kovils* in Ceylon, and the *nats* similarly worshipped in Burma, are worldly powers. Among the thirty-seven *nats* of Burma, some were semi-legendary, semi-historical persons; they are indigenous local deities who have no connection with the Hindu gods. One of them, indeed, was a Muslim in his life on earth, and is still considered to be a follower of that faith. His cult-devotees, although themselves Buddhists, abstain from eating pork, just as the Buddhist followers of Hindu gods in Ceylon avoid meat, fish and eggs, the sole object being to keep in the good graces of their patrons. These godlings (*devatā*) are approached with homage and suitable offerings to win their favour exactly as a king’s minister or the head of a business corporation might be waited upon, flattered and offered services with the same end in view. This practice, although it is found in all Buddhist countries, with variations, has nothing whatever to do with the Buddha’s teaching of the way to bring suffering to an end. It caters for a human weakness which Buddhism in its purest form exhorts man to transcend. Even though the aspiration to be reborn in a heavenly state is a *lokiya* aspiration, the *lokiya* deities are no more capable of granting it to a human being than is his works manager or the chairman of his board of directors.

But there is another way offered by Buddhism to those who have worldly ambitions for wealth, fame and pleasure. This is the forming of a wish accompanied by a good action (*kusala kamma*); it is the “meritorious deed” which, unless it is obstructed by some heavier *kamma* of an unwholesome kind, brings the desired result in the present life, and if delayed, bears fruit in a subsequent one. The wholesome *kamma* linked to the wish reinforces it by rendering the person who makes the wish worthy to have it fulfilled. This makes use of the principle of *kamma* and *vipāka*, and it is effective; but it is not to be used for an evil purpose, such as doing harm to an enemy or gaining unlawful advantages over others. To try to make use of the law of moral causality in such a way would be demeritorious in the last degree, since it could not fail to rebound on its source, the misguided person who had generated the unwholesome intention. One in whom wisdom is developed will never resort to any device for causing harm to an enemy, be it in the natural way or by invoking the aid of inferior deities. So far as protection from injury to himself by an enemy is concerned, he knows that so long as his own *kamma* is good, no hostile power, human or superhuman, can seriously affect him. He may be wounded, as the Buddha was by the stone hurled at him by Devadatta, but eventually more ill will come to the aggressor than to his intended victim.

There can be no doubt that prayer on the higher level, where it approaches meditation, can be instrumental in bringing about alterations in mental attitudes and consequent behaviour;

whether it can cause lasting alterations in the structure of personality must depend upon the degree to which its influence penetrates to the unconscious strata. For this to happen, another mode of consciousness must be brought into play, and it is here that prayer, which by its nature is discursive, has to give way to the technique of bare attention or mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), which rigorously excludes conceptualisation. It is not with this that we are concerned at present, but with prayer as a means of gaining specific ends.

Prayer which is for something is an expression of desire, and desire is only a weaker word, and so less pejorative, for craving. A desire that is strong enough to seek expression in prayer can scarcely fall short of craving, though it may be far from the craving for drink or drugs which has given the word its objectionable colouring. Now, craving (or thirst—*taṇhā*) is the factor which supports and promotes grasping (*upādāna*); that is, attachment to the components of personality. This grasping supports the process of becoming (*bhava*, the life-continuum), and the life-process in turn brings about arising (*jāti*), which is both the arising of the successive moments of existence in the psycho-physical order that constitutes the ordinary life-continuum and the arising of the first consciousness-moment in a new series after death; in other words, arising in a new birth. Thus craving is the king-pin of the mechanism, or the *élan vital* which keeps it going.

It is a psychic energy which manifests itself in the will-to-be and the will-to-do and the will-to-possess. In another guise, it is the will-not-to-be, the death-wish, the craving for annihilation (*vibhava-taṇhā*).

Prayer for something that is desired must necessarily be an expression of one or other of these cravings. People have even prayed for oblivion in death. Therefore a prayer of great intensity is a method of concentrating and harnessing craving. And since craving is the base of the life process and an extremely powerful psychic force, prayer of this kind may be effective to some degree. The dynamism inherent in a single-minded wish might indeed act upon the inert factors of a situation much as Balzac supposed it to do.

To express a wish is to bring oneself a step nearer its fulfilment. To concentrate upon it to the exclusion of all extraneous desires is to give it the driving force of the psychic component that sustains life itself.

And that is a dangerous undertaking. Someone once wrote: "Take care what you desire before you are twenty—for you will surely get it." In youth the desires are strongest; they are also the most deeply felt. But how many people, having obtained what they wished for most when they were young, have found that they no longer want it; that their desires have taken a different turn, have fastened themselves onto new objects. How many more have spent themselves in many years of striving and scheming for wealth, voluntarily stripping themselves of all other interests, only to find when at last they possess the riches they craved for in their youth of poverty, that they have so robbed and depleted themselves of all capacity for happiness that they cannot enjoy any of the advantages that money brings, and that alone make it desirable. The sad fact is that most men, when they wish, wish for the wrong thing; or, like Midas in the Greek myth, wish for it in the wrong way.

To desire and work for the acquisition of a special skill is more sensible, for at least there is a good chance that it may become woven into the texture of the *saṅkhāras* and manifest anew in subsequent lives. Unlike the self-made millionaire, the man who sets his mind upon becoming a great musician, artist or writer does not have to leave behind him all the fruits of a lifetime's labour when he goes to the grave. No reckless hand will carelessly throw to waste everything he so painfully amassed, after he is gone, and no one else's life will be ruined in the process. On

the contrary, he will carry with him into his next life something—and perhaps a great deal—of the art or science that he loved and strove to perfect; and another genius will enrich the world.

But in the final reckoning, any form of desire is prone to cheat him who harbours it. Prayer is a vehicle of desire, and desire is wedded to the deceptive idea of selfhood. The only safe wish is the wish to attain Nibbāna, the wish to strip away all desire and all delusion connected with desire. When that wish is fulfilled there is nothing left to wish for, and the weary round is over. And because prayer, whether it is effective or not, does not tend towards the attrition of desire nor to the uprooting of the delusion of self, it has no importance in the Noble Discipline of the Buddha.

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