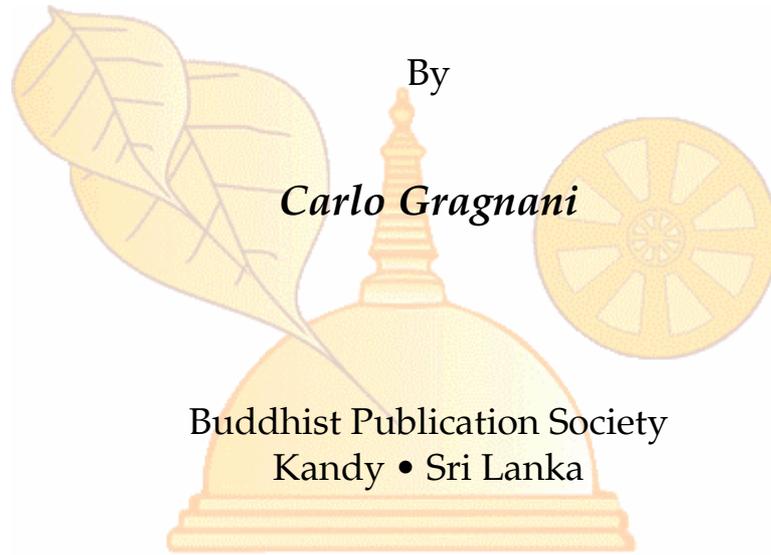


Three Symbolic Ways of Life



The Wheel Publication No. 270

Copyright © Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, (1979, 1986)

BPS Online Edition © (2009)

Digital Transcription Source: BPS.

First edition: 1979

Reprinted: 1986

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 and the Buddhist Publication Society is to be acknowledged as the original publisher.

Three Symbolic Ways of Life

Let us start with an example and, to be fashionable, let us take anxiety (although any other example would do). The question I will try to answer is the following:

“In what fundamental way can I be connected with anxiety?”

Well, one way is what I am doing this very moment: *writing* about anxiety. I might talk or think about it. In all these cases I would use words. Whenever I operate in that way, I am in an area which might be called: “verbal plane.”

What are its characteristics?

Obviously, I have to arrange words, to combine them in a certain order; my sentences must abide by certain principles and rules or else I would talk nonsense.

Words are signs which stand for something else. If I say: “bla-bla-bla,” I simply utter sounds without any meaning. If I say: “table simultaneously procrastination,” although each of these words taken separately has a meaning, the whole phrase has not. Grammar and syntactic rules have not been observed and, again, my sentence is not intelligible. Besides, verbal expressions must fit into one of the various logical systems. “A table is a table” is not a very exciting but a correct statement according to Aristotelian logic. Not so this one: “A table is and is not a table,” although it is correct from the point of view of Hegel and perhaps of Nāgārjuna.

Now, what I want to stress is that the observance of these principles and rules (which are flexible in time and/or space, but within limits) confers stability, fixity, to what is expressed in words. Through language, the world appears solid, lasting, orderly, rational; things may be temporarily not present to our consciousness, but we consider them still as existing, although absent, and we recognise them when they appear again.

All this allows us to classify, to categorise, to establish correlations, laws. A trivial example taken from abstract thinking: $2 + 2 = 4$ is an eternal truth, of which I can make use for actual calculations, or not; however, it does not cease to exist and to be true even when nobody resorts to it.

To live on the logical level, therefore, is to live in an orderly, rational, stable, durable, recognisable world, where there are truths, certitudes, to stand on; a world where. “I am I” and “you are you”; where we can understand each other, so that if I ask the waiter for a steak, there is little risk that he will bring me a box of matches.

The verbal level is very reassuring; it gives the sensation of being on solid ground, of being sane; so much so that to see the world in a radically different way would be interpreted as a sign of mental disorder.

Another fundamental way to be related with anxiety—to pursue our example—is to *experience* it. Faced with this sensation, I may try to repress it by applying myself to some engaging task, I may take a tranquillizer, or I may just live with my anxiety.

More generally, this second fundamental way of relating myself consists of action with the aim of abolishing a sensation or modifying or creating one. In so acting, I am in direct contact with things; I use them (instead of talking about them as I do on the verbal plane).

So, on the one side we have *words*, on the other, *action*. Through words we understand intellectually; through action we try to reach our aims. In the first case, it is the mind that is mainly involved; in the second, it is the body—with its five senses.

But these distinctions do not represent reality faithfully: they are too sharp, too clear-cut. In fact, the relationships, the interconnections between the verbal level and what might be called the “action level” are many.

The two sectors are distinct, not separated. To continue our example, while words may start anxiety, anxiety may be assuaged by words, by talking about it. More generally, if it is true that the verbal level engages mainly the mind, it is also true that talking, writing and even thinking are not possible without the participation of the body. Conversely, acting consciously involves some mental implications which, directly or indirectly, refer to verbal activity; even the movements of the artisan (who is so familiar with his tools that he handles them automatically) are based on the recognition of things: when he needs a hammer, he takes just a hammer and not something else. This means that the world is categorised, classified, by him. And what is that, if not language at a deep level or, if you like, the necessary basis out of which language emerges?

That having been said, the fact still remains that words and action are different and, in a way, even alternatives: the taste of tea is not a good description of it; a dinner is not its menu card; the word “tiredness” is not tiredness itself.

* * *

The verbal level may be geometrically symbolised by the straight line. Verbal expression is linear, analytical; words come one after the other in succession; meaning has no form, no dimension. Like the straight line, reasoning is unidimensional and potentially infinite; it never reaches either definite conclusions or its origins; thoughts engender other thoughts...

Action, on the contrary, radiates in many directions at the same time; it is multidimensional; it evokes form. Even the (mental) planning which prepares and accompanies action proper is synthetic: the chess player looking at the board before making a move gets a panoramic view of the situation as a whole. Therefore, action, doing, can be symbolised by space: in geometrical terminology, by the plane.

* * *

At one moment we live and are engaged chiefly on the verbal level, at the next on the action level—the two covering the whole range of human activity. Sometimes we can distinguish an experience from its verbal expression; sometimes we mistake one for the other, as when we believe ourselves to be compassionate but are in fact simply in love with beautiful compassionate words.

In any event, however, the two levels have in common the characteristic of being goal-oriented. We constantly try to reach our aims, however big or small they may be. Even the simple act of going to the office is evidently goal-oriented and therefore needs some planning.

Now, to be goal-oriented may mean two things, depending on whether the accent is put on the first or on the second word; one may be oriented in order to reach a goal or one may have a goal in order to be oriented.

The first attitude seems to be the only rational one:

I want something; therefore, I pave the way to obtain it. However, man is inclined to follow also the second path, irrational as it may appear. Goals are very often an excuse to justify our action to reach them.

Is it not true that we very frequently work—and sometimes very hard—only to neglect the result of our effort? Why is this? Why, as soon as one goal is attained, do we immediately pursue another one, without enjoying the first? When eating a slice of apple pie, why, instead of tasting it, do we think about how to get an additional portion? Or, when there is no apple pie left, why is it that disappointment prevents us from relishing what we are eating? And this happens in every field: one strives for years and years to become an Ambassador only, after becoming one, to feel frustrated because the time for retirement is approaching.

There are also more subtle ways in which the same development occurs. Take the case of a camera fan. At the very beginning, his interest in photos is no doubt prompted by his desire to recapture, at home by the fireside, to his own contentment and to the ill-concealed boredom of his guests, the beautiful views he has admired, let us say, during a trip. But as time goes by, he becomes increasingly interested in panoramas and monuments not for themselves but as occasions for taking a few shots. Then, the interest shifts to cameras; our friend starts talking at length about lenses and other components. Soon, the camera industry comes into the picture: different types of productions technical details... At this point, photos are almost forgotten: the recipe has supplanted the meal.

So, in one way or another, man does not dwell long enough on his experiences for getting the full "taste" of them; he passes through everything hastily, anxiously... to get *more* things that will probably be used *more* hastily, *more* anxiously... So he finds himself void of the "fullness," the fulfilment that he looked for.

How is it that to stay happily with the coveted object is so difficult? The usual answer, that it is due to our restlessness, amounts to nothing more than a mere name for the phenomenon without an explanation of it: therefore, it is not satisfactory. We have to find out the basic cause for this state of affairs, however much social or other conditions may contribute to strengthen this cause.

Well, the core of the matter lies in the dichotomy between the world as it is normally conceived and the world as it is experienced.

As said above, we conceive the world as solid, stable, lasting. If it were not for language, we could not see the world that way. But it must be added that, if it were not for our likes, dislikes, interests and desires, we would not accept this conception of the world so uncritically. Passions induce convictions; so much so that right at the beginning our perceptions are often coloured by our feelings and emotions. If I am afraid of ghosts, I shall see them; if I am thirsty in a desert, I shall soon see mirages. Everybody would agree that imaginary things are perceived in such extreme circumstances. *But in fact, we see imaginary things all the time.*

What we see in things is lasting pleasure or displeasure or indifference. Since indifference is boring, we more often see things that seem worthwhile having (because of the pleasure that we hope to derive from their possession), or things that are worthwhile rejecting (because of the displeasure we fear we shall feel in having them).

The extent to which imagination influences our perception can be found out through our experience, which regularly belies our expectations. Things and—what is more important—feelings do not stay put; they "wobble," to say the least. What appeared to be lasting, and therefore worthwhile having or rejecting, reveals itself to be of a quite different, even opposite, nature.

Because we assume that things and feelings are persistent, durable, we think how beautiful it would be to listen to music for hours on end or to live on a remote small island for months. But we would indeed be in a predicament if those wishes were fulfilled. Sometimes I imagine what it would be like if there were some malevolent deity who instantly fulfilled the desires of human beings the moment they entered the mind: if someone wished he could travel his whole life long, lo and behold! he would immediately start travelling for the rest of his days! Man does not always realise how lucky he is that he is not always able to do what he would like to do. If he realised that, he would be more attentive to “what is” and less to “what he would like to be, or to have.”

So, we suffer from an unresolved dichotomy. We do not learn the lessons of our experience; instead, we again and again try to obtain the impossible, justifying the preceding failure with all sorts of rationalisations.

In fact, we cannot learn our lesson because a lesson learned intellectually or even through experience is not enough when strong feelings are involved. If this were not so, the neurotic, conscious of his state, as many of them are, would be cured immediately.

And our experiences indeed involve strong feelings. One of the most powerful and prominent of them is the feeling of security, directed at preserving and promoting the most important of the durable, solid entities that we conceive on the verbal level: our ego, which, like other components of the world, we imagine as an entity with a core, that remains unaltered and unalterable despite changes that occur here and there; some sort of identity in continuity, or “invariant under transformation,” to use the language of modern physics.

Not only do we try to defend our ego, to promote it and to make it last longer and longer, but we also try to protect our conviction that we are such an entity—a conviction which is constantly contradicted by fact and experience.

The fact is that our view of the world as solid and durable and our similar view of the ego mutually support each other: the ego could not live its own life in an ephemeral world; conversely, from an ego-less point of view, the world could not be conceived as it appears to us. And this tragicomedy goes on and on, with a Sisyphus—like character on the stage, trying unsuccessfully to grasp at perceptions, feelings, and what not, which are continuously slipping through his fingers.

In order to end this ordeal, to stop “looking for something which does not exist” and to start “looking at things as they are” instead, one must be really fed up with all of this; but the great majority of people are not. Like flies in a bottle, they do not see or do not want to see the way out through the neck of the bottle and endlessly repeat the same unsuccessful attempt to reach salvation, freedom.

* * *

Now, for those who are fed up, how to get out of this tangle?

As long as the world is looked at with the attention directed to the ego, that is, an attention “wanting” to see things in conformity with the ego requirements; as long as the world is experienced with the intent of looking for lasting pleasure, in the framework of a verbal structure supporting this notion—the vicious circle of desire and dissatisfaction will be doomed to repeat itself.

It would be preposterous to suggest the renunciation of passions and feelings as a means of breaking this circle. In any case; it would be practically impossible to achieve this through deliberate effort alone, as the passions and feelings would only be repressed, not eliminated.

The only line of attack would seem to be rather a new way of looking, perceiving, and being attentive.

It may seem strange to reduce such a vital point to a question of attention; but the fact is that attention is the point at which things may go right or wrong. Much depends on its quality and intensity. Attention is a key: the key to Paradise is not the same as the one to Hell and the difference between them may be a question of millimetres. But a small differentiation at the source very often leads into opposite directions.

We are not accustomed to consider how to cultivate this faculty of attention. We do not learn how to be attentive any more than we learn how to walk or to stand up. But, as many of us walk and stand up badly (to the point that malfunctioning of the body ensues), so many of us direct our attention wrongly, which also has ill effects. Let us see how.

We are goal-oriented. This means that our interest is focused on certain things; and since interest stimulates attention, the latter cannot but be partial and discriminatory. In fact, attention is mostly directed from a preconceived view point or desire; it lights up what interests us and leaves the rest in the dark. (Odd situations arise from this. He, who tries to demonstrate the virtue of tolerance in a discussion, does not realise how intolerant he himself sometimes is with his interlocutors. Similarly, he who fights vehemently for the cause of love and peace is not aware how full of hate he is for his opponents).

Now, discriminatory attention contributes to the general dichotomy: subject/object or, if you like, ego/world, where the factors left in the dark accumulate around attention and restrict it. Thus, we are attentive with an admixture of impatience or desire or worry, etc. This aggregation forms an obscure, but very much real, conglomerate which is individualised as the ego.

(And that, incidentally, is an additional reason why the existence of the ego is not generally disputed, although extreme vagueness surrounds any definition of it.

The existence of the ego is affirmed as a certainty because the conglomerate constituted by attention and its associated elements is felt either as a unit or as something needing a support; but, since attention does not clarify these uninteresting objects—sometimes neglected because they are unpleasant to look at!—the definition of this fabricated whole, the ego, cannot but be vague. In other words, the ego, like a ghost, is felt to be a certainty as long as it is not analysed.

Normal attention, besides being partial and discriminatory, is also generally not sharp enough, being not well focused: it is like a badly adjusted telescope. This is because there is no proper balance between attention and mental absorption (or full concentration).

What does that mean and what are the implications?

Let us see. To be attentive is very different from being totally absorbed. Attention requires space, distance from the object one is attentive to. Absorption, on the other hand, if it is total, eliminates all distance; it is union, identification, “disappearance through incorporation in something,” as the Concise Oxford Dictionary defines it. When one is absorbed, locked into the object, one is incapable of seeing it, of describing it; besides, the natural flow of events or the “stream of consciousness” is interrupted.

However, a good measure of absorption is nevertheless necessary for attention to be operative. Attention that is too distant (in the real and the figurative sense) runs the risk of being so little involved as to miss the object; a risk that is always run by those who are afraid of being over “subjective.” An extreme example of this is the case of the art critic who, jokingly, refused to see the painting he had to judge, so as not to be influenced by it, to be “objective” in his judgement!

The problem is now to find a good equilibrium between being *in* and being *out*. This balance is rarely kept, or even aimed at. Thus, either we do not know what we are doing because we are what we are doing, or we do not know what we are doing because we are too far removed from what we are doing. The result is the same in both cases.

The two main characteristics of our everyday attention (discriminative and out of focus) contribute greatly to our normal vision of the world, distorted by passion and egotistic interests.

Instead of being a sovereign master who tries to exercise his power in the best possible way, attention lets itself be degraded and allows its sphere of authority to be infiltrated by intruding elements (interests, passions...), to which it becomes subservient.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the resulting conception of the world (including that of the ego) reflects those interests and passions. It may be said that interests and passions engage in narcissistic contemplation of themselves, creating the deceptive image of a solid, lasting world.

We can now easily come to the conclusion that a “non-deceptive” type of attention should have the opposite characteristics to those mentioned above: it should be non-discriminatory and well focused, in the sense implied earlier. To be non-discriminatory, it must be directed to anything that is present to our consciousness, regardless of inclinations, preferences and the like. (Should the latter make themselves felt, they, like anything else, would become the object of attention). To be well focused, it must be well balanced with absorption, achieving a combination of maximum identification and maximum detachment.

Such pure, detached attention cannot function from a preconceived view point: it must maintain contact with whatever is happening at the moment, with what our senses bring to the fore of our consciousness, with what is present here and now, which is always one thing at a time, just as only one point of a turning wheel is in contact with the ground at a time.

All this is easily said; many things are easy on the logical level (where we now are). It is not so easy, however, to put them into practice, so that the very nature of reality may be experienced in such a poignant, matter-of-fact way that our behaviour is instinctively attuned to such experiences and in harmony with them. Training methods have been devised to facilitate the process, with the main emphasis on learning to determine the obstacles that prevent pure attention from emerging; but the subject is too large for discussing it here.

The new way of perception goes against long-standing habits. It is not easy just to *look* at inclinations and likings, instead of trying to satisfy them; the temptation to fall back into the old habit is always present and often succumbed to.

But insofar as the new system works properly, attention stands unencumbered and alone: it is no longer associated with unnoticed but actively present elements, because, in this way of practice, there is nothing actively present that is not observed. There is no longer any “looking with...” but always and only “looking at...” This means that the dividing line between subject and object has moved, so that everything is now on the side of the object. To put it differently, the dichotomy subject/object has changed into attention/object. The “I” has become an eye. The ego has dissolved into the ephemeral state of consciousness; its apparent compactness has lost its glue. It is as if everything happens impersonally, is watched anonymously, impartially.

The difference between the new kind of attention and total absorption is now quite evident. In total absorption, the ego is neither dissected nor examined in its separate components but simply put into abeyance, forgotten for a while—for as long as the absorption lasts. Total absorption (no matter whether the identification is made with God or with a rose) is a mystical state: only one thing lives from “within,” the rest is blotted out. And what happens to the compactness of the ego when pure attention is applied happens also to the rest of the world.

Reality no longer appears as solid and lasting but as small, short-lived, almost evanescent, interdependent units. In terms of the logical class theory, we have passed from a class to its components or, better still, from the characteristics of the first to those of the latter. Or, to use musical terminology, what was read before as "legato" is now read as "staccato." The *ringing of the alarm clock* in the morning and the consequent *getting up* are now seen as labels covering a variety of experiences: the sound in all its modulations; its meaning (getting up); the unpleasant feelings connected with having to do that; the movements of the body; the thoughts about the first appointment at the office... and so forth; all these elements of units being taken not in a preconstituted order, but as they present themselves to the attention; felt separately, distinctly, in their own taste, in their own appearance, duration, disappearance, and, finally, in their interconnections.

In pure attention, any event which comes to the consciousness bears the mark of its place in time. And that place in time can only be the present, since consciousness can be aware only "now." Thus, fear of death is a "now fear" of something that is not present; the presence concerns the fear, not the death; a souvenir of something that happened two years ago is a now souvenir of something no longer present.

To realise this eternal, inevitable present, this inescapable time to which waking life is linked, is to avoid being lost or alienated in the past or in the future, as is frequently the case in everyday modes of life. It also means being constantly vigilant. The stage is lighted; when the light is on, confusion either disappears or becomes ineffective.

Only he who is dead to the past lives in the present. The death of the past does not mean that it has been forgotten; it means that the emotions connected with it have spent themselves. What remains is mere recollection of it (greatly enhanced, by the way, by constant awareness of the present).

Only he who is dead to fears and hopes about the future lives in the present. To be dead to fears and hopes about the future does not necessarily mean that they have been eradicated (although so much the better if so); it means that they are lived as present happenings, belonging to and unavoidably connected with the moment at which they occur.

When only the present is alive, newness is alive. Each and every event is experienced as individual and unmistakably itself, yet related to others. Because pure attention includes absorption, every *form* is vividly detached from its *background*, is unique and unrepeatable. Because pure attention implies distance, detachment and perspective, every *form* belongs to its family or class.

Nietzsche has written "He who cannot stand on a point without dizziness and fear, like a deity of victory, will never know what happiness is and will not be able to do anything to help others to be happy" (*Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*).

But we do not usually know how "to stand on a point," how to live in the present. So we cannot have the sense of newness; we cannot be happy. Everything carries with it an oppressive past. We write books about books; ideas follow ideas. What we hear we have already heard; what we see we have already seen. Any message is dissolved in reminiscent echoes. Anything new has an old flavour. On the other hand, we are also bent towards the other slope; we are always projecting something or ourselves into the future. Martin Buber relates the answer given by Rabbi Jizchak to the question: "What was the real sin of Adam": "He worried about the following day."

* * *

If the straight line represents the verbal level, and the plane the realm of action, the curve is perhaps the geometrical figure best suited to symbolising the “pure attention level.”

Pure attention, being focused on one object after another, has a linear development but, in contradistinction to the verbal level, in pure attention everything changes from moment to moment; everything is and is not itself. In order to indicate these changes, the line is curved and not straight.

To go into more detail, normal attention (which is discriminative) may be represented by the straight line, since both are exclusive. As the former excludes objects that are not the chosen ones, so the latter excludes directions that are not its own.

On the contrary, pure attention (which is not discriminative), directs itself to anything present to the consciousness; thus, as soon as one direction is taken, it is abandoned for another one. There is no “follow up.” The geometrical representation of this state of affairs is the curve, since it is the place where all these incipient stages of events are linked; each point of the curve may be considered as the departure of a straight line which was never traced, because attention, instead of following the verbal pattern, immediately turned to the next event that emerged on the stage of consciousness.

Let us see what may happen at this very moment, as I am writing on pure attention and its geometrical representation. There are two possibilities: either the subject matter is dealt with on a verbal level, as is usually the case; or pure attention not only focuses itself on what is or had to be written, but also directs itself to what ever makes itself felt as a presence: intruding thoughts, imaginations, body sensations, and so on. In the second case, what is written now would emerge from a living curve, from pure attention in operation.

* * *

Pure attention has no support; it is self-supporting, so to speak: a watching from no-man’s land or—which amounts to the same thing—from a dimensionless point, from nowhere.

Living on the curve—it is clear now—does not mean refraining from thinking and acting (which, incidentally, would be impossible). But the thoughts and actions—or life in general—are watched from that vantage point which is nowhere. Leaving the talk to the talking, the walk to the walking, and so on, means liberating energies that were previously invested unnecessarily in those activities and thus enabling them to be invested in pure, vigilant attention. It might be worth stressing that the functioning of the latter is not tantamount to “considering” or “pondering” and the like. If it were, it would be an extra dose of thinking, another straight line added to the others! But it is not, although this is a trap the beginner is bound to fall into innumerable times! The function of pure attention is more akin to “tasting,” “feeling,” like tasting food or touching a piece of cloth. This sort of knowledge, which can be called “tasting” or “feeling” only metaphorically, can be applied to the activity of our six senses (the five traditional senses plus the mind). And each sense has a flavour of its own. Seeing “tastes” different from hearing, smelling, touching, tasting (proper), and thinking and, of course, each one of these “tastes” different from the rest. Even “thinking,” the least corporeal of the senses, has a “taste” (a pretty dull one, I am afraid!)

Pure attention perceives, recognises and acknowledges all this and makes a mental note of it: a rather unusual activity which, if judged by its description, may appear boring and purposeless. But it would indeed be purposeless to argue the point, for any practice is for practising and this case is no exception.

Only he who is aware of his perceptions, feelings and mental states in the manner outlined above, that is, through intimate contact with their texture, caught in the process of its making, can really know what seeing or being angry or being worried or what not, are like.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

* * *

But, let us face it: the chances are that not only the cooking of the pudding goes against the grain, but that even the result (especially if the recipe has been scrupulously followed) tastes rather disgusting! Leaving aside the metaphor, not only does the practice of pure attention counter old habits and long-time inclinations, but also the reality revealed by that practice manifests itself as rather disagreeable.

In fact, what is experienced through pure attention is a high degree of impermanence: our “bête noire” a “black monster.” We do not want to admit that everything that is born must die and that what must die, is in a sense, already dead. We discard this view too easily as being pessimistic, whereas it is neither pessimistic nor optimistic but reflects only what is. We angrily flog dead horses but this does not even make us a taxidermist; it makes us only more and more similar to that neurotic who knew that $2 + 2 = 4$, but who got angry about it.

The glaring realisation that reality is utterly impermanent makes reality itself even more unsatisfactory, because desires, fears and hopes—still at work—have no firm hook to hang from. And, what is worse, we can do nothing about it, because our ego is revealed by pure attention as a “pathological phenomenon,” as an illness that consists of the ego’s claim to exist and its self-promotion or consists in its being ego-less, to put it in one word. Such an ego, or rather non-ego, cannot modify this state of affairs. Our supposed all-of-a-piece self is not the master of impermanence, because it is impermanent itself.

But, sooner or later, this situation draws to a climax, which is also a turning point. Sooner or later, a “giving up,” a “letting go,” manifests itself: reality is accepted as it is; any dichotomy between what is and what should be disappears; life and reality become one, not in the sense of a mystical union, but in that of being attuned to one another. And that is peace, harmony, not because everything is going smoothly but because everything is inescapably the way it is and therefore cannot be otherwise. The deep recognition of this fact does not leave any leeway for vain speculation.

This is not fatalism. The chances of missing the bus are reduced by running for it; but once the bus has been caught or missed—to one’s contentment or disappointment—this result (including the contentment or disappointment) is the unchangeable effect of what has gone before. Apart from that, the new practice also teaches us that we often run unnecessarily; we interfere unduly. Things have a way of doing themselves by themselves. “I hope to find what I am going to say interesting” was the witty remark I heard from an excellent speaker, one minute before he delivered his speech.

* * *

The “way out” need not have a dramatic turning point; its development may be smoother, marked by many insights along the road. It seems advisable not to make too much fuss about them. Are they genuine? Or not? Too much doubting is itself a clear sign that the ego is not very far off. In any case, the best mark of the true value of these insights resides in one’s ability to receive them, spontaneously and in a spirit of humility. Obviously, one cannot *want* to be spontaneous, although this double constraint plagues many unprepared beginners. On the contrary, boasting about flashes of insight, playing the role of the noisy convert, is a symptom of

inauthenticity. Sometimes these manifestations are allowed to pass under the complacent cover of helping others to follow suit. But this end is better served by examples than by words: the most effective help comes especially when it is unintentional and in the form of a by-result of what one is.

* * *

Nobody can help you to an insight, *nobody* can even put you on the curve; least of all *yourself*. Effort and discipline may be required but not *your* effort or *your* discipline; in other words, they should not be the issue of an ego. And yet the starting point cannot be other than where one is, that is to say, it is most likely in a full-fledged ego that wants to become ego-less and is therefore striving to reach this goal. Now, an ego-less situation cannot be the product of an ego's desire and planning. All the same, and paradoxically, this almost inevitable false start may eventually have happy turnings. Ambroise Parè, a famous French surgeon of the XVIth century, used to say of every patient he could keep alive: "*Je le pansay, Dieu le guarist*" ("I have bandaged him, God has cured him"). In non-theological terms, any result is at least in part the effect of uncontrollable circumstances.

In the same spirit, we can say that the passage from self to no-self must be prepared, although it cannot be determined. It comes with a leap that takes no time and covers no space. It is an arrival without previous departure. More than an event, it is an advent. Being beyond time, it cannot be explained or described. What can be explained and described must have a temporal nature; hence, endless references in both directions: the past and the future. Insight, however, is a vertical break in the horizontal, temporal line. It bears no "before that," no "after that."

Insight is THAT.

* * *

A few words of acknowledgement.

In the preceding pages, the Buddhist reader will have recognised, as a sort of watermarks, some of the vital points of the Dhamma, suttas have not been quoted, nor have Pali words been cited. The intention was to deal—in today's language—with problems that are as important for man at present as they have been at all times in the past. As Buddhism is independent of "source references," the attempt seems to be legitimate. But it may, of course, be off the mark; which would not be so strange: *paṭiccasamuppāda* was at work while it was written.

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